

THE PASSING PLAYBOOK

Isaac Fitzsimons



DIAL BOOKS

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Dedication TK

ONE

Spencer's morning went to hell when some asshole on a dirt bike swerved in front of Mom's Subaru.

Mom slammed on the brakes and flung her arm across Spencer's chest, despite the fact that he was wearing a seat belt, and even if he weren't, it's not like her arm would keep him from hurtling through the windshield and becoming sausage meat.

At least she'd already finished her coffee. The last thing he needed was to spend all day smelling like the inside of a Starbucks.

"Is everyone okay?" Mom twisted around to check on Theo in the back seat, but his eyes remained glued to the nature show playing on his tablet. Spencer was impressed by how nothing seemed to faze his little brother.

"Maybe we save the vehicular manslaughter for tomorrow," said Spencer. He didn't want to be known as the kid whose mom ran over someone at drop-off. He wasn't sure he wanted to be known as *anything*. As far as he was concerned, the less he stood out, the better.

Mom ignored him as she steered the car more carefully up the tree-lined drive and parked at the curb. “Promise me you’ll make an effort today. Talk to people. Smile sometimes.” She tugged on one of his earbuds, pulling it out of his ear. A muffled *da-da-da-dun-da-da-da-dun* from the song he was listening to trickled out into the car. “It wouldn’t kill you to be more social.”

“It might.”

Mom’s jaw clenched. “That’s not funny, Spencer. Not after last year.”

“Too soon?” said Spencer. If he turned it into a joke he could pretend that he didn’t still wake up in the middle of the night, heart racing, drenched in sweat thinking about The Incident. He called it “The Incident” so he wouldn’t have to remember it all in excruciating detail: the threatening email, the picture of his face in crosshairs stuffed in his locker, the call to the school that prompted a lockdown, huddling in the corner of a dark classroom, the cold tile leeching heat from his body, and knowing that if someone got hurt, it would be all his fault.

“I’m serious, Spence. We don’t have other options if this doesn’t work.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” The back of his neck grew hot and prickly like it had whenever he was awakened in the small hours of the day by the creak of the staircase as Dad crept up to bed after spending all night preparing for the extra college courses he was teaching that summer to pay for Spencer’s tuition.

Even with the extra work, it didn't take a math genius to figure out that Dad's paycheck was barely enough to send one kid to private school, let alone two. So after two years in a Montessori program his little brother, Theo, who was autistic, had to go to public school for the first time.

Theo had spent his summer stretched out on the living room carpet in front of the TV watching anything and everything with the word *planet* in the title. Spencer wasn't sure how well an encyclopedic knowledge of the mating behavior of amphibians (called *amplexus*, according to Theo) would go over with other eight-year-olds.

"Hey, what's with the face?" asked Mom. "This is going to be a great year. For both of you," she added, reaching around to pat Theo on the knee.

Spencer picked his backpack up off the floor and squeezed it to his chest. He reached out to open the door when Mom said, "Are you sure you want to keep that there?" She pointed at the *I'm here, I'm queer, get over it* pin on the front pocket.

Spencer's fingers brushed over the pin. He'd had the same conversation with Aiden over the phone last night.

"Think of it as a test," Aiden had said. "If someone makes a big deal out of it, you'll know to steer clear. Besides, how else will you find the other queers?"

"I'm just saying," continued Mom, "it's a bit . . . provocative for your day one. Why don't you wait and see how the QSA meeting goes first? That's today, right?"

Spencer nibbled his bottom lip. Last night he had agreed

with Aiden, but now, seeing the glittery, rainbow letters sparkling in broad daylight, the idea of walking into the building with it on felt like sticking a target on his back. Sure, Oakley might brag about being the most liberal school in the county—after all, that’s why they’d chosen it—but it was still in rural Ohio, where just that morning they’d passed by half a dozen churches, one of which had a sign that said: *Don’t be so open-minded your brains fall out.*

He undid the clasp and tucked the pin in his backpack, hoping Aiden didn’t ask him about it when they debriefed after school.

“All right, do you know where you’re going?” asked Mom.

“I think so,” he mumbled.

“If you’re not sure, you need to ask for directions.”

“I know.” He tried to keep the tinge of annoyance out of his voice. When Mom got anxious, she tended to treat him like a baby. But this was a big day for all of them.

“Here,” said Mom. She rolled down Spencer’s window, and leaned over him, calling, “Hey, you with the bike!”

Spencer slouched lower in his seat as several kids, including the boy on the dirt bike, turned to stare at them.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

The boy on the bike reversed, rolling backward to the car and stopping outside Spencer’s window.

“I’m sorry about cutting you off earlier, ma’am. I didn’t want to be late.” His voice was low and gravelly and muffled inside his retro motocross helmet.

“That’s quite all right,” said Mom, clearly charmed by his slight Appalachian twang. Her own accent, courtesy of a childhood in West Virginia, came out stronger. “This is my son Spencer. He’s new this year.”

“Nice to meet you.” The boy stuck a gloved hand through the window. The worn leather was as soft as lamb’s ear against Spencer’s palm.

“Do you think you could show him to his first class?” asked Mom.

The helmet visor hid the boy’s expression, but Spencer imagined the amusement in his face at being asked to play babysitter. “It’s okay—” he began, longing to turn around, go home, and try again tomorrow, but then the boy lifted off his helmet and Spencer’s words died in his throat.

He was cute—all farm boy tan in a navy polo and Wrangler’s. But what really made Spencer’s insides feel like he’d just been dematerialized and rematerialized in a transporter was that this kid, with his brown eyes and mega-watt smile currently aimed right at Spencer, was a dead ringer for Wesley Crusher from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Spencer’s nightly ritual was watching *Star Trek* with his dad, who would disown him, not as a son but as a fellow Trekkie, if he knew that the only reason he put up with the cheesy special effects was because of his teeny-tiny crush on acting ensign, wunderkind, Wesley Crusher.

Mom gave him a little nudge. “I have to go put Theo on the bus. Have a good day, sweetie.”

Spencer climbed out of the car, careful not to trip over himself, and slammed the door behind him. Did she have to call him sweetie? In front of *him*? What was wrong with bud? Or sport? Bike Boy's parents probably didn't call *him* sweetie, especially not at school.

He waved them off, watching the Subaru disappear around the corner, and trying to ignore the hollow feeling in his chest.

"So, what grade are you in?" asked the boy, parking his bike and waiting for Spencer on the sidewalk.

Spencer's thoughts became all tangled up in his head as he tried to shape them into words.

"Are you a first year?" Bike Boy prompted.

"No," said Spencer, a little too forcefully. He pulled himself up to his not very tall height of five feet. He wasn't insecure about it, not really, but it would be a long year if everyone, *especially* cute boys, thought he was a middle schooler who got lost on his way to class. "I'm a sophomore."

"Cool, me too."

He followed Bike Boy up the path to the gated entrance. On the way the boy waved to a couple kids and high-fived another, but he didn't introduce Spencer. Then again, what would he say? *This is the kid whose mom almost ran me over and then made me walk him to class?* Not exactly the first impression Spencer wanted.

"Let me guess, you were kicked out of your old school for

talking too much.” Bike Boy shot Spencer a wide grin. His two front teeth overlapped slightly, which Spencer found oddly endearing considering that most of his friends had been put in braces as soon as they hit double digits.

Spencer searched for something witty to say back. Something to show Bike Boy that he wasn’t a complete weirdo, but his words got lost again.

The smile on Bike Boy’s face slipped off. “Wait, were you actually kicked out? I’m sorry, I—”

“I wasn’t kicked out.”

“It was just a joke.”

“I know,” said Spencer, growing frustrated that even the most basic of conversations left him flustered.

Not wanting to prolong the agony, he made a decision when they reached the entrance. He knew where he was going. Sort of. He had taken a tour earlier that summer when signing up for classes.

“So what’s your first class?” asked Bike Boy.

He opened his mouth to respond when someone going past pushed him from behind, and he fell into Bike Boy, who reached out a hand to steady him.

Spencer pulled back his arm like he’d been burned. “It’s okay. I know where I’m going. But thanks for your help.”

Bike Boy searched his face as if trying to see if he was telling the truth. “Are you sure?”

Spencer nodded, scuffing his foot against the floor.

“All right, then. I’ll see you around, I guess,” said Bike

Boy, his voice lilting slightly like he was asking a question. He hitched his backpack higher and turned to join the swarm of students on their way to class.

Spencer watched him leave, not with relief, but with something that felt a little like guilt. Maybe he should be a touch nicer to the guy who had offered to help him, despite narrowly escaping death at the wheels of his mother's Subaru. Hell, Spencer didn't even know who he was.

Before he could stop himself, he called out, "Wait, what's your name?"

Bike Boy turned and flashed Spencer a smile. "Justice. Justice Cortes."

Justice Cortes. Spencer silently mouthed the name before another wave of students knocked into him. He shook his head. The last thing he needed was to think about Justice Cortes, or any boy, really.

What he needed was to keep his distance. If he didn't get too close to people, they wouldn't find out his secret. If they didn't find out, they couldn't use it against him. Nobody at Oakley knew he was transgender.

Spencer needed to keep his head down, study hard, and escape Apple Creek, population 1,172, where the only traffic jams were caused by tractors and Amish buggies.

But first he'd have to survive PE.

...

After a few wrong turns, he finally found the locker rooms just as the warning bell rang.

When he opened the door the nauseating stench of body spray mixed with floral air freshener blasted him in the face, invading his nostrils and making him lightheaded.

Spencer hovered awkwardly at the door as a few stragglers in various stages of undress glanced up at him from the wooden benches lining the room. Maybe he should change in the nurse's bathroom like Ms. Greene, his guidance counselor, had suggested. Private stall, a door that locked, and nobody who'd snap him in half like a twig if given the chance. But then someone might wonder why he didn't change with the rest of them. First rule of passing: Don't be different.

He found an empty corner and untied his shoes, avoiding eye contact. He wiggled his toes as a chill from the concrete floor seeped through his socks. After a minute the only sounds in the locker room were the thumping of his heartbeat and the dripping of a leaky faucet.

Alone at last, he jumped into action, wriggling out of his jeans and pulling on shorts from his backpack. He tugged on his T-shirt, grateful, not for the first time, that he hadn't needed top surgery or to suffer through wearing a binder. Starting hormone blockers at thirteen prevented too much growth and almost one year on testosterone replaced whatever fat there was with smooth muscle.

The late bell rang and he slipped into sneakers, shoved his clothes and backpack into a locker, and hurried out the door.

With its towering oak trees and ivy-covered walls, the Oakley School looked impressive on the outside. But inside, the lemony scent of disinfectant, and the squeak of his shoes against the linoleum as he jogged down the hallway connecting the locker room to the gym told Spencer that this was more like the charter school Miles Morales attended than the Xavier Institute. The hallway, which had teemed with the hustle and bustle of chattering students five minutes ago, was empty. He snuck into the gym, where a dozen or so boys were flinging foam balls at each other. One sped toward his face, forcing him to duck. Where was the teacher?

“You’re late.”

Spencer jumped and twisted around to see a man in a baseball cap standing beside him. The man wore saggy sweatpants and a ridiculous-looking cardigan with a hood—a hoodigan?—and had a toothpick dangling from his mouth.

“Are you Coach Schilling?” he asked, slightly out of breath. “Sorry, I—”

“Name?” Coach Schilling cut him off.

“Spencer Harris.”

“Harris, eh?” He surveyed his clipboard, rolling the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

Sweat pooled clammy and moist under Spencer’s armpits.

The principal, Mrs. Dumas, had assured him that his school records would have the correct name and gender, but that didn't stop the panic rising in his chest. If someone had made a mistake, he'd be outed in his very first class, and all of it—his dad working overtime, Theo switching schools—would be for nothing.

"You're new," said Coach Schilling. It wasn't a question. With a school this small, new students must be easy to spot. "Make sure you're on time tomorrow." He pulled a magazine from the back of his sweatpants and began thumbing through it.

"Could you tell me what's going on?" Spencer sidestepped as another ball hurtled toward him.

Coach Schilling, preoccupied with uncovering the secret to getting rock-hard abs in thirty days, barely glanced up from his magazine and said, "Dodgeball."

"Right," said Spencer. "But what should I actually be doing?"

Coach Schilling raised a bushy eyebrow and gave three sharp bursts of his whistle. A hush fell across the gym. Spencer's face burned as all eyes turned on him. Coach Schilling picked up a loose ball and shoved it in Spencer's hands. "Take this and throw it over there." He pointed across the painted line in the center of the gym. "No head shots, no crotch shots. Got it?"

Spencer nodded.

“Good. Have fun.” Coach Schilling blew his whistle to start the game then went to sit on the bleachers with his magazine.

Spencer’s knees knocked together as he joined his teammates. At least if it was a total disaster he could probably duck out after attendance tomorrow and Coach Schilling wouldn’t even notice.

After a few minutes of playing, Spencer’s pent-up anxiety about the first day of school dripped away with the sweat. He might be small, but he was nimble on his feet. He ducked, dived, and even got in a few hits himself, until he was the last man standing on his team and found himself outnumbered, two to one.

His first opponent, a tall boy with shaggy brown hair, chucked a ball at him. Spencer did a clumsy pirouette and it whipped past. He grinned as his teammates called out encouragement from the sidelines.

His second opponent threw a ball, which Spencer caught. His team erupted into cheers as the player moved to the sidelines, out of the game. Now it was Spencer and the shaggy-haired kid.

The boy launched the ball into the air. Spencer used the ball in his hands to deflect it back, then threw his second ball, forcing the kid to defend both shots simultaneously.

To Spencer's shock, his opponent reached out with hands the size of Spencer's face and caught both balls. Spencer was out.

Coach Schilling blew his whistle. "All right, game over."

Spencer threw his head back. He didn't consider himself a sore loser, but he disliked losing enough to make sure it didn't happen very often. When it did, it was like a kick to the shins: incredibly painful, but unlikely to cause any real damage.

He forced his grimace into a smile as his opponent approached him, hand outstretched. "Nice moves out there, Twinkle Toes." He winked at Spencer.

Spencer's cheeks ached with the effort of keeping his smile from falling. He took the kid's hand, squeezing it limply. He couldn't tell if he was making fun of him or not.

As the kid turned around and started walking back to his buddies. Spencer's pulse raced. He imagined him telling them what he'd just called Spencer and the nickname spreading around the school. His eyes fell on a ball in front of him, and before his brain caught up with his body, Spencer pulled his leg back, and let loose. The ball made a perfect arc in the air before smacking the kid in the back of his head.

The kid whirled around, his cheeks flushed and eyes flashing. Spencer's brain finally caught up. *Oh, shit.*

"Who did that?" shouted the kid.

All eyes turned to Spencer. Even the girls playing

badminton over on the other side of the gym with their own teacher stopped their game.

The kid rounded on Spencer.

Spencer flinched.

“Did you throw that at me?”

Spencer couldn’t exactly lie, not with a room of witnesses.

“No, I kicked it.”

“With your right foot or your left foot?” asked the kid.

“I— What?” asked Spencer, wondering what the hell that had to do with anything.

The kid took another step toward Spencer, who found himself backed up against the wall. “That shot. Did you make it with your right foot or your left?”

“Left. My left.”

To Spencer’s surprise, the boy smiled and turned to Coach Schilling. “Did you see that, Coach?”

Coach Schilling was also staring at Spencer with a curious look on his face. “That I did, son, that I did.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “Macintosh, why don’t you head to the nurse and get an ice pack. You.” He pointed his whistle at Spencer. “Harris, right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Spencer.

“You’re coming with me.”

TWO

If there were a record for fastest expulsion, Spencer had crushed it. Maybe he could do online classes or Mom could homeschool him again. That is, if she didn't kill him when she found out what he'd done.

He followed Coach Schilling into a dingy room the size of a broom closet. A whiteboard with scribbled, half-erased plays was stuffed in the corner.

Coach Schilling squeezed himself behind a tiny desk and indicated for Spencer to sit on a metal folding chair. Spencer was so cramped that his knees collided against the front of the desk, which was bare except for a framed photograph of a boy with a toothy grin holding a baseball bat, and a placard that said *Luck is for the Unprepared*, which wasn't helpful, as Spencer wasn't feeling lucky, nor prepared.

Coach Schilling steepled his fingers together and eyed Spencer. "I've got one question for you," he began, a huge grin spreading across his face. "Where the heck have you been all my life?"

“I—uh—what?” Maybe private school handled discipline differently.

“I’ll give it to you straight: I need a player like you on my team.”

“Your team?” He’d figured “Coach” was some sort of honorary title bestowed upon PE teachers after a certain number of years forcing kids to climb ropes and run a timed mile.

“Soccer, football, the beautiful game. Whatever you want to call it. Surely you’ve played before. I was watching you in dodgeball. You’re agile and have an innate intelligence for finding space. And the way the ball collided with Macintosh’s head tells me your shot has accuracy and power.”

“Yeah, I used to play midfield.” Thinking of his old team brought back warm memories of playing cards during long bus rides to games, and monthly chili dinners at his coach’s house.

“We’re neck deep in football country, which means I don’t even have enough players for a separate JV team because they’d all rather get concussions fighting for a pig-skin. I need someone like you if we have any chance at winning the League Cup this year.”

Framed team photos lined the wall behind Coach Schilling. Row upon row of boys stared back at Spencer, the passage of time measured by their hair getting shorter and their shorts getting longer. He recognized his opponent from PE wearing the goalie kit in the most recent photo,

which explained how he had blocked Spencer's shots. Then he found another familiar face in the lineup.

"That boy, there. He's still on the team?" he asked, doing his best to sound casual.

Coach Schilling followed to where he was pointing. "Ah, that's Justice Cortes. Sophomore. Scouted him myself. He also plays midfield."

Well, shit, that was just what Spencer didn't need. He'd barely been able to string two sentences together when he spoke with Justice earlier that morning, and that was when they were both fully clothed. He'd probably become completely comatose if he had to change in front of him.

Coach Schilling watched him expectantly. The thing was, he knew he was a boy, but he didn't know if he belonged on that wall of players with their broad shoulders and narrow hips. None of them had to worry about getting changed in the locker room or where to hide their tampons in case they started their period.

Besides, being on a team again and getting that close to people had risks. Worst of all, if everything went haywire, it wouldn't just be him who'd be affected. There was Mom, Dad, and Theo to think about.

On the other hand, that twenty minutes playing dodgeball was the first time in a long time that he felt like he belonged to something bigger than himself, like other people had his back. It was a nice feeling.

"I don't know," said Spencer.

Coach Schilling scratched his days-old stubble. “Well, you signed the handbook, so I assume you’re familiar with our zero-tolerance policy for violence. Maybe Principal Dumas will be lenient on you since you’re new, but zero tolerance generally means, well, zero tolerance.”

Okay, that changed things. “And if I join?”

“When I fill out the incident report, I’ll call it an accident.”

Getting blackmailed by his PE teacher hadn’t been part of his plans, but Coach Schilling’s offer had to be better than whatever his parents would do to him.

“Can I think about it?”

Coach Schilling handed him a piece of paper. “Have your parents sign this. Tryouts are tomorrow after school.”

By lunchtime, Spencer’s brain was fit to bursting with all the information he had to remember from his morning classes: how to get to them, the names of his teachers, the page numbers for the homework he’d been assigned, even though it was only day one.

He slipped past the cafeteria, which sounded like it had been taken over by wild animals, and instead made his way to the classroom where the Queer Straight Alliance was meeting. He double-checked the number by the door, making sure it matched the one that Ms. Greene had sent in an email a few days ago. If he couldn’t wear his pin, Spencer

figured this was the next best method of meeting other queer students.

He steeled himself, then opened the door.

Inside, the desks had been arranged in a semicircle. Spencer counted six other students. It looked like he was the last to arrive.

A boy in a deep V-neck shirt and a pair of skinny jeans so tight they could have been painted on looked up at the sound of the door opening. "Here for the QSA? Come on in. we're about to do names and pronouns."

Spencer took a seat at the desk nearest to the door.

"I'll start," continued the boy. "My name is Grayson Condon and I use *he* and *him*. This is my third year at Oakley and my second year as president of the QSA." He turned to the kid slouched in a chair to his left.

"I'm Riley." Chin-length blond hair with purple streaks peeked out from under the kid's hoodie.

"And your pronouns?" asked Grayson.

Riley stared at the floor. "I . . . I don't know. I'm still figuring everything out."

Grayson leaned forward. "Hey, this is a safe space. You can use whatever pronouns you want here." He gave the kid a reassuring smile.

"*They*, I guess." Riley uncrossed their arms and sat up straighter.

"Okay, then, *they* it is. Let us know if anything changes."

Spencer nodded at Riley encouragingly. Coming out was never easy, even when it went well.

The first time he came out was in a Kroger parking lot when he was thirteen.

He had endured awkward puberty talks from his parents and his health teacher, and intellectually he knew that one day he'd grow boobs, and hips, and look like the women he saw on TV. But there was part of him that thought, *What if I didn't.*

Before he went to bed each night, Spencer would pray that he would wake up as a boy.

It never worked.

Then, one day when he was in eighth grade, one of his teammates came up to him after soccer practice. Even with a strand of hair stuck to her glossy lips, she carried herself with a sort of unself-consciousness that Spencer had never felt before. She was like everything a girl should be, and everything that Spencer wasn't.

"Look," she said, "this is awkward, but maybe you should think about wearing a sports bra. You can borrow one of mine if you want," she added, trying to be helpful. "I think it will really improve your game."

A red, hot tingle started to prickle Spencer's scalp and crawled down his back. There was no meanness in her comment, but the idea that someone had been inspecting his body, especially *that* part, made him feel sick. If she had noticed he needed a bra, then other people did too.

So, Spencer didn't show up for the next game. Then he skipped a few practices and stopped going to team sleepovers. He stopped doing much of anything.

One day Mom dragged him out of the house to the grocery store. As they were leaving, her phone rang. She pulled back into their parking spot to check the caller ID.

"Mom, can we go home? The ice cream is going to melt." He didn't really care about the ice cream, but he wanted to be back in his bedroom, the only place where he could truly be himself.

"You know I don't like talking and driving. It's your coach. This will only take a minute." She answered the phone.

Spencer took out his own phone to lose himself in an endless scroll through social media but was brought back when Mom's voice rose.

"Excuse me, what?" Mom swiveled in her seat to look at him. "I'm going to have to call you back." She hung up and frowned at Spencer. "Coach Ireland says you haven't been going to practice."

Spencer avoided her eyes. "Can we talk about this later?"

"No, we're talking about it now. Do you know how much money we spend for you to be on that team? I'm talking about your kit, gas to drive you to games and tournaments, that summer camp you went to. And you can't even be bothered to show up for practice? What's going on with you?"

Silence filled the car.

Mom spoke again. "Do you not want to play anymore?"

It was as if an ice cube were stuck in his throat. He shook his head.

"Then why didn't you tell me you wanted to quit soccer?"

"I don't want to quit soccer." Spencer's voice came out raspy. "I just don't want to play on that team. I want to play on a boys' team."

Mom drew in a breath. "I have to say, I'm disappointed. You know that girls play just as hard as boys." Leave it to Mom to turn his coming out into a speech about feminism.

"No, it's not that. It's just, I just—" He paused, unable to continue. "I don't think I'm supposed to be a girl." He stuffed his hands under his legs to stop them from shaking.

Mom stared straight ahead. "I don't understand."

He took a deep breath. "I don't want boobs."

"Sweetie, lots of girls feel that way. It's natural to be uncomfortable about your changing body."

"It's not just boobs. It feels wrong when I get my period."

"You got your period, when?"

"A couple months ago." He'd stuffed his underwear with a hand towel and thought that if he ignored it, it would go away.

She didn't say anything for a long while. Spencer's chest felt tight, like a cord had been wrapped around it. Then she said, "Thank you for telling me. I want you to know that I'll always love you, whether you feel like you're a girl or a boy or whatever." And the cord around his chest loosened.

A week later, they went to Supercuts for his first short haircut. Examining his fresh fade in the mirror afterward, he finally looked more on the outside how he felt on the inside.

One evening, not long after, Mom went out and Dad said she was meeting a friend. She came home late and knocked on Spencer's door. He was on his bed, his laptop on his thighs. She entered the room.

"Can I sit?"

Spencer moved his laptop, which had gotten too hot for his legs, and pulled his knees up to his chest.

"I went to a support group for parents of transgender and gender non-conforming kids. That's what you are, right?"

"I guess."

"There were a lot of nice people there who gave me some great advice. This is all new to me, so tomorrow I'm going to make an appointment for you to see a therapist who specializes in these types of issues and get you the support you need."

"Really?"

She put a hand on his knee. "I'm not going to make you grow up into someone you're not meant to be."

"Name and pronouns?" asked Grayson.

Spencer realized that the room had grown quiet and looked up to see everyone staring at him.

He swallowed; his throat felt like sandpaper. “I’m Spencer—”

“Can you speak up?” interrupted Grayson.

“Sorry,” he said, louder. “My name’s Spencer, I use *he*, *him*, *his*.”

“Awesome, thanks Spencer,” said Grayson.

When everyone had introduced themselves, Grayson took the floor again, sharing a bit more about the QSA and the different programs they did each year.

“We have to do something for National Coming Out Day in October. Then in November there’s Transgender Day of Remembrance. And we always do something big for Pride before school ends in June. If you want to take the lead on planning anything, let me know.”

The rest of the meeting passed smoothly, a welcome oasis from all the chaos that morning, and Spencer grew hopeful that maybe he’d found a place at Oakley where he could belong.

Still, Spencer was glad when the meeting ended early since it gave him the chance to use the bathroom before everyone else exited the cafeteria en masse. He even managed to find a stall where the toilet wasn’t completely covered with pee. He quickly took care of business, then left, almost bumping into Riley outside the door.

“Sorry,” he said, holding the door open for Riley.

Riley hesitated. Spencer read the anxiety in their face.

“There’s nobody in there, if you want to go in now,” he said.

Riley still looked unsure.

“I can wait outside and tell anyone who tries to go in that there’s a leak or something.”

Riley cracked a smile. “You’d do that?”

Spencer shrugged. “Of course.” He leaned against the wall and waited, nodding awkwardly at people as they passed by. His anxiety spiked each time it was a guy. Still, it felt good to use his passing privilege to help Riley.

To Spencer’s immense relief, no one tried to use the bathroom, and after a couple minutes Riley came back out.

“Thanks,” they said, hanging their messenger bag across their shoulder. As Riley started down the hall, Spencer noticed a patch with Aiden’s band name sewed to their bag. “Wait, you know The Testostertones?” he called out.

Riley turned back. “They’re like my favorite band.”

“No way. Aiden Nesbitt is one of my best friends,” said Spencer excitedly.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, I met him . . .” Spencer trailed off. He’d met Aiden at a two-week sleepaway camp for trans kids. But he wasn’t ready to come out, not yet, even to Riley. “I met him this summer.”

“Is he as awesome as he seems online?”

“Better.” To be honest, Spencer often suspected that lots

of people considered Aiden to be their best friend. That's just who he was. It helped that he was the drummer in a punk rock band, ran an active YouTube channel documenting his transition, and had an internship at a popular online queer zine.

"If you want, I could introduce you sometime," said Spencer. "His band has a few gigs coming up. I could see if he can get us tickets; we could all hang out."

"That would be amazing," said Riley.

"Cool. Give me your number and I'll let you know." Spencer couldn't stop the smile spreading across his face as Riley punched their number into his phone. Maybe this whole making friends thing wouldn't be so hard after all.

THREE

Music Appreciation was Spencer's last class, and the one he'd been looking most forward to. For the first time all day, he made it to class early. The classroom was deep in the school's basement. Guitars with chipped necks lined the wall and mismatched chairs were arranged in a semicircle.

The stained, mustard-yellow carpet and lack of natural lighting suggested to Spencer that his tuition money wasn't going toward funding the arts at Oakley. Especially when he compared this room to the state-of-the-arts science lab he'd seen during his tour of the school.

Mom had clutched his arm excitedly at the sight of it, her nails leaving half-moon-shaped indents in his skin. Spencer liked science. He was good at it, great even. The science fair medals pinned to the corkboard in his bedroom proved that. At his old school, he'd been allowed to take chemistry a year early.

But when he'd told her that he wanted to take Music Appreciation instead of physics, she acted like he'd said that

he wanted to enroll in a Klingon language course instead of English.

“Do you really want to choose a music elective over science? That’s not like you, Spence.”

The thing about moms is that they think they understand you better than you do yourself, just because they changed your diaper for a couple years.

Along with an affinity for science, Spencer also inherited his mom’s complete lack of musical talent. Dad, on the other hand, still slept in the T-shirt from his college a cappella group. Neither of his parents did sports, but at least he could geek out over science with his mom. If he took Music Appreciation, he’d have something more to talk about with his dad too. In the end, Ms. Greene made the decision when he was signing up for classes after his tour of the school earlier that summer. “If I may,” said Ms. Greene, sitting up straighter in her chair, “I think we should let Spencer sign up for the music elective. Physics can wait until next year. Here at Oakley we encourage expanding the mind through academic exploration.” She sounded like she was quoting one of the motivational phrases plastered around the walls of her office.

No such posters lined the walls of the music room. Instead, there were the typical pictures of musical notes, plus black and white photos of musicians. Some Spencer recognized from Dad’s record collection—Mahalia Jackson, Duke Ellington—and others he didn’t know.

Spencer picked his seat and watched the rest of the students trickle in after the warning bell rang. A few of them looked familiar, but they didn't acknowledge him. Good, at least he was flying under the radar. A few seconds later, the teacher walked in. Her dress, made out of yellow kente cloth, fanned out around her. Spencer hadn't thought it was possible for a teacher to be cool, but there was no other word for it. She looked like she had just got back from vacation in Wakanda.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Ms. Hart. Welcome to Music Appreciation." Her smile seemed to light up every corner of the drab room. She started with roll call and then launched into an explanation of the syllabus.

She was just going over the part about how while this class may be an elective, she still expected everyone to take it seriously and anybody who was anticipating an easy grade could leave right now, when the door opened and Justice Cortes, the dirt bike riding, soccer playing, Wesley Crusher, lookalike, strolled in.

Spencer's heart fluttered like hummingbird wings in his chest. He'd been low-key disappointed that he hadn't had any classes with Justice, until he remembered his disastrous attempts at conversation that morning.

Considering Ms. Hart's lecture at the beginning of class, Spencer braced himself for her reaction to Justice's tardiness.

Justice aimed his crooked grin at Ms. Hart. "Did you miss me?"

Ms. Hart opened her arms. “Come give me a hug.” She wrapped her arms around him and rocked him side to side the same way that Spencer’s aunt hugged him whenever they visited her in New York.

“Sorry I’m late. I was talking to Coach about something.”

“It’s okay. Find a seat.”

As if Spencer’s thoughts were sending out a homing beacon, Justice looked over in his direction, making eye contact, and Spencer understood what Gimli saw when he gazed upon Galadriel. But, no. Just no. He hadn’t even known this kid existed five hours ago. It was scientifically impossible to develop a crush in that amount of time, right? And, besides, he wasn’t in the position to be crushing on anybody.

But of course, Justice chose the empty seat right next to him. For the next ten minutes Spencer tried very hard to concentrate on what Ms. Hart was saying, but it was difficult because his leg kept brushing against Justice’s in the small circle.

Finally, Ms. Hart put down the syllabus in her hand and said, “Okay, everybody up. I know it’s almost time to go home. Let’s shake off this afternoon sluggishness.”

She then led them through a series of stretches. Spencer became very aware of every sound that Justice made next to him as he stretched, and had to remind himself to look at Ms. Hart and not at Justice when she demonstrated a weird hip-swiveling routine.

Spencer was relieved when they finally finished and he could retreat to the safety of his seat, but Ms. Hart had other ideas. “Now, just because this isn’t choir, doesn’t mean I’m not going to make you sing.”

Maybe he should’ve taken physics after all. Spencer had never been good at singing, but his voice had become much more unpredictable lately even when he was only talking.

Ms. Hart moved to the piano and played a scale. “We’re going to do sirens. Start on the low note and I want you to slide up to the high note and back down again.” She demonstrated the exercise, her voice rich and melodic. “Got it?”

She cued them in and Spencer opened his mouth to sing. He hit the low note all right, but then his voice cracked, sounding like a tortured goat. He saw the corners of Justice’s mouth turn up. The tips of Spencer’s ears went red and he switched to mouthing for the rest of the exercise.

When the torment was finally over and they were allowed to sit down again, Ms. Hart addressed the class. “This semester we’re going to be exploring different music genres. Where there are people, there is music. I’m sure you all listen to music all the time. Like right now. Cole, I can see the AirPods in your ear.”

Cole, a white kid with a buzz cut, sheepishly removed the AirPods.

“But who can tell me, what is music?” asked Ms. Hart.

The class shifted uneasily.

When nobody answered she said, “Come on, folks, this isn’t a trick question.”

A girl raised her hand. “It’s like organized noise.”

“Organized noise. Nice. What else?”

A few more kids raised their hands and she called on them.

Spencer opened his notebook to start writing down notes, but jumped when Justice’s voice whispered in his ear.

“I heard you’re trying out for the soccer team.”

A shiver ran down Spencer’s spine. He shrugged. He didn’t trust his voice enough to speak.

“Are you any good?”

Spencer kept his eyes on Ms. Hart, not wanting to look at Justice. “I guess,” he whispered back. He’d led his old team to championship victory in middle school, but he couldn’t tell Justice that since it was a girls’ team.

“Coach seems to think you are, anyway,” continued Justice. “And Macintosh was practically skipping when he told me what happened in PE.” He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I’ve never seen anyone so happy to be belted with a ball before. But a word of advice: This isn’t like playing in the backyard with your little brother. We’re ranked second in the league. You’ll need to be able to keep up.”

Spencer bristled at that. “What makes you think I can’t keep up?” The words left his mouth too loudly, causing Ms. Hart to pause and look over in their direction. But seriously,

who did this kid think he was? He'd never even seen Spencer play.

Justice waited until Ms. Hart went back to her lesson to answer. "No offense, but you're like half the size of everyone else on the team. Not to mention the rest of the league. Look, come to tryouts if you want, but I just don't want you to get your hopes up."

Spencer opened his mouth to tell Justice where he could shove his hopes, but Justice was looking intently at Ms. Hart as if the conversation had never happened. Still disgruntled, Spencer attempted to do the same.

"Music can be found in every country," Ms. Hart was saying. "In every culture, and across every time period. Who can tell me where music began?"

Justice raised his hand so fast that it created a breeze that ruffled Spencer's hair. Ms. Hart called on him. Spencer expected him to say Nashville because of his country twang, but to his surprise he said, "Africa."

Ms. Hart smiled, her teeth flashing white against her dark skin. "That's right. Every genre can be traced back to its African roots. This semester, we're going to study how music has evolved over time. For your final project, you'll choose a song that has been covered by multiple artists across genres and identify how the different interpretations affect its message. I'll give you more information about that later on in the year. Now, I know it's been a long day. Let's finish up

by listening to some music.” She put on old-school R&B similar to what Spencer’s dad jammed to when cleaning the house.

Spencer crossed his arms and tried to let the music wash over him, but his mind kept wandering back to Justice’s comment. The more he thought about it, the more annoyed he got. Who was Justice to tell him what he could and could not do? Though trying out for the team didn’t exactly mesh with keeping his head down, he sure as hell wasn’t going to let Justice have the final word.

The fridge cast a blue glow as Spencer chugged orange juice straight from the carton later that evening. He peered through the doorway to the dining room, where Dad graded papers and Mom was setting the table for dinner.

“Cliff, can you move your stuff, we’ll be eating soon. Spencer!” she called.

Spencer swallowed his mouthful. “I’m right here.”

Mom looked into the kitchen and wrinkled her nose. “Use a glass, Spence. And close the fridge door. You weren’t raised in a barn.”

Spencer let out an *oink* before closing the fridge like she’d asked. He left the kitchen and snuck up behind Dad, throwing his arms around his neck.

“Look who finally decided to leave his room,” Dad said as he wriggled out of Spencer’s grasp.

“I was recharging.”

“Connie, did you forget to plug him in last night?”

Spencer rolled his eyes. Being an introverted child of two extroverts was exhausting.

He took a seat at the table next to Dad. “Are we waiting for Theo?”

“Let’s go ahead and get started,” said Mom. “He needed a little chill-out time after school. He’ll come when he’s ready.” She piled some chili on his plate. “So, tell us more about your day, you hardly said anything on the ride home.” She kept her tone light, but a slight waver to her voice betrayed her nerves. When she’d picked him up after school, Spencer had kept to mostly monosyllable responses, too drained for anything else.

Spencer shrugged. “It was all right.”

“Thank you for that description, Mr. Shakespeare,” said Dad. “It’s like I was actually there.” He turned to Mom. “We’re paying how much to send him to that place, and he can barely string a sentence together. Shaking my head.”

Spencer rolled his eyes again. His parents had done their best to hide negative reactions to his transition, but he’d heard enough to know that some people called them abusive for supporting him. He wished he could tell them that the only abuse he suffered was his dad’s corny jokes.

“Dad, first of all, it’s SMH. Second, you only write it online. Third, nobody really uses it anymore.”

“Thank you for that enlightening lecture, Professor

Harris. It's not like I have a PhD or anything," he added under his breath in a mock whisper.

"Call me Spencer. Professor Harris is my father."

Dad tossed his crumpled napkin at him and attempted to put him in a headlock.

"Cliff, please unhand our child." Mom sighed dramatically and turned back to Spencer. "Did you meet anybody nice?" Spencer noticed that she had barely touched her chili.

Spencer hastily shoveled another spoonful in his mouth to avoid answering, burning his tongue in the process. Just then, Theo entered the dining room wearing nothing but socks and underwear with blue manatees on them.

"Hey sweetie, we wear pants at the table, remember?" said Mom.

Theo looked down. "Oh yeah." He ran back out of the room.

"What about Theo?" asked Spencer, thankful for the distraction of his younger brother. "How was his first day?"

Mom and Dad exchanged a glance. Mom lowered her voice. "He had a little trouble getting on the bus this morning after we dropped you off, so I had to drive him. And his teacher called; they want to set up a meeting this week. I just hope we made the right decision moving him."

Dad reached over and squeezed Mom's hand.

"There's always tomorrow, right?" said Spencer.

"Right," said Mom. "Oh! Tell Dad about that boy from this morning. Do you have any classes with him?"

Spencer's fork missed his mouth. "Yeah, one." He leaned down to pick up a bean that had fallen on the floor before his tabby cat, Luna, could eat it. If the table hid the pink blush spreading across his cheeks, that was only a bonus.

"What's his name?"

Spencer sensed an incoming rapid-fire round of questioning. Mom used to be an ER nurse and was a pro at weaseling out information from mortified patients about what they were trying to stick where. It was only a matter of time before she cracked him.

"Justice." Justice, who didn't think he could hack it on the soccer team, he thought bitterly. Which reminded him . . . "He's on the soccer team. I also met the coach, who said I should come to tryouts." His voice went up at the end, turning it into a question.

Mom choked on her water. "The boys' team?"

"Well, yeah." What other team would he mean? "I've got the permission slip here." He took the form out of his pocket and handed it to Mom.

Mom scanned the form. Then his parents had a wordless conversation that involved lots of raised eyebrows and pursed lips. Mom broke the silence. "We don't think that's the best idea."

"Why not?" said Spencer, raising his voice.

"The plan was that you were going to ease into this transition," she said. "Let's not complicate things. Think about it: Where would you shower? And what about overnights?"

There might be hazing rituals that involve nudity. There's a boatload of things that could go wrong. We don't want to go through what happened before."

Of course, Spencer had similar concerns. But it was *his* life and it should be *his* decision. "But this morning you were going on about how I needed to make friends."

"Yes, but there are other ways to make friends. I'm sure there are other activities you can join that maybe aren't as physical."

And there it was: She didn't think he could handle playing with the boys' team. He waited for Dad to step in to back him up, but he was adding spoonful after spoonful of sour cream to his chili, and not looking at him.

Mom continued, "What about AV club? You used to love making those little movies with Theo."

"Yeah, like when I was in sixth grade."

"Let's make a deal. This semester you join AV club, then Dad and I will think about soccer for next year." Mom folded the permission form and put it in her pocket. Conversation ended.

Spencer stabbed a bean with his fork. His parents might support his transition, but they would never truly see him as a boy.

After dinner Spencer went into his bedroom, shut the door against the world, and sank into his beanbag chair. He

groaned when he heard Luna scratching at the door outside. He got up and opened the door for her. She leaped onto his bed and began kneading his blankets, purring. He nuzzled his face against her fur, then picked up his phone and called Aiden. He'd know what to do.

"So, how was it?" Aiden picked up after the first ring, and his familiar, raspy voice formed a warm cocoon around Spencer. It was wild to think he'd only known him since June. At trans camp they'd discovered that they only lived about thirty minutes away from each other and Aiden had invited Spencer to a local trans support group, which met every month.

"Not too bad, I guess."

"Dude, seriously? Has anyone told you that you're kind of hard to read? Don't make me claw it out of you."

"It was okay. Oh, I met one of your fans."

"Are we talking YouTube, music, or memes?" Spencer could practically hear Aiden grinning through the phone.

"Is the zine still not taking off the training wheels?"

"You could say that. I get that they hired me as the Gen Z whisperer, but I want to be able to write a story that matters, not recycle Twitter posts and TikToks. Anyway, back to my number one fan."

Spencer groaned good-naturedly. If it were anyone else, he'd be annoyed at the arrogance. Luckily Aiden's heart was twice as big as his head.

"Their name is Riley. They listen to your music. I . . . might have said you could hook us up with tickets."

“Trying to shoot your shot, huh?”

Spencer gave a slight shrug. “No, Riley’s nice, but not my type.”

“What *is* your type?” It wasn’t the first time Aiden had asked him that. He was always suggesting people Spencer might be interested in, but Spencer had a hard enough time learning to love and accept his own body, let alone inviting someone else to.

Justice’s face came unwillingly to mind. Spencer shook his head to clear it.

“I don’t want to talk about my love life or inflate your already humongous ego. I need your advice.” Spencer explained the situation about soccer tryouts and his parents not letting him go.

“I know what you want me to say. You want me to tell you that you should disobey your parents and go to prove to them that a trans guy can keep up with a bunch of cis boys. That way, when they find out, which they will because no offense, dude, you’ve got all the stealth of a drunk rhinoceros, you won’t feel as guilty because I gave you permission.”

That was what Spencer liked most about Aiden, he kept him honest.

“So I shouldn’t go to tryouts?”

“I didn’t say that. But *you* need to make the decision. Not me. You’re not roping me into this one. Your mom already thinks I’m the anti-Christ.”

“That’s not true. Number one, my mom’s an atheist and I’m pretty sure you need to believe in Christ to believe in an anti-Christ.”

“Interesting theory. Not sure if it holds up. Look, I have to finish a post for tomorrow. Just do what you think is best. I’ll see you on Saturday, right?”

On Saturday there was a barbecue for the trans support group they went to. “Yeah, I’ll be there. Thanks Aiden. I think I’m going to do it.”

“Good luck, bro. Love you, bye,” said Aiden.

Spencer settled back on his beanbag and turned on FIFA. He controlled his favorite soccer player, Rafi Sisa, on the screen. If Sisa, the son of a dirt farmer who grew up playing barefoot in Ecuador, could become a professional soccer player, then he sure as hell could try out for a high school team.