



# THIRSTY

JAS HAMMONDS

# THIRSTY

A NOVEL

## PRAISE FOR *THIRSTY*

“A revelation. In this stunning, messy-hearted, soul-soothing novel, Hammonds gives readers a means to examine, confront, and be curious about what alcohol can mask and destroy within us. This book will save lives, I have no doubt.”

—**MARIAMA J. LOCKINGTON**, STONEWALL HONOR AUTHOR  
OF *IN THE KEY OF US* AND *FOREVER IS NOW*

“Jas Hammonds remains one of literature’s most electric voices. Breathtaking and courageous, *Thirsty* challenges our social norms, perception of addiction, and expectations for all kinds of love. I was dazzled and devastated by every page.”

—**JEN ST. JUDE**, AUTHOR OF *IF TOMORROW DOESN'T COME*

“A vibrant, affirming look at addiction, resilience, and what it means to take charge of your own life.”

—**REBECCA BARROW**, AUTHOR OF *AND DON'T  
LOOK BACK* AND *THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE*

“Vulnerable, tender, heartbreaking, and so full of hope. *Thirsty* is a compelling exploration of interiority that feels universal by a profound and incredible author.”

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“*Thirsty* is an undeniable force. A knockout with nuance. This stunningly crafted story tugs at the reader with breathless pace and sharp insights that ultimately delivers the hope of recovery.”

—**CORY McCARTHY**, BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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“Utterly consuming and tenderly poignant, *Thirsty* is a fearless exploration of toxicity, addiction, rage, and healing. A transformative novel that readers will cling to long after the final page.”

—**JULIAN WINTERS**, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
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“Poignant and gutsy. *Thirsty* is a brilliant exploration of girlhood and desire and what it means when we haven’t been taught to love ourselves. With the promise of hope and hard-fought insight, Blake’s journey is both compelling and confronting. A must read.”

—**STEPHANIE KUEHN**, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
OF *WE WEREN’T LOOKING TO BE FOUND*

“Visceral and engrossing, *Thirsty* by Jas Hammonds plunges readers into the glittering world of country clubs and luxury boats—a world Blake is desperate to be part of as she battles crippling anxiety and self-doubt with one more round. This book is astounding in its searing authenticity and tenderness.”

—**ALEXANDRA VILLASANTE**, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
OF *THE GRIEF KEEPER*



ALSO BY JAS HAMMONDS

WE DESERVE MONUMENTS



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*for the drunk girl in the mirror*



## CONTENT WARNING

*Thirsty* includes depictions of alcohol addiction, self-hatred, suicidal ideation, racial microaggressions, transphobic rhetoric, and nonconsensual outing. For a full list of content warnings, please visit [jashammonds.com](http://jashammonds.com).

Please read this story with care. And, perhaps, a cup of tea.



# HOW TO BE THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

**ARRIVE LOOKING FINE AS** hell. But not *too* fine. You should be a disheveled, *I just put this together* fine. An effortless fine.

Everything should always appear effortless.

Keep up with the heaviest drinker in the room. It's important to impress her. You don't want people to think you're boring. Plus, you're funnier when you're drunk. And what good is being the life of the party if people can't laugh at you?

Make out with your girlfriend because she smells like sweet honey, because her lips taste like sea salt and sugar, because she's redwood tree tall. You want to climb her, crawl inside her, live like this forever. Tell her she looks beautiful under an arc of neon light. Silence the little girl in your throat who wants to plead, *Tell me you love me*, because, confession? Even after four years together, you still aren't sure sometimes.

Drink something strong and smoke something sweet and light up the room like a firecracker. Compliment people's outfits and mean it. Scream *I love this song* and prove it by singing every word.

Don't worry. Have a drink, and another. Be chill. Tuck your anxieties in your bra so no one besides you will notice them poking you like warped underwire. Ignore the voice in your head that believes everyone secretly hates you.

Dance. Dance. *Dance!*

(Your insecurities can't catch you if you keep moving.)

Glimpse traces of That Feeling whenever you notice yourself in mirrors and coffee table reflections. That *Feeling* of swollen lips, invincibility, sexiness, power. *Belonging*. That Feeling is a song, and you are the maestro. You never want this crescendo to end.

You are not a loser. Not anymore. You have made it. You are one of Them.

Or . . . you will be.

*Soon.*

Drink.

That's right, keep going.

You have an audience to please.

**JUNE**





# CHAPTER 1

I LOVED THE SOUND of my own name.

*“Dance with me, Blake.”*

It wasn't vanity. Not entirely . . .

*“Blaaaaaake.”*

Hearing my name reminded me I was here. I existed. I had a witness.

And it felt good to be seen.

*“I love you, Bee.”*

My girlfriend's breath was hot in my ear. We were dancing. I loved dancing with Ella Spencer. This gorgeous statue of a girl who only had eyes for *me*. She was electric, and so was I. We were Blake and Ella, Ella & Blake, the couple Landstown High voted Most Likely to Still Be Together in Ten Years for yearbook senior superlatives. Only ten years? A decade sounded insulting when the honor was first bestowed.

We were going to last forever, I just knew it.

We were on Josiah Winters's yacht, *Byte Me*. I didn't know what time it was. The string lights looked pretty and so did my girlfriend, my beautiful, beautiful girlfriend. Someone handed me a drink and I downed it without asking what was in it. It was pink and it was pretty, what more did I need to know? I was here and everything was good.



Someone shouted over the music, “*You aren’t going to fucking believe this!*” Josiah. Loud-ass Josiah. Ella and I swayed toward the knot of our coworkers clustered around the bar, and there was Roxanne Garcia, glowing under a crystal chandelier. She grinned at me over a martini glass like the Cheshire Cat. She was so pretty she made my teeth hurt.

“Mr. Peterson hosted a costume party on his boat last weekend and he showed up in blackface,” Josiah said, and declarations of “Shut up!” and “*I know you fucking lying!*” exploded from the group like confetti. Ella snaked an arm around my waist, and I sank into her.

(My beautiful girlfriend—who chose *me!*)

Josiah had evidence. He airdropped it to the entire party so we could see. When Ella opened it, she laughed and called him an asshole, but when I saw the photo, my anger was scarlet and slingshot fast. I hated the Petersons. I served Mr. Peterson and his miserable, entitled family all the time at the Snack Attack Shack. More than once he’d snapped his fingers to get my attention because he didn’t know my name.

“I hate him,” I spewed, tossing my phone onto the bar with a clatter. “He’s such a racist piece of shit! Someone . . . someone”—the room swayed—“someone should teach him a *lesson*.”

“Uh-oh,” Ella said. “Big Bad Bee’s coming out.”

(You know what’s even better than the sound of your own name? A *nickname* someone created just. For. You.)

“I love it when Big Bad Bee comes out!” Josiah cheered, his pale cheeks ruddied from wine.

“Who’s Big Bad Bee?” someone asked.

How could they not know?

I sashayed around the bar and plucked the cotton candy vape out of my best friend Annetta's hand. She muttered, "Not like *I* was using that," when I took a giant hit. I looked so cool.

"I am Big Bad Bee," I declared through a cloud of sweet smoke. The crowd cheered, "Bee! Bee! Bee!" but all I heard was, *Me*—

*Me.*

*ME!*



I was in the bathroom. Swirling like I was going down a drain. I grabbed the sink for balance and my eyes snagged on the girl in the mirror. She looked so good. Wild black curls, straight white teeth, smoky eye makeup that hadn't budged all night. No more Little Blake. This was Big Bad Bee.

"I'm so sexy," I purred, grabbing my chest and shimmying my shoulders. Someone giggled. A toilet flushed and Ella—*my* beautiful girlfriend—joined me at the mirror. She'd been here the whole time?

"Yeah, you are," she said, running her tongue along her bottom lip. Her mouth was grenadine red.



Inside the golf cart bay. It was hot. Summers in Virginia were always so damn hot, even at two in the morning. Was time *was* it? Who knew. Who cared. Not me, Big Bad Bee.

I was drinking something fruity. Watermelon? No, grapefruit.

"You should chill," Annetta said. She was always popping up like some overbearing Whac-a-Mole just when the party was getting good.

Ella came over with a frosty bottle of rum and topped me off. “She’s *fine*, Nettie. My Bumblebee needs her nectar.”

I sipped and winked at Annetta.

*Buzz, buzz, bitch.*



Someone mentioned Frank Peterson again, and I got riled up again and told everyone how much I hated him again. When I turned around, Roxanne Garcia was there. Somehow she was always there.

“You know, Blake . . .” My name fell from her pink-painted lips like scribbled cursive, impressive for just one syllable. “The Serena Society fiercely condemns racism and anti-Blackness in all its forms.”

I knew. Of course I knew. I wanted to be a Serena Society girl so bad it took everything in me to not throw myself at her feet right then and there. I nodded like a hungry disciple.

Roxanne’s mouth slid into a pout. “So what are you going to do about it?”



This is where things got hazy.

Outside, the parking lot. It was so hot. Asphalt sizzled beneath my feet. Why was I barefoot?

Tunnel vision. I was searching for something. I had a feeling I’d know what it was when I found it. Alcohol surged through my body, propelled me forward.

At my back, a chorus line: “*Big Bad Bee! Big Bad Bee!*”

A heavy paint can. Hot tin, liquid gold. It was in my hands and the lid was off. It was in my hands and my palm was bleeding, but I didn't care. I was Big Bad Bee.

A desperate hunt. The wooden dock groaning beneath my feet. So much laughter. I was the reason.

*"Who wants to see me fuck up this white man's boat?!"*

Their cheers lit me up from the inside. There it was: That Feeling! I was glitter and whiskey and audacity, I was THAT BITCH! A symphony of encouragement. Only one dissenter—

*"This isn't a good idea! Blake, stop—"*

Roxanne's laughter drowned everything. She was the president of the Serena Society and she was happy. Whatever she wanted, I'd do. I lifted the paint can over my head.

My target? Frank Peterson's yacht, *La Dolce Vita*. I flung the can with *everything*. Yellow paint. A neon swirl, lighting up the night. Spraying and splattering across pristine white.

*"Yoooooo!"*

*"Blake's fucking wild, bruh!"*

*"Big Bad Bee! Big Bad Bee!"*

I loved the sound of my own name.

# CHAPTER 2

**I WOKE UP IN ELLA'S BED**, the only mementos from the night a throbbing headache and yellow paint caked beneath my fingernails.

Ella stirred awake. "Morning, Bee." She yawned and said, "Last night was unbelievable. You should've seen Roxanne's face. No one thought you were gonna do it."

I rotated my left hand and winced at a large red gash that sliced my palm in half. I looked at Ella in confusion.

"The paint can," she explained, propping her head up. Her long waves, recently dyed fiery red, splayed across her silk pillowcases. "You cut yourself on the lid."

My fingers curled over the cut, palm pulsing, raw and tender. Ella snuggled against my neck and kissed the underside of my jaw. I ran my tongue over my teeth, still not used to how slick they felt without braces.

"You are so *wild*," she murmured. She sounded pleased, thank goodness.

I sat up, head pounding, and squinted against the honey morning light spilling through Ella's sheer ivory curtains. Her chubby tabby cat, Nina, yawned at the end of the bed. A clock bounced around the snoozing computer monitor across the room. Nine thirty. We were about to be late for work. Ella sat up, too.

"You okay, Bee?"

I looked at her. She wore no trace of last night on her face. Her pink lips were moisturized, soft brown eyes bag-free.

“You’re not worried about Mr. Peterson, are you?” Even her breath smelled fresh. “Because you shouldn’t be. He’s the worst, remember? He totally deserves it.”

“What did I do?” I asked, and she laughed.

“You threw paint all over Frank Peterson’s yacht because he’s a racist piece of shit.”

I froze. The night was foggy, but the paint under my fingernails was real and flaking all over Ella’s lilac duvet.

“Shit,” I said. “Did someone see? What if—” The thought was too terrifying to finish. I didn’t know how much yacht detailing cost, but it sure as hell was more than I made at my crappy minimum-wage job. I couldn’t afford the repair. Would Mr. Peterson go after my parents? They didn’t have money, either. But—

“Hey.” Ella shook my shoulders. “Don’t freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I lied.



Outside, the humidity amplified my anxieties. Even stopping by our favorite coffee shop, Perk-U-Later, for large iced mochas didn’t help. Thoughts of being fired once my boss discovered I’d ruined the yacht of one of the club’s wealthiest members ran through my mind incessantly. I’d be out of a job, no paycheck, no longer able to hang out with Annetta and Ella during the day. And I was 99 percent sure the Serena Society wouldn’t accept someone who couldn’t keep a simple summer job.

But by the time Ella and I pulled into the employee parking lot of the Crystal Grove Golf and Yacht Club, she’d convinced me everything



would be okay. Mr. Peterson *had* gotten what was coming to him. He was by far the most pompous member of the club, the most annoying. He was the kind of man who rattled his empty glasses at waiters and let the ice cubes ask for another round. He was constantly bragging about his luxury yacht, *La Dolce Vita*, boasting about it so often that it became a running joke between me, Ella, and Annetta. Whenever Mr. Peterson passed us at the pool, we'd place our hands on our hips, jut our chests out, and mock him.

*It cost 3.9 mil, you know? Before I poured another mil in for renovations, of course.*

*She's 108 feet. Could've got something longer, but the wife said no!*

*The name just came to me. I spent some time in Italy, you know? Let me tell you all about this beautiful Italian gal I met . . .*

I'd been accompanying Ella and her family to the club for four years and working there for the past two, and not once had I ever heard him utter a thank-you to any staff member. His wife was also a nightmare, his son was a brat. He'd been known to drop a racial slur in passing conversation, even though it was widely known he liked to cheat on his wife with Black women. He was also running for mayor of Virginia Beach in the fall, and his ugly face had been plastered on campaign flyers and television ads for months now.

"He deserved it," Ella repeated as she backed her Range Rover into a tight space. "Besides, he's so rich he could just buy another boat if he wanted to."

She was right. Ella was always right. I relaxed against the leather seat and took another sip of iced mocha. My palm was still throbbing, even after Ella wrapped it in gauze.

"You're fine," Ella said, flipping her visor mirror down to check her reflection. "You impressed Roxanne. At the end of the day, that's all that

matters.” She applied a careful coat of kohl to her lashes, taking the time to flick the wand up at the ends. We were already fifteen minutes late, but Ella Spencer rushed for no one.

The Crystal Grove Golf and Yacht Club was in its usual Saturday morning frenzy as we began the long walk to the pool. Ella got on her phone to wish her fifteen thousand followers good morning. I usually loved being shown off in her videos, but today I stayed out of the frame. Instead, I listened to the birdsong drifting from the towering trees that lined the club’s main road, hoping it would ease my headache. The sun was blazing hot, and it felt awful after leaving the Range Rover’s glorious A/C. Golf carts whizzed by on rolling hills of emerald, a parade of old white men. Many of the drivers called out to Ella, undoubtedly proud of themselves for remembering her name, not that it was hard. Ella and Annetta were the only Black kids of Crystal Grove members, so they had a fifty-fifty shot on getting it right.

“Morning, Miss Spencer!”

“Love the new hair!”

“See you at the pool later!”

Ella laughed a tinkling laugh and hollered responses. She had charisma for days, inherited it from her parents. She remembered people’s birthdays and little facts about their lives, asked you how that doctor’s appointment went last week. When she talked to you, she could make you feel like the only person alive. And she’d always been like that, like Jupiter, the biggest planet in the solar system, the prettiest. I trailed behind like one of her rocky moons with a name no one could remember. These white men didn’t care about me. My parents didn’t shell out the club’s five-figure annual membership fee. I just worked here.

When we entered the pool gates, Ella blew me a kiss and strode to her lifeguard chair to lord above everyone. I sighed as I took in the

crowded deck full of sunning housewives and bratty preteens. I was late and bound to hear about it, so I slapped on my Good CGGYC Staff Member smile and headed for the Snack Attack Shack.

Inside, Annetta was cleaning the blender. Our boss, Todd, hovered over her shoulder like an unhelpful gnat, scolding her on proper sanitation techniques.

“Good morning,” I trilled. I snatched my name tag off the counter and pinned it to my lime-green polo. “Todd, the pleats on your shorts look *impeccable* today.”

Annetta bit back a grin. Todd’s face pinched.

“What time is it, Blake?” he asked.

I zeroed in on his splash-proof G-Shock watch. “Why don’t you tell me, Todd?”

“It’s 10:20. As in, twenty minutes after your shift began.”

I flashed him my most dazzling smile. “Isn’t time merely an illusion?”

“Don’t start with me,” Todd said with a sigh, and Annetta laughed, grateful to no longer be the focus of his constant scrutinizing. “You girls think this is a joke? Mr. Donohue is on edge this morning. I’m sure he’d have no problem firing you if I marched you over to his office.”

“Awww, what’s wrong with Daddy Donohue?” I was pushing it, but the comment made Annetta laugh again, so it was worth it.

“There was an act of vandalism last night,” Todd said, resting a hand on the slushie machine, bracing himself. “Someone defiled Frank Peterson’s yacht.”

Annetta averted her gaze, and my stomach churned. I shoved my hands in my pockets. I thought I’d scrubbed away all the evidence, but my palm throbbed in protest.

“What happened?” I asked, desperate to find out how much the

club knew. Were there cameras around? Was Mr. Peterson about to burst into the Snack Attack Shack and fire me himself?

“That’s none of your business,” Todd said with a smug little grin. “*Your* business is to be on time, Ms. Brenner.”

I nodded at his pleated shorts. “I’ll try to be on time, Todd.”

“CGGYC staff members do not *try*,” Todd said, enunciating every syllable. “CGGYC staff members *do*. Can you *do* for me, Ms. Brenner?”

“Yes, Todd.”

He straightened his visor, satisfied. “I’ll be back before the lunch rush. Blake, you’re on register.”

I groaned. Todd knew I hated working the register. “We’ll discuss putting you on expo when you show up on time,” he said. He pulled the dreaded Snack Attack hat off the back of the door and placed it on top of my head. It was an embarrassing thing, shaped like a shark with a tail pointing skyward. Its jaws clamped over my curls.

“Why doesn’t Annetta have to wear this when she’s on register?” I protested.

“Annetta is never twenty minutes late,” Todd said. When he was halfway out the door, he added, “And don’t forget to use the official Snack Attack Shack greeting!”



“Welcome to the Snack Attack, what are you munchin’ on?”

Someone cleared their throat, and I looked up from the register to see Frank Peterson. My stomach somersaulted—less than ten minutes at work and I was already face-to-face with the man whose yacht I’d thrown paint all over twelve hours earlier.

“You should really look at people when you’re serving them,” Mr. Peterson said. His eyes were hidden behind douchey Oakley shades, but I still felt myself withering beneath his glare.

I swallowed. “Sorry about that, Mr. Peterson,” I said. “What can I get for you?”

“An order of fries. And a chocolate milkshake.”

“Member number?” I asked, even though I really should’ve had it memorized. Club members hated being asked mundane questions.

“This one’s on the club,” Mr. Peterson said, now distracted by his phone. “After what happened to *La Dolce Vita* last night, it’s the least they can do.”

“Right,” I said. I glanced at the cook, Tristan, and he dropped a fryer into sizzling grease. The blender whirred to life as Annetta started on the shake. “It’ll be right up, sir.”

Mr. Peterson grunted and picked up a call. I quickly looked at my hands, making sure there wasn’t any paint left under my fingernails. My heart pounded, sure he was going to see guilt written all over my face. But he was rambling on the phone, making plans for an afternoon round of golf.

Past his shoulder, I had a perfect shot of Ella perched in her life-guard chair. She was scanning the water carefully, red hair cascading down her back. She’d always taken her job seriously, even though she’d never needed the money. She claimed having a job would look good on her application to Jameswell University, the most elite college in the Southern Ivy League. *I need to convince the admissions department I wasn’t raised with a silver spoon*, she’d told me and Annetta when she convinced us all to apply for jobs when we were sixteen. She’d lucked out with the cool lifeguard position while Annetta and I got stuck with the Snack Attack Shack. While we’d sweated in a grease

pit for two summers, Ella chilled under a large umbrella and soaked up attention. Annetta and I always joked that Ella still ended up with a silver spoon while we'd been handed sporks. Nevertheless, she was right about hard work paying off—the three of us were bound for Jameswell in the fall.

“Order up!” Tristan called as Annetta slid the milkshake down the counter. I handed Mr. Peterson the striped paper basket of fries and his shake. He walked away without saying thank you.

“Well, he’s got my vote,” Annetta joked. “Seriously, he’s going to be the worst politician. He can’t even *pretend* to be nice.”

“Someone should teach him a lesson,” I replied. “Oh, wait.” I giggled as I met Ella’s gaze across the pool. She held her hand up in a backward C, and when I mimicked her, we formed an entire heart.

“How’s your hand?” Annetta asked, concern etched on her dark brown face.

I lowered my hand. The gash throbbed beneath the gauze.

“It’s fine,” I lied.

“Fine,” she repeated dully. Her raised bushy eyebrow sent a hazy snippet from last night bubbling to the surface—a smear of blood and Annetta using her own T-shirt to apply pressure.

“It hurts a little,” I admitted with a sigh. “But it was worth it, right?”

She drummed her fingers over her pocket, itching to pull out her vape. She always did that when she was uneasy. Annetta Jones and I had been friends for nearly four years, and working side by side for two, so I knew her every tell. Ever since her parents’ divorce, her anxiety had been through the roof. Ella and I jokingly called her Nervous Nettie. Now it seemed like the only thing that truly calmed her down was her colorful assortment of vapes.

“I just worry about you,” Annetta said, and I laughed at how genuinely

afraid she sounded. Like I was about to go to war or some shit. I flicked a dishrag her way.

“Okay, Nervous Nettie, I get it,” I said. “I’m a clumsy bitch.”

“Clumsy bitch or not, you need to watch it around Todd. He’s looking for any excuse to let you go.”

“Do you promise?” I asked, and Tristan laughed without looking up from his phone.

Annetta shrugged. “Just trying to look out for you.”

I swiveled on my stool just in time to see the pool gates open. Roxanne Garcia strutted in, her curves barely contained in a rainbow string bikini. She was surrounded by her usual gaggle of college friends, and Ella waved and blew them all kisses. I tried to swallow my jealousy.

*Stop*, I told my anxious brain. Ella loved me. Sure, Roxanne was beautiful, older, Serena Society president *and* Jameswell University’s self-proclaimed Big Lesbian on Campus. But Ella took *me* home last night. We’d been together four years. I didn’t have anything to worry about.

While her friends set up camp near the diving board, Roxanne headed for the snack shack, her flip-flops thwacking the concrete. I straightened on the stool as I took in her tall Coke-bottle figure and honey-brown skin. She was drop-dead gorgeous, and she knew it. As a member of the wealthy Garcia family, Roxanne had been a fixture at Crystal Grove for as long as I’d known Ella, but our age gap had kept her at a distance. That was all changing this summer.

A few weeks ago, Mrs. Spencer threw me, Ella, and Annetta a huge graduation party at Crystal Grove and formally introduced us to Roxanne. Roxanne was immediately smitten with us, especially when she found out we were all queer, too. *Lesbians are taking over the Serena Society*, Roxanne had joked before inviting us to a party on her family’s

yacht, the *Bewitched*. Thus began our unofficial induction as Serena Society hopefuls. We'd been anxiously waiting for the official pledge process to start ever since.

"Hi, Blake," Roxanne said silkily. Her gaze skipped to Annetta. "Hi, Annetta."

"Hi," I said breathlessly. Annetta muttered a hello and drifted over to the sink to wash dishes. Roxanne looked amused.

"Someone must still be hungover from last night," she said, pushing her oversized sunglasses up into her brown hair. "How are *you* feeling, my little wild one?"

Honestly, I felt like shit. The caffeine from my mocha was fighting a losing battle with my hangover. But I knew Roxanne didn't like light-weights, so I shrugged.

"Great. Ready for the next one."

"That's my girl," Roxanne said, and I melted under her proud smile.



The next two hours passed in a blur of hamburger and veggie wrap orders. When there was finally a break, Annetta made us strawberry smoothies. She added a dash of Oreos in mine, just the way I liked it. We cheers'd and sipped, savored the chill in the steam of the fryers.

"Is Roxanne still here?" Annetta asked.

I surveyed the pool but didn't spot her. "Nope. Why?"

"She gives me the creeps," Annetta said. "Whenever she looks at me, I feel like she wants to eat me."

"Maybe she likes you," I said, brightening. If Roxanne liked Annetta, maybe that meant she had no interest in Ella.

Annetta made a face. "She's too old."



“She’s twenty-one!”

“Exactly. She’s a senior. Too old to be looking at freshmen like that. And you know she’s not my type.”

“Actually I *don’t* know.” I nudged her elbow. “Care to elaborate?”

“Oh, look, you have a customer,” she said breezily, and I laughed and resumed my place at the register. As open as Ella and I were about our love life, that’s how closed off Annetta was about hers. I’d seen her in shambles after her parents’ divorce, she’d cleaned vomit out of my hair, and I’d helped her insert a menstrual cup for the first time. But whenever the topic of romantic relationships came up, Annetta was an icy fortress. Impenetrable to even those closest to her.

Another hour passed. More entitled assholes were served. Annetta and I exhausted our usual games of Guess How Much That Woman’s Bathing Suit Cost and Who’s Had Plastic Surgery Since Last Summer? She coaxed my puffy curls into two neat boxer braids and we played tic-tac-toe on the back of an inventory sheet. I got Tristan to make me a grilled cheese with extra cheese, and even though I ate slowly, there were still three hours left on our shift when I finished.

“*Please* let me take the first break,” I begged Annetta. “If I don’t get out of this shack, my eyeballs are going to pop out of their sockets and slide into my undies and come out of these cargo shorts. Do you want to see that? Do you?”

“You disgust me,” Annetta said without looking up from her phone. “Please leave.”

I grabbed two Styrofoam cups, filled them with crushed ice and lemonade, making sure to leave room at the top. “Be back in fifteen!” I said, throwing off the shark hat.

Once outside, I held the cups up, knowing Ella would get the hint

that it was time for our ritual. Two minutes later, we were strolling through the pool gates together.

“I’m so *bored*,” Ella whined. “Can we trade places so I can hang out with Nettie?”

“You’ll have to wear the hat,” I replied.

She wrapped an arm around my waist and kissed my shoulder. “Done. You make that hat look sexy.”

“You’re a horrible liar.”

“Seduce me, Shark Bae.”

“Let’s go then, Princess Ariel.” I tugged on a lock of her red hair, and she laughed and shoved me and we kissed our way to the parking lot.

“I overheard Mr. Peterson on the phone,” she said against my lips. “Ripping club security a new asshole.”

I pulled away. “What did he say?”

She lowered her voice into an annoying drawl. “How can there not be any security footage? What am I paying you people for? Blah blah blah.”

I felt sick. “You think he’s going to find out?”

Ella scoffed. “Nah. The cameras near the dock have been down all summer. That’s why he was pissed. Relaaaax, Bee.”

I took a deep breath. We reached the Range Rover and climbed in. Ella grabbed two rum minis hidden beneath a pile of clothes in her back seat. We dumped them into our lemonades and enjoyed them with the windows down.

“It’s almost time, Bee,” she said.

“For what?” The cup was cold in my hands. It seeped through my bandage, chilled my palm and my worries.

“Serena,” she said. “The process will start any day now. My mom’s been hinting.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “And Roxanne texted me after she left the pool. Saying you *really* impress her.”

My anxieties about the yacht and getting fired softened at once. I took another sip, then another, thinking of Roxanne Garcia’s delighted laughter when I threw the paint can. It felt good to prove I belonged in her inner circle. Even better to know I could still impress Ella after all these years.

“This is it, Bee,” Ella said, tapping the steering wheel with a manicured fingernail. “In the fall, we’ll be at Jameswell. We’ll be in Serena. It’s going to be so perfect.” She got this faraway look in her eyes, and I could tell that she was envisioning us on the porch of the Serena Society house in the fall, wearing sapphire-blue sweaters with the swirling gold calla lily emblem. It was one of the reasons she dyed her hair, insisting Vampire Red would go well with Serena’s official color. I tipped my cup back, and by the time I finished, I was soft and giddy, not a care in the world.

“Love you till we’re playing shuffleboard at the retirement home?” she asked. It was our favorite game, *Love You Till*. We were always filling in the blanks.

“Love you till we’re flinging mushy peas at each other,” I replied. Ella leaned over the center console and kissed me. The feeling of her mouth on mine always felt like the crest of a roller coaster. Four years later, and I still felt the rush. I clenched my empty cup and held on.