

**THIS DAY
CHANGES
EVERYTHING**

A Novel



EDWARD UNDERHILL



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

ONE



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21—4:00 P.M.

ABBY

THERE'S A SCENE in my favorite book, *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane*, where the main character (Clara Jane) takes an elevator to the top of the Empire State Building in New York City, and just before the doors open, she realizes she's about to be free, because she is really, truly, madly in love with the guy who's waiting on the other side.

See, the whole setup for this book is that Clara Jane keeps living the same day over and over, but each time, she falls in love with a different guy. At the end of the day, she takes the elevator up to the top of the Empire State Building to meet whichever guy she's fallen for this time, but on the ride up, she realizes he's not really her true love. He's the wrong guy. And as soon as she realizes that, the day starts over. She never makes it to the top.

But at the end of the book, she takes the elevator up and realizes that this guy (his name is Chris—kind of a boring name, if you ask me) *is* her true love. The elevator doors finally open, she sees Chris, and they kiss at the top of the Empire State Building, breaking the time loop.

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It's not a great book. I mean, the dreamboat guy's name is *Chris*. And Clara Jane doesn't really have a hundred romances. She has eight. I guess the author thought *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane* sounded better than, like, *The Eight Romances of Clara Jane*.

Which it does. A lot of people have probably had eight romances. People who aren't me, anyway.

I read a theory on Tumblr suggesting that Clara Jane could have been living the same day over and over before the book even starts, so she actually *has* had a hundred romances, and we just don't see them all. But I've read this book twenty-four (and a half) times, and I think it's perfectly obvious that Clara Jane hasn't relived the same day over and over before the book starts, and the first romance in the book is, in fact, her first one.

Although, just to be safe, I sent the author an email asking for clarification, care of her publisher. She never replied.

Anyway, *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane* may not be a Great Book, but I love it. Even though it's cheesy.

Because the truth is . . . *I'm* cheesy. I believe in fate. And true love. And kissing your true love at the top of the Empire State Building.

I guess what I mean is—I believe in the Universe. That sometimes you end up in the right place at the right time, or with the right person, and (sometimes) magical things really can happen.

I hope I'm right about that. Because I'm leaving a lot to the Universe on this trip, and I could really use the help.

I might be kind of cheesy, but I don't think I'm completely out of my mind. I mean, the Universe has already made some magic happen. Right now, our entire marching band from Westvale, Missouri—all ninety-six of us, plus our band director, assistant band directors, chaperones, instruments, flags, and uniforms—is heading to New York City for the biggest marching event in the country: the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Hundreds of bands sent in audition tapes, hoping for one of a dozen slots, according to our band director, Mr. Sussman. And

Macy's picked *us* to be one of those bands. We were "unique, polished, fun, and quirky." That's what the rep from Macy's told us when he showed up in our band room eighteen months ago, armed with a confetti cannon and a giant banner that said *You're Going to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade!*

The rest of that day was a blur of screaming and laughing and crying and ducking into the band room between classes to make sure that big, bright banner was still there, strung up over the percussion lockers. It was pretty freaking magical, especially since all I'd ever wanted was to play clarinet in the marching band at my older brother's football games, instead of joining the debate team, like my mom suggested.

Not that I would have made the debate team in a million years anyway. I can memorize and perform a whole halftime show no problem, but the minute I have to talk in front of a lot of people, I want to sink into the floor.

Our band spent the next eighteen months putting together a performance and raising money to get ourselves all the way from our boring sorta-suburb of Kansas City to New York. We practiced in the mornings, in the evenings, on weekends. In the band room, on the football field, in the high school parking lot on a giant green tarp with the Macy's Parade logo on it, held down by traffic cones borrowed from the driver's ed teacher. (Our school had the tarp specially made, just to practice with. It's exactly the size of the big green rectangle on Thirty-Fourth Street, so we could plan every formation, every step, to perfectly fit.)

We marched across that tarp hundreds, maybe thousands, of times, all on top of the usual football games we had to play. On top of last spring's concert band schedule. On top of marching in the Kansas City Fourth of July Parade and playing in the park before the local Westvale fireworks show. On top of two state championships.

And whenever we weren't practicing, we were fundraising. Car washes. Bake sales. I literally celebrated my sixteenth birthday at a

pancake breakfast (not as fun as it sounds when *you're* the one serving the pancakes).

But now—finally finally *finally*—it's here. In two days, on Thanksgiving morning, we'll be marching down Sixth Avenue in our purple-and-white uniforms, with white feather plumes in our shakos, surrounded by giant balloons and decked-out floats filled with Broadway stars. We'll perform a medley of jazzed-up Christmas carols while our color guard waves red-and-green flags in front of all those cameras. Millions of people will watch us live on national TV.

And, I mean, that's magic. One day I'm scooping ice cream at Sundae Fun Day to add something to my college fund, and the next, I'm scooping ice cream at Sundae Fun Day while everybody who comes in tells me congratulations. Going from being a nobody to getting a bigger cheer during halftime than the football team gets during the whole game is . . . well, it's magic. There's *no way* that's not some Universe-intervention magic.

So, the way I see it, if the Universe can do *that*—if the Universe can get our band from Missouri to Macy's—then maybe it can help me tell Kat Wu I'm madly in love with her.

Kat Wu, who plays flute, wears her shoulder-length black hair in perfectly messy updos, and sews her own vintage-inspired dresses because she wants to go to fashion school.

Kat Wu, the only other person I know who has read *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane* and loves it as much as I do.

Kat Wu, who is currently sitting next to me, eighteen hours into this endless bus ride to New York, because she's my best friend.

Kat and I have been telling each other everything—and I mean *everything*—for years, ever since we met in middle school band. I was the first person she told about her dreams of going to fashion school. I know she still sleeps with the stuffed pig she's had since she was little. And Kat knows I cried at my first sleepaway camp because I was that baby who was homesick. She knows pineapple makes my

tongue itch. She even knows exactly how many *Clara Jane* fanfics I've read (a number I will never tell another soul, ever).

But there's one giant, looming thing I haven't told her: I've had a crush on her for months, ever since the traditional end-of-the-school-year marching band pool party at Westvale Park. The night ended with a bonfire, and everybody spread out towels and sat around playing cards or goofing off. Kat and I lay on our backs, talking through the events in a *Clara Jane* fanfic we'd both read. And somehow, part-way through discussing whether Clara Jane working in a coffee shop was more compelling than Clara Jane working at a magazine, and whether the original character created to be the love interest of Clara Jane's best friend, Olivia, was compelling at all, and whether fanfics should even *have* original characters . . .

Our fingers ended up twined together.

My stomach turned to butterflies. I kept waiting for her to let go, but she didn't. Not until Mrs. Lewis told us it was time to go home.

When I got home, I googled *how to tell if you're gay*.

I know it's ridiculous to google it, but I didn't know what else to do. I'm not sure how much it helped anyway. I mean, half the stuff I read made it sound like I'd have to actually kiss a girl to really know if I'm gay. And I have definitely *not* kissed a girl.

I've *thought* about kissing Kat. A lot. Mostly at the top of the Empire State Building.

Part of the problem might be that I haven't kissed a boy, either. I haven't kissed anyone. I did have a crush on this guy in band last year. He was a senior and nothing was ever going to happen between us, but he played trumpet and he had blond hair that made him look like a surfer, and I found Clara Jane's boring dreamboat Chris a lot more interesting once I started picturing him as Blake Orłowski.

So . . . maybe I'm not gay. Or maybe I only had a crush on Blake Orłowski because almost every girl in school did. I'm kind of suggestible.

The only girl who didn't seem to care about Blake Orlowski at all was Kat.

Which gives me a little bit of hope. Because whether or not I'm gay according to Google, I *definitely* want to kiss Kat Wu. And now that I'm on my way to New York City, with boring Westvale fading behind me, I'm hoping—really hoping—I might finally get my chance.

From now on, at least for this trip, I'm going to take risks. I'm going to throw myself out there and let the Universe catch me. I'm going to be fearless Abby Akerman. Done with Google. Done with my own personal time loop, where every day I wish I could tell Kat how I feel . . . and then don't. Done with being confused and indecisive and *stuck*.

Fearless Abby Akerman has a plan. A plan that Clara Jane is going to help me with.

Kat and I both have dog-eared, sun-faded paperback copies of *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane*. Kat found them at a discount bookstore in Kansas City and got them because the Empire State Building is on the cover, and Kat has wanted to visit New York City for years. She thought it would be fun if we both read this book at the same time. Then, obviously, we got obsessed with it, and the rest is history.

But two months ago, I found a mint-condition, hardcover copy *signed by the author* at the same discount bookstore. I have no idea how it got there, but it felt like a sign from the Universe. So I bought it, and I spent weeks finding and underlining my favorite lines. I spent weeks carefully selecting the pages with the most romantic scenes, and writing romantic notes to Kat in the margins.

How when I looked into her eyes, I felt just like Clara Jane did in this scene.

How I wanted to lean my forehead against hers, just like Clara Jane in that scene.

How I'd close my eyes at night, and picture Kat's smile, and feel

that smile *spreading through my entire being, to the ends of my fingers*, just like Clara Jane does on page 84.

It felt a little sacrilegious, at first, writing on the pages of a book. I've checked books out from the library where people wrote in them, and it always made me mad. Who does that?

But this wasn't a library book that a hundred other people would read. This was a gift for Kat. This was my version of a love letter, written in the pages of our favorite book.

And anyway, I did it all in pencil, just to be safe.

Now the trip is finally here, and I have the mint-condition, signed-by-the-author-and-carefully-annotated-by-me copy of *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane* in my backpack, and if the Universe can help me find the right moment . . . I will give it to Kat. I will tell Kat I love her.

And then, I hope, I will kiss a girl.

I scroll to the next page of the *THRoCJ* fanfic I'm currently reading on my phone and glance over at Kat, who's still sketching out new dress designs in a notebook, sitting cross-legged on the seat next to me with her earbuds in.

I wouldn't even need three guesses to know what she's listening to: *Pixelated Dreams*, the last album of Damaged Pixie Dream Boi, this weird, indie, alternative group and Kat's favorite band. They're originally from Kansas City, and Kat's even more obsessed with them than she is with *Clara Jane*. Their music sounds like video game bloopers mixed with death metal if you put it in a blender with a lot of angsty complaining, but Kat loves it. Which is kind of funny, given that her other favorite genre is musicals. She's been listening to this album nonstop ever since the band broke up over the summer. Supposedly two of the guys in the band were dating, and when they broke up, that broke up the band.

Which is more evidence that gives me some hope. Exhibit A: Kat held my hand at the pool party. Exhibit B: she didn't care about

Blake Orlowski at all. Exhibit C: her favorite band is *gay*. Maybe that's even why she likes them.

I haven't asked her this, of course. If I asked, she'd want to know why I was asking, and then I'd be stuck. I'm not very good at lying, and I couldn't just say, *Well, I'm trying to figure out if you're gay for no reason at all.*

Besides, in Westvale, Missouri, being gay isn't something you shout from the rooftops. Nobody talks about it—like somehow, if we pretend the whole concept doesn't exist . . . it won't. I've never even heard a teacher say the word *gay*. And I don't think it's because they're all raging homophobes or anything. It's just that at this point, talking about it means someone will get upset and complain, and then there might be legislation. Or . . . more legislation than there already is.

Maybe it would be a little different if we lived in Kansas City, or even across the border in Kansas. But in my suburb, on the Missouri side, being gay is something you erase from your search history and never even write in your journal. Or at least . . . I wouldn't, if I had a journal.

Which is why I think it's possible—even though Kat and I don't normally hide things from each other—that we both might be hiding this. That maybe there's a reason we never talked about the night we held hands. And if I haven't told Kat I might be gay, maybe she hasn't told me she is.

It's possible.

But in New York City, you can shout anything you want from the rooftops. You can be anybody. It's the kind of place where Magical Interventions of the Universe happen all the time. I've never been there before, obviously, but I have that feeling. After all, the author of *The Hundred Romances of Clara Jane* lives in New York City, and she set the book there. She must know what she's talking about.

Plus, Kat is obsessed with New York. And not just because our band gets to play in the Macy's Parade. New York City is the fashion

capital of the country; it's exactly where Kat wants to go to fashion school. She even wants me to go with her. Not to fashion school—just to New York, for college. I have no idea what I'd want to study. My two favorite things are marching band and reading, and I don't really know how to turn either of those things into a major. Unless I want to be a band director, and I definitely don't. For one thing, I'm too short. Nobody in the back of the band would be able to see me. I'd need stilts.

But that's not the point. The point is: New York City is objectively romantic.

Kat is obsessed with New York City.

We're both obsessed with a romantic book set in New York City.

And that's why this trip is *It*: the time to confess my feelings to Kat, if I'm ever going to.

Next to me, Kat brushes a stray wisp of black hair behind her ear and pulls a tube of ChapStick out of her pocket. "Where are we now?" she asks, squinting past me to the bus window.

I quickly stare out the window instead of at my best friend. "Um . . . I saw a sign a little while ago that said *Welcome to New Jersey*."

"New state!" Kat balances her sketchbook on her knees and holds up her phone. "Freeway picture time."

That makes me laugh. As soon as we were out of Missouri, Kat decided we should take selfies at least once in every new state, with the scenery going by out the window. Except the scenery has been freeways, bare trees, and flat brown fields, and all the pictures have looked the same. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, look!" Kat waves a hand at the window. "There are buildings now. Totally more exciting. Anyway, we have to complete the set."

"Of kind of pointless pictures?"

Kat gives me a very offended look. "Of beautiful American vistas to commemorate our journey."

I grin. “Fine.” I do my best to strike a pose, like I’m presenting the squat gray buildings flashing past, and Kat snaps a picture on her phone.

“Perfection.” She turns the phone around so I can see. I’m completely backlit in the photo. With my curvy shape, and the hood of my sweatshirt pulled over my mass of curly hair, I kind of look like a gnome-shaped black hole.

Which makes me laugh. “You should post it on your Tumblr.”

Kat snorts. “Maybe I can turn it into a meme.”

Kat has a Tumblr where she posts whatever sewing project she’s working on and “fashion inspo.” So far, the fashion inspo has been images Kat collects from around the internet, everything from shimmering evening gowns to European architecture. And a lot of pictures of New York. I know she can’t wait to add pictures of the city that she takes herself. She’ll finally be in the middle of all that fashion inspo, instead of lurking around the edges of it, everything filtered through a Google search or a Pinterest board.

Everything Kat posts on Tumblr gets hundreds of reblogs, which just goes to show that she has good taste. I can’t imagine sharing anything with that many people, but I made a Tumblr anyway, so I could follow Kat. And look up *Clara Jane* fan posts.

Lately, I’ve also been looking up queer stuff, scrolling hashtags by myself late at night, in the hopes of feeling a little less like an Only. The Only Maybe-Gay Girl In Westvale. The Only Person Looking For Herself On Tumblr.

The Only Person Reading That One Gay *THRoCJ* Fanfic . . . over and over and over again. (The one where Chris is Christina, and Clara Jane breaks the time loop when she realizes she’s in love with a woman.)

So I use my Tumblr to look up flags (there are so many flags). And what queer people wear. And whether if I’m gay I should cut my hair short.

All I’ve figured out so far is that apparently queer girls wear a lot

of plaid flannel shirts—just like me. I have no idea if this means I’m gay, or if it’s just a coincidence.

And I don’t want to think about it right now, so I turn around to lean over the back of my bus seat. “Hey, Jared, what’s your phone say?”

Jared Nguyen looks up from whatever game he’s playing. He’s been obsessively tracking our location this whole bus ride. “Hang on.” He switches to a map. “Looks like Union City, New Jersey. I think.”

“Where’s that?”

“Um.” Jared looks confused. “New Jersey.”

“Yeah, I got that. I mean, is that close to New York?”

Jared squints back at his phone. “Hang on, I’m too zoomed in—”

“Hey, look!” Morgan Ellis, across the aisle from us in her usual seat next to Amira Aboud, suddenly jabs her finger at her window. “Guys, that’s New York! That’s totally New York!”

“Where?” Kat pops up from her seat, sending her sketchbook to the floor.

“Hang on, hang on . . .” Jared scrolls madly on his phone.

But nobody’s waiting for him. Around us, the whole bus wakes up, people pointing, voices rising. Morgan is pulling out her phone to film the view. Amira is trying to see around Morgan. Even Lacey Thompson, who slept through three whole rest stops, is blinking and twisting around in her seat.

But I can’t see anything. The bus window next to Morgan is too far away and too tinted, and outside my window are the same houses and trees and low buildings we’ve been driving past for a while now.

“I got it, I got it!” Jared triumphantly waves his phone in the air. “That’s New York! That has to be New York!”

The bus turns, following the loop of the freeway around in a half circle, and for a minute, everything around us is a wall of trees. Then the trees fall away, and across the lanes of concrete and the traffic roaring past my window is an expanse of blue water, and past that, a

jagged skyline of endless skyscrapers, going right down to the water's edge.

New York City. Real, actual New York City. I've never seen it before, in real life, but there's no mistaking that that is *definitely* New York City.

The whole bus erupts, everyone shouting and cheering. Kat lets out a whoop and grabs me in a sideways hug. We're almost there. We're *finally* almost there.

Which suddenly feels like a huge relief. I've been doing okay so far, but now it's like the eighteen hours we've spent on this bus catch up with me all at once. My butt is numb. My back is sore. It really does not smell great in here.

The bus turns away from the view, following the loop of the road down a gentle slope.

"Uh-oh," says Jared.

Kat's arm leaves my shoulder as she turns to look at him. "What?"

But it's already obvious. We're heading down into a tunnel. And we're slowing to a stop.

"The map says this is the Lincoln Tunnel," Jared informs us. "And it's a straight line of red in the traffic data. My phone says it'll take . . . Hang on. I lost signal . . ."

"We're going under the water," Mrs. Gunnerson says helpfully, from her spot up near the driver. She's one of our chaperones, and the mother of Zach Gunnerson, who is the most annoying human alive and, luckily, not on our bus. He's on the bus behind us. "The Lincoln Tunnel goes under the water into New York City. Isn't that cool?"

Well, it would be cooler if the tunnel wasn't full of brake lights. Apparently everyone wants to go the same direction we're going.

"Maybe it's Thanksgiving traffic," Jared says.

Morgan groans. "It's *Tuesday*."

Kat sinks back down in her seat. "You want to listen?" She holds out one of her earbuds.

I take it and sit down next to her. All the fanfic has drained my

phone's battery anyway. Kat turns to a blank page in her sketchbook, draws the outline of a dress, and hands the pencil to me. It's a game we invented on the bus ride to the championships last year: we pass the pencil back and forth, each of us adding one design element, like a flower, or a ruffle, or a big bow, until we run out of room. The first few dresses we made looked pretty reasonable, but now it's almost like a contest to see who can be the last one to cram something on. The dresses from our last band trip were pretty ridiculous.

Approximately five lifetimes later (or six dresses—we've gotten pretty good at cramming), we finally escape the tunnel. The last of the late-afternoon sun brightens the bus, and I stop halfway through adding what's supposed to be a lace collar, because just like that, we're *here*.

Skyscrapers shoot up all around us, so high they block the sun, and I can't see the tops even with my face pressed against the window. The city streets around us are crowded with cars and trucks and yellow taxicabs, and the sidewalks are crowded with people, all bundled up in coats and scarves. I've seen homecoming crowds on the football bleachers in Westvale, and that's a lot of people. I also went to a Royals game in Kansas City once, and that was even more people.

But those were events. New York City has huge crowds of people just *walking around*. Where are they all going?

"Oh my god." Kat grabs my arm. "Abby, look."

Outside our window is a tall, rectangular sign, sticking out from the side of a building. Black, white, green . . . it's a sign for *Wicked*. Underneath the sign are much more unassuming letters, spelling out GERSHWIN.

"It's the Gershwin Theatre!" Kat turns to me with a huge grin. "We're gonna see a Broadway show."

I can't help but grin back. "I know."

"We're gonna see *Wicked*. You and me!"

A shiver runs up my back. According to our itinerary, we're going

to see the matinee show, tomorrow at two o'clock. If I'm being totally honest, I'm not sure I'm as into *Wicked* as Kat is. She can sing every song from memory. Musicals just aren't quite my thing. I like songs where you can't tell exactly what they're about. Where they aren't really telling a story, but the words are still beautiful. Then it's easier to imagine your own story to go with them.

But still. A real Broadway show. With Kat.

I let myself wonder, for a minute, if maybe I'll be holding Kat's hand tomorrow, in that Broadway theater. If maybe, by then, I'll have given her *The Book*.

The bus turns down another street, which isn't quite so crowded. We crawl past more taxis and a food cart that says HALAL and finally creak to a stop.

Mrs. Gunnerson stands up. "All right, everyone, please make sure you grab all your belongings and let's be polite getting off the bus."

I shoot to my feet so fast that Kat's earbud yanks right out of my ear. "Oh, crap. Sorry . . ." But Kat isn't looking at me. She's fumbling with the cord, shoving it away in her backpack with her sketchbook.

Nobody pays attention to Mrs. Gunnerson. We're all too desperate to get off the bus. Jackets hit me in the face. Backpacks bump off each other. Everyone's shouting and pointing and cheering.

I turn sideways and suck in my breath as I inch down the aisle behind Kat. My legs are so stiff that I almost fall over when we finally step onto the sidewalk, just behind Morgan and Amira. The air is crisp and cold and not exactly *fresh*—honestly, it smells kind of like gasoline—but it's still a whole lot better than bus air.

It's a good thing this street doesn't seem to be nearly as busy as the last one, because two big charter buses and a truck full of instruments take up a lot of space, and now that we're all getting off the buses, we're taking up an awful lot of the sidewalk, too.

In front of us is a big black awning that says GRAND FELIX HOTEL in white letters with lots of flourishes. Under the awning are gold-trimmed sliding doors, which Mr. Sussman is currently

heading toward, gently nudging people out of his way. "I gotta get us checked in, guys. Listen to your chaperones. Excuse me, Nick."

The bus drivers open the cargo doors in the sides of the buses and the whole sidewalk devolves into chaos as everyone dives for their suitcases. Mrs. Gunnerson is yelling and waving her arms, but everyone ignores her. So much for listening to our chaperones. We're too excited to get our stuff and get inside the hotel.

"Oh, I see our bags!" Kat dives into the mess and emerges hauling two matching purple duffel bags behind her. We bought them together, for that first sleepaway camp, the summer before high school. (Yes, I cried because I was homesick at age fourteen. Whatever.) Kat's mom made us rainbow pom-poms out of yarn to tie to the bag handles, because she was worried some other kid would walk off with our luggage. Kat's pom-pom fell off ages ago, but mine is still knotted to the handle of my bag. It's sort of ragged now, but I haven't been able to part with it.

And anyway, now it might . . . Mean Something. Maybe after this trip, I'll have to keep it because it'll say something about who I am. Or maybe I'll want to throw it away for the same reason.

"Come on, Abs!" Kat is already lugging her bag toward the gold-trimmed sliding doors.

I pick up my bag and follow her. We made it to New York. I take a deep breath.

All right, Universe. Here we go.

TWO



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21—6:12 P.M.

LEO

HOW DOES THE Universe hate me? Let me count the ways.

One: I just spent twelve hours on a bus, utterly convinced I was seconds away from barfing into my backpack.

Two: I am now in New York City, the bustling hubbub of hell.

Three: I'm going to be on live television in two days.

And now, the bonus round: another marching band just pushed through the hotel lobby doors like a many-headed amoeba.

It's definitely a marching band, because they've all got matching varsity jackets just like we do, stuffed suitcases and backpacks just like we do, and wide-eyed wonderment plastered all over their faces just like . . . well, like most of us do.

"He's making the Face," says Gina.

Evan looks down at me. "Yeah. You're making the Face."

I roll my eyes. I've apparently been making the Face for the whole trip so far, but this late in the day, after three hours of sleep and several close vomit calls, I'm done caring. I know I'm supposed to be Happy To Be Here, Grateful For The Opportunity, but twelve hours

stuck in a cramped bus seat trying not to hurl isn't going to put anybody in a good mood.

Gina jerks a thumb toward the other marching band. "He has seen more people partaking of the Enjoyment."

"He too could partake of the Enjoyment," Evan says somberly, "but alas, he would prefer to make the Face."

They're trying to make me laugh, but I am too far into my grumpy rut. "Yeah, I get it, guys. I'm the worst."

I mean it to be sour—but it comes out *really* sour.

And it wipes the grin off Evan's face. "Come on, man, we're trying to help."

Now I feel guilty. Evan must be worried if he pulled out *man*. He doesn't love Dude Language and neither do I, but he also knows that calling me *man* always makes me feel, well, more like a man. Or a boy. A guy. Whatever.

And that means he thinks I'm not feeling like a guy right now, because I'm stressing about my extended family and being on TV.

I'm annoyed that he's right.

He usually is. Evan Cartwright knows a lot of things about me, even though we've only been friends since we met as terrified freshmen in high school band camp two years ago. I ended up next to him courtesy of the alphabet, because my last name is Brewer. I was a lanky weirdo who hated my first name (but didn't know why) and hadn't come up with a better one yet, so I glared at everybody, hoping nobody would ask what my name was.

The only person who *didn't* ask my name was Evan. Even then he was a good head taller than everybody else, which should have made him intimidating, except that he's . . . well . . . Evan. He sat down next to me on the football field during roll call on the first morning, noted that my giant T-shirt said I MARCH TO MY OWN DRUMS, and proceeded to cheerfully call me "Drums" for the rest of the summer.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products
of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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