

SORRY

NOT

SORRY

JAIME REED

POINT

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-14900-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, March 2019

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll

# CHAPTER 1

*It's for a good cause.*

If I had a dollar for every time someone said that this week, I could rebuild the town myself from the ground up. No need for charity events or pledge drives—the money would come solely from uninspired platitudes. What did people mean by a good cause anyway? As opposed to a bad one?

I should've asked the old lady who'd said it, but she'd already walked off, and she probably didn't know the answer, either. She was one of those pinch-lipped, cardigan-wearing schoolmarms who'd play the church organ on Sunday, then gossip and gamble the rest of the week. She'd rolled up to my booth, all grins and holy conviction, and handed me a box of expired relics from a cellar pantry.

“Oh them poor, unfortunate souls!” she'd cried out in a breathy Scarlett O'Hara drawl, clutching the pearls around her neck. “So many people, completely destitute in a matter of hours—can you believe it? My prayers are with the victims and their loved ones during these trying times.”

Going by the state of her donation, the question was who needed prayer more: the hurricane victims or whoever ate from this E. coli care package. It was a good thing that all the volunteers were required to wear rubber gloves, because dealing with this much rust had me wondering: *When was my last tetanus shot?*

Clipboard in hand, I inspected each dented and dusty tin: chicken soup, string beans, corned beef hash, and some janky preserves with peeling homemade labels. Out of two dozen contestants, eight cans made it to the finals. Could it be that “a good cause” had nothing to do with generosity but with the downsizing of one’s cupboard space? Or maybe the weather was making me cranky. Who knows?

We were a month into the school year, and the sun had hooked the state of Virginia on a rotisserie spit. Thanks to the mother of all storms ravaging half the East Coast, the air was so thick and sticky you had to breathe in sips. I was the color of a bronze statue; I’d traveled to countries literally sitting on the equator and not once in all my eighteen years had I needed sunscreen until now. No hairstyle could survive this steam bath, which was why I kept my micro braids pinned in a high bun and off my neck.

I turned to deposit the cans in the box labeled FOOD. I’d organized six separate boxes for my booth: clothing, food, hygiene products, baby paraphernalia, bedding, and miscellaneous. Cases of bottled water, first-aid kits, and blankets were popular items today, as requested by the local news bulletin. The less imaginative

givers slipped a few dollar bills in the water jug on the counter. Nothing wrong with that—at least they were honest.

My friend Sera had been helping me all morning but was now dozing in the folding chair next to me. Her head and limbs drooped like a wilted flower; her mouth gaped open in a gurgled snore. Even in sleep, Sera Kimura was over the top.

A bullhorn dangled from one hand and a portable fan whirred on full blast in the other. Since sophomore year, Sera had been by my side at every organized walkout, boycott, hunger strike, fundraiser, and picketing protest rally at our school, but even she was losing her pep today.

I bent down to the red cooler by my feet, dipped my hand in the slushy water, and flicked droplets at her face.

Sera returned to the conscious world with a start, hopped to her feet, and cranked the horn.

“Leave your donations here, people!” she shouted. “Come right over and give to the hurricane relief! Every little bit helps!”

“Good save,” I muttered, fighting a case of the giggles.

“Show your support for your fellow citizens! White Chapel needs your help!” She targeted a student filming the action on his phone. “Hey, you, Neckbeard! This ain’t the Coachella Music Festival, bro! Either go big or go home! That is, if you still have a home left. Not many do around here!”

Sera had a scratchy, I’ve-got-strep-throat voice that put you in mind of tobacco, whiskey, and a spittoon. It was a jarring

combination with her five-foot height and long black pigtailed that made her look like a twelve-year-old.

“Our town is in ruins, so roll up your sleeves and lend a hand!” Sera continued. “If not you, then who? If not now, when? Ask not what White Chapel can do for you, but what you can do for White Chapel!”

I snatched the bullhorn from her, its feedback screeching in the air. “Any more famous speeches you wanna steal?”

“Hook or crook, I’m gettin’ the crowd riled up!” Sera replied and made a grab for the horn, but I held it out of her reach. One of the perks of being five nine.

“Oh, I think they’re riled up just fine. They wouldn’t be here otherwise.” I dropped the horn into a crate under the table, then swept a glance around the school parking lot.

The lot resembled a county fair, crowded from end to end with tents and folding tables. Colorful banners divided each station by its purpose. The kiosk to my left sold *I SURVIVED BIG LORETTA* T-shirts and coffee mugs for ten dollars. The battle of the baked goods kicked off to my right: homemade vs. store-bought. Blue-haired grannies manned their booths in opposition to the soccer moms across the lane.

My heart swelled with pride at what we’d accomplished in so little time. People were coming out in droves to help, neighbors who’d never spoken before joining together for a common goal. This was the beauty of humanity, and it was a real shame a tragedy had to strike for it to happen. Better late than never.

Before that thought could settle, a disruptive vibe contaminated the air. It wasn't smoke, though that had been common lately, due to the recent spike in barbecues. The power had been out last week, so people were grilling up their refrigerated food before it spoiled.

But no. What now alerted me to the approach of evil was a Valley girl croon, followed by an all-too-familiar fake laugh.

“I know, right? It's *boiling* out here. Weather is so disrespectful.”

The mean-girl posse of White Chapel High School approached our tent in a strut that looked choreographed. Leading the march was Alyssa Weaver: patron saint of the backhanded compliment, homecoming queen two years running, and voted by the student poll as most likely to star in her own reality show.

Alyssa sported the same yellow disaster relief T-shirt that all the volunteers had to wear. Mine hung past my shorts and made me look like a bruised banana. Hers had been bedazzled to death and was cropped, revealing flat abs and a belly button ring. An effective, albeit tacky, route to rally up supporters, but we'd take what we could get in a crisis.

The other girls in Alyssa's crew had followed suit, as was standard operation within the Borg, as Sera called them. There was a fine line between copying a style and falling under collective mind control. Kristen, Jenna, Liz, and Destiny had yet to find that distinction, so the *Star Trek* reference fit.

Alyssa stopped at my booth and pulled her sunglasses to the bridge of her nose. “Oh, there you are, Janelle! We've been looking for you all morning.”

“I don’t see how, since you didn’t get here until noon,” Sera replied with a snarl.

“Yeah, well, it’s Saturday,” Alyssa pointed out, as if that were a legit reason for tardiness. “Plus, I had to grab a few things around the house to donate.” Standing on her tiptoes, she peered over heads in the crowd and waved someone over.

Sera’s brother, Ryon Kimura, broke through the mob, towing a wagon full of bloated trash bags. He’d worked up a sweat pulling the load, yet maintained the effortless cool of a K-pop cover boy. Ryon had done a lot of volunteer work with us in the past, but unlike Sera, he kept his enthusiasm at a lower volume.

Each member of the Borg took a bag from Ryon and carried it to our booth. Arms folded, Alyssa oversaw the labor with the superiority of a queen.

My gaze flitted from the jumbo bags, the worker bees, and then to her royal highness herself. “Somebody’s been spring cleaning,” I told her.

Alyssa tossed her head back and stared at me. She was delicately pale with an athletic build and long, strawberry-blond waves that made her look like a mermaid on dry land.

In a tone ripe with exhaustion, she said, “You. Would. Not. Believe the stuff my mom had lying around.”

“Oh, I believe it.” I recalled her mom’s frequent wholesale shopping sprees. Their living room and kitchen were loaded with so much crap in bulk, Alyssa was often embarrassed to bring friends home.



I hadn't been there in ages, but the memory was burned into my brain.

I dove into the first bag, and every household item you could think of spilled onto the counter. Twelve-pack cases of shampoo and body wash. Bedding sealed in its original packaging. Did the folks at Costco know that half their inventory was missing?

Sera opened a second bag full of clothes. "You sure you wanna let these go?" she asked Alyssa. "They still have the tags on them."

Alyssa finger-combed her hair and examined the ends in an attitude of boredom. "Nah. Half the stuff is so last season, and since I lost eight pounds, they don't fit anyway. I'm sure someone else needs them more than I do. Just because they're homeless doesn't mean they have to look the part."

And just like that, the new and not-at-all-improved Alyssa came out to play. It served to remind me why we were ex-besties, just barely on speaking terms. She hadn't always been like this, but it was the state of affairs nowadays.

I noticed that her loyal subjects had abandoned their unloading task and were currently checking out the soft-pretzel vendor two tents over.

"You think he's a college student?" Liz asked.

"Who cares? Pretzel guy is bae goals for real!" As always, Destiny sounded clipped and corny, like an exchange student who had no black friends. Her family was from Trinidad and yet she'd had the nerve to tell me—on several occasions—that *I* talked like a white girl. Priceless.

No goon squad would be complete without an enforcer, and Destiny Howell, my light-skinned clone, was the real MVP. This designer knockoff had been trying to rust the link between Alyssa and me since freshman year. We hadn't really needed Destiny's help on that front—our friendship chain had fallen apart on its own.

Ryon shuffled forward and set the final bag on the ground by the counter. "Okay, that's the last of it. You really outdid yourself, babe. All I brought was water and toilet paper." He stood up straight, cracked his back, and rotated his broad shoulders. Sweat clumped his short black hair into spikes and formed a dark stain on the back of his yellow T-shirt. "I think I might have pulled something," he groaned.

Alyssa wrapped her arms around his neck and planted kisses on his sweaty face. "Thank you so much, Sugar Booger. You didn't have to carry all that stuff for me."

There went that fake laugh again. It was an artificially sweetened giggle that grated my ears and caused my left eye to twitch. Nobody laughed like that in real life, and Alyssa's *true* laugh was a loud series of snorts and croaks.

*Wait, did she say Sugar Booger? Seriously? That's a new one.*

"No problem," Ryon mumbled between kisses. "I don't think you would've gotten all that stuff here by yourself."

Alyssa stroked his biceps. "I know. But it's still sweet of you to do that. I can't believe how strong you are."

Nuzzling noses, they stared dreamily into each other's eyes as Ryon replied, "You know I'd do anything for you."