

JUDE SAVES THE WORLD

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To my twelve-year-old self. I'm sorry I didn't have the language to describe what I was feeling, but I do now, and you'd be proud of me.

And to Gus, Darcy, and Reggie, for I would not still be here if these cats hadn't imprinted their paws on my soul during my darkest hours. I miss you.

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CHAPTER 1

Sometimes all you need is someone next to you to make everything okay. I've already found that person here in Aberdeen Falls, and I'm only twelve.

And right now I'm trying to be patient while my best friend, Dallas, finishes listening to his Song of the Day. I *do* already feel better being beside him, but it's not nearly enough. I pick at the hole on the back of the bus seat with my fingers.

I already know what he's going to say. It won't be like when Mom tells me the whole world doesn't rest on my shoulders. But heck, what if it does? What if I end up being the hero? And Dallas and I go on a huge quest to save the earth from mutant alien robots?

Anything seems better than doing the same thing over and over again—which is exactly what last night was. A repeat of the same Monday for the last two years: dinner with my grandparents who are from the Stone Age. They say and do hurtful things without even realizing it, and Mom always has to remind me that they aren't as open-minded as we are.

I thought older people were supposed to be wise, but I haven't seen any evidence from them yet.

I fiddle with the cuff of my plaid shirt. It's my favorite: comfortable, worn, and a little too big. I picture my mom's face last night, giving me pleading looks to keep my lips shut. I don't get it.

"Sorry," Dallas whispers, pointing at the song's time on his iPod. It's a billion generations old, but his oldest sister gave it to him before she moved to Australia, so Dallas cherishes it.

"No worries," I reassure him.

Dallas tries to get in at least one song on the ride to my stop, but since he lives so close, he doesn't always get to finish it before I get on. He considers it the best way to set the mood for the day, and it usually tells me how he's feeling.

Today, he's listening to Nat King Cole, and I raise an eyebrow. Nat's his go-to when he needs a pick-me-up. He says it reminds him of his grandmother, and she was the only one who understood him. She passed away two years ago, and I don't think I've heard Dallas sing since.

I wish I could say the same thing about my mom, but she continues to wake me up at the crack of dawn by singing off-key in the shower. It's right beside my bedroom,

so I always pull a pillow over my head and beg her to stop.

“Did you remember your permission slip?” Dallas whispers as he scratches the back of his head. He’s still listening to his song when the sun shines through the bus window, making his brown skin glow.

I make a face. Did I? Good question. I start to dig through my backpack, pushing aside some old pieces of paper, a binder, my lunch, and my sweater.

Just as I find it, I notice a large blow-up Mr. Peanut flailing in the wind out the window. I lean forward to get a better look at it. He’s massive. I try to calculate approximately how many of me can fit inside him. I’m guessing at least a thousand, but maybe only eight hundred if I’m wearing my blow-up *T. rex* costume from Halloween.

As soon as it’s out of sight, I pull out my permission form and flatten it. I wave it in front of Dallas.

He doesn’t meet my eyes, so I grab his hand and wrap it in mine. The corner of his mouth briefly twitches into a small smile. I like the contrast of our hands together: his deep brown skin against my sun-kissed white skin. He’s not chubby like me, though. He’s tall and lanky, especially after he hit a mini growth spurt last year.

And Dallas's hair is always neatly trimmed, while I have mastered a classic bedhead look. My hair is short enough that it stands up every which way, but not long enough that I can do anything about it.

When Dallas pulls his hand away, he starts twisting his headphone cord in his fingers, reminding me of that sunny day.

He had been listening to Keiynan Lonsdale that morning and twisting his headphone cord, just like now. Dallas had never listened to Keiynan Lonsdale before, so I thought that was odd. Then he asked me if we could talk after school.

He didn't make it until then. At lunch, we were settling down in our usual spot in the courtyard, and he blurted, "I'm gay."

I dropped my water bottle, and it rolled under the table. But I left it there so I could hug him tightly and promise that I love him. I'm not entirely sure why, but he got stuck on this idea that I wouldn't want to be friends with him anymore. Coming out is hard, but he never had to worry about me.

"I'm queer too, and I think I want to change my name," I told him, and suddenly, we were a mix of tears and laughter. Dallas shoved my shoulder and teased me

about stealing his thunder, but I don't think he felt anything but relief, relief that we were going through this together. At least, I know that's what I was feeling.

Being nonbinary, and figuring it out young, has been a little strange. I know who I am, but I'm unsure how to tell the world. I tested the waters with my name change at school, but so far I've kept my pronouns to a select few: just my mom, Dallas, and Dallas's family. *Baby steps* is what Dallas calls it. But I don't know anyone who is out in Aberdeen Falls—or the neighboring town, Rose Creek.

Mom is worried about my grandparents. She thinks gender beyond the binary is too much for them. She's probably right, but sometimes I wish for her to be wrong.

What if they can learn just like she did?

Dallas hasn't told his family anything, and I don't blame him. He's afraid one of his sisters would accidentally let it slip or be overheard by his parents. And really, who knows how they'd react? They're cool with me, but I'm not one of their kids. Dallas has five sisters, four of them older, and their parents named them all after places. I think it's a cool way to connect them, but Dallas thinks it's stupid.

It's good that Dallas and I found each other. He gets lost in the shuffle of his family. Sometimes I wonder

if his Song of the Day is so vital to him because it's the only time he has alone.

Dallas stops twisting his cord and turns his iPod off when the song ends. He leans back and looks at me.

"What happened?" I ask, hoping the answer is better than I'm expecting.

It's not.

"The usual. Fighting. Screaming. Aspen was crying and spent the night in my bed again." Dallas runs his hand over his buzzed hair. "I didn't sleep much. Jersey even came and camped out on the floor."

It must have been pretty bad if Jersey left her room. I keep my voice low. "I'm sorry, Dal. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nah," he says, as usual. Some days I wish he'd tell me there *is* something I can do just so I can feel more useful than this.

"Do you want to talk about it or be distracted?"

"Distracted." He rubs his face and then asks, "You had dinner with the grand-ghosts last night. How'd that go?"

I give him a tight smile and lift my hand to start counting on my fingers. "Let's see. They referred to my gender assigned at birth as a weird term of endearment seven

times before dessert. Only twice after. They misgendered me the entire night. It's all I could hear ringing in my ears. They called me by my deadname *thirty-two* times. Like, I *know* they don't know my name is Jude now, so of course they'll keep using the name Mom gave me, but . . ."

"Still sucks." Dallas nudges me with his elbow. He whispers, "Jude, Jude, Jude, Jude, Jude, Jude . . ."

I count in my head.

He says my name thirty-three times.

I feel a tear in the corner of my eye, but I don't rush to brush it away. Instead, I let it slip down my cheek and fall onto my chest. It darkens the light orange tank top under my plaid shirt, but I don't care. I lean into Dallas.

"I love you, Dallas Knight."

"I love you too, Jude Winters."

Thirty-four.