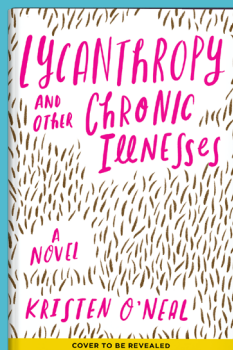
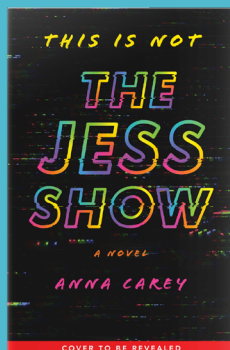


Quirk Books YA FICTION PREVIEW 2020-2021!

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPTS FROM



QUIRK  BOOKS

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"This rom-com told in alternating viewpoints is poised to steal any book geek's heart."

—*Booklist*

"A satisfying fairy-tale nerd love story."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Enjoyable, moving, and easy to read, like eating a smooth, sweet bowl of ice cream."

—*New York Journal of Books*

BOOKISH AND THE BEAST

Once Upon a Con Series

By Ashley Poston



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA



ROSIE

WHENEVER YOU THINK YOUR LOVE LIFE SUCKS, just remember that I fell in love with a boy whose name I didn't know.

Let's be clear: I didn't *mean* to fall in love. It just sort of happened, the way falling usually does. You trip on something you didn't see and, if you're me, you lose your heel and go stumbling into a stranger at the ExcelsiCon Ball who just so happened to be holding a glass of neon-yellow Galactic Twist punch that goes . . . absolutely everywhere.

And so now the front of your skirt is drenched with the sticky yellow Kool-Aid that looks more like, well, *pee* than Galactic Twist, and there isn't a bathroom in sight. With one glance, I could already tell my cosplay was ruined. So was the other person's cosplay, but he didn't seem to care as he stumbled on.

He *wasn't* who I fell in love with, by the way.

He's just the reason I met him.

If I didn't have my stupid mask on I probably would've seen the prop sword lying on the ground. Who puts a prop sword on the ground in the middle of the dance floor, anyway?

Apparently, with a quick look around, a person cosplaying as Cloud Strife did just before he broke down the Electric Slide.

I looped back for my heel, grabbed it off the ground before someone could kick it away, and left the dance floor to see if I could salvage my outfit. If I didn't love my friends so much, I would've just stayed in my hotel room and watched reruns of *The Great British Bake Off*. I was still contemplating the possibility, honestly.

Quinn and Annie had told me the ball would be good for me. They told me it would take my mind off what had happened this past summer. They told me . . . well, I guess it didn't really matter what lies those lying liars peddled to get me to come out of my hotel room. What mattered was the universal question:

How early was *too* early to leave a ball?

"You don't want to miss the magic, do you?" Annie had asked as she pulled me out of the room toward the elevators. "Last year we saw Jessica Stone—*the* Amara!—stand on a food truck to Romeo and Juliet her girlfriend. And the year before that, Darien—Darien *Freeman*! Carmindor *himself*!—proclaimed his undying love for Geekerella! What if this is your year?"

I'd never been to ExcelsiCon before—it always seemed too big and too loud—but I knew that Quinn and Annie were trying to get me to have as much fun as I could, because the last year has sucked.

It's sucked so terribly hard.

"Well, last I checked, Darien Freeman's taken," I had replied. "And so is Jess Stone."

"Yes, but look across this great expanse, Rosie." Quinn looped their arm into my free one, and they led me toward the hall balcony where, thirty floors below, the ExcelsiCon Ball began to come to life. "Do you smell that possibility?"

“All I smell is vom and con stink,” I replied.

Yet I caved, because *wouldn't* it have been wonderful to find Prince Charming at the ball? They knew I was a romantic at heart—my mom fed me a healthy dose of fairy tales and romance novels when I was little—and they knew I was a sucker for every rom-com known to humankind, and so they tempted me with lies of Happily Ever After.

After all, if anyone was to find love somewhere romantic, why couldn't it be me? Why not this year? Why not make something memorable to lessen the pain in my chest?

Still, though, I should've listened to my gut telling me to just *stay in the hotel room*. Because not five minutes after Quinn and Annie dragged me down to the ExcelsiCon Ball, I had lost them in the masses of people.

There were just so *many*.

I tried looking for them—they were hard to miss, dressed as floating glowing neon goldfish (“We’re the snacks that smile back!” Quinn had said with a wink). I had put together a closet cosplay that I found in my, well, closet—an unassuming black crop top and a white skirt, and an empty shot glass around my neck.

. . . A shot in the dark, get it?

No one ever does.

It only took another few minutes for me to become absolutely overwhelmed, run into a Nox King who spilled his Galactic Twist all over my cosplay, and bail from the ball. I returned to the elevators and squeezed into the first one available, damned which floor. To my utter chagrin, it only took me up to the tenth floor, and I let myself out to escape the smell of sweat and hairspray clogging the elevator.

The tenth floor was mostly a lobby overlooking the chaos below. It was quiet here, at least. Much quieter than I expected,

given the thumping bass down below. There wasn't a chance I was getting back into those elevators anytime soon—it looked like the one I just came out of broke on the fifteenth floor, and the other two were . . . well, to put it politely, not in the best shape.

Great, I guess I wasn't going back to my room after all. And I was stuck in a damp skirt.

There was a door that opened to a small outside area, and I let myself out. The night air was crisp, and warm. I sucked in a lungful of fresh air to calm my nerves. There were only a few people on the garden balcony—a couple dressed as Pokémon making out in the corner, and a guy leaning against the balcony rail.

Oh, I thought as I walked up beside him to enjoy the view, *he's got a nice butt*.

Not that it really mattered. I leaned against the railing and tried to see the damage to my outfit in the low rooftop light, patting down the stains with the wad of napkins I stole from the drinks kiosk on the way here. For once, I was happy that everyone was downstairs dancing the night away to a dubstep version of “The Imperial March,” because here it was so nice and quiet—so quiet my ears rang.

My skirt was ruined, that much I could guess. I just wanted to go back to the hotel room and get out of these heels and take a hot shower to get all of the con grime off me. There was a book in my suitcase just calling my name—the new *Starfield: Resonance* companion novel.

I'd rather be saving the galaxy with the insufferably kind Carmindor than be on this balcony praying for the night to end already.

“A shot in the dark, right?”

The voice startled me.

I glanced up to the guy, because it certainly wasn't the couple

playing tongue hockey who asked me. He was unnervingly tall, but then again I was known for two things—being stubborn, and being short. “What?” I asked.

He motioned to my costume. He wore a very well-put-together General Sond costume, complete with beautiful long white-blond hair and a crooked smile, and a mask that covered just enough of his face to make him look alluring and absolutely unidentifiable. “Your cosplay,” he followed up. He had a strange accent. I couldn’t place it—but it sort of sounded like those fake American accents you sometimes hear on TV from actors who are very clearly not American. It was too hometown, too clean. “A shot in the dark?”

I glanced down at my costume. “*Technically* I’m cosplaying the title of the thirty-seventh book in the extended-universe saga of *Starfield*, *A Shot in the Dark* by Almira Ender.”

His eyebrows jerked up over his mask. “Oh, well, I stand corrected.”

“It’s a really deep cut, though,” I quickly added.

“Oh, I do see it,” he replied, cocking his head. He pointed down to the hem of my skirt. “The little *Starfield* logo trim at the bottom. That’s a very nice touch.”

“You think?”

“Of course. There’s thought to it.”

“I just didn’t have the money for a nice costume,” I replied, motioning to his very, *very* nice costume, and then realized my mistake. “Oh God, that sounded like an insult! I didn’t mean it that way, I promise. I’m just, you know, saving up for college and all, and—” I forced myself to stop talking, I babbled when I got nervous.

“No, no, I didn’t take it that way at all!” he said, though his voice was full of thinly disguised laughter. He leaned closer

to me—just a little—enough to whisper, “You want to know a secret? This costume isn’t mine. It’s for my job, so they let me borrow it for the night.”

“Just tonight?”

“Well, this weekend.”

“That must be quite a cool job, then, if you have to dress as Sond for it.”

He smiled again. “Yeah. So, did you come out to escape the socializing, too?”

“I know I’m going to sound boring, but I’m not really big on parties,” I said.

“That *does* sound boring.”

“Hey!”

“I was agreeing with you!” He laughed. “I’ve never known anything else. Parties, socializing, loud music, and lots of people. It’s a place I can get lost in.”

“Yeah, I hate that feeling.”

“I love it,” he replied, closing his eyes. “It’s like being invisible.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I wanted to reach out and touch his shoulder. We barely knew each other, but it felt like he had just admitted something to me that he’d never told anyone else before. Maybe he realized that, too, because his shoulders went rigid. I stilled my hand to keep it by my side.

“What’s home for you?” he asked.

I gave a one-shouldered shrug. Home, to me? If I was going to scare him away, I might as well start with the most boring part of me. “A small town and a quiet library, where sunlight slants through the window just right, making everything golden and soft and . . .” I trailed off, because I hadn’t thought about that in a long time. Not since the funeral. “My mom used to call them golden afternoons.”

“That sounds magical.”

“It is. You should visit. Maybe I can tempt you to the dark side with hot chocolate and a good book.”

He smiled, and there was a delicious dare tucked into the edges. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Oh no,” I replied, returning that devil-may-care smile, imagining what he would look like in a certain slant of golden light, curled into a wingback chair with my favorite book. “It’s a promise.”

“I can’t wait, then,” he said earnestly. Then something caught his eyes behind me, and I began to look over my shoulder when he said, “This might sound a little forward, but would you want to go for a walk? With me?” He outstretched his hand.

I thought about Quinn and Annie dancing the night away, and about the book waiting for me back in my hotel room, and how improbable this was, and for the first time in my life—

I pushed those thoughts aside.

I took his hand, because this moment felt like a dandelion fluff on the wind—there one moment, walking the streets of Atlanta and eating Waffle House, and talking on the rooftop of one of the hotels until the sun rose and all of the cosplayers down below were stumbling their way home, the memory so visceral I can still smell the strange scent of his cologne, lavender mixed with oak, and then, well—

Gone.

BUT EVEN THOUGH HE’S GONE, I can’t get him out of my head a month later when I should totally be over it by now, as I scan

my math teacher's box of jumbo condoms at the Food Lion where I work. I try not to make eye contact as I read off the total and he pays, also avoiding eye contact. He leaves the grocery store as quick as the clip of his shined loafers will let him.

I massage the bridge of my nose. Minimum wage will never pay for the years of therapy I'll need after this.

Maybe I can put some of this—any of this—into the college essay I've been failing to write for the last week, but what college admissions officer would want to read about some lovesick fool ringing up condoms for her calculus teacher? Right, like *that'll* win over admissions.

Suddenly, from the other side of the cashier kiosks, Annie cries, "It's here! It's *here*!" as she vaults over her checkout counter and comes sliding toward mine.

Already?

Every rumor on every message board said that it would drop at six—I check the time on my cashier screen. Oh, it is six. I quickly key out of my register so the manager won't yell at me for goofing off on the job—technically I'm on break!—and turn off my cashier light even though there are two people in line.

"Hey!" one of the customers shouts.

"Three minutes!" I reply.

"This is *life-changing*!" Annie adds, holding up her phone screen for us. The glare of the halogens above us catches on the edges of the screen protector as she sticks one earbud into her ear and hands me the other.

The trailer begins to play.

Darkness. Then, a sound—the beat of something striking the ground. Sharp, high-pitched, steady.

Coming this December . . .

It's only September, and December feels like a lifetime away. We've been waiting a year and a half for the sequel—a *year!* *And! A half!*—and my twisting stomach can barely stand it.

There is a soft, steady beat that echoes over the sweet, low horn of the *Starfield* theme.

The text fades and there is Carmindor kneeling in front of the Noxian Court. His lip is bloodied, and there is a gash across his eyebrow. He looks to have been tortured, his arms bound tightly behind his back. His eyes are shadowed by his disheveled hair.

“Prince Carmindor, we find you guilty,” says a soft, deep voice.

The other members of the court, of the different regions in the Empire, some emissaries from far-reaching colonies, representatives from the Federation, all dressed in their pale official colors. Their faces are grim. At the head of the court is a throne, where the ruler of the Nox Empire should sit, but it is empty.

“Guilty of conspiring against the Empire,” the same voice says. “Of treason.”

There are flashes of the first movie—Carmindor at the helm of the *Prospero*, the defiant faces of Euci and Zorine beside him, the fight between the Nox King and Carmindor on Ziondur, the moment Amara says goodbye to Carmindor and locks him on the bridge—

“But most of all,” the voice purrs, and the blurry image of a man in gold and white, hair long and flowing, looking like a deity of the sun, slowly comes into focus. Bright blue eyes, white-blond hair, a sharp face and a pointed nose, the hem of his uniform glowing like burning embers. A chill curls down my spine. “We find you guilty of the murder of our princess, our light—our Amara.”

Amara's ship swirls into the Black Nebula, her smile, her lips saying words without any sound that mysteriously look like "*ah'blen*"—

A hand grabs Carmindor's hair and forces his head back. Lips press against his ear, and the prophetic voice of General Sond whispers, "No one is coming for you, princeling."

Annie gasps, pressing her hand to her mouth. Because Carmindor's eyes—his eyes are the pale, pale white of the conscripted. The beat—the clipping sound—gets louder. It sounds like the drum of a funeral march, like the coming of a predator, like a countdown to the end of the world.

The screen fades to black again, and then on the next beat—two pristine black boots, heels striking against the ground. The flutter of a long uniform jacket the perfect shade of blue. The errant flash of bright red hair—as red as a supernova. The glimmer of a golden tiara.

Annie grabs my wrist tightly, and squeezes. I know—I *know*.
It's her.

The camera pans with her as she makes her way toward the throne, from her fluttering Federation coat to the golden stars on her shoulders, to her face. You can tell she's different. That she isn't the same princess who sacrificed herself to the Black Nebula. She's new, and unpredictable, and impossible.

My heart kicks in my chest, seeing her again, returned from some improbable universe, and my eyes well with tears.

Because for once death isn't final.

For once, for once, love is enough.

And the left side of Amara's mouth twitches up.

The screen snaps to black—and then the triumphant orchestra of the *Starfield* theme swells into our ears, and the title appears:

STARFIELD: RESONANCE

And then it ends.

We stare at the blank screen for a moment longer. My heart hammers in my chest. It's real. It's happening. And Amara is back—*our* Amara.

Finally, Annie whispers. "I...I think I just popped a lady-boner—"

"A-*hem*."

Annie and I whirl around toward the sound of our manager, Mr. Jason. He's red-faced and standing with his arms crossed over his chest in the middle of our respective cash registers. She quickly yanks the earbud out of my ear, rolls up the wires, and shoves the cell phone into her apron.

"If I see you two with cell phones out one more time tonight . . ." he warns, wagging his finger at us, "then I'll—I'll . . ."

Uh-oh, he's so flustered he doesn't have words.

"We won't, sorry, sir," Annie says, and Mr. Jason nods, not quite believing her, and turns on his heel back to his office.

I let out a sigh of relief.

Annie mouths, *Yikes*.

I agree. He's really not in the best mood tonight. We shouldn't push our luck. Mr. Jason is known to have two modes: absent and dickweed. At the moment, he's in full dickweed mode.

After I ring up the waiting customers, I straighten my aisle and leave to wrangle the shopping carts from the parking lot. There's a toy dispenser outside that is calling my name, and I've got just the quarter that feels lucky enough for me to test it.

"Going to go try it again?" Annie calls to me as I wander toward the automatic doors.

“After that trailer, I’m feeling lucky,” I reply, flipping the quarter with my thumb, and step outside in the warm September evening.

There is a *Starfield* toy dispenser by the grocery cart lane, featuring the old characters from the TV series, though the Amara really looks nothing like Natalia Ford. She’s in this skimpy bodysuit with a pistol, and honestly Princess Amara would burn the entire dispenser if she saw that. Carmindor and the other six collectibles look somewhat like themselves, at least, though I’ve gotten so many Carmindors I could melt them all down and make a life-sized Carmindor to use for target practice whenever I decide to take up axe-throwing.

Maybe today, though, I’ll finally snag a Sond.

I pop the quarter into the *Starfield* toy machine. A toy rolls out, and I fish it out of the metal mouth and shake it. It doesn’t *sound* like another Carmindor. Maybe Amara? Euci?

Ugh, I have enough Eucis, too.

The outside of the shell reads, *LOOK TO THE STARS AND CHASE YOUR DESTINY!*

Dare I disturb the universe, crack open the egg, and find out what my future holds?

I’m about to twist the sucker open when someone calls my name. Like, not just calls from across the parking or anything, but like . . . megaphone calls my name.

I glance up.

And pale.

Oh, *no*.

Garrett Taylor is standing in the bed of his Ford truck with a karaoke machine. On the window of his muddy black truck, he dramatically unfurls a banner that says, *HOME COMING?*

What the . . .

Oh.

Oh Jesus Mother Mary Aziraphale Crowley.

The realization of what's happening hits me like the *Prospero* fresh out of hyperdrive. And I don't have time to escape.

"Rosie Thorne," Garrett begins valiantly, turning his snap-back around. Tufts of his chocolate-brown hair stick out the hole in the back of his cap, shaggy around his ears. A silver stud glints in his left ear. "You and I are a tale as old as time," he says into the microphone, trying to be smart and funny.

He's none of the above, and this is one hundred and ten percent *mortifying*.

Forget the carts in the parking lot. I try to make it back into the store before he can do something I will regret.

"Rosie!" he calls after me, vaulting off the flatbed, and races to cut me off. He succeeds. Barely. "What do you think?" he asks, motioning to the large *HOMECOMING?* banner. His posse follows him with their expensive GoPros, and I can feel their tiny bulbous camera eyes slowly leeching my soul.

Ever since he went viral on YouTube, I can't *stand* him. He was fine before, but now he's just insufferable. Everything has to be video'd and monetized.

"Garrett," I say, putting my hand up so the GoPros can't capture my face, "I'm flattered, but—"

He grabs me by the hand I was using to block the cameras and squeezes it tightly. "Don't say it! Just think on it, okay?"

"I *did* think—"

"Rosie, you know as well as I do that we're a team! Remember back in elementary school? We were the best Red Rover pair."

"We have similar last names so we had to stand by each other—"

“And then in middle school, we made the best English projects together.”

I try to yank my hand out of his. “I did all of the work!”

“And I’m sorry high school hasn’t been very kind to you. Not since your mom died, and you had to move into a bad apartment after you had to pay for the medical bills—”

All things that make my skin crawl when he brings them up. Things that he has no right to say—period. Especially not on camera.

“—but I want to make your last Homecoming the most magical it can be. Yeah? Remember back on the playground? I promised you I’d look after you.”

“I’m not a charity case, Garrett,” I snap, finally able to pull my hand free. “Is that what you’re doing? ‘Oh, poor Rosie, she’s had a tough time—’”

“You’re also really pretty, if that helps,” he adds, and his two henchmen wince. He realizes a moment too late his folly, because I’m already halfway back into the grocery store. “Wait! That’s not what I meant!”

“You’re just too kind, Garrett,” I tell him over my shoulder in the most sickeningly sweet voice I can muster. “I don’t deserve you.”

I return into the grocery store, and as soon as I’m out of direct eyesight from Garrett, I duck down behind a line of shopping carts and watch as he returns to his truck with his two goons, waving at them to quit recording. Then they hop into his truck and they drive away, the *HOMECOMING?* banner flapping in the wind like a strip of toilet paper on the bottom of a shoe.

I pull out my phone to text Quinn.

ROSIE (6:16PM)

—YOU. WOULDN'T. BELIEVE.
WHAT. JUST. HAPPENED.

QUINN (6:16PM)

—Oh no did Annie just throw down an
entire bottle of kombucha again?

ROSIE (6:17PM)

—No but

“*Rosie!*” I hear Annie hiss, and when I look up she’s at the register, making a motion to hang up the phone. But I’m not even on the—

The intercom squeaks and the tired voice of my manager says, “Rosie Thorne, please report to the office. *Immediately.*”

Shit.

Annie sighs to the heavens.

Well, time to grovel, I guess. Dejectedly, I stand and brush off my work slacks—someone really needs to clean the floors—and make my way toward the back of the store. The manager’s office is situated in the far left corner, shoved between the frozen produce and the meat counter, so it always smells like frozen chickens and artichokes. I knock on the metal door before I poke my head into his office. Mr. Jason is sitting behind a crappy desk, vigorously pumping a smiley-face stress ball. He motions me inside, and I close the door gently behind me.

“Just let me explain,” I begin, but he holds up a hand and I quickly fall silent.

He doesn’t say anything for a long moment. Mr. Jason is one of those guys who hangs his screenwriting degree behind his desk

to remind himself of all of the mistakes he's made in his lifetime, now a lowly grocery store manager in the middle of nowhere rather than some award-winning screenwriter in LA. Maybe once he had a head full of black hair, but he opted to buzz it short when he started going bald. I only wish he'd shaved off his porn-stache too, but we can't always get what we want.

"What did I tell you," he says quietly, "about your phone?"

"You see, out in the parking lot—"

"This is your third write-up, Rosie," he interrupts.

I stare at him, uncomprehending. "Third? That can't be right."

He flips open a folder on his desk—a folder I hadn't noticed before—and begins reading from a detailed write-up form. "First write-up happened last summer, when you told Travis Richardson—and I quote—'sit and rotate' while presenting him the middle finger."

"I turned him down, so he told me I'd die alone with seven cats!"

He went on, "And the second write-up was this past spring, when you filmed a TikTok in the middle of the frozen meats section to the song—"

"'If I Can't Love Her' from the ending credits of *Starfield*, yeah I remember that one," I mutter to myself. "But it went viral! I mean, sure I did a few bad things, but I'm a good employee! I was an employee of the month!" I add, flinging my hand back to the wall of photos behind me.

Mr. Jason closes the file and gives me a weary look. "Listen, Rosie. I understand that life without your mother must be difficult."

The words are like a sword through my middle. My hands involuntarily fist.

"It must be tough," he goes on, as if he understands what I went through, as if he knows what it's like to have part of your

heart ripped out, “and I’ve read in plenty of coping books that acting out is a part of healing, but—”

“I’m not acting out!” I interrupt, shoving myself to my feet, but he just stares at me with this sorry sort of look in his eyes. It’s the same look I’ve seen in the eyes of teachers, and neighbors, and classmates, and strangers alike.

And something in me breaks. It snaps. Right in two.

I claw at my name badge, unhook it, and slam it onto the desk. “I quit.”

“Rosie!” He gives a start, rising to his feet. “We can talk about this—”

I force myself to my feet and leave the office, anger pulsing through me like white-hot fire. I grab my bookbag from the lockers and I don’t look back.

Annie looks up from her phone, which she has, unlike me, artfully hidden under the counter, as I pass her toward the front doors. “. . . Rosie?”

I don’t stop for her. My eyes are burning with tears, because he had the nerve to look at me like that. My mom died. Yeah, that happened. Yeah, it sucked. Yeah, there’s a hole in my chest where she should be but it’s empty because she no longer exists.

I get it.

I just hate the look people give me. The pitying one. The one that, behind the sadness in their eyes, they’re thinking *I’m glad it was her and not me*.

“Rosie,” Annie calls, but I’m already halfway out of the store.

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow,” I say before the automatic doors close on me. I’m so angry I don’t slow down until I wrench open the door to my antique mustard-yellow hatchback and buckle myself in.

It’s finally quiet.

My hands are still shaking as I curl them around the steering wheel and breathe out a long breath. The kind of breath my therapist told me to breathe out whenever I felt the world spinning out of control. I'm okay. Everything's fine.

Everything *will* be fine.

That's when I remember the toy egg I crammed into my pocket before the whole fiasco started. I take it out, and shake it one more time.

Please, please let it be Sond.

I crack it open.

A small plastic figurine falls out. White-blond hair and a purple uniform. I smirk a little to myself and curl my fingers around the tiny General Sond, remembering the boy on the balcony. He didn't look at me like I was broken, something that couldn't be fixed. I wish I'd gotten his name. I wish I had pressed more ardently, even though I asked, again and again—

And each time he'd just smile at me and say, "You should guess."

"That's no fair, you won't give me any clues! Fine, I won't tell you mine, either. You'll have to guess."

He chuckled. "How many guesses do I get?"

"Until morning," I decided.

"Until morning," he agreed.

I wish I could go back and live in that night forever. But . . . it doesn't matter what I wish, because that night is over, like the boy himself, one moment there—then by morning, gone.

but I almost choke on my biscuit as he breaks into a tap-dancing number.

“Just think, that could’ve been you,” Elias comments, non-plussed by the situation at hand, while the sight of Darien Freeman dressed as a sexy Halloween version of the Goblin King from *Labyrinth*—a sparkly leotard and fishnets, with an exciting blond wig—will haunt me for the rest of my life.

It is very akin to watching a train wreck in slow motion. The lights flare on and he pulls out a riding crop and slaps his thigh.

The crowd, at least, goes wild. They wave around posters that say *WANNA WABBA WABBA WITH ME?* and *YOU SAVED AMARA!* and *I’M SINGLE* and *I LOVE YOU DARE-BEAR!* And a lot of other signs that should honestly be blurred out. He does a full-on split as the song ends and the entire audience erupts into chaos.

Well, *that* performance will certainly give Tom Holland a go.

“I’m going to bed,” I announce, because my migraine is only getting worse watching this, but even as I say that I find myself pulling my leg over the couch and sinking down into the cushions beside Elias. He’s curled up in the corner of the L-shaped couch in his comfortable blue robe, his wet dark hair gently curling against his neck. He’s my stepdad’s uncle, and my current guardian—for a multitude of reasons.

Sansa, my German shepherd, is stretched out on the other side of him. She barks at something only she can hear.

“Shh, Sansa, we’re watching an idiot in his natural habitat,” I tell her, earning a snort from Elias.

On the screen, the two judges rush over to Darien as he stands, that big dumb smile on his face, taking off his wig and flicking his sweaty black hair out into the crowd. They howl. He winks at them.

Jessica Stone, who is also my costar and who plays Princess Amara of the *Starfield* kingdom, lounges on the spectator couch in a bedazzled golden dress. She stares at Darien, openmouthed, and I can't tell if she's actually surprised Darien did that split, or pretending.

"What a performance!" the female announcer cries.

The male announcer agrees. "And that was Darien Freeman as the sexy Goblin King! How do you feel after that performance?"

"I feel like I'm going to win this," Darien says to the audience, grinning, and then turns to Jess to add, "Sorry, *ah'blena*," with a wink. She sticks out her tongue at him. The teen girls in the front row squeal as he says *ah'blena* like he just hit the sweet spot of their souls. "I couldn't ask for a better opponent."

"Or a better costar," she adds.

"Or a better costar."

"Speaking of costars, now I've got to know," the announcer says, leaning toward Darien a little, and I can feel a chill curl up my spine. "Do you think you could ever get Vance Reigns on the show?"

"Never," I reply, putting my feet on the coffee table. I steal a piece of popcorn from Elias, and one for Sansa, before Elias bats my feet off the table with a glare because it's not our house.

It doesn't matter—if I ruin something, I'll just buy the owner a new one.

"I mean, after he returns from his break, of course," the female announcer agrees with a smile.

"My *break*?" I mutter. "More like exile."

"That's a little dramatic, don't you think?" Elias says.

Darien laughs. "I'll see what I can do. No promises. But! I can give you one thing that I know you've been waiting for."

Jess nods from the sofa. “The first-ever look at *Starfield: Resonance!*”

I finish off the last few kernels of popcorn and roll off the couch. “All right, I’m heading to bed—”

“Let Sansa out first,” Elias reminds me.

“How could I forget my good girl? My best girl!” I scrub Sansa behind the ears. Her pink tongue lolls out happily, and she slides off the couch and follows me to the back door. Sometimes it feels like Sansa’s the only girl who doesn’t care that I’m Vance Reigns. It’s because she doesn’t understand the concept of an A-list film star with a track record for bad ideas, but I’d like to think it’s because I give her extra treats when Elias isn’t looking. I slide the door open, and she trots out as I find the floodlights and flip them on. Sansa’s ears whirl around, and she darts out into the darkness beyond the pool and the shed and into the backyard.

I shove my hands into my pockets and kick a rock into the pool, and watch it sink to the bottom.

Everyone keeps calling this a *break*, but it’s not.

I didn’t choose this.

My stepfather did. “If you can’t grow up, then you’re going to learn the hard way,” he’d said.

He thought that by taking away all of my toys, my cars, my friends, he could somehow punish me for—for what? Having a little fun? As if he could throw me into some nowhere town to teach me a lesson.

Well, joke’s on him.

The only lesson I’m learning is how to absolutely ignore him the second I turn eighteen on October 11. As soon I do, I’m out of here. Just a month more.

I can endure this for a month.

THE MOMENT MY FLIGHT FROM LA ARRIVED, I hated this place. Four hours in an airplane, and it seems like I landed on another world. Into the tiniest airport imaginable. One terminal, twelve gates. Outside, it wasn't much better. Too many trees, all still somehow green even though it was September. A hired driver in an old tweed suit drove me to the middle of nowhere and deposited me in front of a house that looked like a castle, though, complete with a drawbridge and two turrets and a mazelike rose garden in the back, built of gray stones and some recluse's pipe dream. I came with my suitcase and nothing else. My driver pulled away without even a second glance. He left me to be murdered by goats or cows or whatever the hell is in the middle of farmland.

I slung my duffel bag over my shoulder and squinted up at the place where I'd be living for the next few months.

"You can't keep doing this, Vance," my stepfather had said when he sentenced me here. "Maybe some time away will help you see things differently."

And it just so happened that the director of *Starfield: Resonance*—my stepfather's best friend—had a house she wasn't using.

The front door was unlocked, so I let myself in and took my Lacostes off in the foyer. I was expecting swords on the walls and skeletons hanging, mouths agape, but the inside of the castle looked right good, really. The floors were a dark wood and while the walls were bare stone, they were decorated with paintings from IKEA and *Better Homes and Gardens*.

It would have to do.

"Elias, I'm here," I called as I dumped my duffel bag in the hallway and made my way into the living room. It was wide

and open, with two long couches and a TV, and in the corner there was a baby grand piano. The back wall was nothing but glass windows that looked out onto the hedge maze and a pool. I found the drawstring to the curtains and drew them closed.

The refrigerator was stocked, so Elias had to be *somewhere*. I grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and bit into it as I wandered through the rest of the house. Bathroom, laundry room, abandoned study—

The last door on the first level was ajar, so I eased it open.

Shelves and shelves of novels lined the walls, those cheap dime-store extended-universe sci-fi books you used to be able to find at petrol stations and grocery stores. There must've be hundreds of them—*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Starfield*, at a cursory glance.

A library.

Such a pity books were a waste of time.

Footsteps came from the hallway, and Elias, my guardian, popped his head into the library, brown-gray hair and a cheerful face. He threw his hands up when he found me. "There you are! I heard someone come in, but I thought for a moment it was a nosy neighbor or something—Sansa! No!"

Suddenly, a brown and black blur zipped past his legs. The dog leapt at me, pink tongue slobbering over my face. "Ooh, you missed me? You missed me, good girl?"

"She has *not* been good," Elias pointedly replied. "She tore up three rosebushes already. *Three!*"

I scrubbed her behind the ears. "Why don't we make it four, good girl? Huh?"

"Vance."

"You know I'm having a laugh," I told him, and then whispered to my sweetest thing, "Destroy them all."

Elias rolled his eyes. "How was the flight?"

I shrugged. “Fine.”

Sansa went off to sniff around a box of even more books and snorted, as though it wasn’t anything of interest.

Elias folded his arms over his chest. “*Fine*, huh.”

“Oi, yeah, *fine*,” I replied, and pulled my hood up over my head as I left the library. “The bedrooms upstairs?”

“All three of them—Vance, it went viral.”

I paused. Debated my words carefully. “. . . What?”

“You flipped off every single journalist at the airport.”

“Oh, *that*.” I spun back to Elias and spread my arms wide. “Just appeasing my fans. And they were hardly journalists. All paparazzi from what I can tell.”

Elias massaged the bridge of his nose. “You can’t keep doing this—”

“Or what?” I laughed. “I’ll be banished to hell? News flash, I think we’re already there.”

“This isn’t hell.” He sighed. “It’s a charming little town, really, if you’d give it the chance—”

“I’m tired,” I interrupted, turning out of the library. I gave him a wave. “Nice chat,” I added as I left for the stairs. The flight had been long, and the car ride to my prison had been a good deal longer, and I was tired and hungry and I just wanted to close myself into a room and sit in silence.

My head was pounding.

IT STILL IS A WEEK LATER.

As Sansa finishes up her business near the rosebushes, my phone vibrates. I fish it out of my pajama pocket. It’s a headline from one of the gossip magazines I follow. Though they usually

publish shite, sometimes it's good to have a leg up on the rumors circulating around.

HOLLYWOOD'S FAVORITE COUPLE ON THE ROCKS?! it reads, showing a picture of Darien and Elle from the set of *Starfield: Resonance*. It was a candid shot, taken as Darien's girl plants a kiss on his cheek. Photoshopped question marks flutter around them like bats.

Well, at least the tabloids have stopped pestering me for the moment.

The less the press talks about me, the sooner I can get out of this damn town.

Sansa comes back with a stick and sits at my feet. I pocket my phone again and scrub her behind the ears. I take the slobbery stick from her mouth.

"The car wreck wasn't my fault," I tell Sansa, but she only wags her tail, looking from the stick, to me, and back to the stick. She doesn't care.

Neither did anyone else.

In anger, I throw the stick—hard. It arcs high into the darkness and disappears somewhere beyond. Sansa takes off running, vaulting over those stupid rosebushes.

I wait for a moment. Then another.

"Sansa?" I call.

But she doesn't come back.

You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *Bookish and the Beast* by Ashley Poston. To continue reading, you can find the book at your local library or the following retailers:

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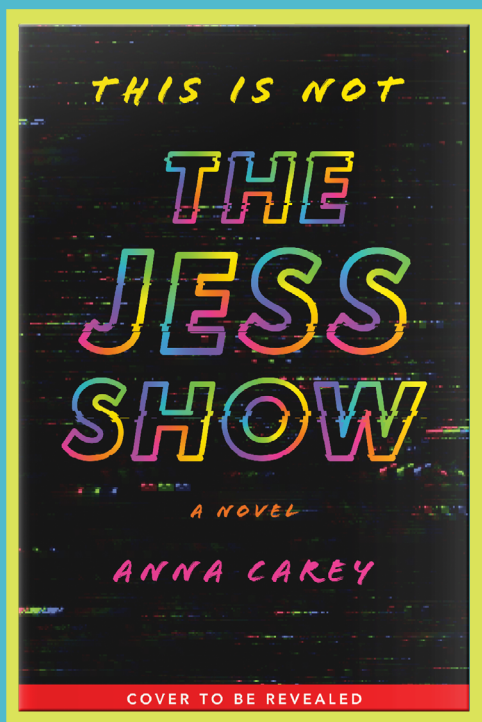
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"Nostalgic, romantic, thrilling, and with an exciting twist, I devoured *This Is Not the Jess Show* and didn't want it to end!"

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—Kirkus Reviews

"*This Is Not the Jess Show* goes deep in exploring how people live their lives and create their own realities—sometimes at a cost."

—Foreword Reviews

1

Three things happened the week I found out. *Titanic* won a bunch of Oscars, and my sister and I stayed up late to watch because we'd never miss a chance to see Leo in a tux. Meanwhile every news anchor was talking about the president, and everywhere I went people repeated that phrase, how he "didn't have sexual relations with that woman." I probably should have cared (president, impeachment, important stuff) but another, more pressing matter, had consumed me: I'd fallen in love with my best friend.

Tyler. Also known as Ty, Scruggs, or Tyler Michael Scruggs. Formerly known as Bugs, Buggy Scruggsy, or Fire Crotch (more on that later). We'd managed to be friends for six whole years with no feelings whatsoever. We'd never got weird with each other, even when we were in the throes of puberty and I was having vivid dreams about hooking up with Zack Morris. Growing up, Tyler had these huge buckteeth and moppy, rust-colored hair. When kids weren't making fun of his smile, they were heckling him for being a ginger, as if that alone were a sin

against humanity. It had taken five years of braces to get his two front teeth back inside his head, but now those braces were gone and his smile was kind of . . . well, perfect. Now he was five eight, and his hair was longer and a little darker, and it fell into his eyes when he played the drums. Now he worked out.

I rolled over in bed, my eyes squeezed shut. This thing with Tyler had gotten into my bloodstream and infected my brain. I was never alone because I was always imagining him right beside me. I couldn't stop thinking about the way the sleeves of his tee shirt strained against his biceps. How he closed his eyes and tilted his head back when he played the drums, and you could see the veins in his forearms. He was still the tiniest bit bucktoothed, but now he rested the tip of his tongue against the bottom of them when he was deep in thought. Now it was totally hot.

There was a knock on my door. My dad pressed his face into the room, his cheek on the doorframe à la *The Shining*.

"Jess, what are you doing?" he asked. "It's almost seven. Kristen's going to be here soon."

"I'm alive. I'm moving."

But I didn't actually move until he closed the door behind him.

I turned over, watching the tops of the trees sway with the wind. A squirrel ran across the telephone wire. It was the end of March and the cold air had just broken, giving way to spring, so I'd slept with my window open for the first time in months. I got up and fumbled for my jeans and my pink, fuzzy turtle-neck, trying not to obsess about the fact that I had band today with Tyler.

Someone was shouting something. It was so far off I couldn't make out the words right away, but it was the relentlessness

of it, the repetition that drew me in. It was a steady and sure as a beating heart. *Power* was the first word I heard with any certainty. The next was harder to make out but it sounded like *Forages*. *Forages, power, forages, power*, on and on like that. The words repeated on an endless loop, but when I stepped into the hallway they sounded farther away.

“The TV’s not on downstairs, is it?” I peered out my bedroom door. My dad was sitting on the bottom step now, his broad shoulders hunched forward as he laced up his work boots. The back of his jacket read FLYNN PEST CONTROL in block letters.

“No. Why?” He picked at a knot with his fingers, not bothering to turn around.

“Never mind.”

I walked across the hall. Sara was sitting up in bed, a blood pressure cuff on her arm. Lydia, her nurse, had arrived early that day, and the room filled with the *thwick thwick thwick* of the pump. She put on her glasses to read the gauge.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“What?” Sara’s black hair was messy at the crown, where it rubbed against the pillow. Lydia didn’t look up until she’d marked Sara’s blood pressure on her notepad and pulled the stethoscope out of each ear. We were all quiet for a moment, straining to hear past the machine by Sara’s bed, which hissed and sighed like a living, breathing thing.

“That bird? The chirping?” Lydia asked.

“No, it was different . . .” I went to the window and opened it, but the words were much harder to hear now, over everything else.

“My faculties must be going. The beginning of the end,” Lydia said, the hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. Her

blond hair was pulled into a low ponytail, and when she leaned forward I could see her roots. “Forty is approaching . . .”

“Forty isn’t old.” I knew she was kidding, though.

She sorted Sara’s pills into piles on the nightstand. Lydia always had an easy way about her, breezing through even the most chaotic days in our house. She was my mom’s best friend, and she’d been a part of our family for as long as I could remember. When I was kid I’d lie awake, listening to faint laughter downstairs as they talked at the kitchen table. She was our live-in nanny when we were really little. When we got older Sara and I would spend hours with her after school, digging up bugs in her backyard while my parents were still at work. Lydia was two years into her nursing degree when Sara got sick, and she’d wanted to go into private nursing, so it made sense that she’d be the one to care for Sara as the disease progressed. She’d be there when we couldn’t.

“What did it sound like?” Sara asked.

Before I could answer a leaf blower started up outside, drowning out my thoughts. Then my dad appeared in the doorway.

“You’re not even dressed yet? Jess, come on.”

“I know, I know,” I said on my way back across the hall. I pulled on the fuzzy turtleneck and paused, trying to hear the strange chanting again, but the leaf blower was still blasting, and the house was noisier now that everyone was starting their day. My mom must’ve turned on the radio in the kitchen. “Waterfalls” by TLC floated up the stairs, the lyrics muffled by my bedroom door.

I went through the motions of getting ready, on autopilot as I stepped into my jeans and brushed my hair. I was still standing at the window when Kristen pulled up and honked the horn.

2

“You’re like the guy from that song, ‘Lady in Red.’” Amber glanced back at me as she unbuckled her seatbelt. “It’s like, really? You’ve known her this whole time and you’re only into her now, after seeing her in a red dress? Isn’t that a little . . . fickle?”

“Or maybe it’s totally normal,” I said, pushing out into the upperclassmen parking lot. Amber and Kristen were really good friends in a lot of ways, but they had this weird habit of dissecting everything I felt. I couldn’t sneeze without it turning into a discussion.

“I just didn’t realize I liked him until I did,” I said.

Kristen tied her flannel around her waist. Her long, curly brown hair was still recovering from last spring, when she got too enthusiastic with the Sun In.

“Until you saw him with his shirt off,” she smirked.

The thing is . . . she wasn’t wrong. It had all started the last week of August, when it was so humid you couldn’t walk from the car to the house without your shirt sticking to your

back. I worked that summer at the Swickley YMCA, playing the keyboard for the Seniors Sing! choir, but on Thursdays and Fridays I was off. Those empty hours were filled with *Saved by the Bell* reruns and swimming in Amber's pool, which was in-ground and heated to a perfect eighty-five degrees. We stayed in the water until our fingers were wrinkly and our eyes were bloodshot from the chlorine.

Ty had called me that morning, bored out of his mind. Driftwood Day Camp had ended and so had his reign as assistant to the Music Director. He'd known Amber and Kristen almost as long as I had, but it wasn't an obvious thing, me inviting him over to Amber's house. I had to beep her, then wait for her to call me back so I could ask, and she said he could come if he picked up a bottle of Dr. Pepper on the way.

He'd already started dressing differently by then, trading in his old polos for vintage tee shirts he'd found at Goodwill, ones that said NIAGARA FALLS or ORLANDO in loopy, '80s font. When he came through the back gate he seemed taller, and he was tan from a summer spent outside, his shaggy hair overdue for a cut. He was the same Ty I'd known for six years, whom I'd defended in gym class when people called him Fire Crotch or Bugsy Scruggsy. The same Ty who'd stayed up late with me, lying in the treehouse in my backyard after Sara was diagnosed with Guignard's Disease. The same Ty who only said sorry, *I'm so sorry*, knowing that the silence was what I needed. But he was different, too. He came through the gate and hugged me, and something felt different.

"I can't believe you're into Bugs, I mean, it's *Bugs*." Amber pulled her braids down in front of one shoulder. Everyone said she looked like Dionne from *Clueless*, but without all the wacky hats.

“He’s gotten so full of himself too,” Kristen said. “It’s painful to be around.”

“I don’t think he’s full of himself,” I said. “Besides, this is high school. People reinvent themselves all the time.”

I didn’t go on, but I didn’t have to. Just two years before Kristen had gone through her own Love Potion No. 9 transformation, saying goodbye to her glasses and the vast majority of her body hair, and returning freshman year with boobs. She’d started September by making out with Kyle Sawicki, captain of the JV lacrosse team, as if that alone could announce: SEE, I’M DIFFERENT!! I never gave her shit for changing. But Amber and Kristen had distanced themselves from Ty almost as soon as he started working out. They kept saying he was conceited, and it felt like he was trying too hard, and didn’t I find it all a little annoying?

“Where is everyone?” I asked, as we passed the tenth empty parking spot on our way inside the school. The school lot was half empty.

“Haven’t you heard? There’s some kind of flu going around . . .” Amber spun her pearl earring between her fingers.

“I heard Paul Tamberino has been barfing for three days straight,” Kristen said. “Fever, chills, the whole thing. We should be wearing hazmat suits.”

She pushed through the back door, which had SPRING FORMAL fliers taped on it. She held it open just long enough for Amber and me to pass through, then rubbed her hand against the front of her jeans. It was seven twenty-six, just four minutes before first period, but the hall was practically empty. No Max Pembroke and Hannah Herlihy making out at the lockers by the auditorium. No sophomore girls standing in front of the vending machines, pretending to be engrossed in a snack

selection as they waited for the senior guys to pass through. No Mrs. Ramirez telling people they needed to hurry up, get to class.

“Half the school is out,” I said. “It’s a stomach flu?”

“Just the regular one, but really, really awful,” Kristen said. “Things coming out of either end, nonstop. They said that—”

“Ew, Kristen, repulsive.” Amber winced. “We get it, it’s bad.”

“Jess asked!” Kristen turned left down the hall, then spun around and walked backward, pulling her tee shirt up over her face so it covered her nose and mouth, as if that alone could protect her from germs. “Stay safe out there.”

“Just remember: Lady in Red,” Amber said, before starting toward her Physics classroom. “She was the same person she was before the dress.”

“It’s not a Lady in Red situation. I swear.”

But was it? There was something about Amber’s declarations that always made me unsure. Amber was the only one of us who’d dated anyone seriously. She and Chris Arnold had gone out for six months last year, and she’d decided to break up with him because he said ‘I love you’ and she knew immediately she’d never say it back.

It wasn’t that Ty was hot now, it really wasn’t. It was that he was hot *and* he was the same person who’d get me a box of candy hearts every Valentine’s, even though it was a completely bogus holiday, just so I wouldn’t feel left out. I’d held his hand at his mom’s wedding to Craig, this macho PE teacher from the next district over. He never complained about Craig but he didn’t have to, that year he spent so much time in the treehouse that we’d ran an extension cord out the kitchen window and moved an old TV and VCR out there. Ty, Sara, and I had movie marathons after school, snuggling up with sleeping bags and

pillows. I'd already loved him as a friend—didn't that mean anything?

I took the stairs down to the music wing. I passed a bunch of juniors I recognized, but it was as if all the underclassmen had vanished. I hadn't seen the school this empty since the tornado in 1996, right at the end of my freshman year. It touched down one night in May, and my family huddled in the basement, listening to it barrel through like a freight train, exploding trees and cars and mailboxes in its wake. The entire block behind the library was destroyed, including Kristen's house. I'd volunteered every Saturday for weeks, digging personal items out of the debris. I'd found Kristen's third-grade picture under a bathtub.

When I got to band, half the seats were empty, and Tyler wasn't in the percussion section. Emily Hanrahan and Kima Johnson, two girls I'd known since elementary school, were the only flutes. The sophomores who sat behind them were out and most of the woodwind section was missing too. A woman with red glasses sat at Mr. Betts's desk.

I went to the music closet, but Tyler wasn't there either. My mom had been on the phone all weekend so I was only able to sign onto AOL for five minutes on Saturday, and he hadn't been on. I hated thinking he might be sick too, that I might not see him for a whole week, maybe more. He didn't stop by our house as often as he had when we were younger, and I looked forward to every class we had together—on Thursdays especially, when he sat next to me in study hall and we spent most of the period passing notes back and forth.

My keyboard was on the top shelf and I had to yank it out inch by inch, sliding it across the wood so that it didn't fall on my head. The orchestra room had a grand piano that I sometimes

played, but Mr. Betts preferred the keyboard this year, considering the medley we were performing. It was a mash-up of all these sitcom theme songs—*Perfect Strangers*, *Friends*, *Full House*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Matters*. He liked how the piano solo at the beginning of *Family Matters* sounded on the keyboard. It was poppy, electronic, and closer to the original. I didn't have a problem with the actual composition, but part of me knew he was going to make us do something cheesy, like wear sunglasses or shimmy our shoulders at the break. He was always adding what he called "dramatic flair," even though it felt more third grade than eleventh.

I'd gotten the keyboard halfway out when someone rushed in to help.

"Hey, sorry." I turned and Tyler was right beside me, lowering the thing to the ground. "I was waiting for you by your locker, but then I remembered you don't go to your locker Monday mornings until second period, so then I came here—whatever, it's stupid. Hi."

I smiled. "Hi."

His snare drum was against the wall, behind us, but he didn't go for it. Instead he just stood there and brushed his bangs out of his eyes. He wore a vintage Eagles tee shirt with a zip-up hoodie over it, and he was standing so close I could smell his shampoo, this new peppermint one he'd started using. One of his drumsticks was in his back pocket and he turned the other between his fingers.

He was completely unrecognizable from the gawky boy I'd met in fourth grade. We'd only interacted because I'd tried to throw a kickball to Kristen and it had flown past her and smacked Tyler in the head. I'd felt so badly I'd asked him to play with us, and then he started coming over after school.

“You weren’t online this weekend,” he said.

“My mom had a work emergency. She never got off the phone.”

“Oh.” Tyler shrugged. We usually IMed at least Friday or Saturday night, just blabbering on about stupid stuff, like Mr. Betts’s new toupee.

I thought he might say something else, but he just drummed on the side of the storage shelf, tapping out a quick rhythm. His cheeks were turning this splotchy pink color. They only did that when he was nervous.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, no,” he shrugged.

“Ty, say it.”

“I guess I just missed you?”

It was a question. He looked up and gave me this half smile, then started laughing. “Fine, I said it. I missed you, whatever. You’re my everything, Jess Flynn, it’s torture without you, blah blah blah. You happy now?”

“Extremely,” I said, and I felt the fire in my cheeks, all the blood rushing to my face at once. “I have that effect on people . . .”

He turned and grabbed the snare drum, carrying it in front of him as he walked out. He stopped right beside me, leaning in so his lips were just a few inches from my ear, and I could feel his breath on my neck. His freckles always disappeared during the winter, but when we were really close I could see the faint remnants of them along the bridge of his nose.

“You definitely have that effect on me.”

Only this time, when he said it, he didn’t laugh or make it a joke. His hazel eyes met mine and there was a moment when I was sure he would kiss me, right there, in the storage closet.

Every inch of my body was suddenly awake and alert, waiting for him.

But then he turned and walked to the back of the room. He looked back twice, smiling at me over his shoulder. Something had changed. He wasn't the same person who'd slept next to me that night in the treehouse, when we were eleven, scanning the trees with a flashlight, looking for bears (even though we both knew Swickley didn't have any). The air between us was charged, and I noticed every time he brushed my shoulder or the back of my hand.

I set up the keyboard stand behind the clarinet section, feeling Tyler's eyes on me the whole time. When I looked up his cheeks were still pink and splotchy. I kept running through the conversation. It was like I'd been possessed by someone older and more confident. *I have that effect on people.*

The sub pulled her grey hair back with a checkered scrunchie, then tapped the conductor's baton against her music stand. A French horn player stopped halfway through her scale. The class was still only about half full.

"I'm Mrs. Kowalsky, your sub for the next few days. I know we don't have a full band, and we're missing almost all of the saxophones . . ." She glanced at Ajay Sethi, who looked particularly lonely surrounded by empty chairs. "But let's do our best. Starting from the top."

She rapped the baton against the stand again, then brought it up in front of her face.

Even after the first song began, the trumpets blaring the first notes of the *Friends* theme, our eyes kept finding each other. The whole period I was thinking of Tyler's mouth, how red his lips got when he blushed. I kept wondering what it would be like to kiss him.

3

“We can’t risk Sara getting sick.” Lydia pushed a heaping pile of salad onto her plate. “I think I’ve sprayed every inch of this house with Lysol.”

Sara pushed her mashed potatoes around with her fork. She was still in her pajamas, even though it was after six o’clock. My dad always carried her downstairs for dinner, singing “Here she comes, Miss America . . .” the whole way.

“That seems kind of unlikely,” Sara said, “considering I see the same four people every day.”

“I had to move all the Reyes’s new furniture into storage,” my mom went on. “The new dining set, every lamp and table I bought for the living room. We were supposed to be putting the finishing touches on tomorrow, but Vicki’s sick, and I wasn’t about to risk it. We won’t be done for another two weeks. That’s if we’re lucky.”

My mom was one of Swickley’s most popular interior designers. Her business grew organically after she renovated our house. She’d spent a whole year huddled over fabric swatches

and paint chips, a measuring tape glued to her hand. She was the one who'd chosen the glass and grey Formica dining table we were eating at. She'd paired it with these asymmetrical chairs that look like someone hacked them in half with a machete. Our living room was painted pale turquoise, but even with the fuchsia carpeting and black media cabinet, it somehow all worked. When she insisted on pink walls in the kitchen we fought back with everything we had. I suggested five other options; Sara said it would feel like swimming in a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. It wasn't until Amber and Kristen came to see it after school that I realized that it wasn't as horrible as we'd thought. Maybe it was even kind of . . . cool?

"I'm just hoping I don't lose too much time," my mom went on. "The kitchen renovation on Oakcrest is a complete disaster. There's only one guy left on the crew. Everyone else called in sick. It took him six hours just to install the sink. I can't even imagine what I'm going to have to deal with tomorrow."

"Sounds rough," I said. She was getting into that hyper-focused place where all she could do was talk about work. I turned to my dad, hoping he'd derail her, but he was cutting his steak with the precision of a neurosurgeon. He held up a tender piece, studying it on his fork before taking a bite.

In the past few years my dad's conversational skills had shrunk to short phrases, as if it took too much effort to form any kind of imaginative or complicated thought. My mom addressed it without addressing it, saying that he was "under a lot of stress" and "having a hard time with Sara's illness" or, my favorite, that he was "a man of few words." It was a horrible, masculine cliché, but the only time he seemed genuinely excited about anything was when he talked about the Swickley High varsity baseball team. He'd been the head coach since

I was a kid. I'd formed all these theories about sports being a socially acceptable way for men to talk about their feelings, to scream and cry and rage against the world. I was certain that when he teared up after the team lost the championships last fall, it was really about losing control, and how he felt about everything our family was going through.

Mostly though, I just missed him.

"Oh, I should show you the design for the Hill Lane project," my mom barreled on. She looked from me to Sara, but I couldn't figure out who she was talking to. "You'd love the master bedroom. All florals. Simple. I usually resist florals because it feels grandma-ish, but what Betsy Baker wants, Betsy Baker gets. That woman is a force."

The table was quiet and for a second I thought I heard it again, that same chanting from the other morning. It was hard to be sure because the stereo in the kitchen was still on. The radio station played a Dave Matthews song I hadn't heard before. Something about not drinking the water.

"Forages . . ." I stared down at my plate, to the last grisly bits of meat. "That just means to look for food, right? It's not like there's some other obscure definition?"

My mom tilted her head and studied me. "Where'd that come from?"

"I just . . ." I started. "I heard it the other morning. It sounded like it was coming from outside, like someone yelling. Forages, power. Forages, power. Over and over like that. But then I couldn't hear it anymore."

"That's what you were asking about yesterday?" Sara asked. "The thing you asked us about?"

"And for a minute or two today, right when I got up."

Sara turned to Lydia. Her dark brows knitted together the

way they did when she was pissed. Lydia stared straight ahead. It was she was purposely ignoring her.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Very strange . . .” My mom said it in this chipper, high-pitched voice. “Does anyone want more steak? There’s two more pieces.”

“I’m good,” I said.

It wasn’t the type of conversation my mom was interested in. She would’ve been happier if I’d engaged with her on her Oakcrest kitchen design, or if I’d told some funny, meaningful story about school. The thing about having a mom who obsessed over the tiniest aesthetic details of our house was that her obsession extended to all the people in it. She was always suggesting new hairstyles (*you should grow out your bangs, shorter cuts are harder to pull off*), and one time she’d bought me a whole pile of new clothes without asking. She’d paired different skirts and sweaters together and had all the blouses tailored to my frame. Everything I said and did and wore had to be just right.

I stacked Sara’s and Lydia’s plates and started into the kitchen. Sara was glancing sideways at Lydia again, like she might say something else, but she didn’t. I wondered if she’d heard the words too, or if she was just responding to my mom’s obsessive need to control the conversation. I’d have to ask her when we were alone.

Sometimes just being in a ten-foot radius of my mother was enough to make me feel anxious. When I was thirteen I begged her to let me take guitar lessons, though she went on and on about how I was such a beautiful piano player—why did I want to change instruments? *Sam*, she said to my dad. *Tell her what a waste that would be.* It had taken months to wear her down,

but she finally agreed that if I kept playing the piano I could also take guitar. I'd do both.

But six lessons in my guitar teacher, Harry, had what my parents described as a "psychotic break." He'd been showing me how to play "Landslide" when he paused, staring at the mirror that hung across from our sofa. He asked if I'd ever wondered about the nature of reality. Did I ever feel, in my gut, that there was more to this world? That things were oppressively surface level? Did I ever feel trapped in someone else's delusion?

I wasn't used to people asking my opinion, so I had to really think about it. *Sometimes things feel weird . . . like I don't have control*, I said. *Like I'm trapped. Is that what you mean?* I started to tell him about my mom, and how she needed to know where I was every second of every day, but then my dad walked in. He'd heard the whole conversation from the kitchen.

Harry never came back to our house. When we went to Mel's Music a week later, they said he'd moved in with his mother in New Jersey. *He'd been hearing things*, an egg-shaped man behind the counter said. His grey beard was so long it made him look like Rip Van Winkle. *He wasn't well . . . in the head, you know?*

I rinsed the dishes and went downstairs. I looked at my reflection in the mirror above our sofa, trying to see what Harry saw in it. Maybe I was smart enough not to say it out loud, but I still *did* question "the nature of reality." I did feel like everything was surface level. And now I was hearing things, too.

He wasn't well . . . in the head, you know?

I was starting to feel like I did.

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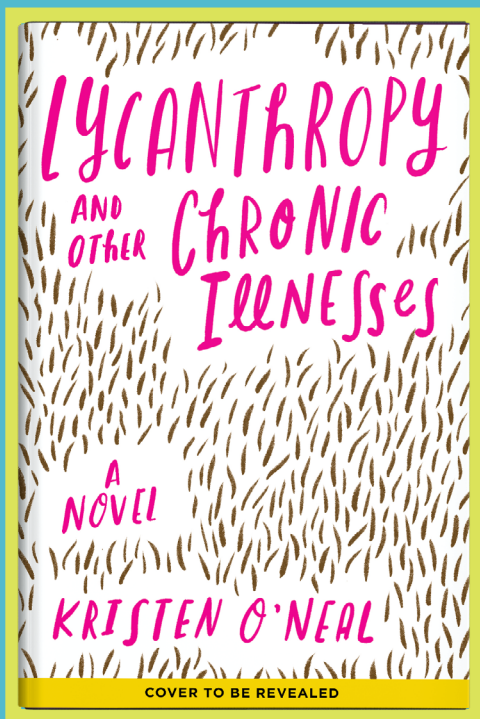
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Teen Wolf meets *Emergency Contact* in this debut young adult novel about friendship and the hairy side of chronic illness.

Priya worked hard to pursue her premed dreams at Stanford, but a diagnosis of chronic Lyme disease during her sophomore year sends her back to her loving but overbearing family in New Jersey—and leaves her wondering if she'll ever be able to return to the way things were. Thankfully she has her online pen pal, Brigid, and the rest of the members of “oof ouch my bones,” a virtual support group that meets on Discord to crack jokes and vent about their own chronic illnesses.

When Brigid suddenly goes offline, Priya does something out of character: she steals the family car and drives to Pennsylvania to check on Brigid. Priya isn't sure what to expect, but it isn't the horrifying creature that's shut in the basement. With Brigid nowhere to be found, Priya begins to puzzle together an impossible but obvious truth: the creature might be a werewolf—and the werewolf might be Brigid. As Brigid's unique condition worsens, their

Lycanthropy — and — Other Chronic Illnesses

Kristen O'Neal



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA



Ticks don't actually have teeth. I looked it up afterward, scrolling through photos with that same kind of sick fascination of watching someone pop a pimple. They've got this horrible ridged capitulum that opens up into three parts like the monster from *Stranger Things*, sinks into your skin, and holds on just long enough to derail the course of your entire life.

I don't know what time it is when I wake up. This time last year, I would have known the second I heard my alarm trilling: 7:30 a.m. on a Monday, enough time to hit snooze once, slip out of bed, turn on the coffee pot my roommate and I weren't allowed to have in our dorm, and get ready to leave for Bio at 8:40. Enough time to sit and drink it, knees to my chest, as she slept, scrolling through my email or my blog. I was a well-oiled machine. I was pre-med at Stanford and I had made it out of New Jersey. I was ready for anything.

It must have happened when I was home for the summer, trudging through the tall grass with my high school friends, cutting across a field to get to town. Or maybe it was down by the Amtrak tracks with the climbing plants as Jadie roped me into "acting" for one of her film projects. I don't know. I'll never know. The only

thing I know is that when I got back to California last fall, I got sick. Really sick.

I don't set an alarm anymore. I know I've slept too long—my internal clock won't wake me when it's supposed to. It's sluggish now, constantly running low on battery, and so am I.

I take a quick inventory, staring up at the same crack in my ceiling that I've stared up at since I was five years old. My head is stuffed with cotton. I feel heavy, like something is pinning me to the mattress. And my joints *hurt*, a throbbing pain that will only get worse as I move. It feels like a handful of fevers scattered around my body, a dozen hungry black-hole stomachs—my left knuckles, my ankle, my knee, my hips, my wrist.

Sometimes it feels like coals being stoked hotter and hotter until I can't move. Sometimes it feels like a fist clenched tight, tight, tight, until I think that my bones are going to break. Sometimes it feels like each segment of my body is floating away from the others like Pangea, a strange, electric humming that separates all of my bones.

Sometimes it doesn't feel like anything at all. Sometimes it just hurts.

Today will be okay, probably. But when the weather's about to change, I can roll over and feel every point where my bones connect to each other. Last week I landed wrong when I walked down the steps to the car, and my swollen knee remembers this as well as I do.

I hear my door creak open before it's pulled shut again with a soft *click*. I don't make a sound.

"Let me just check if she needs anything," comes my mom's voice. She doesn't know how to whisper, so her version of a hushed tone cuts right through the door. "She hasn't been to church with us in so long."

My dad replies in Tamil, mostly. "Let the girl sleep. She needs to rest. You talked with the doctor yourself, didn't you?"

"And what does he know?" I can *see* my mom waving her hand. Then, a little louder: "Priya—"

My dad shushes her. "You are shouting—"

"I am *not* shouting, you are—"

"I'll stay back in case she needs me. Okay?"

There's a pause. Then, my dad's voice again: "She's going to be just fine."

My mom's: "We should be going to church as a family."

"We will, I promise."

“Okay.”

The door opens again, and I let my eyes close. I hear my mom pad over to my bed, sit on the side. She smooths back my hair and kisses me on the forehead, gentler than she usually is with me.

I think about pretending I’m still asleep, but a soft-edged affection tugs at my heart and I pretend, instead, that she’s woken me up.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Pretty good,” I lie. It’s worth it for the grin that makes its way across her face, and she pats me on the cheek.

“Don’t tell your father I woke you up,” she says. “He’ll get mad at me.”

I smile back at her. “Have fun at church.”

“I always put you in the prayer requests,” she says. I know it’s meant to be comforting, but the thought of everyone talking about me and my illness makes me want to stay in the house forever and never show my face in public again.

“Say hello to God for me,” I joke. Her face turns severe.

“Say hello yourself!” she says. “You’re being silly. Okay, go back to sleep. Don’t tell your father.”

“I won’t.”

I mean to wake up then, to pull open my closet and put on something other than sweatpants. I mean to go downstairs and eat breakfast with my dad, or maybe even flag down my mom and brother and sister, tell them I’m coming to church with them after all. But instead my eyes close, and I’m pulled back under before I even reach over and click the Tumblr app on my phone.



It takes me a few seconds to realize that the buzzing is coming from my bedside table, but I’m not quick enough. My phone shim-mies its way off the table and falls to the floor with a *thud* that’s muffled by the thin, yellowing carpet. I pull it up by the charger like the world’s worst fisherman.

bigforkhands sent you a message, the screen says, right underneath 11:53, February 2. I try to be gracious with myself, but seeing the time still shoots a spike of adrenaline right through me. *You’ve wasted your day*, says a voice in my head. *What’s a day when you’ve wasted the whole year?* says another.

The phone buzzes again. I should be rolling my eyes, but instead, I feel a smile spreading across my face. I open up my messages, scrolling up to the top.

bigforkhands:

hey did you know that during one of the battles in the civil war a bunch of soldiers just started.

uh. glowing in the dark

like

they were stuck in the mud for like two days and they looked down and were like "oh cool, sweet, my wounds are glowing blue"

thisisfine.jpg

and

AND!!!!!!

the soldiers with glowing wounds actually got better faster than the other ones??

bigforkhands:

listen some teens DID solve this mystery (as teens always do) and they found out that all these factors came together to make these nasty nasty wounds the perfect home for this bioluminescent bacteria

which... somehow heals you? idk I haven't quite figured that part out

you're the scientist, you tell me, doc

anyway

could you IMAGINE. what that would be like with this like, 19th century nothing knowledge

like. god. what must they have been thinking was happening to them?

bigforkhands:

ok I read more and they called it "angel's glow" which fucking slaps

it must have looked like a miracle, huh. like. i can't even imagine what that would be like. emotionally i mean.

do people still believe in miracles? do you?

bigforkhands:

| priya wake up

Before I can even finish reading, my phone buzzes again, and I scroll down to type out a quick message.

paranormaldetective:

| Brigid!!!

bigforkhands:

| oh sweet you're up

| rise and shine, sweet cheeks

paranormaldetective:

| HATED that.

bigforkhands:

| stop using periods at the end of your sentences dude
| you sound ilke a serial killer

| you gotta be cool and fun... how do you spell lazey
| faire

paranormaldetective:

| Yeah I think that was right

bigforkhands:

| :)))

paranormaldetective:

| Okay, let me scroll back up.

bigforkhands:

| NO PERIODS!!!

| coincidentally that also describes my body

paranormaldetective:

| Are you okay

bigforkhands:

| absolutely not, thank you for asking

I scroll back up. She's sent me a post that reads, "Send Your Followers a Box of Toads to Demonstrate Your Undying Affection." Under this, there's another message from Brigid:

bigforkhands:

| hey what's your address

| for no particular reason

paranormaldetective:

| Brigid you LITERALLY just sent me a post threatening to mail me toads

bigforkhands:

| i don't know what you're talking about

paranormaldetective:

| Mmhmm.

bigforkhands:

| was it a threat or a promise

paranormaldetective:

| I'm not giving you my address

bigforkhands:

| ughhh you're always so much cagier on the internet than i am

| it's like you actually learned the lesson you were supposed to learn instead of telling strangers your name and a bunch of information about yourself and also your deepest darkest secrets

paranormaldetective:

| Consider it an honor that you know my name

bigforkhands:

| oh i do, trust me

| okay, I'll give you MY address

paranormaldetective:

| Knock yourself out!

| Not literally please

bigforkhands:

| too late

This is exactly the way that Brigid and I became . . . well, friends. At first that was just the word I used to explain our conversations to my parents—one of my friends was telling me about this. No, you don't know her, she goes to another school. I was lying, in more ways than one; even though we messaged every day, friend didn't seem like the right

word for someone on the other side of a computer screen, someone made up of pixels and words and images, whose blog description said “i’m bridge, i’m 20, and i’m not sure what’s happening here either.” It didn’t seem like the right word until, suddenly, it was.

Here’s what I see when I scroll through her blog: A meme about Victor Frankenstein. An extremely cursed text post I refuse to repeat even to myself. A gifset from *True or False*, the mid-2000s USA Network TV show that we bonded over watching a decade too late. A post that just says “I saw a snake on my way home from work!!” followed by a digital illustration she’s done of a grinning cartoon snake with a braided, crosshatch design on its back. It’s captioned “funky little dude!” She’s got such a distinct style that I always know when I see one of her drawings—her tag is “doodles,” and they’re made to look effortless, but she’s really talented.

I can never quite tell how etiquette translates to talking to people on the internet. How many posts do you have to reblog from each other before it’s okay to send them a message? How many comments do you have to leave before you become friends?

But I didn’t actually have to worry. A few weeks into following each other, she sent me a message that said “i LOVE your blog and upon deliberation, i have decided that we are going to be friends!”

And that was it. She spoke it into existence like God creating the universe.

We’ve been chatting on and off for two years now, whenever she felt like popping into my inbox. But we’ve been talking almost nonstop since I’ve been back in Jersey. I keep up with a handful of college friends, but no one knows what to say to me. *Sorry you had to drop out of school for the rest of the year. Sorry you had to move back home in shame.*

With Brigid it’s easy. We talk about movies or religion or celebrity crushes or yearning, she sends me memes, and she doesn’t feel sorry for me.

My phone buzzes again, and I swing myself out of bed, trying to stand. I forget my knee until it buckles, and I have to catch myself on the bed. The giddy bubble of brightness from Brigid’s messages pops.

I take a couple of breaths to stop myself from crying. I cry more now than I ever used to. I hate it. When I’d gotten back from the hospital, the sight of my own clean, white sheets had twisted something in my chest, and I’d wanted to ask my mother to change them

to something colorful, but I was embarrassed I couldn't change them myself, and exhausted from the trip home, so I'd just burst into tears instead.

bigforkhands:

| 6969 cool street
| ...ok but actually:
| 11 Natalis Road
| Bellows, PA 19508
| we're pen pals now, the contract has been signed

I cannot believe it.

paranormaldetective:

| ...Oh my God

bigforkhands:

| what??

paranormaldetective:

| You literally live like, an hour away from me

bigforkhands:

| whAT!!
| YOU'RE KIDDING ME
| we are NEIGHBORS, PRACTICALLY

paranormaldetective:

| !!!!!!!!!

bigforkhands:

| holy shit holy shit holy shti

paranormaldetective:

| This is so crazy!!!!

bigforkhands:

| come visit
| slumber party
| hiking trip
| rob a bank with me
| ...i'm kidding, sorry for being weird haha

paranormaldetective:

| No, I don't mind

bigforkhands:

| you never seem to, and i cherish that about our friendship

I smile.

paranormaldetective:

| Me too <3

bigforkhands:

| :')

paranormaldetective:

| Is that his nose

bigforkhands:

| no! he's shedding a happy tear!

| or she

| do smileys have gender

paranormaldetective:

| No

bigforkhands:

| yeah of course they don't

paranormaldetective:

| So... Bioluminescence?

bigforkhands:

| love of my life... i thought you'd never ask

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