

YOU SHOULD
SEE ME
IN A CROWN

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-50326-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

20 21 22 23 24

Printed in the U.S.A.

23

First edition, June 2020

Book design by Stephanie Yang

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I'm clutching my tray with both hands, hoping that Beyoncé grants me the strength to make it to my usual lunch table without any incidents.

I shudder at the thought of a slip that douses me in ranch dressing or a trip that lands me in the lap of one of the guys from the wrestling team. Or, worse, a video of that fall blowing up on Campbell Confidential, the gossipy, Twitter-esque app some senior created a few years ago that has become my worst nightmare. I'm grateful that in a few months all this will be behind me. I'll be on my way to Pennington, the best private college in the state, living the life I've always dreamed about: one surrounded by people like me, in a place I fit, on track to becoming a doctor. It's so close I can taste it. All I need is the email confirming that I got the scholarship and—

“Lighty, watch it! I’ve got a *thing* to do.” Derek Lawson leans into the word *thing* like what he’s prepping for is some big mystery as he plants himself directly in front of me. I take a step back—tray still in my death grip—and brace myself. I know what happens next. We all do. This type of public spectacle is second nature in Campbell this time of year.

Before I have a chance to spare myself the very specific torture that accompanies watching a flash mob full of varsity athletes singing and dancing in unison like some sort of value-brand boy band, it’s already happening.

Derek slides across the floor with the type of drama that would make the cast of *Hamilton* sit up and take notes. He climbs onto the long table where his crew normally sits and points down to his girlfriend and my not-so-secret rival, Rachel Collins. Someone presses play on a speaker somewhere, and that’s when it starts: another freaking promposal.

Even though this has been happening at least twice a week since the semester started, I swear one of the freshman girls at the table next to me faints from excitement when Derek begins singing a remixed and prom-themed version of “Time of My Life.” Her friends are too distracted to even help her up.

Prom in Campbell County, Indiana, is like football in Texas. The only difference is, we don’t get our fanaticism out of our systems every Friday night for months on end. Nope, in Campbell we just hold it in, eleven months and twenty-nine days per year, until one day we explode. The whole town, covered in a heap of sequins and designer tuxes and enough hairspray to fuel the Hindenburg.

It might be impressive if it weren't so ridiculously, obnoxiously annoying.

"You're the one girl, I want to go to prom with!" Derek is belting at the top of his lungs and it is certifiably awful, but no one seems to care. The girls from the pom squad come in from the hallway, where they must have been lying in wait, fully decked out in their uniforms, and grab their partners from the basketball team. And suddenly, they're doing full *Dirty Dancing* choreo and not missing a beat.

The entire cafeteria is watching this show, and I sort of want to die. My stomach threatens to bring up the granola bar I ate for breakfast just at the sight.

Not only because it's Rachel at the center of the attention again, but because this public of a display of, well, *anything* really terrifies me—even when I'm the furthest thing from being involved in it. I mean, everyone is looking at you, watching you, waiting for you to do something worth posting to Campbell Confidential. The idea of people's eyes being on me for any longer than the time it takes for me to pass out their sheet music before concert band rehearsal makes me undeniably anxious. It's why I never ran for class president or auditioned for a school musical and can barely take solos in band without wanting to evaporate.

When you already feel like everything about you makes you stand out, it just makes more sense to find as many ways to blend in as you can.

But still, there's something about the way Derek is looking at Rachel that makes my heart sink. People like Rachel and Derek get the perfect high school sweetheart love story to tell their kids

about one day, but tall, black, broke Liz Lighty doesn't stand a chance. Not in a place like this, anyway.

I don't resent my classmates—I really don't. But sometimes (okay, *most* of the time) it's just that I don't feel like one of them.

"I've searched through every Campbell store, and I've finally found the corsage for you!" Derek extends his hand, and Rachel grabs it, fully sobbing now. How she manages to look like an Instagram model even as she sheds a bucketful of fake tears, I'll never understand.

Derek's grand finale—I kid you not—is The Lift.

With clearly practiced finesse, Rachel runs forward, leaps into his arms, and is lifted above the crowd in the cafeteria. She looks less like Baby and more like Simba looking over the Pride Lands if you ask me, but whatever. Everyone is on their feet by the time the song ends, and the entire fourth-period lunch booms with applause.

There is a look of begrudging respect on my best friend Gabi's face as she watches the poms and the basketball guys stand around clapping and looking up at the couple in admiration. Everyone in the room now has their phones out, no doubt recording for Campbell Confidential. And the freshman girls next to us are in literal tears—the one who fainted is even doing a CC Live recording from the floor.

I look past Derek and Rachel's table and the hordes of fans surrounding them, and my eyes lock onto the corner of the cafeteria that I've avoided like the plague since freshman year. I can't help myself. Some of the senior guys from the football team are cheering, standing on their chairs and shouting support to their fellow clichéman, Derek. All of them besides Jordan Jennings. I feel the

same anxious clench of my heart I always do when I see him, my ex-best friend. His smile is faint as he claps, half-hearted, and I can tell how artificial it is from this far away.

He's almost too cute to stare at for more than a few seconds at a time. And this isn't just me being thirsty; with his smooth brown skin, his waves where his curls used to be, he really looks like he belongs in a teen soap opera—all effortlessly flawless or whatever.

I remind myself of what he made sure I knew when we were freshmen: People like me and people like him exist in two different stratospheres, and it's best to keep it that way.



“Ugh! Organizing a promposal on the day Emme vacates her spot as potential queen? It’s Kris Jenner–level strategy. I’d be pissed if I weren’t so jealous I didn’t think of it myself.” Gabi shoves a book into her locker and shakes her head. “The devil works hard, but Rachel Collins works harder.”

“Jealousy is a disease, Marino. Get well soon.” Britt smirks from where she leans against the wall, and Gabi narrows her eyes in her direction. “Seriously, who cares about Rachel Collins? I’d rather talk about who would win in a steel-cage match between Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. Who are you putting your money on, Lizzo?”

Stone, sitting cross-legged in deep meditation, seems to be completely unconcerned with the fact that there’s a furious between-class rush that threatens to flatten her. I haven’t said much since the promposal at lunch—haven’t been able to shake that weird

feeling of *otherness* that sometimes hits me in waves so strong they threaten to pull me under—but that doesn't stop Gabi and Britt from trying to get me to chime in anyway.

"G, that is so far from relevant," I start, linking my arm through hers as we all head toward our next classes. "It's not like any of us are next in line for the throne."

"I'd say we're a lot closer than some people," Gabi says, voice laced with faux sadness. "Closer than Freddy, at least."

I've been good, careful, not to ever have any cafeteria mishaps, but other people haven't been so lucky. Last week, Freddy Brinkley tripped over his own shoelaces (rookie mistake, you always double-knot before you start the trek into the battle zone) on his way to his seat and face-planted into a plate of spasagna, Campbell County's lasagna-spaghetti hybrid dish.

At least thirty people captured it on Campbell Confidential, and it's been remixed, remastered, and retooled so many times and in so many ways that I don't think poor Freddy is ever going to get past #SpasagnaGate.

Freddy got cocky, thought he could make *The Walk* without the proper precautions, and he paid the ultimate price: a public meme-ification. You hate to see it.

Britt and Stone leave us at the band room to head to their next class. Band passes quickly, too quickly for my taste. Between my anxiety about waiting for the scholarship email, which I know is supposed to come today, and the general buzzing energy of prom season kicking everything into overdrive, I'm not ready for class to be over when it is.

Gabi gathers her things quickly once the final bell rings, not

taking nearly the same care as I do to tuck her clarinet back into the soft velvet of the hard case. She's going to miss her favorite Campbell Confidential livestream—the Prom Projectioners, a group of girls who make predictions every Monday afternoon about who does and doesn't stand a chance at making prom court—if she doesn't leave right now.

The rest of our classmates are pouring out the side doors into the parking lot, but I'm staying behind like I do most afternoons. There's always something more to get done before going home.

"I still can't believe that Emme went ghost like that." She pulls her sleek black sunglasses from her bag and adjusts them over her eyes. She pauses for a second. "You think Jordan is okay?"

Emme Chandler: Jordan's girlfriend of three years, the sweetest person alive, and mysteriously disappeared shoo-in for prom queen. We weren't friends with her—we were barely in the same area code, socially—but since she's practically Campbell County royalty, it's hard not to wonder where she went.

But the question still catches me off guard. Back when the three of us were friends, G and Jordan fought constantly. I wonder if a part of her cares about him still, even if she doesn't want to, the same way that I do.

Jordan, G, and I were closer than close in middle school. For years, the three of us did everything together. We all met in band in sixth grade, when me and Jordan were battling (auditioning, technically) for first-chair clarinet. And whenever he landed first chair, his smile smug and shining with his braces, he'd say, "Don't be embarrassed, Lighty. A first is nothing without a good second!"

During the school year, we would watch Jordan hang up his nerd hat on Friday nights to play football for our surprisingly good middle school team, and then we'd practically camp out at Gabi's house for the rest of the weekend—me and Jordan putting Gabi on to black cult classics from the '90s like *House Party* and *Friday*. We were so goofy back then, so unconcerned with what other people thought of us as long as we had each other, we even performed in our school's talent show together. Or at least me and Jordan did. Even then, Gabi had a pretty refined aesthetic.

Jordan and I dressed up in these awful, thrifted, super-baggy '90s outfits and did the Kid 'n Play dance sequence from the first *House Party*. We got second place, but honestly, we were robbed by Mikayla Murphy and her stupid Hula-Hoops.

But things change, people change, and Jordan is no different.

At some point, he made sure I knew that our friendship was just a phase. And there wasn't much I could do about it by then.

Gabi is still looking at me, and I realize I don't know how he's doing. I don't know anything about him anymore.

"I'm not sure, G," I say.

And despite how I feel about him now, I can't help but think, *But I hope so.*