

# ONE

We push open the apartment building's glass door, out into the yellow sunshine that's a little too cheerful and bright. It's hot as hell—the kind of heat that sticks to your skin, your hair, your freaking eyeballs.

“Christ, why did we sign up for this again?” Ezra says, his voice hoarse. “It's so early. I could still be asleep.”

“I mean, eleven isn't technically *early*. It's—you know—about halfway through the day.”

Ezra lights a blunt he pulls out of I-don't-know-where and offers it to me, and we suck on the last of it as we walk. Reggaeton blasts from a nearby park's cookout. The smell of smoke and burning meat wafts over, along with the laughter and screams of kids. We cross the street, pausing when a man on a bike zooms by with a boom box blasting Biggie, and we

walk down the mold-slick stairs of the Bedford-Nostrand G stop, sliding our cards through the turnstile just as a train rumbles up to the platform.

The train doors slide shut behind us. It's one of the older trains, with splotches of black gum plastered to the floor and messages written in Sharpie on the windows. R + J = 4EVA.

My first instinct is to roll my eyes, but if I'm honest with myself, I can feel jealousy sprouting in my chest. What does it feel like, to love someone so much that you're willing to publicly bare your heart and soul with a black Sharpie? What is it like to even love someone at all? My name is Felix Love, but I've never actually been *in* love. I don't know. The irony actually kind of fucks with my head sometimes.

We grab a couple of orange seats. Ezra wipes a hand over his face as he yawns, leaning against my shoulder. It was my birthday last week, and we got into the habit of staying up until three in the morning and lying around all day. I'm seventeen now, and I can confirm that there isn't much of a difference between sixteen and seventeen. Seventeen is just one of those in-between years, easily forgotten, like a Tuesday—stuck in between sweet sixteen and legal eighteen.

An older man dozes across from us. A woman stands with her baby stroller that's filled with grocery bags. A hipster with a huge red beard holds his bicycle steady. The AC is blasting. Ezra sees me clutching myself against the ice-cold air, so he puts an arm over my shoulders. He's my best friend—only friend, since I started at St. Catherine's three years ago. We're

not together like that, not in any way, shape, or form, but everyone else always gets the wrong idea. The older man suddenly wakes up like he could smell the gay, and he doesn't stop staring at us, even after I stare right back at him. The hipster gives us a reassuring smile. Two gay guys cuddling in the heart of Brooklyn shouldn't feel this revolutionary, but suddenly, it does.

Maybe it's the weed, or maybe it's the fact that I'm that much closer to being an adult, but I suddenly feel a little reckless. I whisper to Ez, "Wanna give this guy a show?"

I nod in the direction of the older man who has straight-up refused to look away. Ezra smirks and rubs his hand up and down my arm, and I snuggle closer to him, resting my head on his shoulder—and then Ez goes from zero to one hundred as he buries his face into my neck, which—okay—I've never actually gotten a whole lot of action before (i.e.: I've never even been kissed), and just feeling his mouth there kind of drives me crazy. I let out an embarrassing squeak-gasp, and Ezra puffs out a muffled laugh against the *same damn spot*.

I look up to see our audience staring, wide-eyed, totally scandalized. I wiggle my fingers at the man in a sarcastic half wave, but he must take that as an invitation to speak. "You know," he goes, with a slight accent, "I have a grandson who's gay."

Ezra and I glance at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Um. Okay," I say.

The man nods. "Yes, yes—I never knew, and then one

day he sat me down, and my wife, Betsy, before she passed, and then he was crying, and he told us: I'm gay. He'd already known for years, but he didn't say anything because he was so afraid of what we would think. I can't blame him for being afraid. The stories you hear. And his own father . . . Heart-breaking. You'd think a parent would always love their child, no matter what." He pauses in his monologue, looking around as the train begins to slow down. "Anyway. This is my stop." He stands as the doors open. "You would like my grandson, I think. You two seem like very nice, gay boys."

And with that, the man is lost to the platform as the woman with the baby stroller follows him out.

Ezra and I look at each other, and I burst out laughing. He shakes his head. "New York, man," he says. "Seriously. Only in New York."

We get off at Lorimer/Metropolitan and walk down and then back up a bunch of stairs to get to the L train. It's June 1—the first day of Pride month in the city—so there are No Bigotry Allowed rainbow-colored signs plastered on the tiled walls. The platform is filled with pink-skinned Williamsburg hipsters, and the train takes forever to come.

"Shit. We're going to be late," Ezra says.

"Yeah. Well."

"Declan's going to be pissed."

I don't really care, to be honest. Declan's a dick. "Not like we can do anything about it, right?"

By the time the train arrives, everyone's fighting to get on, and we're all packed together, me crushed against Ezra, the smell of beer and BO slicking the air. The subway rattles and shakes, almost throwing us off our feet—until, finally, we make it to Union Square.

It's a typical crowded afternoon in the city. The sheer amount of people—that's what I hate most about Lower Manhattan. At least in Brooklyn, you can walk down the street without being bumped into by twenty different shoulders and handbags. At least in Brooklyn, you don't have to worry if you're literally invisible because of your brown skin. Sometimes I try to find a white person to walk behind, just so that when everyone jumps out of that person's way, they won't knock into me.

Ezra and I inch our way through the crowd and past the farmers' market, the smell of fish following us. We're dressed pretty much the way we always are: even though it's summer, Ezra wears a black T-shirt, sleeves rolled up to his shoulders to show off his Klimt tattoo of *Judith I and the Head of Holofernes*. He has on tight black jeans that're cut off a few inches too high above his ankles, stained white Converse, and long socks with portraits of Andy Warhol. He has a gold septum piercing, and his thick, curly black hair is tied up in a bun, sides shaved.

Whenever I'm around Ezra, eyes usually skip right over me to stare at him. I have curly hair, a loose gray tank that shows my dark scars on my chest, darker than the rest of my

golden-brown skin, a pair of denim shorts, smaller random tattoos that I'd gotten for twenty dollars down at Astor Place—my dad flipped out the first time, but he's gotten used to them now—and worn-out sneakers that I've written and drawn all over with a Sharpie. Ezra thinks I've ruined them. He has a thing for keeping the *purity of the designer's intent*.

We walk through the crowds of people who idle in front of the farmers' market stalls selling jars of jam and freshly baked bread and flowers with bursts of color, men in business suits shoving past, dogs on leashes and toddlers on three-wheeled scooters threatening to trip us. We make it out of the farmers' market and up the path that cuts through the green lawn where a few couples laid out on blankets. Some kids show off on their skateboards. Girls in summer dresses and shades lounge on benches with books that they aren't really reading.

"Why'd we decide to do this summer program again?" Ezra says.

"For our college applications."

"I already told you. I'm not going to college."

"Oh. Then, yeah, I have no idea why you're doing this."

He smirks at me. We both know he's probably just going to live off his trust fund when he graduates. Ezra is part Black, part Bengali, and his parents are filthy rich. So rich that they bought Ezra an apartment just so that he can live in Bed-Stuy for the summer while he's in the arts program. (And these days, apartments like Ezra's are just about a million

dollars.) The Patels are the stereotypical Manhattan elite: endless champagne, fund-raisers, gala balls, and zero time for their own son, who was raised by three different nannies. It's fucked-up, but I have to admit that I'm jealous. Ezra's got his entire life laid out for him on a golden platter, while I'm going to have to claw and scrape and battle for what I want.

My dream has always been to go to Brown University, but my grades aren't exactly stellar, my test scores are less than average, and their acceptance rate is 9 percent. It isn't that I haven't tried. I studied my ass off for the tests, and I write down every word my teachers say in class to stop my mind from wandering. Like my dad's said, my brain is just wired differently.

The fact that I almost certainly won't get into Brown sometimes makes me feel like there's no point in even trying. But people have gotten in despite shitty test scores before, and even if my grades suck, my art doesn't. I'm talented. I know that I am. The portfolio counts even more for students applying to focus on art, and since the St. Catherine's summer program offers extra credit, there's a chance I could raise my grades up from Cs and Bs. I might still have a shot of getting in.

Leah, Marisol, and Declan are already on the Union Square steps for the fashion shoot. St. Cat's is on a different schedule from most NYC schools, and the summer program officially began a few days ago. St. Catherine's likes to kick off the summer program with projects so that we can get to

know the students from other classes. Ezra and I signed up for a fashion shoot, using some of his designs. Leah, with her bushy red hair and super-pale skin and curves and tank top and slightly revealing booty shorts, has her camera, ready to take photos. And, of course, Marisol is the model. She's just as tall as Ezra, olive skin and thick brown hair and Cara Delevingne eyebrows. Just seeing her makes my nerves pump through my chest. Her hair's a giant nest, and she has green feathers glued to her eyelashes to match her lipstick. She wears the fourth dress in the lineup we'd planned: a sequin-portrait of Rihanna.

Declan Keane is running this whole thing as the director, which really just annoys the crap out of me. He doesn't have any experience as a director whatsoever, but somehow, he always manages to weasel his way into everything. It doesn't help that Declan acts like it's his only mission in life to treat me and Ezra like shit. He talks crap about us every chance that he gets. He hates us, and he's on a crusade to make everyone else hate us, too.

Declan's busy talking to Marisol when he sees us coming. His eyes flash. He clenches his jaw.

"So nice to see you," he calls out to us as we walk over, loud enough that a few people lounging on the steps turn their heads. "Ezra, thanks so much for coming."

Ezra mutters beside me, "Told you he'd be pissed."

Declan gives a slow clap. "It's an honor—no, really, it



is—to have you come to your own fucking fashion show.”

Ezra holds up a fist, pretends to crank it, and slowly lifts his middle finger. Declan narrows his eyes at Ez when we get closer.

“Are you *high*?” he demands, and Ezra turns his face away. “Are you fucking kidding me? We’ve all been waiting here for over an hour, and you’ve been getting *high*?”

I try to step in. “Jesus, relax.”

He doesn’t even bother looking at me. “Fuck off, Felix, seriously.”

There’s no point in even trying to explain that our train was late.

“You’re right,” Ezra says. He nods at Leah and Marisol, who’re watching us from the stairs. “Sorry. We lost track of time.”

Declan rolls his eyes and mutters, “Fucking ridiculous” under his breath—like he’s never been late for anything in his life. There was a point, before he decided he was too good for me and Ez, when all three of us would walk into class thirty minutes late together, high as fuck—and now, suddenly he’s the Second Coming? God, I can’t stand him.

“We’re already halfway done anyway,” Declan says, smoothing a hand through his curls, as if he doesn’t actually give a shit whether we’re here or not. Declan’s mixed—his mom is Black and Puerto Rican, his dad a white guy from Ireland—so he’s got brown skin, lighter than mine, and loose

brown curls with glints of red that fall around his ears, dark brown eyes. He's a little stockier, with broad shoulders—a jock in Old Navy clothes: pink graphic T-shirt, baggier faded jeans, flip-flops.

He turns his back on us. "Let's hurry up and finish. I don't want to be here all day. Felix, go hold that reflector."

I don't move. I can't willingly make myself do whatever Declan Keane tells me to do. Not with that dismissive tone.

Ezra whispers, "Come on, Felix. Let's just get this done." I roll my eyes and walk up the stairs, snatching up the reflector from the stack of supplies. Declan still hasn't even bothered to grace me with a single glance.

"All right," he says, "let's get back to it. Marisol, I don't think you should smile for this one—the juxtaposition of the Rihanna portrait with a serious expression . . ."

I zone the fuck out. About 99.9 percent of the time, Declan's speaking to hear the sound of his own voice. The shoot continues, Leah circling Mari with her camera as Marisol twists and turns, staring off at the sky (which is good, because it's easier to avoid eye contact with her), until it's time for the next outfit. I have to hold up a sheet around Marisol, staring hard at the ground, as Ezra helps her get changed into another dress he made, this one covered in manga panels from *Attack on Titan*. When she's ready, Declan barks his orders.

"Leah, position yourself a little more to the right. Felix, hold the reflector still."

Marisol shields her face. “And can you get the light out of my eyes, please?”

Mari and I used to go out. For, like, two weeks, so it really isn’t that big of a deal, but still—I can’t help but feel a little riled up around her, I guess, even after all these months. Marisol just acts like absolutely nothing happened between us, sprinkling a dash of salt onto the wound. The way she broke things off doesn’t help, either.

Declan snaps his fingers at me. Literally, hand to God, *snaps his fucking fingers at me*. “I said to hold the reflector still. Christ, pay attention.”

I hold the reflector up higher. “Fucking bullshit,” I mutter to myself.

“Sorry, what was that?”

I must’ve spoken a little louder than I thought—because when I look up, everyone’s staring at me. Leah bites her lip. Marisol raises an eyebrow. Ezra shakes his head from across the set, mouthing, *No, no, please, Felix, no*. That kind of pisses me off, too. Why does Declan get to treat us like crap, and we’re just expected to take it, no complaints? I ignore Ezra and look right at Declan. “I said: Fucking. Bullshit.”

Declan tilts his head to the side, crossing his arms with the smallest smile. “What’s bullshit?”

I shrug. “This.” I wave the reflector at him. “You.” His smile becomes a laugh of disbelief. “*I’m* bullshit?”

“You don’t know anything about directing a fashion

shoot," I tell him. "You're just here because you're rich and your dad donates a shit ton of money to the school. It's not like you earned this."

I can see Ezra's eyes flicker to the ground, and I feel a pinch of guilt.

Declan hasn't noticed. He grins at me, like he knows it'll piss me off more. "You're just mad because you're not the director," he says, "and you don't get to add it to your Brown application. *Reflector boy* isn't exactly as impressive, is it?"

I hate that he's right—I *am* mad that I can't describe being the director on my application while Declan gets to use this, along with his perfect grades and almost-perfect test scores and family pedigree . . . I know he's applying to Brown, too. I know it's his first choice, because back when we used to hang out, we'd both planned on going to Brown and getting our dual degree with RISD. Ezra would chime in and say he'd move to Rhode Island with us, and it'd be the three of us, like always. That plan didn't exactly last long.

On top of that, Brown University has had a tradition of giving one St. Catherine's student a full scholarship. I can't afford college. My dad won't be able to pay the tuition. I'll have to take out a shit ton of loans and probably be in debt for the rest of my life, just to pursue illustration—while I can't think of anyone who would need, or deserve, that scholarship less than Declan fucking Keane. Just the thought of him getting that scholarship makes me want to stab pencils into my eyeballs.

Declan smirks at me. “What? Nothing else to say?” “Leave it alone,” Ezra tells me.

But I can’t leave it alone. People like Declan are so used to getting their way. Acting like he’s so much better and more important than everyone else. That’s what he does to me—to Ezra. Ez acts like it doesn’t bother him, but I get pissed off all over again every time I see Declan and remember the way he’s treated us—the way he betrayed us.

“You know what?” I tell him. “Fuck you. You act like you’re better than everyone else, but you’re nothing but a fucking fraud.”

Ezra’s shaking his head, like he’s annoyed with *me*, as if he thinks I’m overreacting even though he knows that Declan is being an asshole. Leah and Marisol awkwardly stand to the side, glancing at Declan to see what he’ll do or say next.

Declan clenches his jaw. “*I’m* the fraud? Really?” Ezra points at Declan. “No. Don’t go there.”

Declan rolls his eyes. “Christ. That’s not even what I meant.”

But the insinuation is there—implication made. It sours the air. Declan lets out this heavy sigh, not bothering to look at me, and out of the countless fights I’ve had with Declan Keane, I know I’ve won this particular battle. Even if his last words are still twisting through my gut. I’ve won, and in any other circumstance, I’d be happy to stay here and bask in the glory—but Marisol and Leah are staring anywhere but at me, and Ezra has these worried-filled eyes, and I know he’ll

whisper, "Are you okay?" every five minutes if I stay.

I drop the reflector. "Forget it."

I'm halfway down the stairs when Declan says that he isn't surprised. That's the kind of crap I always pull. I just flip him off and keep going.

# TWO

The trip from Union Square isn't as bad as from Bed- Stuy, but it's still about an hour before I get off at the 145th stop in Harlem. I've only been living here half a year. My dad and I used to live pretty close to where Ezra is now, on Tompkins. I miss the hell out of Brooklyn, but our landlord raised the rent, and my dad just couldn't afford it. He works most weeknights as a doorman for a luxury condominium in Lower Manhattan, and some days he'll try to take up extra jobs, like making deliveries and walking dogs. I'm on a talent-based scholarship, and even then, all his money goes into me and St. Catherine's—just so that I can pursue my passion for art. The pressure to get better grades, to pull off an amazing portfolio and college application, to make all the sacrifices worth it and actually get into Brown . . . it can fill me up sometimes, to the

point where it's hard to even breathe.

Dad tells me not to worry. "Besides," he said, "I've always wanted to live in Harlem." I don't know if he's just lying to cheer me up, but there's definitely something exciting about this neighborhood. Langston Hughes and Claude McKay and all the other Black queer poets of the Renaissance made their art way up here. Maybe being in Harlem will snap me out of whatever the hell this creative block is and inspire me to put together an amazing Brown University application and portfolio—strong enough not only to get in but to get that full-ride scholarship, too. God, how incredible would that be? Getting into Brown would be like giving a giant middle finger to the Declan Keanes of the world—the people who take one look at me and decide I'm just not good enough.

I put in my earbuds and pop Fleetwood Mac into my Spotify station as I head down the steep hill, passing the park I avoid at all costs, ever since a rat tried to climb up my leg as I cut through the grass one night. I pass the Starbucks—the ultimate sign of gentrification in any neighborhood—and the Dollar Tree, the gym, and the fruit stand on the sidewalk. There are lemons, grapes, strawberries, and the brightest mangoes I've ever seen. They look like miniature suns. I pull out my phone and snap a photo for Instagram, even though I wouldn't really classify myself as a #foodporn kind of guy.

The seller glares at me. "You buying anything?" I shrug. "No?"

"Then get the fuck out of here."



I walk up the block, by the Chinese restaurant and the KFC, kids on bikes popping up onto their back wheel and whooping down the street, fire truck sirens blaring a few blocks off, a shirtless man walking his Shih Tzu without a leash. The building my dad managed to get us into is all red brick with a courtyard where a few guys are sitting around on the ramp's railings. I pass by into the lobby with brown tiles and potted plants in the corners, a girl chatting on her cell phone by the stairs. The elevator takes me up to the fifth floor, and after walking down the hallway that reminds me of *The Shining*, I unlock the door and let myself in.

"I'm home!" I call out, not sure if my dad's even here. Captain, who must've heard me coming down the hall, is waiting by the door. She immediately rubs against my leg, back arching and purring, tail flicking back and forth. I'd found her as a kitten in Brooklyn one winter day when I was walking to my Bed-Stuy apartment with Ezra, and I was afraid that she'd die if I didn't help her, so I brought her home. My dad was pissed, but he let me warm her up and feed her milk, and one day turned into a few days, which turned into a few weeks, and after a few months, my dad had to admit that he liked her, too. I bend over to pick Captain up, but she's gone in a flash, bolting away from me and toward the kitchen.

The apartment is smaller than what we had in Bed-Stuy. The walls are beige, the light brown hardwood floors scuffed and worn down, an AC unit stuck into the living room's only window. This is a one-bedroom apartment, technically, but

there's a tiny, windowless den that's supposed to be an office space and has now become my room. It's just big enough for my twin-sized mattress, one side table, and a dresser pressed up against the wall. I told my dad that I felt like Harry Potter, sleeping in the cupboard under the staircase. I was just joking, but I felt bad the second I said it. My dad's really effing trying, I know that he is—and complaining about my new room, when he's been working his ass off for me and my school, wasn't exactly my shining moment.

The wooden floor squeaks on my way into the kitchen, where I see a container from Jacob's, the cheapest and most delicious takeout around: beef stew, peas and rice, plantains, and baked macaroni and cheese. Dad's home, then—not surprising, since he'll have to leave for work in a few hours. My dad's always been the kind of person to have odd jobs. He told me once that his passion isn't work—it's his family. He would've been totally happy as a stay-at-home dad. Mom worked as a nurse at the hospital, bringing home the bacon, I guess—but when she left, everything fell apart. Now my dad's fighting to send me to a private school filled with rich kids, just so that I can live my dream and have a chance to go to an Ivy League school, all while pretending we aren't struggling to stay afloat. Declan Keane's voice echoes in my head. I'm the real fraud. What sucks is that he's kind of right.

I get comfortable in the living room, toeing off my sneakers and grabbing my laptop from the coffee table, sprawling

out on the comfy couch. I end up where I always do: my email drafts folder.

I've got 472 emails drafted. All of them are to the same person: Lorraine Anders. Her last name, after she went and divorced my dad and changed it from *Love*.

I click on *compose* to write a new message and type *hi again* into the subject line.

Hey Mom,

This is the 473rd email I have drafted to you.

That's . . . a lot.

Is this kind of weird? Would you think I'm a freak, writing you all these unsent messages for years and hoarding them in my drafts folder?

I'm not going to send this one to you either. I already know that I won't. But maybe, one day, I can get the courage to actually write you an email that I hope you'll read and wait by my laptop, constantly refreshing my Gmail to see if you'll respond. I don't even know what that email would say. *How're you? How's Florida? How's my stepsister and my stepdad? Do you ever think about me? Do you still love me?*

Anyway, you know I just started the summer program and I had a group project. Long story short, Declan Keane was there. I've told you about him before. He pissed me off, like he always does. But—get this—*Ezra* was angry at *me* for fighting with Declan. I mean, what the hell? Marisol was also there. I'm so

awkward whenever she's around, and I wish I could figure out a way to . . . I don't know, make her see that she was wrong about me. I know that I can't *make* anyone do anything, but it still really sucks whenever she just ignores me or acts like she doesn't give a shit about me and my existence. It makes me feel . . . well, I guess a little like how you make me feel. Except you're 10,000x worse. Because you're, well, my mom.

Okay, enough self-pity for the day. Maybe one day I'll actually go through and click send on every single one of these messages just to flood your inbox. But until then . . .

Your son,  
Felix

The bedroom door opens, and my dad walks out, bleary-eyed. I snap my laptop shut. I realize this makes me look like I was watching porn or something, but my dad doesn't notice. He's got on his white collared shirt and tie, jacket hung over his arm. His gray hair is balding, and his frame seems to get thinner every year.

"Hey, kid," he says, since he still has a hard time saying my name.

My dad and I haven't seen each other in three days. The program is basically an away summer camp, but set in the city instead of in the woods. Most of the other students stay on campus in the dorms "for an immersive creative experience," as St. Catherine's likes to say, and since classes are right down the street from Ezra's apartment, I try to stay with him as much as possible. My dad, however, said that he wants me

here, with him. I argued that it's important for me to gain life skills before college and get used to the idea of living on my own, which was only half bullshit, so we agreed on a compromise: I'd spend some days with Ezra, and some days at home. Basically, I've been living the dream. Not many teens get a chance to actually live without adults *before* college.

"You grabbed any food yet?" my dad asks me as he walks over to the plastic takeout container.

"Nope," I say, opening my laptop again and jumping onto Instagram to see how many likes my #foodporn post of the mangoes got. Two so far: one from Ezra, the other from Ezra's fake account.

"How're things?" my dad asks, mouth full of macaroni and cheese. "How's Ezra? You've been eating well and going to bed at a reasonable time and doing your work and everything?" I hesitate. I don't think he'd want to know that we've been staying up until three every morning, smoking weed, or that I'm still struggling to get my shit together. He keeps going. "I'm trusting you to be responsible. You know that, right?" Then—"Ah, shit—God damnit, the cat pissed everywhere again."

I help him grab paper towels to sop up the mess while he mutters something about needing to take Captain to the vet, and I say Captain's probably just anxious. She's never liked this new space—we can't open the only window, and there's no balcony, no fire escape, nowhere to sit outside. I understand. I feel pretty trapped in this apartment, too.

My dad points at the roll of paper towels in my hands and

says my name to get my attention—but not my real name. He says my old name. The one I was born with, the one he and my mom gave me. The name itself I don't mind that much, I guess—but hearing it said out loud, directed at me, always sends a stabbing pain through my chest, this sinking feeling in my gut. I pretend I didn't hear him, until my dad realizes his mistake. There's an awkward silence for a few seconds, before he mumbles a quick apology.

We never talk about it. How he doesn't like saying the name Felix out loud. How he'll always slip up and use the wrong pronouns, and not bother to correct himself. How some nights, when he's had a little too much whiskey or beer, he'll tell me that I'll always be his daughter, his little girl.

I put the paper towel down and take the ten steps into my bedroom, closing the door behind me with a soft *click*.

"Kid," I hear my dad call, but I ignore him as I lie down on my bed, staring up at the flickering lightbulb. Captain appears out of nowhere, hopping into my lap and brushing her head against my hand, and I try not to cry, because no matter how pissed I am at him, I don't want my dad to hear me.

I wait outside of Ezra's gray, steel, and glass apartment building, sunglasses on to save my eyes from the bright summer light. It's seven, and the air still has that early-morning chill. Ez comes bounding down the stairs and out the front door, shades also on. I kind of hate how predictable we are right now.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” Ezra immediately says. His hair is down, but it doesn’t look like he bothered putting a comb through it, so tangled curls flop into his eyes. Ezra can always tell when I’m pissed or upset. He says that he’s an empath. I think he’s full of shit.

“Nothing.” He keeps staring at me as we walk, waiting, so I say, “It’s just my dad. He deadnamed me again.”

“Shit,” Ez mutters. “I’m sorry.”

I shrug, because while I want to say *it’s okay*, it really isn’t. Some trans folks have always known exactly who they are, declaring their correct gender and pronouns as toddlers and insisting that they be given different clothes and toys. But it took me a while to figure out my identity. I’d always hated being forced into dresses and being given dolls. The dresses and dolls weren’t even the real issue. The real issue was me realizing that these were things society had assigned to girls, and while I didn’t even know what *trans* was, something about being forced into the role of *girl* has always upset the hell out of me. I’d always tried to line up with the other boys whenever teachers split us up. I followed those boys around the playgrounds, upset that they’d ignore me and push me away. I had dreams, sometimes—dreams where I’d be in a different body, the kind of body society says belongs to men. I’d be so effing happy, but then I would wake up and see that nothing had changed. I remember thinking to myself,

*Hopefully, if I'm reincarnated, I'll be born a boy.*

It wasn't until I was twelve, almost five years ago now, that I read this book that had a trans character in it: *I Am J* by Cris Beam. Reading about J, it was like . . . I don't know, not only did a lightbulb go off in me, but the sun itself came out from behind these eternal clouds, and everything inside me blazed with the realization: I'm a guy.

I'm a freaking guy.

It took me a few months of flipping out and going back and forth over whether I was really trans or not. Another few months to figure out how to tell my parents. I sat my dad down in the living room of our old Bed-Stuy apartment. I felt like I was going to throw up the entire time, and I was so nervous that the only words I could get out were, "Dad, I have something to tell you," and, "I'm trans." He was quiet. He had this expression, like he was confused. And then he said, "Okay." But I could tell it wasn't okay, not to him—could tell the whole *coming out* thing wasn't going so well. He said he was tired and went to bed, and that was the end of the conversation. I emailed my mom the next day, since she's lived in Florida with my stepdad and my stepsister since I've been ten years old. She never responded. It was the first and last time I actually hit *send* on an email I wrote her.

It was almost an entire year of begging before my dad agreed to let me see a doctor for hormones. It isn't always easy to start hormones, so I'm lucky that I could. That was around the time I started to show I was really talented in art



and he decided to send me to St. Catherine's, which was great, because I didn't have to be around people who knew the old me. I didn't have any friends at my former school anyway, so it wasn't a big deal. It took a lot of convincing, and my doctor's help, but almost a year ago now, my dad even helped me get top surgery. I know how lucky I am for that. Not everyone who wants surgery can afford it. My dad had to do a lot of paperwork with letters and providers and everything, and he had to figure out my health insurance to make it happen. Even then, he still had to pay some money out of pocket. No matter how much he pisses me off sometimes, I wouldn't have been able to start my physical transition without my dad. Maybe that's what's most confusing of all: Why would he pay for my hormones, my surgery, my doctor's visits, everything—but refuse to say my real name?

Ezra met me right at the beginning of my transition. We sat next to each other in class and gravitated to each other's sarcastic comments, until we found ourselves spending practically every second of every day together. Ezra has only ever known me as Felix. I haven't told him, or anyone else, my old name. I've tried to wipe out all evidence of my past life: photos or videos where I have long hair, or where I'm wearing dresses, or anything society's prescribed to *girls*. It just isn't who I am anymore—who I ever was. It's funny. In a way, I guess I did experience reincarnation. I've started a new life, in a new physical form. I got exactly what I'd wished for.

My dad asked me to keep a few of my old pictures—*for*

*the memories, you never know if you'll want to remember who you used to be one of these days.* It wasn't really for me. I could tell he wanted those pictures for himself, one last anchor to who he thinks I was, or who he thinks I still am, which is enough of a reason for me to want to delete each and every single one of them. I have the pictures stored on Instagram, and I've come pretty close to deleting the photos a few times. I get a lurch of nausea whenever I see the old me pop up in my gallery. But I still keep the pictures. It's weird. He pisses me off, but he's still my dad, and I shouldn't feel like I owe him anything for helping me with my transition, but I do. I guess I figured it doesn't really matter. I've hidden the photos from the public. Only I can access them anyway. It doesn't really hurt to keep them around until my dad can finally accept me for who I am.

But . . . Even after coming out, even after starting my transition, sometimes I get this feeling. The feeling that something still isn't right. Questions float to the surface. Those questions begin to pull on this thread of anxiety, and I'm afraid if I pull too hard, I'll unweave and become completely undone. Maybe that's why I hate my dad deadnaming me, more than anything else. It makes me wonder if I really am *Felix*, no matter how loud I shout that name.