



Tiana Warner





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# CHAPTER 1

## DRAGGING HOME A MOOSE FLOATIE

I'VE BEEN AWAY FOR ONE night, and in that time, my street has turned into a movie set.

Easing my car to a stop behind an orange-and-white-striped barricade, I gape at the crowds, white tents, and trailers filling the intersection in front of my apartment. A metal fence surrounds the area like a crime scene.

My gut twists and I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. On any other day, this would be exciting, but all I want right now are my bathtub, bed, and painkillers. Today is supposed to be a blissful day off before I have to start my master's thesis research, not a daring crusade to get to my front door.

A crane lifts a camera high into the air, where ropes and wires crisscross above the set. Is that a zip-line leading into my favorite pizza place? What kind of over-the-top action flick is this?

My third-floor balcony is visible from here, with its two wooden patio chairs and the wilted hydrangeas that Abby and I never remember to water. In the window beside it, my dark bedroom curtains are shut, as always.

Staying home to spy on the set would have been more fun than that stupid-ass camping trip, but here I am, sweaty and hungover.

Scowling, I back up my rusty, old SUV and circle the block, searching for a way into the parkade.

In the rearview, my reflection is waxy and pale, and my short, sandy hair is so greasy that it's a shade darker, like I've just come out of the shower. Self-loathing has sucked the confidence from my posture.

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Yeah, I was an idiot, but in my defense, Julia was flirting with me and totally into it.

“Ooh, Rachel, let’s get naked in the lake together,” I say to the windshield, mimicking her sultry tone.

It’s hard to believe that the unspoken thing between us is over—late-night study sessions, hanging out after class, inside jokes, our shared suffering as we both go after master’s degrees in medical physics. She’d quickly become a good friend, and after she found out I’m a lesbian, she started asking questions about my love life and wanting to hang out more—like she was curious. Like maybe she thought she wasn’t straight and wanted to explore some things.

Months of anticipation, over in one night, leaving me hollow.

This camping trip was supposed to be a big end-of-term celebration for our department. For Julia and me, it was a culmination, an excuse to get drunk and spend a couple of nights together.

The tension between us was ready to snap, and it did—so hard that it gave me whiplash.

I rub my temple, weaving through the streets and trying to get to my parkade. The movie set takes up way more space than it has any right to, forcing me to make a wide perimeter. As soon as I figure out how to get to my apartment, I’m filling the bathtub and dropping in a glittery bath bomb. Since I left yesterday morning, I’ve swum in a lake, gotten sweaty, been briefly rained on, and walked through a lot of spiderwebs, so I need a good scrub. My skin is so sticky that my shirt is plastered to my back.

After circling for ten minutes, I resign myself to parking three blocks away. I drag my camping gear down the road—the bag of damp clothes, the cooler of food I never ate, and a mostly deflated moose floatie. The early summer heat wave adds more sweat to what’s already dried to my skin. I’d better not run into any neighbors in the elevator, or they’ll be in for a treat when they get a whiff of me.

I swipe my fob to get inside, and before I open the door, laughter erupts behind me.

I whirl around, ready to tell off whoever is laughing at me for dragging camping gear down the street, but the sound is coming from the movie set.

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A metal fence separates me from the set—they have to keep us peasants out, obviously—and white tents block most of my view beyond it. Between two tents is a gap that tunnels my vision to a point.

My heart does a wild, out-of-control flip, knocking me off balance so that I have to grab the door handle to stay standing.

Cate Whitney is on the other side of the fence, talking to a tattooed guy with a boom mic.

*Cate. Whitney.*

I forget how to breathe.

In her early forties and well-established on the A-list, she carries herself with easy confidence. She's rocking a badass black and brown steampunk outfit, including a corset, thigh-high fishnet stockings, a frilly skirt that exposes her thighs in front and hangs calf-length in the back, and a top hat with goggles resting on the brim. Her shoulder-length blond hair is in soft curls, and her white skin has a warm glow, like she's been in the tropics. She's wearing her signature mischievous smirk, her makeup drawing attention to her sharp cheekbones and ice-blue eyes.

How is it possible for anyone to be so attractive? I guess that's why she ended up in Hollywood. She's the type of woman who can rock a tux better than any man and a Valentino dress better than a runway model.

Seeing her in person sparks memories of pivotal moments in my life, making my chest flutter.

When I saw her kiss a woman in a 2000s historical drama, that was the moment I knew. Though the movie was fiction and the actors were straight, their love felt so real, sending butterflies through me. I wanted what those women had—their passion for each other, the connection that reached beyond friendship, the purity of their love.

I asked out my crush after seeing it, and she said yes.

On our fourth date, we watched that same movie together, and I made out with a girl for the first time.

So I'm not being dramatic when I say that Cate Whitney changed my life.

Now, standing with the poise of a goddess, that woman is ten feet away. She's deep in conversation with the guy with the boom mic, but that doesn't stop her from looking past him and meeting my eye.

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*Why?* Why does she have to see me when I look like I climbed out of a dumpster?

Reflexively, I offer an awkward half-smile, which she returns.

My insides flip. This is either the greatest thing ever to happen to me or the worst, depending on whether she can smell me from this distance.

Regaining feeling in my legs, I whip open the door of my building and hurtle myself inside, then grab my camping gear and drag it in after me. The moose floatie smacks the door frame on the way in.

*Cate freaking Whitney is feet away from me, filming a movie.*

I hyperventilate my way up to my apartment and unlock the door with trembling hands. The familiar smell of home hits my nose—sweet-orange essential oil diffusing on the kitchen island, woven with layers of shampoo, burnt toast, and cheap coffee. Abby must be up.

I dump my camping gear and rush through the kitchen and living room toward the balcony. The apartment is as I left it, cluttered and full of low-maintenance plants. My laptop, heap of textbooks, and blanket nest are untouched on my side of the couch. Trinkets from travels, books, and pictures of friends and family take up every surface. It's disorganized—Abby prefers the term *eclectic*—but it's home.

I slide open the patio door and burst through to spy on the movie set.

The view is awe-inspiring. They've built a clockwork storefront over my favorite coffee shop. White tents and trailers, the back of wooden structures, and a lot of expensive film equipment clutter the intersection.

From the depths of the apartment, footsteps pad closer, and Abby says, "You smell like worn-off deodorant and sunscreen. I thought you weren't coming home until tomorrow."

"Cate Whitney is down there," I whisper-shout, scanning the dozens of people milling about the set.

"Fuck off!" Abby screams, rushing beside me to peer over the balcony.

I clap a hand over her mouth. "Shh!"

Abby pries my hand off. "You *saw* her?"

"Right as I was coming inside." I wrack my brain for the last headline I saw about Cate Whitney. "She must be filming *Clockwork Curie*."

*There she is.* She's with a group of people behind the cameras, pointing at a monitor and nodding. She's easy to spot because of the outfit but also because of that abnormally attractive Hollywood look. What is *with* that?

## FROM FAN TO FOREVER

“Clockwork what?” Abby says.

“It’s a steampunk movie about Marie Curie,” I whisper. “The scientist. We were talking about it in class not long ago.”

As if a high-budget movie about science hero Marie Curie isn’t awesome enough, they had to go and cast Cate Whitney as the lead. Excuse me while I cry feminist tears.

“Abby, she was, like, ten feet away from me,” I say, making sure she understands the situation.

I peel my gaze away from the set. Abby is wearing a smart navy blazer and no pants. Her thick, dark hair is styled to emphasize its natural waves, she’s wearing makeup, and her oversized glasses are unusually free of smudges.

“What’s up with you?” I ask.

“Virtual job interview.”

“What company?”

“Enough about me. Are you going to try and meet Cate?”

My heart jumps at the question like I’ve just been dive-bombed by an angry crow. “What? No. She’s working.”

“Girl, you’ve been obsessed with her since before you knew you were a lesbian. Remember the magazine pictures taped to your high school locker?”

“Shh!” I say, dragging Abby inside. I slam the patio door and round on her. “I can’t just walk up to her!”

“Sure you can. Rachel, this is the universe bringing you an opportunity,” she says, picking lint off her blazer. “Seize it.”

I rub my tired eyes. Cate Whitney really is a queer icon. Between her film roles, her wardrobe, and being an outspoken ally, I’m positive that if someone were to poll all of the lesbians and ask them to rank their top celebrity crushes, she would win the popular vote.

I guess I could try to say hi to my hero. The prospect sends a nervous thrill through my chest. “What would I even say?”

Abby opens the bamboo privacy screen we use as a backdrop during video calls, which conveniently masks the surrounding disaster. “I don’t know. *Big fan of your work?*”

“Ugh, that’s so normal.”

“If you want her to remember you for something abnormal, fine, but I think you’re better off sticking with something average here.”

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“Fair enough.” I hesitate, heart thumping. Then I shake my head firmly. “No, I can’t. It’s too awkward.”

“You have to!”

Carefully, she places her laptop in front of the dirty dishes and unfolded laundry on the kitchen table.

“You just want me out of the apartment during your interview,” I say.

“Well, yes, but I also want you to seize the day. Do it. I’m not letting you back in until you say at least one word to her.”

“Excuse me?” I say, laughing.

“You heard me, Rachel Henrietta Janssen,” she says severely. “I’m shoving you out the door and bolting it until you succeed.”

“What if I’m not allowed on se—”

“I double dare you,” she says in a girly tone reminiscent of our high school slumber parties.

“Oh, shut it.”

She makes chicken noises and I throw a tissue box at her. It bounces off her chest.

“Did Amelia Earhart let people stop her from achieving her goals?” she asks, waving her arms.

“Amelia Earhart died while achieving her goal, Abby.”

“Beside the point. You’ll thank me later.”

I chew my lip. As uncomfortable as it would be to approach a celebrity, I would live my life in deep regret if I didn’t do it. Cate Whitney is more than a celebrity crush. She’s a legend, an icon who helped me discover my sexuality and come out.

“It’s not like you’re the only one. I saw a couple of girls leaning over the fence to get pics with the actors last night,” Abby says, a wry smile on her lips, like she knows I’m at my tipping point.

I can’t help it—my face breaks into a grin. “Dare accepted. I’ll ask her to sign the back of my phone.”

I grab a permanent marker from the jar on the counter.

“An autograph? What kind of person in this day and age—” Abby stops, probably remembering that the alternative is to ask for a selfie, and I hate having my picture taken. “I guess having Cate Whitney’s signature on the back of your phone would be cool.”

“Hell yeah, it would. Do I have time to shower before your interview?”



## FROM FAN TO FOREVER

“Yes!” Abby squeals in excitement. She opens her laptop and settles into a chair, checking the position of the privacy screen. “You’ve got twenty-four minutes to get out of here. Why are you back early, anyway? How was camping?”

“Good luck with your interview,” I shout, racing to the bathroom.

My attempt to dodge her question doesn’t work, and she chases after me.

“How was camping, Rachel?”

“Fine!”

“Liar.”

Ugh, she’s too perceptive.

Before I can shut the door, she wedges her hand between it and the frame.

“What happened with Julia, Rachel?”

# CHAPTER 2

## BRINGING MY A-GAME

I OPEN MY MOUTH TO tell Abby it's nothing, but she gives me a stern look. I'll feel better when I talk about it, and we both know it.

"Fine. You were right about her."

Abby's face falls. "Oh. Shit."

"Give me one sec," I say, shutting the door.

She gives me a minute to get into the shower. I pop some painkillers, strip down, and step under the lukewarm stream with a groan. I don't think a shower has ever felt so good.

The moment I shut the curtain, Abby comes into the bathroom and sits on the counter. "Okay, go."

I sigh, squeezing shampoo into my palm.

"So we're all drinking around the fire and playing beer pong," I say, my voice amplified by the bathroom's acoustics, "and she keeps catching my eye—or maybe we're catching each other's. Either way, it's hard to misinterpret the way she's looking at me. It's that sultry, through-the-lashes look, you know?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely flirty."

I lather my hair, eyes closed. "We end up standing beside each other at the drinks table, and we're both getting fall-down drunk, like we're using alcohol for courage. And she keeps grabbing my shoulder *for balance*."

"Mm. I've used that ruse many a time."

"Exactly. So I tested the waters with a flirty tequila shot—that move where you put the lime in your mouth so the other person has to bite it from your lips."

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Abby squeaks. “And she did it?”

“She lingered as our lips brushed.”

A pause. “Okay, that’s more than flirty.”

I rinse my hair, stomach twisting in anticipation of what comes next. “So I’m like, ‘Hey, want to get in our bikinis and jump in the lake?’ And you know what she says?”

“What?”

I crack open the curtain to see her face. “She says, ‘Who needs bikinis?’ and runs into the lake naked.”

Abby gasps, her eyes enormous as she drinks in this juicy story. “You skinny-dipped?”

I nod, vividly recalling the swoop that went through me, like the moths around the lanterns had gotten trapped in my chest.

I tug the curtain closed and grab the conditioner.

“Where was everyone else?” Abby says.

“Drunk and occupied. Nobody noticed us running off together.”

The glassy lake was out of sight and sound of the campers, leaving the two of us alone in the pristine wilderness. The bright streak of the Milky Way crossed overhead, and the BC rainforest loomed thick and high on all sides, like we were at the center of a snow globe.

The moonlight was bright enough to see her blazing-hot gaze, her pale, glistening shoulders and chest, and her nipples playing peek-a-boo at the surface. After months of falling for her, of smiling when she smiled, wanting to make her laugh, wanting her to think about me when we weren’t together, I finally had her alone—ready to follow through on what we’d been silently promising each other.

When she drifted closer, laughing in her usual adorable way, heat tingled between my legs. This gorgeous woman had told me she wanted to try kissing me, and there was no questioning what was going to happen.

“So we’re in the water,” I say, scrubbing down, “and she tells me my tattoo is sexy and uses it as an excuse to touch me.”

“God, that tattoo has been such a sex-starter for you.”

“I know, right?” Who knew a ribcage tattoo would have that effect? Women love the glimpse of it when I wear muscle shirts. “Anyway, I asked if she was still curious, and she nodded, and...”

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And beneath the water, her skin was achingly soft and warm in the cool lake. I ran my palms over her curves, up to her breasts, and her breath hitched, smelling like tequila and lime as it tickled my face.

Our lips met. Her hands brushed over my breasts, gently, and then with confidence as our tongues explored each other's mouths. Heat spread through me, a tingling rushing lower.

Her fingers traveled down my neck, over my back, and down to my hips, where she pulled me against her. She moaned as I teased her with my tongue, playing with her lips.

Then her hand moved lower, lower...

"And stuff started happening." I turn off the water and reach through the curtain. Abby passes me my towel. "And then..."

I wrap the towel around me and step out of the shower, solemn. Abby's covering her mouth, like she's afraid of what's coming.

"Her boyfriend found us," I say, my self-loathing at an all-time high.

Found us, shouted at us, drove a crack into that perfect snow globe.

"Boyfriend?" Abby shrieks. "She didn't tell you that she has a *boyfriend?*"

"Oh, I knew about Andrew," I say, heat rising in my face. "But she barely ever talked about him, and when she did, it was to complain about him. She spent more time with me than him last night."

"Ah."

"So, yeah, I'm an idiot..." I tug open a drawer and absentmindedly rummage. "But also, she's clearly not into him anymore and just stringing him along! So I don't know which of us is the worse person here."

"You're probably both awful," Abby says helpfully.

I sigh. "So she starts defending herself. 'We were just having fun, Andrew. I told you I wanted to experiment, Andrew.'"

Abby jumps off the counter. "Fuck off. She didn't."

"For fun. An experiment. No real feelings."

My eyes burn, and I turn away under the pretense of reaching for the hairdryer. It gives me the few seconds I need to pull myself together.

"So I left them to fight it out on the shoreline and went for a walk," I say, relieved to hear cool indifference in my voice.

My walk lasted until sunrise and sobriety. Because that's what I do when I'm stressed or confused or too drunk to make good decisions—I find a nice path, and I walk.

## FROM FAN TO FOREVER

It probably wasn't smart to walk alone in the forest at night, where the cougar and bear populations are famously high, but I'm alive, aren't I?

Alive and fine.

Sort of.

"Oh, Rachel," Abby says. She lifts her arms, then drops them, like she was about to wrap me in a hug before realizing it would get her shirt wet before her interview. "Babe, you deserve better than that. You shouldn't be anyone's experiment or *just for fun*. You're someone's soulmate."

"Thanks," I say, blinking before my burning eyes betray me.

Abby's been warning me not to get attached to Julia for months, and she was absolutely right. Julia didn't want a girlfriend. She was experimenting with her sexuality, and I was the test subject.

But my last serious girlfriend was shy, guarded, and desperate to keep me a secret, so Julia's free spirit lured me in. Her boldness was hot, and I let my heart take hold of me.

Why did my brain have to run off and imagine a relationship with her? Bringing her home to meet my family, flying to exciting destinations together, walking the beach hand-in-hand? This physically hurts, like a stab wound in my chest.

"I'll get over it," I say, forcing a smile. "It's her fault that blew up. Right?"

"Oh, for sure. She came onto you, and now she and her pissed-off boyfriend can work that out."

I don't know if Abby is just being loyal, but it makes my smile come easier.

"You can just, like, avoid Julia on campus forevermore," she adds.

I grimace. "I absolutely will be doing that. Anyway, I'll get out of here so you can do your interview."

Abby hesitates, and I feel her stare.

"I'm fine, Abby. Really. Meeting my lesbian awakening will cheer me up."

She smiles. "That's the spirit."

"How long do I have?"

Abby checks her phone. "Twelve minutes."

"I'll be out in eleven." I race to my bedroom, which is basically a cave because I never open the curtains and only have one bedside lamp. I put

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on black Bermuda shorts and a white collared shirt, then quickly do my hair and makeup. If I'm going to meet an actor I have a massive crush on, I should bring my A-game. I dry and spray my hair, sweeping it to one side, then put on dark eyeliner and touch up my eyebrows.

I check out my reflection in the dusty mirror that I haven't had time to clean in months. My undercut needs attention, but I have no time for that right now.

"Confidence," I whisper, trying to summon it.

I'm more nervous than if I had to do a presentation, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I'll kick myself if I miss the chance to meet Cate Whitney. If it's totally awkward, I'm sure her memory of me will blend in with the thousands of other fans who have approached her.

And if I'm not allowed to meet her...well, I'll have to try harder. Fangirling aside, Abby dared me, and I probably won't be allowed back into the apartment until I do it. We take Truth or Dare very seriously.

I put my phone, key, and the permanent marker in my pockets.

"Good luck," I whisper, slipping out the door as Abby settles in front of her laptop, still pantsless.

She gives me a two-finger salute. "Same to you."

On the street, I let out a slow breath. I feel better after pouring my heartache onto Abby, but the hole in my chest is going to take time to heal. I haven't had a serious relationship in five years—not since Sarah and I broke up in grade twelve. I've been telling myself I'm not in the right mental state, and that university makes it hard to find time for it—but this tells me I'm ready to be fully invested in someone again.

I guess it just won't be with Julia.

Ugh, she wasn't even my girlfriend, and it still feels like I got dumped.

Walking the perimeter of the set, I find a gap in the metal fence where people with badges walk in and out.

I address the security guard blocking it. "Are there any meet-and-greets with the actors?"

He laughs like I'm cute for asking. "Sorry, love. The actors are pretty busy."

I figured as much. I'll have to see if I can spot Cate over the fence—or else sneak inside, if I'm feeling especially daring.

I pretend to give up and walk the perimeter again, testing for weaknesses like a clever velociraptor trying to escape her enclosure.

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The fence reaches all the way around the set, and the only break is at the back of one of the white tents—but that’s no good because the tent is blocking the way in.

I pause.

*Unless...*

There’s a gap between the ground and the base of the tent. What if I could lift it and slip under?

If Abby were here, she would be pushing me toward the gap right now.

I don’t know what possesses me to do it. Maybe I’m too tired to realize it’s a terrible idea on all levels. Maybe I’m feeling reckless after such a catastrophic weekend. Maybe I’m so desperate for a small win in my life that I’m willing to do something drastic to get it. I wait until the street is empty, then drop to my hands and knees and lift the bottom of the tent.

It’s stiff, made of some kind of thick, ruthless polyester. I have to tug hard to fit under it, and even then, I’m lying on the pavement with my boobs pressed flat.

Panting, I claw my way under and pop out on the other side with a gasp.

I try to stand—and my head smashes into something.

“Ow!”

I brace on all fours, dizzy. Why the hell didn’t I check whether I ended up underneath anything?

Beside me, several trays hit the floor, and fruit and sandwiches scatter across the pavement.

“Fuck,” I say, crawling out from under the table. My hand smears a mustard-covered croissant across the ground.

Apparently, I have arrived in the craft services tent.

“Oh, you scared me,” a smooth voice says.

I lift my gaze and meet a pair of ice-blue eyes. Everything inside me melts. I’m about to become a puddle on the pavement.

I did not think this would work.

I honestly expected to be kicked out or to wander the set for five minutes before panicking and leaving, so that I could tell Abby I tried.

Cate is standing there, holding a script in one hand and a strawberry in the other. She’s cool and charming in her steampunk outfit and professional makeup—and I’m on the ground with mustard on my hands.

# CHAPTER 3

## BIG DYKE ENERGY

CATE WHITNEY STARES AT ME in a way I never, ever wanted her to stare at me—a mix of confusion, horror, and pity. She lowers the script, which she must have been reviewing.

I jump to my feet, wiping my mustardy palms on the back of my shorts.

“B-big fan of your work,” I blurt.

Dammit, why did Abby have to suggest I say that? I sound like an idiot.

I guess it’s better than saying, *Hi, you were my lesbian awakening and I’ve seen your movies multiple times and find you incredibly attractive.*

My face is absolutely on fire. I definitely look like a shiny tomato right now.

Cate tilts her head, perplexed. “Are you...working on set?”

Her smooth, husky voice brings to mind the number of villains she’s played. My insides tingle.

Then the meaning of her words sinks in.

Crap. She’s onto me.

“No, I don’t work here,” I admit. “I was wondering if—” I stop, like my throat has sealed shut. If I tell her I snuck in to ask for an autograph, she’s going to think I’m a stalker. I don’t want to be responsible for giving her the feeling that she isn’t safe from rabid fans.

Am I being a rabid fan? *Dammit, Abby.*

No, it’s not like I keep track of where she is and what she’s doing. I respect her privacy and avoid tabloids and paparazzi shots. I just admire her. And I’m torn between wanting to be her and wanting to kiss her.

Fuck. I’m being weird.



## FROM FAN TO FOREVER

“I was wondering if the producer is accepting applications,” I say, shoving the marker deeper into my back pocket to preserve my last shred of self-respect. “For a—science—consultant.”

“Oh?” She raises an eyebrow.

I stand taller. “Yeah. I’m a graduate medical physics student specializing in Marie Curie’s work.”

The Marie Curie part is a stretch, but I’ve taken radiotherapy physics, so it’s not a *total* lie.

Her lips curve upward, almost imperceptibly, and I’m pretty sure she doesn’t believe for a second that I’m here for a job application. But she doesn’t call security or tell me to leave.

“You probably understand this role better than I do,” she says, holding up the script. “Any tips? I know Marie Curie discovered radium and coined the term *radioactive*, but I don’t get what it all means or how she discovered it. Any research I’ve tried to do has taken me too far down a physics rabbit hole.”

“She invented a technique for isolating radioactive isotopes. She discovered polonium, too.” I’m about to say more, but I shut my mouth when Cate’s brow furrows. This gibberish must be supremely unhelpful.

“Radioactive isotopes,” she says, tasting the words. “But how does someone just *discover* a new element?”

“She extracted them from a mineral called pitchblende.”

Cate’s gaze is fixed on me, making my face heat up. She chews her lip, looks at the script, then points across the set. “We might be able to use a consultant. I have to get ready for my next scene, but are you okay going to find a producer?”

“Sure,” I say, having absolutely no intention of making a further fool of myself in front of this film crew.

Cate eats the strawberry she was holding before I crawled into her life. The way her gaze is fixed on me while she sucks on it is enough to make me forget how to breathe.

I always thought her gay vibes were part of her acting talent, but the energy is real. It’s something about the way she carries herself, or maybe the intense eye contact. If we were in a club, I’d be offering to buy her a drink right now.

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I walk past her to where she pointed because it's the only thing to do. The permanent marker presses against my butt.

I knew I would be starstruck, but this is ridiculous. I can barely string my thoughts together.

Before leaving the tent, I turn and say, "I'm sorry I ruined the food table."

She casts a gorgeous half-smile that makes me sway. "I won't tell a soul it was you. Good luck with the job application."

*Did I just swoon?*

"Thanks," I say.

And my big moment meeting Cate Whitney is over. I open my mouth to ask for a signature, remember my last shred of dignity, and close it again.

Why can't I be cool? Why do I have to be covered in mustard and croissant flakes right now?

"Hold on," she says, striding toward me. She reaches out and plucks something from my hair.

A tingle runs down my neck.

A cobweb is pinched between her fingers. She lets it flutter away.

"Must be dirty under the table. We can't have you going for your job application with that in your hair."

From this close, she smells sweet and summery.

"No," I say, breathless. "Thank you, Cate."

"You're welcome..." She pauses, and it takes me a moment to realize she's waiting for me to fill in the gap.

"Rachel," I say. "Rachel Janssen."

A guy my age rushes over and shoves a granola bar into Cate's hands. "You got a call from your publicist about the gala. Also, you need protein."

He has the poise of a dancer and every inch of him is well put together, from his buzzed black hair to his purple suit to his platform shoes. His deep brown skin is flawlessly contoured with shimmery makeup.

"They'll be ready to block the scene in a few minutes," he adds, typing frantically on his phone.

Cate doesn't take her eyes off me, apparently immune to having this guy fuss over her while she's in the middle of something.

"Rachel," she says. "Hope I see you around."

The guy shoots me a suspicious look, like he didn't notice me until now.

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I give an awkward nod and leave the tent, stomach doing flips.

I spoke to Cate Whitney. She touched my hair. She told me she hopes to see me around. My name came out of her lips.

Except she definitely thinks I'm weird.

And I am. Weird, awkward, and mortified.

Why did I sneak onto the set like this? I blame Abby.

I leave the tent behind, torn between wanting to crawl into a hole and wanting to fist-pump. It's sweet that Cate wished me luck and made me feel worthy about applying for a job I would never get. I guess her kind reputation is true.

I slip through the exit, earning a double-take from the security guard who turned me away minutes earlier.

Oh well. I'm leaving, not arriving, so he can't do much now.

I don't want to interrupt Abby's interview, so I walk up and down the beach until my gay panic subsides. Around me, people and their dogs are scattered across the shore, enjoying the heat. The sun glints off the gentle waves, where boaters, kayakers, and paddleboarders coast by. The air smells like barbecue, and seagulls are trying to ambush people and steal their food like a noisy sky gang.

I cover my face as I walk behind a couple taking a selfie. All of this activity is nice, but living by the beach is better in the off-season when there are fewer people around.

As I walk back and forth, Cate's energy clings to me like steam in a sauna. I can't get over her touching my hair.

She was way too nice to me. In her position, I probably would have called security.

My stomach growls, and I head for my favorite sandwich shop—which has, apparently, been converted into a steampunk storefront for the movie set. A sign on the metal fence tells me that all shops in the area are closed for the summer.

I groan and keep walking. There's a crêpe place up the road that'll do fine.

It's busy inside, probably because all of the would-be-customers of the other shops have been displaced. The best spots to eat have been absorbed by the movie set.

## TIANA WARNER

After ordering a spinach and feta crêpe and a coffee, I grab the last, lonely seat on the patio. If I were smarter, I would have brought my laptop. The nagging feeling that I should be working is a permanent fixture in my life, and I could be using this precious time to do thesis research.

I pull out my phone and look up the machine learning program I've been eyeing. There might be a gold nugget in this program if I can use it to analyze medical imagery, and I can read about it until Abby tells me it's safe to come home.

But after a few minutes of poking around the internet, it's clear that I don't have the mental capacity for this today. First, I'm hungover and haven't slept. Second, it's not easy to concentrate on deep-learning algorithms when I've just come face-to-face with one of the most talented and attractive women in the world.

Third, my heart is still dust after getting crushed by a woman who I secretly thought would turn gay for me.

I guess you could say I'm not in the right headspace for thesis research right now.

A text from Abby pops up, sparing me from my listless scrolling and crêpe-eating.

*Interview went well, and they want another with the team leads in 10 mins. Are you okay to hang out for a bit? I can text you when I'm done.*

Her news lifts my mood a little. It's a nice day, so I'm fine to stay out of the apartment.

*Yay for rocking the interview! No problem. I'm just eating and hanging out.*

*Awesome. Thanks, bestie. Any luck meeting Cate?*

My mouth twists into a smile.

*I met her. Didn't get the chance to ask for a signature, but we said actual words to each other. My heart is still recovering.*

*What?!!! Is she as amazing in person?*

## FROM FAN TO FOREVER

*It was like talking to a goddess. She doesn't need to know the details.*

*You're my hero. Text you soon.*

An hour later, I've managed to absorb a few tidbits of research and am still waiting to hear from Abby. The interview must be going well if it's gone on for this long.

Programming interviews sound awful. I can't imagine having a prospective employer stare at me while I write code for several hours.

Then again, to a lot of people, everything I study in medical physics sounds awful. Maybe a six-hour interview is better than taking courses in quantum mechanics, nuclear medicine, and radiotherapy. Abby seems to think so.

I'm hungry again, so I go inside to order another crêpe. The cool air is a relief after spending a couple of hours on the patio. All four tables inside are still occupied, and two people stand waiting for their orders.

As I scan the chalkboard menu on the wall, it reminds me of the last time I had crêpes, with Julia during a study session. The ache of losing her is getting worse, like I haven't fully processed it yet. She and I had a fun thing going, even if it was doomed to end in an angry boyfriend.

I guess I thought the camping trip would end in me asking her out properly.

"What can I get you?" the teenage girl behind the counter asks, clearly waiting for me to hurry up and decide what I want.

In the mood for sweet instead of savory this time, I order the chocolate-strawberry crêpe.

I'm reaching for my wallet when the air shifts around me and murmurs meet my ears.

Heads turn toward the door. Everyone whispers, leans into each other, and points.

A tall woman walks into the café, her presence lighting up the whole place. Smiling, apparently immune to the stir she's causing, she takes off her sunglasses and looks up at the chalkboard menu.

I catch a glimpse of her steampunk costume under a jacket that's too warm for this weather. Cate Whitney must be on a break from filming.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# FROM FAN TO FOREVER

BY TIANA WARNER

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