

YOU HAVEN'T KNOWN FEAR UNTIL YOU'VE MET . . .



THE CHANGING MAN

TOMI OYEMAKINDE

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
New York

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The Changing Man is grudgingly dedicated to my dearest nemesis.

Without you, my writing journey would have been a much slower—gentler—burn, and this story would not exist here and now. Which has consequently meant less sleep, countless rejections, and limitless frustration.

Despite the obvious inconveniences to my peace, I am grateful. It's because of you I do not take the journey we are on for granted. You're somewhat encouraging, mildly funny, and healthily optimistic. But most of all, you help me hold on to *why* I write.

So, grudgingly, this book is dedicated to you, Rachel.

PS: Our bones never lied.



PROLOGUE

Even though the trees shivered and the ground was frosted, Leon Small was a furnace. Vodka snaked down his throat, searing his chest, and when the burning faded he realized the bottle was empty. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and flung the bottle at the weathered baby statue in front of him. He watched it fall short.

“Do you reckon Ros noticed my new look?” Henners asked, drawing up alongside Leon and offering him a Ferrero Rocher.

Leon passed on the chocolate. Henners should have known by now he loathed nuts. Even ones smothered in chocolate. “No clue, mate. But she *definitely* noticed the drool face you made at her all night.”

“That obvious?”

Leon *hmm*ed, an unlit cigarette between his lips.

As they headed down the hill, back to Nithercott’s grounds, one of Leon’s pockets vibrated with a text from Benny asking where he was.

Out, Leon responded mentally.

When Leon’s pocket buzzed again, he swore. He loved

his little brother, but Benny needed to stop leaning on him, else he'd never think for himself.

But looking at the screen, his right eyebrow quirked. It wasn't from Benny after all, and looking at the display picture, he bit down on a smile.

Judging by the image it was from the new girl, Leila.

WYD?

How does she have my number? She's barely ever said a word to me. Could she be . . . interested?

"Leon, bro, you alright?" Henners asked.

If Leon answered truthfully, he knew how it would all play out. Henners would tell him not to reply. He'd say she was the type to chew him up and spit him out. *High maintenance*. What he wouldn't say is that while she wasn't good for Leon, she was good for *him*. That he could "handle" her, as if she were some piece of volatile Bitcoin or whatever buzzwords made them feel relevant.

So he swallowed the truth. The hope that maybe—just maybe—she might be interested in him. "All good."

Henners raised an eyebrow and parted his lips. Leon held his breath, waiting for his friend to stop bloody staring. Finally Henners turned away. Sometimes Leon found it hard to breathe around him. They were good friends—Leon didn't want anyone misunderstanding—but they were from different worlds.

As he stared at those three letters, his heartbeat pulsed at the end of his fingertips. *She messaged ME, first. And it's LEILA*. What the hell was he supposed to say? The only option was to play it cool.

Nm, just heading back.

You didn't say goodbye 😞

Leon frowned, trying to find the meaning behind Leila's words. They hadn't spoken all night—and he'd been trying. She'd barely looked at him.

"What's up?" Henners asked. "Who hurt you?"

Leon angled his phone away. "It's . . . none of your business, Henry," he said in a jokey, please-leave-me-alone way. "Nah, it's just Benny. You know what he's like."

A shrug of Henners's shoulders meant Leon could type in peace the riskiest message he'd ever sent. Each tap of the screen sent the flutter of his heart up toward his throat.

You want me to kiss you good
night?

But the moment he pressed send—instant regret. Several times Leila started typing and then stopped. *Oh God. She's definitely thinking about how to turn me down. Or she's going to air me.*

Leon needed to deflect, deflect, deflect. He was about to send a passably funny GIF and caption it with a joke, but then his phone vibrated.

Read my mind 😊 Meet by the
abandoned cottage?

Leon's toes scrunched in his trainers as butterflies

swarmed in his stomach. It took everything in him not to fist pump. Energy zagged through his bones, and fantasies of him and Leila together swam through his head. He'd show everyone she wasn't "too much" for him.

Clearing his throat, Leon turned to Henners and said, "Uh . . . Benny needs me, so I'm just going to go see he's alright."

Even though Leon was sure Henners didn't believe his excuse, his friend didn't say anything. He never did.

He can be so . . . apathetic. Like everyone at this stupid school.

See you soon x

Within minutes Leon was striding toward the abandoned cottage. He paused and played with the rings on his fingers. Lately, Henry had started messing with him. Following him and then claiming he was making stuff up. Every other step he looked behind him, just in case his friend trailed him and messed everything up.

Henry was probably only here because his parents were former students and regular donors. In fact, the last three Nithercott Day events had been funded by his parents. Why not send their child here if that's what they wanted?

Meanwhile, Leon was all about what he needed, because a lot of the time what he *wanted* was out of his reach. Two different—

A branch snapped behind him.

Leon stopped to gaze into the velvet darkness. *Nothing.* His heart pulsed like it was drowning in his chest and trying to break free for air.

Squinting, he could make out the shape of the cottage up ahead. A crooked silhouette that leaned to the right. He forced himself to breathe.

Then he heard it again. A gentle rustle that turned his blood to slush. Someone was definitely following him. He reached into his pockets and grabbed at the bottle opener to use as a weapon. When he stopped moving, the rustling stopped also. When he moved, the rustling picked up again.

"The hell?" Leon muttered, whipping out his phone and texting Leila.

Walk toward me.

At that moment a siren blared from the country road a stone's throw away. His hands and shoulders jerked, sending his phone flying through the air to sink into a bed of autumn leaves. He got on all fours and wrinkled his nose at the strong smell of earth in his nostrils. *Where is it?*

Leaves crunched in a one-two rhythm. Footsteps, moving closer.

Leon stopped searching and turned. "Hey, Lei—"

No one to see. Instead there was a hazy orange mist that made the air shimmer. The stench of earth got stronger. He blinked several times, but the rippling mist didn't disappear.

What?

Then he felt the bone-curdling sensation of breath against his face. Leon's heart caught in his throat. His flesh was riddled in goose bumps. He was sure he would scream, or shout, but sound evaporated long before it could make it out his mouth. Leon swallowed as he stared into the

orange mist. The breaths grew heavier. Tiredness and panic suddenly wrapped around him as something emerged from the darkness.

Two glowing eyes, too big to be human.

No, no, no—

Slowly, slowly, the world darkened.



Ben's world was dark. His eyes were squeezed shut as he washed some painkillers down with water. He leaned back in his gaming chair, the building migraine showing no signs of slowing down. And somehow, it wasn't the most annoying thing in his life right now.

It was Leon.

"Pick up, you mug," he grumbled, glancing down at his phone. *I don't ask for much.*

Okay, that wasn't fair, Ben mused, spinning around in his chair. Leon was usually good at getting back to him. It's just tonight he *really* needed his help with this English assignment—due tomorrow and not a single word written.

Ben was about to try calling his big brother again when his phone *pinged*. He couldn't unlock it fast enough.

Hey, Ben, so sorry I missed your
calls. Out on the hill, L

Nws. When will you be back?

I'll be out late. Don't wait up, L

But I need you for my English assignment.

You know what. Gimme your laptop password. I'll just get the one I need

Let's talk tomorrow, L

Bro ...

It can't wait till tomorrow.

Leon Small is typing . . .

Leon Small is typing . . .

Leon Small is typing . . .

And then nothing. Ben blinked. He took several deep breaths before letting out a torrent of profanity his mum would not approve of. Leon was royally screwing him over. The *one* time Ben actually needed his help, and suddenly Leon was following through on his threat to let him learn the “consequences of his actions.”

Ben should have known something was up when Leon called him Ben instead of Benny—too formal.

Now he was left with two options. Pull an all-nighter and find a way to complete his assignment. Or hop on his PlayStation and drown his frustration in the sounds of *Call of Duty* gunfire.

There were several moments of silence before Ben

scooched his chair right up to his PlayStation and powered it on. He'd deal with the consequences tomorrow. And when he saw Leon, he'd make sure to tell him *exactly* how he felt.



One Month Later

CHAPTER 1

THE PHYSICS OF BAD LUCK

The roof crackles like hot oil as rain lashes against it. Inside tight and toes curled uncomfortably, I'm daydreaming in the middle of physics and wishing I could be somewhere else. I try staring past my reflection, sulking at me with tired eyes, to the A-road. If I concentrate, I can hear the cars zooming by—hurtling away.

I'd do anything to be in one of them.

Colored pieces of paper swirl in the wind. They zigzag through the air above the front lawn, evading the hands of the groundskeeper—a stooping man with pleasantly wrinkled features. The scraps of paper are what's left of a now-forgotten sign Leon's friends put up a few weeks ago to show support for him. I see them still going on lunchtime walks looking for possible clues. Anyone—student or staff—is welcome.

Leon went missing right before I joined. Some people think he ran away. Others whisper and blame the Changing Man—a stupid urban myth that's apparently been around forever.

"Go on, mate, do it," the boys behind me whisper, drawing my attention away from the window. The teacher's back is to the class.

Next to me, Ben—Leon’s younger brother—makes a loud fart noise with his armpit, and his friends, scattered around the class, erupt into giggles. Mr. Morley hushes them with a dull, dark glare.

I go to side-eye Ben, expecting him to be smirking. Instead there’s a tightness in his ocean-blue eyes. I’m trying to work out what it is when Ben turns toward me. I jerk my head back to the window and fix my eyes outside.

A few moments later a sleek car coasts down the driveway, coming to a stop on the side of the front lawn nearest to the school. A burly man steps out holding a coffee cup. The warden of the Nithercott Foundation. He gave a talk a few weeks back about how he, along with the headmaster, is making sure the values of Nithercott are upheld.

The warden hobbles on a jeweled cane that winks with each step. I roll my eyes, thinking about how he called Nithercott a *fundamental* and *accessible* institution of education, equipping tomorrow’s leaders for public impact.

A mouthful of nonsense.

Mum and Dad are paying through the nose for me to be here, despite the reduced fees that come with being on the *Urban Achievers Program*. If I do well academically during my first year, the school’s more likely to match me with a sponsor who’d essentially pay the rest of my school fees, and uni too.

My parents like to pretend there’s no pressure or expectations, but I know that’s not true. When they say they’re proud of me, it’s heavy with pressure. All my life they’ve tried to give me better. So when they asked me to take the entrance exam, I obviously couldn’t say no. And when they asked me to give Nithercott a chance, I did.

A fizz of guilt bubbles in my stomach at my ungratefulness. But a month in, I'm running out of steam and motivation. The demands are higher even than the expectations of my very Nigerian parents, which says a lot. To top it off, even though I got in the program because of my art, they don't seem all that interested in it now that I'm here.

The art they've got me doing is so bland. But apparently it's the type of art that's more "esteemed."

If my bestie, Zanna, were here with me, then everything would be fine. I could be the person I was back at Archbishop's. Every single day wouldn't feel like the moment before the roller coaster drops.

Hoping to ease the storm in my stomach, I slouch in my seat, but it makes things worse so I sit up straight again. Through the sliding rain, I spy the centerpiece of Nithercott School—Porthaven House. It's wearing vines with cerulean flowers, and it's made of dimpled bricks the color of autumn leaves. I feel nauseous. Everything's so different here.

As my thoughts stew, I get distracted by the excited way my phone's vibrating against my chest. Fishing it out, I check the lock screen.

The group chat from my old school is blowing up, giving me a hollow feeling in my chest. I need those girls like I need my eyebrows. Without them backing me up from a distance, I'd feel so weird and out of place. Well, even *more* out of place.

Joining midway through the first term of year eleven means I've missed out on a lot of the schoolwork already. Plus, almost everyone's been at Nithercott since year seven.

I don't know where I fit.

I take a deep breath because as stifling as Nithercott is, I have a reason to survive—Malika. She's the only other Black girl in my year and the closest thing I have to a friend here. We bonded over our mutual dislike of nearly everybody else. The rest is history.

Tomorrow, Malika's helping me meet Zanna halfway between Nithercott and my old home of Orlingdon. A fluttery feeling drifts through my chest.

"Any of you able to describe to me the interaction responsible for keeping protons and neutrons together in a stable nucleus?" Mr. Morley is asking. With his shirtsleeves rolled up and faded tattoos peeking out from his collar, he's not the typical Nithercott teacher.

Hands punch upward until they're high in the air. Mine stays down. I *think* I know the answer, but this isn't the kind of school you survive at if you aren't sure.

My phone vibrates again. I look down and stifle a laugh. Zanna's sent me a GIF of Taraji P. Henson in the bougiest coat with the caption *Ife's new look*.

I mean . . . Taraji's killing it, but that'll never be me. I key a quick response in our made-up language.

lhnastic. Ownnastic chaalsastic,
imosastic ldaastic omastic.

LOL really had to check our
language rules! *New* elitist
school, same old you, you mean.
Anyway, can't wait to hear all
about THAT life. Also feel free

to bring any friends along.
Would love to meet them!
Avolastic aeyastic x

My fingers hover over the keyboard, trying to think of the perfect comeback. After a moment I try a few GIF searches but can't find anything. Moving schools has zapped my GIF-picking superpower.

Stoking the flames of determination in my stomach, I scroll, search, and scan until I find it. Nah, this is it. Holding back a laugh before pressing send is usually a good sign. *I win.*

As soon as I press send, a message from Nithercott Quick-Talk comes in. It's from Malika.

So ...got an update on
tomorrow

Go on ...

Cuz can't give us a lift, but my
step-nephew can. Just have to
meet him in the next town over
by 9:30.

Lights out at 10. Ms. P always
makes sure we're in bed ... Can
it be later???

He says he's got a gig that he
can't be late to.

There's a pinch in my chest. I swallow it down, my hands trembling.

🙄 Is there anyone else you can ask?

Malika is typing . . .

A chill burrows through my bones. Malika's step-nephew *has* to come through. I *have* to see Zanna tomorrow. She and I started plotting our reunion the moment my parents dropped me off here and flew out to Norway. I've been falling ever since, like a bloated blob of paint that's slipped off the edge of a canvas.

I didn't ask for any of this.

Malika replies.

I think so . . . but can't promise anything.

My heart bangs against my chest. *Please God*, I pray. I have to see Zan—

"Ife!"

My shoulders tighten and my head jerks up.

"Y-yes, sir?" I reply, trying my best not to show fear. I swear it fuels him.

I focus on my breathing, not batting an eyelid as I let my phone slip from my hands and free-fall into my unzipped backpack.

Mr. Morley runs a hand through his spiked hair and shakes his head. "All I ask is for you to pay attention in my

class, Jesus Christ. Goes for the rest of you. Starting now, anyone caught not paying attention—automatic detention.” Mr. Morley sighs like he’d rather be somewhere else, and I get it. We’re on the same side. He points at me. “If a nucleus decays by alpha decay, where two particles are emitted, how is the baryon number conserved?”

I clear my head and flip through the pages in my mind. This was in my prereading before I joined. I stammer my way through the answer in a way a Nithercott student would never. The way “before” me would never.

“Umm . . . a-according to the laws of conservation, the number of baryons must be the same before and after the reaction. That means in . . . alpha decay, the number of nucleons, protons, and neutrons doesn’t change?”

Mr. Morley chews on his gum like it’s really pissed him off. Pausing for a sigh, he says, “Wrong. In alpha decay a neutron changes into a what?”

It takes me a few seconds. “A proton?” I swear—

“A proton,” he repeats. “Did you not go over the reading material we sent you?”

His words hammer down with disappointment. Like I should’ve known better. But I was so sure. I go over the question again and I see the mistake in his question and thinking.

Except fearless Ife isn’t around anymore. Not when everything is so different here. When there’s no Zanna to back me up.

My throat is closing and I just want to disappear.

A gentle voice punctures the silence. “Sir, actually, Ife’s right. You’re talking about beta decay.”

A few groans sweep through the class. Ben chuckles next to me. Across the room, Bijal—little miss know-it-all—smiles in my direction. Her braces glint as scattered sunlight spills in through the windows. Ever since she found out Archbishop's was the sister school of her old school, she's tried to earn my approval.

She turns to Mr. Morley. "You got confused between alpha and beta decay. In alpha decay it's actually one particle emitted, not two. So actually . . . Ife's right."

Mr. Morley flips through his workbook. When he lands on the page he wants, he spends a good minute reading while chewing his gum harder and harder. He looks ready to explode.

I'm scared Mr. Morley *will* explode when Ben pipes up.

"Sir? Cat caught your tongue? It's basic physics. Oi look, he's all red. They say those that can't do, teach. What do they say about those that can't teach then?"

What the hell is he doing? I open my mouth to warn him, but nothing comes out. Even though Ben's wearing a smirk, I see how tightly he's curled his hands into fists in my periphery.

"This is a new low, even for you, *John*. Actually, nothing will top your wife leaving you for a sixth-form student."

Deafening silence. I scramble to understand. *Did he really just go there?* Not even Ben's friends are laughing.

"Ben." Mr. Morley's voice is calm, scraping at the silence. Not a raised decibel in sight. "Pack your things and get out. Now."

"No offense, but I only listen to teachers who actually know what they're talking about." Ben shrugs and leans back on his chair with his hands on his head. It's like he's trying to get himself in as much trouble as possible.

Mr. Morley flicks another stick of gum into his mouth

and leans back against the whiteboard. "I'm not going to get into a pissing match with you. Christ, I get paid regardless. If you want to waste your potential, then be my guest. Now get out."

I glance at Ben to see what he's about to do, but his smirk is gone and he's quietly packing his stuff away. His chair grates against the floor as he stands up.

I never noticed how tall he is. *And cute*. I swallow the sudden laughter trying to rise to the surface. Now's not the time. Still . . .

Maybe it's the hair? The back and sides are shaved and what's left is all over the place. He's scruffy, but it works with his shirt half untucked, top button undone, and sleeves rolled up.

Mr. Morley shakes his head as he watches Ben leave without a word. "Right. Now that—"

Everyone starts laughing and he frowns. Then he catches on and turns to the window behind him where Ben moons the whole class.

I'm laughing too, even though it's gross. Ben is *not* cute, I almost decide.

The lesson continues and no one tries anything because Mr. Morley is a roaming shark. For the last half hour he gives us a surprise difficulty-adjusted test. The radical type of education an elitist school like Nithercott would create. Apparently it's their way to make sure students are striving to reach their potential.

"Raise your hand if your current Dynamic Difficulty Score is between forty and forty-nine?"

My hand is the only one to creep up. I cringe at the soft

sniggers. Moments later a test paper and equation sheet plop onto my desk.

“Do not begin until I say so,” Mr. Morley orders. When he’s finished passing out everyone’s papers, he sits at his desk ready to invigilate. “You may now begin.”

I look through the pages and realize I can barely answer any of these. Which is soul-crushing, since my low DDS should mean I get easier questions.

“Sir, this isn’t fair,” a girl moans. “How come State School gets an equation sheet?”

Murmurs ripple through the room. A flash of heat rushes through me and my scalp prickles, all too aware of how I don’t fit in.

As if it isn’t bad enough that Urban Achiever (UA) students also have to wear a slightly different uniform too, as a show of “distinction” and “pride.”

They might as well stamp *Urban Achiever Kid* on my forehead.

Mr. Morley ignores the complaints, pointing his pen at the scribbly message on the whiteboard:

Exam conditions.

This whole situation is Ben’s fault. We’re only supposed to get these tests once a week, not twice. This should be *his* punishment, not ours!

As I’m working through a question that looks relatively easy, my phone vibrates multiple times in my bag. Piercing through the exam-conditions silence. I cough and tap my pen against the table. *Crap.*

Mr. Morley jumps up and breathes out a laugh. "You . . . kids. Give me a break." He definitely wants to say a lot more than that. He's clenching his fists so tightly his knuckles are white. "Own up. If you do, I'll only give you a week's worth of detention. I'm feeling generous."

No one does for a full minute and a half. Which makes sense, because I should be the one owning up. For once, Mr. Morley seems too tired to do anything. Dealing with Ben was enough.

He sinks back into his seat.

I'm about to reach in and turn my phone off completely, but the preview messages on my lock screen are from Malika.

Malika: You in a free? Need to vent about this place. Also school's told me my grades have been good enough to get a sponsorship. 😎 3m ago

Life's good for some. Meanwhile, my parents are going to ask me the next time we talk if I've got a sponsor yet.

Malika: Sponsor wants to meet me #robtherich 3m ago

Malika: ??? 3m ago

Malika: nvm, I checked ur timetable for week B. You've got a free. 3m ago

My eyebrows squish together. It's week A.

Malika: I'll call you in 2 mins. You
better pick up. 2m ago

Unease crackles through my gut. I scramble to power my phone down and instead accidentally switch silent mode off. It blossoms into song.

*Cut my life into pieces, this is my last resort
Suffocation, no breathing
Don't give a—*

Mr. Morley slams his left hand on the table as he stands up, his signet ring clacking against the wood. My shoulders tighten, and hands loosen, as my phone tumbles to the wood-paneled floor. I scramble for it at the same time a voice squeaks, "It's State School's phone, sir."

I flinch. *Thank you, Stacey.* Even though she's an Urban Achiever student like me, and *also* came from a state school, she tries extra hard to act like she isn't any of those things. It's embarrassing.

He points at me. "Up. Now!"

Like the prisoner I am, I obey. If the floor could swallow me up, that would be great.

When Mr. Morley strides over to my desk my phone is still singing, and the floor is clearly not hungry today.

"Jesus! Turn it off then!"

I crouch down, decline Malika's call, and power my phone off.

Mr. Morley scowls at me like I'm the worst person in the room.

"State School's *actually* crying," someone announces.

Yes. I *actually* am, because it's so dumb. The whole situation is! Now here I am, my tears messing up my physics test.

"I—I didn't think . . ." My voice is shaky and quiet. I hate how tiny I feel. "I—"

My throat dries up. Before I can recover, Mr. Morley cuts in.

"Of course you didn't think," he spits. "You've wasted my time, and the class's time. We're here to learn, not to play guess who." He doesn't say anything else, and I realize he's waiting for me to play my part. To apologize. Except my mouth isn't working. "Well? You're not going to say anything?"

All I can do is gape at him, speechless. Confident Ife is in hiding. He frowns at me and I know what's coming next.

"For the love of God! Right, well since you clearly don't care," he starts. *I do*. "A day of detention for each person's time you've wasted here today."

I look around at the rows and columns of heads. I get halfway through counting the second column when Mr. Morley says something that spins me and I face him.

"Huh?" I want to make sure I heard him right.

He sighs. "For God's sake, girl, *listen*. I said give me your phone."

"But—You can't—I—"

"Oh? Now you can talk. Christ, I'm not asking you, Ife." His voice blasts over me like too-cold aircon. "You'll get it back after you finish your detentions."

My heart deflates like a balloon. *Zanna*.

I take a deep breath, hold back the tears, and hand my phone over to an unimpressed Mr. Morley. He huffs and steps back up to the front to go on one long rant about how he doesn't get the respect he deserves. But it's just noise to me. I bury my head in my arms, the tears dampening the sleeves of my school jumper.