



Amanda Woody

# THEY HATE EACH OTHER

(A ROMANCE)

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*Amanda Woody* is a metro-Detroit-based queer author. When not writing and reading happily ever afters, she can be found drinking caramel apple cocktails, playing *Hades*, begging her parents not to kick her out, or rewatching *ATLA* with her siblings. She would like to give special thanks to Jenna, Laura, V, Tay, Ash, and Pure Untamable Spite for being constant driving forces behind her writing, and for being the best support system she could ask for.

**JONAH AND DYLAN GET ALONG LIKE OIL AND WATER.  
UNTIL A FAKE-DATING PLOY GIVES THEM NEW PERSPECTIVE,  
AND THEY REALIZE THAT "FALLING FOR YOUR ENEMY"  
ISN'T AS IMPOSSIBLE AS IT SEEMS.**

There are plenty of words Jonah Collins could use to describe Dylan Ramírez. “Arrogant,” “spoiled,” and “golden boy,” to name a few. Likewise, Dylan thinks he has Jonah accurately labeled as an attention-seeking asshat who never shuts his filthy mouth. Their friends are convinced Jonah’s and Dylan’s disdain for one another is just thinly veiled lust—a rumor that surges like wildfire when the two wake up in one bed after homecoming. Mutually horrified, Dylan and Jonah agree to use the faux pas to their advantage by fake dating. If they can stay convincing long enough to end their “relationship” in a massive staged fight, they can prove their incompatibility to their friends once and for all. But the more time they spend together, the more their plan begins to fall apart—and the closer they come to seeing each other clearly for the first time.





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DEDICATION TK

**\*\* CONTENT NOTICE \*\***

Alcoholism in a parent

Recurring theme of child neglect

Multiple instances of underage drinking

A character copes with PTSD and panic attacks

Multiple mentions of eating habits and body image

A minor is sexually harassed by his employer (not graphic)

Use of abrasive language and explicit sexual language/innuendos

Discussion of physical abuse (some flashes in nightmares/invasive images)

## **A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:**

This book is meant to depict queer characters and love in a community that is safe from discrimination based on one's identity. As such, please be aware that the narrative does not allow room for queerphobia of any kind. Thank you!



# DYLAN

Jonah Collins is dancing on my kitchen table, and I think . . . yes.

I think I'm about to lose my shit.

I'm impressed I've been holding it together so well. My house has been infested with uninvited partygoers since the last homecoming song, and I've been running around, scrubbing drink stains out of the carpet and picking up after sloppy classmates. Hanna and I only invited a handful of people, so why is half the class here? A thick, bulging vein has been pulsing in my temple for two hours, dangerously close to detonating.

Then, I see him. On my furniture. Dancing to the beat of the music, surrounded by his usual crowd of cheering onlookers.

I stop in my tracks. Inhale. Exhale. Find peace, Dylan.

Jonah is spilling his drink over the rim of his Solo cup. His homecoming tie is wrapped around his forehead, and his pasty white face is flushed, probably from the amount of alcohol he's been looting from the drink table. He pulls Andre up next to him, and they start grinding, and—

*No.*

I storm through the living room, squirming around people who are hunched with hilarity because, *haha, Jonah Collins is making an ass of himself again, and everything he does makes us laugh, even when it's not really funny!*

I wrestle my way to the inner part of the circle and glare up at them. When Andre sees my expression, he squawks, scrambling down. "I'm sorry!" he cries out. The edges of his dark brown forehead and low drop



fade sparkle with sweat, and he's giving me puppy eyes. "Jo-Jo made me do it!"

Andre's sober. That's the power Jonah wields over people—the natural ability to make them sink to his level.

"Go find your girlfriend," I snap at him, before turning my attention back to Jonah. I wonder if she's still ushering people away from the staircase leading upstairs. Regardless, I need her, because Hanna is the only person Jonah listens to.

"Go easy on him," Andre pleads. "He's wasted out of his mind—"

I shoot him another glare that makes him gulp and sends him skittering into the throng behind us.

"Andre?" Jonah whirls around, apparently just now realizing his best friend is no longer grinding up against his back. More liquid sloshes onto the tablecloth, and it takes all my willpower not to wrench it out from under him. "Where'd you . . . ?"

His sharp gray eyes fall to mine. Just like that, his distressed expression flips, and his lip pulls into a grin.

"Oh," he drawls. "It's Prissy Prince himself!"

A hush falls over the crowd. As the focus in the room shifts to me, my muscles tighten like springs. People always get quiet to watch a spectacle between Jonah Collins and Dylan Ramírez. Even if it's usually just Jonah screaming obscene things while I resist flinging him through a window.

"Come to ruin the fun?" Jonah tips his cup into his mouth. Half the drink misses his lips and spills onto his button-down. "As is required in the killjoy job description?"

An "ooh" echoes around the crowd.

"Get down," I mutter through my teeth.

“Two more minutes. Just two more, okay?” Jonah asks, swaying and giggling.

My heart beats against my throat, pumping blood into my head until I’m seeing red. Why? Why does this egotistical jerk cause a scene everywhere he goes? Always running around, leeching attention without a care for anyone but himself. Trying to pick fights with me, as if he’d last five seconds.

“Get off my table,” I say, seething, “before I drag you off.”

“But you would *never*,” he says in mock sternness. “Everyone keeps saying you’re this amazing, fan-fucking-tastic guy. Like, a real stand-up gentleman.”

Rage is swelling in my chest. The audience is already cheering him on. Because everyone loves Jonah. He says everything with such confidence, you can’t help but believe him. Root for him. Unless you’re me, and you have to deal with his personality on a daily basis.

I don’t know what I’m going to do next—the number of eyes burning into my face makes me want to slink under the table and hide. Suddenly, though, a voice draws our attention.

“Jonah.”

Hanna Katsuki is standing at the edge of the table. She looks exactly like she did before the dance, her long black hair curled against the rosy undertones of her shoulders like a princess’s, her royal blue dress smooth and unruffled. She’s swirling a glass of vodka and Sprite, her weary gaze focused on Jonah, looking like she wishes she was drunker than this. Andre peeks around her shoulder, eyes flicking between us.

Just like that, because he holds no respect for anyone other than imposing women, Jonah concedes. “Yes, ma’am,” he says, and my heart drops when he goes to step off the table.

“*Collins!*” I shout, lunging in front of him.

It happens how I expect. Jonah steps forward and realizes the ground isn’t under him. He falls with a gasp, but before he can slam his head against the floor, I catch his weight in my chest. His cup smashes between us, pouring sticky pop and alcohol down our shirts.

He looks up at me in bewilderment. People laugh, like he didn’t almost just concuss himself. I swallow a scream of loathing frustration as his drink seeps through my clothes.

“Ramírez?” Jonah flutters his eyelashes at me. “You *do* care about me!”

I am going to concuss him myself.

I seize his shirt and drag him behind me, beelining for the door. Jonah doesn’t struggle until I swing it open. “Wait, *wait!*” he shouts as I thrust him onto my porch. “What the hell?”

I fish a water bottle out of the cooler next to me and toss it at his feet. “Sober up,” I snap, and I slam the door in his face, locking it. When I turn, fuming, I find Andre and Hanna behind me, him nervously adjusting his royal blue tie, her staring at me with one raised brow, clearly about to accuse me of something.

“Do you ever wonder what it might be like?” she asks.

Here we freaking go. “No,” I say immediately.

“Joining him? Dancing with friends? Making a ruckus? Having fun?” Hanna takes a sip of her Sprite. “I’m never the loudest person in the room, either, but at least I know how to enjoy myself at a party. Unlike some people who only care about what Jonah Collins is getting himself into.”

Ah. I can’t go a day without someone insisting Jonah and I should get

along. “My version of having fun doesn’t involve stomping on people’s furniture and twerking for the masses,” I grumble.

Hanna looks pointedly at Andre. “Aren’t you going to give him company?”

Andre laughs. “Who, the white guy that just got drop-kicked out of the party? Nah.”

Hanna stares, unblinking, overwhelming him with her formidable energy until his lanky shoulders buckle, and he shuffles to the door. When Andre swings it open, Jonah’s belligerent voice surges into the living room like a tornado gust.

“Hey!” Andre says soothingly, battering him backward. “Jo-Jo, come on, we don’t need to go inside right now, shh . . .”

*“LET ME PUNCH HIM IN THE SACK—!”*

Andre closes the door, cutting him away.

“Menace,” I mutter, storming to the staircase. I glance back at Hanna. “I’m changing. Mind making sure nobody burns this place down?”

I hurl myself up the stairs and into my bedroom without waiting for an answer. I slouch onto my bed, prying my dress shirt off. I don’t realize how scalding hot I am until the cool air tingles against my skin.

I sit there. For . . . I don’t know how long. All I know is I’ve exhausted my social stamina, and I want this night to be over. I can’t say for certain, but I’m 90 percent sure the reason half these people showed up in the first place is because of *him*. Everyone flocks to him and follows him around like he’s the most interesting person in the world. I guess most of them only get his personality in short, entertaining spurts. Lucky them.

I must space out pretty good, because when a text brings me back into focus, music is no longer thrumming through my house. Things are

eerily quiet, aside from idle chatter out on my driveway and street.

I take no less than one minute to gather my senses before fumbling for my phone. It's from Hanna.

Managed to get everyone out. Trying to leave  
but Andre and Jonah are arguing in the  
driveway. Lock your doors.

A relieved smile touches my lips. She's technically the one who made me host so I couldn't ditch, but maybe I can forgive her for clearing this place out. The promise of sleep coaxes me to my feet, and I start to the door. But then I hear something. This thudding noise, steadily getting louder. The sound of someone mumbling.

My door swings open so viciously that it slams against the wall stop. It's Jonah Collins.

My jaw snaps shut. His pale face, twisted with rage, is pink under the glow of my bedside lamp. His nose is scrunched with his scowl.

"Leave," I order, because it's way too late to deal with his nasty disposition.

"You threw me out!" Jonah yells. "Into the cold dark night! *What if I died from hypothermia? What if someone kidnapped me because I'm so hot and sexy?*"

As if it isn't a balmy sixty-eight degrees outside. As if any criminals would want his screechy ass. "Why are you still here?" I demand. "What do you want?"

"A fight! *Fight me!*" He drives himself into my bare chest, clearly hoping I'll lose my balance. But I could bench-press two of him, so he doesn't even break my stance.

“Doesn’t this get exhausting?” I snarl, prying him off of me. “Being this annoying. Like, don’t you ever get tired?”

I figure he’s going to hurl another insult, but he staggers back with a groan. For a moment, I’m afraid he’s about to puke all over my beige carpet. But he merely moves toward my bed, eyes drooping. “What the hell is with your house? It’s so warm.” His voice is so slurred I can barely understand it. I watch in bewilderment as he flops onto my mattress and hugs my pillow. “Hey, Prissy Prince. D’you know the valley on Mars . . . it’s ten times longer than the Grand Canyon . . . ?”

He passes out.

What?

What the fuck?

I don’t know what just happened. Why did he say . . . *any* of that? I realize quickly that I don’t care. I’m tired, and anxious, and so angry that it’s shortening my breath to frustrated spurts. I storm to the bed, prepared to shake him awake. As I reach out, though, a message from Hanna glows up at me from my phone screen.

Jonah wants to fight you and Andre can’t get  
him into the car. Sorry. Maybe let him crash  
on your couch? :)

I’m seeing red again.

Jonah Collins is going to regret waking up tomorrow.

# JONAH

I'd sell my soul for the chance to wake up like those cheery assbags in a Disney Channel movie.

Seriously. Is stirring awake to chirping birds so much to ask for? Is it so impossible that I, too, could greet the morning sun, then twirl to my walk-in closet and choose between my cutest outfits? Can't *I* be the one to snag some toast and sprint past my quirky parents because, oh dicks and fiddlesticks, I'm late for school!

Of course not. Because I'm Jonah Collins, and I could never be so lucky.

I can barely pry my face from my soggy, saliva-laden pillow. A throbbing headache expands through my temples and jaw. I squint through my crusty eyes, making out scattered posters on deep burgundy walls. *The Great British Baking Show*, *Chopped*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Pesadilla en la Cocina*, *Cake Boss*. The dressers are scattered with tourist trinkets—snow globes, figurines, key chains.

Okay, I'm in someone's bedroom. That's one question answered.

But I'm . . . in my . . .

Underwear?

Oh *shit*.

A curled fist of realization punches me back into last night. Sensations from the after-party nip at my eyes, unraveling and disappearing. Shouting over music. Howling laughter. The sting of alcohol. Sparkles fluttering away from dresses. The glare of my phone screen as I check my texts again.

There's a slight incline in the bed, like there's something weighing

down the other side. My heart hammering, and half-hoping I'm lying beside a gargantuan teddy bear, I flip over.

Instead, there's a real human lying next to me. Loose black curls tickle his brows, and he's sleeping, one dark brown arm extended under his head, his shirtlessness burning into my retinas. It's . . . It's . . .

Dylan. Fucking. Ramírez.

My jaw unhinges. White, numbing panic burns behind my eyes. I'm fever dreaming, right? No way I'm lying half naked in bed beside my ultimate archenemy without some logical explanation. I have to think . . . *remember* . . .

Okay. I have to go back to square one.

First, my friends and I head to Buffalo Wild Wings for dinner. I order cheese curds, then promptly regret it when I end up in the bathroom, producing curds of my own.

Second, the dance. Music pounds through the cinder block walls of the cafeteria. The DJ pops on a slow song, and my friends break off in pairs, leaving me to dance dramatically by myself, pretending to hold the imaginary waist of a beautiful exchange student. People giggle, fueling my confidence, and then I notice Dylan Ramírez standing away from the crowd, his arms folded grumpily.

The night is suddenly swell.

Third, the after-party. Dylan rarely hosts, so this is the perfect time to cause chaos. Maybe I could "accidentally" bump into one of his thousand-dollar vases or, better yet, steal one. Before I can step through the door, though, he's pulling me aside with his Goliath palm.

"*Hey!*" I yell. "*Unhand me, foul bitch!*"

He smiles coolly. "Break something," he says in a honey-sweet voice, "and you'll regret it. Understand, Collins?"



Oh my God. Is he *threatening my well-being*? I whip my trembling, rage-induced fists out in front of me, prepared to spill blood on his fancy rich people porch.

His eye roll nearly makes me swing prematurely. “Cute stance,” he says, and then he turns to join the party, leaving me flushed and ready to swing at the wall.

Fourth, I’m chugging spiked lemonade, trying to distract myself. From the embarrassment of my wretched singleness. From thoughts of my sisters. From Dylan’s presence. He’s zigzagging around the party, scowling at everyone within his radius and steering people away from the staircase.

Fifth, I’m checking my phone again, because I can’t help it, and—

“Relax, Jo-Jo.” Andre’s skinny arm slinks around my shoulders, and he gives me a reassuring squeeze that delivers the message. *They’re fine*. “Start paying attention to me or I’ll cry.”

He drags me away from my anxieties, so we’re flaunting ourselves in the middle of the party, spreading foolhardiness and laughter.

Sixth . . . ? Oh, yeah. I’m showcasing my sexiest dance moves on a table. At least until I’m on the ground again, courtesy of Dylan, and being shoved into the cold dark night.

Seventh . . .

“Get in the car.” Andre’s hand steadies me while I teeter, my shirt buttons half-undone. “Mom’s pissed that I missed curfew. If you go back, you’ll just challenge Ramírez to a death brawl, and he’ll kick your ass.”

I choke on my horror. Does he really have that little faith in my ability to body a bitch? *My own best friend for all of eternity*? I have to prove him wrong, now, so I swivel, wandering up the neatly trimmed lawn to

Dylan's front door and flinging a middle finger up behind me.

"Okay," he calls. "Hanna and I are leaving. Remember to ice your black eyes."

I'm sure I say something witty, but the memory folds away.

Eighth . . . hmm. Eighth was . . . ?

I'm stumbling up a staircase, my steps echoing around his massive, empty house. "Where are you, Ramírez?" I slur, shoving into his bedroom. "I'm gonna challenge . . ."

Ninth. Downturned, deep brown eyes are glaring at me. It's him. The bane of my existence. The rotten core to my apple of life.

Tenth . . . I don't remember. Everything beyond that is a blur, so I blink back into focus, zeroing in on Dylan again. He's still there, a mere foot away. The image hasn't dissolved. Which means . . . we . . . ?

"No!" I roar, planting my palm on Dylan's face and thrusting it away. I scramble off of his mattress, struggling to conceal my very irresistible, very unclothed body. "*Absolutely not!*"

"Huh?" Dylan squints through his bleariness, then sits upright, his nose crinkling. "Why did you *strip*?"

I'm too far gone in my horror to fully comprehend his words. Instead, I seize the pillow plagued with my spit and reel it forward like a baseball bat, zipper slapping him with the rage of ten thousand gods of virtue.

"*Ay! Collins!*"

He lurches out of bed, and I brace for the fight I've been prepared to start with him over the last several years. Dylan has always been bigger and better than me. He's got the higher grades, because he apparently has all the time in the world to study and has zero obligations to anything but himself. He's got the brawnier build, confirmed by Andre, who

repeatedly has the gall to tell me I look like a yipping chihuahua next to him. He has the superior luck—the proof being the house that currently surrounds us.

Basically, all of this is to say that if I can beat him unconscious with this pillow, he can beat me *more* unconscious with it.

I have to knock him out before he counters.

First, I'll aim for his face. As miserable tears of pain blind him, I'll go for the throat. I'll continue this pillow torment until his writhing dissolves into twitching, and then, I'll make my escape.

Good. Good plan. I just have to . . .

I hurl the pillow forward, and he tears it out of my grip.

Bad plan.

I'm about to be maimed. Not only does he have my weapon, but there's nobody around to see him lose the perfect pompous persona he's always wearing like a costume. In a last, desperate attempt to flee, I sprint for the closed door—until his foot hooks around mine, nearly ripping me into the splits. “Ow,” I croak. “You little . . .”

Dylan snaps the pillow into my nose, sending me sprawling. “*You* got into *my* bed,” he snarls, poised to strike again. “In case you forgot.”

There aren't enough words in my brain for me to describe how incredibly impossible that is. Nonetheless, I'm aching too much to tell him how wrong he is, so I maneuver onto my knees, fumbling for my pile of clothes beside the bed. I shove my legs into slacks and hoist my sticky button-down over my shoulders. Hopefully that massive stain down the front will come out in the wash. My “nice” shirts are few and far between.

“Unbelievable.” Dylan drags sweatpants to his waist. “I should've thrown you out on the lawn . . .”

I clamber to my feet. My body feels like it weighs triple what it normally does, and my headache is bad enough to blur my vision, but I can't show weakness, so I hold my chin high and say, "I require water."

He stares at me in this "only if I can drown you in it" kind of way. "Okay? And?"

"I'm your esteemed guest!" I snap, marching to the door. "You should take responsibility for—"

Dylan trips me a second time, and I crash against the wood with a thud. I groan, sliding onto my back.

"Of course." He glares down at me with an unpleasant smile. "Anything for my *guest*."

Homecoming. The one night I can go out, have fun, get shamelessly wasted, and forget about my woes.

Like everything in my life, Dylan Ramírez ruined it.

Dylan and I have been archenemies since we were eleven, back when he moved here from Detroit and wrestled into my friend group. Back when Mom was still alive, and I had time to compete with him.

The thing is, he wins. Always. It's been like that since the start, when he slapped me with that +4 in Uno. In our sixth grade music concert, he stole my recorder solo. In eighth grade, everyone went to his Christmas party instead of my birthday bash because he had a chocolate fountain. Freshman year, he nudged me aside to win homecoming prince. Dylan steals *everything*.

And why? He has everything he could ever want. A gigantic, cozy house in a safe neighborhood. The ability to buy overpriced food from the lunch lines without a bead of sweat. Sparkling fresh clothes that

make him look pristine and proper and *ugh*. I swear the guy doesn't know how to operate a washing machine, considering how often he's wearing new clothes.

My point? I hate him.

He hates me, too. He says I'm whiny, annoying, too loud, and I over-exaggerate, which I have never done in the history of *ever*. But Hanna is his best friend, and Andre is mine, and their romantic relationship is stable, so we're forced to tolerate each other.

For some sadistic reason (hint: we're bisexual singles within driving distance of each other), our friends have been trying to set us up. Because, *oh, the tension!* Sure, we have that, but it's mostly in a "see how far you can stretch this rubber band before it snaps" kind of way. Regardless, I've wanted to drop-kick him back to Detroit for years.

As I run around Dylan's house, searching for my phone, I pause at the bathroom. I intently examine my neck to make sure he didn't express his innate desire for me in the form of hickeys.

Dylan, who's trudging by with dirty paper plates, scoffs. "Do you really think," he says flatly, "I would ever suck on your crusty skin."

"*Um, I am baby-ass smooth, thank you?*"

"Please. I've seen your cracked elbows." He crushes the plates into his kitchen trash can, ignoring my squawk of protest, then pulls a glass from an overhead cabinet, filling it with water and holding it out.

"You remember more than me," I mutter.

"Obviously. I wasn't drinking. Though, maybe I should've been." He grimaces. "I wish I could delete last night from my brain."

Reluctantly, I take the glass from him and mutter a thanks. My lack of memory is causing anxiety to tingle under my skin. "So we didn't . . . *do* anything," I say, hesitant. "Right?"

“Of course not,” he snaps. “You barged into my room, challenged me to a fight, told me the valley on Mars is longer than the Grand Canyon, and passed out. I didn’t feel like sleeping on the couch, so I shoved you over and got in next to you.”

My face rises to boiling temperature. I shared a *fun fact* with him? What’s wrong with me? I don’t disclose my space information to just anyone, let alone Dylan “Who Gave You Permission to Speak to Me” Ramírez. How dare my drunken mouth betray me?

I glug the water, then stride into the living room, still seeking my phone. The pastel furniture and brick fireplace look as fancy as they did when his family first moved here. His TV is the size of my backyard. The windows are expansive and inviting. Everything about this house screams “unnecessarily wealthy.”

I head to Dylan’s room, hands tingling. It has to be there. Otherwise . . .

The Goddess of Luck blesses me with one spare moment of her time, because as soon as I walk through his door, I hear my “Saturn’s Rings” chime beneath his bed. Sighing with relief, I crawl between his nightstand and bed frame, snagging it, then open my conversation with Mik.

Dad home yet? Mrs. Greene is  
leaving at 9.

BRAT

Yep, he’s here. Have fun loser!!!

Nothing else, so that’s relieving. I do have a text from the betrayer of my heart (I must’ve changed his contact name last night).

ASSHOLE BASTARD WHORE

How was the death brawl? Did it turn  
into something . . . sexier? heheh

He's included a GIF of two cats licking each other. Grinding my teeth, I swipe to call.

"Good morning, babe." I can almost hear Andre's leering, treasonous smile.

"Don't call me babe." My growl comes more like a squeak. "You were my DD. Why did you leave me with this asshat?"

"You wouldn't get in my car, remember? I thought Mom was going to squeeze through my damn cell phone and drag me home herself if I didn't get on the road." A beat. Then, "So, how was it? Is his package as big as it looked in the locker room—?"

"Oh no, oh God, no, shut up immediately." I rub my temple. Andre's superpower is riling me up within the first twelve seconds of our conversation. "We didn't do anything weird, okay? It was a mistake."

Andre is quiet. Just when I think the line is dead, "What was a mistake?"

Shit. "What?" I clear my throat. "Nothing. Anyway—"

"So you did *something* with him?"

"No, I—"

"No way." Andre is basically guffawing, now. "I have to tell Hanna, oh my God—"

"Don't say anything!" I reel my head up, slamming it into the corner of Dylan's nightstand and sending a fresh wave of pain rippling through

my temples. As I groan and reach for my skull, something drops onto the carpet in front of me. “We didn’t do anything, so don’t be weird! I have to go.”

“No, wait, tell me more, I’m too emotionally invested—!”

I disconnect, cussing and massaging my head. The fallen object before me is a picture frame. As I pick it up, my insides boil with nausea—because of my kiss with the dresser, or because I’m looking at Dylan’s child face, I’m not sure. Dylan is probably nine or so and flanked by three people. His mother, a gorgeous Latina woman with soft curls, a tailored suit, and a rusted smile, like it’s not often used. His father, a hefty Afro-Latino man with cropped hair and a beaming grin. Dylan, who’s peeking shyly at the camera, his hands bunched up in front of him. Then . . .

A teenager slightly older than us now, clutching Dylan’s shoulders, wearing a smile similar to Mr. Ramírez’s. Warm, wide, and glittering with energy.

I frown. I don’t know much about the Ramírez family—only that Dylan’s mom is Mexican and grew up in Texas, and that his dad moved to the U.S. from Brazil when he was a child. Beyond that, I don’t have any other information. Talking about our families in the friend group is a rare occurrence, and something I actively avoid, unless it’s about my sisters.

But it feels like I should’ve known Dylan has a brother.

I set the picture on the nightstand and return to the kitchen, where Dylan’s wiping a stain off a book stuffed with colorful tabs titled *Recetas*. “So I . . . uh.” I clear my throat. “Andre thinks we got nasty last night.”

Dylan scowls. “Messed up already? Feels like a record.”



Whatever brilliant insult I'm about to generate fizzles when I see the clock above the living room mantle. My chest twinges with unease, and I shuffle around again, looking for my jacket.

"Have a ride home?" he asks, following me.

"My legs."

"But it's raining. Your dad can't pick you up?"

I find my jacket on the coat rack and secure the black buttons, ignoring him.

Dylan watches as sheets of rain douse the street and pummel the windows, then says, "I'll drive you."

My hand is already around the doorknob, but I hesitate. There's nobody around to see his gentlemanly act, so why keep up the image? Why offer something that would force him to spend more time with me?

I decide not to contemplate it. Instead, I salute him and say, "Looks like you've got some cleaning up to do, so no thanks. Deuces!"

I swing it open, but Dylan's hand slams the door before I can squirm through. "How about," he says, voice dangerously calm, "you stop bitching for once, and you thank me?"

My jaw tightens. If I turn around, my face is going to be right in his neck, so I stay still, hating the oppressive heat from his chest mere inches from my back. He doesn't move, either—maybe he's waiting for me to offer my immeasurable gratitude, but I'm not going to give it to him. He probably has some diabolical motivation for wanting to take me home, like to put me in his debt.

Besides, I don't need anyone's help. For *anything*. Especially not his.

"Ridiculous," he mutters. He snags a windbreaker off the coatrack, then pulls me into the rain. He's got a newly leased metallic gray car that makes me grumble with envy.

He stuffs me into the leather passenger seat like a hostage, and then we're off.

Delridge is a small, busy city in the middle of Absolutely Nowhere. In the center, it's any forgettable place, with bars, restaurants, department stores, the occasional neighborhood, and two schools—one for K-8 and one high school. But in the outskirts, it's little more than expansive, twisting country roads, one Amish house, and infinite golden fields.

The ride is quiet. As we encroach on the other side of town, sidewalks begin to fracture. Potholes cut deeper into the asphalt. Weeds reach for the autumn sky, and two-story houses collapse into one-story houses. Jagged wire springs to life in the form of spiraling fences. I don't realize I'm chewing my nail until I taste blood.

"Stop here." We're in the middle of a street, but I pull the door handle anyway.

Dylan sighs. "Just point me in the right direction so I can get back to my life."

Right. His perfect, stress-free life. "Sorry for taking up so much of your precious day," I drawl. "What, do you need to go polish your yacht? Feed your Persian cat? Meet your brother at some thousand-dollar steakhouse—?"

It's like I pulled a trigger. Suddenly, Dylan swerves into a rundown ice-cream parlor lot and screeches to a stop.

I stare at him, alarmed. He's unblinking. Deadpan.

"Get out," he whispers.

His seething tone sends a warning tingle up my spine. I fumble for the handle and push the door open, allowing the sound of gushing rain

to surge into the car. I'm not sure what conjured this menacing air—it's not like I've never poked at the fact that he's well-off. What's different?

*I mentioned his brother.*

I've known Dylan a long time (tragically), but I've never interacted with his family. Hanna said his mom is a traveling businesswoman, and his dad is the owner and head chef of a local churrascaria, which I've heard is this ridiculously delicious Brazilian restaurant. Nobody's ever mentioned siblings.

I step onto the asphalt. Rain explodes against my shoes, dampening my slacks. This tension feels worse than before, like I crossed a line and didn't realize it. Maybe I should say something. Like, thank him for the ride after all, or mumble an apology for . . . whatever I did.

Instead, I slam the door and turn away, hugging my sleeves. The tires squeal against the pavement as Dylan swings the car around, kicking it onto the street. My shoulders slump. My pinched eyebrows melt apart.

"My bad," I whisper.

I swivel to the sidewalk and continue the trek home.

# DYLAN

I'm not sure how long I sit in my driveway, my breathing startled and shallow. Part of me feels guilty about abandoning Jonah in the rain. Another part feels he's lucky I took him that far.

I lean against the headrest. My brother's name flits around the edges of my thoughts, always there, even when I try to avoid it.

*Tomás.*

How did Jonah know? My secrets stay where they are, caged and stifled in the back of my head. Especially around arrogant loudmouths who don't know how to function unless everyone is looking at them.

I'm frazzled, which means one thing.

Stress baking.

I head inside. Before yanking out ingredients for pudim de leite condensado, I clean up remaining hints of the party. I scrub at the lemonade stains soaking the counter, empty the coolers, vacuum crumbs and sparkles out of the carpet. I consider picking up Mom's picture above the mantle—the one with her in her quince dress—but it's not like she's ever around to see it, so I leave it tipped over.

I realize how Jonah found out when I go upstairs. The da Costa Ramírez family picture on my bedside table. It's standing up.

I huff in frustration, slapping it facedown.

I return to my kitchen and switch my oven to preheat, then caramelize the sugar, trying to focus on . . . well, anything but *him*. But I can still hear his spiteful yells ricocheting through my house. He's always yelling. God, can't he ever shut up? Andre's squealy, but Jonah's *relentless*. I want to stick a ball gag in his mouth, and not in a sexy way.

School is going to suck. Andre has no doubt unleashed his rumors to our friends at this point, courtesy of Jonah's inability to keep his mouth shut about us sleeping in the same bed. Normally, I'm good at ignoring our friends when they insist we have "couple vibes," but now, we've given them the perfect ammunition for another flurry of smug looks and sly suggestions.

This has been going on since sophomore year. Since I started nonchalantly mentioning that I was bisexual. Jonah has been out (and exceptionally loud) about being the school's "cutest bi-masc guy" since I first moved here in sixth grade.

And . . . sure, maybe his confidence, his willingness to shout it to the skies, was partially what motivated me to do the same. Not to have a whole "coming out" speech in front of my graduation class, but just not to hide it, like I did back in Detroit. It wasn't that people in my old school were outwardly prejudiced, but I was still this quiet, awkward kid who had a maximum of two friends, both of whom stopped texting when I moved away. I didn't want to further ostracize myself by revealing that some of my attraction was reserved for more than just girls.

But, of course, as soon as our friends and acquaintances found out that we shared the same sexuality (and literally nothing else), the pleas for us to try going out began in full force. Even while I was casually dating other people around school.

*It's not just because you both like guys, Hanna told me at one point, with a violent eye roll. It's because you've always had chemistry.*

The only kind of chemistry Jonah and I have is nuclear.

I pour the caramel into my ramekins, and something catches my eye. The drawer next to the sink. It's cracked open. The sealed envelope and faded ink glare up at me.

*Lil Dyl*

That's the name on the front. It used to be Little Dylan, the Americanized version of my father's old nickname for me (Dylinho), but Tomás decided that was too many syllables and chopped it. "If you become a famous rapper," he said, "you've got a name. You're welcome. I'll take thirty percent of your profits."

He sent this over a year ago. I still haven't opened it.

I bump the drawer closed with my hip, fingers trembling around my whisk as I blend egg yolks. Think about something else. Something . . . anything . . .

Suddenly, I hear keys jangling near the front door, and my heart rate spikes. It has to be Dad. Right? Did he take the rest of the day off for once? He probably got in late last night, since his restaurant closes at midnight and he sometimes hangs with his employees at the bar afterward. He often leaves home early to set up, too, so he definitely saw the party mess on his way in and out.

The door swings in. Sure enough, it's Dad, wearing an apron over his owner's attire, cradling his cell phone between his cheek and shoulder.

"Mantenme informado." He must be talking to a subordinate, because Mom would be scolding him for sounding so authoritative. Most of his Latine staff converse in Spanish, which gives him a good excuse to practice the language to impress Mom's side of the family instead of whining about how nobody in the Midwest speaks Portuguese. Not that he's even fluent anymore—he moved here from Brazil when he was barely seven, and when his mother refused to converse with him in anything other than English to "help him adjust," his fluency deteriorated. All he was allowed to bring with him, really, was his fascination for the food. "Gracias. Volveré en unos diez minutos."

My shoulders slump. He's not sticking around. I shouldn't be surprised, considering this happens every time he walks through the door.

He strides toward me, wearing his famous ear-to-ear grin. "Nice to see you alive and well. Figured you'd be out cold until two," he booms, peering into my mixture of ingredients. "A flan kind of day, eh?"

"Yeah . . . it's been rough."

He slings a burly arm around my shoulder and stretches up to kiss my forehead. I savor this moment, because I'm not sure when it'll happen again.

"Did you forget something?" I ask sternly.

"Keys to the back office. Had to leave George in charge." He shudders, and now I understand why he's in a hurry. "How was your party?"

"Fine." Even if I wanted to tell him the truth, he doesn't have time to listen.

His grin turns mischievous. "I peeked into your room this morning."

I can almost feel the color drain from my face. "You didn't."

He fumbles through the drawers for his keys, glancing only once at the one concealing Tomás's letter. "Who was he?"

"Let's not talk about this," I say shortly. "Nothing happened. He was drunk, so—"

"*What?*" Dad snatches his keys, then turns on me, nose flaring. "You got into bed with a *drunk* person?"

"Yes, but we didn't—"

"Dylan Mauricio da Costa Ramírez. You *know* people can't give their consent when they're intoxicated. Didn't we already have this talk?"

I shudder at the remembrance. Like I could ever forget the humiliating day he decided to sit me down and say, *Let's talk about sex, son*. "I know! Like I keep trying to say, nothing happened. I just didn't know

where to put him, so I let him share my bed.” Irritation creeps into my chest, and I mutter, “Don’t you have to get to work?”

Part of me hopes he’ll say no. That he’ll be upset enough to sit me down and scold me. Maybe we’ll have the most uncomfortable conversation a father and son can have.

Instead, he says what I expect.

“Yes.” He rushes to the front door, tossing one grim look over his shoulder. “This conversation isn’t over, Dylan.”

It is. In fact, he’s already gone.

I return to baking. I should’ve picked a more complicated recipe. This one is easy enough that I don’t have to think about what I’m doing. Baking has always helped take my mind off things—distract me from intrusive thoughts. It was a mild interest at first, until my therapist told me pursuing it might help me focus on something other than . . . well.

My phone chimes.

HANNA

Andre said something happened with you and  
Jonah. Why am I hearing about it from him??

Immediately, I silence my phone, scowling. There’s no way I’ll be able to convince anyone that nothing happened between us. They’ll never stop bugging us, never back down, until . . . I don’t know. We give it a shot, or something. But I’m too emotionally exhausted to contemplate an idea as repulsive as that, so I stow it away.

At least for now.



# JONAH

I'm cold and hungover and drenched and this *sucks*.

As I walk, I try not to think about last night. Despite what happened, I had fun. It's not often I can spend so much time with my friends—Andre in particular. He's always swamped in AP homework and student council meetings, being the vice president alongside President Hanna Katsuki. They're Delridge High's power couple, and *busiest* couple, so getting to hang out with them isn't easy.

Not that my own schedule is any help. The only person who seems to have eons of free time on his hands is the Prissy Prince, and he's the last person I'd want to hang out with one-on-one while Andre is driving his brother to lacrosse games, or Hanna is volunteering at the Little League's softball rec center while the varsity team is on break.

The point is, even if my memories from the party are spotty, the moments I do remember are warm and filled with laughter.

It might've been perfect, if I hadn't gone back into Dylan's room.

My house is dainty, and there's tape over one window. The color's faded, the wood's curling, shingles are missing from the roof, the porch is rotting, and the lawn is an expanse of tangled weeds. I could probably do more to make it look less like a fixer-upper, if I had time.

I shake my shoulders out, draw a deep breath, and lift my chin. Adult Mode: Activated.

I head inside, where I'm greeted with the horrifying sight of my sister kicking a soccer ball against the glass door.

"Hey!" I growl.

She squeals and whirls, her brown hair flying around her face. "Jo-

Jo!” She smiles innocently. It used to work a few years ago, but she’s twelve—the ripe age of losing squishy cheeks and childlike wonder—so she’s not as cute as she thinks.

“Mikayla,” I say darkly.

“Hello, my brother.” She eyes my sopping wet clothes.

“I can’t even afford to fix my window,” I snap, kicking my shoes off. “What do I do if you shatter the whole door?”

“I was being gentle! And. Um.” Her gray eyes scavenge the ceiling, seeking an excuse. “I need practice, and you won’t let me kick in the backyard when you’re not home . . .”

“You have *actual* practices, right?” I ask, rubbing my forehead. “Where’s Lily?”

“Our room.”

“And Dad?” I glance around. He always leaves traces when he comes by—the stinging scent of whiskey, melted ice on the counter, bottle caps. Right now, there’s no sign of him.

Mik fidgets, and I can see the truth written all over her face. The sight of it makes my stomach plummet.

“You told me he came home last night,” I say sharply.

“I didn’t want to ruin your fun!”

“Mrs. Greene left you here *alone*?” I demand. She’s the elderly woman who lives across the street and watches Mik and Lily so she can escape her grumpy husband. She usually doesn’t walk home until I get there to replace her.

“I . . . might’ve told her Dad texted me that he was five minutes away and said she could go home.” Mik looks everywhere but at my eyes.

Though I’m soaked to the bone, I fold into the couch. My blood rises into my temples, worsening my headache. “You can’t stay here alone

with Lily,” I say, leveling my voice. Normally, I wouldn’t be able to, but Adult Mode grants me the power of composure. “What if someone broke in?”

“What if?” she demands. “Not like Dad would do anything about it.”

“*Mikayla.*”

My stern voice causes tears to sparkle in her lashes. “Sorry. I just . . . Jonah, I *really* didn’t want you to come home.”

She’s a little twerp. I love her to death. “Hey,” I say, bumping her chin up, forcing her to meet my eyes. “Thank you. But you understand why you need to be honest, right? I have to know I can trust your word.”

Her lower lip trembles, but she bites it away, nodding.

“I have to get ready for work.” Though my whole body is aching, courtesy of the hangover, I rise from the couch. “Ms. Harris is picking you up at one for your game at the dome. Make sure Lily brings a coloring book.”

“Don’t worry, Jo-Jo.” She sticks one thumb in her chest. “I’m the most mature person you know. I got this.”

“Says the girl using the glass door as a soccer net.” I examine the house again, assessing for damage. The couch footrest is still stuck in its usual half-up, half-down position. The kitchen is cluttered with plates, but nothing unmanageable. “Put towels on the couch, would you? I want that ass imprint gone.”

“You’re the one dripping rain everywhere!” she hisses, but she trudges to the kitchen anyway. “Making me wipe your butt off the couch . . . so gross . . .”

It’s enough punishment for now, so I head down the hall, prying my damp clothes off. I veer into my room and fold a robe over my shoulders, then glance to the taped window. Beside it, angled toward the sky, sits

my telescope. As soon as I lay my eyes on it, a pang of nostalgia rocks my stomach. Or maybe it's just the nausea again.

I maneuver toward it through the cramped space, then pick up my feather duster, swiping it along the clean, glossy top. The lens is cracked, so it's useless. But it was a gift from Mom, so it's fine where it is.

I head across the hall, nudging into Mik and Lily's room.

Lily is lying atop her bed, dressed in a pink skirt and one of my old zip-up hoodies, humming over a sketchbook. My sleeves are five inches too long on her nine-year-old arms. You'd think she would stick to wearing her own clothes, considering we've stuffed her wardrobe with new tops, bottoms, and the like since she transitioned last year. Alas, it seems she's only ever truly content when she's drowning in one of my sweatshirts. "Hi, Jo-Jo," she says with a smile that cures my aggravation.

"Hey, Lilypad." I prop myself on her mattress, combing down the curls tangled over her forehead. She's drawing a giraffe, which is the least surprising thing that's happened today. She's got a horrible fascination with those long-necked monstrosities.

"That's the best giraffe you've drawn all week!" I say brightly. "The neck is the perfect height. And I love how fluffy the tail is."

She blushes with satisfaction. "Do you want it?"

I reel back, gaping at her. "You . . . would let me . . . have your amazing, beautiful drawing?" I sniffle, fanning my face. "I'm going to cry."

"I give you pictures all the time," she points out, but she crawls over and throws her arms around me anyway, squeezing. "Don't cry, okay? Also, you're all wet, you know."

Oh, right. I remove her from my lap before dampness can seep into her clothes.

“Um . . . Jo-Jo?” She sits cross-legged, fumbling with her hands. “There’s a book fair tomorrow. Ms. Brennan . . . you remember her?”

I nod. Ms. Brennan has been Lily’s counselor for almost a year now. She’s been a massive resource for Lily at school, where they have private weekly meetings to talk about everything under the sun. Ms. Brennan wrote a letter home not long ago to say that Lily has been doing well, and is feeling more and more like her authentic self as time passes.

It was addressed to me. Not Dad. To which I panicked for over a week, wondering how much Lily has been telling Ms. Brennan about our situation. But there haven’t been follow-up questions or repercussions, so maybe Lily is just saying she feels the most comfortable around me, or trusts me to be the one to read updates.

I know it’s risky, pairing her with a counselor whose job is to dig deep and ask questions. But ensuring Lily has some kind of support system at school is my biggest priority.

“She found this book she thinks I should get,” Lily says lightly. “The main girl is like me. I never read one of those. It looks *reaaaaally* good! So maybe . . . I can have a little money?”

The tentative way she asks makes my chest sting. I hate that, no matter how hard I try to hide it, Lily is fully aware of our situation. “Of course.” I make sure my smile is bright, warm, and comforting. “I’ll put money in your backpack.”

I peck her forehead, easing up. Everything’s good. Nobody burned the house down. Still, the thought of Mik and Lily spending the night here alone . . .

I don’t have time to contemplate what a horrible brother I am, so I dart for the bathroom and suffer through a lukewarm shower (I need to figure out what’s going on with the water heater). As I scrub shampoo

through my hair, I list out my schedule. Work. If it's slow, maybe I'll get further in *Pride and Prejudice*. Then, sleep. Then, school. Then, work. Then, piled up homework. Then, sleep. Repeat. Repeat . . .

I stare at the grout in the tile, eyes drooping, goosebumps raking my arms and legs. I started this school year off pretty well, somehow managing to perfectly balance my personal life with school, homework, and actual work. But I can never seem to maintain it beyond a few weeks, and I fall behind in gradual increments. I've been slipping in certain subjects, especially twelfth grade English. I have no doubt Ms. Davis is going to have some shit to say about it. She's the last person I want to get involved with, but I can't help it. Reading takes more time than, say, solving equations in math, or writing short answers for early childhood education. Naturally, it takes a back seat to subjects I can conquer more quickly.

Once I'm dressed in my server uniform, I call Mrs. Greene. When she says she's about to walk over, I jog to the door.

"Mrs. Greene is watching you until Ms. Harris picks you up for soccer," I tell Mik. "Keep the door locked. Also—"

"I *know*." She rolls her eyes. She looks like Mom when she does that.

I fold open my broken umbrella. The rain is heavier now, so this walk is going to suck.

I stride into the downpour anyway.

I was spotted staggering back into Dylan's house by about five people.

Yet, somehow, everyone knows.

When I get to school on Monday, people are winking, offering congratulations, and slapping my back, like I single-handedly won the

homecoming football game. It's like the student body's been pining for us to date since Dylan first thrust his dick into my life.

Nobody believes my story.

"Jonah," Maya says while we walk to precalc, after I've recounted the tale of how I cussed Dylan out and fell asleep immediately afterward. "You and Dylan have more sexual tension than anyone in the school. There's no way you just did some yelling and then crashed."

"It was only a matter of time." Casey, normally my saving grace when it comes to people demanding that Dylan and I taste each other, nods during English. "I try to leave you alone, but now you're spending the night together after parties . . . it's sickeningly adorable."

"I knew you were after Dylan," Rohan says during partner work in sociology. "You're always stripping him with your eyes."

"I am *not*!" I shriek, which makes Ms. Anderson scowl at me.

"Right . . ." Rohan arches one dark brow at me. "Hey, how many inches?"

*"Shut up! Shut up, shut up—"*

"Jonah Collins!" Ms. Anderson snaps.

"I am being harassed," I announce. "May I be removed from this partnership?"

To which she tells me to quit messing around or she'll send me to the office, and I resist the urge to walk there myself.

I don't see Dylan until I'm heading to the cafeteria for lunch with a swarm of students. He stands out in a plaid shirt and beige chinos, with the sleeves rolled up like he's some hot English professor. "Hey," I say, weaseling through the crowd and bumping into him. "Prissy Prince."

I can tell he's refraining from a violent eye roll. "Oh good," he mutters. "It's you."

“What have you been telling everyone?”

“That nothing happened and people are overreacting.”

We spill into the cafeteria—the only part of the school I like. The ceiling is paneled high with glass, allowing sunlight to flood in if we’re lucky enough to see it. I’m a sucker for glass ceilings, because I imagine, at night, I could watch the stars without worrying about my cheeks freezing. (Not, like, *the* glass ceiling, of course. Shatter those wage gaps, ladies.)

“Oh no,” Dylan says, groaning. When I see our lunch table, I grimace.

Our friends are hunched together, talking. Even Casey, who avoids the drama, is tilted in. Maya whips her head back and forth between people so quickly that her microbraids threaten Rohan, who clearly doesn’t have the heart to tell her. Andre’s the center of attention, and I know. I *know*.

“They’re talking about us,” Dylan says, mirroring my thoughts.

Hanna is on the outer edge of the group, watching us. She smirks.

“Nope.” Suddenly, Dylan has my wrist, and he’s pulling me away from the cafeteria.

“Let go!” I hiss, fighting his monstrously strong grip, but he ignores me, nudging me into the bathroom near the main office. It’s usually empty, which means it’s a great place for emergency dumps. It’s also great for private conversations, so long as no one’s ripping ass in your ear. “What’s your problem?”

“Everything.” He kicks the stall doors to make sure they’re vacant. He looks flustered, angry, annoyed—like he’s at the end of his rope. I wonder if people have been prodding him about Saturday just as much as they’ve been prodding me. “They’re never going to stop harassing us, unless we do something.”



“There’s nothing we can do.” I scowl. “Just keep saying we didn’t—”

“That isn’t *working*, Collins. It never does!” He gets this look like he’s smelling something rank. I have the feeling it’s nothing to do with the bathroom. “I . . . have an idea. That could possibly make it go away.”

I narrow my eyes. He’s looking more uncomfortable by the second.

“They bother us because we won’t try going out,” he explains. “So, what if we did? We could—*um, no, get back here.*”

He catches my shirt collar before I can sprint away.

“*Hell nope!*” I shout, wriggling against his grip.

“Just listen.” He releases me, and my momentum nearly carries me into the wall. “What if we pretend something *did* happen after homecoming? We decided to try dating under wraps. But, oh no, they found out anyway!” He shrugs with a fake, playful smile. “Guess we’ll go public. We keep it up, and just as they’re congratulating themselves for ‘setting us up,’ boom. We have a blowup. With screaming and crying. Then, we stop talking, and they’ll all feel too bad to continue annoying us.”

By God, he’s serious. “You’re telling me,” I say slowly, backing away from him, “we should start a Hallmark rom-com.”

He blinks at me. “In rom-coms, they fall in love.”

I retch violently.

“Exactly,” he says. “So, what do you think?”

It’s a repulsive idea. There’s no way I’d be able to pretend like I’m hopelessly falling for my Ultimate Archenemy of All Time.

Then again, I can’t count the number of times people have proposed the idea—Jonah and Dylan becoming *one*.

I tap my worn sole against the tile, deliberating. “We could hold out until graduation.” Anything to avoid this horrendous plot.

“Do you think this is going to stop just because we’re not in high

school anymore?” Dylan asks skeptically. “Our best friends are going out, Collins. This won’t end unless they break up, and I don’t think either of us want that.”

He’s right. Andre and Hanna have been dating for two years, and Andre is the happiest I’ve ever seen him. And, though she’s always been the cool, reserved type, I can tell Hanna’s happy as well. She doesn’t talk outwardly about it, but from what Andre told me during one of our deep (and rare) best friend conversations in his car, she’s always been uncomfortable discussing her asexuality with her partners. Since we were all already friends who knew about it when they started dating, she didn’t have to “come out” to him, or fear his response.

He’s good at making her feel safe and unrooting her from her stubbornness. She’s good at pulling him out of the clouds and grounding him when it matters. I don’t want their happiness to end just because I’m sick of Dylan’s face. “How long?” I mutter.

“Long enough to convince everyone we gave it a chance. Through winter break, maybe?”

Three months. It’s three too long, but if it means putting the harassment and teasing behind us for good . . .

“Okay,” I say in resignation, slumping forward. “We pretend to date, and during winter break, we get into a fight and end it.”

“Fine.”

We regard each other with wary eyes.

“We’ll have to . . . act it out,” he says grimly. “Do things.”

I fold my arms, the thought already churning my stomach. “We don’t have to *do* anything.”

“Relax, you dip.” He gives me a vicious eye roll. “You won’t have to ride me in public—”

*“Who is riding whom?”*

“My point,” he cuts in, “is that we have to act lovey-dovey, like a real couple. So when we go out there, you should sit on my lap or something.”

My cheeks tingle with warmth. Did that suggestion actually just come out of Dylan Ramírez’s mouth? “Why can’t *you* sit in *my* lap?” I demand. “Is it because I’m skinny? My thighs are quite sturdy, thank you, and they can totally handle your weight—”

“Dios mío.” Dylan clasps his hands and looks skyward. “Uno de estos días lo voy a matar . . .”

Before I can offer an amazing comeback to whatever Spanish insult he hurled at me, the door swings open. When the intruder sees us, he gulps and scurries to a stall.

Dylan and I leave to let him take care of business in peace. Which means it’s time to commence our plan, I guess.

Fake it until we crush it. For good.

# DYLAN

I didn't think anyone other than Andre and Hanna knew that Jonah spent the night at my house. And yet, I've found myself at the ass-end of ridiculous questions from people that make my blood temperature spike.

*Is Jonah as loud in bed as he is everywhere else?*

*We knew you guys were going to hit it eventually.*

*I heard you tried the "get it out of our systems" method.*

I'm tired of it. I'm tired of *him*. But if we stand any chance of getting people to let this go, we need to work together. So, as Jonah and I reenter the cafeteria, I draw a deep breath. It's only three months. Hopefully the ruse will be worth the mental strain of putting up with him.

"Take my arm," I mumble. Some people are eyeing us, watching us walk together. Reluctantly, Jonah wraps his lean arms around mine, both of which are cold enough to start leeching my body heat. "Come with me to the lunch line. I don't want you going over there and ruining everything with your face."

He huffs, but he must know I'm right, because he doesn't complain. Jonah's face says everything for him. I glance to our lunch table, just in time to see Maya jam her elbow into Rohan's side and point to us. He follows her finger, and his eyes double in size.

No going back now.

When we reach the front of the line, I order my usual protein-heavy sub and apple, then turn my eyes to Jonah. "Not buying anything?" I ask. Now that I'm thinking about it, I can't remember the last time he came to the table with a lunch tray, or even a paper bag from home. I try

to avoid thinking about Jonah Collins throughout the day, though, so it's never been something I actively noticed.

He squeezes my arm tighter, like he's trying to crush it. Tragically for him, he's got the strength of a strawberry. "I eat at my job," he says irritably. "It's seventy percent off and more filling than whatever expensive crap they sell here."

"Ah . . . right." He sounds defensive and that's not something I want to deal with, so I guide him to our table without comment. Jonah's clinging to me like I'm a lifeline, now, and his face is strained with worry, which makes *me* worry. Will he be able to keep up a consistent act in front of our friends? "Deep breaths," I whisper. "You'll do fine."

Jonah looks up at me, trepidation flickering in his eyes. I want to remind him that we're about to be in his favorite place—the center of attention. So, why is he nervous? Because he needs to lie, maybe?

Jonah examines my level expression, and the tightness relaxes in his jaw. He nods.

I try not to acknowledge that he just used me to center himself.

Finally, we reach the table. Hanna's legs are in Andre's lap, but when he sees Jonah, he lunges to his feet, nearly sending her flying. "Jo-Jo!" he says, grinning widely. "I *knew* you couldn't resist a fine-looking man like Ramírez."

Maya wags her finger at our linked arms. "Nothing happened, my ass," she snaps. "What's that about?"

There's a pause. Rohan's eyes are still bugged. Casey's peeking over their phone at us. Hanna's looking suspiciously between us under her long eyelashes, fumbling with a worn softball hat she was probably asked to remove earlier (like every week), studying us. She's the one I'm

most uneasy about. She's always been grounded and observant—a stark contrast to Andre, whose energetic personality nearly rivals Jonah's. I'm more familiar with her Bullshit Detector than anyone.

This won't be easy.

“Um,” Jonah says, his voice cracking, and he pushes me into one of the metal-legged chairs. “Don't mind if I do.”

He shrugs his backpack off and collapses into my lap.

More silence.

Okay, this probably doesn't look *great*. Because yes, Jonah's smaller than me, but he's not small. He's a five-foot-eight high school senior, sitting pin straight in a six-foot-two guy's lap. There's no goddamn way this looks natural, sweet, or anything I was shooting for. I guess we're going to need to find time to plan how to make our relationship look legitimate.

“No offense,” Rohan says, “but what the hell?”

I curl my arm around Jonah's waist to try and make this look less awkward, and feel the shudder of revulsion that rushes up his body. “Since you figured something happened between us during homecoming, we decided not to hide it,” I say.

They're still staring. Andre looks like he's vibrating in his seat.

“You see—”

I pinch Jonah's side, squeaking away his sentence. If he keeps his mouth shut, we can get away with this. Calm and steady, I begin to spew bullshit. I tell them Jonah stumbled up to my room, and after a long, deep conversation about our feelings and some other garbage, we decided to try dating. That we were planning on hiding it, until we got to school and realized everybody already knew anyway. They listen, enraptured, clinging to my every word.

Except for Hanna.

Knots twist in my stomach. She's watching Jonah closely, still spinning that hat in her palms. Clearly aware of this, Jonah is looking at everything but her. Only then do I realize how close he is—how many fine details I can see on his face. The rounded tip of his nose. The tired red veins stretching away from his irises. The fine texture of his hair.

"Anyway," I say when I suddenly realize I've stopped talking. "We told each other how we felt and went to bed. That's all."

"Really?" Hanna's voice is steeped in skepticism. "After all the whining and complaining Saturday night, you just . . . came to your senses?"

Shit. We haven't even made it past the first "fake" scene and she's already suspicious? On a whim, I snatch Jonah's hand and begin to massage the length of his thumb. It feels weirdly soft and tender, but I know we'll have to get used to far more, so I don't let it bother me. Hanna looks for smaller clues, so this is a good start. "I didn't expect it either, honestly," I tell her. "But when we were alone, things felt different. Right . . . cariño?"

That word tastes all kinds of wrong on my tongue.

"Right," Jonah wheezes, draping his head in the crook of my neck.

"So basically," Maya says, a slow smile creeping into her cheeks, "we were right."

Which leads to an eruption of laughter, cheers, we-told-you-so's, we-knew-its, and the like. I muster my most convincing smile and squeeze Jonah's palm—I can tell he hates this as much as I do.

Three months. Then, this will be over.

"Let's do a double date!" Andre says, dragging his chair toward us. "My parents are taking Bryce up north for a lacrosse tournament this

weekend, so Hanna and I are hanging out at my place on Saturday. We're getting food delivered and drinking my parents out of their booze. You should come!"

"Well. Uh." Jonah fumbles with his hands. "I probably work—"

"Nope! I have your schedule login information, remember?" Andre grins, wagging his phone in Jonah's face. "I take a picture of it every week so I know when to drop in."

Jonah swallows audibly, then turns to me. "What do you think . . . Shnookums?"

Yeah. We're fucked.

"Can't wait," I say weakly.

Just like that, our fates are sealed.



# JONAH

Just when I think I've escaped this school day from hell, Dylan catches me on my way out the doors. "Collins," he calls. "Let's talk."

Dylan yanks so hard on my backpack handle that my feet nearly depart the concrete. "Ugh," I growl as he pulls me to the side, so hordes of students can go around us. "Do you drag everyone around like this?"

"Sorry. Sometimes I forget how light you are." He sounds less sorry than he's ever been.

I rub my arms to battle the cool October breeze. The lingering heat of summer is dwindling every day. "What do you want?"

"We should be on the same page about everything if we're going to . . ." Speaking low, Dylan glances at everyone rushing around us to the parking lot. ". . . convince them. Like, how to keep up the act, rules and boundaries. Maybe we can talk at your house—"

"No!" I snap, fleeting panic darting through my body. He draws back, startled. My tone probably sounded more desperate than angry, so I scowl. "Hell no, you can't see where I live."

His jaw does that irritated twitchy thing. Before he can say anything else, I realize my phone is vibrating in my pocket. I pry it out, looking at the caller ID.

*Bastard Man.*

He sure as hell isn't calling me to ask about my day, so I should probably answer. "Hang on," I say, turning my back to Dylan and ignoring his whiny protest. I lift the phone to my ear. "What?"

"School called." He sounds far away. Not literally. I can hear him fine, but his words are monotonous and more breath than sound, like he

can't be bothered to create noise. "Mikayla's in trouble. They're expecting you."

Just like that, he ends the call. Charming.

Thoughts of Mik instantly begin to overwhelm whatever chaos was previously going on in my head, so I start beelining to the main street. If I walk quickly enough, I can get there in twenty—

"Are you seriously walking away?" Dylan's irritable growl reminds me that he's still here. When I glare at him over my shoulder, I realize he's stomping after me like a gigantic toddler. "Where are you going?"

"The K-8 school." I try quickening my pace to lose him, but his annoyingly long track legs don't let me get far.

"We still need to figure a plan out. I'll drive you, and we can talk on the way there."

He's offering me a ride? *Again?* I swivel to examine his expression. There's no hint of pity or sympathy. Nothing to indicate his offer is anything more than a chance to talk.

So I say, "Fine."

I follow him across the asphalt, through the maze of vehicles, hardly noticing as he takes my hand—probably to make us look more convincing in front of the dozens of students clambering into their cars. What's with this guy always being so warm, anyway? And not even in the sweaty, clammy way.

I drop into his passenger seat, gnawing on my nails. I hope Mik's principal will take pity on her for . . . whatever she did. Maybe she talked back to a teacher. Threw a book at someone. Cussed at a lunch lady. Regardless, I hope she doesn't earn another suspension, or I'll have to skip school to watch her. Mrs. Greene comes through as a temporary babysitter, but she's a busy old woman, too.

Dylan is talking. Something about listing out how comfortable we are doing couple things in public, or whatever. I unlock my phone, hoping Mik texted, but she hasn't. Dad got her a phone, but only so I could keep in touch with her so he didn't have to.

"*Well?*" Dylan snaps, hoisting me out of my daze.

"Well what?" I demand.

"I said I'd drive you so we could talk." Dylan frowns. "Normally, you're a pro at running your mouth. Are you ignoring me?"

I decide to do exactly that and lean against my window. They wouldn't *expel* Mik. Right? She's a pest, sure, but she's a good kid. They know that, don't they?

"Seriously, what's wrong?" Dylan demands. I can't tell if he's annoyed or concerned, but the question only agitates me further.

"Nothing." I have it under control. I always do.

"Can I . . . do anything?" he asks, sounding like he's choking on glass.

I should say, "No, but thanks," or "It's fine," or literally anything other than what comes out of my mouth. "You could drive faster, you damn snail."

Ice seeps into the air around him.

I want to apologize, because that was shitty of me, but I can't build the words on my tongue. And I might accidentally say something even worse, so I give up, sealing my lips between my teeth.

Eventually, we come upon the one-story brick school building and its tinted glass windows. With a quick "thanks," I crawl out, sling my backpack over my shoulder, and slam the door. I tromp toward the building, my mood worsened. Dylan gives me ulcers, but . . . I probably

didn't need to be like that. Especially since he's the reason I got here so quickly.

After the guard buzzes me in, I beeline to the front office and take a deep breath. Straighten my shoulders. Pop a stern eyebrow.

Adult Mode: Activated.

When I stride into the main office, I'm greeted by the principal's glowering frown. She hates when I come in place of my father. Mik sits before her desk, kicking her tennis shoes, and there's a boy in the seat next to her, nursing a swollen cheekbone on a bag of ice. A scowling woman sits beside him. She looks like the kind of person who thinks a 15 percent tip is generous.

The principal scolds the boy for snapping Mik's training bra. She scolds Mik for punching the boy in the face. There's yelling, mostly on that mom's part. I yell back, because loudness is my specialty. Before I can tell her she's lucky I don't punch that little perv myself, the principal comes between us, looking ready to evolve into a human-size migraine.

"Detention for the next week during lunch, both of you," she says. "No recess privileges, either. Go home."

I exhale quietly. No suspensions. Which means I'm not going to fall further behind in school by staying home with her for multiple days. To be fair, I don't care much about schoolwork and studying. It's not like I'll have the means to go to college without racking up six trillion dollars in debt, so I'm not going to bother. Still, if I don't keep up appearances and have decent enough grades, my teachers are going to take notice.

Especially Ms. Davis. The worst-case scenario.

Mik and the boy offer half-baked apologies to each other. Moments

later, we're following the sidewalks home, bracing against the nippy wind rustling our coats.

"Um." This is her first word after minutes of silence.

"Yeah?" I ask darkly.

"I . . . didn't know Dad would send you." She runs her thumbs up and down her backpack straps. "Sorry, Jo-Jo."

"You're lucky they didn't suspend you, or worse," I snap. "Quit taking things into your own hands and go to a teacher next time."

"But *you're* always taking things into *your* own hands."

"I'm an adult," I say stiffly.

"You can't even vote."

*"Listen."*

She swings her arm around mine, hugging it. I expect she's trying to get on my good side, and yeah, it still works. "Guess Lily's gonna have to ride the bus alone," she mumbles.

I grimace. Lily is the kindest kid in existence, but she's quiet and timid, and prefers to spend her time with a book or sketchpad rather than people. Mik rides the bus home with her every day, and has this dangerous "big sister" energy that keeps some of the older, brattier kids out of their radius.

"I'll walk back later to pick her up," I decide, because I'm not sure I want to sit and wait around for another hour and a half before their school is dismissed.

"I'll come, too."

"Well, I'm not going to leave you alone to break the glass door again."

"Yeesh." She huffs, and a strand of chestnut brown hair flutters to the side of her face. "That was so long ago. Let it go, loser."

I shoot her a dagger-sharp glare. “Really? You have the balls to call me a loser right now?”

“I took yours when you were sleeping.”

I can’t help it. Adult Mode malfunctions, and I laugh. Mik grins, clearly pleased with herself.

I love this little shit.