

LOUDER THAN WORDS

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First days have a way of making me feel a little less than real.

The way no one looks too long at me, but everyone looks for a second longer than feels comfortable. The way I can pass through the hallways like a ghost but still stick out like a thorny rose in a field of wispy wildflowers. The way I don't speak, sometimes for hours, until I'm forced to, and my voice comes out all croaky. I sound nothing like myself, but no one knows that I sound nothing like myself. Because no one knows me.

In a way, feeling less than real is good. I like feeling like an outline or an early version of one of my sketches: still flat and gray and waiting to be made whole. And if I'm not real—if there are no expectations about how I'm supposed to look or act or sound—I can be whomever I want.

This is a second chance, and second chances are rare. I may not deserve this opportunity for a fresh start, but I need to do something right to make up for all the wrong. So here I'll be someone different. Someone good. A better person than I was before.

The concrete stairs leading up to the front doors of Edgewood High are narrow and steep, and late-summer sunlight filters through the branches of two tall oaks springing up like giants on either side of the entrance. I want to sit in the grass and trace the way the light dapples the school's stoop in uneven shapes, take stock of the shadows and the few leaves that have already turned and fallen, though it's still much too warm to be autumn. This part of DC is so different from the section of the city where my old school was—the houses are smaller, the bus stops and Metro stations busier and louder—and I want to document that too, how much more this school feels like it's inside the version of the city I know. But I wasted enough time deciding what to wear this morning and I don't want to be late. I hike my backpack higher on my shoulders and pull open one of the school's double doors, trying hard not to think about the reason I'm here.

Conversations swell and subside all around as I step into the wide entryway. Kids in mint-green T-shirts and tangerine shorts, violet tank tops and bright yellow sneakers fill my sightline with color,

and it's a jarring reminder that I'm in public school now. Hartwell Academy, my old private school, was so stuffy and obsessed with tradition that we all had to wear a bland navy-and-white uniform that almost made me forget how much I love putting together a look. As I glance around at students with blue braids and funky shoelaces, I see that even some of the teachers have several piercings in a single ear or are wearing glittery makeup. My handmade jewelry doesn't seem so out of place in a school like this one. And neither do I, I realize, noticing how many faces are various shades of brown. Unlike the whitewashed halls of Hartwell, so many more people here look like me.

Unconsciously, I touch my laid edges, the puff pulled tight at the crown of my head. I look down to see if I need to straighten the collar of my oversize flannel or retie my spotless white Chucks. I don't, and I smile, grateful that I at least *look* perfect.

I'm so used to being different and doing everything I can to adapt to everything and everyone around me. It hadn't occurred to me that here I might be able to blend in. That I might even *fit* in. I feel my heart speed up, stutter, skip a beat. It's a sure sign that I'm nervous—and the only remaining sign that my heart has ever struggled to do what it's supposed to. The painless arrhythmia also makes me miss an old friend, Bree. When I felt the stutter with

her, it was usually from excitement. I decide to assign that emotion to this moment instead of anxiety, hoping the stutter is a sign of good things to come and not a warning, as it sometimes can be.

According to my schedule, the room number of my first class is A450, but after walking around for ten minutes without successfully finding *any* rooms that start with the letter A, hiking up and back down a flight of stairs, and getting so turned around I pass the same water fountain three times, I realize I won't figure this out on my own and decide to look for the office.

Hartwell was tiny compared to Edgewood's long hallways, its dozens of hidden corridors and towering flights of stairs. I go down one hall and then another, turning right and heading toward what I think might be the main office, but as I come around the corner, I slam right into a statuesque Black girl with a bleached-blond buzz cut and perfectly winged eyeliner.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," I say immediately. She bends down to pick up a composition notebook and her phone, which flew out of her hand when we collided. "I'm new and I'm all turned around. I can't find the office and I thought it was around here somewhere, but—"

"You good," she says. "I'm Scarlett, and I'm a little turned around too. I'm . . . well . . . newish. But yeah, I just left the office." She

throws a thumb over her shoulder, pointing to a dark blue door, and smiles.

I let out a relieved sigh. “Right. Thanks. Your phone okay?”

She nods. “Phone’s cool,” she says, holding it up so I can see that the screen isn’t scratched or cracked.

“Oh, perfect. I’m Jordyn,” I tell her, reaching out for a handshake.

The girl looks at my outstretched hand and then back up at my face, squinting. For a second, I swear I see a flicker of recognition in her eyes, but where could this girl possibly know me from? The moment passes as quickly as it came, but her smile fades.

When she doesn’t reach for my hand, I let it fall.

“Are you a junior too?” I ask. “It would be a relief to know at least one person. Maybe we have some classes together?”

Scarlett shrugs and fiddles with one of the studs in her ear. “Maybe,” she says. Then she walks away without looking back, her round, blond head floating a few inches above most of the other students’.

For a moment I’m embarrassed by the way she brushed me off—by how little she seemed to want to know me. But then I remember that I want this year to be different. The old Jordyn would overthink this situation and wonder if there was something she did wrong, something about her that turned Scarlett off. But I’m the

New Jordyn now. I head to the office, telling myself to let Scarlett's rejection roll off my shoulders like rain, but her rejection lingers overhead like a storm cloud.

The admin assistant in the office is instantly able to point me in the right direction for first period, so I stumble into Mr. Roderick's Digital Design class just before the bell sounds—a flat tone that reverberates against the concrete walls and makes my ears ring in a way that means I'll be hearing it tonight in my dreams. "Jesus," I mutter under my breath as I walk in, and I earn a half grin from a curly-haired white boy sitting in the front row.

"I know," he says. "It takes some getting used to, and then it's still terrible."

I can't help but smile. I glance around and I'm surprised to see Scarlett in the class too, seated right in the middle. I don't want to have to walk past her and relive whatever her icy reaction to me in the hall was about, so I take the empty seat beside the boy. "My old school didn't have bells—swore they were disruptive to the *retention of information* and the *facilitation of deep discussion*," I say, and he chuckles.

"I'm Jordyn," I add, taking a risk old Jordyn would never have taken again so soon after being brushed off by Scarlett. But New Jordyn dives right in. "This room was, like, impossible to find."

“Kaleb,” he says. There’s a tiny, sparkling stud in his nose, shining like a fleck of glitter when he turns his head. “And yeah. We call this part of the building the Attic because it’s so far away from everything.”

“Is that what the weird *A* stands for?” I ask.

Kaleb laughs and tucks one of his curls behind his ear. “I think it actually stands for *annex*? But sure, let’s say that it does. Roderick is def weird enough to live in one.”

I glance up at our teacher. He’s stocky and tan, with salt-and-pepper hair and a sky-colored shirt he has buttoned all the way to the top. He’s handsome in a nerdy way, like an actor playing a college professor, or a scientist who works out.

“What’s weird about him?” I ask, and Kaleb just shakes his head.

“You’ll see,” he says.

“Okay!” Mr. Roderick says seconds later. He pushes his gray hair away from his gray eyes and slips on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, completing his look in a way I approve of. *How could someone as stylish as him be anything but cool?* I think, glancing over at Kaleb.

“Let’s get started,” the teacher says.

He reviews the syllabus with us and tells us what software we’ll be using in class as well as the projects we’ll be required to complete in order to put our new design skills into practice. At first, I think

Kaleb is completely wrong about Mr. Roderick, and I'm interested in almost everything he mentions. Though I still love drawing by hand, graphic design is really fun for me too, and I know those are skills that I'll need if I'm going to get into a good art school. But then I notice how Roderick glances at a cute Asian girl in the front row as he says that some students have a *natural* talent with the software, while others (did he just look at *me*?) don't.

When he moves on to how we'll be working in groups the first semester to make sample zines, I start getting excited again. I tell myself I must be imagining things, until he starts sharing examples of what subject matter our zines can cover. "Your group's zine can be about whatever subject you like. Reviews of the best ethnic restaurants in your neighborhood; basketball, movie, or book ratings; queer rights; feminism . . ." He gestures, actually *gestures*, to an Indian student when he says the thing about ethnic restaurants, to a Black kid when he mentions basketball, and then in Kaleb's direction when he says the word *queer*.

I stretch my eyes at Kaleb. Is this guy serious? "Uhhh," Kaleb says. But he doesn't continue, just shakes his head and whispers, "Wow."

About halfway through class, Kaleb fashions a tiny flag out of notebook paper and writes the word *RED* on its tiny mast. Then he holds it up facing me every time Mr. Roderick says or does

something problematic . . . which definitely happens more often than it should. It makes me feel like my skin is a beacon, shining and brown, and I'm anxious and unsettled waiting for him to say or do something particularly awful to me. Kaleb's flag is a salve, making me snort because of his impeccable comedic timing, but after three or four moments that make me increasingly uncomfortable, I'm wondering how the rest of the class is feeling—if anyone else's skin feels too tight, or like it's a target waiting to be Roderick's bull's-eye. I think something needs to be said, but I'm not sure if I should be the one to say it. Roderick's jokes are always just shy of offensive, his comments on the verge of being mean but just subtle enough to be denied—the micro-est microaggressions. I've had teachers like him before, but it was worse at Hartwell, where my face was often the only one with color in any given classroom. I felt alone or like I was the only one who noticed. Here things feel different—*are* different—I remind myself, glancing over at Kaleb. And I'm different now too.

But I don't cancel Roderick just yet. I let his BS slide since it's the first day, hoping that he's nervous being in front of a new group of students he doesn't know or that I'm being extra sensitive since I'm in a new place. Still, it's a comfort that Kaleb sees his messiness too. At least I know I'm not the only one.

“Wow,” I whisper as I pack my bag at the end of class. “You weren’t kidding.”

Kaleb raises his eyebrows. “Tip of the iceberg, J. Tippy top of the iceberg.”

I smile a little at his use of a nickname even though we just met. But I guess we did kinda bond over the last forty minutes. “Sooo, now that we’ve survived *that* guy, you got any other classes in the Attic?” I ask as we step out of Roderick’s classroom and into the hall. Kaleb smirks.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” he says.

I like this kid’s vibe. Plus, the way he read Mr. Roderick right away makes me want to keep him close.

“I’m pretty sure I do,” Kaleb continues. He pulls up his schedule on his phone and shows it to me. I pull up mine to compare it with his. “We have two other classes together,” I say, trying to contain my excitement, wondering if I’ve already made my first friend.

“Nice,” he says. His phone vibrates in his hand, a text notification appearing, and I glance at it by accident:

Mila: *Seen the new girl yet? She cute?*

This Mila person, whoever she is, couldn’t mean me . . . could she?

Kaleb clicks the power button, putting his phone to sleep. I can’t tell if he knows that I saw. His nails are painted a sparkling shade

of blue, and I ask him the name of the color, just so he doesn't feel the need to address the text if he doesn't want to. "Dark Side of the Moon," he says, wiggling his fingers so his nails shimmer. Then he asks me about my bracelets, my flannel, the earrings I'm wearing that I made this weekend. He loves it all, and I blush, hoping he likes me as much as my accessories.

"Guess I'll be seeing you soon," he says as the warning bell rings. As he turns to leave, he adds, "Mila loves gossip. Don't worry about her."

I smile and nod.

I can tell that Kaleb is *good*. Kind and open and real. It's only my first day, but I feel like he's someone I want on my side—exactly the kind of person the new me needs.

"See ya," I say, feeling the new girl loneliness close around me like fog the farther away he gets.

Navigating the rest of the morning is fairly easy, once I know where the Attic is. My other classes are closer together, and while I don't connect with any other students the way I did with Kaleb, when it's time for lunch, I'm not feeling too bad. The cafeteria is big and crowded, and people are laughing and tossing french fries like they do in the movies. Freshmen carry trays and look a little bit lost, but everyone else already seems to have a place they belong—a fact that

makes my chest feel kind of tight, my face a little hot. But knowing I'll see Kaleb again in the afternoon makes me feel better.

I eat in a quiet corner at a mostly empty table and read on my phone, too intimidated by the wide-open room to approach any of the kids sitting and talking together. It makes me ache a little for the friends I had at my old school, but then I remind myself of the things they said, the terrible things we did. I ache a little for Bree too, despite the turn our friendship took. But I can't afford to forget the way it all ended, how difficult the summer was, the way I felt like I wouldn't survive. Today is hard, but I know that eventually things will be better here. They have to be.

"You're Jordyn, right?"

In my next three classes, I hear this half a dozen times. Either that or, "So, *you're* Jordyn," though I know for a fact that Kaleb and Scarlett are the only two humans I've uttered my name to since I stepped foot in this building. Somehow many more people than that know who I am. Eyes follow me in the halls, and it seems like the other kids are glancing over their shoulders at me, whispering with their friends while looking in my direction. And then there are the ones who look down their nose at me, who give me a wide berth, the students, like Scarlett, who rebuff my attempts at friendliness. The lack

of introductions I get to make are reminders of Mila's text, and what Kaleb said about gossip. But I still don't get it. I haven't been here long enough to be the subject of rumors, and even if I had been a student here last year, we haven't even gotten through a full day of school yet. Fear about what it all could mean makes my hands go clammy, so I keep rubbing them down my thighs and shoving them deep into my pockets.

The next time I see Kaleb, I say, "Yo . . . How does everyone know me?" Kaleb laughs and shrugs. "Word travels fast when you're a new kid, I guess."

"This seems like more than just being new," I tell him, looking around nervously. He doesn't seem that worried, just laughs again, acknowledges that it's annoying but promises that it will die down, that I'm just a shiny new toy. But I need to know what's going on. Truth be told, I'm a little afraid that I won't like whatever I find out.

The answer doesn't come until I finally get the guts to ask someone else about it in my last class.

"You're Jordyn, right?" a curvy girl with dark wavy hair asks as soon as I walk into Physics, before I even have a chance to let my bag slide off my shoulder.

"Uh, yeah?" I say. "That's me. But . . ." I glance around and step

closer to her before I whisper, “How does everyone already know my name?”

The girl lowers her voice too. “Oh, *everyone* has been talking about you, Jordyn Jones. The newbie from private school. You’re shorter than I thought you’d be though. Anyway, they’ve been saying you’re not talking to anyone because you think you’re better than us, but I was like, chill, she’s new. She could just be nervous!”

I smile, appreciating her kindness, though I’m unnerved that she knows even more than just my name. Hartwell Academy is home to the kids of diplomats and senators—big-time lobbyists, journalists, and other politicians who all work on Capitol Hill. It doesn’t surprise me that people who know I went there might think I’m stuck up.

“It’s definitely more the nervousness than anything,” I say. “But I still don’t get it. How do you know I went to private school?”

“Oh,” she says, sounding surprised. “Kaleb didn’t tell you?”

The skin on the back of my neck prickles. “You’re . . . friends with Kaleb?” I ask.

“Yeah, hi! I’m Mila. I thought he would have told you.”

“Told me what?” I swallow hard, hoping my instinct about Kaleb wasn’t wrong.

Mila smiles an easy smile and touches my arm. A dimple pops into her left cheek. “I didn’t mean to freak you out! Just thought he would have told you about Tomcat Tea. It’s our school’s podcast. Someone started it during lockdown and it got super popular because we were all bored a.f. at home doing virtual school.” She faux gags. “Whoever runs it set up this email address where people can send in tips and gossip, and they put it all into a weekly show. Maybe someone sent in a tip about you.”

She pauses for a second, and I take the moment to process what she’s just told me: podcast, anonymous tips, me. Mila taps her nails on her bottom lip before she speaks again. “I guess Kaleb wouldn’t have told you about it, actually. He kinda hates the pod and probably hasn’t listened to the newest episode.” She grins again.

“A podcast, huh?”

“Yep,” Mila says. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a tube of lipstick, turning her mouth a pale shade of peach. It’s a beautiful contrast against her light brown skin, and I finally smile back.

“I hope it’s mostly good things?” I say.

Mila makes a face that’s somewhere between a wince and an awkward smile, and moves her hands around like she’s looking for the right words. I like how expressive she is—how she talks with her whole body and how her face hides nothing. “It’s mostly . . . things,”

she says. “You should listen though, so at least you’ll know what they’re saying about you. Here, gimme your phone.”

I pull it from my pocket and watch as she taps around my screen, showing me where I can stream it. She hits subscribe for me too, so I’ll always know when a new episode drops.

“They?” I ask. “Don’t tell me there’s more than one person I have to worry about.”

Mila shakes her head and her big silver hoops swing under her hair. “They, singular. No one knows who the podcaster is. It’s a whole thing.” She hands my phone back before tilting her head at me for a second. “You’re cute,” Mila says. “We should hang out. Kaleb said you were cool too.”

I look down, blushing a little. “Well, whatever’s on that podcast must not be that bad if you wanna chill with me.”

“I didn’t say all *that*,” she teases as the teacher comes into class and tells us all to sit and quiet down. “But what can I say, Private School? I’m a sucker for a pretty face, even if it means trouble.”

Hello, fellow students! We're back! Did you miss me? You know how much I missed you. I couldn't be more excited because we have a lot of tea to spill. Last season showed just how messy the people we go to school with can be, so it would be cruel of me not to give you all the sordid details. Let's buckle up for a wild school year.

Now, let's get into it: Over the summer, the power couple we thought would be together forever, Cassie Taylor and Devon Wheeler, sadly broke up while audibly sobbing at the Smoothie King at the mall. Eyewitness reports say it was a, quote, "tough watch." Considering we expected them to be prom queen and king this year, this bumps up Bella Martins's and Luke Haley's chances of winning. If they make it till then, that is. Also, believe it or not, Chance Martinez, who up to now was best known for attempting a backflip in his mascot costume and having the head fly off, went viral over break and has become an internet sensation on TikTok. In case you were lucky enough to miss it, his newfound

stardom . . . is from posting thirst traps. The internet really is an *interesting* place.

And for our new students—a special welcome to all our freshmen! Heads up, *High School Musical* lied. Have low expectations.

Speaking of freshmen, does everyone remember that one girl who left suddenly before sophomore year? Good ol' Scarlett Fisher. Well, rumor has it she'll be back and gracing the junior hallways this year. You may be asking, "Why bring up Scarlett?" Well, I honestly am a little suspicious of her return. The real question is, why didn't she tell anyone she was leaving, and more importantly, why is she coming back?

Scarlett isn't the only newcomer to the junior class: A Miss Jordyn Jones will be making her arrival at Edgewood. Apparently Jordyn is joining us fresh off an expulsion! Not to mention this is her first time in a public school. I guess the princess turned into a frog, whomp whomp. But for what reason? What could little Miss Jones do that was so bad her old school expelled her? Don't worry, what's done in the dark comes to light. And the moment it does, I'll make sure to be the first one to let you all know.

And finally, for the last segment of this episode, we have everybody's favorite: BOMBSHELL, where we drop some tea so piping hot that it'll leave you craving the next episode. This week's star

is . . . Jasmine Everett! Jasmine, we've heard that over the summer you may or may not have had not a boob or a nose job, but *toe-shortening surgery* . . . By the looks of her feet in those Gucci slides today, the rumors seem to be true. Guess all those LaCienega Boulevardez jokes got to her. Either way, you look great, girl. If only everyone had a rich daddy who could magically fix our problems.

With that, happy start of a new school year and start of another beautiful season of Tomcat Tea. I'll be back next episode with more tea. Stay tuned, and stay messy. Let's go, Tomcats!