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**Working Towards 'Gaytopia'**  
**in LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF CREATIVE WRITING**

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## Abstract

This Master of Creative Writing thesis consists of a critical essay titled "Working Towards 'Gaytopia' in LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature", and the opening section of a contemporary young adult novel titled *Skybourne*. Both sections explore the ways in which LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed in young adult (YA) literature and provide insight into the complexities of LGBTQ+ identity.

The critical component investigates how the treatment of LGBTQ+ characters in YA literature has evolved over time through an analysis of core texts from each stage of the literature's development. Since the first depiction of YA homosexuality in 1969, pioneering LGBTQ+ YA texts have been plagued by isolated and lonely queer characters who undergo painful romantic experiences and traumatic 'coming out' story arcs with explicit links to death. This thesis demonstrates that over the subsequent decades, LGBTQ+ YA literature has evolved to portray LGBTQ+ characters who are able to form supportive friendships, feel a sense of LGBTQ+ community, have an affirming queer romantic experience, and exhibit more diverse LGBTQ+ and ethnic identities. I argue that this significant development in LGBTQ+ YA literature indicates a continued deepening of understanding of the complexity of queer identities and hopefully points towards a brighter, rainbow-coloured future for both LGBTQ+ YA characters and LGBTQ+ young people in society.

*Skybourne*, the creative component of the thesis, is the first section of what will be a complete young adult novel. *Skybourne* is closely related to the critical component in that it contemplates many of the same ideas surrounding the portrayal of LGBTQ+ YA characters. It centres around 17-year-old Faatina and her uncertainties regarding her own sexuality, and

her resulting discovery and acceptance of her asexual identity. Running parallel to this is the out-and-proud Shiloh, who identifies as genderfluid, and who complicates Faatina's LGBTQ+ journey when they form a strong connection with each other. Weaved throughout the issues of queer sexual and gender identities are many other aspects to the characters' storylines and personalities. These include: struggles with anxiety and stress; the tensions that arise between people of different ethnicities, different classes, and different life experiences; and the courage required to follow your passion in spite of adversity and self-doubt. *Skybourne* aims to join the ongoing conversation within the LGBTQ+ YA genre by adding to the growing diversity in LGBTQ+ YA literature and hope for a real-life 'gaytopia'.

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## Introduction

This thesis consists of a critical essay which examines how the treatment of LGBTQ+ characters in young adult (YA) literature has matured over time, and a creative component which is the opening section of a contemporary young adult novel with the working title of *Skybourne*. Both sections explore the ways in which LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed in YA literature and provide insight into the complexities of LGBTQ+ identity.

My informal 'investigation' into LGBTQ+ YA literature first began when I became a young adult myself. During my teenage years, I spent hours trawling through library shelves, scanning blurbs to try and find the smallest hint of a LGBTQ+ character. I grew up in a regional New Zealand town where library facilities were proportionately modest, and at the time contained only a handful of LGBTQ+ YA texts. Luckily for me, one of these texts was David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). This novel unlocked a rainbow-coloured world of possibility, and showed me that heterosexual/cisgender was not the only option. The gaytopia within these pages filled me with a deep feeling of connection, in a way that I could not yet express. I did not yet understand why I was drawn to LGBTQ+ characters; I just knew that I engaged with them in a different and more satisfying way than non-LGBTQ+ characters.

In 2016, I discovered Alice Oseman's *Radio Silence*, and was struck by how the genre had developed. Compared to the early 2000s, there now appeared to be numerous YA texts with LGBTQ+ characters, and a much more diverse range of representation, in sexual and gender identities and ethnicities. It was this diversity in *Radio Silence* that captured my

heart – in particular, the bisexual character of Frances, and the asexual character of Aled. I had finally found characters that I could connect with on an intrinsic level, that reflected and validated parts of my identity that I was still uncertain about. My connection with *Radio Silence* gave me a first-hand experience of the importance of LGBTQ+ YA literature, in the way that the genre can provide comfort and assurance for young people struggling with their queer identities, as well as bring more awareness of all kinds of LGBTQ+ experiences to all young people, queer or not.

The critical component of the thesis investigates how the treatment of LGBTQ+ characters in YA literature has evolved over time through an analysis of core representative texts from each stage of the literature's development. My primary method of research was to read a large variety of LGBTQ+ YA texts, to encompass as many kinds of sexual and gender identities as I could find, a diverse range of ethnicities and storylines, and both contemporary texts and older texts spanning as far back as 1969. While my essay does have a larger focus on contemporary texts, I realised as I read older LGBTQ+ YA texts that it was important to examine how these earlier YA texts portrayed LGBTQ+ characters, to better discover the ways in which these portrayals have evolved over time and bring deeper understanding to the current ideological state of the genre. During my research of literary criticism on the LGBTQ+ YA genre, it became evident that Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins would be my most valuable resource. Their publications, which seek to encompass LGBTQ+ content from 1969 to the present day, guided my reading of LGBTQ+ YA texts and introduced me to many novels that I might not have found otherwise. After working through my extensive reading list, I initially wanted to include a vast assortment of LGBTQ+ YA texts to illustrate my arguments, but I found that choosing a couple of representative texts for each stage served my investigation better; I was able to go more in-



depth with my close readings of my core texts, and also provide a more detailed analysis of individual contemporary texts than what currently exists in literary criticism. The critical component is admittedly of a non-standard length, at 22,000 words. This is because this essay fills a gap in literary criticism—particularly in New Zealand—in that the LGBTQ+ YA genre has been under-explored in critical literature, and there is little in-depth critical analysis on the three contemporary LGBTQ+ YA novels I chose as my core texts. The critical essay will therefore be a substantial contribution to the LGBTQ+ YA genre and bring new knowledge and analysis to its literary criticism.

The creative component of this thesis had a less straight-forward journey of conception. I knew that I wanted to write a young adult contemporary novel with LGBTQ+ characters, exploring themes such as the fear of following one's dreams, and the stress and anxiety associated with high school. My first round of drafts are almost unrecognisable from my current novel-in-progress; I had a different narrator—which turned into two narrators—with the story set at university, and a severe lack of plot tension and character development. As I continued to generate more material, my supervisor encouraged me to deliberately release my control over my writing process, to break down any walls I had built up as a writer around what I was 'supposed' to be writing, and draw on my own fears and vulnerabilities and emotions – write by pulling words directly out of my heart. Letting myself do this was the catalyst for my current novel. I started afresh with a blank document, beginning by delving into the mind of a character who had emerged in the first round of drafts, and discovering that she was far more complex and interesting than I had first realised. This character was Faatina, and she became the narrator for my new draft.

In order to increase the narrative energy and tensions within my novel, I introduced an overarching plotline of a group of high school students staging Shakespeare's 'Twelfth

Night' as a school production. My original thematic preoccupations are still present, in that the novel contains several LGBTQ+ characters and an exploration of their queer identities, the challenges of pursuing your passion in spite of adversity and self-doubt, and the unacknowledged stress that high school inflicts on students. However, new tensions also presented themselves in the form of class differences between characters, issues related to gender expression, and, of course, sexuality. I was able to develop and complicate these tensions in a way that was missing in my first round of drafts. I also concentrated on developing my characters into more three-dimensional and complex versions of themselves. As is not uncommon, each of my main characters has been created out of some aspect of myself. This connection with my characters is the reason I found it difficult to let my characters suffer – to throw them into bad situations, to undergo conflicts with one another. However, I have now learnt that this is a necessary part of an engaging narrative. This new story underwent three holistic drafts, with each draft becoming tighter, each scene an important step forwards in plot complication and character development. I gained more awareness of my strengths and weaknesses as a writer, and found that my narrative language was flowing more naturally than it ever has before.

*Skybourne* is around 24,000 words, and is the first eight chapters in roughly one third of what will likely be a standard 70,000-80,000 word young adult novel. As such, the plot tensions and character story arcs have not been fully realised or resolved. In the remaining two-thirds of the novel, the various plot complications will continue to spiral together, and Faatina's character development, in particular, will be explicitly linked to the increasing narrative tension. In playing Viola she will come to understand that her real passion lies in theatre, not science and medicine like she has always assumed, causing further tension with her parents who—she believes—will disapprove of her studying

theatre at university. Faatina's connection with Shiloh will grow deeper, and this tension will force her to confront her uncertainties regarding her sexuality, and result in her discovery and acceptance of her asexual identity. Her friendships with Mateer and Jess will produce more tension in class difference, as well as highlight the stress and anxiety that accompanies high school – in particular, balancing schoolwork with the school production and social interactions, and in Mateer's case, work. The staging of 'Twelfth Night' will continue to serve as an apt backdrop for these unfolding storylines. The play will specifically challenge Faatina in terms of her romantic feelings—or lack thereof—for Shiloh, through trying to channel the emotion of Viola's infamous 'willow cabin' speech, and the eventual marriage between Viola and Orsino. The play will also allow further exploration of gender expression, through Faatina's portrayal of Viola and Cesario, and Shiloh's portrayal of Orsino. I hope that by the end of the novel, my characters—especially Faatina—will be more aware and have a deeper understanding of their LGBTQ+ identities, recognise the damage that stress and anxiety can do to a person, and be passionate about following their dreams for the future even in the face of obstacles such as class-adversity and low self-belief.

Throughout my entire thesis journey, I have often been surprised by the ways in which the research for the critical component informed the creative component, and vice versa. Reading past and present portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters no doubt influenced my own portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in *Skybourne*. Conversely, exploring how Faatina feels about her LGBTQ+ identity has deepened my understanding of past and present trends within LGBTQ+ YA literature. My aim with both the critical and creative components of this thesis is to contribute to the continual evolution of the LGBTQ+ YA genre by filling a gap in the literary criticism and hopefully encouraging future in-depth

analysis of other contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts. Ultimately, I'd like to offer the next generation of readers another set of contemporary LGBTQ+ YA characters to connect with and be inspired by. As is all literature, LGBTQ+ YA literature is a powerful tool with which to reassure queer young people who may be uncertain about their identity, and to bring awareness of LGBTQ+ experiences to all young people, queer or not. We can realistically hope that future development of this genre will increase the number of young people benefitting from a more affirming and diverse portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters, as well as build a more inclusive, rainbow-coloured society for all.

## Working Towards 'Gaytopia'<sup>1</sup> in LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature

And we step off the curb, all of us together, as if to say: Here we come. Through hard days and good ones, through despair and through exhilaration, in love and out of love, for just now or for forever. Here we come. It's our parade.

(LaCour & Levithan, "You Know Me Well" 248)

LGBTQ+<sup>2</sup> young adult (YA) literature spans a history that can be categorised into three distinct phases: the pioneering texts, beginning in 1969 through to 1980; the bridging texts of the 1980s and 1990s, and into the 2000s; and the contemporary texts from 2010 onwards. Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins have arguably been the most important contributors to the literary criticism of LGBTQ+ YA literature, with their 2006 publication *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, and again with their updated 2018 publication *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*. Cart and Jenkins's goal "to chart the evolution of the field and to identify [LGBTQ+ YA] titles that are remarkable either for their excellence or for their failures" ("Representing the Rainbow" xiii) has guided crucial literary criticism on the genre. However, as Cart and Jenkins themselves admit, their collection and analysis of LGBTQ+ YA books "can never be absolutely comprehensive" ("Representing the Rainbow" ix), and understandably favours examination through breadth and scope over the depth of analysis of individual texts. In this essay, I aim to examine how the treatment of LGBTQ+ characters in YA literature has matured over time by analysing

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<sup>1</sup> This neologism is taken from Johanna Lewis' review of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (p.216), see "Works Cited" for full citation.

<sup>2</sup> Any acronym for queer sexual and gender identities will remain incomplete, as the language used to describe how people identify is "ever expanding" (Chown & Brown). I use "LGBTQ+" to reference the more familiar identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, to include the more encompassing term 'queer', and to recognise through the '+' the many additional identities that are just as valid as the more historically prominent identities.

core representative texts from each stage of the genre's development, thus being guided by Cart and Jenkins's substantial research whilst also filling some of the gaps in the genre's literary criticism. I have chosen to allocate a larger portion of my analysis to considering contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts as a point of contrast with the earlier two generations of texts. This is because there has of course been less literary criticism of these recent works, but—more importantly—because focusing on the way that these contemporary texts portray LGBTQ+ YA characters in comparison to previous depictions provides insights into the complexities of both a changing genre and society. Investigating the maturing treatment of LGBTQ+ characters in YA literature is an important area of research, primarily because LGBTQ+ YA texts are themselves important to LGBTQ+ young people. As Cart and Jenkins point out, "the fight for the human rights of LGBTQ+ teens is ongoing" ("Representing the Rainbow" xiii), and so portraying LGBTQ+ YA characters in a compassionate and understanding way can bring an immeasurable amount of comfort and assurance to young people who are perhaps struggling with their own queer identity – as well as bring more awareness of LGBTQ+ experiences to all young people, whether they are queer or not. LGBTQ+ YA literature, as does all literature, literally has the power to save lives.

In their book *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, Cart and Jenkins assert that most LGBTQ+ YA literature in this time period presents LGBTQ+ characters as being "isolated as they navigate their sexuality", with few texts showing these characters "as members of a larger community" (Lewis & Durand 39). This first wave of pioneering texts often focuses primarily on a character's 'coming out' story arc, and the romantic experience which allows them to uncover this part of their identity. While there are pockets of positivity amongst

these older texts, the majority of these LGBTQ+ characters undergo distressing experiences, with a large number of texts explicitly linking these experiences with death. The bridging texts simultaneously confirm the isolation and despair of the pioneering texts, while slowly but surely working to convey an improved and more hopeful LGBTQ+ experience. In contrast, recent contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature as a whole depicts a much more supportive experience, by highlighting the presence and importance of the wider LGBTQ+ community, and building integral and strong friendships between LGBTQ+ characters. I will argue that while contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature continues to explore characters discovering their sexuality, and engaging in romantic relationships to this end, these recent texts often place just as much, if not more, emphasis on friendship and community within LGBTQ+ circles, and portray this as a crucial element of their identity. I will also demonstrate the different kinds of narratives now being explored, with characters of underrepresented ethnicities and more nuanced sexual and gender identities. Throughout each stage of the genre's development, I will draw parallels between the portrayal of LGBTQ+ YA characters and the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, and what impacts the genre might be having on society and vice versa.

John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* was published in 1969, and marked "the birth of LGBTQ[+] YA literature" (Garden, "LGBTQ Young Adult Literature" 79), being the first YA novel to deal with queer content – in this case, male homosexuality. This inaugural text inevitably influenced the way in which LGBTQ+ characters were treated in the texts that followed in the 1970s and 1980s. Rosa Guy's *Ruby*, published in 1976, is similarly significant as "the first YA novel to feature a lesbian relationship" (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 25). Both of these texts serve as representative core texts, as they each demonstrate many of the qualities found in the majority of

pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature. I will consider the isolation and lack of connection that these LGBTQ+ characters face, the constrictive focus on the 'coming out' story arc and related romantic interaction, and the predominately negative LGBTQ+ experience, including clear links with death. My analysis of the pioneering texts' treatment of LGBTQ+ YA characters will also draw attention to the real-life struggles facing LGBTQ+ young people at this time, and the way in which society's disapproving regard for those with an LGBTQ+ identity may have affected those young people identifying as queer.

Isolation features heavily in the first wave of pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature. Jan Goodman noted in 1983 that these LGBTQ+ characters "lead lonely lives", and are often without a support system (14); they come from a 'broken' family and do not seem to have any proper friends. In *I'll Get There*, Davy's isolation is established immediately in the first chapter with the death of his grandmother, who he had been living with, and who was "the most important person in [his] life" (121). He is distant from his divorced parents and other relatives, and has "no one [he] can talk to" about his problems (51). The only connection Davy does have is with his dog, Fred. Davy talks to Fred—arguably more than to any person in the novel—and he wishes that Fred "could talk or let [Davy] know in some way he understands all the stuff [Davy] says[s] to him" (7). Davy's desire for someone to understand him is also evident in his fascination with a stuffed coyote at the Museum of Natural History; he thinks, "there is something in [the coyote's] eyes which makes me believe that he understands that I am there and talking to him as a friend" (68). These inadequate connections exemplify how alone Davy actually is, and indicate an "emotional disengagement with other human beings" (Hartinger, "We Got There" 206). This example of disconnection may have been devastating to LGBTQ+ young people at the time, no doubt confirming the pervasive feelings of not belonging, that they were somehow



'different' to other people. For young people considering their own LGBTQ+ identity, seeing Davy experience these feelings would likely have been painfully conflicting; a reader's initial relief that this fictional character felt the same way could have easily yielded to despair, and the belief that this isolation and disconnection was somehow inescapable.

The first word of Rosa Guy's *Ruby* literally is "Loneliness" (1). The feeling has "encompassed her heart" (1) and clings to Ruby's character throughout the entire novel. She describes herself as "a desolate island in a stormy sea" (41), alone and distant, making it difficult for anyone to connect with her. Her mother is dead, her sister removes herself from the world by constantly reading, and while Ruby has one friend, Consuela, she admits that she forgets about her "the moment she [is] out of sight" (14). This is not to say that Ruby does not try to form connections with people. For example, she cares for her father almost obsessively when he is ill, but she is carelessly overlooked when he asks, "But where [is] the other one?", referring to Ruby's sister (29). Likewise, Ruby "had cared and cared" for her mother when she was dying, but "the last night... it was Phyllisia she called" (29). This suggests that Ruby is fated to her isolation, despite her best efforts to overcome her loneliness.

The isolation faced by LGBTQ+ characters in these pioneering texts is compounded by the absence of a LGBTQ+ community. During this era, the characters act as if nobody else in the world is LGBTQ+. These characters have no role models, and no one to help them figure out what they are feeling. The closest Davy comes is his father asking if Davy has a "crush" on Altschuler; his father then essentially dismisses the validity of Davy's feelings by telling him that "a lot of boys play around in a lot of ways when they are growing up" (173). Ruby does not even get an opportunity to talk about her relationship with Daphne to anyone; she must make do with imagining oblivious platitudes from her

father's friends, such as "these things happen but you can put it behind you and go on" and "we all do things we are sorry for" (206-7). It is no coincidence that the only other LGBTQ+ characters in each text—Davy's and Ruby's love interests—both face isolation as well. Like Davy, Altschuler's parents are divorced, and his closest friend Larry dies midway through the novel. Daphne's father—like Ruby's mother—is dead, and when Ruby confesses to Daphne that she is lonely, Daphne replies by claiming "I happen to be the loneliest person in the world" (53). Both Altschuler and Daphne are portrayed as aloof and somehow detached from their classmates. Notably, there is an obvious "gender segregation" within these older LGBTQ+ YA texts, in that gay male and lesbians YA characters "lead very separate lives", and rarely feature in the same book (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 40). This segregation reinforces isolation along gender lines and further splinters the potential LGBTQ+ support community. The complete absence of role models and support for any LGBTQ+ YA character in this period contributes to their isolation, and deepens their desperate desire for true human connection and understanding. This disheartening portrayal may also have had implications for LGBTQ+ young people at the time, by reinforcing the idea that other LGBTQ+ people simply didn't exist, and that their queer feelings were invalid and wrong. It could have been all too easy for these LGBTQ+ young people to conclude that the only way to form connects with other people would require renouncing or ignoring their queer identity.

This patent desire for connection is explored in these pioneering LGBTQ+ YA texts through their queer romantic experiences – however, these romantic experiences only provide another source of isolation and despair. In both *I'll Get There* and *Ruby*, the initial connection between the LGBTQ+ characters is tainted by dislike. Davy and Altschuler clash during school over who should have the role of Caesar in the class play; Altschuler

looks at Davy "in an unfriendly way" and Davy wonders if he's made a "New York enemy" (76). When Ruby goes to see Daphne at her house, Daphne is unwelcoming, her voice is "sharp, almost brutal" (45), and "hate... blazed out of her eyes" (49). While the romantic interactions do create a connection and understanding between these characters, there is always an underlying anxiety that this connection is wrong. Davy "keep[s] telling [himself]" that he is "not ashamed" of what he and Altschuler have done (158), but quickly doubts himself, worrying that "there's nothing wrong with Altschuler and me, is there? ...it's not dirty... it's all right, isn't it?" (161). The fact that he questions this indicates that he is trying, and failing, to convince himself that his connection with Altschuler is natural and 'normal'. In Guy's *Ruby*, Ruby is acutely aware that she must "guard her life-and-death secret" (59); Daphne tells Ruby that "we must be careful" not to display intimacy in public (58). When a male student notices Daphne paying special attention to Ruby, he says that he "knew something was wrong with you" (58). Neither Davy nor Ruby have a strong enough voice to counter this negativity. They do not "fight for themselves" (Hayn & Hazlett 68) or take a stand against the voices—inner and outer—telling them these feelings are wrong. One can understand why these LGBTQ+ YA characters do not speak up for themselves; they have no LGBTQ+ community to support them, and they are riddled with self-doubt and despair. This is one of the reasons why LGBTQ+ young people in the world, even today, might often find it difficult to publically own and be proud of their queer identity. The negative undertones of Davy and Ruby's romantic connections devalue their power and prevent the characters from ever achieving a true and deep understanding of each other.

While queer romantic connections are undeniably at the foreground of pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature, the stories are aesthetically constrained by concentrating solely on the 'coming out' story arc. As Cart and Jenkins point out, much of these texts' "dramatic

tension [arises] from what *might* happen when the invisible is made visible" ("The Heart" xx). Other plotlines are scarce, and the fact that being LGBTQ+ is the main fuel of the story suggests that homosexuality is being depicted as "a [narrative] problem rather than an orientation" (Younger 53). Indeed, in both *I'll Get There* and *Ruby*, the majority of the story's potential and actual conflict is provoked by their "angst-filled secret affairs" (Gross). Everything that happens to Davy and Ruby is tied in some way to their 'coming out' story arc; as a result, this narrow focus means that their sexuality is their defining personality trait, which "drain[s] novels of in-depth character portrayals" (Logan et al 31). When these characters do come out, it is not a deliberate action. They become passive protagonists, and their queer romance is usually discovered inadvertently by someone else in a traumatic and confronting way. Davy's mother finds him and Altschuler, for example, "spread out together on the floor" with their arms "stretched across each other's backs" (166), and she immediately asks Davy "what the hell's wrong with you?" (166). She goes on to ask if something "unnatural" happened between them (169).

In Ruby's case, the 'coming out' story arc causes a despair that nearly results in Ruby's suicide. Daphne has just broken up with Ruby, and Ruby decides she will jump off the roof, but her father is there to hold her back. It is not explicitly explained how much of their interaction her father has seen or heard, but Ruby states that "she held no secrets from him... he knew all", and his reaction to that knowledge was to cry (222). The 'coming out' story arc of these pioneering texts is more often being forcibly dragged out of hiding instead of the sign of self-acceptance that it should rightfully be, suggesting that this 'narrative problem' can only end with an unhappy resolution. The fear of being 'found out' would have had a devastating impact on LGBTQ+ young people at the time, reinforcing the

idea that a queer identity was something to keep hidden and repressed, and likely would have discouraged what would have been a healthy exploration of self-identity as a result.

Given the preoccupation with isolation and loneliness, and the aesthetically constricting focus on the often traumatic 'coming out' story arc, it is unsurprising that death has a constant presence in pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature. In these texts, as Goodman argues, it was "physically dangerous to be gay" (14), with a clear "cause and effect relationship between homosexuality and... death" surfacing in almost every novel of this time period in various ways (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 31). The correlation between death and being LGBTQ+ manifests most obviously in these texts as a literal threat of characters dying. *I'll Get There* begins with the death of Davy's grandmother. Desperate to retain the lost connection, Davy visits his grandmother's grave to 'talk' to her – in exactly the same way that he talks to the dead, stuffed coyote at the Museum of Natural History. Altschuler is also touched by death when he loses his best friend Larry. The most significant death of *I'll Get There*, though, is the death of Davy's beloved dog, Fred. Davy struggles to accept that Fred has died, and searches for someone to blame. He realises that his mother took Fred out for a walk "because of me... she wanted to leave me alone with my father to talk" (180), about what had happened between him and Altschuler. From here, Davy concludes that "nothing would have happened to Fred if [Davy] hadn't been messing around with Altschuler" (180). Davy believes that Fred's death is a kind of punishment for his and Altschuler's "queer business" (197), thus creating a "causal" connection between homosexuality and death (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 15).

Ruby is also surrounded by the threat of death; her mother has already died from cancer, and within the first 30 pages her father falls ill, badly enough that he thinks he is "near dead" (25). Daphne, like Altschuler, does not escape unscathed, as her father's death

is something which still troubles her. When Ruby and Daphne hit a rough patch in their relationship, Ruby is convinced that she is "dying of unhappiness" (113) and that if Daphne were to leave her life, "I am dead... I will die" (126). When Daphne does break up with Ruby at the end of the novel, she vows to jump off the roof of her building, to "land at [Daphne's] feet... splash her with blood" (219). Ruby's impulse to die by suicide is, along with car crashes, one of the more popular "punishments" for LGBTQ+ YA characters in these pioneering texts (Garden, "LGBTQ Young Adult Literature" 80).

Death is also thematically and symbolically present in the imagery of these LGBTQ+ YA texts. In *I'll Get There*, Davy plays the title role of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* - interestingly, the play is specifically rewritten so that it "end[s] with [his character's] death" (109). At the end of the novel, Davy undergoes a metaphorical death, in that he effectively renounces his queer sexuality in order to return to heterosexuality. He suggests to Altschuler that "maybe if we made out with some girls, we wouldn't have to think about, you know, the other" (197). In some ways, this obsession with death suggests an awareness of the death of an integral part of oneself. In actively denying the feelings and thoughts associated with a LGBTQ+ identity, one would be deliberately shutting off—effectively killing—part of what makes them who they truly are. It appears that in these pioneering texts, death—in whatever form—continues to be present in the LGBTQ+ YA character's life until they sacrifice their LGBTQ+ identity, by accepting the death of that part of themselves. The obsession with death is evident in *Ruby* as well. Talking to Daphne about her father's death provides Ruby with an opportunity to form a deeper connection with her – and this conversation is sparked by Daphne reciting Hamlet's soliloquy about suicide. Another point of connection between Ruby and Daphne comes when Ruby rushes into the middle of the road to try and stop a drunk man dying after being hit by a car.

Daphne is distressed that Ruby "risked [her] life" (82), and she admits that she "could not have stood it" if she had been hit by a car too (82). Like Davy, Ruby experiences a death of 'self' at the end of the novel. In a unbelievable turnaround from her desire to die just a few pages previously, the novel ends with Ruby "poised to resume a relationship with her former boyfriend Orlando" (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 25). The constant reminder of death in LGBTQ+ YA literature is unfortunately a critical element in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters and their queer romantic experiences, and casts a shadow over the genre for many decades to come. LGBTQ+ young people at the time in all likelihood would have been—at best—demoralised, and—at worst—terrified at the suggestion that death could be a plausible consequence of identifying as queer, as the events and themes of these pioneering LGBTQ+ YA texts seem to suggest.

The evolution from the pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature to contemporary texts did not happen quickly. The texts of the 1970s, the 1980s, and even into the 1990s, largely dealt with the same tragic stereotypes, painful experiences, and predictable 'coming out' story arc. There are two key novels, however, which stand out as efforts to move away from such aesthetically constrained and pessimistic portrayals, and which begin to bridge the gap between the older, pioneering texts, and the contemporary texts. I have selected Nancy Garden's 1982 novel *Annie On My Mind* because it is the most hopeful text of the 1980s; the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement in Young Adult Literature was awarded to Garden in 2003 principally because in writing *Annie On My Mind* she became "the first author for young adults to create a lesbian love story with a positive ending" (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow" 52). While the characters in *Annie On My Mind* still experience difficulties and nasty consequences linked to their queer romance, Garden balances out this negativity by giving her characters the hope of a future

together and voices to defend themselves. Upon considering the LGBTQ+ texts published during the bridging era of the 1980s and 1990s, I found that *Annie On My Mind* is the novel to take the most productive steps away from the stereotypical portrayal found in almost all pioneering texts. Other bridging texts do contain innovations: Aidan Chamber's 1982 *Dance On My Grave* is the first text to enrich the genre with a mature literary quality, full of ambiguity and symbolism; Francesca Lia Block's treatment of a homosexual relationship in the 1989 novel *Weetzie Bat* is full of acceptance and hope for the future. However, even these texts fall short of truly reaching forwards to a new, optimistic portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters. These other bridging texts often sideline LGBTQ+ YA characters to secondary characters to be observed through a heterosexual protagonist, as—indeed—in *Weetzie Bat*; alternatively, many of these texts follow the well-trodden narrative construct of the 'coming-out' story arc, with predictably pessimistic resolutions such as death, as in *Dance On My Grave*. For this reason, Garden's *Annie On My Mind* is the most progressive text of the early bridging era, and thus an ideal choice for my analysis. The most revolutionary text of this era, however, is likely David Levithan's groundbreaking *Boy Meets Boy* which was published in 2003, the tipping point for change within the genre. The novel's radical portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters being "blithely accepted" and, in fact, celebrated truly paves the way for a new type of LGBTQ+ YA novel (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 144). Brett Hartinger's *Geography Club*, also published in 2003, makes similar progress to *Boy Meets Boy*, in that several LGBTQ+ YA characters come together to form a supportive community. I decided to choose Levithan's novel over Hartinger's, however, because the ending of *Geography Club* unfortunately negates some of the novel's positivity; some members of the newly formed LGBTQ+ community are ultimately too afraid to hold onto their LGBTQ+ identity, at least for the time being, and so retreat back into the closet. *Boy*



*Meets Boy*, happily, is much more solidly optimistic about the future for LGBTQ+ YA characters. In the following analysis, I will examine the way in which LGBTQ+ characters in these two bridging YA texts form a greater number of human connections than in the pioneering texts, and begin to feel part of a wider LGBTQ+ community. I will also demonstrate the maturing portrayal of both the queer romantic experience and the 'coming out' story arc, and consider the way these bridging texts start to challenge the presence and role of death in LGBTQ+ YA literature, as well as the way that the developing genre reflects a change in approaches to LGBTQ+ identity in society.

These key bridging texts strike a balance between isolation and true human connection, by depicting LGBTQ+ characters who experience loneliness as well as supportive relationships and friendships, including with other queer people. In *Annie On My Mind*, Liza does not have any particularly close friends, but she does have a loving and supportive two-parent family and a caring younger brother. She recognises that she "often felt as if [she] didn't quite fit in with most of the people around [her]; [she'd] felt isolated in some way that [she'd] never understood" (105). In spite of this isolation, the connection that Liza forms with Annie is deep and genuine, with both "the love and the friendship" components of their relationship presented as equally significant (121). The fact that *Annie On My Mind* contains another gay couple among its characters—Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer—is significant, as this fact demonstrates to Liza and Annie that they are not the only LGBTQ+ people in the world. Notably, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer *also* have a strong connection with each other, positively described as "so comfortable with each other... like a couple of old shoes... a pair that fit with ease into the same shoe box" (132).

Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* takes acceptance and human connection one step further by portraying protagonist Paul as openly gay to his family and friends. Paul has "never

really been lost" or felt alone because of his sexuality (184). While Paul has other gay and straight friends, *Boy Meets Boy* does contain LGBTQ+ characters who experience loneliness. Tony, for instance, has a strained and distant relationship with his "religious, intolerant parents" (118), and when they see Paul hugging him, Tony "is grounded" (125), thus forcing him into isolation. Kyle, Paul's ex-boyfriend, has "loneliness behind his eyes" due to his confusion over his own sexuality (69). Despite this, Paul has a deep connection to both Tony and Kyle, and they have the support of other friends as well. Both *Annie On My Mind* and *Boy Meets Boy* thus demonstrate a definite leap forwards from the past severity of isolation faced by LGBTQ+ YA characters, while continuing to address the difficulties still present in the texts of the time. The careful balance between isolation and support is realistic, in line with the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ young people in a society which was slowly beginning to tolerate people identifying as LGBTQ+, although not quite to the extent of full acceptance. The contrast between the different LGBTQ+ experiences highlights the way that both *Garden* and *Levithan* are paving the way for the changes still to come in future LGBTQ+ YA literature.

Unlike the pioneering texts, the bridging texts contain a partial sense of LGBTQ+ community, albeit to differing extents. In *Annie On My Mind*, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer serve as LGBTQ+ role models, but equally as importantly, Liza and Annie discover a queer community through reading. They discover *Patience and Sarah* by Isabel Miller, an adult lesbian novel, and although they are "terrified", they buy "a couple of gay magazines and newspapers" (144). Reading about other lesbians helps Liza and Annie "discuss the one part of [themselves] [they'd] only talked around so far" and makes Liza feel as if she were "meeting parts of [herself] in the gay people [she] read about" (144). However, one cannot avoid the fact that there is no larger LGBTQ+ community in either

Liza or Annie's lives. Reading about lesbians is not quite the same as interacting with them in real life. Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer do provide Liza and Annie with advice and solace, which is attested in Liza's observation of "what a comfortable feeling it was to be able to sit there with other people like us, holding hands" (229). However, as Cart & Jenkins point out, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer's "viability as... sympathetic role models" is compromised by their quiet acceptance of their teaching jobs being terminated once they are outed ("The Heart" 47). Garden therefore does create a LGBTQ+ community, albeit an undeveloped, remote one, available to read about from a distance as opposed to being part of an official support group with a physical presence. Nevertheless, Liza and Annie still have "hope that there will be a queer community in their future" (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 70); Liza comes to believe that there are societies who "have accepted and do accept gays" (161), and that hopefully—one day—she and Annie will live in one of those societies together.

*Boy Meets Boy*, on the other hand, provides us exactly the "present-day gaytopia" that Liza and Annie wish they could inhabit (Lewis 216). Paul lives in a town where "there isn't really a gay scene or a straight scene... they got all mixed up a while back" (9), where the elementary school's gay-straight alliance's membership "soon surpassed that of the football team" (22), and the "P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is as big a draw as the PTA" (142). Paul is at the centre of a large, supportive LGBTQ+ community which truly is a first in LGBTQ+ YA literature. There are multiple LGBTQ+ characters, a mix of gay (Paul, Tony and Noah), lesbian (Amber), 'drag queen' (Infinite Darlene) and even bisexual (Kyle). Even more crucially, the connections between these characters are primarily friendships—as opposed to romances—with the only romantic storylines being between Paul and Kyle, and Paul and Noah. The emphasis on friendship is in some cases

prized above romance. Paul's friendship with Tony, for instance, is described as "something even more rare, and even more meaningful" than a romantic relationship (49). Paul also makes a point of holding onto his friendship with his ex-boyfriend Kyle after they have broken up, saying that "[they] are going to be friends... just because [Paul] doesn't think [they'd] be good together [in a romantic way] doesn't mean [they] have to be apart" (203). The importance of friendship over romance is even discussed by Paul and his heterosexual best friend, Joni, who says she "hate[s] the phrase 'more than friends' [because] there's nothing more than [her and Paul]" (160).

This deliberate switch from focusing solely on LGBTQ+ romantic relationships to prioritising a variety of LGBTQ+ friendships highlights the strength of *Boy Meets Boy's* LGBTQ+ community. Levithan, however, makes sure to show that not every LGBTQ+ character gains full access to this queer community. While Tony "love[s] being a part of" Paul's world, he can "never really enjoy it because [he] know[s] that at the end, [he'll] be back here" (185), returning home to his disapproving parents. Instead of being a full-time member of the LGBTQ+ community, Tony must think long-term, to gradually "prove [his parents] wrong" by showing them that being gay will not ruin his life, and hope that "maybe they will [accept him] someday" (186), and allow him to join the LGBTQ+ community on an unrestricted basis. By introducing a variety of LGBTQ+ YA characters to support one another, *Boy Meets Boy* celebrates a groundbreaking portrayal of a strong LGBTQ+ community, while making sure to balance this portrayal against less fortunate LGBTQ+ characters like Tony. These contrasting experiences of the LGBTQ+ community reflect the evolving LGBTQ+ identity in society at this time, and the young people who may have related to Tony's circumstances would no doubt have been heartened by the

possibility of joining a LGBTQ+ community such as Paul's gaytopia, even if it was not yet a present-day reality for them.

One of the most important developments in the bridging LGBTQ+ YA texts is the maturing portrayal of the queer romantic experience. *Annie On My Mind* is one of the first LGBTQ+ YA novels to "actually depict the romantic aspects of a relationship" (Mason et al. 12) – unlike the depictions of romantic connections in pioneering texts, Garden spends time exploring the way that Liza and Annie's feelings grow for each other, concentrating on the way their relationship evolves "gradually, naturally and plausibly" throughout the novel (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 54), and effectively showing the reader what it feels like for Liza and Annie to fall in love. Liza makes a point of mentioning her shock that, upon looking up 'homosexuality' in the encyclopaedia, "the word 'love' wasn't used even once... it was as if whoever wrote the article didn't know that gay people actually love each other" (143). This focus on love is far removed from the pioneering texts, where arguably more time is spent focusing on how much the two LGBTQ+ characters do *not* love each other. Keeping with the bridging texts' inclination for balance, Liza's queer romance experience has both its challenges and its triumphs. During the initial stages of their relationship, Liza struggles with her attraction to Annie. Immediately after the first time they kiss, Liza feels as if there is "a war inside [her]", with one side saying that these feelings are "wrong and bad and sinful", and another side saying that "nothing has ever felt so right and natural and true and good" (93). Liza's confusion is understandable given the divided way that society viewed LGBTQ+ people at the time. However, when she begins to speak honestly from her heart, Liza works through this confusion and eventually comes to a realisation:

'Because you're better than anything or anyone for me, too, Annie, better than – oh, I don't know better than what – better than everything – but that's not what I want to

be saying – you – you're – Annie, I think I love you.' I heard myself say it as if I were someone else, but the moment the words were out, I knew more than I'd ever known anything that they were true. (94)

Liza's queer romantic experience is confronted with negativity, however, when she and Annie are interrupted and subsequently outed during an intimate moment while house-sitting for Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer. Other teachers call Liza and Annie's relationship "immoral and unnatural" (168) and "abnormal" (183), but arguably the most antagonistic reaction comes from Liza's supposed friend, Sally. Sally is present when Liza and Annie are discovered, and stares at them "as if [they] had at least five heads apiece, like end-of-the-world monsters" (169). Sally appears to be personally offended by Liza and Annie's relationship, describing it as "disgusting" (194) and asking Liza incredulously "how *could* you – with a *girl*?" (193). Near the end of the novel, Sally is almost sympathetic, which in reality comes across as condescending; she believes 'gay' is "a terribly sad word", and that homosexuality "isn't love, it's immature, like a crush, or some sort of mental problem" (222). Trying to explain Liza's LGBTQ+ identity away as a mere crush is exactly what Davy's father does in *I'll Get There*, and undoubtedly recalls the discouraging way that these pioneering texts portray LGBTQ+ romantic experiences.

The difference between *Annie On My Mind* and the pioneering texts, however, is that Liza is given a strong voice to stand up for herself, against other people and her own self-doubts. Importantly, this is most apparent when Liza responds to Sally who, we have just seen, has the most prominent negative reaction in the novel. After Sally calls her relationship with Annie "disgusting", Liza counters that Sally "[doesn't] have to be disgusted" because "it doesn't have anything to do with [her]" (194). When confronted by

Sally's condescending 'sympathy', Liza does her best to try and make Sally understand her own perspective:

'It's not a problem,' I said. 'It's not negative. Don't you know that it's love you're talking about? You're talking about how I feel about another human being and how she feels about me, not about some kind of disease you have to save us from.' (222)

The force of Liza's belief provides a convincing counterargument to the stereotypical negativity faced by many LGBTQ+ YA characters in previous texts. Just as significantly, Liza is able to overcome her own self-doubts by the strength of her belief in her own feelings. At the end of the novel, Liza reflects on everything that has happened with Annie, thinking that "if [she] hadn't been gay [and] if nothing had happened in that house" (226), then none of the terrible consequences of her relationship with Annie would have happened. However, Liza listens to her heart, and admits to herself, "but dammit... you are gay, Liza, and something did happen in that house, and it happened because you love Annie in ways you wouldn't if you weren't gay" (226). This is a powerful statement of self-acceptance, and a landmark development in LGBTQ+ YA literature. *Annie On My Mind* skilfully manages to address "the difficulties of being a lesbian in a homophobic culture" while retaining a hopeful outlook for Liza and Annie's future together (Younger 61). Through balancing an optimistic focus on love against unsupportive reactions and self-doubts, Garden's portrayal of a queer romantic experience is a realistic mirror of the experiences that LGBTQ+ young people underwent at the time, and looks forward to an even more affirming depiction in future LGBTQ+ YA literature.

In *Boy Meets Boy*, Paul's queer romantic experience is, for the first time in the genre's history, normalised. When he is in kindergarten he "just assumed boys were attracted to other boys" (17), a clever twist to the heteronormative assumptions found in

previous LGBTQ+ YA literature. His budding romance with Noah is built on joyous emotions, like "that comforting unattributable vibe [they're] both feeling" (61), and Paul makes a point of thinking that "it feels natural" (219). This particular word choice serves as a stark contrast to the 'unnatural' label typically assigned to queer relationships in pioneering texts, such as Davy's mother asking if something 'unnatural' happened between him and Altschuler in *I'll Get There*. On the topic of parental reaction, Paul's parents are decidedly supportive of his being gay. When Paul first came out, far from being shocked or angry, his mother simply told his father, "Honey, Paul's learned a new word!" (19). In another reversal from what might be expected in a LGBTQ+ YA text, Paul is worried about introducing Noah to his parents, not because they'll disapprove, but because "[he's] afraid they'll be too friendly" (77).

Paul only mentions a negative backlash to his sexuality once in *Boy Meets Boy*, recounting the time during eighth grade when he was "tackled by two high school wrestlers after a late night showing of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* at [his] local theatre" (23). Paul almost misinterprets their "grunts" as "a strange kind of foreplay", and then casually describes the actual insults as "queer, faggot, the usual" (23). However, this potentially terrifying situation is quickly diffused when Paul explains that "[he] wasn't about to take such verbal abuse from strangers", and describes with surprisingly comical detail that "luckily [he] had gone to the movies with a bunch of [his] friends from the fencing team, so they just pulled out their foils and disarmed the lugheads" (23). As if that was not enough, one of Paul's 'attackers' went on to become "a drag queen in Columbus, Ohio" (23). This scene demonstrates that Paul has a strong voice to counteract any unsupportive reactions to his LGBTQ+ identity, and moreover, that he actually lives in a world where such negativity towards LGBTQ+ people appears to be rare. Paul's sincere assertion that he is "not used to



being hated" (28) emphasises his largely supportive queer experience, and reinforces the idea that Levithan really has created the first gaytopia for the LGBTQ+ YA genre.

Other LGBTQ+ characters within *Boy Meets Boy*, however, do have discouraging and difficult experiences in relation to their LGBTQ+ identities. Drag queen Infinite Darlene is confident in her own skin, and has a larger-than-life personality. Despite this, Paul suggests that this confidence sometimes masks the difficulty she faces due to her LGBTQ+ identity:

Infinite Darlene doesn't have it easy. Being both star quarterback and homecoming queen has its conflicts. And sometimes it's hard for her to fit in. The other drag queens in our school rarely sit with her at lunch; they say she doesn't take good enough care of her nails, and that she looks a little too buff in a tank top. (26)

Tony, however, is shown to have the most difficult LGBTQ+ experience in the novel, stemming from the fact that his parents reject his gay identity. Tony's decision to come out is taken away from him, just like it was for many LGBTQ+ YA characters in the pioneering texts—for instance, Davy in *I'll Get There*—when his mother discovers a gay magazine tucked away in his clothing drawers. Their disapproval is clear; even though "they didn't yell at him... they prayed loudly, delivering all of their disappointment and rage and guilt to him in the form of an address to God" (120). While "they didn't kick Tony out of the house, [their reaction] made him want to leave" (120), and so Tony ends up living in a mountain clearing for a week before eventually returning to his parents. Living with parents who "honestly believe that if [Tony doesn't] straighten out, [he] will lose [his] soul... be damned" cannot be easy for Tony (185). His character is an important nod to the LGBTQ+ young people who have endured—and continue to endure—difficult circumstances, particularly when too young to escape unsupportive parents. Overall, *Boy Meets Boy*

depicts a forward-thinking validating LGBTQ+ experience, creating a world where LGBTQ+ characters have more opportunity for self-discovery than self-denial. Crucially, Levithan does not ignore those who are not as lucky as Paul, and therefore this bridging text accurately reflects the developing—and sometimes conflicting—approach to LGBTQ+ identity in society at the time, by acknowledging that although a gaytopia is the ultimate goal, in many respects society is still a long way from achieving that ideal.

The 'coming out' story arc is still an important concern of the bridging LGBTQ+ YA texts, but the way in which it is written has matured to give the characters more depth and more individuality. Garden argues that while "coming out is indeed a pivotal part of all LGBTQ people's lives", some YA literature of this time period slowly begins to shift the focus onto "more universal issues than the basic LGBT rite of passage [that is] coming out" ("LGBTQ Young Adult Literature" 81). While such texts are still a minority at this point in the genre's development, the broadened focus allows for more complicated plots, which helps to reduce the narrative significance of sexual identity. *Annie On My Mind* represents the very first step in this endeavour to challenge aesthetically constricting narrative devices. A significant portion of the narrative arc is indeed driven by Liza and Annie's unwillingness to come out as gay. Their "fear of being outed" does, to an extent, overshadow their relationship (Mason et al. 12), and is a cause of conflict between them. As their romantic feelings for each other grow, they both realise that their physical attraction for each other is growing as well, and yet, they "still didn't touch each other much more than [they] had at the beginning", because "the more [they] realised [that they wanted to], the more [they] tried to avoid it" (116). Liza retrospectively thinks that this was partly because "[they] were always afraid that someone would walk in", and discover them together, but also partly because they "just needed more time" to come to terms with their

LGBTQ+ identity (123). Liza and Annie's hesitancy causes them to begin "misunderstanding each other more and more", and "to fight about dumb things" (117). When they do become more physically intimate with each other, the misunderstandings and the fights disappear, but the fear of coming out to their parents and friends is still there.

Unfortunately, in a way that is undeniably influenced by the tendencies of the genre's pioneering texts, Liza and Annie are not able to choose when to come out, as they are discovered together and consequently outed. Crucially, though, *Annie On My Mind* relies on a structure in which subplots run parallel to the 'coming out' story arc, thus demonstrating a more complex narrative structure which has evolved from the earlier, aesthetically constrained forms found in most pioneering texts. Liza's position as head of student council results in unrelated narrative tension and this subplot dovetails with the ensuing tension of her sexuality. Liza and Annie are both given other interests and ambitions, such as Liza's desire to become an architect, and Annie's talent for singing. Even though these additions seem small, they contribute to the depth of Liza and Annie's personalities and storylines, and certainly signify an improvement from the narrow focus of the pioneering texts. In *Ruby*, for instance, Ruby does not have any hobbies or goals for her life, and it would not be an overstatement to say that her existence seems explicitly centred around Daphne. As a result, Ruby's character is rather one-dimensional. When comparing this to *Annie On My Mind*, one can see that even though the narrative is still tied to a coming-out story arc, the depth of Liza and Annie's characters significantly outstrips that of Ruby's, and other LGBTQ+ YA characters in the pioneering texts.

*Boy Meets Boy* is the text in which the sea change in narrative focus in LGBTQ+ YA literature begins. Because Paul is already openly gay, the 'coming out' arc is irrelevant to his story. He believes that his life is not "so much out of the ordinary", consisting of "the

usual series of crushes, confusions and intensities" (23). In this way, Paul's homosexuality is just like "any other unique characteristic an author might choose to explore when depicting complex adolescent human beings" (Koelling 57). His sexuality is merely another equally noteworthy part of Paul's multifaceted personality. Tony's plotline in *Boy Meets Boy* does follow a more typical 'coming out' story arc, but it is more complicated than what is found in pioneering texts. In keeping his LGBTQ+ identity invisible, Tony "has been living with his fear for all his life", but when he begins to stand up to his parents, he "convert[s] [his fear] to courage" (190). Tony firstly challenges his mother about why Paul is not allowed to visit after school to do homework together, and achieves a compromise in that Paul can stay, as long as Tony's bedroom door is open. More notably, Tony decides to convince his parents that he should attend the school dance, and "figure[s] if enough people come to pick [him] up... then maybe they'll let [Tony] go" (209-10). Tony deliberately chooses the hard route, not to sneak out, but rather, to confront his parents and make them consider how their beliefs regarding his LGBTQ+ identity are impacting his life in all areas, even the areas that should be unconnected to his sexuality. Through Tony's strength of self-belief, and Liza and Annie's multifaceted narratives, both of these bridging texts demonstrate a developing, more complicated approach to the typical 'coming out' story arc, which allows more depth for LGBTQ+ YA character exploration as well as a more thorough examination into LGBTQ+ identity. This development encourages a new way of portraying LGBTQ+ YA characters and their LGBTQ+ journeys, and foreshadows future change still to come in the genre. Conceiving LGBTQ+ YA characters as more dimensional and complicated might also have had positive ramifications for the way society at the time viewed LGBTQ+ young people, hopefully assisting people to realise that such young people had more to their personality than just their queer identity.

Regrettably, death still has an undeniable presence in many LGBTQ+ YA bridging texts of the 1980s and 1990s. The previously mentioned *Dance On My Grave* by Aidan Chambers, for instance, revolves around the protagonist Hal's obsession with death, and, in turn, Hal's gay lover dies at the end of the novel. William Taylor's 1994 *The Blue Lawn*, and Paula Boock's 1997 *Dare, Truth or Promise*, each involve near-death car crashes, and the subject of AIDS (which unavoidably evokes the idea of death in this time period) appears in several bridging texts, first in M. E. Kerr's 1986 *Night Kites*. However, both *Annie On My Mind* and *Boy Meets Boy* offer a reprieve from this common narrative preoccupation, and begin to lessen the grip that death holds on the genre. In *Annie On My Mind*, for instance, nobody dies. The only mentioned threat of someone dying is in relation to Annie's grandmother, and this threat relates only to Annie's *fear* of her grandmother's death, because in Liza's opinion, she "didn't seem... to be anywhere near dying" (87). In reality, death has more of a thematic presence in this novel. When Liza and Annie first meet, they pretend to be two duelling knights who are "fight[ing] on till the death for the benefit of our audience" (12). Their pretend roles give them a kind of control over death, which is highlighted in Annie's assertion that "a knight [such] as you would never fall in battle" (54). Liza and Annie also share a fascination with a series of unicorn tapestries which "tell the story of a unicorn hunt" where the "hunters wound the unicorn badly" (55). The way the unicorns are depicted is specifically noted by Liza:

In one tapestry [the unicorn] looks dead – but the last one shows him alive, wearing a collar and enclosed in a circular pen with flowers all around. Most people seem to notice the flowers more than anything else, but the unicorn looks so disillusioned, so lonely and caged, that I hardly see the flowers at all – but the unicorn's expression always makes me shiver. (55-56)

This image of the unicorn is significant, because after this scene, Liza begins to use 'unicorn' as a nickname for Annie. The parallels between the deathly images of the unicorn tapestries and Annie can be understood to symbolise the way Annie—and Liza, for that matter—is trapped by the necessity of keeping her LGBTQ+ identity a secret, unable to truly live. However, unlike the unicorn, Annie and Liza are able to free themselves from their metaphorical cage; on the very last page of the novel, Liza and Annie reconnect, having accepted the truth about their LGBTQ+ identities, and Liza tells Annie, "I'm free now. I love you" (234). The deathly fate of the unicorn has been overcome by their love for each other. These two thematic images of death both subvert and diminish the power that death has long since held over LGBTQ+ YA characters, by giving the characters control over their lives and futures.

*Boy Meets Boy* similarly challenges and subverts past depictions of death by using death in unexpected ways. One character is directly affected by death, with Kyle's aunt dying midway through the novel. What is striking about her death, however, is the way that Levithan depicts it. It is a peaceful death, as far from traumatic as possible, with his aunt's husband "curled up in the hospital bed, singing Beatles songs to her and looking her in the eye"; Kyle says that "it was so sad and it was so beautiful" (127). More significantly, though, is the realisation that his aunt's death prompts within Kyle. After witnessing the love between his aunt and her husband, Kyle "knew what [he] wanted... something real", something that would make him "feel like life matters" (127-8). Death essentially causes Kyle to see that he did have "something real with [Paul]" (128), and if he wants something real with someone else, he must face his bisexual identity, and understand that in order to live life honestly and fully, he must accept who he truly is and how he truly feels. This

conclusion is particularly striking when one recalls that in *I'll Get There*, Davy comes to believe the exact opposite after experiencing the death of his dog.

The only other mention of death in *Boy Meets Boy* occurs when the characters decide to use death as a theme for the school dance, thus actively bringing death into a joyous, social environment. The characters control the way that death is present; they "decorate with images of death" and "use tombstones as centrepieces" (154). The dance attendees wear heirlooms passed down from family members who have died, so that "as [the students] dance, they will be in some way alive again" (215). Levithan makes a point of stating that the characters "are not focusing on death; instead [they] are surrounding [themselves] with all the things that remain after death... [they] want to enfold death in colour" (215). In this way, *Boy Meets Boy* subverts the role that death has thus far played in LGBTQ+ YA literature. Death is not a punishing threat to be feared, as it was in the pioneering texts, but accepted as a part of everyone's lives, regardless of whether one is queer or not. *Boy Meets Boy* effectively leads the charge against death's presence in the genre – if not by eradicating it, at least by lessening its power over these LGBTQ+ characters, and leaving LGBTQ+ YA literature with a more realistic view on death.

Levithan's 2003 *Boy Meets Boy* sparked a revolution within LGBTQ+ YA literature. Since 2010, in particular, there have been significant developments within the genre, so much so that Cart & Jenkins have updated the investigation they began in *The Heart Has Its Reasons* with their 2018 publication *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*. In what follows, I will argue that contemporary texts have predominantly moved away from focusing on isolated and conflicted queer teenagers, and instead have begun to highlight the importance of the wider LGBTQ+ community and integral and strong friendships between LGBTQ+ characters. Linked to this

supportive LGBTQ+ environment is the largely affirming queer romantic experience found in contemporary texts, where being LGBTQ+ invokes less opposition and danger, and much more hope and validity. I will demonstrate that the presence of death in these narratives—although still visible in some cases—is, thankfully, no longer an imminent threat to the majority of LGBTQ+ YA characters, but more of a way to reflect on the real life circumstances that some LGBTQ+ young people must face. More importantly, these LGBTQ+ characters are no longer merely defined by their sexuality, and often their 'coming out' story is not a central part—or sometimes *any* part—of the narrative. As a result, romantic relationships are less and less frequently the most important connection between characters, with many contemporary texts prioritising friendships over romance. Because these recent narratives are expanding to include all kinds of LGBTQ+ stories rather than just a 'coming out' story arc, contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature has now begun to explore a wider range of diversity, with characters of underrepresented ethnicities and more nuanced sexual and gender identities.

I have chosen three core texts to consider in my analysis of these contemporary novels, all published in 2016. *You Know Me Well* co-written by Nina LaCour and David Levithan shows both a lesbian and gay male experience of being part of a LGBTQ+ community, and celebrates the importance of Pride events and friendship. Alice Oseman's *Radio Silence* has multiple LGBTQ+ characters, but is notable for the fact that queer identity is not central to the main narrative. The novel also features a large amount of diversity within sexual and ethnic identities, with a biracial, bisexual female narrator, and an asexual/demisexual male character who is in a relationship with a gay Korean male character. *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin centres upon a genderfluid character who gains the support of friends and a transgender-focused LGBTQ+ community. In



addition, Garvin showcases the value of giving these LGBTQ+ characters a voice with which to fight. Through analysing these texts, I will demonstrate the extent to which contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature has evolved and matured from the depictions found in the pioneering and bridging texts, and what this evolution bodes for LGBTQ+ young people in society.

Friendship—or, human connection—has arguably become one of the most important themes of contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature, acting as an antidote to the isolation that queer YA characters experienced in previous texts. An overwhelming majority of recent texts depict LGBTQ+ characters who "are not alone but are surrounded by supportive friends and family members" (Logan et al. 31), who have some sort of support network, commonly in the form of friendships with other queer characters and non-queer characters as well. *You Know Me Well* is an excellent example of a text which centres upon LGBTQ+ friendship. The blossoming friendship between the two narrators, Mark and Kate, is at the heart of the novel, and the core element of their friendship is the bond they form over both identifying as LGBTQ+ (gay and lesbian, respectively). At first glance, their friendship seems unlikely, even impossible. They know of each other, attend the same school—actually sit next to each other in Calculus—but have never really spoken before. Their very meeting defies the odds, as neither of them are supposed to be at the club where they meet; Mark is underage and legally not allowed to be there, and Kate is supposed to be meeting the girl of her dreams, Violet, at a party across town. And yet, from the very first moment they meet, they form a connection. Kate says to Mark:

I've spent the whole day, the whole school year, really, realising that I might actually not like my friends all that much. Which is why I'm at a bar by myself on a night when everyone else is with other people. I wasn't supposed to be here, but here

I am, and then here *you* are, and it's like a flashing arrow is pointing at you, telling me that you are someone I should know. (24)

Kate then discovers that Mark can relate to her struggle regarding her feelings for Violet, because he is going through a similar struggle with his feelings for Ryan, and this understanding cements their connection:

'Have you ever wanted something so badly that it sort of takes over your life? Like, you still do all the things you're supposed to do, but you're just going through the motions because you are entirely consumed by this one thing?' [...] Mark nods, and he really looks into my face as he does it, and I look hard back at him, and it is clear: We understand each other. (24-5)

After spending the rest of the evening together, their friendship has been firmly established and they have "formed [their] own rainbow alliance" (56). Kate believes they "must have been destined for each other" (43), and Mark sees Kate as "something [he's] always wanted but didn't know [he] wanted... a partner in crime" (56). It is as if LaCour and Levithan are defiantly giving these characters a human connection that we do not expect them to receive – that previous LGBTQ+ YA literature would not have given them. This point is intensified in that Mark and Kate also have an easy and effortless friendship, with no conflict between them; Mark reflects that "sometimes it isn't all that hard... sometimes you can just fall into step with someone" (215).

There are moments in the narrative where one might expect Mark and Kate to feel alone and lonely – however, each time that these LGBTQ+ YA characters come near to isolation, their friendship with each other—their support network—intervenes. When Kate gathers enough courage to return to the party to finally meet Violet, Violet has already left, and Kate's friends are angry and disappointed in Kate for standing Violet up. Although her

friends refuse to support her, Kate does have Mark's support. Mark "expect[s] one of her friends to pat her back, to tell her it's going to be fine [but] when none of them does that, [Mark] find[s] [him]self doing it instead" (36). Likewise, Kate does not let Mark isolate himself after his declaration of love for—and his subsequent rejection by—his best friend Ryan. She "look[s] up directions to his house" (127), and lets herself in to find him hiding, upset, in his bedroom. Even though Kate is meant to be attending the opening evening of her art show, she decides to skip it in order to watch a movie with him, to offer Mark a "short forgetfulness... to step out of [the world] for a while" (134-5). Their friendship prevents any potential feelings of isolation and loneliness throughout the novel, and thus demonstrates the power that friendship can have in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature. The fact that Mark and Kate's friendship is built upon nothing but a shared LGBTQ+ identity exemplifies how important those identities are to the formation of their friendship, and offers a new vision of possibility that LGBTQ+ YA characters can experience true human connections as a result of their queer identity.

Similarly, Oseman's *Radio Silence* contains a core friendship between LGBTQ+ characters, except that in this novel, the LGBTQ+ characters actually do experience isolation and loneliness – albeit with a deliberate twist. Just as in *You Know Me Well*, the novel centres around the developing friendship between Frances and Aled. Like Mark and Kate, Frances and Aled know of each other, and have interacted before, but only minimally. Their actual friendship begins with a chance moment of connection, when Aled accidentally tells Frances that he is the secret creator of the obscure online podcast series 'Universe City', which happens to be Frances's "favourite thing in the entire world" (98) and the show for which she secretly draws fanart. Their friendship quickly deepens, and after only having hung out twice, "it felt like [they] were friends... friends who barely knew

anything about each other except the other's most private secret" (85). Refreshingly, the secrets which spark their friendship are entirely unrelated to their queer identities, subverting what one might expect from LGBTQ+ YA literature; even though Frances and Aled both identify as LGBTQ+, they do not actually learn of—and hence bond over—their shared queer experience until much further through the novel.

However, neither Frances nor Aled in *Radio Silence* are immune to feeling isolated or lonely. Before Frances becomes friends with Aled, she does not feel truly close to anyone. She is "uninvolved with [her] friendship group" (23), and believes that she cannot be her real self around them, as they "only like School Frances... not Real Frances" (75). Spending time with Aled is an antidote for Frances's loneliness; she "start[s] to get used to seeing him every day, and felt a bit lonely when [she] didn't" (107). Frances's friendship with Aled opens her eyes to what such a genuine human connection can feel like, because "being friends with Aled made [Frances] feel like [she'd] never had a real friend before, ever" (121), thus highlighting the isolation that she had felt prior to connecting with Aled. Aled's isolation and loneliness is even more pronounced than Frances's is. Aled has felt abandoned and alone ever since his twin sister Carys ran away from home, and creates the science-fiction podcast 'Universe City' as a "cry for help from a brother to a sister" (326). His podcast acts as a way for Aled to express his feelings of isolation and loneliness. In one particularly evocative segment, his protagonist 'Radio Silence' explains:

I feel a bit like a BOT18 sometimes. Old and rusty, aching and sleepy. Wandering through the city, lost, circling, alone. No gears left in my heart, no code whirring in my brain. Just kinetic energy, being pushed gently onwards by other forces – sound, light, dust waves, the quakes. I'm as lost as ever, friends. Can you tell? I'd like it if someone were to rescue me soon. (258)

Given that Aled strongly identifies with Radio—he says that "the voice inside my head is Radio's voice" (146), and "sometimes I think I *am* Radio" (308)—it is clear that he too endures the deep feelings of isolation and loneliness that Radio does. The isolation and loneliness that Frances and Aled both feel is compounded by the fact that their friendship undergoes some conflict when Aled is exposed as the creator of 'University City', at the same time as Aled is leaving for university. He stops all contact with Frances and his friend Daniel, thus isolating himself. Frances worries that "Aled hasn't got anyone" at university (359) and one of Aled's college room neighbours says that Aled "doesn't leave his room" and "seems so *isolated*" (363). Aled's self-isolation also causes Frances to feel more isolated herself, despairing that she has "possibly just lost the only real friend [she] had ever made in [her] entire life" (237).

Despite the isolation and loneliness that plagues Frances and Aled throughout the novel, they are each ultimately saved by their friendship. Spending time together combats these unpleasant feelings, as evidenced by Frances's claim that "everything with Aled was fun or good. Usually both. We started to realise that it didn't even matter what we did together, because we knew that if we were both there, we would have a good time" (104). Their friendship gives them a genuine human connection that allows Frances and Aled to feel as if they can be their true selves around each other. Aled letting Frances listen to him recording an episode of 'Universe City' feels "more personal than anything [she'd] seen or heard of him before" (123), and during the recording she reflects: "I was listening to a completely different person – no, not different, just *more* of Aled. Aled at 100 per cent. Aled being himself. I was listening to Aled's brain" (124). Frances also says to Aled: "I love making 'Universe City' with you... I feel like myself when I'm with you " (388). The reconciliation at the end of the novel holds the most power towards permanently alleviating

their isolation and loneliness. Aled worries that he has "nowhere to go... no one to help [him]", but Frances immediately replies with "I'm here... I can help you" (372). Frances urges him not to return to university, or to his mother—that is, a lonely and isolated existence—by painting an ideal life for them both, built on their friendship. She tells Aled: "You can live with me and we'll get joint shifts at the village post office and we'll make *Universe City* together... and we'll be happy" (382). *Radio Silence* demonstrates a reversal from past LGBTQ+ YA texts, in that forming a LGBTQ+ friendship actually is the solution of Frances and Aled's isolation and loneliness. Oseman's novel is representative of a larger trend within contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts, of creating LGBTQ+ YA characters that are capable of escaping such isolation and loneliness. Even if these LGBTQ+ characters start out alone, or experience isolation at some point, they are now largely able to form a friendship(s)—a support network—that will help to counteract and supersede these painful feelings.

In addition to the central friendships in *You Know Me Well* and *Radio Silence*, both novels feature friendships between secondary characters which are complex and difficult friendships that prove to be just as important as the core friendships of the narrative. In *You Know Me Well*, Ryan is Mark's best friend, but their friendship sometimes spills over into romantic territory, into the "halfway world" of friends-with-benefits (61); when Kate asks Mark if they're together, he says "no, we're not... only, sometimes we are" (29). Their friendship is further complicated by the fact that Mark is romantically in love with Ryan, but Ryan becomes romantically interested in another boy, Taylor. Both Mark and Ryan are forced to untangle their romantic and platonic feelings for each other, and, indeed, see if they can manage to salvage their friendship:

'Look,' [Ryan] tells [Mark], 'I can say it over and over again. You are my best friend... I love you like that, which is huge. [...] I never thought that what we did was... that. I am very, very sorry if you did. But I didn't do anything to make you think that. I didn't. It's always been clear to me. And that doesn't make you any less awesome to me. You are completely awesome to me. You're just not my boyfriend. You're my best friend.'

'But do those have to be two different things?' I ask, barely keeping the sob from engulfing my voice.

'In our case, yes.'

This is so much worse than I feared it would be. (115)

Kate, the other protagonist in *You Know Me Well*, has been close with her best friend Lehna her whole life, "twin-like" in the way they had "simultaneous realisations that [they] liked girls" and "even came out [to their parents] together" (221-2). However, Kate understands that "there has been an undercurrent of trouble between Lehna and [her] for a while" (45), not because of a definitive conflict, but because of a gradual drifting away from each other. Kate knows that there are "conversations that [Lehna] and [her] have *not* been having... about college, about the future" (71), and the fact that they have not been talking about these important, life-altering topics has now resulted in Kate "realising that [she] hardly recognise[s] the person [Lehna has] become" (72). Both Kate and Lehna must re-learn each other and figure out if their friendship is worth the effort to repair. LaCour and Levithan carefully balance the easy, central friendship between Mark and Kate against the more difficult and complex friendships they must navigate with Ryan and Lehna, and these varied examples of LGBTQ+ friendship gives the novel's focus on friendship even more depth.

In *Radio Silence*, both Frances and Aled have friendships with secondary characters which are as complex and as integral to the novel as Frances and Aled's core friendship is. Frances has a complicated friendship with Aled's twin sister, Carys. They, like Frances and Aled, become friends by accident, when Frances sits in Carys's usual seat on the train to school. Frances is not sure why Carys would want to be friends with her, but suspects it is because "nobody else wanted to be friends with [Carys], and essentially, [Frances] was the only option" (110). Ironically, Carys is shown to wonder why Frances hangs out with *her*, as Carys believes that she is "just a bit annoying... and really dumb compared to [Frances]" (111). This uncertain friendship is complicated by the fact that Frances has a romantic crush on Carys, "because she was pretty [and] because she was the only queer girl [she knew]" (86). Their friendship is in a state of unresolved conflict for most of the novel, as Frances blames herself for Carys running away from home. Aled's friendship with his best friend Daniel is similarly complicated; they have been best friends since "[they] were born" (275), but also have an undefined romantic relationship which bears striking resemblance to Mark and Ryan's relationship in *You Know Me Well*. Frances assumes that Daniel is "[Aled's] boyfriend... and best friend", but Daniel replies with "no, I'm not... I'm just someone he kisses sometimes" (273). Their relationship is undefined largely because of Aled's hesitation and confusion regarding his own sexual identity, which I will examine in more detail later on in the essay. Oseman's nuanced exploration of these different kinds of friendships, along with the friendships in *You Know Me Well*, further highlights the significance that many contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts award to friendships between LGBTQ+ characters, and how integral these friendships are to the narrative.

*Symptoms of Being Human*, like *Radio Silence* and *You Know Me Well*, features friendships that are important in the battle against isolation and loneliness for LGBTQ+



characters in YA fiction, but Garvin examines this idea from a slightly different perspective. In Garvin's novel, there is only one protagonist, Riley, and Riley's friendships with Solo and Bec are both central to the story. Riley identifies as genderfluid<sup>3</sup>, describing it as "some days [they] wake up feeling more 'boy' and some days [they] wake up feeling more 'girl'... and some days... somewhere in between" (29). At the start of the novel, Riley has just transferred to a new school "to escape [being] harassed and bullied on a daily basis" (12), and is therefore isolated from both their past and present peers – Riley struggles to "think of one person [they] can call [their] friend" (24-5). Adding to this, Riley uses isolation as a form of self-protection by wishing to "be invisible" on their first day at Park Hills (4):

My heart beats faster as I get close; I keep my head down and try to blend in with the concrete. To my relief, no one says anything to me; I've dodged the first bullet [...] All I have to do now is make it past the group of girls, and then I'll be on campus, where I can disappear into a crowd. (4-5)

Riley wishes to fit in with everyone else, but unfortunately for Riley, their LGBTQ+ identity is more visible than others – their gender identity is often expressed through appearance and clothing, and so it is difficult for Riley to be anonymous. Sticking out so noticeably increases Riley's isolation and loneliness, as their indefinable appearance is shown to disconcert some people, making them less likely to approach Riley. However, Riley does manage to form two key friendships during the novel which offsets their isolation and loneliness. Solo, who is a tall, solid football player, initially acts as a kind of "massive bodyguard" to Riley (16) and is the first person Riley meets at Park Hills who

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<sup>3</sup> Riley's pronouns are not specified in the novel, so I have decided to use the gender neutral 'they/them/their', which is often used by genderfluid and genderqueer people.

"doesn't seem put off by [Riley's] appearance at all; in fact, he seems genuinely interested" (10). Most importantly, when Riley chooses to come out to Solo, he accepts Riley's genderfluidity without question, even saying that he has "sort of been doing homework on gender stuff" in order to better understand what Riley might be experiencing (196). Bec, on the other hand, is more familiar with LGBTQ+ issues, due to her late sister identifying as a transgender girl. She invites Riley along to a LGBTQ+ support group as a way of showing that "she's already accepted [Riley]" (153), and tells Riley that she's "totally cool with it... with [Riley] being genderfluid" (209). As a result, Riley feels more able to be their true self around Bec, who "seems to short out [Riley's] ability to pretend" (147). Solo and Bec both make up significant parts of Riley's support network and help Riley feel less alone.

Despite having friends to support them, Riley still experiences feelings of isolation and loneliness throughout the novel. Early on in their friendship, Solo ignores Riley in the cafeteria in front of his football team, making Riley feel like Solo was merely "pretending to be nice" (45). Their friendship is cemented, though, the next time that the football crowd—namely, Jim Vickers and his girlfriend Sierra—begins bullying Riley at lunch:

'Seriously, it's hard to tell,' [Sierra] says. 'Are you, like, an effeminate dude, or just an ugly chick?'

More laughter. I feel my face turning red.

Vickers says, 'What she's trying to ask is, are you a *dyke* or are you a *faggot*?' [...]

'That's not really it, babe,' Sierra says to Vickers, her voice dripping with artificial sweetness. 'What I want to know is'—she turns towards me, gestures at my crotch—'is there, like, a dick in there? Or a vag?' [...]

And then Solo is on his feet, his imposing frame towering over the table. He reaches out a massive hand and claps Vickers on the shoulder.

'Sit down, bro,' he says. 'You're being an ass.' (87-8)

This scene is one of several examples of moments where Riley might start feeling isolated, alone, misunderstood and different to everyone else, but Solo stands up to support Riley. Their friendship effectively soothes these harmful feelings, and proves to Riley that they do have a support network to rely on. Each time that Riley faces conflict, Solo and/or Bec are there to help, even when Riley might "want to be left alone – isolated – [Riley is] surrounded instead" (284).

One notable difference in *Symptoms of Being Human* to *You Know Me Well* and *Radio Silence* comes from the fact that the sexual identities of Riley, Solo and Bec are not confirmed within the text; we only know their gender identities, Riley being genderfluid, and Solo and Bec both being cisgender male and female respectively. Based on the way that Solo is portrayed, he is most likely heterosexual, but both Riley and Bec are likely queer, in large part due to Riley's genderfluidity. This deliberately different approach to LGBTQ+ identity means that the friendships within Garvin's novel offer different representation to *You Know Me Well* and *Radio Silence*, but with the same end results of reducing Riley's isolation and loneliness. In particular, the friendship between Riley and Solo shows that contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts which include friendships between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual characters are just as significant in the quest to move away from the stereotypically pessimistic past portrayal of queer YA characters. Cart & Jenkins "believe we will see more examples of [LGBTQ+ YA characters] having firm friendships with self-described straight kids" as the genre develops ("Representing the Rainbow" 145), which will help to confirm the idea that LGBTQ+ characters are never completely alone.

The depiction of supportive friendships between queer and non-queer YA characters will arguably also bring more awareness of LGBTQ+ identity to heterosexual/cisgender young people in society, perhaps making it easier for them to empathise and connect with LGBTQ+ young people in real life.

The prevalence of friendships between LGBTQ+ characters in contemporary YA literature has developed so far that these texts are now often including friendships between a diverse mix of queer characters with different sexual and gender identities, which has important implications regarding LGBTQ+ identity and inclusion for both the genre and society. Cart & Jenkins argue that there is an "unfortunate continuity [with] the ongoing segregation of the sexes" in that there is only a small percentage of LGBTQ+ YA texts that include both gay males and lesbian characters ("Representing the Rainbow" 130).

However, I believe that while there are admittedly less texts than what one might hope for, if the scope is broadened to include all types of LGBTQ+ friend combinations, such as bisexual females and gay males, or lesbian females and transgender boys, we will find that more and more texts are starting to make an effort to include a wider representation of multiple identities from the LGBTQ+ rainbow. *You Know Me Well* of course has friendships between gay males and lesbians, but also includes a genderqueer character, Greer, who is included in the novel's main friendship group towards the end of the book. *Radio Silence*'s central friendship is between a bisexual female and an asexual/demisexual male, and other friendship combinations exist too. Raine, who identifies as pansexual<sup>4</sup>, forms a friendship with Frances (bisexual female) and Daniel (gay male), and is a crucial

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<sup>4</sup> Raine does not actually identify as pansexual within the pages of *Radio Silence*, but in Alice Oseman's short story 'Party Girls' which features Raine engaging in a relationship with another girl, she self-identifies as pansexual, saying "I don't really mind what gender I, er, get with". Since this short story has only been published on Oseman's blog, it is not necessarily canon, but it may be viewed as such, and the author herself regularly refers to Raine's pansexuality when responding to questions from readers.

support person to both of them when they are feeling upset and need someone neutral to talk to. Carys, a self-identified lesbian, has her friendship with Frances, and also begins to form a connection with Raine near the end of the novel. *Symptoms of Being Human* includes the friendship between Riley (genderfluid) and Solo (heterosexual), and indeed the less definable LGBTQ+ friendship between Riley and Bec.

The diverse representation of LGBTQ+ identities arising from these friendships is an important step towards a more inclusive LGBTQ+ YA genre, to tell the stories of a wider variety of sexual and gender identities. This diversity would arguably have a significant impact on LGBTQ+ young people in society, particularly those who do not identify with the more familiar LGBTQ+ identities of gay and lesbian; if they are able to see themselves—their own LGBTQ+ identity—portrayed in such texts, it may help them explore their identity more deeply, as well as have their feelings validated. More representation would also necessarily garner more awareness of the nuances of LGBTQ+ identity, and hopefully bring about more acceptance within society for these lesser known sexual and gender identities. Finally, including multiple LGBTQ+ characters in contemporary YA literature is a more accurate reflection of the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. Every single friendship in both *You Know Me Well* and *Radio Silence* is between LGBTQ+ characters – an admittedly rare occurrence in YA literature at present. Cart & Jenkins rightly point out that texts such as these are at last starting to "become more realistic in depicting the relationships and alliances that commonly exist" between different LGBTQ+ young people ("Representing the Rainbow" 130) – to reflect

the way that LGBTQ+ people naturally gravitate towards other LGBTQ+ people<sup>5</sup>, whether consciously such as Mark and Kate in *You Know Me Well*, or unconsciously like Frances and Aled do in *Radio Silence*. We can suppose, then, that the current trend in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature is moving towards a wider representation of LGBTQ+ identities, which will have positive outcomes for both the genre and society.

In another point of difference from *You Know Me Well* and *Radio Silence*, *Symptoms of Being Human* focuses more on Riley's relationship with their parents as a way of dismantling the isolation faced by LGBTQ+ teenagers in past texts, and reversing the historical parental role in LGBTQ+ YA literature. As we have seen, the pioneering and bridging texts of LGBTQ+ YA literature have often featured parents who either disapprove and patronise their queer offspring, such as Davy's parents in *I'll Get There* and Tony's parents in *Boy Meets Boy*, or are dead or absent from the LGBTQ+ character's life, like Ruby's mother in *Ruby*. In *Symptoms of Being Human*, however, both Riley's parents are involved and present in Riley's life, if not always completely able to understand of the struggles that Riley is going through. At the beginning of the novel, Riley thinks that their parents "couldn't misunderstand me more if they actively tried" (4), but they do try to support Riley through their anxiety and depression as much as they can. For instance, when Riley tells them that they "can't go to [Riley's dad's political] fund-raiser", their mother worries that Riley is "having another episode" (67)—that is, a panic attack—and Riley's parents end up letting Riley skip the event to avoid triggering Riley's anxiety any further. Before the start of the novel, they checked Riley into a mental health hospital, Pineview, and continue to make sure Riley has regular appointments with a therapist. Also, even if

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<sup>5</sup> Research studies which investigate the role of friendship within LGBTQ+ communities are surprisingly sparse (Forstie), but recent works have observed the fact that LGBTQ+ people tend to 'gravitate' towards each other, to instinctually feel "a sense of connection... [and] of sharing something in common" (Formby).

she appears awkward, Riley's mother does her best to make Riley feel comfortable enough to talk to her, saying "this... thing you're going through. You can tell me about it. All right? You can just tell me. Sometime." (233). This parental support is a driving force behind Riley eventually feeling confident enough to want to come out to their parents, and making a plan with their therapist on how best to tell them. Here, the novel's narrative undeniably recalls past LGBTQ+ YA literature, in that Riley is outed by the media first, taking away Riley's right to come out at a time of their own choosing.

Even though this appears to be a regressive step backwards for the genre, Garvin is merely reflecting the fact that even in the face of many encouraging steps for LGBTQ+ young people, experiences such as being unwillingly outed are still commonplace. At this stage, Riley's parental support is tested. Their initial reactions are less than reassuring:

'Oh,' [Riley's mother] says. Her tone is polite, distant. 'So it's... you're transsexual.'

I hear a thin vein of contempt in that last word, and it sends a jolt through my heart. Mum reads my reaction and shakes her head. She opens her mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. [...]

'Well of course they figured it out!' My dad's voice, almost a bellow. 'I'm a United States congressman running for re-election, Riley. For Christ's sake, you don't think there are people trying to dig up dirt on my family? [...] One month out of Pineview, Riley. We're not even through dealing with *that* mess, now you want to broadcast your bisexual phase on the goddamn internet?'

The moment the words are out, his face goes pale. [...] 'Riley,' he says. 'I didn't mean –' (252-4)

Mislabelling Riley's genderfluid identity as 'transsexual' and 'bisexual' shows that neither of Riley's parents yet truly understand what Riley's identity means. However, both appear to regret their contempt and anger straight away, suggesting that their responses were fuelled by confusion and misguided anger, rather than genuine disapproval. After a few days of processing and researching genderfluidity, Riley's parents are more supportive and tell Riley they "love [Riley] no matter what" (296). They admit that "this is all very new to [them]... until [Riley] said it out loud, neither of [Riley's parents] had heard of 'gender fluid'", and that Riley will "have to help [them] navigate this whole thing" (296).

By the end of *Symptoms of Being Human*, Riley's father is "being cool about it... maybe he thinks it's just a phase [but Riley is] giving him the benefit of the doubt" (302), while Riley's mother "accepts it without really understanding it... [and is] just relieved it's out in the open" (303). The biggest show of parental support, though, comes in the novel's final pages. Riley decides to speak at a LGBTQ+ panel, and even though it would likely damage his political campaign to be seen at such an event, Riley's father attends:

One of the doors in the back of the hall opens partway, and a man slips in. He's tall, and wear a blue baseball cap over dark aviator sunglasses. [...] I look closer and see that there's gold writing on his blue cap; it's the University of Notre Dame logo. It's my dad. My heart swells in my chest [...] and [I] smile at him. He nods in reply, then he sinks down in his chair to disguise his height. [...]

I look at my father, hunched down in his chair, watching me intently. He lifts his hand so that it's level with his chest, then extends his pinkie and index fingers, making rock 'n' roll devil horns. I smile at him. (328-30)



Even though Riley's father is incognito, it is still a risk to his career to be there. His 'rock 'n' roll' gesture is his way of showing his support for Riley, meaningful despite the small nature of it.

The way in which Riley's parents are depicted in *Symptoms of Being Human* demonstrates that including positive parental support in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature is a step towards breaking down feelings of isolation and loneliness faced by LGBTQ+ characters, and that even if this support is conflicted at times, a parent's willingness to try and form a true human connection with their queer teenager is paramount. The ultimately validating support found in *Symptoms of Being Human* is in stark contrast to parental reactions in previous texts, and is hopefully a trend that will continue to be explored in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature. For readers who are parents of LGBTQ+ young people, these portrayals might prove incredibly informative and help to guide the way they interact with their queer child.

The presence of a LGBTQ+ community is, somewhat surprisingly, not often visibly represented in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature. Perhaps this is due, as Cart & Jenkins suggest, to the fact that "out teens are now simply presumed to have a sympathetic unofficial community of friends both gay and straight whether or not they have access to formal communities like school Gay-Straight Alliances... or teen LGBTQ+ centres" ("Representing the Rainbow" 142). However, there are some texts which contain—and indeed celebrate—a visible LGBTQ+ community, which offers LGBTQ+ characters another way to form connections and friendships with people who know how it feels to identify as queer. *You Know Me Well* places the LGBTQ+ community at the forefront of the story's narrative. LGBTQ+ Pride Week acts as a structuring device for the novel, with the entire plot taking place over the course of this one week. As such, *You Know Me Well*

contains multiple Pride events organised by and for the LGBTQ+ community. These events are crucially weaved throughout the novel to provide apt settings for key plot moments, prompt character development, and even act as catalysts for certain plot points to occur. For example, Mark and Kate would never have met each other had it not been for the "gaygantuan kickoff party for San Francisco's very own Pride Week" at the club 'Happy Happy' (3). The Angel Project, a queer youth charity organisation, holds a fund-raiser poetry slam for LGBTQ+ poets to share their work. This event allows LGBTQ+ young people to come together and express their deepest feelings and thoughts in a safe place, without judgment. For instance, Quinn, the poetry slam organiser, reads a poem entitled 'The Beat', which recounts his difficult home life upon coming out as gay. It is clear that sharing his personal story unites the entire LGBTQ+ audience, with "hands beating together. Voices meeting together. Someone gets to their feet. We all get to our feet..." (193). In terms of narrative development, Ryan and Lehna each read a poem, which gives both Mark and Kate valuable insights into their friends' personal struggles, and hence how they might begin to repair their respective friendships with them.

The epic Pride Parade in the final section of *You Know Me Well* is the perfect finale to gather every LGBTQ+ character in one place, to instinctually connect with each other and celebrate the rainbow of queer identities. LaCour and Levithan write:

The warm sun. The people filling the streets. The bass so powerful it thrums through me. The people hawking Jell-O shots and bottles of water. The drag queens and drag kings. The trans men and trans women. The straight couples cheering us on. The topless girls, waving from apartments above us. The gay boys on fire escapes, shaking their asses. The bears, holding hands in matching wedding rings. The lesbian moms with toddlers on their shoulders. And those not as easily

identified or defined. The bi, the genderqueer, the questioning. All of us with love in our hearts.

We are all a part of this. (244)

LaCour and Levithan's decision to thread the LGBTQ+ community through the narrative of *You Know Me Well*—and on such an intrinsic level—truly showcases the positive presence of this community to LGBTQ+ YA characters. Interacting with the LGBTQ+ community gives every single character an opportunity to connect with all sorts of sexual and gender identities, because "the whole spectrum is in attendance... breathing in the rainbow air" (3), all with the same goal to "celebrate ourselves and each other" (15). Being involved with a LGBTQ+ community is a powerful weapon against isolation and loneliness, making it near impossible to feel disconnected; Mark recognises that even when he makes his way through the Pride Parade alone, he is nevertheless "a part of this... a part of everything" (239), that there is "no such thing as a stranger" (244). Likewise, Kate and Lehna attend school with "rainbow paraphernalia... rainbow friendship bracelets [and] Legalize Gay t-shirts", which act as "beacons to the other queer kids [who find them] by the rainbow glow of [their] backpacks" (218). Championing the LGBTQ+ community in contemporary YA LGBTQ+ literature thus appears to be a successful way to ensure that these queer characters can form true human connections, and experience a comforting sense of belonging.

The LGBTQ+ community has a significant physical presence in *Symptoms of Being Human* too. While Riley's high school GSA group "only [has] two names on the sign-up sheet, both dated three years ago" (124), it is the LGBTQ+ support group 'Queer Alliance'—or, 'the Q'—that gives Riley their first experience of a real-life LGBTQ+ community. The Q is a "safe place" for local LGBTQ+ people to "come together as a community" (153), for queer people to share their struggles and victories with people who

will understand and support them unconditionally. Indeed, the group begins each session with a dedication where everyone vows "not to focus on our flaws, but to celebrate our uniqueness. To share our pain, our joy, and our love, and to create a better tomorrow" (153-4). For Riley, being at the Q allows them to "start to feel more normal" (156), and gives Riley the valuable chance to connect in real life with other people just like them. This opportunity becomes particularly significant to Riley when they meet another genderqueer person at the Q:

I'm transfixed. *Genderqueer*. I realise this may be the first person like me—or *close* to being like me—that I've ever met. I look at the trace of lip gloss, the green hair protruding from the back of the baseball hat – and all at once, I understand what it must be like for someone else to see *me* for the first time. When I saw Morgan, my first instinct was the wonder: Boy or girl? And if I saw *me*, with my untamed midlength hair and my ambiguous wardrobe, I'd probably wonder the same thing. I think of all my mother's scrutinising looks, all the lectures about appearance I've endured from my dad. Were they really judging – or just trying to figure me out? (193)

The experience of meeting someone with the same LGBTQ+ identity as them provides Riley with a new insight and consideration for how other people might view them, and a potential explanation for why people might react they way they do around Riley. The safe space at the Q helps Riley feel comfortable enough to come out as genderfluid to the group, the first time Riley has shared their identity out loud/in public. Riley experiences the subconscious human connection that comes with sharing a LGBTQ+ identity, noting that they have "never been so accepted by a group of strangers – or friends for that matter" (196). By the end of the novel, the support that Riley gains at the Q is a big influencing

factor in Riley's decision to speak openly about identifying as genderfluid at a Trans Health Con panel being run by the Q's mediator, Mike/Michelle. Being a part of a LGBTQ+ community is instrumental for Riley's personal journey and for accepting their own identity and sharing it with the world. Without other LGBTQ+ people to meet and connect with, Riley would arguably have found it more difficult to overcome their feelings of isolation and loneliness, and certainly would not have formed as many human connections with other LGBTQ+ people as they do through the Q. Riley's character development is a testament to the benefits of the inclusion of a visible LGBTQ+ community in contemporary YA literature.

*Radio Silence* may be distinguished from both *You Know Me Well* and *Symptoms of Being Human* by the fact that there is no mention or presence of an official LGBTQ+ community. And yet, we do see members of this community connecting in a more subtle 'unofficial' way, namely through the fan base—or, fandom—of Aled's podcast 'Universe City'. 'Radio Silence' is the name of the protagonist of 'University City', and is described as an "agender science fiction university student" (42). Radio's voice is alternately pitched high, medium, or low, in order to convey the idea that "none of the voices are girl or boy voices... [because] Radio doesn't have a gender" (56). In addition, Radio's sexual identity—while not actually defined—could likely be described as pansexual, because "Radio falls in love with all sorts of people, boys and girls and other genders and... aliens and stuff" (198). Radio's queer identity is an important component of their character. It would not be a leap to suppose that a large number of LGBTQ+ people are thus drawn to the 'Universe City' podcast and fandom because of Radio's agender and pansexual identity. Frances is certainly an example of one. When Frances comes out to Aled as bisexual, she explicitly links her LGBTQ+ identity to 'Universe City':

'When did you realise you were bi?' Aled said [...]

'There wasn't, like, one moment,' I said. 'It was like... well, I found out what it was on the Internet and then it just made sense...' I'd never tried to explain this to anyone before. Not even myself, really. 'Like... this sounds really stupid, but I've always been able to imagine being with a boy or a girl. I mean, obviously they're slightly different, but, like, the general feelings are the same... does that make sense?' [...]

'Like, it's one of the reasons that I got so into *Universe City* in the first place. Because Radio falls in love with all sorts of people, boys and girls and other genders and... like, aliens and stuff.' (198)

Frances can personally relate to Radio's LGBTQ+ experiences because of her own LGBTQ+ identity, and this connection no doubt helps Frances come to terms with her sexual identity, to further understand her feelings and realise that she is not alone in those feelings. Radio's creator, Aled, of course identifies as queer as well; one could say that Aled is creating his own LGBTQ+ community through 'Universe City', in bringing LGBTQ+ people together as fans of the series. As Cart & Jenkins mention, teenagers may not always be able to access a formal LGBTQ+ community, and thus can "find their LGBTQ+ peers and a sense of community in informal friendship networks" ("Representing the Rainbow" 88). *Radio Silence* demonstrates that fandom communities can often act as unofficial LGBTQ+ communities, and hence offer another avenue of support and human connection for LGBTQ+ characters in contemporary YA literature.

Even more widespread in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature, however, is another one of the "unofficial communities of support" that has sprung up (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow" 144): the online LGBTQ+ community. Being able to find and

join an online LGBTQ+ community has been pivotal in counteracting the isolation and loneliness faced by contemporary LGBTQ+ YA characters. Incorporating the internet into these recent texts has meant that queer teenagers who may previously have been isolated and lonely – such as those who live in small towns with no physical LGBTQ+ community, or those who identify as a less 'mainstream' sexual and/or gender identity and have no real-life examples to look to – now have the opportunity to connect with other LGBTQ+ people online. The online LGBTQ+ community in *Symptoms of Being Human*, for instance, is equally as important as the physical LGBTQ+ community. Riley's therapist encourages Riley to start an anonymous online blog to "interact with 'people like [Riley]' in a 'risk-free' way" (27). Riley quickly realises that the blog can be "a place where [they are] free to be what [they] are" (30), and that their blog represents "the truest part of [Riley]" (120). The sense of connection that this online LGBTQ+ community brings Riley is apparent in the way that Riley regards their blog followers as "new friends, all 624 of them" (120), and the way that "knowing [Riley has their] blog community... makes [Riley] feel like [they] belong" (137).

It isn't just Riley who finds solace in an online LGBTQ+ community; Bec and her transgender sister "researched on the internet... [and] found the Q" (224), a fact which demonstrates that online and physical LGBTQ+ communities complement each other. Other sources of online community are mentioned throughout *Symptoms of Being Human*, such as specific websites like QueerAlliance.org. Riley also learns "from another genderfluid blogger" that lip gloss can help soothe feelings of gender dysphoria (44). We can see, then, that the online LGBTQ+ community is prevalent through Riley's entire world, and likely the worlds of many other contemporary LGBTQ+ YA characters. Tellingly, the Trans Health panel which requires Riley to speak publicly about their identity

is titled "Building LGBTQ[+] Communities Online" (326). It is clear that the internet is a key component of contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature, and serves as another way to rid the genre of the stereotypical past portrayal of an isolated, lonely queer teenager. As these recent texts begin to mirror the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, we will no doubt only see more examples of the strong influence that online LGBTQ+ communities can have on these queer characters.

With strong friendships and a strong LGBTQ+ community encouraging characters to connect with each other, it is no surprise that the queer romantic experience is portrayed much more optimistically in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts than in the pioneering or bridging texts. In *You Know Me Well*, the main developing romantic relationship between Kate and Violet is not singled out, or treated differently due to its queer nature; Kate and Violet face the same obstacles that challenge any relationship, queer or non-queer: the fear of not being 'good enough' for each other, miscommunication, and uncertainty about the future. Despite the tension that threatens to keep Kate and Violet apart, the overall feeling of their relationship is one of hope. For instance, when Kate is too afraid to meet Violet at the party on the opening night of the novel, Violet discards the rose she had meant to give to Kate – but the way in which she discards the rose is portrayed in an unexpectedly optimistic light. Violet leaves the rose on a bench at the pier, and since Kate and Mark have gone looking for Violet, they find it.

'Was she throwing [the rose] away?'

'She might have been,' Mark whispers back. 'But maybe not. Maybe it was an act of hope, like when you make a wish, send it out into the world.'

'You hope it finds its way back to you,' I say. (47)



This moment of despair is instead turned into one of hope, hope that Violet has not given up on Kate, and they still might be able to find each other. Mark's queer experience, too, is normalised, in that he is "living [his] out-to-everyone life pretty much the same as before everyone (including me) knew [that he was gay]" (4). Instead of "display[ing] shame over being LGBTQ[+]" as in previous texts (Hayn & Hazlett 68), the queer characters in *You Know Me Well* are comfortable enough to kiss in the street, as Kate and Violet do. The reactions from bystanders is a complete reversal of the disgusted disapproval of the past:

A clap begins; a whoop follows. More cheers, more applause.

'Happy Pride!' a voice yells, and then more voices join in.

If it were up to us, we'd keep kissing forever. But eventually, we have to let go. The strangers are kind; they don't stick around to make us self-conscious when it's over. (107)

Mark's friend Ryan decides to come out by wearing a shirt to school reading 'By the way, I'm gay', and the reactions are similarly positive with "people stop[ping] him to say how much they love the shirt" (237). *You Know Me Well* depicts a thoroughly supportive queer romantic experience – one might say that it is an extension of the gaytopia found in Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* – where living as openly LGBTQ+ is no longer something which is viewed as immoral, or wrong, but rather is a positive, validating experience that can feel "almost as natural as breathing" (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow" 135).

*Radio Silence* contains both detrimental and supportive aspects of the queer romantic experience, yet the depiction is more complicated and matured than that of previous texts – and the balance decidedly tips in favour of the positive overcoming the negative. Frances is sure of her bisexual identity, and has "always been able to imagine being with a girl or a boy" (198). However, Frances is not actually out as bisexual to

anybody until she tells Aled midway through the novel, because "there was never really anyone worth telling" (198). Frances is unintentionally hiding her true self from others, but we already know that this is not constrained to just her sexuality, because Frances also hides her passion for drawing fanart for 'Universe City'. We can therefore see that Frances's concealed queer identity is for a more complex reason than those found in previous LGBTQ+ YA texts. Frances also attaches painful feelings to her only queer romantic experience, which is with Carys. After kissing Carys, Carys "started screaming" at Frances, saying she thought Frances was her friend and that Frances must have been "just pretending this whole time" (313), which leads Frances to blame herself and her actions for Carys's subsequent disappearance. However, this queer experience is shown to be not as straightforwardly demoralising as Frances believes it to be; when Frances and Carys meet up again two years later, they are able to laugh at the fact that Carys had overreacted by "literally scream[ing] at [Frances] for a good ten minutes just because [she'd] kissed [Carys]" (352). Carys even gives Frances "an apology kiss" (351), thus turning the very catalyst that had caused the initial conflicted experience into something pleasant. Once this resolution occurs, we understand that Frances interpreted Carys's reaction more negatively than it was in reality, largely due to her own personal uncertainties which are not necessarily related to her LGBTQ+ identity.

Aled's queer experience in *Radio Silence* is likewise both challenging and affirming, which affects his romantic relationship with Daniel. Aled "literally [doesn't] care about what anyone else would think" about their relationship (156), and yet does not want to come out as a couple because he "didn't want to be... couple-y around other people [they] knew... it was all just for [them] in private" (277). This causes Daniel to worry that Aled is "just pretending to be attracted to [Daniel] because [he] feel[s] sorry for him" (373). At first

glance, this portrayal may seem similar to those in previous LGBTQ+ YA texts where characters try to deny their feelings, and keep their relationship a secret from disapproving eyes. However, Aled's queer experience, and his relationship with Daniel, is more complicated than this. As mentioned above, Aled does not care what others think of their relationship, and Daniel is certainly comfortable with his sexuality; he describes himself as "massively gay" (390) and knew he was gay "as soon as [he] understood what gay was" (275). The complication in their relationship stems from Aled's uncertainty regarding the intricacies of his own queer identity. Aled "doesn't think he's gay", but "doesn't really feel attracted to anyone except [Daniel]" (277), and has trouble understanding exactly what these contradictory feelings mean. These challenging feelings are neutralised by the end of novel, though, because Aled is able to reconcile his queer identity and identify as demisexual, because he feels "*partly* asexual... only feel[s] sexually attracted to people [he] know[s] really, *really* well" (389). Hence, Aled's queer romantic experience and his relationship with Daniel is actually shown to have improved, and has conversely turned into an affirming queer romantic experience. For both Frances and Aled, then, the balance between challenging and triumphant queer experiences in *Radio Silence* is more complex and more realistic than those found in pioneering and bridging LGBTQ+ YA texts, and ultimately leaves the reader with a more optimistic outlook, ensuring that contemporary "LGBTQ[+] characters are seen in healthy, positive romantic relationships" (Hayn & Hazlett 69).

Riley's queer experience in *Symptoms of Being Human* is undeniably the most destructive out of these three texts, but also arguably ends up being the most victoriously positive. Identifying as genderfluid means that Riley is subject to verbal abuse at school, with students whispering behind Riley's back, calling them "the new tranny" (21) and the

dehumanising "it" (5). This treatment is "at best... invasive curiosity; at worst, open condemnation" (28), causing Riley to sometimes "feel guilty for being how I am" (36) and is part of the reason why Riley decides to hide their identity for so long. Riley also faces abuse online, with anonymous messages calling them "fag" (86) and urging them to "kill urslef" (sic) (229). The most disturbing thing to befall Riley, though, comes when Vickers and his gang escalates their bullying into physical and sexual assault. After Riley is outed by the media, and their parents react badly, Riley flees the house, and escapes to the parking lot that they have been to before with Bec. Unfortunately for Riley, Vickers and his football cronies are there, and decide to take the opportunity to attack Riley. They pin Riley down on the hood of Riley's car in order to try and find out what genitals Riley has:

'Anyone want to take bets on what we got here? I got ten bucks on chick.'

'That thing is too ugly to have a pussy.'

Another laugh. Then Vickers says, 'One way to find out.'

I feel a hand grip my upper thigh, and I scream... I thrash on the hood, kicking wildly. [...] My arms are pulled apart and pinned so that I'm spread-eagled on the hood. [...]

[Vickers] whispers, 'Not so tough now, are you? Fucking freak.' (261)

Luckily, Solo and Bec arrive in time to stop Vickers and the others from going any further, and they are able to take Riley to the hospital. This traumatic experience unequivocally adds to Riley's painful queer experience – and judging by these events alone, one might be tempted to categorise *Symptoms of Being Human* as a pioneering LGBTQ+ YA text.

However, there are strong moments of victory throughout the novel that result in an overall hopeful outlook for Riley. Riley frequently uses their blog to champion the genderfluid identity, with emphatic statements like "SOCIETY NEEDS TO CHANGE" to

accept the notion that there are more than two genders (59), and telling a suicidal trans girl that "there is NOTHING wrong with you... it's not a choice! It's how you were born" (116-7). Riley's blog gives Riley a voice to stand up for themselves and others like them, and to counter the prejudicial attitudes in society. Riley is also able to defend themselves against Vickers and Sierra's bullying; Riley tells Sierra that it is "none of [her] business" what gender Riley was assigned at birth (87), and tells Vickers to "Back off" when he begins hassling Riley and Bec after a football match (217). Riley's self-belief and confidence in the validity of their identity grows to the point that they begin sharing this belief not only on the internet, but in real life as well. When Riley's parents find out, Riley is strong enough to tell them "this is not a phase... this is who I am" (254), and when the students at school find out, Riley announces in the cafeteria: "I'm not going to stop being who I am just because you don't like it... and I'm not going to stop talking about it just because you don't understand it... I'm only going to talk *louder*" (312).

The most explicit way that Riley turns their traumatic queer experience into an affirmative one comes after Riley has been physically and sexually assaulted by Vickers and his gang. Initially, Riley feels like "a broken thing" and "a burden" (277), but after gaining some perspective, Riley realises that "this is [their] chance to speak up for other people like me" (318), that "if [they] can talk about it... maybe it will help [Riley] process all of this... give it a positive meaning, instead of just being a sad story" (317). This deliberate decision to view their queer experience as ultimately victorious is a key example of the way that many contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts foster a validating, supportive queer romantic experience, even while acknowledging the damaging experiences that LGBTQ+ teenagers often still face. This "literature of hope" portrays "characters [who] encounter barriers, struggles and crises, [and] gain resiliency and exit with a sense of self-

confidence" (Logan et al. 33). Indeed, portraying these experiences in a hopeful light—in spite of the challenges—gives these characters even more power, and allows them to be open to future possibilities instead of "dwelling on despair" (Logan et al. 33).

It is worth noting that another interpretation of contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts which contain more stereotypically painful experiences involves considering whether the specific LGBTQ+ identity being represented is relatively 'new' to LGBTQ+ YA literature. Given that the pioneering and bridging texts were primarily focused on gay male and lesbian YA characters, all of the other LGBTQ+ identities are inevitably lagging behind in regards to the quantity of texts portraying them. It could be argued, then, that the LGBTQ+ YA literature which specifically pertains to these lesser explored queer identities are still in their development stages, working through issues similar to those found in the overall genre's pioneering and bridging texts. Therefore, we can reasonably expect these characters, in some texts, to face more harmful experiences, like Riley in *Symptoms of Being Human*, or to still be struggling with coming to terms with their LGBTQ+ identity, like Aled in *Radio Silence*. Riley's genderfluid identity, and Aled's asexual identity, have not yet been explored as deeply in LGBTQ+ YA literature as the more 'mainstream' LGBTQ+ identities have been, and so LGBTQ+ YA characters with these lesser known identities arguably must, in a way, endure the same challenges that gay and lesbian YA characters have endured, as a way of developing the genre, and to definitively earn more inspiring queer experiences for all LGBTQ+ identities.

Working alongside these favourable queer romantic experiences is the fact that the influence of death is—at last—significantly reduced in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature. In general, death is no longer a substantial threat in these recent texts. Cart & Jenkins note that "for too many years LGBTQ[+] literature has been deadly serious" –

emphasis on the deadly – but contemporary texts have been "infused with a welcome dose of humour" and "offer a benign, lighthearted view of the universe" ("Representing the Rainbow" 127-8). Of course, there are recent texts which do mention and deal with death, but these exceptions are depicted in a more complex way compared to previous depictions, and do not revert back to the oversimplified stereotypes found particularly in pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature. For instance, in Alice Oseman's *Radio Silence*, Aled returns home during a break from university to find that his mother has had his dog Brian euthanised without discussing it with Aled first. He makes "painful noises... like he [is] dying", and his mother's cruelty is described as her way of "burning [Aled], slowly, until he die[s]" (306). It is tempting to compare Aled's situation to Davy's devastation in *I'll Get There* when his dog died – and yet, unlike the way Fred's death was portrayed, the death of Aled's dog is entirely unrelated to his sexuality. In fact, Aled's sexuality itself is largely unrelated to the novel's primary plotline; his sexual identity is merely part of a secondary plotline that follows Aled and Daniel's changing relationship. Brian's death, in comparison, is a catalyst in the main narrative plotline, prompting Aled's dreaded return to university, to his self-imposed isolation and decision to stop making 'Universe City'. The circumstances surrounding the death of Aled's dog suggest that death affects characters *regardless* of their sexual and/or gender identity, and thus quashes the causal link between the two. This inclusion of death is therefore more complicated than what we can find in the pioneering LGBTQ+ YA literature, and it subverts the reader's expectations by using death in a way that is completely unrelated to Aled's LGBTQ+ identity.

Bucking the trend, there are a few contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts which mention death by suicide. Cart & Jenkins observe that "suicide has more or less disappeared from the pages of LGBTQ+ novels" ("Representing the Rainbow" 222), and while it's true that

LGBTQ+ characters very rarely take their own lives in contemporary YA literature, the issue of suicide in relation to queer teens is occasionally discussed. In *You Know Me Well*, Ryan's new boyfriend Taylor pays tribute to a LGBTQ+ support organisation called The Angel Project at the poetry slam event, saying that if he hadn't received support from them, "[he] wouldn't be here now... on this planet" (189). *Symptoms of Being Human* is more comprehensive in its discussion of suicide as an LGBTQ+ related issue. Our narrator, Riley, is revealed to have tried to take their own life before the start of the novel; they tell Bec that "over the summer, [they] chased a bottle of Xanax with a glass of [Riley's] dad's favourite Irish whiskey" (292). Riley explains that they "[weren't] on meds yet, or in therapy or anything" (292), and so was more vulnerable to anxious and suicidal thoughts:

I was getting ready for one of my dad's big events, like the fund-raiser last week... getting dress up – it triggers my dysphoria. It was especially bad that night, and it snowballed into a full-on panic attack. And I just... I felt like it would never end.

Like there was no other way out. (292)

Another haunting description alluding to suicide comes when Riley is dressing for their father's political event, who says that "putting [the dress] on is like a suicide ritual; as I dress, I'm killing any possibility of expressing my other, less acceptable self" (64). One character actually does die by suicide, although this occurs before the start of the novel; Bec's transgender sister Gabi took her own life because of "the way [her] family reacted" to her coming out as transgender (225). Additionally, a trans girl named Andie sends Riley an anonymous message on their blog saying that she had a fight with her parents after coming out as transgender, and is currently "staring at the train tracks and thinking [she] should just throw [her]self down there" (115). Thankfully, Andie's death does not eventuate.



The inclusion of suicide in *Symptoms of Being Human* does not mean that the novel has reverted back to the way death is portrayed in pioneering and bridging LGBTQ+ texts. Rather, openly discussing suicide serves as a way to reflect the unfortunate reality of many LGBTQ+ young adults in the real world. A 2015 study showed that LGBTQ+ youth are "two to five times as likely as their straight peers to attempt suicide" (Cart 194). Although one wishes that it was not, suicide is unfortunately a necessary subject for some contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts, because it is "important to have literature that reflects these disturbing realities" that are still present in the real world (Cart 194). There is admittedly an implicit contradiction here, in that despite the fact that LGBTQ+ suicide rates are high in reality, LGBTQ+ YA literature does not often focus on the issue of death. Some might believe this turning away from death to be irresponsible, or unrealistic. There is no easy answer or solution for this contradiction; on one hand, we want LGBTQ+ YA stories of hope, of celebration, but on the other hand, we need stories which openly discuss difficult subjects like suicide, so as not to pretend the issue does not exist. I would argue that a balance between hope and realism is the most effective way to explore LGBTQ+ identity in YA literature, to provide both accurate and inspiring stories for LGBTQ+ and heterosexual/cisgender young people alike.

The 'coming out' story arc will arguably always be an important part of LGBTQ+ literature, because "a large number of queer individuals choose to come out, or at least realise their feelings, during their teens" (Oseman, "Queering Genre"). As such, there are still some contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts which focus on a character and their coming out experience. However, rather than reducing this journey to a "problem-driven [novel] that end[s] with a character's coming out", these recent texts "follow characters through the process of coming out into an examination of their lives as [LGBTQ+]" (Cart & Jenkins,

"Representing the Rainbow" 127). *Symptoms of Being Human* is an excellent example of this matured perspective operating at its most successful. The novel centres upon Riley's exploration into their genderfluid identity, from the first steps of articulating their queer identity to themselves, to articulating that as an anonymous blogger, and finally feeling ready to come out to their friends and family, and the wider public. And yet, while the 'coming out' story arc is a central part of the novel's narrative, it is not the *only* part. The difference between previous texts and contemporary texts is the way in which these recent texts "weave their coming-out stories into larger dramatic narratives" (Gross). In *Symptoms of Being Human*, for example, Riley also must face the broader challenges of dealing with anxiety, finding their place at a new school, making new friends, and dealing with the fame associated with being the child of a politician. In this way, Garvin integrates Riley's coming out narrative "into the rich and varied spectrum of human experience" (Gross), thus creating a full and genuine character-driven novel, as opposed to a novel driven by the 'problem' of coming out as LGBTQ+.

Another way that contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts portray the 'coming out' story in a more refined way is by including it as a secondary plotline rather than the driving force behind the main narrative. In *You Know Me Well*, the two protagonists Mark and Kate are both already openly out as LGBTQ+, and so their narrative plotlines are not influenced by their 'coming out' story arcs. Kate's main narrative arc threads together her developing relationship with Violet and her uncertainty over what to do with her life once she leaves high school. Mark's storyline is admittedly more affected by a 'coming out' story arc than Kate's – however, it is not his own coming out story, but his friend Ryan's. Before Ryan is out, Mark cannot feel as if he is in a legitimate relationship with Ryan, and once Ryan is ready to come out, it is an meaningful moment that helps Mark accept that he and Ryan are

moving forwards as friends, not lovers. Ryan's coming out is unquestionably a secondary plotline, however, because Ryan himself is a secondary character, and Mark's storyline contains other dimensions such as his friendship with Kate. Consequently, *You Know Me Well* conveys the idea that the 'coming out' story arc—while still a significant aspect of contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature—does not necessary have to be the sole focus in a novel's narrative. In doing so, *You Know Me Well* takes "its characters beyond the coming-out trope and giv[es] them other questions to focus on", which unquestionably enriches the novel and its characters (Flax 138).

*Radio Silence* has an even smaller focus on the 'coming out' story arc; Oseman's novel contains multiple queer characters, and yet none of their queer identities are central to the main plotline. Frances already knows that she is bisexual, but has very little romantic interactions during the novel – the only references to her bisexual identity come when her crush on Carys is mentioned through flashbacks. Her queer identity is not a crucial part of her main plotline, which is concerned with her friendship with Aled and making the podcast 'Universe City' with him, and deciding whether she really wants to attend a prestigious university after high school. Aled's demisexuality is also not as relevant to his main storyline, in which he develops a friendship with Frances, struggles against anxiety/depression as well as his oppressive mother, and deals with the pressures involved in the sudden popularity spike of 'Universe City'. Aled does have a coming out moment during the novel, however, when he realises that he identifies as demisexual. Yet, this is part of his secondary plotline with Daniel, not his main plotline, and represents a different kind of coming out story to that of past texts, through both the reduced narrative significance and the less common LGBTQ+ identity of asexuality. *Radio Silence* symbolises the shift in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature, where more and more often

the focus is on characters whose coming out stories are not a central part, or sometimes *any* part, of the narrative. These recent texts suggest that these LGBTQ+ characters are no longer merely defined by their sexuality, and the "plot is not driven by the characters' queerness" (Kokie 30). Some may fear that this runs the "risk of tokenism", where "the inclusion of the queer character is superficial diversity rather than genuine inclusion" (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow 129), but the best texts certainly do not stray down this path. Rather than "treating queerness like an add-on trait", the best of these recent texts acknowledge that "queerness is only one part of a whole character" (Oseman, "Queering Genre"). Hence, the development and maturation of the 'coming out' story arc is predominantly a confident step forwards in creating LGBTQ+ YA characters that are complex, multifaceted, with genuine depth, and are therefore more engaging and identifiable to both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual/cisgender young people.

Because these recent narratives are expanding to include all kinds of LGBTQ+ stories rather than just a 'coming out' story arc, or romantic relationships, contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature is now free to explore a wider range of diversity – and we are finally seeing more texts including LGBTQ+ characters of underrepresented ethnicities and more nuanced sexual and gender identities. Pioneering and bridging LGBTQ+ YA texts had a sadly narrow focus; the texts of the 1970s and 1980s dealt exclusively with homosexuality, and these early texts were also "overwhelmingly white", with only three novels with queer people of colour by 1992 (Waters). Bisexuality wasn't addressed until the 1997 publication of M. E. Kerr's novel *'Hello', I Lied* (Cart & Jenkins, "The Heart" 52), and transgender YA texts were "virtually nonexistent" until Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* in 2004 (Waters). The other disparity is found in gender representation, with LGBTQ+ cis boys outnumbering LGBTQ+ cis girls 4:1 in 1992 (Waters). Thankfully, contemporary

LGBTQ+ YA literature—particularly in recent years—has begun to encompass more diverse stories, and this "push for more inclusive queer literature seems to be having successes" (Waters). More and more texts have LGBTQ+ characters who identify as something *other* than gay or lesbian. In relation to gay and lesbian YA novels, the number of novels which represent different sexual and gender identities is still unsurprisingly lower – but nevertheless, contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature has "very slowly... begun expanding toward other letters later in the LGBTQIAP acronym" (Waters), and we can realistically hope that this positive step forwards will continue in the coming years. Unfortunately, there continues to be an imbalance between the number of LGBTQ+ cis boys and LGBTQ+ cis girls, with the ratio currently standing at 2:1 (Waters). However, as E. M. Kokie points out, there has been "a bit of a girls-loving-girls boom" in recent years (30), hopefully indicative of a growing trend for future texts. Sadly, many LGBTQ+ characters are still "disproportionately white" (Waters), but there has been some growth in LGBTQ+ characters of colour and diverse ethnicities. *Radio Silence*, for example, contains a bisexual, half-Ethiopian female character (Frances), a gay Korean male character (Daniel), and a pansexual Indian female character (Raine). While the numbers of LGBTQ+ characters of colour are still "relatively small and growing far too slowly... they are significantly larger than in the past and may... point toward a more inclusive literature to come" (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow" 128).

If contemporary LGBTQ+ YA literature continues to follow its current progression, I would argue that we will most certainly be gifted with more diverse LGBTQ+ stories—containing different sexual and gender identities, different ethnicities, and more female queer characters—in the years to come. Seeing more diversity in this genre will have monumental impacts on both LGBTQ readers as well as heterosexual/cisgender readers.

LGBTQ+ young people, especially those who have non-white ethnicities, are still seen as—and most likely are—a minority group. At this point in society, minority groups continue to face challenges in regards to being accepted and empathised with. As such, LGBTQ+ young people "must negotiate a complicated social and political environment" (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow" xiii), and understandably, many struggle through this path. If a LGBTQ+ young person is able to read a YA novel in which someone *just like them* is represented—with the same LGBTQ+ identity, the same ethnicity, the same feelings of fear and hope and love—then this novel acts as a form of support. Diverse representations in YA literature can assure readers that they are not alone. Heterosexual and cisgender readers, or any reader who does not identify in exactly the same way as what is being represented, will learn about people with different life experiences than themselves, will perhaps relate to another aspect of the character's personality or behaviour, and will—hopefully—find it easier to empathise with these diverse LGBTQ+ YA characters. With these realistic, diverse portrayals of LGBTQ+ YA characters, we can hope that readers will "not simply feel *for* LGBTQ+ people but also *with* them" (Cart & Jenkins, "Representing the Rainbow" xv). Only then can society begin to move forwards into a more accepting and more considerate way of thinking which encompasses *all* people.

LGBTQ+ YA literature has not always been a place of hope. Since the first depiction of YA homosexuality in 1969, with Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip*, the genre has been composed of isolated and lonely queer characters, who undergo painful romantic experiences and traumatic 'coming out' story arcs, and have many explicit links with death. Over the following decades, LGBTQ+ YA literature has slowly but surely evolved and matured, beginning to portray LGBTQ+ characters who are able to form supportive friendships, feel a sense of LGBTQ+ community, have an affirming queer

romantic experience, and explore a wider range of narrative plotlines from which references to death have almost disappeared entirely. In addition, contemporary LGBTQ+ YA texts have finally developed to the point where more diverse stories are being told, in terms of different sexual and gender identities, and different ethnicities, which will provide comfort to LGBTQ+ readers and encourage empathy and understanding from all readers. Moving forward, we can only watch and wait, and—at last—we can have hope for a parade of LGBTQ+ YA texts that will create a bright, rainbow-coloured future.

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## *Skybourne*

### 1.

Faatina was the first person out of the classroom after the bell rang. She'd mentally mapped out the best route to the door, and her long legs zigzagged between the rows of desks, changing direction when confronted with a bag or someone leaning back in their chair. The heat outside was blazing, simmering up from the asphalt, but Faatina had to sprint. At least the trees that lined the path provided shadows to temporarily hide in. She just had to beat the chaotic roadblock of everyone trying to leave their classrooms at once. If she got caught in that, she'd be screwed. She had to get to the drama block *immediately*.

Auditions for this year's senior production were held last Thursday and Friday after school. Skybourne College's head drama teacher, Ms Burnett, had said she would take the weekend to decide on the cast and crew, and then hang a paper copy on the drama department's notice-board at exactly 3:15pm on Monday. Which was... now.

One of Faatina's best friends, Jess, sat next to her in Calculus. Jess knew exactly how Faatina felt about the cast list. Mostly because Faatina had spent the whole class fretting about the cast list. Jess had suggested that Faatina tell Mr Baldwin she was getting her period, so she could leave class early.

"It freaks the male teachers out," she'd said with a smirk.

"Firstly, that is brilliant and I will probably use that in the future, but secondly, how dare you? I can be patient."

That was a lie. Faatina was feeling anything but patient. Case in point: the cast list was also posted on the school's online bulletin, which was updated every morning. But that was a whole 18 hours away. Faatina needed to know *now*.

She thought her audition had gone pretty well – she'd felt confident, full of energy. She hadn't even stumbled over the lines. Faatina had loved Shakespeare for ages though, ever since they'd studied 'Romeo and Juliet' in Year 9, so it wasn't such a foreign language to her. She *had* to get it. But. What if she didn't get it?

Faatina made it halfway across the school grounds before she had to slow to a fast walk, to avoid melting into a sweaty mess. The brick buildings were radiating heat, even though it was coming up to autumn. Ice cream would be Faatina's next priority, after all of this. She was nearly past the library when she heard something. A wet gasp, a sniff. Someone was crying – but there didn't appear to be anyone around yet. Since she could hear them, but not see them, she figured they were trying to hide. That kind of made it worse. Faatina hesitated – the *cast list* – but, she stopped.

"You alright, mate?"

Clearly they weren't – sobbing alone outside the library wasn't what anyone would call 'alright'. There was an abrupt intake of breath, then nothing.

"I've got tissues," Faatina continued. She slowly approached the corner of the building. "They've got a seriously cool flamingo pattern on them, so you can't really say no."

As Faatina rounded the corner, she was met with the sight of a boy who was sitting on a bench, the library's wall shading him from the sun. He had brown skin, a bit lighter than hers, and his face was streaky, his eyelashes sticking to his cheeks. Faatina guessed

that he was maybe a year younger than her. The boy looked up, and quickly shoved his fingers beneath his glasses to wipe at his eyes.

"Hey, wait, I wasn't joking about those tissues." She dug in the front pocket of her bag and handed the packet to him.

"Thanks," the boy mumbled. He blew his nose.

"No problem." She watched him for a moment, then sat down next to him. "Nice hiding place."

Even though he was biting down hard on his lip, the boy tried his best to raise the corners of his trembling mouth.

"Can't be that good if you found me," he said. His voice was soft and scratchy.

"Yeah. I'm a little too good at being in places I shouldn't be. Sorry. I can leave, if you want?"

"No, it's fine."

Faatina waited for him to take a couple of deep breaths. The cast list would probably be up by now. She linked her fingers together so she wouldn't be tempted to fidget. It was actually kind of nice, having someone else to focus on right now.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's nothing," he said, looking away. "I mean – nothing important." He blew out another long puff of air. "It's just, yesterday, I spent all evening on my Chemistry homework – we've started doing chemical reactivity, and there are so many types of reactions – I thought I'd worked it out, but then before our teacher arrived, I was talking to my friend Emily, and I realised I'd done it *all wrong*." The boy's voice hitched. "I just sat there for the whole lesson, so confused, didn't even know what I was doing. I ran out as soon as the bell rang." He broke off to blow his nose again. "I know it's silly."

Faatina resisted the urge to put her hand on the boy's shoulder, because it looked as if he was trying to collapse in on himself, like a dying star.

"It's not silly," she said. "Once during Physics class I threw my textbook halfway across the room because I couldn't understand what the heck we were supposed to be reading. Mr Lensen wasn't that pleased."

The boy snorted, which was closer to a laugh than a sob. Faatina was going to count it as a laugh. He cleared his throat, like he was going to say something else, but he didn't. Faatina knew that schoolwork could be freaking stressful and definitely push people to tears – she'd been there. God, had she *been there*. Part of the reason why she was so nervous about reading the cast list was that if she *did* get the part, she was going to be busy as hell – what if she started failing her other classes? Faatina forced that thought aside; it felt better to think about this lost boy in front of her. In his case, it felt like there was more to it than a couple of difficult Chemistry questions, but it wasn't like she was going to ask him to spill all his secrets to a random girl. She stuck a hand into her hair and ruffled it with more force than necessary.

"What's your name?"

"Mateer," he said to the concrete between his feet. "But everyone calls me Matty. It's easier."

"I like Mateer. It's interesting," Faatina said.

"Thanks. I – I like the way you say it."

"Well, it's not that hard to pronounce, to be honest. My name's Faatina. People can either learn it, or go fuck themselves, to be honest."

Mateer looked over and finally met her eyes. There was a hint of curiosity in his expression.

"Anyway," said Faatina. "I'm sure your teacher wouldn't mind if you stayed behind after class, asked for some help. Who do you have?"

"Miss Pugh." Mateer's gaze slid back to his knees. "Yeah. That's a good idea. Thanks." His voice was flat, and Faatina got the feeling that he probably wasn't going to take her advice. She wasn't sure what else she could do, though. Being in a class with 30 other people, being expected to keep up, be at the same level, every single lesson. It could be exhausting.

Mateer held out the packet of tissues. "Sorry for being a damsel in distress."

"Hey," Faatina said, and her tone was sharper than she meant it to be. She smiled to make up for it. "Boys can cry too."

One corner of Mateer's mouth twitched up, and he fiddled with his satchel strap.

"I know," he said. "Thanks for being – just, thanks."

Mateer stood, and re-shouldered his bag. He gave Faatina an awkward wave, and walked away. She followed, and rounded the corner in time to see him being swallowed by the crowd of students now flowing towards the school gates. Realistically, they probably wouldn't speak to each other ever again. Faatina wasn't sure why, but that made her feel like she was trying to keep hold of a dream that was disintegrating, second by second, despite it having never really existed in the first place.

\* \* \*

The notice-board was empty.

Faatina had jogged the rest of the way to the drama building, weaving between the clumps of people on their way home. It was 3:24pm, so the cast list should definitely be up by now. Strangely, though, the corridor was deserted. Didn't anyone else want to know if they'd been chosen? Jess was meant to be coming, but she'd wanted to talk to Mr Baldwin



about last week's algebra test first. Faatina leaned against the opposite wall, listening to her accelerated heartbeat. Ms Burnett had said –

The nearest classroom door opened.

"You're late," said Faatina.

"Just keeping my audience in suspense," Ms Burnett said, a smirk dancing over her lips. Faatina suspected that she'd been deliberately waiting for someone to show up. Her frizzy black curls bounced around her face, and she was carrying a few sheets of paper.

Her expression was impassive, not offering Faatina any clues. Was that a bad thing? Was she trying to tell Faatina not to get her hopes up? Or was she still being dramatically mysterious? Bloody theatre people, it was so hard to tell. What if, though, her audition had actually been terrible and she hadn't got the part?

Ms Burnett banged drawing pins through each of the papers, arranging them in a crooked row. Faatina couldn't wait any longer. She moved to peer over Ms Burnett's shoulder, which wasn't hard because Faatina was nearly six feet tall, and Mrs Burnett was closer to five foot two.

Faatina skipped through the first page, which had all the official stuff like *thank you for auditioning, incredibly hard decisions, first rehearsal meeting, wardrobe measurements*, whatever. After a couple of seconds, Faatina's gaze snapped onto the second page.

## **Skybourne Senior Production 2018**

### **'Twelfth Night' Cast List**

She read as far as the first main role, and then stopped. Everything stopped. Faatina stared at the letters. It felt like her brain had suddenly converted exclusively to Hindi , and she was trying to decipher English for the first time.

**Viola.....Faatina Dhamija**

"See you at rehearsal," Ms Burnett said, amusement finally lighting up her face. Faatina waited until the classroom door had shut again before giving into a highly dignified squeak.

Faatina had never played a lead role in anything before. There hadn't really been any lead roles that she'd *wanted* to play, until now. When she'd mentioned the school productions to her parents in the past, they'd pointed out that it would make her very busy, and that she would need excellent time management to balance it against her schoolwork – which was terrifyingly true. She'd played smaller roles, though, in the years before she'd started NCEA, and there'd been the short plays their drama classes did for assessments. They got to perform them for the drama classes in different year groups, and sometimes even at school assemblies. Doing that had been fine – Faatina had been happy.

But Shakespeare. *Twelfth Freaking Night!* And Faatina was in her last year at Skybourne. Soon, she'd be leaving, going off into the 'real world', where theatre was for the hopeful, the brave, the lucky. The ridiculously talented. Or, the stupid. This was her last chance.

She hadn't even told her parents that she'd auditioned.

The sound of footsteps made Faatina look to the right. The sunlight from the open doors created a silhouette, walking down the corridor towards her. She thought it might be Jess, but as the outline got closer Faatina realised it was Shiloh, who was also Year 13, and in her drama class. They'd been part of the same assessment groups before, but outside of

class their paths hadn't crossed much. Shiloh's friends were all theatre people, whereas Faatina's friendship group was mainly studious prefects. Jess was the only one Faatina could really talk to about drama stuff.

Still, you couldn't attend Skybourne without knowing who Shiloh was. This was partly because Shiloh had publically come out as genderfluid last year. The whole school had heard the news by the end of the day, but Faatina had found out during one of their drama classes, where Shiloh had made a special point of coming out to the class in person. Ms Burnett was always telling them that you had to be able to trust each other in drama class. Be vulnerable, and all that. Apparently that was where the best acting came from. Shiloh had asked people to use "they/their" pronouns, which most of the school respected. Faatina couldn't see why anyone wouldn't – how hard was it to simply call people what they wanted to be called?

The other notable thing that Shiloh was known for was their impeccable sense of fashion, and the fact that they were forever lending out weirdly specific items of clothing to people. People went to Shiloh if they wanted something to wear on a date, or to a fancy family dinner, or – anywhere, actually. Shiloh probably owned more clothes than the school's drama department.

"Isn't it hilarious that Ms Burnett insists on doing the 'big reveal' the old fashioned way," Shiloh said, as they joined her at the notice-board. "Did you get the whole staged entrance thing?"

"Yeah, I think she enjoys it. She's a sadist at heart."

"Oh sweet, I got Orsino!"

Because Faatina had been busy dying, she'd forgotten to read the rest of the cast list. She moved down the page to see 'Shiloh Taimona' next to Orsino – and underneath that, 'Jess Fields' beside the role of Olivia. Faatina couldn't wait to see the look on Jess's face.

"Looks like we'll be getting to know each other a little better this year," she said, raising her eyebrows pointedly at Shiloh. They let out a loud laugh, and Faatina had a pretty good guess as to why. In 'Twelfth Night', Viola falls in love with Orsino while disguising herself as his man-servant, Cesario. Orsino is undeniably attracted to Viola (as Cesario), even while professing to be in love with Olivia. Meanwhile, Olivia falls in love with Viola (also as Cesario), and hates the thought of loving Orsino. Add in some classic Shakespearean 'lost twin' shenanigans, and a healthy dash of gay vibes, and you ended up with Faatina's favourite play.

"Talk to me, girl! Did you get it??" Jess's voice echoed down the corridor, vibrating off the walls. She ran towards them, her art design folder slapping against her legs with every step. Faatina gave her the thumbs up, and Jess stumbled to a halt next to them.

"I'm so proud of you," Jess said, leaning her hands on her knees and letting out a cough.

"Dude, look at the cast list though – you're Olivia!"

"Excellent," Jess said without looking up. "Now the world will finally know how much I love you."

Shiloh snorted.

"This is going to be fun as *fuck*," they said.

Jess looked up, having caught her breath, and started reading through the notice-board. Being dyslexic meant that she took a little longer to do it, but Jess was nothing if not persistent, and truthfully, far more thorough than Faatina.

"So Ms Burnett wants us to meet up Wednesday after school to introduce ourselves, and get our scripts and full rehearsal schedule. Apparently they're going to be on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays," Jess told them once she'd got to the end of the first page. She looked sideways at Faatina, and grimaced. "Oh my god, rehearsals. Are your parents okay with all this?"

"Uh..." Faatina glanced awkwardly at Shiloh. She didn't really want anyone else knowing that her parents might be an issue. "They're fine."

Jess raised her eyebrows, but kept silent. Faatina hadn't convinced herself either. But Faatina *really* wanted this. She was sure that once she'd explained it to her parents, they'd understand. They'd support her. They always supported her.

2.

"Mummy, Faatina's home!"

She heard her seven year-old brother, Rahul, before she saw him. Faatina purposely took her time undoing the straps on her school sandals. Anything to delay having to talk to her mum about the play.

Her house was what most people would call fancy, or posh – Jess did, whenever she visited. Jess was teasing. Mostly. Yes, her family was financially secure, because Faatina's dad was a doctor and had worked up the ranks until he was the owner of a general practice. Her parents hadn't specifically wanted a fancy house – it was more that they'd wanted a big house. Five bedrooms, to accommodate her, her parents, and her three siblings. Two storey, high ceilings, soft carpet. Faatina knew she was lucky. She wasn't too proud to admit that she took it for granted most of the time – but, to her, it was just her home. It was comfortable, familiar. Safe.

"Hey, Rahul! How's my favourite sibling doing?" she said as he raced into the foyer. Rahul giggled and wrapped his arms around one of her legs.

"Don't let Saffie and Jeetan hear you say that!" he said. Faatina knelt down and gave him a kiss on his forehead.

"Faatina? Is that you, sweetheart?"

Faatina prised Rahul's hands away from her leg, and let him curl them around her pinky finger instead. She gripped the strap of her backpack, and headed towards her mum's voice. Each step caused a swooping sensation in her chest. During the walk home, Faatina had run through different versions of telling her parents about being cast as Viola. They'd be excited for her. They'd be proud. And it was only the first term – the performances would all be during second term – so she had all of third term to study for her end of year

exams. Her grades wouldn't suffer at all. She wouldn't let that happen. They just had to trust her.

God, she couldn't stop her fingers from shaking.

"Hi Mum," she said, finding her in the lounge. "How was your day?"

Her mum looked up from her pile of laundry. Safrina really did have too many identical pairs of jeans. Faatina moved to help with folding.

"Good, good – busy," her mum added, smoothing her hands over one of her Dad's button shirts. "You know Cindy from the Hospice shop? She wants to organise a raffle, except she has no clue how to go about getting donations or anything like that, so she's asked me to help."

"You mean, alongside all the other fundraising things you're currently doing?"

Faatina pointed out, smiling in spite of herself.

Faatina's mum was technically a stay at home mum, but she did so much volunteer and charity work that she didn't end up 'staying home' much at all. She wouldn't have it any other way – she loved what she did, and she loved being busy.

"It's okay, I can multitask. How was your day at school?"

"Good," she managed, sounded vaguely like a strangled cat. "I..." *Just say it.* No – wait, give her some background information. Build up to it. "They're doing 'Twelfth Night' for senior production this year."

"That's great," her mum said. "Rahul, stop, those are tangled." She rearranged the pair of underwear that Rahul was attempting to fold.

"So," Faatina surged on. "I thought – maybe –"

"Yeah, of course we can all go and see it!" Her mum smiled at her. "I know how mad you are about Shakespeare. And the children will all love it."

"Right. Awesome." Faatina's brain was screaming at her, but she didn't know how to make it stop. "That'd be good, yeah. But, actually, I –"

"Muuuum?" Faatina's twelve year old sister, Safrina, wandered into the room. "Jasmine asked me if I want to have a sleepover at hers this weekend. Can I go?"

"You've got your swimming lesson on Sunday morning, but Friday night would probably be fine." Her mum looked at her watch distractedly. "Faatina, would you mind txting Jeetan to ask him to let us know when he's on his way home from drum practice?"

Okay, so, she hadn't told her. It was fine. Probably best to wait for her dad to get home anyway. She could tell them at dinner, and then they could freak out together.

Good plan.

\* \* \*

Faatina loved her bedroom. When she was younger they'd lived in a smaller house; she'd had to share with Jeetan, so that baby Safrina could have her own room and not wake them up by crying. Once they'd moved into this house, she not only got her own room, but the biggest room, after her parents. Being the oldest had some perks. Her bedroom was upstairs, with a slanting ceiling and a window nook looking out onto their back garden. It was the perfect place to sit and escape the chaos that was – sometimes – her family.

Faatina was sprawled over her bed on her stomach, working through some unfamiliar text questions for English with an episode of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* playing in the background, when her phone chimed. A Facebook notification. It was a friend request, from Shiloh. That was quick. It made sense though – they'd be talking a lot over the next few months. She accepted, then turned back to her homework. She'd only managed to write a couple more words before her phone chimed again.



*- hey! :D so i was thinking since we've got some important scenes together it'd be good to meet up and read through them together. maybe this weekend?*

Faatina stared at the screen. Was that something people did for main roles? She'd been planning on reciting her lines over and over to herself – but she supposed it might help to practice with someone else too. She didn't want to be that annoying person at rehearsals who had to be prompted every single line.

*- sounds good! my house or your house?*

*- i was thinking we could get coffee somewhere, i know a place that has lots of space and squishy armchairs :)*

Okay, so Shiloh wanted to go out for coffee. That was. Fine? A little less formal, maybe, but fine.

*- should i ask jess as well? we could practice our scenes with her too?*

The typing symbol appeared on her screen. And stayed there. Faatina frowned. She watched the dots move up and down. It was surprisingly rhythmical.

*- sure*

Faatina waited, but nothing else came through.

Weird.

Did Shiloh really want Jess there? Or did they want it to be just them? It was difficult to tell over text whether Shiloh was being sincere or sarcastic, or something else entirely. Wait. Was this – Shiloh wasn't asking Faatina on a date, right? It wasn't a date. It probably wasn't. Why would it be a date? Faatina's skin started prickling as her nerves spiked. What did Shiloh want?

Faatina squeezed her eyes shut, then reopened them, her bedroom just a fuzzy blur for a few, long seconds. Maybe she was just being ridiculous and completely overthinking

it. Faatina picked up her discarded pen so that she could jab it into her forehead, and stared at her phone, which was still sitting silently on Shiloh's 'sure'. She began to tap out a reply.

*- although, i think jess will probs be busy, bc she's always busy, so it might just be the two of us?*

It felt more like ten minutes than one minute before their response came through.

*- okay :) i'll let you know when and where!*

Faatina realised that her fingers were clenched painfully tight around her phone, and she forcibly relaxed them. Stop. Overthinking. It. She tossed her phone towards the other end of the bed so she couldn't say anything else stupid. Then she rolled over onto her back to stare up at her ceiling.

The thing was – Faatina had never had a boyfriend – or girlfriend – before. Or anyone like that. She'd never really had a crush on anyone either. At least, she didn't think she had. Faatina tried *not* to think about it, actually, and most of the time that was easy, it didn't bother her. Sometimes, though, like when Jess was agonising over whether to ask for the phone number of someone she liked, Faatina noticed it. Noticed that *she'd* never felt the need to ask anyone on a date, or ask for anyone's number. She'd never wanted to hold hands with anyone in a romantic way, or kiss anyone. Or... more. In the rare moments that she let herself think about it, it became even more confusing when she realised that in theory, all of that sounded *amazing* – and, if she shut her eyes and imagined herself having it, her chest began to hurt in the best and worst way – but in reality, it just wasn't *there*. Something wasn't there. Something was missing.

Faatina's gaze refocused on the fairy lights strung up over her bed. At night, once she'd turned off the main light switch, she could pretend they were stars winking at her. At the moment, they just looked like empty plastic shells.

Faatina forced her attention back onto her English homework. Writing about metaphors and symbolism wasn't quite enough to stop that niggling ache spreading from her chest to the rest of her body.

\* \* \*

That evening at the dinner table, before Faatina had worked out a way to bring it up herself, her mum said, "Faatina wants us all to go and see 'Twelfth Night' next term." Two massive dishes of lamb curry sat in the centre, along with enough rice for probably three more curries. Her mum always made extra. "The college are putting it on."

Not the most ideal opening Faatina could've asked for.

"Actually," she began, but then something caught the corner of her eye. Jeetan, who was sitting opposite her, was frowning, opening his mouth. *Fuck*. What if he'd seen the list? He'd spent the entire afternoon at Skybourne for band practice.

So Faatina did what any sister would. She reached out with her leg and kicked the nearest available limb. He jumped, and muffled a yelp as his mouth snapped shut. She widened her eyes, hoping that Jeetan would take the hint.

"That'd be lovely!" her dad said, his voice thick with naan bread. "I'm surprised you didn't audition, love. Sounds like it's right up your alley."

"Yeah, about that –"

"But I suppose you will be extra busy with school work this year, so I can understand why you didn't. In fact," her dad added, "That sort of thinking takes a lot of maturity, Faatina. I'm proud of you." He was gazing at her now, and he was absolutely beaming. She felt like all her muscles had frozen into place.

"It can't have been an easy decision, sweetheart," her mum said, as she steered Rahul's spoon back towards his plate – he'd been trying to sneakily return some of his vegetables to one of the main curry dishes.

Jeetan was still frowning at her, mercifully silent, but Faatina's mind was blank. She felt like she was on stage, standing under the spotlight, with no idea what her next lines were supposed to be. What was there to say?

"Yeah – exactly," she got out. "Uh – in fact – " Nope, this wasn't headed anywhere good. "I've joined a study group." Shut up. Stop *talking*. "It's three afternoons a week – " *What was she talking about??* "I thought it would be helpful."

Brilliant. Just – *brilliant*.

"Oh! That's a great idea!" her mum said. "Is a teacher running it?"

"I don't think so?"

"Ah well. You're at the right age to be taking your study into your own hands." Her mum gave her an approving nod. "Jeetan, I hope you're paying attention to this. It wouldn't hurt for you to do a bit more study in your spare time. Maybe NCEA won't be such a shock next year."

The conversation moved on, although Faatina's brain didn't seem to realise. She replayed her own words in her mind. How had she managed to do the exact *opposite* of telling her parents about the play? Faatina's mouthful of curry suddenly tasted bitter, but she swallowed. She dragged her spoon through her bowl, trying to ignore Jeetan's glare.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Faatina did her best to drown out her panic with loud pop music and Calculus homework. She'd just settled into a rhythm when there was a knock on her bedroom door.

"Yooooo!" she answered.

She scribbled down the rest of her current quadratic equation, and then looked up. Jeetan had let himself in, and was wrinkling his nose in the direction of her iPod speakers.

"Don't judge me, Mr Punk Rock," she said before he could get in first. "You know I love Green Day as well."

Jeetan was fourteen, the perfect age to act like a bit of an angsty teenager. 'Act' being the operative word – it may have fit his image of being a brooding drummer, but he was mostly a sweet kid brother.

"So, you know how the music block and the drama block are connected," he said.

"Yeah?"

"And after drum practice I have to walk through the drama block to get to the main gates."

Faatina knew where this was going. Didn't mean she had to make it easy for him.

"What's your points, Jeets?"

"I saw your name on the drama notice-board. Did you really get the main part in the senior production?"

Faatina forced herself to stop clicking her pen on and off repeatedly. She dropped it on her desk with a dull thud, kind of wishing it was her forehead instead.

"I did, yeah."

Jeetan cocked his head to one side, as if he needed to view her from a different angle.

"Why didn't you tell Mum and Dad?"

"I – I wanted to. I *am* gonna tell them. Just... have to find the right moment." Faatina held up her index finger. "Don't – just don't say anything to them, alright? Promise me you won't tell them."

Jeetan let out a deep breath, seemingly unconvinced.

"I'll do your chores for you this weekend," Faatina offered her last bargaining chip. She could see him thinking about it – she knew he'd wanted to go and see the Black Panther movie (for the third time) with his friends on Sunday.

"They're gonna find out somehow."

"I know." God, she knew. Her parents were pretty damn popular in the community. There were endless possibilities for someone to innocently let something slip. "I'll tell them before they do."

"Alright, alright," Jeetan said. "It's your funeral."

"Thank you, as always, for your brotherly support."

## 3.

It was the first meeting for 'Twelfth Night', and Faatina was freaking out. The drama rehearsal room had high ceilings and bare, padded walls, which created excellent acoustics. It was currently filled with about sixty students sitting on the floor, which was all of the cast plus the backstage crew. Ms Burnett was in the midst of handing out scripts, and with everyone's excitement, the acoustics were a little too good – Faatina could barely hear her own voice.

"Damn, Viola has a lot of lines!" she said, flipping through the thick, stapled script. She'd read the play before, obviously, but still, seeing it like *this* was different. This was going to be a big job.

"You're basically the entire plot, what else did you expect?" said Jess directly in her ear. Faatina shaped her mouth into a soundless scream that was only half-exaggerated, and Jess laughed. Her own script was twice as thick as Faatina's, because it was printed on pale yellow paper in a special font, with lots of clear space between the lines and words. It made it much easier for Jess to read.

"Don't worry, you're gonna be fine," said a voice beside Faatina, and she turned her head. Shiloh was smiling at her. Their facial features seemed softer today, as if they were wearing a subtle layer of foundation, and their eyelashes looked darker. Faatina watched as they brushed the tops of Shiloh's cheeks as they blinked.

"I'm glad someone has faith in me," Faatina said, blinking herself. "Because I am *this* close to leaving the country."

Shiloh let out the cutest fucking giggle Faatina had ever heard. Luckily, Ms Burnett chose that moment to ask for everyone's attention.

"Alright, settle down," Ms Burnett called out. "Stand up, move your stuff against the walls, and gather around in a circle." She waited for the rustling movement to subside.

"Before you all launch into your characters, we need to introduce our actual selves. Even if some of you do bear an uncanny resemblance to your roles." A few snickers met these words. "You need to tell everyone your name, what year you're in, who you're playing, and your favourite Shakespeare play. How about we start with our leading lady, Viola?"

Faatina's heart was beating faster than normal. She took a deep breath.

"Hi guys, I'm Faatina. I'm in Year 13. This'll sound kind of lame, but my favourite Shakespeare play literally is 'Twelfth Night'. I just love how queer and *extra* it is. Every single character is nuts, and it's great." Other students laughed, and something eased in Faatina's chest.

As they went around the group, Faatina learned that she wasn't the only Shakespeare nerd at Skybourne. Everybody knew what everybody else was talking about. When Jess said that 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' was her favourite play because of the love-rectangle and the sadistic fairies, other people were nodding. When the Year 11 boy playing Feste, the Fool character in 'Twelfth Night', said that he liked 'Julius Caesar' because he, too, had been stabbed in the back by his friends before, a mixture of sympathetic 'awwws!' and groaning 'ughhhs!' filled the room.

Faatina looked to the next person, and her eyes widened involuntarily. It was Mateer, the boy from outside the library. His gaze flickered in Faatina's direction before darting around the rest of the group.

"Hello, my name's Mateer. But you can call me Matty, if you want. Uh. I don't mind. I'm in Year 12, and I'm playing Sebastian." Ah – Viola's twin. Now that she thought about it, they looked similar enough – and he was close to Faatina's height, or would've



been, if his shoulders hadn't been curved inwards like he was trying to make himself smaller. "My favourite Shakespeare play is probably 'Hamlet', because I just think he's a really interesting character."

Faatina nodded absently, while casting a careful eye over Mateer. What were the odds? Faatina didn't believe in fate – her parents both had Hindu backgrounds, but had chosen to bring up Faatina and her siblings in a non-religious household, so they could make up their own minds. However, randomly meeting Mateer yesterday and now finding out they were playing twins in the production – that felt pretty close to fate. Or, at least, a pretty startling coincidence. She hoped Mateer wouldn't feel awkward about their previous meeting. Viola and Sebastian weren't reunited until the last scene of the play, but they'd still have to work closely together, to make sure that the audience recognised the fact that they were indeed twins.

Shiloh went last.

"...and my favourite Shakespeare play has to be 'Twelfth Night' as well," they said, making direct eye contact with Faatina. "This may come as a shock to you all, but gender expression is something I'm fascinated by – and there's just so much to work with in this play. I'm looking forward to playing Orsino as a dramatic drag queen, or something."

The students all dissolved into laughter, and even Ms Burnett's lips were twitching. Faatina was sure Ms Burnett would let Shiloh do it, too. Portraying Orsino as trans would be *fantastic*.

"Right! Housekeeping," Ms Burnett said. "As you're aware, rehearsals will be Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 3:30pm – 5:00pm. It's extremely important that you show up to every rehearsal that you're needed for – double and triple check your copies of the full rehearsal schedule. You *must* be on time. I've blocked out the whole 2nd week of

the April school holidays for rehearsals – please let me know *immediately* if that's going to be a problem for you. Leading up to the performances in May, rehearsals will be almost every day after school." She paused, looking around at all of them. "We've got a good bunch of people in this room. Together, we can produce a spectacular play. Don't let yourselves down." Ms Burnett was about to dismiss them when another teacher waved at her from the side of the room. "Oh! Almost forgot. This is our costume manager, Miss Thornhill, and she needs you all to come in on Saturday morning for measurements. This will take a few hours all up, which is why we can't do it after school. Your staggered arrival times are also on the rehearsal schedule. Okay, *now* we're done."

People began migrating back to their belongings. Ms Burnett and Miss Thornhill parted the crowd on their way out the door, discussing something as they left. Faatina hadn't had Miss Thornhill as a teacher, because she taught Classics, but she seemed pretty cool. Faatina's gaze reached Mateer, who was crouching beside his bag.

"I'll be right back," she said to Jess, and dashed across the room. Mateer didn't notice her approach; he was carefully sliding his script into his satchel. Faatina could see that one of the straps was being held together by safety pins.

"Hey," said Faatina, and Mateer jerked his head up. A flash of recognition settled into his expression, but his smile was closer to a grimace.

"Hey," he said. He closed his satchel and stood up. Other students jostled around Faatina and Mateer as if they were in the centre of a storm.

"So, you're my twin!" Faatina said. Mateer ducked his head into a nod. "I don't remember seeing you at auditions," she went on. "But I can't wait to see you as Sebastian." Mateer cleared his throat and tightened his grip on his satchel.

"Thanks. You'll make a great Viola," he said. He was still avoiding her eyes. "I'll – I'll see you round." Mateer started turning towards the door.

"Wait!"

Mateer must be embarrassed about crying in front of her – not that Faatina thought he had anything to be ashamed about *at all*. Mateer paused, but he was looking away from her, so that she had to speak to his profile. She grasped at the first thread that came to mind, anything to recapture that moment of connection they'd felt outside the library.

"How's the chemical reactivity coming along?"

Mateer gave a light snort, and glanced back at her.

"Terribly."

"It's just – I thought, you know, I still have my notes from last year. And I'm not half bad at Chemistry – my dad's a doctor, I have good science genes. I could help you. Like, tutor you, or whatever." Faatina rocked on her heels. "Are you free sometime this weekend?"

Mateer was completely stationary for a few beats. When he eventually turned to face her properly, his mouth was slightly open, and he was frowning.

"Won't you be too busy? I mean, you're in Year 13 – you'll have even more homework than me. And then there's rehearsals."

"We'll find time," Faatina said firmly. "Besides, we do need to get to know each other, for the play. We're twins! Gotta make it feel authentic, yeah?"

Mateer shook his head slowly, staring at her as if she was one of the Chemistry questions that he couldn't figure out.

"Okayyy," he said, drawing the word out. "I'm working Sunday. And now we've got the wardrobe fittings on Saturday. But maybe once we're done there?"

"Perfect." Faatina grinned at him. Mateer didn't exactly return it, but at least he wasn't looking as embarrassed anymore. He walked to the door with his shoulders hunched up towards his neck.

"What was all that about?" Jess asked. She'd made her way over to Faatina, and was holding her bag out to her.

"Just introducing myself to my fake-twin."

Jess raised an eyebrow, but nodded.

"Also, Shiloh asked if I was going to be having coffee with you two this weekend," she said. "And I said that I had no idea what the hell they were talking about."

"Oh. Right." Faatina avoided Jess's pointed look by focusing on tucking her script away in her bag. "Yeah, are you free this weekend? Shiloh wants to meet up and read through our scenes together." She kept her tone carefully light.

"You mean, Shiloh asked you out for coffee?"

Faatina finally looked up at Jess, who now had both eyebrows raised, and even higher than before. The rehearsal room was mostly empty now.

"Yeah, to *read through our scenes together*," Faatina emphasised. A crease appeared on Jess's forehead.

"Are you sure that's the only reason?"

"Uh, *yeah*."

Faatina felt herself crossing her arms over her chest. Jess bit her lip, scuffing her shoes against the drama room's shiny hardwood floor. The resulting squeak bounced around the walls.

"Listen," said Jess. "All I'm saying is, Shiloh is... *Shiloh*. Half of Skybourne would die for a date with them. They could literally take their pick – and they asked you out for coffee. It's just, you know, something worth thinking about."

Faatina made a show of rolling her eyes.

"Trust me, that's not it," she said, doing her best to sound confident and uninterested. "Besides, we're playing two of the main roles. The play needs all of our focus. Shiloh knows that."

Jess shrugged one shoulder, and then gave Faatina a half smile to defuse the tension that had subconsciously built up between them.

"We should go before we get locked in for the night."

"At least then I'd have some uninterrupted time to start learning my lines," said Faatina. She was only half joking.

The school grounds were deserted by the time they escaped the drama block.

"Just out of curiosity," Jess said, as they began walking towards the gates. "If Shiloh *did* ask you out, on a proper date, would you say yes?"

Faatina glanced sideways at Jess.

"Mate, it doesn't matter what I *would* say, because they haven't asked me, have they?"

Jess sighed dramatically.

"Fine. Be like that. Don't tell your best friend anything."

"Maybe *you* should ask Shiloh on a date."

"Dude. It's Shiloh. I would absolutely do that if I wasn't sure that I have no shot in hell."

They turned left at the school gates, and began the ten minute walk home. Faatina and Jess only lived about five minutes away from each other, so they often walked most of the way to and from Skybourne together. The sun had dipped lower in the sky, and was stretching their shadows down the path.

"Hey, I forgot to ask," Jess said. "How did your parents take the news about you getting Viola?"

This morning had been weird. All of Faatina's excitement about the play had rushed back to her when she'd checked Skybourne's online bulletin from the warm cocoon of her bed. However, her mood had deflated slightly when she'd met her parents in the kitchen, organising Rahul and Safrina's lunch boxes. She'd taken the incredibly brave option of grabbing a slice of toast and her school bag before escaping out the front door.

She'd never had to lie to her parents before, not really. Faatina definitely didn't want to lie to Jess as well. But. If she told her, that made the lie real.

"They know how much I love Shakespeare," Faatina said. *That*, at least, was true.

"That seems odd. I thought your parents really cared about your grades, and stuff."

"They do! It's just, they also care about me doing what I love."

The words tasted like ash in her mouth. Could something become true if you wanted it badly enough? Faatina let out a long breath, and looked up at the sky. No point worrying about what might or might not happen. She *was* going to tell her parents, and once she did, everything would be fine.

This was real, this was happening, and it was going to be glorious.

\* \* \*

When Mr Lensen asked her to stay behind after Physics on Thursday, Faatina was sure that she was in trouble. She'd been pretty distracted in class, going over Viola's first

couple of scenes in her mind, and Mr Lensen must have noticed. She hadn't raised her hand to answer questions like she normally did. God, she hated disappointing Mr Lensen. He was awesome.

"In my defence," she said before he could open his mouth. "Nuclear reactions only require half my brain power, since we're still going over what we learnt last year."

Mr Lensen chuckled.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Although I do appreciate people doing their best *not* to daydream in my class," he added with a wry smile. "I wanted to ask you if you'd thought about taking Physics at Scholarship level."

Faatina felt her eyebrows move upwards.

"Uh, no, not really?"

"Well, I don't say this often – in fact I've only ever had two students take Scholarship Physics before – but I think you'd do well in it." Faatina couldn't think of anything to say. She'd never even thought of doing Scholarship *anything*. "And it would be immensely helpful preparation for university, you'll be a step ahead of a lot of people already."

"Oh," Faatina said hurriedly. "I'm not sure if I'll be studying physics at uni, yet."

Mr Lensen pushed his glasses back up his nose. His forehead creased.

"Sorry – I thought I remembered you saying last year, at one of the parent-teacher interviews, that you wanted to study medicine?"

Of course. With the best possible intentions, her dad had a tendency to tell everyone what an excellent doctor his oldest daughter would make, especially when her science and maths teachers told him how well she was doing in class. He was just... proud of her.

"I mean, I've thought about it," Faatina said – and she had. She knew she was good at science, and she liked to help people. She cared about people. But – study medicine? Become a doctor, like her dad? "I just haven't fully decided."

Mr Lensen's frown was thoughtful now.

"Maybe studying physics at Scholarship level would help you make up your mind?" he said. "Since nobody else would be doing it, I can offer you one-on-one sessions, around once a week, or fortnight if you prefer."

Faatina did not have time for this at all. Not on top of rehearsals, and keeping up – doing well – in all of her other classes. Even for her, Physics was *hard*, and frustrating, and half the time she wondered what on earth had possessed her to take the subject for so long. Why would she want to make it even harder? Mr Lensen was watching her, clearly trying not to look too hopeful.

Her dad would want her to do this. Faatina could vividly picture how widely he would smile if she told him about it. Maybe – if she did this, maybe it would help lessen the blow when she told her parents she was the lead in the senior production. This could be a peace offering. A compromise. This would prove that she could act in 'Twelfth Night', *and* get good grades.

"Okay. I'll do it."

"That's great!" Mr Lensen pulled open a drawer of his desk. "We can have our first session next week, but here's some introductory information to read in the meantime." He handed her a wad of paper, probably about thirty pages.

"Ha... excellent," she said, trying to keep the hysterical edge out of her voice.

"The rest of the Physics department are going to be pleased and jealous in equal measures," Mr Lensen said, looking one step away from clapping his hands together with



maniacal glee. He'd make an excellent super villain. She must've looked slightly traumatised, because he earnestly added, "I have faith in you."

He was looking at her as if seeing something that only he could see. It felt like a lot of people were doing that lately – like they had all these expectations of her. Faatina hadn't decided if that was a good or bad thing – she just knew that it was stressful as hell wondering whether or not she'd live up to them.

## 4.

"Trust," Ms Burnett said, spreading her arms wide. "It's key to any successful production. You must be able to trust that everyone involved has your back. If anyone's here to become a lone star in the spotlight, you can leave right now and not look back."

That afternoon's rehearsal was focusing on team-building. There were fewer people than yesterday, because the backstage crew were meeting separately, but the drama rehearsal room still felt full. Despite this, Ms Burnett had a way of demanding attention. She had paused deliberately, and was scanning the room as if trying to make eye contact with every single one of them. She could be bloody scary when she wanted to be.

"We are a *team*," Ms Burnett continued. "We help and support each other. If there is no *trust*, we cannot succeed. To this end, we're going to spend our first proper rehearsal getting to know each other better with some classic drama exercises."

They started with a couple of group exercises. They all walked around the room in every direction, leaving no empty spaces, and increased in speed while trying not to bump into anyone. They formed a circle and joined hands at random, creating a giant knot that they then had to untangle without letting go of each other. Faatina had done these sorts of exercises before, in drama class – the majority of them probably had. As cheesy as it sounded, they really did work.

Next they did some pair exercises, changing partners after each round. These were designed to force them out of their comfort zones. Faatina and the girl playing Maria had to stare into each other's eyes without blinking, without judgement. It was intensely confronting. Faatina and the boy playing Feste – he reminded her that his name was Roy – had to take turns leading each other around the room while blindfolded, guiding the other person past obstacles. They were awful at it, and Faatina could already feel a bruise

forming on her shin where she'd walked into a chair. After that, Jess had to move Faatina's limbs and body posture into a sculpture of something – Jess claimed that she'd transformed her into a prancing unicorn, but Faatina just could not see it.

It was almost five o'clock when Faatina found herself next to Shiloh.

"Last one, everyone! And this one's a classic. Trust falls." Ms Burnett seemed to take pleasure in the predictable groans. "Simple – don't let your partner fall on their ass."

"Yeah, what she said," Shiloh said, eyes shining. "I'd like to keep my ass the way it is."

This surprised a snort out of Faatina.

"Don't worry, I'll protect your *assets*."

Shiloh laughed. "Me first," they said, and turned their back on Faatina. She barely had time to stretch out her arms before Shiloh was falling towards her – being taller made it easy, in the end, as she caught Shiloh underneath their arms. They were lighter than she'd expected.

"Go on, then," Shiloh said, still smiling. They spread their arms wide. "Promise I'll catch you."

Faatina turned on her heel, closed her eyes. Her heart was thumping loudly in her ears. Falling on the floor wasn't a thrilling prospect.

"Ready?" Shiloh asked.

What the heck.

Faatina tilted backwards, slowly at first – then she reached the point where gravity joined in, and she picked up speed, and *that* was when doubt started to creep in – what if Shiloh was standing too far away, what if she fell too fast, this was going to hurt *a lot* –

– and then Shiloh's fingers were curling around her shoulders, around her biceps, and they were holding her in place, stopping her descent. Faatina opened her eyes as Shiloh pushed her back upright.

"There," Shiloh said in her ear. "Told you I'd catch you."

\* \* \*

On Friday evening, Faatina had just finished reading Rahul a few chapters of David Walliams's 'The Boy In The Dress' when he asked something that made her heart momentarily stop.

"Who's Viola?"

"Uh..." Faatina scrambled for a response. "What Viola are we talking about?"

"I dunno," Rahul said. "I saw it on your bed before. Mum let me carry your laundry to your room all by myself."

Oh *shit*. She'd obviously left her script lying around – not that she'd expected anyone to be wandering around her room. There was something about Rahul's endearing innocence, though, that made it impossible for her to lie to him. It would be ten times worse than lying to her parents, or even Jess. Rahul was just a kid.

"She's my character in the school play," said Faatina.

Rahul's eyes widened.

"Do you get to wear a princess dress?"

Faatina had to hide her smile behind her hand. Of all the things he could've asked.

"Well, at the end of the play, I do. I'm mostly dressing up as a boy, though."

"That sounds fun," Rahul yawned.

"It will be."

Faatina smoothed down Rahul's blankets, although they were already neatly tucked in.

"Hey, but, um." She bit down on her lip. "Me being in the school play is kind of a secret right now, okay?"

"Like a surprise?" Rahul said.

"Yeah. A – a surprise. For Mum and Dad. So, would you mind keeping it a secret for now?"

"Okay," Rahul yawned again. His eyes had fluttered shut before she'd even turned off his lamp.

Now Jeetan *and* Rahul knew. Faatina was pretty sure Jeetan wouldn't spill her secret – he probably didn't even care. But. Rahul. She knew he wouldn't *mean* to tell their parents, but kids were surprisingly attentive when they wanted to be, and could easily remember something random, or innocently talk about something, without being aware of the significance. Faatina was in dangerous territory.

During the week, Faatina had managed to avoid any in-depth conversations with her parents, which she was pretty proud of to be honest. Half an hour later, however, she was in the midst of emptying the dishwasher (part of her deal with Jeetan) when her dad stuck his head into the kitchen.

"When you're done there, would you mind coming into the lounge? We have something to talk to you about."

Faatina nodded at him, her chest suddenly tight. Somebody had told them. They must have. A patient, or one of her mum's friends. Maybe Rahul had already said something. Oh, god, they were going to ask her to tell Ms Burnett that she couldn't do it. After ten minutes of unnecessarily rearranging the plate cupboard, Faatina dragged herself

into the lounge. The sliding doors were open, letting in a warm evening breeze and the last of the day's sun. Her mum had sunk into an armchair with her reading glasses on, probably doing a Sudoku puzzle. Her dad was on the couch, looking up at her expectantly. He patted the cushions beside him.

"What's up?" said Faatina, moving to sit down next to him. She had her poker face firmly in place. Hopefully.

"Guess who I bumped into at the supermarket after work today?" her dad said. Faatina raised both hands in an imitation of the shrugging emoji. He rolled his eyes. "Mr Lensen!"

He gave her a knowing smile. Faatina scrambled to remember if she'd mentioned the play to Mr Lensen. She didn't think she had. And Mr Lensen hadn't asked her about it either – the senior production's cast list probably wasn't something a physics teacher would be paying much attention to. So this must be about –

"– doing Scholarship Physics! He was very excited to finally have a capable student to tutor," her dad was saying. He seemed just as excited as Mr Lensen, judging by the way he was almost bouncing in his seat.

"Uh, yeah! I – must've forgotten to tell you guys. Mr Lensen thought I could do it, so..." Faatina trailed off. Relief spread through her body, and she combed her fringe with her fingers to steady herself. They didn't know.

"This is a good step, Faatina," her dad said. "Scholarship Physics introduces some of the key principles that are covered in a first year university course."

"But – we're just *worried*," said her mum, exchanging a meaningful glance with her dad, "That you're overworking yourself. We don't want you to burn out, sweetheart."

"I think – " Faatina cleared her throat, trying not to choke on the words. "I think I'll be alright. A lot of it's just, like, building on concepts we're already learning about in class."

"And how's the, erm, study group going?" her mum asked. "Are you sure you'll have time for it along with everything else?"

Right – the 'study group', the thing Faatina's parents thought she was doing when she was actually at rehearsals.

"It's fine. I'm trying to organise my time better." *That* was certainly true.

Her mum pulled her reading glasses down her nose so she could examine Faatina. Her expression was perfectly neutral. Faatina had no idea what her mum was thinking.

"Okay, love. If you're certain. Of course we want you to do well," she said.

"You've got the brains for it," her dad said, smiling.

"I'm sure Mr Lensen wouldn't have suggested it if he didn't believe you could do it." Her mum broke eye contact, and took a deep breath. "Your father and I, we came to New Zealand because we wanted our children to have all the opportunities and encouragement to succeed. I want you to have the option to do things that I never dreamed of doing." She was referring to her own parents – Faatina's grandparents – who were apparently very traditional, and strict. Faatina had never met them in person before. Faatina's mum met her eyes again, and her gaze was twice as intense as before. "You can be anything, Faatina. Don't forget that."

Faatina nodded wordlessly. It was all she could do. She was beyond lucky to have parents who loved her, who wanted the best for her, who believed in her potential and wanted to support her to realise it. She *loved* her parents for that. It's just that 'anything' sometimes felt like a lot of choice, and a lot of pressure. What if doing what she truly wanted to do was a waste of that potential? What if she chose wrong?

Her dad was watching her with an unexpectedly gentle expression on his face.

"You know you can tell us anything, right?" he said. "If there's anything that you want to talk to us about?"

And now they were veering into sappiness – and talking to her parents was something she was trying to *avoid* doing. Faatina rolled her eyes to cover the way that her dad's offer actually did stab at her heart.

"I'll... keep that in mind," she said. Her parents shared another look.

"So, I've got a trainee GP starting next week," her dad said carefully. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you stopped by the practice one afternoon, to say hello. She'd be able to tell you anything you want to know about studying medicine."

Faatina bit her lip, looking between both of her parents. This was a good time to tell them.

"Sounds great," she heard herself say instead.



## 5.

Wardrobe measurements were scheduled to start at 10:00am on Saturday, and Faatina was listed first. She'd arrived early – she figured she needed to be a good role model for the rest of the cast, and all that. Miss Thornhill and Ms Burnett had set up in the drama rehearsal room. Racks upon racks of clothes covered at least half of the space – sparkly, ruffly, baggy, everything over-the-top and wonderful. Various changing areas were partitioned off with carpet-covered portable walls. Miss Thornhill stood in the centre of it all, a measuring tape dangling from her neck, and a battered notebook on a nearby desk. Ms Burnett was strolling between the racks, pulling garments out to examine them in more detail. Every now and then, Faatina caught a fleeting glimpse of one of the backstage students involved with the costume department before they disappeared into the whirl of colour.

Faatina settled in one of the chairs against the wall, to wait until she was called for. Even though most of the cast hadn't arrived yet, the atmosphere was charged with an energy that was part excitement, and part madness. Faatina breathed it in. This was the start of transforming the words of a script into something palpable. Something unique, unlike anything else. It made the hair on her arms stand on end, despite the humid morning. She wished she could feel like this all the time.

"Where do you want these, Miss Thornhill?"

That was definitely Shiloh's voice, but all Faatina could really see was a haphazard pile of clothes suspended in midair, with only Shiloh's clutching hands and legs in sight. They were carrying what looked like enough clothes to fill Faatina's entire bedroom wardrobe, and they were staggering slightly under the weight. Faatina leapt out of her chair.

"Need some help?"

Shiloh poked their head around the side of the stack to grimace at Faatina.

"Possibly."

Faatina took half of the clothes, and followed Shiloh over to the teachers.

"Excellent! We'll keep your clothes separate, don't worry," Miss Thornhill said. She gestured towards a spare rack of empty coat hangers, set aside from the rest.

"These are your clothes?" Faatina asked Shiloh. Even though she'd heard plenty of rumours about their clothes lending 'business', the mountain of material Shiloh had carried in was an impressive sight. Both of them draped the clothes across a row of chairs so they could begin transferring them onto the coat hangers.

"This is only a fraction of my collection," said Shiloh. They sent Faatina a small, pleased smirk. "Miss Thornhill specially requested some things that the drama department didn't have." There was a reverent care in the way Shiloh hung up each of their garments, smoothing out any creases and picking off stray fluff.

"Where did you find them all?"

Shiloh merely raised their eyebrows and tapped the side of their nose.

"You might find out my secrets one day, if you're lucky," they said.

Now that Shiloh wasn't holding an armful of clothes, Faatina could see what Shiloh was actually wearing. They'd opted for a neutral outfit, denim shorts and a short sleeved plaid shirt. A few long chains swung from their neck. It was the first time she'd seen them in something other than the school uniform, and Faatina could appreciate just how carefully Shiloh had constructed their outfit to create a particular 'gender vibe', or lack thereof in this case. She wondered if that was part of the reason why Shiloh owned so many clothes.

Faatina snapped her gaze away from Shiloh. She was about to help with the coat hangers – honestly – when a corner of fabric caught her eye. She tugged it free.

"Wow, this jacket is excellent!"

It was a softly pointed tailcoat, made from a deep blue velvety material, and had two rows of gold buttons. It looked slimming, but not fitted.

"You should try it on," Shiloh said. They watched as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. It was a comfortable size, enough room to move. The tails fell to just above the back of her knees.

"This is – I will do *anything* to be able to wear this when Viola's disguised as Cesario," said Faatina.

Shiloh had turned a critical eye on Faatina. "It suits you," they said, tilting their head. Faatina's heart may have been beating quicker than normal, but this was *exciting*.

"What do you think, Miss Thornhill?"

Faatina froze up momentarily, not expecting to have three pairs of eyes suddenly fixed on her, but did an obligatory twirl in front of Shiloh and the two teachers.

"It's perfect, right?" said Faatina.

Miss Thornhill studied every inch of the jacket, with both her eyes and fingers, while Ms Burnett stood back and took in the overall effect.

"It would match the steampunk setting that we're looking for," Ms Burnett said, once Miss Thornhill had finished prodding Faatina from all angles.

"We hardly need to make any adjustments, maybe undo a few tucks here and there," Miss Thornhill added. "It hides your feminine curves, which is what we need for Cesario."

Faatina snorted – it wasn't like she had much in the feminine curve department to hide.

"We'll need a plain shirt underneath, and as for the style of pants..."

While Miss Thornhill and Ms Burnett debated it, Faatina gave Shiloh a big thumbs up. She'd expected them to leave once they'd finished hanging their clothes up, but instead, Shiloh joined the teachers.

"I'm Miss Thornhill's assistant," they said in response to Faatina's questioning eyebrow. "It's my job to take photos of everyone's costumes, so we don't muddle anything up."

As Faatina's costume came together, Shiloh ended up assisting in other ways too. They darted off to one of the racks and came back with several pairs of pants to try on, including the ones that were eventually chosen by Miss Thornhill. Cesario's pants ended up being light grey with a flared waist and thighs to give a 'breeches' effect. Cesario also got a hat that Faatina thought must've been stolen from a London cab driver, and solid, buckled shoes. Faatina must have tried on at least fifty different dresses for Viola – she needed one for after the shipwreck at the beginning of the play, and one for the very end for her marriage to Orsino. The latter wasn't so difficult – the drama department had plenty of elaborate and dazzling dresses – but the first dress caused some trouble. It had to be understated, modest, and feminine, as well as reflect Viola's grief at losing her twin brother. They all finally agreed on a simple aqua blue dress with corset detailing, from Shiloh's collection, and knee high boots with *a lot* of shoelace.

"We can rough the hems up a bit, so it actually looks like you've survived a shipwreck," Miss Thornhill said. "I think, though, it just needs something else. There's something missing." Faatina fought the urge to fidget as both teachers fixed her with steely regard.

"I know!" said Shiloh, making the three of them jump. They took a few steps closer to Faatina, their mouth slowly curving into a smile. Reaching behind their neck, Shiloh

fiddled with the clasp of one of their necklaces. Faatina didn't fully register what was happening until Shiloh's hands were brushing past her shoulders, and a chain dangled against her collarbone – Shiloh's fingers were cool on the back of her neck, she wasn't sure where to look, but Shiloh's face was very close to her own, and they were biting their lip in concentration, fumbling with the necklace's clasp. Faatina wasn't sure if she was brave enough to breathe. And then, Shiloh was stepping away again, a light dusting of pink over their cheekbones.

"There," they said happily. Faatina looked down at the necklace, and caught the pendant between her fingers. It was dark gold, an antique-styled nautical compass, with tiny engravings decorating the edges. She wasn't certain if the compass needle really was pointing north – it seemed to be currently pointing straight ahead, at Shiloh – but it bobbed when she moved.

"I like it," said Ms Burnett.

"That's it," Miss Thornhill said. She clapped her hands together. "You, Faatina, are done."

Faatina helped Shiloh photograph all of her costume pieces, and then they put everything into a container marked 'Viola'. She would've liked to hold onto the necklace for a bit longer, to run her fingers over every detail, but it had to be packed up too. She wouldn't see it again until two weeks before the show opened, during dress rehearsals.

"I'm glad we went with the aqua dress," said Shiloh, stacking the containers to one side. "I've only worn it once, to one of my baby cousin's christenings, but I really love it."

"Bet you looked awesome," Faatina said.

"I definitely made an impression, which I'm not entirely sure is the same thing."

Faatina laughed, and Shiloh's eyes crinkled at the edges. She hesitated, her curiosity warring with a weird spike of nerves. "That compass necklace..." she trailed off, wanting to ask, but at the same time, not wanting to expose her interest in it. Was that weird? That was weird.

Shiloh's expression softened, and they looked down at the rest of the chains hanging around their neck.

"My grandmother gave it to me. It's like a less complicated version of the Māori star compass. This will probably sound weird, but wearing it helps me feel more grounded. More like me." Shiloh let the other chains fall between their fingers.

Faatina's eyes widened. "Are you – I mean, are you sure it should be part of the production?" she asked. "It seems a bit more personal than lending your clothes."

"I guess it is. You could call it my taonga – my treasure." Shiloh shrugged a little. "But this feels right. Viola needs it."

Faatina's breath was caught in her throat, and she couldn't think of a single reply that didn't sound stupid.

"Shiloh! You're next, darling," Ms Burnett called. Shiloh cleared their throat, uncharacteristically fidgety.

"I was wondering, did you want to do our coffee date after this? If you don't mind sticking around until I'm finished helping out."

"Oh." Faatina hesitated. "Sorry, I've actually got plans – I said I'd help Mateer with some Chemistry homework after his fitting."

Shiloh's face was carefully blank.

"The kid playing Sebastian?" they said. Faatina nodded.

"I'm free tomorrow, though," she said.

Shiloh was nodding now, an absent, prolonged movement.

"Sure. Tomorrow."

"Shiloh? This century would be nice!" Miss Thornhill's voice broke into their bubble. Shiloh stood there, as if they were going to say something else, but in the end they just patted Faatina lightly on the shoulder before turning back to the teachers.

They'd called it a coffee date.

\* \* \*

The rest of the cast had gradually started arriving for their fittings. Since Faatina had to wait for Mateer to finish his fitting, she tried to use that time to read through some of the Scholarship Physics handout from Mr Lensen. It was so easy to become distracted, though, when people walked past in ruffly shirts, elaborate waistcoats, or feathery hats.

Faatina was distantly watching Jess strike a different superhero pose with every outfit she tried on when Mateer arrived. He looked a lot more relaxed than the last time Faatina had seen him, but maybe that was just because he wasn't wearing a school shirt and tie.

"So I brought all my Chemistry notes with me," she said. "If you don't mind, could we go back to yours? I would invite you round to my house, but my little brother was having a couple of friends over, and we'd probably just get roped into playing Lego with them. Which – awesome, because it's *Lego*, but we kinda have to concentrate on kicking Chemistry's butt."

Faatina expected him to laugh, but he began chewing his lip instead.

"Yeah, I guess that would be okay," he said.

Faatina was about to ask if there was a problem, but Miss Thornhill beckoned for Mateer to join her. Jess, who'd apparently just finished, made a beeline for Faatina, giving Mateer a curious look as they passed each other.

"Catching up with your twin again?" she asked Faatina.

"Yeah. I'm gonna help him with some Chemistry stuff he's having trouble with."

Jess covered half of her face with her hand, and sighed.

"You don't know how to say no, do you?"

"... no?" said Faatina innocently.

"Seriously, Faatina. Like, look at this –" Jess waved a hand at the paper crowding Faatina's lap. "Scholarship Physics? I mean, *fuck*. Just that by itself would make me scream. But playing the lead role in the production as well? And now, what, helping some Year 12 kid just to be nice?" Jess let out a long, full breath. "Girl, you're going to have a mental breakdown if you're not careful."

Faatina swallowed down the panic that was threatening to tighten her chest, and leaned towards Jess.

"I'm not the first person at Skybourne to be busy," she said lowly. "You know what it's like! You work twice as hard as me. Remember the end of last year – you worked on your Art portfolio for a week straight, 10 hours a day, and still had to pull an all-nighter to finish on time." Faatina slouched back in her seat, letting out a humourless laugh. "Dude, this is just what school is like."

Jess had folded her arms. She kicked her feet into the floor, and then flopped down in the chair next to Faatina.

"Yeah, well, *you* should remember that after I handed that portfolio in, I was walking home and was so exhausted that I stepped out onto the road and almost got



flattened by an oncoming cyclist. I literally started sobbing in the middle of the street. It was the most embarrassing thing I have ever done, in my life." Jess aimed a half smile at Faatina. "I don't want something like that to happen to you, babes."

"I know this, and I love you for it." Faatina bumped shoulders with her. "But that's the exact reason I want to help Mateer. He's really upset about Chemistry."

"At least let me buy you ice cream whenever you need a break?"

"Deal," said Faatina.

One of Jess's mums came to pick her up soon after that. The sense of unease that Jess had poked at stayed with Faatina, though, prickling in her gut. Abandoning her Physics readings, she wandered over to where Mateer was trying on outfits to try and distract herself. He'd ended up with an excellent costume that used the same shade of blue as Viola's tailcoat, which would highlight their twin identities to the audience. Faatina avoided Shiloh's eyes as she waited for Mateer to get changed.

"Good to go?" she asked, a tad too brightly, as he emerged. Together, they made their way outside. She definitely did not look back at Shiloh. The sun was directly overhead, and Faatina was glad to hide behind her sunglasses. "Are we walking?" she asked Mateer. He nodded.

"Follow me."

\* \* \*

Mateer was quiet during the twenty minute walk back to his place. Faatina suspected that was his default mode – around her at least.

"Sorry for inviting myself round to yours," she said.

"It's okay," Mateer said quickly. "My mum will be out anyway, until her shift finishes mid-afternoon."

"Where does your mum work?" Faatina asked, more out of politeness than anything else. Mateer, however, looked away, and she wasn't sure if he was going to answer.

"She works in hospitality," he said eventually.

Faatina felt like she should be walking on conversational eggshells around Mateer, but she wasn't sure why. He seemed a bit cagey, about a lot of things. She didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable; normally she was great at asking harmless, 'small-talk' questions. Maybe they weren't harmless to Mateer.

They'd walked a few blocks into the older part of town when Mateer's footsteps began to slow.

"Here we are," he said, and Faatina glanced over at him. The tips of his ears seemed to be flushed, and he was refusing to make eye contact with her. She looked up at the house they'd stopped in front of. It was small, with cracks running up the stucco walls, and peeling paint around the window frames. The garden was slightly overrun, a haphazard mixture of flowers and grassy weeds. Separating the garden from the footpath was a low, rusty corrugated iron fence.

Mateer was standing there, his shoulders folded inwards, clearly embarrassed about where he lived. The reason for Mateer's awkwardness clicked into place. The way that he was edging away from her, turning his back on her, made Faatina think that he might be expecting her to leave. But – Faatina kept looking, and she saw past the weeds to spot a climbing red rose, entwined with the neighbour's fence. She saw stepping stones nestled in the lawn, leading towards the back yard. The hand-picked shells that had been neatly glued onto the roof of the letterbox.

"It looks really homely," Faatina said, and she meant it. Mateer's head jerked up so fast that her vision blurred for a second. He stared at her, mouth open, as if trying to work out whether she was making fun of him. She kept her gaze steady.

"I know it's a bit messy," he said. His chin stuck out defiantly, but his eyes were relieved. "But it's just me and Mum, so."

"It looks alive," said Faatina.

They set up at the kitchen table. Since they hadn't had any lunch, Mateer offered Faatina a couple of cheese scones that his mum had made. They were probably the best she'd ever eaten. They pored over their combined Chemistry notes on chemical reactivity, working through different types of example questions, looking things up in the school textbook. Faatina had to talk Mateer through the theory a couple of times, but she kept her voice calm as she repeated the important points. Over an hour later, Mateer finally smiled.

"I think I get it. It actually makes sense. Thank *god*."

"Knew you could do it," said Faatina. "Everything's harder when you're stressing out – it's amazing how much clearer you can think when you're calm."

"I generally only feel calm around 10% of the time," Mateer said, deadpan.

"Yeah, since rehearsals started, I am also feeling less and less calm." Faatina let out a small chuckle. Mateer was rolling his pen between his fingers.

"I just – I don't know how I'm going to have time for everything this year," he blurted out. "Everyone keeps saying that Year 12 results are really important to getting into uni – apparently they look at them to kind of guess how you'll do in Year 13, since those results come out really late. I can't quit my job, because then I won't even be able to afford to go to uni, and everything will be pointless. And now, senior production – I mean, I love drama, and Sebastian's part isn't even that big, compared to Viola's. But. I. um. I didn't

actually audition." Mateer gave Faatina a sidelong glance. "Ms Burnett said that she really wanted to cast you as Viola, but she needed someone that looked vaguely like you to be Sebastian, and I was the only one who could do it."

Faatina felt like she'd swallowed a shard of ice.

"Oh – *god*."

"It's okay."

"Fuck, Ms Burnett can find someone else, I'm sure she can – god, I'm so sorry –"

Mateer was shaking his head. His eyes were soft, not accusatory like they should be.

"Or, I – " Faatina pressed her lips together, trying to stop them from shaking. "*I* could tell Ms Burnett that I can't do it – that I can't be Viola, and then you wouldn't have to – "

"No *way*," Mateer said. "I won't let you pull out. The play *needs* you."

Faatina's relief was so strong that she had to run her hand through her hair to steady herself.

"If I really couldn't do it, I wouldn't," Mateer said. "It can count towards my NCEA assessment, so it's not like it's a complete waste of time. And it's going to be fun." He cleared his throat. "I think I'm going to need something fun this year. I dunno. It sometimes feels like a lot, that's all. I'll be fine."

That sentiment spoke to Faatina on so many levels – the idea of not wasting time, of trying not to feel guilty about doing something purely 'for fun'. Mostly, though, it was the way he was trying to convince himself that everything was okay. That felt accurate as *fuck*.

"You still get to choose," she said. "You can say no – you don't have to do it all."

Even as she said it, Faatina knew it wasn't that simple. Mateer half-smiled, like he knew it too, maybe even better than she did. You weren't always lucky enough to get a

choice. Faatina *was* lucky – she couldn't imagine worrying about a job, on top of everything else, like Mateer had to. Sometimes Faatina felt guilty about not having a job. She knew that a lot of people at Skybourne had to work after school, on the weekends, if they wanted money to go to the movies, or go shopping. Or go to uni. It was like she was missing out on a crucial, teenage experience by not having to work. It was weird. Talking about money was fucking awkward.

"Lucky I have no social life," Mateer said, raising one eyebrow, and just like that, they were both cracking up. Mateer's laugh was one of the best sounds Faatina had ever heard.

"What's your job like?" she asked once they'd caught their breath.

"It's not so bad. Minimum wage, bit boring sometimes. Doesn't really matter if I enjoy it or not, I need the money." The last thing Faatina expected was for a sly smile to light up Mateer's face. "Besides, my boyfriend would kill me if I quit, because he works at the same place, and it's where we spend 80% of our time together."

"You are full of surprises," said Faatina, a tear of mirth escaping down her cheek. The undignified snort from Mateer was worth smudging her eyeliner for.

## 6.

Shiloh had chosen a café called 'The Fix', which was about a ten minute drive away – Shiloh had borrowed their parents' car – down at the shops, by the beach. Faatina had been past it many times, but never inside. At that moment, though, Faatina was wishing that she was almost anywhere else. The café wasn't the problem – it was her.

Ever since she'd woken up that morning, Faatina had felt this underlying sort of unease, that *Something Was Wrong*, but it was impossible to pin down anything concrete. Because on the surface, nothing *was* wrong. She was hanging out with a friend, which she loved doing – she was *excellent* at hanging out with friends – and they were going to read through the script for 'Twelfth Night', which would remind her how excited she was about playing Viola. There was nothing wrong with this scenario, and yet. Something kept needling at her, just beneath her skin. Everything felt *difficult*. It would be easy to say that she was in such a weird mood because she was tired – she'd stayed up 'til 2:00am reading the Scholarship Physics handout – but it was a pretty thin excuse. It had to be something else – Faatina just couldn't work out what.

And now she couldn't decide what bloody drink to order.

"Don't you have, like, a 'usual' coffee, one that you prefer?" Shiloh asked.

"No. Not really. They're all just coffees – I don't think I like one any differently to the others. I like them all the same."

"Maybe you should go for the hot chocolate, then," Shiloh said, lips twitching.

Faatina groaned, and pressed her palms against her cheeks. What was so fucking hard about choosing a damn drink? The only good thing about all of this was that Shiloh seemed more amused than annoyed.

"I make an excellent hot chocolate, just sayin'," a voice from behind the counter piped up. It was a short, cute boy wearing the brown café apron, which complemented his deep green eyes. "At least, that's what my boyfriend says. It's his favourite drink."

"Alright. I'll have one those. Thanks," said Faatina, stupidly relieved to have made a decision, any decision. As if she couldn't feel even more embarrassed, Shiloh then paid for both drinks.

"You can get next time," they said, waving her wallet away. At the rate this was going, Faatina severely doubted there would be a next time. "Come on, they have sofas upstairs."

"Sorry," Faatina said, following Shiloh up the stairs. "I'm not usually like this." Shiloh glanced over his shoulder as they reached the top.

"Want to know a secret? I changed my outfit around fifty times this morning. Decisions are hard." They smiled, and it actually did make Faatina feel better. "You're not alone."

There were only a couple of other people up there, which was comforting. Shiloh wandered over to the far corner and flopped onto a sofa against the wall. Faatina sat down in the armchair opposite them, and took the time to look at which clothes Shiloh had ended up choosing. They were wearing a fairly neutral outfit: skinny jeans, Converse sneakers, and an Ariana Grande concert t-shirt. If Faatina hadn't just been told otherwise, she would've assumed it was an utterly effortless choice. She wondered if Shiloh went through that every day. She'd barely thought about her own clothes; she'd chucked on the nearest high-waist shorts and colourful blouse she could find.

Faatina rescued her script out of her bag. Smoothing her fingers along the edges made her feel calmer, more assured of herself. It was ridiculous, getting worked up for no

reason at all. Shiloh laid their script on the coffee table, but before they could get any further than that, a familiar voice made Faatina jump.

"A caramel latte and a hot chocolate?"

"Mateer?!" she said, as he placed their drinks in front of them. Sure enough, when he straightened up, it was him. Mateer's eyes widened as he noticed her.

"Faatina, hi! Sorry, I didn't realise it was you. I run on autopilot here sometimes," he said.

"Understandable." Her gaze cut across to Shiloh. They had been leisurely stretching out on the sofa, but now Shiloh was upright, their posture stiff, their hands folded neatly in their lap. They were also staring directly at Mateer. "Shiloh, you remember Mateer from rehearsals, right?"

"You're playing Sebastian," Shiloh said, and their voice was deeper, more drawling, than it usually was. Their eyes were harder, too. Mateer nodded, and gripped the tray he'd used to bring their drinks, holding it against his chest like it was a shield. When it became clear that Shiloh wasn't planning on saying anything else, Faatina frantically tried to fill the awkward silence.

"So this is where you work? Wait – " she stopped, her brain suddenly piecing some information together. " – that's your boyfriend, at the counter downstairs?"

"Yep. His name's Tommy," Mateer said, and the corners of his mouth lifted up instinctively. "He's the best." Faatina's gaze caught on the way Mateer's eyes crinkled, the way the tension began melting out of his shoulders. The uneasy ache throughout her body retracted to hone in on her chest, like tendrils enclosing her heart. She took a careful, tight breath around it.



"I didn't know you had a boyfriend," Shiloh said. Their expression had become less hostile, and they were leaning forwards, shoulders open.

"Just because I'm gay, doesn't mean I'm popular," said Mateer. "We can't all be like you." He said it with a wry smile, and there was a short moment where Faatina wasn't sure how Shiloh would react. Then, Shiloh laughed, and shook his head at Mateer.

"With sass like that, I'm no longer surprised that you're queer."

They looked at each other, this time with a point of connection between them. It made Faatina's heart feel full, but since it was still being squeezed in a death grip, it only felt even more painful. She didn't have anything like this – such a pure and *human* link with someone, shared knowledge and experience without words. She had nothing.

"I'd better get back to work," Mateer said. "Say goodbye before you leave, yeah?" His gaze moved onto Faatina just before he turned away, and for that split second, he looked like a different person – lighter, free. It was beautiful. She watched him until he disappeared down the stairs.

"Shall we get started?" she said, her voice mercifully steady.

\* \* \*

An hour later, they'd gone through the whole play, reading the scenes that Viola and Orsino interacted out loud. Faatina allowed herself to sink into Viola's character, to feel every word she said to Orsino. Once they'd reached the end, Faatina's skin was no longer crawling, and she'd invited herself onto the other end of Shiloh's sofa, lounging against its soft arm. Tommy's delicious hot chocolate might've released some much needed serotonin into her brain, too.

"Okay, but what about this line of Orsino's – " Shiloh was saying, bent over their script. " – 'I have unclasped to thee the book even of my secret soul' – like, I'm so mad that

Shakespeare skipped over that. We're just supposed to make the audience believe that Viola – sorry, Cesario – and Orsino are now instant BFFs?"

"That's a good point," said Faatina. "We'll have to make sure they know that time has passed. Otherwise it'll just feel like insta-love. I *hate* insta-love."

"Mmm. It has been done many times before. Bit boring, to be honest."

"Seriously, I don't see how it could ever happen in real life," Faatina said, absently flicking over pages of her own script.

"I dunno. I suppose some people feel it."

Faatina let her script fall shut, and looked up at Shiloh.

"What, love at first sight? It's not *real*. It can't be," she said. Shiloh shrugged.

"I only know how I feel – I'm not going to tell someone that what they feel is not real."

"That's not what I meant," Faatina said, cringing internally, and feeling the back of her neck heat against her will. "I don't know – I guess I just don't understand how someone can feel instantly attracted to someone with one look. It's too hard for me to believe."

"That's fair," Shiloh said. "But just because *you* don't feel it, doesn't mean someone else doesn't." They shrugged, a bittersweet curl to their lips. "All I know is that people are weird, and wonderful, and feel all kinds of things. Whatever tickles your pickle."

Faatina let out a breath, trying to expel some of the energy that was still pent up inside her.

"You should get that on a bumper sticker," she said, after a moment.

"Yeah, my dad would not appreciate that on his car."

They both laughed, Shiloh's deep and low-pitched laugh a musical contrast to Faatina's soft giggle. As their laughter died down, though, something rippled over Shiloh's face, as if they were in pain.

"You okay?" said Faatina.

"Um. Yeah. Sorry," Shiloh said and they sounded a little strangled, there was something off in their tone. They twisted their fingers together for a few strained moments before reaching over to dig through their bag for something. Faatina leaned forwards, her concern increasing as Shiloh's searching got more and more feverish.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

Her dad's doctoring instincts were kicking in – she wondered if Shiloh was looking for an inhaler, maybe, or some other medication, but when Shiloh finally withdrew their hand they were holding – lip-gloss? Shiloh let their eyes flutter shut for a moment, and let out a brief breath. They raised the lip-gloss to their lips, and Faatina could discern the tiniest tremble in their fingers. With quick, precise strokes, Shiloh applied the lip-gloss, which was a barely noticeable light brown colour.

"Sorry," they repeated once they had tucked the lip-gloss back into their bag. "I really tried not to – I didn't want to make things weird, but – " Shiloh took another controlled breath.

"What happened?" Faatina said gently.

"It was my laugh, it – it sounded really – well, *masculine*, I guess, and – I just, um, I get gender dysphoria, less often than I used to now that I'm mostly out, but. It's like, when you feel like you don't have the right body parts, or you can't present as the gender you want to present as – or if my gender changes when I'm out and I'm suddenly wearing the

wrong clothes, and it makes *everything* feel wrong –" Shiloh swallowed hard, and lowered their eyes.

Faatina found it difficult to catch her breath for a moment. She couldn't begin to imagine what it must be like to feel like you didn't belong in your own body.

"That sounds – Shiloh, I'm so sorry you have to deal with that."

"I – " Shiloh cleared their throat. "Uh, thanks. It's worse if I'm actively focusing on it, worrying about how I'm going to be perceived. I try not to let it bother me so much these days, but it's hard. I mean, it's not like I can hide the fact that I was assigned male at birth – everyone knew who I was before I came out. I guess that makes it worse sometimes, everyone having all these preconceived thoughts about me. I wish I could just have a clean slate. A fresh start. Some place new." Shiloh let out a deep breath, and then refocused their gaze on Faatina. "I dunno. Anyway. Sorry. For the rant. And for being weird."

"Hey. Don't apologise," Faatina said. "You should never have to apologise for being yourself."

Shiloh nodded. They drew their legs towards their chest and rested their chin on their knees.

"True. But I'm sorry if I freaked you out. It's just, right now, I feel like a girl, but then my laugh definitely sounded like a guy..." They groaned, and tugged a hand through their hair. "And I tried my best to dress neutrally today, so this wouldn't be weird." Shiloh choked on a bitter laugh.

"It's not weird," said Faatina, trying to make eye contact with Shiloh.

"If I'd turned up in something super gendered, like a skirt, it might have been weird."

"Shiloh." She waited for them to look up at her. "I don't care what you wear. You should be able to wear whatever makes you feel comfortable." Shiloh's fingertips were scraping against their cheeks. "Did – did the lip-gloss help?" she asked hesitantly.

"A bit. It's kind of an invisible way that I can feel more feminine, and it's easy to put it on whenever I need to. Even if I'm the only one who knows I'm wearing it."

"And... how are you feeling now?"

Shiloh snorted, and Faatina pretended that she didn't see the tear sliding down their cheek.

"I wish I was wearing a fucking skirt," they said through gritted teeth.

"So let's go find you a skirt."

Shiloh blinked, and finally met Faatina's gaze. Their eyes were red, glazed over, but they still directed an impressive, arched eyebrow at her.

"I appreciate the thought, but my house is currently packed with practically everyone my family has ever met, for our Sunday hāngi. I really can't deal with a crowd of people right now."

Faatina was already shaking her head and packing away her script.

"I actually had something else in mind."

\* \* \*

"Welcome to the best op-shop in the universe," said Shiloh.

They flung their arms wide open as Faatina followed them through the main entrance. Shiloh was a little pale, but being here seemed to ease the insecurity that Faatina had seen in their eyes at the café. She hoped so, anyway. She was touched that Shiloh had been so vulnerable in front of her – it had been a rare glimpse into someone who was normally confident and certain of themselves. Or appeared to be.

"I've never even set foot in here before," Faatina said, looking around. They were inside an old warehouse building, one massive room, filled with rows upon rows of clothes. Surprisingly, there were quite a few other people strolling up and down the aisles.

"Honey, op-shopping is addictive. I'm totally letting you in on my trade secrets here, but, this is where I buy all my clothes. They're cheap *and* unique, which is the perfect combination for compiling a wardrobe like mine. I've been coming here for years." Shiloh's eyes were shining. "Plus, they organise everything by *colour*."

Faatina examined the racks more closely, and realised that Shiloh was right. A rainbow was twisting throughout the room, curving around the ends of each aisle. She'd never seen anything like it. It was charmingly uncomplicated.

"After you," she said.

Shiloh meandered their way through the greens and the blues, trailing their hands through the racks like they were trying to touch every single garment. They began actively flicking through the coat hangers amongst the purples. Faatina, holding back a giggle, presented Shiloh with a bright pink tutu she'd spotted in the next row. Of course Shiloh looked brilliant in it. After several minutes of smoothing their fingers over the fabric, Shiloh eventually returned it to the rack, staring wistfully back at it as they continued down the row. They'd sifted through the mauves and magentas, and had migrated to the red racks, when Faatina froze. She listened hard, wondering if she'd imagined it.

"No way, Mum, I wouldn't be caught dead wearing those!"

That – that *was* Safrina's voice. Faatina's sister was here? And, apparently, so was her mum? What the heck? Faatina spun around, and there they were, browsing the pink clothes, heading straight towards Shiloh and her.

"Safrina, it was the 70s. Everyone wore bell-bottoms."

"I could fit my whole body in that bit, though!"

Shit. Shiloh. She couldn't let them speak to her mum – what if they mentioned something about the senior production? She'd told her mum that she'd been meeting up with a friend to work on a drama project. Almost the truth. But if Shiloh innocently said the wrong thing –

"You'd look fabulous in those pants, in my opinion."

Ah, crap. Too late.

Shiloh was nodding their head at the fluorescent pink flared pants that Faatina's mum was holding out to Safrina. Her sister looked up at Shiloh with a frown.

"Would you wear them?" Safrina said sceptically, without hesitating.

"Of course I would! Who wouldn't want to look like Cher during her glory days?"

"Who's Cher?"

"Seriously?" Shiloh said to Safrina.

Faatina couldn't hold back her groan, which unfortunately drew her mum's attention.

"Faatina! We didn't expect to see you here. I thought you were working on something for drama with your friend?"

Shiloh's eyes widened, and they sent Faatina a pointed look. She fixed a smile onto her face, and used all of her restraint *not* to roll her eyes.

"Hi mum. This is my friend, Shiloh. We've already finished, and we thought we'd stop by here on the way home."

"Hi, Faatina's mum!" Shiloh said, and their smirk was one notch away from pure evilness. "And you, the poor Cher-deprived child, must be Faatina's sister?"

"I'm Safrina!" she said. "My friend Jasmine is having her birthday party next weekend, and we all have to dress up in 70s clothes. Do I have to wear these pants?"

"You know, I bet we could find something that you'd like even more," said Shiloh. They offered their free hand to Safrina, who, after an affirmative nod from her mum, wound her hand around Shiloh's wrist and pulled them further down the row. It was impossible for Faatina to feel too annoyed, because Shiloh was grinning again, returning some balance to the world. Faatina and her mum watched as the pair darted between racks, rapidly collecting a pile of things for Safrina to try on.

"Shiloh seems nice," her mum said, her tone deceptively casual.

"Shiloh is nice," said Faatina. Her mum flashed her a sideways glance. Faatina finally gave in to the temptation, and rolled her eyes. "We're *friends*, mum."

"Okay," Faatina's mum said, not even trying to hide her smile.

Fifteen excruciatingly embarrassing minutes later, Shiloh had helped Safrina choose an outfit that she actually liked, and also looked like she belonged on the front of a 70s vinyl record cover.

"The tie-dyed headband really makes it," Faatina's mum said seriously.

"Right?!" Shiloh said.

"Thank you so much for your help. I was fighting a losing battle."

"Thanks Shiloh," Safrina chimed in. "I hope you get to buy your tutu sometime."

"Me too," Shiloh said. As Faatina's mum and Safrina walked away to the front counter, Faatina could've sworn that Safrina was singing "If I Could Turn Back Time".

"That was kind of amazing," Faatina said. "But let's never do that again. I apologise on behalf of my crazy family."

"You haven't met *my* family," Shiloh laughed. "That was *nothing*."

"Don't worry, there are still three other members of my family for you to meet."



"Is that a promise?" said Shiloh, and it sounded like they were mostly teasing, but there was a sweet undertone to the question that made Faatina's mind go blank for a second.

"Only if you have no sense of self-preservation," she managed. Shiloh merely shrugged.

"Your mum seemed really nice, and Safrina was awesome."

"I'm surprised she let you help her, to be honest. Saffie can be a brat sometimes," she said.

"You forget, matching people with the right clothes is literally my best talent. She was a bit reluctant at first – but once I told her that I helped you with your costumes for 'Twelfth Night', she was all good."

Ice trickled down Faatina's back. *Fuck*. This was not good.

"Wait here," Shiloh said, oblivious to Faatina's internal turmoil. "I'm going to try something on. It's the perfect thing to wear home." They headed towards the changing rooms.

Safrina wouldn't say anything to their mum, right? It probably wouldn't occur to her to mention it. In the context of their conversation, Faatina being in 'Twelfth Night' was kind of an irrelevant detail. Safrina would likely forget that Shiloh had said anything. And hopefully their mum would stay blissfully in the dark. Shit. Seriously though, how did Faatina have the most nosy siblings in the world, how the actual fuck? She ruffled up her hair, running her fingers through to search for nonexistent knots.

"What do you think?"

Shiloh had reappeared. They were wearing an orange, corduroy a-line skirt that reached halfway down their thighs. The copper shade of orange looked lovely against Shiloh's light brown skin.

"You look like autumn," Faatina said. Shiloh grinned.

The woman at the counter seemed to know Shiloh, because she let them pay for the skirt while they were still wearing it. Shiloh was noticeably more assured as they both walked out into the sun, to make their way back to where Shiloh had parked their parents' car.

"Better?" Faatina said.

"Definitely." Shiloh cleared their throat. "Thanks for being so cool about this. Not everyone would be." Shiloh was fidgeting with their bag strap, like they were trying to seem uninterested in her reaction.

"Their loss," she said firmly.

They had to walk past The Fix café to get to the car park. Through the windows, Faatina could see Mateer and Tommy behind the counter, laughing about something. Their intimacy was subtle, but it was there, in the way Mateer's hips were tilted towards Tommy, and the way Tommy was brushing something off Mateer's apron. Shiloh, with a mad cackle, ran over to the glass and banged their fist on it. Mateer and Tommy jumped, as did the two other customers in the café, but Shiloh just brandished both arms, and twirled to model their new skirt. Both Mateer and Tommy gave them a double thumbs up. Faatina gave them a more sedate wave with her fingers, which they returned.

"Can't *believe* I didn't pick Mateer being gay," Shiloh said, and they sounded genuinely disappointed in themselves. "It would've saved me a lot of trouble."

"What does that mean?"

"It just would've been good to know earlier – that I don't have to be jealous."

Faatina raised her eyebrows, waiting for them to explain in a way that actually made sense. A small smile crept onto Shiloh's face, and they let out a puff of air.

"I was kinda jealous yesterday, when you blew me off to hang out with him," Shiloh said.

"You were?"

"Yeah. I was." Shiloh's cheeks were a light pink, but they met Faatina's eyes, determined. "I'm a terrible human being, what can I say?"

Faatina didn't know what to say either. She didn't have much experience with jealousy – it wasn't in her nature. She'd certainly never had anyone feel jealous because of her before. Despite her best efforts, her face started to feel hot. She still couldn't think of something to break the lengthening silence.

"I've freaked you out," Shiloh said on a sigh. "I knew it would happen somehow. I'll admit, I thought it was gonna be the skirt thing, not this."

"I'm not freaked out," she said. "Just wasn't expecting you to say that."

They'd reached the car. Shiloh unlocked it, and tossed their bag of clothes into the back seat.

"You can forget I said it, if you like," they said. Their tone was neutral, too neutral. Faatina's skin had started prickling again, a buzzing, painful heat. She waited until Shiloh was pulling out of the car park to speak again.

"That's not it. I – I'm not offended, or anything like that. I don't want you to think that. You're great. It's nothing to do with that."

"So this is a 'it's not you, it's me' type of thing," said Shiloh, checking the rear view mirror. Faatina was looking out the passenger window, so that she could try and pretend that Shiloh wasn't sneaking glances at her every few seconds.

"Kind of, yeah. Something like that. I don't know."

Shiloh hummed thoughtfully.

"Okay," they said.

This time it was Faatina chancing a look over at Shiloh.

"Okay??"

"Yeah. However you feel, it's okay. I'm not going anywhere."

Faatina turned back to the window, and swallowed thickly. It might've been easy for Shiloh to *say* that it was okay, but it felt almost impossible for Faatina to believe it.

## 7.

Faatina meant to corner Safrina as soon as she got home, to find out how much she knew about Faatina's role in 'Twelfth Night', and whether she had mentioned it to their mum. She'd only just got home, however, when a distraction appeared in the form of Jess arriving on her doorstep.

"So, how did it go? I want to know everything," Jess said the moment Faatina opened the door. "Every. Single. Detail."

Faatina lifted an eyebrow and leant against the doorframe.

"Were you hiding around the corner, waiting for me to get home?"

"Where did you guys go?" said Jess, as if Faatina hadn't even spoken. "Ooh, did you go past that new place that has a karaoke night every Tuesday? We need to put that on the to-do list. I bet *Shiloh* can sing –"

"Oh bloody hell, come in."

Jess smirked.

They made a pit stop via the kitchen to get some Coke, before heading up to Faatina's room. Both of them flopped onto her bed. Jess tilted her head towards Faatina, and pushed her lips into her best pout.

"Are you seriously not going to let me live vicariously through you?" she said.

"You aren't missing out on anything! It was fine, Shiloh was great, we're going to smash out the play, and I think we're going to be good friends."

"Good *friends*?" Jess stared at Faatina for so long that Faatina had to fight the urge to fidget. Hopefully her poker face was holding strong. Finally, Jess's own face dropped.

"Damn. I really thought there was something there."

Faatina took a leisurely swig of her Coke, her long legs dangling off the side of the bed.

"What can I say, Jess. You'll have to use your matchmaking skills elsewhere."

It turned out that Jess hadn't only come to bug Faatina about Shiloh – she also wanted to compare her English homework to Faatina's, just in case she'd misinterpreted the questions. Her dyslexic brain often came up completely different answers that were equally as intelligent, but kind of irrelevant. They alternated between homework and watching some classic Vine videos on YouTube until Faatina's mum popped her head in to invite Jess to stay for dinner. She'd made samosas, since she knew Jess *loved* samosas. It was only when her whole family and Jess were sitting around the dining table that Faatina realised this was a horrible idea, and that everything had the potential to go very, very wrong.

"So, Jess," Faatina's dad said. "Faatina tells me that you're thinking of doing a Fine Arts degree at university next year?"

"Yep, that's right," said Jess, having just polished off her second samosa in as many minutes. "I think I'd die if I didn't do something creative."

"Good for you, honey," said Faatina's mum, her eyes lighting up. "We all loved your paintings in the school's art show at the end of last year, didn't we?"

"My favourite was the rainbow one!" Rahul declared, sitting up straighter in his chair as he tried to attract Jess's attention. He'd adored Jess ever since she'd drawn a picture of Rahul wearing an Iron Man suit for his fifth birthday. It was still hanging on his bedroom wall.

"Thanks, Rahul." Jess couldn't hide her pleased grin. "And thanks Mrs D. I haven't decided what to major in yet, but I don't want to narrow it down too soon anyway."

"Well, I think you'll do very well, and I admire you for following your heart and studying something that you're passionate about," Faatina's dad said. He passed the dish of pumpkin and turmeric samosas down to the other end of the table. "Think of how dreadful it would be to spend years of your life on something you don't enjoy!"

Faatina jerked so hard that her knee banged the underside of the table. Jeetan was the only one to notice; he made a circular motion with his index finger next to his head, indicating that he thought she was crazy.

"I never wanted to do anything other than medicine," her dad continued. "Luckily, I was also good at it – or, I like to think so, anyway!"

"*Daaad.*" Safrina groaned, and rolled her eyes. "You've just taken the cringe factor to, like, 10."

"One of the perks of fatherhood," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Anyway, I seem to have passed the science genes onto Faatina!" Her dad sent a fond smile in her direction.

"I'm glad you persuaded Faatina to take Drama again this year, though, Jess," Faatina's mother said. "It'll do her brain some good to tackle something completely different to Maths and Science."

"Oh," Jess said, somewhat awkwardly. "I didn't persuade –"

"Ms Burnett was the one who really encouraged me," Faatina said hastily. She glanced at Jess, who frowned back at her.

"Do you have any interesting assessments for Drama coming up?" Faatina's mum asked them both.

"Not really –" Faatina began, frantically trying to think of some way to change the subject.

"We're mainly just working on 'Twelfth Night' at the moment, parts of that count for NCEA," said Jess.

Faatina's parents exchanged a look.

"Oh! Your whole class is involved in the senior production?"

Faatina's breath caught in her chest.

"Well, yeah, Ms Burnett's directing it, and like Jess said, it counts towards our assessments," she said quickly, before Jess had a chance to speak.

"But that's lovely!" her mum said. "I know you'll love being part of the play, Faatina. You love Shakespeare so much that if he was alive today, you'd already be married to him," she laughed.

Jess opened her mouth, a confused frown on her face, but didn't say anything. Faatina just stared at her from the opposite side of the table, her eyes wide, willing her to stay quiet. Beside Faatina, Jeetan let his forehead fall onto his palm with a smack. Faatina resisted the urge to kick him under the table.

"Shiloh is picking the costumes," Safrina piped up. "They told me —"

"Shiloh is Miss Thornhill's assistant, they're *helping* to pick the costumes," Faatina corrected.

"If they're anything like the outfit Shiloh found for Safrina today, I'm sure they'll be very good," said her mum.

"You guys met Shiloh??" Jess said, and *seriously*, talking about 'Twelfth Night' was actually preferable to talking about Shiloh, so Faatina blurted out the first thing that came into her mind.

"Hey, I totally forgot to tell you guys, Jess got one of the lead roles in the play, she's playing Olivia!" Faatina said, probably a bit louder than necessary.



Her parents began congratulating Jess, telling her that she would be excellent, and that they couldn't wait to see her on stage.

"We're all going to see it, of course!" Faatina's dad said, and Jess looked at Faatina in confusion, which slowly gave way to a dawning glint of suspicion in her eyes. Rahul began babbling excitedly about whether Jess would get to wear a princess dress, and she had to look away to assure him that her dress was indeed huge and sparkly. Faatina smiled, hoping that would hide her trembling lips.

\* \* \*

Jess rounded on Faatina as soon as they made it to her bedroom after dessert – she made a point of shutting the door first.

"What the hell was that, Faatina?"

It made her insides feel like lead, but Faatina's best chance was to play innocent. She had to contain this.

"What the hell was what?"

"*That*, at dinner, what your parents were saying about 'Twelfth Night'." Jess took a deep breath, and imperceptibly straightened to her full height. "It sounded like they had no idea you're playing Viola."

"What do you mean?" Faatina cocked her head.

"They were pretty damn surprised when I said we were working on the play! What did your mum say... 'Faatina, you'll love being part of the play, isn't that lovely!' " Jess said, in a scarily accurate imitation of her mum's voice.

Faatina scoffed.

"That's ridiculous." *Yes, she was ridiculous.* "Why *wouldn't* they know about the play?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jess said in a hiss. "Maybe because you didn't *tell them* like you said you did?!" Each word stung. Nevertheless, Faatina forced herself to shrug.

"Maybe you misread the situation. I don't know what you're talking about."

Something in Jess's eyes caught fire, and for a moment they seemed to be the same colour as her dark red hair. Then she blinked, and her expression became set, like it was carved out of stone.

"Whatever you say, Faatina. I'm not stupid, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't treat me like I was."

Heat rushed up the back of Faatina's neck to engulf her ears.

"Shit, Jess, that's not what I meant at *all* –"

Jess picked up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder.

"Don't involve me in this, because I'm not lying to your parents for you. I *hate* lies – you *know* that. And you still lied to *me*."

A lump in Faatina's throat was preventing her from speaking, but it hardly mattered; she couldn't think of a single thing to say. Jess shook her head, a bitter curl to her lips, and strode out of Faatina's room, flinging the door wide open. Faatina almost wished she'd slammed it shut instead – it was like she was left hanging, still waiting for the argument to end. She heard Jess call out a goodbye to her parents, and then, silence.

Faatina and Jess had never really had a fight before. Not a serious one, anyway. Not in the whole five years they'd been friends. Now Faatina wasn't sure if Jess would want to ever speak to her again.

Faatina sat down at her desk and plugged her headphones into her iPod. She had to shut her eyes, though, because they were starting to burn.

\* \* \*

Faatina wasn't avoiding Jess. She just felt like spending her lunch hour outside the library, catching up on homework. It had nothing to do with the fact that Jess had blatantly ignored Faatina in English, the class they shared during 4<sup>th</sup> period on Mondays. It definitely wasn't because after lunch they had Calculus, where they would have to sit next to each other for an entire hour, and then after *that* there was rehearsal, where they were reading through the script for the first time.

Who was she even kidding? It was going to be hell. And yes, she was a coward, but she couldn't face Jess's silent treatment during lunch too.

She was half-heartedly nibbling at her sandwich, stuck on a Chemistry question, when she felt someone appear from around the corner of the building.

"Faatina?"

Mateer was standing in the last patch of sun before the building blocked it out completely. He stepped forwards into the shade.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said, sitting next to her on the bench.

"I needed a good hiding spot," Faatina tried to joke, but it fell flat. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I've already had my daily sobbing session in the bathroom this morning, so I'm just here to eat my lunch." Mateer squinted at her from behind his glasses. "Are you okay?" He sounded so genuinely concerned that Faatina's heart twinged.

"I had a fight with my friend. My best friend, actually."

"The girl playing Olivia?"

"Yeah. Jess." Faatina swallowed. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

Mateer's fingers fidgeted in his lap, in constant motion of some sort, tracing his fingernails, picking at his cuticles. Faatina didn't mean to watch, but it was rhythmical in a morbid sort of way.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he said. There was some serious irony in him posing that question to her – and at this very spot. How could she even begin to explain the mess she'd gotten herself into? Matter was sitting patiently, though, smoothing his fingertips together, and Faatina had to talk to *somebody*, had to try and stop these feelings and lies ripping her insides to shreds.

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Of – of course," said Mateer.

"I haven't told my parents that I'm in 'Twelfth Night'."

Mateer's eyes widened in surprise. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't decide what.

"Why not?" he asked eventually. Faatina had expected him to sound judgmental, accusatory, but he didn't. He just sounded – well, curious. She let out a breathless laugh, even though she couldn't be less amused.

"I seriously have no fucking clue. Because I'm a coward? Because I'm actually an awful person?"

Mateer's eyebrows crept into a frown.

"You're not."

Well, shit. What was it about this particular bench outside the library that made people want to cry? Faatina blinked back the prickling heat in her eyes and let out a long breath.

"You don't understand, though," she said. "I've been *lying* to my parents, and I've been lying to Jess about *not* lying to my parents. I've been really shitty to her, honestly, and now she's furious at me and pretending that I don't exist, which I totally deserve. I just – " Faatina clenched her fingers together. " – I don't know how to fix this."

Mateer didn't say anything for a while. Faatina began tapping her fingernails on the underside of the bench, an erratic, tense beat. A gust of wind rounded the corner of the library, and light goosebumps raced across Faatina's arms. One look at the sky confirmed that clouds were starting to dull out the sun, creating a motley pattern of light and shadow. Finally, Mateer pushed his glasses further up his nose and spoke.

"I mean, I think the only way to fix things is to tell the truth – to both Jess and your parents."

Faatina slumped back against the library's brick wall.

"Yeah, I get that, but – I don't know what to say. What if I make things worse? What if my parents force me to quit the play – or Ms Burnett forces me to quit because Jess can't stand me? What if *she* gets kicked out of the play? What if," Faatina said, her throat sticking, "What if she doesn't want to be my friend anymore?"

Faatina knew she probably sounded like a scared six year old kid, but that was how she felt. How else could she explain the dull panic threatening at the edges of her mind, how could she tell Mateer that it was all she could do to keep smiling and breathing and try to drown it all out with music, with schoolwork, with the play? How could she put that swirling, stabbing feeling into words? If she tried, she might not be able to contain it anymore.

"I'm not really an expert on talking," Mateer said, "but I think you'll know what to say. Just be honest. That's all you can do."

Faatina turned Mateer's words over in her head. She'd known, deep down, that was what she had to do, but hearing Mateer say it out loud made it sound less impossible, somehow. Her only hope for escaping this mess was to talk to Jess during Calculus – apologise again, as many times as it took – and to talk to her parents tonight, tell them the truth about the play. She would make this right.

"Are you secretly a seventy-year-old trapped in a sixteen-year-old's body?"

"You got me," Mateer said, in his deadpan way that Faatina was beginning to love.

Faatina took another bite of her sandwich, feeling her appetite begin to return.

Mateer dug through his bag and pulled out an apple.

"I suppose you were meant to be having lunch with your boyfriend," Faatina said.

"Sorry for stealing you away."

"Tommy's not at Skybourne. He goes to Kingsgrove, across town."

"That must suck."

"Yep."

"Who do you usually sit with, then?"

Mateer scratched his fingers against the back of his neck.

"To be honest, I usually just come here and do homework at lunchtime. I don't really have many friends here."

Faatina's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. After she was silent for a few long seconds, Mateer glanced over at her.

"Oh – don't look at me like that," he said. "It's fine, really. Doing homework at school saves time *after* school, and on the weekends. Besides, it's not like I don't have any friends at all. There's some people in class, like Emily. And I have Tommy."

"And me," Faatina said. "Mateer. I feel like we should hug. Should we hug?"

"I don't know. If you want."

Faatina reached over to wrap her long arms around Mateer's shoulders. It was a bit awkward, because Mateer didn't seem to know where to put his hands, but they ended up between her shoulder blades, and *damn* Faatina hadn't realised how much she needed this. She shut her eyes and pretended that they could just sit there forever, if they wanted to.

\* \* \*

Faatina didn't talk to Jess during Calculus. Mr Baldwin was teaching them how to differentiate using the chain rule, which involved a lot of complicated steps and examples, so there wasn't much opportunity to talk to anyone, let alone Jess. It didn't help that Jess didn't glance in her direction even *once*.

Faatina didn't talk to Jess during rehearsal either. Jess deliberately sat on the opposite side of the drama room to her, and their emotional distance was obvious when they read their main scene together, where Viola attempts to woo Olivia on Orsino's behalf. To put it mildly, it was a disaster. Faatina was so distracted that she ended up stumbling over a few of her lines, and even lost her place on the page. She wondered if she was the only one who could hear the thinly veiled chill in Jess's voice, or whether that was just how Olivia was supposed to sound.

Apparently Ms Burnett was happy enough with the cast's read-through—despite Faatina being certain she'd screwed up the majority of her lines—because she dismissed them ten minutes early. By the time Faatina forced her way through the crowd, Jess had disappeared.

Faatina's plans to talk to her parents also evaporated the moment she stepped through her front door. The living room was a hive of chaotic activity – even more chaotic than usual. Her dad was already home, wandering around in one of his more posh suits, his

shirt unbuttoned and a silver tie hanging loose around his neck. Rahul trailed behind him, doing his best to convince him to wear his 'really cool pineapple tie' instead. Her mum was balancing on the arm of the sofa, using one hand to put on an earring, and the other to fasten the straps on her bright red high heels, while Safrina was insisting on showing her a video on YouTube where someone with a gratingly cheerful voice was explaining how to fix your hair into a glamorous bun in three easy steps. Jeetan was sitting at the coffee table with his headphones on, using two pens to drum on the wooden surface.

"Thank god you're home," Faatina's mum said as soon as she spotted her. "We're leaving in five minutes."

"Where are we going?"

"We, as in, your father and I," her mum said. "We've got that fundraiser dinner for the new Wellington Children's Hospital, remember?"

Faatina didn't remember, but she nodded anyway.

"There's money on the table for you to order pizza," said her mum. "Rahul, Safrina, normal bedtime still applies! Rahul's already had his bath. Jeetan? JEETAN! The dishwasher needs unloading. And Faatina, can you put the watering system on for half an hour? The hydrangeas need a good soaking."

Faatina's mum, successfully wearing both of her high heels and all of her earrings, swept off in the direction of the bathroom. Her dad reappeared, and Faatina noticed that he was now wearing his pineapple tie. She decided not to comment.

"We'll be back home around ten o'clock, hopefully," her dad said. "We don't want to make you stay up too late."

"It's funny that you think I ever go to bed before ten," Faatina said. Her dad's resigned sigh was interrupted by her mum materialising at his elbow, tugging him towards



the garage. They both called out goodbyes over their shoulders, and Faatina just managed to tell her parents to have fun before the door shut.

Stuck on babysitting duty. She resisted the urge to bang her head against the nearest wall. There was no way she'd have time to talk to them about the play tonight, either. Was the universe conspiring against her?

"Give my phone back, you ghou!"

Faatina looked up in time to see Safrina chasing Rahul around the living room, nearly knocking over one of the home entertainment speakers by the TV.

This was going to be so much fun.

Two hours later, Faatina had successfully made sure that her siblings were full of pizza, and that they hadn't killed each other. Yet. Rahul was safely tucked in bed, and Jeetan was clanging dishes in the kitchen. Faatina had managed to snag a leftover slice of pizza and was spread out on the sofa when Safrina peered into the living room, leaning against the doorframe. She must've just finished showering, because her hair was wet and she was dressed in purple cat pyjamas.

"I'm going to bed to read my book, okay?" Safrina said.

"Cool. Lights off by nine, yeah? And – phone?"

Safrina rolled her eyes, but handed it over. Rules were rules. She began to turn away.

"Hey, Saffie," said Faatina. They were alone – this was her chance to ask her.

"Yesterday, at the op-shop, did you and Shiloh talk much?"

"I guess." Safrina shrugged. "Why?"

"I – uh, what did Shiloh say about 'Twelfth Night'?"

"Just, like, that they were picking out the costumes, which all sound awesome, by the way. Do you really get to wear a fancy coat? What character are you playing, anyway?"

Faatina swallowed. No time like the present, she supposed.

"Viola," she said carefully. "The main character, actually. And yeah, Shiloh found me an epic coat. Just – I haven't told Mum and Dad yet, about being in the play, so..."

"So you don't want me spilling your secret," Safrina finished, a mischievous kind of smile lighting up her face.

"Right."

"Okay," said Safrina. "I can deal with secrets. That's like a staple of teenage life."

"You don't turn thirteen until August," Faatina said. "And I think you've been watching too much 'Riverdale'."

"I regret nothing," Safrina shrugged. "Hey, I was wondering. Is Shiloh transgender?"

Faatina thought about that for a moment.

"Sort of. Technically, yeah. Shiloh's genderfluid, which comes under the transgender 'umbrella'."

The smirk returned to Safrina's face. "Just so you know, Shiloh totally likes you."

"And look at that, it's time for bed!" Faatina said loudly. Then she stuffed some pizza into her mouth so that she wouldn't have to say anything else.

*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was currently playing on TV, which would normally demand her attention, but not tonight. Faatina knew she should drag herself upstairs to do some homework, or study her lines, but instead she found herself browsing Mateer's Facebook page. He didn't post much – the last thing on his wall was a few birthday wishes from people in October – but there was one photo of him and Tommy. It was clearly a

selfie – Faatina thought they might've been lounging on a sofa, or a bed. Their heads were touching, their shoulders pressed together, and they looked so *comfortable* with each other, like they really fit. Mateer's eyes were crinkled at the edges. Faatina knew that a single photo—on social media, no less—couldn't capture an entire relationship, but this photo made things look so simple for them. Like there was nothing more natural than the two of them, together. But if it was truly so simple why did it feel so far out of Faatina's reach?

## 8.

At Wednesday's rehearsal, they worked on the first three scenes of Act I, meaning that Jess didn't need to attend. Unfortunately, that did little to stop Faatina from thinking about her. Jess had continued to ignore Faatina in each of the three classes they shared – English, Calculus, and Drama – and Faatina had taken to sitting outside the library with Mateer at lunchtime. Faatina had tried her best to speak to Jess, to break the ice with small talk before class started, or whenever the teacher had their back turned. Small talk, apparently, wasn't going to cut it. And so here Faatina was, standing at one end of the drama room, supposedly watching Ms Burnett direct the students playing Maria, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, but in reality trying to figure out a way to get her best friend back.

"Everything alright?"

Faatina startled. Shiloh was right beside to her, watching her expectantly. She didn't know how long they'd been there.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, you didn't laugh at my incredibly camp interpretation of Orsino's opening speech."

"I – you were great, I didn't mean to –" Faatina said.

"Relax, I was joking," said Shiloh. "You were just looking pretty spaced out and serious over here."

"Everything's fine."

Shiloh leaned back against the wall, their ankles crossed. Their analytical gaze seemed to pierce through Faatina's outer defences, and threatened to uncover parts of herself that she would rather keep under lock and key. She had to deflect.

"How's the line memorising coming along?" she said.

"Not bad. I was thinking we could have another script session together this weekend," Shiloh said carefully. Their casual pose might have fooled most observers, but Faatina could pick up an undercurrent of nervous energy running through them. "Only if you want to, no pressure or anything."

"That would be good," she said. That *would* be good, right?

"Cool." The tension in Shiloh's shoulders eased a bit. "We could go to the Fix again, or, maybe, you could – you could come round to my house. You know we have a hāngi every Sunday. If you came over early, you'd be welcome to stay for the food. There's always enough to feed an army. I mean, it'll be crowded and loud and a bit cringey, but it'd be fun, I promise."

Faatina's mouth was dry, and she couldn't help lifting a hand to ruffle through her hair.

"That sounds lovely. I'll – uh – let you know, okay?"

"Okay," Shiloh echoed. They threaded their fingers through their own hair in an absent-minded way. Faatina had always thought that Shiloh's hair looked brilliant. It was shaved close on one side, and long enough to flop over on the other side. *And* now she was probably staring. Excellent. She refocused on the scene being rehearsed and actively avoided thinking about anything that wasn't directly related to the play. It mostly worked.

\* \* \*

It was time for something drastic. It was Friday morning, and Jess was still refusing to interact with Faatina. None of Faatina's strategies had succeeded. It was time to try something new.

Faatina was currently sitting on Jess's front door step. She'd set her alarm for 6:30am instead of her usual 7:00am, making sure she had time to fill two thermoses with

fancy coffee from her parent's coffee machine. She'd arrived at Jess's house at 8:00am on the dot to begin her stakeout. Given that Jess didn't normally leave until 8:30am, Faatina was ridiculously early, but she didn't want to leave anything to chance. This was happening. Today.

Jess's neighbour was peaceful. The houses weren't as new as they were in Faatina's street, but they were well kept, with tidy, colourful gardens. An elderly man strode by with impressive speed, with a small dog scampering along beside him. He nodded to Faatina, and his smile boosted her confidence. Sitting there, in the warmth of the morning, with a soundtrack of birds and rustling trees and humming insects, it was easier to believe that everything was going to be okay.

One of Jess's mums, Leanne, left for work at around 8:10am. She waved at Faatina from inside her car. At least *she* didn't hate Faatina. Jess's ginger cat, Boris, discovered Faatina not long after and flopped on the concrete steps beside her, seeking a tummy rub. Faatina obliged. She hoped the coffee wasn't going cold.

Finally the front door opened.

"Don't encourage him. He's spoilt enough as it is."

Jess knelt down and scratched Boris's ears, immediately contradicting her own words. At that angle, her hair was covering most of her face, so Faatina couldn't gauge her mood.

"I'm sorry," Faatina blurted out. Jess tucked her hair behind her ear to look Faatina in the eye, their faces level.

"About Boris?" she said, archly.

"I should never have let you believe I'd told my parents when I actually hadn't. I didn't mean to lie to you, but I did, and I'm sorry. I really fucked up." Faatina swallowed,

but forced herself to maintain eye contact. "I know you're not stupid, I have never thought that, and it was cruel to imply that you were. I'm just – I'm really fucking sorry. And – I miss you. You're my best friend. I don't want to let go of you without a fight."

Jess kept staring at her. Boris stretched out between them, a blissful smile on his face. Faatina was moments away from breaking the silence again when Jess leaned backwards, and nodded at the thermoses balanced on the bottom step.

"Is one of them for me?"

"Yeah." Faatina handed the blue flask over. "It's – um, a cappuccino with cinnamon." Jess removed the lid, and took a sip.

"My favourite," she said, as if Faatina didn't already know. Faatina took a gulp out of her own thermos. She'd forgotten to put sugar in hers.

"I saw you arrive, you know," said Jess. "Did you forget that we can see the street from our dining room?"

Jess reached out to absently pat Boris again.

"This week wasn't fun for me either," she said. "Of course I missed talking to you. But you have to understand – I had to take a stand. You – you lied to me. You, of all people, know how much I hate it when people lie to me."

Faatina did know. A couple of years ago, Jess's mum Sarah had finally told Jess why she didn't speak to her parents—Jess's grandparents—despite her dropping Jess off every second Sunday at their house. Apparently they'd kicked Sarah out after she came out as gay, at the age of just fifteen. That was the first time that Faatina had seen Jess *truly* furious – at her grandparents, but also at her mum for not telling her the truth sooner, and for allowing her to unknowingly spend time with her homophobic relatives. She said it had

made her feel like 'an ignorant fool'. Jess had forgiven her mum, but she hadn't been back to her grandparents' house since. And Faatina was the only person Jess had told.

"I know," said Faatina, her voice hoarse. "It was a shitty thing to do. I was scared, I suppose, and I didn't think about how it would affect you. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Jess said softly.

"And you were right – I should have told my parents straight away. I guess I panicked, and I was waiting for the right time, but... there's never really a 'right time', is there?"

"Not really," said Jess.

"And I've honestly been trying to tell them this week! But they had this fundraiser dinner, and my dad's been working late catching up on paperwork, and my Mum's busy with this raffle for St. Johns, and I just –" Faatina dragged her fingers through her hair. "I'm just gonna have to tell them this weekend. Just get it out in the open. Especially since, like, *all* of my damn siblings know. I still don't know how that happened."

"It's times like these that I'm happy to be an only child," Jess said, her mouth actually curving into a smile. Faatina hadn't known if she'd ever see that smile directed at her again. She couldn't help mirroring it.

Jess rolled her eyes. "Oh my god, *stop*."

"I'm just glad that you don't hate me."

"I don't think that would be possible. To be honest, this is kind of funny. Only you could get yourself into such a disastrous situation."

Jess took a long swallow of coffee.



"Do you think that your parents really are going to react that badly? I mean –" Jess sent Faatina a sharp look to dissuade her from interrupting, which let Faatina know she wasn't *completely* out of Jess's bad books yet, "– they both seemed really excited about you being part of the play. And you keep saying that your parents know how much you love Shakespeare. I'm sure they'll understand how important this is to you?"

It was true that Faatina's parents had never forced her into anything. They hadn't forced her to study science – she'd just been good at it. They'd never told her *not* to study drama. But. It was hard to explain, but Faatina had always gotten the impression that her parents were worried that she would be too busy at school, that she would over-commit herself. Obviously, they didn't want her to fail. They wanted her to be happy. These were things that every parent should want for their children. But her dad was a doctor, an excellent doctor, and her mum was clever and hard-working, helping every charity and fundraiser under the sun. They were important members of the community. They made a difference to the world. How could acting ever measure up to that?

"We better start moving," Faatina said. "Don't wanna be late for Drama, do we?"

Boris yawned and rolled over. His singular concern in life seemed to be sunbathing. Lucky bastard.

\* \* \*

Faatina didn't often have to be up early on the weekend. Her typical Saturday morning began at 10:00am, at the earliest. Or, at least, it used to. She hadn't been sleeping as late this year; she felt too guilty, lying in bed, achieving nothing. This Saturday, however, was a bit extreme, even by Faatina's new standards. Out of bed at 7:00am? It should be against the laws of nature. And yet, that was when Faatina tugged her unruly bed-hair into a messy bun and tiptoed her way down the stairs.

She couldn't sleep. She'd been thinking about how she was going to tell her parents all night, and she still didn't have the right words. She couldn't stop picturing their reactions, couldn't stop the tight fist enclosing her heart, her throat, making it difficult to breathe.

When Faatina arrived in the kitchen, though, she discovered that she wasn't the only one awake.

"Sweetheart? What are you doing up?" Her mum was perched at the breakfast bar, the morning's newspaper covering the majority of the space. She was holding a bowl of muesli, and wore a plain shirt and a pair of track pants. She must've been out for her morning walk already.

"Couldn't get back to sleep." Faatina dug around the pantry to produce a mug and a teabag, and picked up the kettle. She could feel her mum's gaze firmly on her back. Faatina's heart rate suddenly spiked, strong enough to vibrate through her ears. Her fingers were clenched around her steaming mug and every part of her body felt hot, as if she were about to spontaneously combust.

"Mum, I'm playing the lead role in 'Twelfth Night'," she said, too quickly and too loudly, but. *Wow*. She'd actually said it. Faatina stared at her teabag, which had almost entirely disappeared, sunken below the hot water. Only one tiny corner was above the surface, grasping at air. Deep breaths. In, out.

"I know, sweetheart."

Faatina wrenched her head up. There was an apologetic smile on her mum's face. She couldn't already know. Could she? Even if she had somehow figured it out, where was the anger?

"It was in last week's school newsletter," her mum said, shrugging. "Also, Rahul might have asked me if I liked your 'surprise' of playing Viola."

The *newsletter*. Faatina barely stopped herself from slamming her head into the pantry door. Of *course* her parents had read it, because they actually cared about the school and what was happening in the community. Faatina really was a complete idiot.

"But," she said, her lips feeling numb and foreign, "If you knew this whole time, why didn't you say anything?"

"Well, the newsletter came out last Friday. By that point, you'd only told us that the school was staging 'Twelfth Night', but not that you were in it. We presumed that you weren't ready to talk about it yet. We didn't want to pressure you."

"We'?" said Faatina, realisation dawning on her far too slowly, and with a small amount of horror. "Oh, god, Dad knows too."

"What do I know?"

Her dad ambled into the kitchen wearing a summer dressing gown and bare feet. His hair was sticking up in several directions at once. He turned his carefree smile towards Faatina, and she almost lost it.

"I don't get it! Aren't you guys mad at me? Mad that I didn't tell you the truth about being in the play, mad that I didn't even tell you I was auditioning? I – I just – why aren't you angry at me?"

Faatina's dad had his eyebrows raised, surprised and confused in equal measures, but her mum shook her head.

"We're sad that we made you feel like you couldn't tell us," she said. "But angry? Why would we be angry?"

"I don't know," Faatina said. "I thought you wouldn't like me putting the play before my other classes. That you'd worry about my grades suffering. I thought – I thought you'd make me quit the play."

Faatina's parents looked at each other. They seemed to be having an entire conversation without saying a word.

"Faatina, honey," her dad said. "We've always known that drama means a lot to you. It's your last year at Skybourne! You deserve to spend it doing something you love."

"Do you think that you *are* putting the play ahead of your other classes?" asked Faatina's mum. "Judging by all the homework you've been doing, I wouldn't say so."

"And you're doing Scholarship Physics!" Her dad leaned his elbows onto the kitchen counter. "It doesn't look like your grades are suffering, love."

There were billions of things that Faatina wanted to say, but she couldn't settle on a single one. It was like, she was hearing what her parents were saying, but it wasn't computing. How had she got this so wrong?

"So, you don't want me to quit?" she finally managed to say.

"No," they said. Together.

Faatina *definitely* wasn't awake enough for this.

"I guess you worked out that there's no study group, then."

"Indeed," her dad said, his lips twitching. "I don't think you actually *need* a study group."

"We can't pretend we're not worried about you, though, taking on so much," her mum said. "If things get overwhelming, will you please come and talk to us? We'll be able to figure something out."

"Uh. Okay. Yeah. Thanks."

"We're here to support you, Faatina," her dad said, rounding the breakfast bar. He reached out to wrap an arm around Faatina, patting her shoulder. "We love you."

Faatina hadn't known what to expect to feel after coming clean to her parents, but it definitely wasn't whatever *this* was. She was relieved, sure, but in many ways, this revelation had dialled up the pressure to infinity. Her parents believed that everything was going to be fine – that Faatina was going to cope with everything, succeed at everything. They *honestly* believed in her. Meanwhile, she was only two weeks into rehearsals, and she already felt like she was barely treading water.

She was so damn tired.