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Changing Times: An Analysis of Diversity in Young Adult Literature

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Changing Times: An Analysis of Diversity in Young Adult Literature

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

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students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

Abstract

This paper explores the representation of diversity in young adult novels published since 2000, focusing specifically on the representation of disability and LGBTQA+ characters and issues, in order to illustrate the gaps being filled by the writer's young adult novel. The writer examines several young adult novels, each featuring a protagonist that is disabled, LGBTQA+, or otherwise connected to the protagonists of the writer's novel, *Blackjack*. Though disabled and LGBTQA+ characters are not new developments in the genre, recent years have seen an increase and improvement in these representations, though there continues to be an absence of intersectionality. The writer argues that progress has been made in the diversity of young adult novels, but still has a long way to go in terms of both diversity among characters and diversity among authors.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Table of Contents	2
Thesis Body	
I. Genre Analysis	3
II. Project Analysis	27
III. Novel Outline	30
IV. Full Text of Chapters 1, 14, and 23	40
Notes	65
Works Cited	66

I. Genre Analysis

Young adult literature is a relatively new genre, generally agreed to have attained recognition with the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in 1967. Typically aimed at teenagers and young adults between the ages of twelve and twenty, novels considered to be “young adult” span a wide variety of genres and are becoming increasingly popular objects of critical study. Though many young adult novels share similar traits—for instance, a significant majority of novels marketed as young adult are written in first person—there is wide variety between them. However, this wide variety often does not necessarily mean there are diverse characters, particularly outside the “problem novel” subgenre. This subgenre was characterized by Don Latham as having a “supposedly realistic treatment of personal and social issues” and has a history of being the first place diverse characters appear (62). For instance, many early representations of gay and lesbian characters in contemporary fiction appeared in problem novels before starting to spread out into other genres. However, YA novels frequently feature protagonists who are white, able-bodied, cisgender, and heterosexual—four major aspects of human identity and diversity, though there are certainly other aspects of identity—and when novels do contain a protagonist who differs in one such aspect and metaphorically “checks off” a diversity category, that same protagonist will only rarely be able to check off a second category. Another word for this ability to “check off” multiple boxes is intersectionality, which appears to be rare in YA novels.

As a result of this lack of intersectionality, a wide variety of groups have appeared in recent years, including the Diversity in YA organization, the We Need Diverse Books campaign, Disability in Kidlit, Rich in Color, and Gay YA¹. Though some of these groups, such as Gay YA, are specifically focused on particular areas of diversity while others take a broader interest and support many or all areas of diversity, like We Need Diverse Books, they all share a similar purpose and goal: to call for more diversity in new releases, to spread the word about diversity in existing releases, to share reviews of good representations and bad, and so on. Some of these sites also track statistics; for instance,

Diversity in YA tracked the number of novels that featured LGBTQA+ characters and were published by mainstream publishers between 2011 and 2014. Others, like *Disability in Kidlit*, emphasize reviews with the purpose of identifying accurate representations of disability and thus keeping authors accountable for their research (or lack thereof).

Many popular novels feature protagonists that are white, able-bodied, cisgender, and heterosexual—though diverse characters might appear in the supporting cast. One such example is the *Twilight* series, which—again—has a protagonist belonging to groups with institutional privilege while diversity is relegated to the supporting cast and intersectional diversity is implied at best. The *Harry Potter* books are another, with a protagonist generally considered to be a member of all four groups listed above, while the supporting cast is dotted with diverse characters such as the Indian Patil twins. However, while the main characters of *Harry Potter*, Harry, Hermione, and Ron, were cast as white in the movie adaptations, neither Harry nor Hermione are explicitly described as white, and some popular fan interpretations see both characters as people of color (POC). In fact, when a black woman was cast as Hermione for the world premiere of “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,” a play set after the end of the seventh book, some people took to Twitter and asked J.K. Rowling her thoughts. Her initial response stated, “Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified,” and was followed by tweets displaying fanart of a black Hermione alongside a picture of the actress and tweets showing support for fans who suggested other “alternative” interpretations of Harry and Ron (jk_rowling).

Some other popular novels do feature protagonists and other major characters who might be considered diverse, such as *The Hunger Games*, in which Katniss is described as having black hair and olive skin, loses part of her hearing in the first book, effectively leaving her disabled, and is popularly read as being aromantic, one who does not experience romantic attraction (Collins 7). However, such depictions of diversity don't always stick: the movie adaptations of *The Hunger Games* series have

received criticism for casting Katniss as a white woman and for erasing not just her disability, but that of several other characters². Katniss is one of the few characters—let alone protagonists—in YA lit who could represent multiple marginalized groups, including race, disability, and social class.

Only one protagonist out of the novels studied for this paper provide any sort of intersectional representation. Seven novels were examined: *Sinner* by Maggie Stiefvater, *Wild Awake* by Hilary T. Smith, *Crazy* by Amy Reed, *Where I Want to Be* by Adele Griffin, *Choker* by Elizabeth Woods, *Fans of the Impossible* by Kate Scelsa, and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* by David Levithan and John Green. Of these, only Mira from *Fans* could act as an intersectional character, as she is biracial and has depression. All seven novels feature protagonists, supporting characters, or both, who are either stated or implied to be mentally ill. Three novels contain at least one representation of bipolar disorder, *Wild Awake*, *Crazy*, and *Sinner*, while *Fans* features multiple characters with depression and/or anxiety and one of the eponymous protagonists of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* also has depression. In addition to Kiri's bipolar disorder, *Wild Awake* also contains a supporting character with an unnamed disorder with psychotic features. *Where I Want to Be* and *Choker* each contain a protagonist with an unnamed disorder that is difficult to identify given the limited and conflicting information in each text: Jane in *Where I Want to Be* has difficulty differentiating reality and fiction, suggesting schizophrenia, though she also appears to exhibit hallmark symptoms of several other disorders, while Cara in *Choker* is suggested by the text as having dissociative identity disorder (DID), while other characters in the text seem to believe she has schizophrenia. It is important to note, in regards to *Choker*, that despite being commonly confused, DID and schizophrenia are separate, unrelated disorders. However, out of all seven novels, Mira is the only stated non-white character. This is, perhaps, not surprising given that most of these novels were written by white women, the most immediately apparent exception being *Will Grayson*, which was co-written by two white men.

Of the calls for diversity in publishing, many are for increased representation among characters,

but there are also many people seeking more diversity among writers and within the industry that publishes their books. The argument behind this search for diversity is, to put it simply, that diverse individuals will create diverse books. In January of 2016, Lee & Low Books published a study of the diversity in the publishing industry. This study found that 79% of people involved with publishing were white, 78% were cis women, 88% were heterosexual, and 92% were non-disabled. The numbers aren't any better at the executive level, where 86% were white, 89% were heterosexual, and 96% were non-disabled. While overall, cis men made up only 21% of the industry overall, at the executive level the percentage of men rises to 40%. Other narrower categories, editorial, sales, marketing, and reviewers, look very similar to the overall numbers. The survey that led to these numbers had a response rate of 25.8 percent, and the author of the report, Low notes that, "people who self-identify as diverse may have been more likely to take the survey," which may have resulted in the results portraying publishing as being more diverse than it is. Even if this *is* the case, the numbers are still overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, and non-disabled—all groups that possess institutional privilege. As a result, what diversity does exist in young adult novels is often written, edited, and marketed by individuals who belong to privileged groups, which is not necessarily a bad thing but can lead to problems such as those discussed in Paula Young Lee's article, "Your manuscript is not a good fit': How 'we need diverse books' can move beyond wishful thinking." She argues that books written by white writers about other cultures are frequently praised over books written by people of color, and just one of her multiple examples is a list of "best Asian fantasy books" containing twelve books... all written by white authors.

A. LGBTQA+ Representation

Of the many aspects that can contribute to a person's identity, for this essay I have chosen to focus on two: disability representation and LGBTQA+ characters and issues. Of the seven novels examined for the purposes of this essay, only two contained LGBTQA+ protagonists: *Will Grayson*,

Will Grayson, and *Fans of the Impossible Life*—though *Crazy* included several LGBTQA+ supporting characters. Perhaps not surprisingly, the author of *Fans*, Kate Scelsa, declares her marriage to a woman in the author bio attached to her book, and one of the authors of *Will Grayson*, David Levithan, is also openly gay. These two authors are alone in this regard among the eight being discussed. Given that gay and lesbian individuals are estimated to be only about 1.7% of the population of the United States according to a report published in 2011 by the Williams Institute, the fact that 25% of the authors being discussed are openly gay or lesbian suggests that could be a fairly representative group—of the American population in general. However, it is not; all eight authors are white or white-passing, and also are not representative of the LGBTQA+ community: gay and lesbian individuals make up only one part of this community, and perhaps because they are one of the larger groups in the community, they often receive the most attention. According to the same report from the Williams Institute, approximately 1.8% of Americans identify as bisexual—a slight majority, and yet one that is frequently erased. The erasure of bisexuality frequently comes from a tendency to categorize people based on behavior—after all, unless a bisexual person happens to also be polygamous and involved with people of different genders, someone who is bi and in a relationship would likely appear to others as being either straight or gay.

However, when dealing with fictional characters, the rules change somewhat. For instance, many older pieces of fiction written during a time when same-sex relationships were illegal or at least heavily frowned-upon do contain LGBTQA+ characters, but readers often must go off of hints left in the text to determine whether or not a character was intended to be read as LGBTQA+. One such text popularly examined by scholars is Willa Cather's short story, "Paul's Case," which Jane Nardin examines within a historical context in "Homosexual Identities in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case'." While "Paul's Case" contained fairly subtle suggestions, other texts were rather more blatant, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the "alarming subtext" of which Nardin claims was "impossible to

misunderstand” (34). In more recent texts, it becomes much easier to identify a character: in *Fans of the Impossible Life*, for instance, the other members of Jeremy's family are simply introduced as Dad and Dave on the same page that Jeremy himself is introduced, in a quiet scene at home (Scelsa 5). In just a few paragraphs, Scelsa establishes Jeremy as the son of two gay men—and as later conversations in the text reveal, Dad is his biological father, while Dave is his father's partner, an arrangement already suggested by the way Jeremy refers to them. In fact, *Fans* is filled with gay and lesbian characters—which results in a novel grounded in reality despite the magical world crafted by Mira and Sebby and into which Jeremy is gradually drawn. Still, however, we see only gay and lesbian characters. Though Sebby has, and Jeremy develops, a close relationship with Mira, both boys continue to identify as gay. Two possibilities seem to present themselves: both of them are gay and simply have close, non-romantic relationships with Mira, or they are attracted to her but continue to identify as gay regardless. There could be several reasons why they would maintain an identity seemingly incompatible. The first and most obvious reason: teenagers experiment with their identities. On a related note, identities such as “straight” and “gay” do not have to be limiting; for instance, it is possible for a straight woman to be attracted to another woman once in her life and still call herself straight. The important part is that individuals determine their own identity; others do not have the right to define that for them based on behavior.

Perhaps Scelsa's greatest accomplishment in *Fans of the Impossible Life* is her deft balancing of its diverse cast. Most striking is her handling of Sebby and Jeremy—who, as the text gradually reveals, have both been targeted by hate crimes. Sebby was attacked by older students who caught him with his then-boyfriend, while Jeremy was similarly (though less violently) targeted for proposing in an English class that a book written in the early 1900s hinted that two male characters had a sexual encounter (Scelsa 230; 178). Both events happened prior to the start of the text, and while Sebby literally carries the scars, his character is much more than just “gay kid and victim of a hate crime.” In fact, not one of

the numerous gay or lesbian characters in the novel are solely defined by their orientation. Similarly, the novel presents some of the dangers of being outed in hostile environments and the dangers of other people assuming that one is LGBTQA+ based on behavior and appearance—yet it does so without focusing on these issues or letting them drive the novel.

To a lesser degree than *Fans*, *Crazy* also contains gay and lesbian characters within its supporting cast: the older sister of one protagonist is happily married to another woman; the other protagonist's girlfriend breaks up with him on account of realizing that she's actually attracted to women, and he later makes a new friend who happens to be gay. However, while *Crazy* does contribute to normalizing the presence of LGBTQA+ characters, like *Fans* it falls short in its absence of characters who fall under the rest of the acronym. Perhaps more importantly, Reed's portrayal of these gay and lesbian characters is also limited; unlike Scelsa's handling of *Fans*, Reed's gay and lesbian characters are little more than their orientations. Even the supporting characters in *Fans* are multifaceted—Rose, for instance, spends much of the novel trying to get back together with her ex-girlfriend, despite the tumultuous nature of their relationship, and yet she is not solely defined by this relationship. In fact, this is a relationship that would not seem out of place if the characters involved were a man and a woman instead of two women—for instance, the relationship between Cole and Isabel in *Sinner* is also rocky for much of the novel, though like a typical love story, they manage to work it out in the end. *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* is, like *Fans*, a novel with a gay protagonist and several gay supporting characters—but it has a distinct lack of *any* other LGBTQA+ identity. At the same time, *Will Grayson* does at least manage to acknowledge the existence of other identities... in a joke, about one Will Grayson's reluctance to date, which accuses him of being asexual. While not representation—and not a flattering mention of asexuality—it is at least *mentioned*, and loosely associated with the actual meaning of the word. Still, every character in *Will Grayson* is either straight or gay, and while there are a variety of gay characters—the second Will Grayson, Tiny Cooper, and

Will's eventual friend Gideon, to name a few—it is still difficult to call the novel representational of either the general population or the LGBTQA+ community.

In each of these novels, the only LGBTQA+ characters that appear are gay or lesbian. Corrine M. Wickens observes in “Codes, Silences, and Homophobia” that a “shift toward . . . inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) characters began in the last 1990s” and yet bisexual protagonists, trans protagonists, and protagonists otherwise included under the LGBTQA+ umbrella seem to be fewer and far-between compared to gay or lesbian protagonists (149). Though population estimates for the whole LGBTQA+ community are still small—the Williams Institute report estimated the total LGBTQA+ population at about 3.8% of the general population, though this report was based on a flawed survey that only looked for gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender individuals. Additionally, many LGBTQA+ individuals are not “out” about their identities, for a variety of reasons, and may be reluctant to accurately report their identity on surveys. As a result, the number may be higher than this estimate. Due to a relative lack of interest in asexuality, there are few statistics to be found, but one researcher named Anthony F. Bogaert estimated in 2004 that approximately 1% of the American population is asexual, a number frequently cited by both the media and the LGBTQA+ community. Again, this number may very well be higher, but when added to the Williams Institute's estimates, it seems likely that at least 5% of the United States population is under the LGBTQA+ umbrella, if not more. Yet, characters who are not straight, gay, or lesbian seem to be missing in mainstream fiction. In fact, other identities are often simply erased. In “Conceptions of Sexuality and Coming Out in Three Young Adult Novels”, Terence Beck argues that in “failing to challenge popular notions of sexuality, . . . novels tend to reinforce them” causing straight and gay identities to become mainstream while others “become peripheral” (253). As long as these “missing” identities remain in the periphery, less than ideal narratives will persist. For instance, a common narrative within the asexual community is that of feeling “broken” prior to discovering asexuality—a narrative that would

be far less common if asexual identities were “mainstream” like gay identities have become. Still, it is important to note that while some LGBTQA+ identities are starting to achieve “mainstream” status, being publicly under the LGBTQA+ umbrella is still a dangerous place to be: hate crimes, “corrective” rape, and murder all continue to plague the LGBTQA+ community.

My novel, *Blackjack*, was written partially in response to this absence. *Blackjack* emphasizes a group of five people, but the core of the novel is a set of siblings, who each narrate different parts of the novel. All five characters are under the LGBTQA+ umbrella, which wasn't so much deliberate and as it was a direct result of my own experiences. A surprising number of my own friends—both in high school and in college—have been LGBTQA+, not because we were actively seeking each other out but because we shared similar interests and eventually wound up in the same circles. Unlike the published novels discussed above, with exclusively gay or lesbian characters, my novel features a bisexual woman, a pansexual non-binary individual, two asexual characters, and a demiromantic man. To put names to descriptions—the primary narrator, Blackjack, is demiromantic—a form of gray-romantic meaning that he does not experience romantic attraction towards other people unless he has already formed a connection to them. In other words, he does not experience “love at first sight” or develop so-called crushes on other people, but gradually fell in love with Lacey after being friends with her for a couple of years. Skye, his sister and the secondary narrator, is asexual, as is his roommate and foster brother, Mo—neither of them experience sexual attraction—while Lacey is bisexual, a fact not erased by her relationship with a man, and Cat is both pansexual and non-binary, meaning that they are neither a man or a woman and that they can experience sexual attraction to anyone regardless of that person's gender identity or presentation. Some people might criticize this cast as “too” diverse, particularly given the low estimates of the size of the American LGBTQA+ population, but I would only point to my own experiences: whether intentionally or not, LGBTQA+ people do tend to find themselves in the same circles, be that in person or online. Much of the supporting cast of *Blackjack* are not under the

LGBTQA+ umbrella, like most of the American population—but this isn't a story about most of the American population. At its core, this is a story about two siblings with the odds stacked against them—not a story about average kids from average homes.

B. Disability Representation

Like LGBTQA+ characters and issues, representation of disability in young adult literature is also rare, and well-written representations of disability in these novels is often even rarer. As previously mentioned, several organizations and websites have sprung up in response to this absence, such as Disability in Kidlit, a group that searches out books with disabled characters. While Disability in Kidlit looks primarily for disabled protagonists, they have reviewed other books such as Cynthia Lord's *Rules*, which, while actually about a neurotypical, non-disabled twelve-year-old girl, also happens to feature her autistic younger brother and a non-verbal, wheelchair user she meets while her brother is at occupational therapy. This particular review on Disability in Kidlit is not a generous one, perhaps because the reviewer, Riki Entz, identifies herself as “an autistic wheelchair user”³. Entz's review can be effectively boiled down to a couple of sentences from the beginning of the review: “This is a book about a girl who has an autistic brother. The fact that she has an autistic brother is crucial to the plot, but her actual brother is really more of a plot device than anything else.” A glance at Disability in Kidlit's collection of relevant books on Goodreads—not all of which have been reviewed on their website—reveals a collection of nearly 600 books. Of these, the most popular categories are autism (67), blindness (53), deafness (50), and wheelchair user (49). Other notable mentions include canes, crutches, and limbs (38), eating disorders (32), depression (28), cerebral palsy (27), and anxiety disorders (25), while a generic “mental illness” shelf contains 120 books. In total, there are 90 categories into which they have sorted middle grade and young adult books. Several of the books discussed here are collected into these shelves: *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson*; *Wild Awake*; and *Crazy*.

The latter two have been reviewed on their website, though *Will Grayson* received a mention on a recommended reading list from anonymous contributors in 2013⁴. Good representations of disability in young adult books are not non-existent, but they can be difficult to find—and that is where websites like Disability in Kidlit come in.

Of the seven novels examined for the purposes of this essay, all of them included at least one protagonist with mental illness, which for the purposes of this essay I am considering a disability, on account of the fact that common definitions of disability include both physical and mental conditions that limit a person's activities, movements, or senses. While no physical disabilities can be found in these novels, several different mental illnesses are present: bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and several that are unnamed or difficult to identify. *Crazy* and *Wild Awake* both explicitly identify a character as being bipolar, while *Wild Awake* also implies that Kiri's older, deceased sister was also bipolar, as discussed later in this essay. In *Sinner*, Cole is never outright stated to have bipolar disorder, but along with presenting many of the symptoms of the disorder, his first-person narrative *does* admit to a history of experimentation with drugs and alcohol—substances often used for purposes of self-medication by people with mental illness. In *Fans of the Impossible Life*, Scelsa is not shy about revealing that Mira was hospitalized for depression, that she met Sebby in the psychiatric ward, and very strongly hints that Jeremy has anxiety. Finally, while *Will Grayson*, *Will Grayson* has some problems, the novel's handling of one Will's depression is excellent, perhaps because one of the novel's authors has personal experience with the disorder.

While these five novels contain well-researched representations of mental illness and rarely stray into negative stereotypes, I took issue with the representations of what appears to be schizophrenia in *Where I Want to Be* and what might be either schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder in *Choker*. That is not to say the others do not have problems; for instance, *Crazy* (and *Wild Awake*, to a lesser extent) strays into “problem novel” territory. While so-called “problem novels” are

not inherently bad, the push for accurate representation of disabilities demands representation in *all* novels, not just problem novels. On a similar note, one could argue that *Sinner* does not count for representation simply because the symptoms of bipolar disorder that Cole shows—which are discussed later on—are never explicitly named as bipolar disorder, nor does he (or any other character) state that he might have any such problem beyond a history of drug use, though Isabel often comments on his manic levels of energy. This could be considered an artistic choice, given Stiefvater's comments about a different novel: “I hope that [readers] don't peer into the reflective glass and see capital-I Issues, though. I hope they merely see real life peering back at them” (Tumblr). By that argument, most of the seven novels would still count—while four of them explicitly name the issues faced by characters, two others clearly state that the characters are mentally ill without naming the illness. While I would consider *Sinner* to be a probable representation of mental illness, others may disagree with me due to the lack of an in-text or authorial confirmation.

Perhaps the thorniest part of writing about characters with disabilities—particularly characters that are mentally ill—is the stigma that surrounds disability and mental illness. To some degrees, American culture has seen progress: one might say that the days of hiding one's “crazy uncle” in the attic is over, but at the same time institutionalization and ableism are still alive and well. Perhaps some writers are wary of “getting it wrong” and so avoid writing about mental illness. Certainly many writers *do* make mistakes, which is to be expected when one writes beyond what they have personally experienced, but sufficient research can work wonders on one's accuracy. As one might expect, the authors of several novels I identified earlier as better representations—Smith, Reed, Scelsa, Stiefvater, and Levithan—have mentioned in interviews or on their personal blogs and websites that they have experienced some form of mental illness, an action which in itself helps to fight the stigma against mental illness and treatment. While not all of them have gone into detail beyond stating that they have experienced mental illness, some have. For instance, Stiefvater has openly discussed her OCD on her

Tumblr on multiple occasions, and Reed explains in a post about *Crazy* that she was fourteen when she started treatment for depression. This simple (though often difficult) act of acknowledging mental illness is a powerful first step towards fighting the stigma around mental illness.

A standalone novel following the events of Maggie Stiefvater's bestselling Shiver trilogy, *Sinner* features two protagonists who share the narration, but its real focus is set on only one: Cole St. Clair, whose history is boiled down in the novel's summary on Stiefvater's website: "Stardom. Addiction. Downfall. Disappearance." The novel picks up with his return to the spotlight, and almost from the very beginning, Cole insists he is not the "train wreck" he is thought to be, but rather that he "had been taken apart and put back together" and had become "unbreakable" as a result (Stiefvater 30; 32). This last claim, of course, is not quite true—as evidenced in the way he continues to struggle with his past. In only a few lines, Cole goes from restlessness, "rock[ing] . . . against the edge of the balcony", to old habits, "wish[ing] for a beer . . . for a needle to push into my skin", only to declare that while he'd been "hired . . . to fail," he wasn't going to (46). These early pages—indeed, even most of the novel—don't read like a character who has already become "unbreakable", but rather a character still in the process of recovery. Cole is also frequently described—by others—in terms that evoke images of mania. At one point, Isabel starts out with describing him as "a blur of motion, leaning hard on one side of the deck and then the other", a relatively ordinary description on its own, but she quickly proceeds to concluding that Cole was in "brain-on-fire mode", phrasing that sounds remarkably like the racing thoughts and excessive activity of mania (75-76). Cole shows other signs of mania, as well—for instance, poor judgment, calling Isabel "forty times a day and leav[ing] obscene voicemails"—in addition to suggesting past experience with depression with the line, "I couldn't take hating myself like I'd hated myself then" (105; 202). Unlike *Crazy* and *Wild Awake*, where manic behavior by protagonists is met with suggestions to see a psychologist and suggestions that bipolar disorder might be to blame, at no point in *Sinner* does the word 'bipolar' appear—though at one point Isabel does describe Cole as

possessing “manic energy” (192). At the same time, Cole makes no attempt to hide his history of drug use, though he is adamant about staying clean; at one point he reminds himself, “History of substance abuse. Key word: history” (63). Later, at a party hosted by an old friend of his—after he notes that she was “very drunk” and that two years earlier, he “would've been, too”, Cole finds himself confronted with his own past. Despite his repeated insistence that he's clean, Magdalene refuses to believe him, saying, “You're an addict . . . I saw you before you started using. You aren't any different now” (230). This line is particularly interesting, when considering the novel and Cole's character in terms of bipolar disorder: first, we know that Cole was probably in his mid to late teens when he *was* using, which is consistent with the usual age of onset for bipolar disorder; second, people with undiagnosed and/or untreated bipolar disorder frequently turn to alcohol and illegal substances to self-medicate. When taken together, it is not unreasonable to suppose that what Magdalene sees is not addiction but rather bipolar disorder.

Not unlike Cole's behavior in *Sinner, Wild Awake* charts Kiri Byrd's descent into mania—specifically, a hypomanic episode, as another character points out late in the novel—without being wholly focused on it. In fact, the novel is more interested in the chain of events that starts with a phone call about her dead sister and leads to both closure and a teenage love story. The hypomanic episode that gradually builds during the novel affects these events, but does not overtake them; instead, they read more like personality traits, much like Stiefvater's depiction of Cole. Kiri seems to be naturally a distracted sort of person, doodling while she answers the phone at the beginning despite her parents' reminder that “detailed and accurate phone messages [are] a serious matter” (Smith 10). However, mania appears to exaggerate this trait: at one point late in the novel, her thoughts are all over the place:

. . . the words *drunk* and *drink* start a little war in my head, *drink-drunk-drunk*, then morph into raindrops that plink and plunk like a toy piano.

It comes to me in a flash. The shoes! Sukey's silver shoes! I wrestle off the boots,

scamper upstairs, grab the shoes, and sit on the stairs, strapping them onto my feet.

(218)

Kiri also exhibits other symptoms of mania—and gradually develops an awareness of the fact that her thought patterns and behavior aren't normal anymore. Her narration increasingly moves towards run-on sentences, evoking the “racing thoughts” of mania, and at one of her worse points, poor judgment and delusional thoughts also make an appearance. One of the most striking lines in the text appears here: “Reality whangs horribly in my ears. I feel like a glow stick that's still glowing the morning after Halloween” (226). This is, perhaps, the most apt description of mania in the novel, and yet *Wild Awake* still manages to avoid being solely about a teenager with bipolar disorder.

Bipolar disorder is also known to have a genetic link—and in Kiri's memories of her sister, it becomes apparent that Kiri may not have been the only member of her household affected by the disorder. In describing one such memory, Kiri describes how, when “Sukey was in one of her good moods, she acted like everyone in the world was her best friend” though she also evidenced poor judgment in “stealing champagne from the grocery store . . . for the second time in a week” (43). While this description doesn't necessarily paint Sukey as being bipolar, it is a convincing suggestion. Mania can present with impulsivity, poor judgment, reckless behavior, and can exaggerate an individual's pre-existing traits—for instance, Sukey's excessive friendliness in Kiri's memory could also very well be a symptom of mania. Assuming Sukey *was* bipolar, she does fall into the “artistic mania” stereotype, as one of her defining characteristics is her art. However, as a minor character existing only in flashbacks, Sukey's stereotypic behavior is not nearly as concerning as the damaging stereotypes that appear in *Choker* and *Where I Want to Be*.

From the very beginning of *Choker*, Cara and Zoe seem to be two parts of a whole—but not equal halves. Cara describes Zoe as her “other half” and yet even before that, it is clear that Zoe controls their relationship, seemingly “pinning Cara against the headboard of the bed” with her eyes in

a flashback (Woods 9; 4). And yet—in a last-minute reveal near the end of the novel shortly after Cara realizes that Zoe has done several terrible things—it turns out that Zoe isn't real. In this reveal, Cara's mother describes Zoe as her “imaginary friend” who was “somehow . . . more real” than she should have been (227). Throughout the novel, Zoe's descriptions have an edge of unreality, perhaps as foreshadowing of this reveal. In particular, Zoe's violet eyes are frequently mentioned, especially early in the novel: Cara recalls her friend's violet eyes as “pinning” her, and when Zoe suddenly reappears in her room a short time later, her violet eyes are the first thing Cara notices: “Zoe was sitting on her bed, her violet eyes shining” (30). Cara then goes on to take note of how Zoe has changed in the years since she'd seen her, but it is telling that Zoe's most unlikely quality is the first thing Cara sees. There is an inherently unbalanced relationship, as Zoe is quickly established to have a remarkable amount of power over Cara in multiple ways. The fact that Cara's mother believes Zoe is her daughter's “imaginary friend,” and indeed the way her mother describes her as having had “psychiatric problems for a long time”, specifically “delusions” that seemed to disappear with medication, suggests that Cara's unnamed diagnosis is that of schizophrenia, which is often characterized by delusions and hallucinations (227; 228). Though schizophrenia normally manifests in adulthood, it can appear in children with much the same symptoms. However, even sufferers of delusions are sometimes capable of recognizing the delusions despite being entirely convinced by them—and even when confronted with the knowledge that no one else can see Zoe, Cara seems incapable of acknowledging that Zoe isn't real. In response to her mother's reminder that Zoe isn't real, Cara snaps back, “How can you say she's not real, Mom, when she's been living in my room for the last few weeks?” (229). As far as Cara is concerned, Zoe is entirely real—which suggests that Cara might not be delusional so much as someone with dissociative identity disorder (DID), also known as multiple personalities.

Throughout *Choker*, there are various moments that lend support to the theory that Cara might have multiple personalities. First, it is not unheard of for different personalities to interact with one

another like Cara and Zoe do, though the manner in which Cara and Zoe interact might be considered unusual. Second, one theory popularized by D.H. Gleaves in 1996 is that childhood abuse leads to DID—and though Cara never mentions an incident that might be traditionally considered abuse, she *does* complain about how as a child she'd been “stuck with one babysitter after another . . . all so Mom and Dad wouldn't miss a single moment” of their work (10). Child neglect is considered a form of trauma and is included in the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), a self-administered inventory developed in the 1990s. According to “Development and validation of a brief screening version of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire,” the CTQ “has five clinical scales—physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and physical and emotional neglect” (Bernstein et al. 174). Regularly leaving a child alone for hours could certainly be considered neglect. While neglect perhaps is not the dramatic abuse typically associated with DID, it perhaps isn't surprising if Cara created Zoe in response to this neglect, taking the idea of an imaginary friend and pushing it way too far. Additionally, Zoe's return comes after Cara chokes on a piece of carrot in the middle of her school cafeteria, leading to several of her classmates calling her “Choker,” an incident not just embarrassing but certainly stressful as well. DID is thought to be a maladaptive response to stress, and the fact that Zoe only appears after a particularly stressful event also supports the idea that Cara might not be as delusional as her parents think. That's not to say Cara's mother is wrong; while the sort of medication Cara is supposed to be on is never identified, Cara's mother does reveal that she hasn't been taking her medication, which is likely some form of antipsychotic given that Cara supposedly suffers from delusions. However, since Zoe first appears after she allegedly stops taking her medication—a medication that is not normally used to treat DID, which is normally treated with psychotherapy—then it is indeed possible that Zoe really is a delusion, as Cara's parents believe.

Whether Zoe is the result of schizophrenia or DID, one fact remains: through Zoe, Cara is legitimately dangerous. While Cara consistently accuses Zoe of violent things—and Cara's perspective

in the book *always* explicitly portrays Zoe as being to blame, except when Zoe seems to do things while Cara is asleep or otherwise not paying attention—from the perspective of everyone around her, Cara is to blame. In the incident that led her parents to seek professional help for her, Cara poisoned a dog that had bitten her—and while Cara's memory of the incident has her watching “Zoe shake the poisonous blue crystals into . . . dog food,” Cara also “watched her hand go out and take the can” from Zoe (Woods 113; 114). However, as her mother reveals at the end, a “neighbor saw Cara poisoning [the] dog” (228). Likewise, in the barn where one of Cara's classmates—one of the two instigators of the “Choker” nickname—is found dead, only one set of prints is found: Cara's. Regardless of what or who Zoe is, one fact remains: Cara is to blame for the deaths of a dog, her mother's cat, and two of her classmates. While it is true that some people with mental illnesses are violent, so are some people *without* mental illnesses. To perpetuate the stereotype that *all* mentally ill people are violent, especially in a novel targeted at teens, is very dangerous territory to tread into. Even worse, the reveal of Zoe as being all in Cara's head reads like a cheap plot twist. Using such a stereotype for a plot twist is not just lazy, but dangerous. There are enough examples of the news and media perpetuating this stereotype—surely fiction can do better, especially fiction aimed at young adults, which has the power to shape the beliefs and thoughts of its readers.

Choker is not the only novel in this list that could be damaging to its intended audience, though *Where I Want to Be* is a different sort of dangerous. While Jane, one of the novel's two narrators, is never violent towards others like Cara/Zoe, she is also implied by others to be schizophrenic. In fact, Jane is not the problem with *Where I Want to Be*—though her character is nothing more than her illness and her effect on her sister, the novel's other narrator. Rather, the problem is the people around her, particularly her sister, and the way they treat Jane. Readers know few specifics about Jane's illness, which is never named: we know that she has tantrums that sweep “through the house like a typhoon” and bad moods, and Jane later admits that there were “other words. *Delusions. Paranoia. Compulsions*”

(Griffin 29; 53, emphasis not mine). These other words lend themselves most strongly to the possibility that Jane is schizophrenic—along with the antipsychotics she starts after she begins seeing a new psychiatrist—though she periodically displays traits that belong to other disorders and disabilities. In recalling a past trip, Jane mentions that she had heard a particular tape “so many times, she knew the story . . . by heart” and that the “familiar words made the car time go more easily” (48). This reliance on the familiar, and repetition of the tape so many times she had it memorized is reminiscent of autism, a developmental disability that often presents with a powerful resistance to change and comfort with and/or enjoyment of repetition, among other things. She does this again later, “bus[ying] herself taking old practice tests for Spanish, although . . . her Spanish exams were over,” occupying herself with something familiar to distract herself from other things (137). Jane is visibly bothered by change on multiple occasions, and recalls the time after her grandparents had died when she suggested, “Maybe we could buy the house,” so that she “wouldn't have to make all the changes all at once” (93). Though an unrealistic suggestion, this is a remarkably adult approach to the same changes she also shows resistance to—and in fact, her storyline ends with her “releasing her hold” and deciding that she “was not scared of what came next” (143). For a character so often infantilized by those around her, an unfortunately common experience among disabled people, Jane shows a remarkable level of maturity.

Despite Griffin's apparent failure to produce a consistent character—and it is difficult to call Jane a character when she is entirely defined by her mental illness—Jane is not where the trouble lies, though her decision to stop taking her medication (a decision that almost certainly is responsible for her accidental death, which occurred before the events of the novel) perpetuates the myth that medication “changes” people. In deciding to stop taking her antipsychotics—which, when done abruptly, has been shown to cause a relapse of symptoms in schizophrenic patients⁵—Jane's narrative also points out, “How else would she find out the truth of who she really was?” (134). The unfortunate thing here, is that medication for mental illness is not supposed to change people. Instead, medication is intended to

help them be who they would be without the negative effects of their illness; for instance, antidepressants are meant to help people with depression get closer to how they were before they were depressed. Medication that does otherwise—for instance, medication that makes people like “zombies,” a common stereotype, generally is not intended to have such an effect, and is normally a sign that they need something different. Some readers might realize that Jane's decision to stop her medications was certainly to blame for her death—but others might come to the same conclusion that others in Jane's town reached. At a party, Jane's sister Lily finds herself confronted with the accusation that Jane's death “might have been, let's just say, not exactly an accident”—or, in other words, deliberate (105). Jane describes the accident differently: “She stepped off the curb. She hadn't seen the car until the last second” (142). Jane's death was not so much deliberate as it was a direct result of stopping her antipsychotics—but when faced with a character often accused of lying, some readers might still doubt.

Despite all this, Jane is not the problem with this novel. The last chapter from Jane's perspective ends with her deciding that “she had been wrong”, that it “wasn't Lily's fault that she hadn't . . . come to Jane's rescue”, and that she “was not angry anymore” about Lily's failure to help her (143). While Jane isn't wrong—Jane's mental illness could never be her sister's fault—that does not absolve Lily of guilt. In fact, the vast majority of the people around Jane were unkind, condescending, or worse—and Jane's story ends without even a single one of them admitting their errors, taking steps to fix their errors, or taking any other step that might do something other than normalize the way in which Jane was treated. To her boyfriend, Lily remarks that her family was always “orbiting around her illness and never acknowledging it. We weren't supposed to make her feel like even more of a misfit”, and yet in never acknowledging that Jane was different, they did exactly what they weren't “supposed” to do (126). One of the inescapable truths of being different is always *knowing* that one is different, and Jane is well aware that, sooner or later, everyone “realized that [she] was all wrong” (120). In refusing to acknowledge Jane's differences, her family alienated her further and created an “old confusion, the

feeling that she'd missed something” instead of helping her understand *how* she was different beyond the “category of hurtful words” that Jane knows Lily thinks but won't say (120). Perhaps the most frustrating part is that Jane either cannot see how her family has failed her, or refuses to see. She tells herself that “Lily was not mean . . . even if she'd bribed Billy. Lily wanted good things for her” and that “[h]er family accepted her. Or, at least, they were not preoccupied with what was wrong” (120; 121). Being preoccupied with the things that are wrong is not good, but completely ignoring them isn't any better. Likewise, having good intentions hardly absolves Lily of guilt, or anyone else. Even one of Jane's psychiatrists, Dr. Fox, is downright condescending, with her “favorite word for what Jane had” being the word “challenges” (53). Jane doesn't have challenges. She has a mental illness. By the time Jane starts seeing Dr. Fox, she's not six. She's old enough for the people around her to use the correct words—so why don't they?

While it would be unrealistic to expect siblings—real or fictional—to have a perfect relationship, the relationship between Jane and her sister is not a healthy one, nor is it ever acknowledged to be unhealthy and unbalanced. As a child, Lily thought of her sister as magic, but at the age of nine she realized her sister was “also half glass” and that it “scared [Jane] to be shut out” of her world (30). Worse, Lily concludes that she “didn't mean to shut her out, but sometimes I did it anyway. I liked having power. Power is its own kind of magic” (31). While it isn't unusual for siblings to seek out advantages over each other, particularly younger siblings, for a nine-year-old to realize the extent of her power over her mentally ill sister and *use it intentionally* is not the makings of a healthy or balanced sibling relationship. This in itself is not the problem, however—it is the novel's refusal to cast Lily's behavior in the negative light it deserves. Instead, everyone forgives her: despite resenting her sister while she was alive, Jane ultimately forgives her, as mentioned above, and time and again, Lily's boyfriend assures her that she wasn't to blame. Even when Lily wonders if she might have been “part of the problem,” Caleb shoots her down immediately and defensively: “How were we the problem? Just

by existing? By being us?” (21). The problem is, Lily *was* part of the problem and she's right: had Jane had a proper, supportive relationship with her sister, maybe things would have turned out differently for both of them. However, no one else in the novel seems to agree with Lily's point of view—a point of view that gradually disappears until she no longer even considers the thought, instead focusing more on the thought that Jane's absence “will take a lifetime to get used to” (147). In refusing to cast Lily's initial worries about her guilt as legitimate, Griffin creates a world where it is okay to mistreat others based on their illnesses or disabilities, normalizing behavior that is already far too common in society.

While *Blackjack* has disabled and mentally ill characters like each of the novels discussed above, in contrast to novels like *Wild Awake* and *Crazy*, my goal has been to include these things in an authentic manner without letting them completely define their characters. For instance, the first protagonist and primary narrator, Blackjack, starts the novel with a relatively recent diagnosis of bipolar disorder. While the particular type of bipolar is not stated within the novel, he is implied to have bipolar II, which is characterized by hypomanic episodes as opposed to the full mania of bipolar I. Over the course of the novel, readers will gradually learn more about this—how a hypomanic episode landed him in the hospital in high school, leading to a diagnosis and the mood stabilizers he doesn't always manage to take consistently, and how the disorder impacts his relationships with others. However, neither the novel's overall plot or Blackjack's individual character arc are defined by bipolar disorder—it is there, it causes conflict, but it does not drive the story. In contrast, “problem novels” like *Crazy* are entirely driven by the “problem” at hand, in which case it was Izzy's undiagnosed bipolar disorder. The second protagonist and secondary narrator, his twin sister Skye, is also disabled, though not mentally ill. Instead, she is deaf in one ear, hard of hearing in the other, and autistic. Again, both of these things cause conflict, but they do not drive the story or her character arc. Skye frequently has trouble with communication, sometimes because she cannot hear or understand someone speaking to her, sometimes because she is nonverbal under stress and Blackjack is the only other major character

familiar with sign language, and sometimes because humans are simply prone to miscommunication. While Blackjack and Skye are the most immediately apparent examples, few other characters are entirely “normal.” While some of these decisions were deliberate, others emerged with the characters. In either case, the ultimate goal is the same: to create a story about people who can be disabled or mentally ill and still be treated with respect, still have stories that aren't solely about their problems, and still have both unhealthy and healthy relationships with others.

There is a common adage about writing: “write what you know.” However, this is something that rarely seems to hold true in fiction, at least not completely. Certainly, every writer knows *something* about what they write, but in a discussion about representation of diversity in fiction, does this diversity extend to the authors of fiction? In the case of the seven novels discussed here, it does—sometimes. For instance, *Fans of the Impossible Life* is a story about LGBTQA+ teens, some of whom deal with depression and anxiety—and its author, Kate Scelsa, is married to another woman and self-identifies as a lesbian on her personal website. Likewise, one of the authors of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, David Levithan, is a gay man according to his website. Six of the seven novels were written by women, and six of the seven novels have at least one female protagonist—while only four of the novels have a male protagonist. Given the significant majority that female writers hold in young adult fiction, these numbers are not surprising. Several of the authors discussed here have also spoken about mental illness online, as mentioned earlier. While these authors have not necessarily written characters exactly like them—for instance, Reed and Smith wrote novels featuring bipolar protagonists, though *Wild Awake* also features a character with some form of psychotic disorder—their own experience with mental illness might very well lend them an advantage in writing about fictional characters with mental illness.

Like some of the authors discussed here, my novel also comes partially from experience. Nearly all of my characters share some facet or another with me—Lacey's stubborn loyalty is mine, as is Cat's

anxiety, Skye's hearing loss (to an extent; hers is worse), and a number of other details and traits. That is not to say any of them *are* me, of course. I do not share Mo's interest in law, or Skye's comfort with the outdoors, or Blackjack's reckless driving (though I will confess a shared enjoyment of fast cars). Similarly, different aspects of my LGBTQA+ identity are split between several characters to avoid creating a character that is identical to me—though those aspects do not necessarily affect the characters the same way they affect me.

From the start, *Blackjack* was the book that I needed as a teenager—which is perhaps not surprising, given that the novel's earliest seeds date back to my first year in high school. I was a voracious reader, especially in high school, when I became somewhat notorious for reading books in the middle of math class. However, among all of the books I read in those four years, I can only think of two that featured a LGBTQA+ character who wasn't just gay or lesbian. The first is *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides, which features an intersex protagonist; the second is *Bloodhound*, a novel by Tamora Pierce which includes a transwoman among the supporting cast. Neither *Middlesex* nor *Bloodhound* is set in modern times; the first is set during the 1900s while the other is set in a fictionalized medieval-era world. Regardless of setting, there are still few novels with trans, intersex, asexual, aromantic, or any other “invisible” identity under the LGBTQA+ novel. One novel can't do everything, but I'd like to think that *Blackjack* could at least be an drop in the bucket so far as representation of the whole spectrum of human identity goes. It's a big, varied world out there. It's on all of us as citizens of this world to make sure our media reflects it correctly.

II. Project Analysis

My earliest notes about the characters who would become Blackjack, Mo, and Lacey go back about seven years. In some ways, they're immediately recognizable: Blackjack has always been called Blackjack. Lacey has always had a kid sister and unruly curls. Mo was always tall and serious—with a sarcastic streak. Originally, several completely different characters were the “main” characters—Blackjack started out as a minor character who wound up stealing the spotlight and running away with it. Other faces were around back then: Kaliea, a kid Blackjack called “Fun Size” on account of the fact that this kid was still young enough to be shorter than Blackjack, and Caden Marchel, at the time a dangerous rival of Blackjack's. These three all started to disappear at around the same time the cast shifted to position Blackjack at the forefront, though Caden lasted the longest as the antagonist until the plot changed and rendered him irrelevant.

That long ago, Skye didn't even exist. In fact, during these early versions, Blackjack and Mo's pasts were fairly different—instead of living in foster care after his parents' death, this version of Blackjack had been living on the streets, while Mo had somehow managed to be living alone in an apartment at seventeen. Before too long, however, Skye started to make an appearance. At first, she was much younger than Blackjack, and at one early point I toyed with the idea tht she, too, had faced a tragic fate. Eventually I decided that was a little *too* dramatic for the sort of story I wanted to tell. Cat came along even later—at around the same time I realized that Kaliea, a half-Mexican girl who managed to steal Blackjack from Lacey, simply didn't fit. In the earliest notes I can find, Lacey and Blackjack were dating—then Kaliea took that spot, despite the fact that their relationship always seemed a bit forced. Once I realized he fit much better with Lacey, Kaliea simply became irrelevant—she had never served any real purpose beyond her interactions with Blackjack. Lacey, on the other hand, was more well-rounded—and so it made sense to scrap Kaliea and give what little role she had to Lacey. The first versions of Cat made an appearance here—though at the time, they were female and

white instead of non-binary and Indian, as they are now, though Cat does still lean towards a feminine presentation. Back then, Cat was called Cath, short for Catherine—now, Cat is a nickname not short for anything, like Blackjack, which certainly isn't short for his legal name, Scott.

Much of the development of these characters occurred in one of two places: in early attempts at writing a novel during National Novel Writing Month (NanoWrimo) and in collaborative writing done with friends. These collaborative endeavors also involved “alternate universe” versions of these characters (most often, Blackjack), and one of our longest-running games involved Blackjack as a vampire, primarily because that was the current fad at the time. Honestly, it was *fun*—and led to the beginnings of a novel that one of my friends and I have been working on in bits and pieces over the last couple of years.

The plot of *Blackjack* has changed countless times, much like its characters. In one version, dating to 2011, Blackjack was involved in shady deals—which more often than not involved drugs—and nearly got himself killed as a result. Even then, he was working in a bookstore part-time just as he does now, but this version was set in high school. The version that I wrote the following year during my first semester of college was, as might be expected, set instead during his freshman year of college, a decision I chose to stick with this time around. It was around this point that I realized that Blackjack's behavior was reminiscent of bipolar disorder—and so I explored this idea and ultimately ran with it. By 2014, I had settled on a plot not unlike parts of the outline included below—and 2015 brought with it the current version, with the heart of the story centered around old conflicts between him and his sister and their difficult reconciliation.

While I'm still not sure this outline is final—every preceding version I was sure was the story I wanted to tell, only to change my mind halfway through—I'm confident it's close. Even in the past month, I've tweaked it further, altering Part Two to condense a section that I felt would be too drawn-out and giving Skye more time to give readers her perspective on the uneasy peace she has with

Blackjack at this point. I still have *more* ideas regarding this—what if Skye narrated the whole story? What if the scope was smaller?—but they're on the backburner for now, for reasons I explain below.

For a long time, the part I struggled most with was not so much plot as theme. I couldn't figure out what story I wanted to tell, which I suspected was because I didn't know what the guiding ideas were. Now, I have a better idea of the abstracts governing the story. One of the main themes can essentially be boiled down to the “found family” trope. Many people argue that family must come first, that blood is thicker than water, but what happens when family fails you, as Cat's parents did? What happens if your family is gone, like Blackjack and Skye, who had only each other after the deaths of their parents? What happens, at least in *Blackjack*, is that friends step up to the plate. After a rough couple of years, Blackjack winds up in the Hadley household, and gradually builds a new family of his own—then, in the events of the novel, that found family is opened, first to Cat, then to Skye. There's no obligation to put up with each other because of blood relation, no sibling rivalry, no chance of being scorned or kicked out for different ideas about the world. (Well, okay, there might be *some* sibling rivalry. Blackjack and Skye literally are siblings, after all.)

It would be false to claim that I intend to finish and immediately query this novel for publishing. While I do plan to publish eventually, I'd like to take a break from this story and genre—I plan to write some different stories for a change, then come back, improve, and publish. By then I hope I'll be a better writer, better able to do this story justice. If I didn't give a story so close to my heart a chance to be its best, that would simply be a shame. I already have ideas for changes to make—or at least entertain—but for now, there are other stories calling my name.

III. Novel Outline

Major Characters:

- Scott “Blackjack” Ausley: protagonist and primary narrator. 17, male. Parents died when he was 12. Placed in foster care and separated from twin sister at 13. Moved into Hadley household at 14 and was eventually legally adopted into their household.
- Mo Hadley: supporting character. 18, male. Lives with his mother and adopted brother, Blackjack. His parents divorced when he was 15, and he and his mother have entirely cut his father out of their lives.
- Lacey Anderson: supporting character, 17, female. Started dating Blackjack at the end of their senior year of high school and encouraged him to go to college with her.
- “Cat” Tagore: supporting character, 18, non-binary. Lacey's roommate, eventually Mo's partner. Was kicked out of their parents' home at 16 after coming out and now lives with their grandmother, who is significantly more accepting of their identity.
- Schuyler “Skye” Ashton: secondary protagonist and narrator. 17, female. Parents died when she was 12. Placed in foster care and separated from twin brother at 13. Adopted by Ashton household shortly thereafter. Both Ashtons are deaf and, like her, primarily communicate in ASL.
- Zach Ashton: antagonist. 17, male. High school senior, but not attending classes. Kinda likes the idea of being a “hero” for finding Skye—and aware that he might be seen as a suspect in her disappearance. Still, he's not as awful as Skye thinks—he's definitely a jerk, but not quite to the extent she claims.

Part One, Blackjack:

1. Chapter One:
 - While packing his last bags for the move to college, Blackjack happens across an old family photo that spurs old memories he would have rather forgotten. He deliberately leaves the photo in his room, only for Mo to retrieve it. Blackjack wants a fresh start, Mo sees no reason why he should abandon the past in order to achieve that. Cue argument.
 - As would be expected, the trip out is an uncomfortable one. After about an hour of tense silence, Blackjack calls Lacey, hoping for some kind of escape. Unfortunately, she doesn't

answer... and Mo makes a snide remark. In the ensuing (renewed) argument, Blackjack doesn't hear his phone ring.

- He calls her back, and she picks up, with something interesting to say. End chapter: “Have you seen the news lately?”

2. Chapter Two:

- Before she can explain, his phone dies. Mo refuses to lend Blackjack his phone... but only a few minutes later, Mo's phone rings. Of course, it's Lacey.
- He's told her bits and pieces about his childhood—not much, but enough that she recognized his sister's name in a news article: a young woman named Schuyler, same age as Blackjack, was reported missing the day before from a town about fifteen miles from the college.

3. Chapter Three:

- Desperate to know more, Blackjack only unpacks his laptop and immediately tries to find out as much as he can. There's not much. A few days later, he hears a rumor that she's presumed dead.
- Despite his initial fears, the rumor isn't true. Instead he learns that earlier reports about her leaving town were wrong and that new information suggests that she may be in the area. Even more, there's a search party combing the woods near campus. He skips class to join them.

4. Chapter Four:

- The search party finds little beyond some footprints that are too large to belong to a girl only 5'2". Blackjack deems most of the other searchers incompetent and wanders off to search on his own. He eventually comes across a path that is blocked by deliberately arranged brambles, as if to ward off people.
- Good thing he carries a pocketknife. Cutting through the brambles isn't easy or quick, but he manages.
- Only to find an abandoned tent containing a small lockbox, a sleeping bag, and nothing else. No person, nothing that might be tied to a person, no tracks leading elsewhere. Dead end.
- Blackjack resigns himself to the fact that he's not gonna find her, the search party isn't going to find her, and the cops might not find her either.

5. Chapter Five:

- A few weeks later, he's picked up a part-time job working evenings in a local book shop. Not surprisingly, he is often bored at work.... to the point where he's fairly positive he's just imagining the strangely familiar girl who just walked in.
- Her hair's the wrong color—for that matter, it doesn't look quite real, like she's wearing a wig—but the fact that she greets him with a name sign he hasn't seen or used in years is pretty obvious. It's Skye, apparently not at all missing.
- She refuses to give him much information, but he learns this much: she's hiding from someone, and she needs help to stay out of their sight. Cue old resentment about their separation. He manages to piss her off, and she walks right back out the door.
- Job? What job? He goes after her. After all, he still doesn't really know what's going on.

6. Chapter Six:

- By the time he gets outside, she's disappeared—and it's fall. There's no snow on the sidewalks for her to have left a visible trail. So he debates: to go in search of her and risk his job, or to give up and go back?
- ...and his boss's car is parked outside the shop when he gets back.
- Convincing his boss that he wasn't blowing off work is... not easily done. Congratulations, Blackjack, you're on probation. One more screw-up and you're out of a job.

7. Chapter Seven:

- It's late September/early October by this point, and it's so sunny and warm out and wow it's such a shame you have classwork to do—oh, wait, no, it's actually time to leave for work and you 100% can't afford to be late
- Also, what in the world is going on with Skye? Who knows.
- “Why do I do this to myself,” he asks himself at two in the morning, agonizing over a paper he still hasn't finished. Predictably, he falls asleep at his desk sometime around three... and is then woken up by his phone going off.
- Turns out, it's Skye—and how she got his number is a mystery to him. Their conversation is a fairly one-sided one, since she can generally talk fine but can't really hear people over the phone well if at all, but it essentially boils down to this: “I get it if you want nothing to do with me right now, but I *really* need somewhere I can hide for a few days.” “....fine.”

8. Chapter Eight:

- Given that his immediately apparent options consist of: a) refusing, b) letting her sleep on his floor, and c) asking Lacey and Cat to let her sleep on their floor, Blackjack opts for option c. Lacey can't be found, but Cat is a generous sort and doesn't take much convincing.
- However, when he heads out to their agreed meeting point, a barely-used parking lot at the edge of campus, Skye's not there. He waits for a bit, aware that she wouldn't just bail for no reason if she's anything like she was when they were younger, but is interrupted by a call from Lacey.
- Skye might be his sister, but Lacey's actually his *friend*. And she's seriously upset about something.
- Turns out her ex is in town and he's... not a fan of Blackjack. Unfortunately, her ex is also about a foot taller than Blackjack is. This is not a good combination—and the frosting on the cake becomes an angry text from Skye.
- Shockingly, she is... once again not at the meeting point when he gets back. And there's a few ominous drops of blood on the ground that he's pretty sure are not his.

Part Two, Skye:

9. Chapter Nine:

- Switch to Skye's perspective. Timeline-wise, starts concurrent with Chapter Five.
- She's trying to escape from—something. She recognized Blackjack around town about a week earlier and has finally decided to try to get his help. Unfortunately, he responds with resentment and, frustrated, she walks out.
- Skye makes it around the corner before she comes face to face with a cop. The cop doesn't seem to recognize her from the missing posters—no doubt because she's made an effort to not look like the girl on the missing posters—but she bolts anyway.
- When she circles back to the bookstore an hour later, Blackjack is gone, but she successfully gets his phone number from the exceptionally bored-looking woman sitting by the register. A few days later, she gets especially desperate to find a new hiding spot, and picks a relatively safe spot to meet him. After calling him—not texting, because the sound of her voice is better proof of her identity than just claiming to be herself in text... she's delayed on the way to the meeting place. And he's gone by the time she gets there.

- So she texts him again. *WHERE ARE YOU*. And he takes far too long to get back—and before he shows up, here comes the exact person she's trying to avoid: her foster/adopted brother, who is (unfortunately) clever enough to remember that she has exceptional difficulty navigating public transportation and therefore hasn't gone very far.

10. Chapter Ten:

- Flashback to the incident, about a month ago, that spurred her to leave. Being that she isn't quite 18 yet, she can't leave without being labeled a runaway—but she's desperate to escape her adopted brother.
- They might legally be family, but she hates him. Always has. Like her, he was adopted by the Ashton household, but unlike her and the Ashtons, he is neither deaf nor fluent in ASL. Given that—at this point, anyway—she is hard of hearing but not quite deaf, Skye effectively takes on a translator role when he moves in. Things don't go well from there, on account of the fact that he's kind of a mess. They don't get along well to start with, and he has a habit towards casual violence—which goes almost entirely unnoticed by the Ashtons. Once in a while, this casual violence escalates to legitimate fighting, but not often. Important part is, she's terrified of him. He doesn't believe he has an issue.
- Cue the incident in question, which is worse than all of their past fights. It doesn't help that he's significantly taller and stronger than she is. Their adoptive parents have never believed her accusations against him, and this becomes the tipping point.
- Late that night, she packs her things and leaves.

11. Chapter Eleven:

- Confronted with the exact person she's been successfully avoiding for about a month, Skye panics. Before she can even manage to get her phone out of her pocket, he has her cornered. He's taller and stronger than she is—and while she manages to do some damage with her fingernails—he manages to get her into the back of his car.
- He heads straight out of town, blowing right through stop signs and red lights, and the moment he stops for a second she tries to get out. He's not amused. Cue unreliable narration.

12. Chapter Twelve:

- He drives. She thinks. And gets nowhere. Then her phone goes off. He's not really a fan of this either. Bye, phone.

- She responds by kicking his seat repeatedly. He eventually pulls over, intending to make her stop—and in the resulting argument/fight, she successfully steals *his* phone. He somehow doesn't notice this in the process of bodily moving her from the backseat to the trunk.
- She's not too bothered about this move now that she has a working phone in her hands.
- In an attempt to prevent her foster brother from driving any farther, she texts Blackjack, hides the phone, and makes as much of a racket as possible.
- Unfortunately, she is ignored. Eventually, he parks the car, turns it off, and leaves her locked in the trunk. Stuck with nothing better to do, Skye racks up his phone bill in revenge.

13. Chapter Thirteen:

- Blackjack finally responds to her texts. She uses the phone's maps function to get an idea of where she is, sends that to Blackjack, and waits.
- It turns out, her brother also drives like a lunatic. He shows up in no time, and her response boils down to: why am I not surprised that you know how to get into a locked car? There's no sign of her phone—or her hearing aid, which she lost in the fight that won her the stolen phone—but she's mostly interested in getting far, far away.
- They don't get away fast enough. Her foster brother catches up to them despite their short lead, but Blackjack seems to lose him after a bit. Once she hasn't seen her foster brother's car in a while, Skye considers how much to tell Blackjack—and reluctantly decides to tell him the whole story—about her foster brother, why she ran away—but only that.

14. Chapter Fourteen:

- A few weeks pass. Now at the end of October, Skye's been hiding out in Lacey's room and quickly discovers that Lacey not only knows a) what Blackjack's birthday is and b) that he and Skye are twins, but that she's planning something. Skye finds the idea of a birthday celebration hosted by people she doesn't really know kind of awkward.
- Blackjack's obviously not a fan either, because the closer they get to the end of October, the more strangely he acts. The day before their birthday, something sets him off and he disappears.
- A few hours later, Mo gets a phone call. He's fine, or at least he will be, but getting hit by a car does tend to have unhealthy consequences.
- Skye's convinced it's her fault, and refuses to join the others when they leave to go find out

what happened—and, at least in Cat's case, to bring him a stash of good junk food.

15. Chapter Fifteen:

- Skye successfully manages to avoid her brother—and his friends—for the first couple of days. Mo eventually manages to catch her, and in order to get him to leave, she agrees to go with him the next time he drops by to visit Blackjack.
- She doesn't go. She genuinely means to, but ultimately can't bring herself to go.
- Lacey intervenes. Gradually she convinces Skye to at least try to talk to Blackjack—though it's pretty clear even through Skye's perspective that Lacey is convinced they're both being ridiculous.

Part Three:

16. Chapter Sixteen:

- Switches back to Blackjack's perspective. Concurrent with the start of Chapter Fourteen.
- Blackjack's not really a fan of birthdays, and he's also well aware that he's been sliding into a depressive episode—which often makes him irritable and on-edge. Predictably, an idle comment drives him out of the room, and he opts to go out running. In the evening. In dark clothes. Shockingly, this doesn't end well.
- Congratulations, you just survived getting hit by a car. Enjoy the broken bones and concussion.
- He tries to convince Lacey it's not as bad as it looks, and, predictably, doesn't succeed. And then he realizes Skye isn't with them.

17. Chapter Seventeen:

- Cat mentions that they lent their phone to Skye, but she doesn't respond to his texts. He gives up—and a couple of days later, Mo mentions that Skye was planning to come along the next time he visited.
- She doesn't. Blackjack decides to write her off. She can figure her problems out on her own.
- Meanwhile, he's sick of being stuck in the hospital—but he discovers they're more interested in moving him to the psych ward than letting him leave, thanks to a nurse who overheard one of his... not reassuring conversations with Lacey.
- He's not shy about expressing his absolute refusal to go along with their plan, and pesters

Mo until his foster brother agrees to convince the doctors to let Blackjack leave.

18. Chapter Eighteen:

- A few days pass, and he gradually changes his mind about writing his sister off. Unfortunately, he can't exactly walk around at the moment, so trying to find her isn't an option. Instead, she finds him.
- Their discussion quickly goes from “are you sure you're okay” to “how do we deal with your foster brother,” and they quickly conclude that their options are limited, since they can't prove that he's done anything illegal, while declaring that Skye's not actually missing would be a grand way to draw a whole lot of attention.

19. Chapter Nineteen:

- Blackjack knows what the story is with her foster brother, but so far as he knows, she still decided to abandon him when they were kids. Regardless, the two of them avoid the topic—until Lacey gets tired of listening to them talking about anything but what they actually need to talk about. She and Cat concoct a plan intended to get them to talk... which goes poorly.
- Blackjack snaps at them—and at his sister, who subsequently freaks out. Rather than deal with the consequences, he declares that he wants to be left alone and leaves.
- For a change, he actually is left alone. Unfortunately he's at the opposite end of campus from his dorm, too tired to actually make it all the way back, and still refuses to call someone and ask for help.
- Predictably, he doesn't get very far—and it starts raining. So, he gives up, accepts his fate, and finds the nearest bench.

20. Chapter Twenty:

- Soon enough, he's drenched and half-frozen. And no one is answering his texts.
- Luckily, Skye happens to walk by. She's not particularly happy with him, but agrees to at least help him get back to the dorm.
- Unfortunately, by the time they get there, her foster brother also happens to be lurking.

21. Chapter Twenty-One:

- Trying to escape him would be futile, but Blackjack passes Skye his ID card so she can get into the dorm and tries to tell her to hide inside. She refuses, then asks if the lit window above them belongs to his room.

- Fancy that, it does. And if the light's on, that means Mo is around. And Mo is both tall and a member of the hockey team.
- So Blackjack calls Mo. And gets a busy signal. When a couple officers from University Police show up a couple of minutes later, Blackjack realizes *why* he got a busy signal. Despite himself, he's glad for their arrival.
- In the morning, he tries to convince Skye to call her foster parents and explain to them what's been going on. She refuses, but grudgingly gives him access to her Skype account and tells him to explain the story to them for her. Shockingly, they don't really believe his version of the story... because Skye's foster brother talked to them first.
- And Skye still refuses to talk to them, even though they're more likely to believe her than some random kid who claims to be her brother.

22. Chapter Twenty-Two:

- As would be expected, Blackjack has, again, racked up a lot of overdue work—but instead of letting him get anything done, Skye interrupts to ask if she'd be able to move in with him, wherever he's living, since they're both eighteen now and legally on their own.
- He deflects and tells her to ask Mo, since it's his house. Mostly, Blackjack's not sure he likes the idea—because he's somehow convinced himself that letting her stick around would amount to clinging to the past, and that's Not Good.
- This leads him to a new idea—and he tries to convince Skye to go back to her foster parents. His main reason is that they know ASL and the Hadleys don't. She disagrees with this line of reasoning—and Lacey steps in to invite Skye to join her family for Thanksgiving. Blackjack doesn't like this plan much either—which is exactly what Lacey was counting on.
- He suggests that Skye spend Thanksgiving with him at the Hadley house... as a “test run” of sorts. And insists that this isn't him agreeing to anything. No one believes him.

23. Chapter Twenty-Three:

- When Mo's mother agrees to let Skye move in, he can't decide if this is unfortunate or lucky (if not surprising). Rather than think about the fact that he's not sure how he feels about this, he distracts himself—and Skye—by focusing on how “difficult” the logistics would be.
- He makes a last-ditch effort to avoid Thanksgiving, especially when Cat and Lacey show

up, but Skye tracks him down when he disappears outside.

- Cue a final conversation between siblings—and a tentative agreement to work together. It's not a perfect arrangement, but it's a step forward—and that's really the important part.

IV. Full Text of Chapters 1, 14, and 23

Chapter 1

Not for the first time, he wondered if college was really the right move. On the one hand, a degree would get him further than a high school diploma. . . provided finishing college didn't turn out to be as difficult as high school had been. On the other hand, massive debt. The state was paying part of the way, but it wasn't enough—and that money was likely to disappear before long.

Shoving the last of his clothes into the same, ancient suitcase that already held near everything else, he decided, again, that this was a question for his eighteenth birthday. A delay of only two months, but one that saved him the trouble of thinking about it now. Procrastination, he knew, but not the harmful sort.

“I don't know about you,” a voice called from downstairs, “but I'd like to get moving sooner rather than later, Blackjack.”

The best nicknames were the ones that started as jokes. And stuck.

“If you're worried about getting there on time, let me drive,” he called back.

Mo laughed from somewhere downstairs. The bottom of the stairs, from the sound of it.

“Absolutely not. I still have no idea how you managed to get a license in the first place, the way you drive.”

Ignoring his foster brother's entirely unfair assessment of his driving ability—so *maybe* he liked to drive a little too quickly, and maybe he liked the snow a little too much—Blackjack returned to packing. There wasn't much left in the room that actually belonged to him. A pillow, a photo in a cheap frame, a folder on the desk still full of notes from the spring musical.

The photo could stay where it was. It was old. Really old—at least seven years old, he guessed, though he could no longer remember. Once, it had held sentimental value, but now...

Two of them were long since dead. He'd made his peace with that, at least.

One had cut ties with him so thoroughly he'd given up trying to track her down.

The last was a happy, well-adjusted kid without a care in the world, and so far as he was concerned, that kid had died with his parents.

Maybe it was better that way.

Everyone had to grow up and leave home sooner or later. He'd just... done it a little earlier than planned.

Blackjack grabbed the folder and the pillow, shoved the first into his suitcase and tucked the other under his arm, and started for the door, only to stop short when Mo stepped into the doorway. Six feet tall and broad-shouldered by nature, Mo blocked the door without even trying.

“For someone who owns so little, you're taking a *long* time to pack,” Mo said, leaning against the doorframe.

“Not all of us pack two weeks ahead of time,” he retorted. “Are you going to move, or do I have to make you?”

He shrugged and stepped inside the room to clear the doorway. “There's room in the trunk if you move some stuff around.”

“Good to know. Does 'moving stuff around' mean I can dump your stuff in the yard?”

“It most certainly does not.”

“What a shame.”

Mo snorted in response, but as Blackjack made his way through the door he interrupted, “You're not taking the photo?”

Leaving the suitcase in the hall, Blackjack turned back and shot Mo a skeptical look. “No?” he replied, his tone implying *why would I?*

But Mo only shrugged. “There's plenty of room in the car, if that's the issue.”

“Nope. Don't need it. This is supposed to be a fresh start, you know? Don't need ancient history

following me around.”

“Ancient his—that's ridiculous.”

Blackjack ignored him, stepping back out into the hallway. He tossed the pillow over the railing of the stairs, watched it land just to the side of the last step, then collected the well-worn suitcase. He made it halfway down the stairs before Mo interrupted again.

“I get that you want a fresh start—between everything that happened last year, I'm pretty sure anyone would—but that doesn't mean you have to leave everything behind,” Mo said.

“I'm not allowed to leave a picture behind, but you can throw out every picture you had of your dad? Right, *that* makes sense.”

With an exasperated sound, Mo retorted, “That's different. My dad was an asshole. Your family didn't do anything to you.”

“They left,” he snapped.

“What are you, six? People die, people leave, it's part of life. How do you not understand that?”

Blackjack scoffed at him, and instead of replying, continued down the stairs. Of course he knew that—but the reality was a bit messier than the clean-cut way Mo put it. It was difficult to blame his foster brother for thinking it *was* so straightforward, when he'd seen how Mo's response to his parents' messy divorce had been to write his father off entirely and move on as if he'd never existed.

It was one thing to write off a person you'd resented for years. To do the same to parents who'd genuinely loved you and had never meant to die and leave you behind... well, it wasn't fair to them. And Blackjack didn't need an old photo to remember them. Sure, the first two years without them had been rough, but now he could hardly remember the last time he'd done more than glance at the photo for a moment or two.

Some of the homes that had temporarily taken him in during those first years had possessed good intentions. He knew that. It didn't change the fact that all of them had either tried too hard, tried

too little, or simply kicked him out without an explanation. Only the Hadleys—even Mo's father, violent and unpleasant—had given him exactly what he'd needed then: space, genuine interest in his well-being, and the company of someone who could tell precisely when to back off.

For all his faults, Mo was still remarkably gifted at realizing when he'd gone too far. Unfortunately, it was a realization he didn't always obey. Not anymore.

It was rare that Blackjack was truly left alone, these days. He understood why they felt a need for constant supervision, but... Well, he didn't have to *like* it. No matter how many times he explained it, Mo and his mother didn't quite seem to grasp the idea that the thoughts were barely more than background noise. Only rarely was the near-constant suicide watch merited. Today was not one of those days. If Mo would just leave him alone, he might even manage to call it a good day.

“You may as well just take it,” Mo finally said. When Blackjack glanced back, he was at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “I mean, you've packed everything else you own. And you never know, you might decide you want it later.”

He shook his head, and turned back. “Why do you care so much? It's my family, not yours.”

“And here we have the elusive Blackjack,” Mo drawled, exaggerating his Long Island accent as he imitated a wildlife guide. “Finding one in the wild is difficult, as they tend to run away from conflict and hard decisions.”

“Very funny,” he retorted, ditching his suitcase at the bottom of the stairs and turning. Then, copying both imitation and accent, he responded, “Standing atop the hill is one of the rare Mo creatures. They're particularly fond of having the high ground, even when it doesn't matter, and they tend to talk about things they don't understand.”

“Is that what you think I'm doing? Taking the moral high ground? Hilarious.”

“That's *exactly* what you're doing,” Blackjack snapped. “Just drop it, would you? I'm not taking it, end of debate.”

“Defensive,” Mo muttered, but he said nothing more.

For nearly an hour—almost a third of the entire trip—the only sound that broke the silence was that of the stereo, playing an alternative rock station at a volume that was both entirely too loud and not loud enough. Stuck in the passenger's seat on account of the fact that he would gleefully drive at a speed well over the limit if given the opportunity, Blackjack had spent most of the trip playing half a dozen different games on his phone. None of the games held his attention for long, though he managed to get a good twenty minutes out of a themed version of Tetris.

Eventually, rather than continue listening to a silence that he knew Mo wouldn't break, Blackjack switched from games to his contact list. It was a dull, empty affair containing only a handful of names, but he liked it better that way. He tapped on the topmost name—Lacey, who was at the top not because they were dating but because the list sorted by last name—and held his phone to his ear, listening to it ring.

It rang once, twice, three times.

Eventually, her voicemail message started.

He didn't need to listen to it to know what it said.

You've reached the phone of Lacey Anderson. I'm unable to answer your call, but leave a message and I'll call you back. Seriously, leave a message.

He didn't leave a message. He never did, even though he knew she hated not knowing why he'd called.

Funny that she hadn't figured out that he mostly called her for the sake of hearing her voice. Why leave a message when she would call him back anyway?

“She has a life, you know. One that doesn't involve you,” Mo remarked as Blackjack dropped his phone into his lap.

“Wow. I *never* would have guessed.”

“You refuse to talk for an hour and the first thing out of your mouth is sarcasm? What a surprise.”

“What the hell is your problem?”

“*My* problem?”

“What, are you bitter because I have a girlfriend and you don't?”

“You know very well that I don't care.” For someone apparently so insistent on causing trouble, Mo's tone was strangely casual. “Besides, the way you're acting, you'll be on a fast track to being single in no time.”

“Guess what: that's literally none of your business.”

Mo snorted. “She's my friend, too, idiot.”

“Look how little I care.”

Then, too late, Blackjack realized his phone was making noise from where it had wound up half between his leg and the seat. By the time he managed to retrieve it, whoever had called had already hung up. A quick search of the call history told him it was Lacey, as expected.

Ignoring whatever Mo was muttering, Blackjack immediately called her back, hoping she would actually pick up this time.

On the second ring, the call connected.

“Blackjack—have you seen the news lately?”

Chapter 14

For most of my life, making friends was a slow, difficult endeavor. False starts and false friends and people who didn't understand me, people who took pity on me, people who thought maybe I would

magically become 'normal' if they drilled me over and over on social norms.

For years, I didn't worry about it. I had my family. They understood me, took me as I was, and didn't ask me to be someone I couldn't be. I didn't need friends of my own. I had my brother, and his friends, though I imagine they always thought I was his younger sister, tagging along as younger siblings tend to do.

I wonder if they ever realized I was actually the older twin. Not by much, but I *was* older.

But then things changed. I was on my own in middle school, in high school. No brother with friends we could share, no friends of my own. Sure, I tried a few times. Eventually, I gave up.

And yet, here I was, sleeping on an air mattress in the dorm room of my brother's girlfriend.

Here I was, being drawn into his group of friends as if I had always been there.

It was strange, but I wasn't about to complain. I liked Cat best; the two of us were the newcomers, still learning where we fit into the tightly-knit circle that my brother had built in high school. The three of them—my brother, Mo, and Lacey—often tossed around comments, jokes, that Cat and I lacked the context for.

Even I could tell there was something they weren't outright saying, though it was difficult to guess what. It wasn't that Lacey smoked, which I had figured out the first time I met her. Nor was it my brother's affinity for parties and drinking—though, given how rarely he spoke of anyone outside the small circle I had already met, I did not understand this particular... hobby. As far as I knew, everything about Mo's life was perfectly ordinary, though we rarely interacted. Cat knew him better, but even they were unable to tell me what sort of topic the three of them were always talking around without directly mentioning.

I tried not to worry about it. A few things were clear enough. Whatever it was, all three of them were involved somehow. They made jokes and self-deprecating comments about it almost exclusively; aside from a fragment of a quiet conversation between Mo and Lacey that I caught late one night, I

never heard any of them speak seriously about (or around) it. Something serious, then—but far enough in the past that they could joke.

This much I found interesting: my brother would periodically crack jokes about... whatever it was, when Mo or Lacey were around, but he avoided any and all mention of what had happened between us.

To be honest, I was fine with that.

Only five years, and yet I was no longer quite sure what had really happened back then. If he knew, he wasn't telling—and I wasn't particularly eager to find out. I had my brother back. What was past, was past.

Well, I had my brother back in *theory*, at least. As October wore on, I saw him less and less until I eventually realized I hadn't seen him at all in four days. I was in Lacey's room—as had become usual, lest I wander out and be spotted by some well-meaning but ultimately unhelpful soul—when she came to the same realization late that afternoon.

One second, she was lying on her bed, reading a book that I could only assume was for a class, given how old and obviously worn it was.

The next, she muttered to herself, “Now that I think of it...”

Without another word, she tucked a folded sticky note into the book to mark her place, ditched it on her bed, and slid off the edge. Bored out of my mind—and curious despite a distant voice in my head reminding me that eavesdropping was Not Allowed (and also remarkably difficult)—I got up and followed her into the hall.

There was an art to closing the doors. Slam them, or let them fall shut on their own, and they would automatically lock. There was no way to leave them unlocked. But, close them slow and careful, enough to look closed without the latch engaging, and you could get right back in.

I'd mastered this particular art. Out of necessity, of course—no self-respecting hardware store

would duplicate a dorm key with *DO NOT DUPLICATE* printed on it, and there was no way to get my own key without either informing the dorm director of my presence (no) or stealing one of the skeleton keys from the dorm office (definitely no).

Well, there were other alternatives.

My brother had offered to teach me how to pick the locks, which he claimed were “cake” to open. This was not a reassuring thought, and I'd turned him down. (How had he learned that? And *why?*)

Once or twice, I spotted other students finding different paths into other rooms. One afternoon, I saw a kid climb up one of the trees that lined the back of the dorm, pop the screen out of a window, and squeeze through. Another day, I happened to pass a couple of girls using a wire hanger to sneak into a friend's room. Supposedly. That was the story they gave me, anyway—and I've learned better than to believe everything I hear.

If Lacey knew I had followed her, she gave no sign. In fact, she almost certainly knew, because the hall was almost completely empty and despite being small in near every regard I was not known for being light on my feet. Still, she neither glanced back nor accused me of following her.

She headed straight down the hall and turned left just past the common lounge, towards the elevator and the short wing that contained my brother's room. I didn't follow her down into the wing, instead lingering in the sectioned-off part of the hall containing the elevator. I knew it would be difficult to hear any conversation coming from my brother's room or the hall outside it, but I didn't dare stand within sight of the door.

Things I heard: indistinct shouting from outside, birds, a knock on the door, the sounds of a conversation I could almost hear but not understand.

Things I did not hear: my brother, someone walking behind and then past me, Lacey's returning footsteps.

As soon as I realized that the unfamiliar student who'd walked through my peripheral vision was holding the door open for her, I had just enough time to turn towards the elevator and pretend I was waiting before Lacey walked through.

She walked right past me, and once I saw the second door close at the edge of my vision, I turned to watch her stalk around the corner of the lounge and out of sight.

I hadn't known Lacey long, but she didn't usually walk with her arms crossed, let alone crossed so tightly.

Knocking on my brother's door was a terrible idea.

I did it anyway.

When Mo answered the door instead, I was surprised to discover that I was relieved, that I had been hoping it wouldn't be my brother.

"He's not here," Mo said, by way of greeting. "Anything else?"

Words failed me.

After a long moment, I managed, "Actually, I was hoping you might be able to tell me something."

To my surprise, he seemed amused by this. "Sure. What about?"

I hesitated. Before, I hadn't dared to ask my brother or his friends what they were so casually hiding. On some level, I didn't want to—but at the same time, I was sure it was important. Perhaps I would find out eventually, but I wasn't sure this attempt at reconciling with my brother would even last. We weren't children anymore; the easy friendship I remembered was gone, and it was difficult to rebuild a relationship with a brother who avoided or rebuked near every attempt.

"I can't figure it out," I admitted. "Scott—Blackjack—is hiding something from me. I'm sure. But I can't figure out what it is, and I don't... really want to ask him, to be honest."

Mo offered me a wry sort of smile. "You'll have to be more specific. He hides lots of things

from just about everyone.”

Suddenly, I wondered if Mo had known I existed before I accidentally became a front-page news story.

Aloud, I replied, “You—the three of you—you're always referencing it. Like... um, like last week, in the lounge?”

“In the lounge... Ah. Normally, I'd tell you to ask Blackjack yourself, but seeing as I haven't seen him since Tuesday, I rather doubt you'd be able to. It's not that long a story, but come in. I'm not saying this in the hallway where half the dorm can hear me.”

He stepped back, and I stepped in, far enough to allow the door to swing shut behind me. Even at a glance, it was easy to tell which side of the room belonged to who: the right side of the room featured an orderly desk and a neatly-made bed, while the sheets on the other bed had all been pushed to the foot of the bed.

For as long as I could remember, my brother had always done that. No matter what, by the end of the night, the sheets would be at the foot of the bed or on the floor.

“To make a short story much shorter,” Mo said, interrupting my line of thought, “it all boils down to this: last January, your idiot brother nearly drank himself to death—and then immediately proceeded to land himself in the psych ward. Make sense?”

No, not really.

“Are you implying—?”

“That he did it deliberately? Hell, I don't know. It happened, it's a thing, but I try to avoid thinking about the chance he'll do it again. He makes awful jokes about it, but most of his jokes are in bad taste to start with, so I don't think there's *too* much to worry about there. Lacey disagrees with me, of course, but she hasn't lived with him for four years. This disappearing act he's pulling, at least? He's been doing that for a while. He'll show up in a day or two.”

Indeed, my brother reappeared the next day. He gave no indication of where he'd been—though Lacey hinted darkly that he'd been sleeping something off. I didn't ask, but I also didn't need to guess. After speaking to Mo, I had a feeling I already knew.

What happened?

Where between ages thirteen and seventeen had he fallen so far off the tracks?

I didn't have long to wonder. By the end of that same day, Lacey seemed happier—as if my brother had told her exactly what she'd wanted to hear. Indeed, that night she and Cat were sitting together on her bed, planning something that I quickly realized sounded very much like a birthday party.

Given that my birthday was only a week away, I had a sudden suspicion that their planning was going to involve my brother at the very least. If they knew my brother and I were twins, well...

No, thank you.

Maybe turning eighteen was a big deal for some people. Aside from the fact that turning eighteen meant freedom from being in the care of the state—for both my brother and me—it held no particular appeal. It wouldn't get rid of Zach, nor would it pay for school or batteries for my hearing aid. At worst, turning eighteen meant I was homeless. Turning eighteen meant my brother had no real reason to stay in school.

No reason to help me.

No, I didn't need a party to celebrate all of the things I was worried about.

A few days after that, Lacey sent me a string of text messages.

(5:33 pm) Do you have plans for Sunday? We're hitting the Tavern in town for dinner.

(5:35 pm) Food's on Cat and Mo, dessert's on me.

(5:38 pm) You and Blackjack are both invited. Do you like cake?

Very reluctantly, I replied.

vanilla cupcakes, no frosting (5:52 pm)

(5:53 pm) Sure! Are sprinkles okay?

yes (5:56 pm)

The night before my birthday, I wondered if it wasn't too late to change my mind about the thinly-veiled party.

The longer I lived in my brother's dorm, the more comfortable I got straying away from Lacey's room. Gradually, I started spending time in the common lounge, even when no one I knew was keeping me company. To be entirely honest, the main appeal was the television; neither Lacey nor Cat had brought one for their room, and without my laptop I was both dreadfully bored and almost entirely out of touch with the rest of the world.

At first, I snuck out to the lounge to watch the 6 am news reports while the rest of the dorm slept. Then I got bolder, and started sleeping later, catching the 9 am news and then channel-surfing until I found something to fill my time.

By the end of October, I was in the lounge for most of the day. Besides watching tv, I proofread Lacey's papers, puzzled over Cat's homework with them, taught Mo the basics of ASL, warily talked to my brother.

At first, I hadn't realized what was going on. For over a week, he'd been snappish, uncommunicative, and frequently locked away in his room, hardly even going to class from what I could tell. But eventually it clicked.

Mom had always been the same way. She'd had a better handle on her moods, but I remembered well the days she seemed to stop still while the world went on without her, and the days she ran laps

around a world that seemed to freeze in place.

It was becoming clear my brother was the same way.

Unlike Mom, however, he was on a path to self-destruction.

Buried deep in such thoughts, I didn't realize I had company until someone sat down next to me. The shift of the couch and a glimpse of dark skin told me it was Cat; Lacey quickly followed suit, perching on the flat wooden arm of the couch. They had already been engaged in conversation, I realized, their words meaningless without my active attention. I left them to it—until Cat nudged me lightly with an elbow, interrupting my line of thought once again.

Once I glanced over, they said—something. Helpful as ever, my brain simply failed to translate sounds to words.

Much more helpful, Cat seemed to recognize my frustration before I even said anything and repeated, “—— good playing tonight?”

I frowned.

Oh. On the tv. Right.

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Not even horror movies?” Cat asked, sounding disappointed. “Two days 'til Halloween, and no horror movies?”

Lacey scowled at them. “You want horror movies, Blackjack wants zombie movies—what is it with the two of you? What's wrong with watching something less... bloody?”

“Sweeney Todd?” I suggested, trying—and failing—to hide the smile spreading across my face.

Cat grinned and agreed, “*That* is Halloween material. You don't like it, Lacey, go watch a kid movie.”

She crossed her arms and grumbled, “There's nothing wrong with kid movies.”

“There is also nothing wrong with horror, zombies, or murder. It's seasonally appropriate.”

“Watch a documentary,” a new voice suggested. I glanced up just as Mo added, “About a serial killer, if you must.”

Cat made a dismissive gesture. “Good luck finding that sort of thing on the tv.”

“You won't know until you try,” he replied, dragging an armchair over to join them. As he sat down, Mo said, “Pass me the remote?”

I dug the remote out from where it had become trapped between the couch cushions and tossed it to him. I missed, throwing the remote too high, but Mo caught it with little difficulty.

While Mo watched the on-screen tv guide slowly flip through the channels, Blackjack finally showed up. Periodically, Cat had pointed out something on the channel guide, but I'd lost interest and started watching the hallway through the wide glass windows that lined the interior walls of the lounge. When my brother showed up in one window, I half expected him to keep walking, but instead he pushed open one of the doors and joined us.

For a moment, I saw indecision in his face, before the others made room for him. Without a word, Cat got up and invaded Mo's space, sitting on one armrest and tossing their legs over the other, effectively blocking him from getting out of the chair. While Cat moved, Lacey gestured for Blackjack to take their seat, but he was already moving towards it.

I realized, as he sat down next to me and leaned his head against Lacey's arm, that this was quite literally the closest he and I had been in years.

And yet we were still so distant.

Eventually, after much debate—and the discovery that, indeed, there were remarkably few seasonal movies being shown that evening—they settled on a movie that had started some fifteen minutes earlier. Once Mo turned the subtitles back on—someone kept turning them off, and while I frequently entertained the idea of covering the television in sticky notes that said *LEAVE THE CAPTIONS ON* I had yet to do so—I found myself watching the movie despite genuinely intending to

at least attempt talking to my brother.

Though I paid little attention to it, I knew the others were running their own commentary parallel to the movie. Occasionally I caught a few words here and there, enough to piece together some idea of what they were talking about, but for the most part I tried to ignore them. While I couldn't understand them well with the noise from the tv, I also couldn't tune them out. Not very well, at any rate.

Then, without any warning, Blackjack stormed out.

Given the faintly baffled expressions around me, I knew they wouldn't be able to explain why.

But I had a feeling.

Lacey tried to text him a couple of times, with no response.

Calling his phone brought her straight to voicemail, as she promptly declared.

We watched the rest of the movie.

Nothing.

This time, Cat succeeded in finding a horror movie. Lacey stayed for maybe half an hour, then left. I considered doing the same, having little interest in what had amounted to little more than a series of jumpscares. Mo lost interest as well, but made no attempt to leave, instead doing something with his phone that I assumed was probably either a game of some sort or homework.

Towards the end of the movie, Mo's phone rang.

I paid no attention to this—until he snapped, “Are you kidding me right now?”

Whatever the answer was, it seemed to mollify him. With a weary sigh, Mo added, “Great. Fine. I'll be there in a bit. Don't do anything else stupid in the meantime.” Then, shoving the phone back into his pocket, Mo worked his way out of the chair and said by way of explanation, “Idiot got himself hit by a car.”

Chapter 23

Returning to the old, narrow house that Mo called home felt strange.

They'd been gone only a few months—and the only change he could see was the absence of the plant normally hanging from the covered roof of the porch. Still, there was something strange about being back.

It was the same house he'd lived in for nearly four years, and yet it was different. Nothing had changed, but it was different.

Blackjack shrugged off the thought and started towards the porch. His sister was looking at the house as if she'd never seen one before. Weird, but she'd always been weird. Not bad-weird, just... weird.

Not that he could claim to be normal.

“Normal” was meaningless, anyway. Normal was average. Normal was common. Normal was whatever society wanted it to be.

Blackjack didn't really care what society wanted.

Society wanted overachievers who fit perfectly into a tiny box and didn't complain. Even Mo, always miles above and beyond what was asked or expected, couldn't manage that. To be fair, he was too tall to fit into a box, but—

Grinning at his own joke, Blackjack hopped up onto the porch and dug for the keys he was sure were in the pocket of his coat. Just as he found the familiar sharp-edged metal, however, a light tap on his shoulder interrupted him.

“Don't you think this looks like our house did?” Skye signed as he turned. “Different color,

same size.”

“I guess it does,” he agreed, using just his uninjured hand to sign. “We didn't have a basement, though.”

“I can't tell,” Mo interrupted, trailing a suitcase behind him as he made his way to the door, “are you talking about my house or something entirely inappropriate?”

His tone was joking, but Blackjack shot him a skeptical look nonetheless. “What if the answer is 'both'?”

“That seems unlikely. Are you coming in, or do you plan to stand on the porch all afternoon?”

“No, I plan to sit on the couch all afternoon,” he countered. “Preferably while you get my stuff out of the car.”

Mo scowled. “I put your stuff *in* the car. Get it yourself.”

“Sounds like a recipe for trouble,” Skye said aloud, shooting her brother a quick smile. “I'll get it. Where do you want it?”

“...in the house?”

“Very specific,” Mo said.

“Always. When's your mom getting back?”

Mo shrugged. “Dinnertime? Maybe? When have you ever known my mother to work regular, predictable hours?”

“That... is a good point. Wait, so you're telling me it's the day before Thanksgiving and I have to make my own food? Blasphemy.”

“I guarantee you there is frozen pizza in the freezer.”

“And I remind you that she always puts it in the basement fridge.”

Mo only grinned and went inside, suitcase clattering over the stone entryway.

With a roll of his eyes, Blackjack followed, his sister lingering just behind his shoulder.

Years, and she still did that.

Funny how many things time *couldn't* change.

Blackjack was halfway through pizza on the couch—because why eat anything else when *pizza* was at hand?—when he heard an old car grumble its way up the driveway. A bit later than predicted, but not as far off as usual. Traffic, then, had slowed her down. When Ms. Hadley stayed late and worked overtime, she usually didn't return until half the neighborhood had gone to bed—though when half the neighborhood was over the age of sixty, that wasn't saying very much.

Skye had disappeared into the lone guest room hours earlier. Technically it was his room, as it had been since he'd first moved in, but she'd taken it on account of the fact he didn't want to deal with stairs. It seemed a fair trade. He got a couch and no stairs, she got a room to herself.

It was a pretty decent couch, too. Which was saying something, given that the Hadley household didn't actually have a whole lot of money to throw at furniture.

The hazards of three people trying to live off the salary of a single nurse—there wasn't much left to go around after food and bills and gasoline.

That much, at least, had never been anything new. His parents had always lived on a tight budget, too.

Well, “tight budget” might be a bit too generous.

Sprawled across the couch in the most comfortable position he could manage, Blackjack had finished his pizza by the time Ms. Hadley actually made an appearance. Despite the in-game sounds from the latest and greatest phone game he was playing, Blackjack half-listened as she went through her usual after-work routine—keys on kitchen table, start making coffee, go upstairs, then back downstairs, finish coffee, wander off with coffee in tow.

Like Mo, she was nothing if not predictable. When she worked late, she always watched the

late-night news, drank her coffee, then went to bed. Other nights, she hunted down her laptop, wherever it was on any given day, and did... whatever divorced women in their early fifties did on computers.

Like Mo, she tended to break habits where Blackjack was involved.

He realized she was lingering in the doorway to the tv room—or, as Blackjack preferred to think of it, the cave—several minutes after she had likely gotten there. When he finally glanced over, she offered a tired smile, lifting her free hand in a small wave.

“So,” she said. “What's this about you having a sister?”

Blackjack could only vaguely remember the last time he'd been roped into Thanksgiving dinner preparations. Years, now, though it hardly seemed like it.

At least having a busted wrist meant he'd been handed the easiest job ever.

Well, two easy jobs.

Mashing potatoes with his right hand was... not quite natural, but it was certainly doable—and tossing imperfectly peeled potatoes back in the bowl of unpeeled potatoes for Skye to go at them again, well, that was pretty easy, too.

The difficult part was the silence.

Skye had never been quiet, before.

But a lot of things had been different before.

So far as he knew, no one had told Skye that she was welcome to move in. In fact, he wasn't even sure if Mo knew. To give his foster brother credit, Mo had an uncanny ability for figuring out secrets—however frustrating it was, sometimes.

There were no secrets in the Hadley household. Not anymore.

Except this one.

The main problem, as Blackjack saw it, came down to a very simple factor: space.

It was a small house. Not tiny, but small. Three bedrooms, one bathroom, one kitchen, a basement, the cave, and the front living room. No garage, no dining room, and certainly not enough beds to fit four people.

Nevermind how much of a headache it was to split one shower between three people.

Then again, Skye *was* planning to re-enroll for the spring. Or at least, she'd said as much. Once. A month ago.

So, at the very least, it would only be crowded when they were off from school. And it would be inherently temporary, anyway; sooner or later, he would move out. Mo would move out. Skye would have to leave, too, eventually.

Ms. Hadley was inordinately fond of the house, though. Blackjack doubted she would sell it, even if she was the only one living in it.

She would probably get a cat. Or two. That seemed like the sort of thing she would do. She was far too conscientious to get a dog and then leave it alone in the house for ten-plus hours a day.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Skye said aloud, snapping his line of thought almost instantly.

Glancing up and across the table, Blackjack shrugged. “Wondering if we have enough potatoes for six people.”

“I doubt that.”

“Then tell Mo to go buy more potatoes.”

“I mean, I doubt that's what you're thinking.”

“It *did* occur to me. A while ago.”

She scoffed, but fell silent for a few minutes. Eventually, she said, “Are you sure I can't stay here?”

“Not sure why you'd want to, to be honest. Ms. Hadley's hardly home, and Mo and I are driving

back on Sunday—”

“I’m perfectly comfortable in empty houses,” she countered. “*You* are the one no one trusts alone.”

He snorted. “They’re paranoid. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Neither am I.”

“Even if you *did* stay here, I’m not sleeping on a couch forever.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“I’m just saying—”

Skye shook her head—but didn’t get a chance to reply, interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

“And there’s my cue to disappear,” Blackjack muttered. Already, he could hear Mo’s footsteps crossing the creaky old floor, and before Cat and Lacey had a chance to invade, Blackjack reached down for his crutches.

His sister made no attempt to stop him.

He managed to reach the back of the house without attracting any notice, and slipped out the back door under cover of the noise from the front door. Blackjack had no complaints about their presence—especially when it had been *his* idea to invite them—but right then, nothing sounded better than being totally alone in the backyard, as modest as it was.

Most important: the kitchen did not have a view of the backyard. Side of the yard, yes, but he had no plans to go anywhere near the steep ravine that marked the edge of the property. It wasn’t that bad, really—a steep drop of about twenty feet, sure, but also lined with trees. At worst, he’d catch a tree halfway down—though falling like that also sounded like a grand way to re-injure his barely-healed ribs. No doubt there was poison ivy lining the edge of the ravine, too.

No, he’d be staying well away from the ravine. For today, at least.

Instead, Blackjack slowly made his way across the uneven grass to the ancient swingset at the

far end of the yard. It was old, but sturdy—a relic of a childhood Mo rarely mentioned. More importantly, the swings had long ago been replaced with a swinging bench. When the weather was good—and sometimes even when it wasn't—the bench had often been his hiding place of choice.

More so in the first couple of years than after, of course. He wasn't so insane as to go anywhere near Mo's father when he was drunk. Or angry. Or whatever the reason was on any given day.

He sat alone in the quiet for a while. The weather was oddly mild for November, and though the skies promised rain, Blackjack realized he wasn't bothered by the thought.

The idea of trying to find a middle ground with a sister who seemed to avoid common ground at all costs was far worse.

So much for that first, naïve thought that they would simply step back into the easy friendship they'd shared as children.

He should have known better.

The past was past. You can't get it back.

The best you would ever get was the future.

What kind of future was waiting?

One where he and his sister stayed in touch, or one where they parted ways for good this time?

. . . and now I'm starving. Great.

-

He guessed dinner was probably close to ready when someone finally came looking for him. He hadn't been watching the time on his phone—but it also hadn't rained, so it was possible not much time had passed. It didn't matter, really.

Not when it was so obviously Skye making her way across the grass. There was no mistaking his sister. Not anymore, now that he'd been given an opportunity to meet her again.

She made it most of the way towards the swingset before she stopped several yards away. Far

enough to put a deliberate distance between them, not so far she wouldn't be able to hear him.

She hesitated.

He didn't speak first.

"Food's almost ready," she offered.

A shrug. "Thanks."

This earned him a frustrated look, as if he'd been expected to understand what she wasn't saying.

That wasn't fair. He understood most of the seemingly-irrelevant comments she made—if only because many of them were *old* references to things they had once shared in common—but if there was supposed to be a secondary meaning to "the food is ready," he had no idea what it was.

After a few seconds, she tried again. "Ms. Hadley invited me to stay."

"And?"

"Am I allowed to?"

"Sure. Not my house."

Skye sighed, anxiously shifting from side to side. "But you're not okay with it."

"Not really, no."

"My fault?"

It was his turn to pause. It was, but it wasn't.

"I think it's both our faults," he admitted. "Fact is..."

"It's complicated."

"Yeah. That."

"Still..."

"I'll give it a try if you will." It wasn't going to be easy, but...

Well, she got along fine with Mo, and Lacey liked her well enough. It was as good a start as

any.

"The thing you have to understand," he added, carefully picking his words for a change, "is that I'm *choosing* to let you back into my life. I'm not doing this because I think I have to. Nothing like that. Despite myself, I'm willing to try to let you in. But you have to meet me halfway, this time."

A ghost of a smile flickered across her face and she shook her head. "It's not that easy, you know. Words are fine and well, but—"

"Nothing's easy," he countered, without heat. "What, you think it's easy sleeping on a couch 'cause I can't get up the stairs?"

This time, she actually laughed—a quiet, hesitant thing, but genuine all the same.

"Nah, it's not going to be easy. But I'll try if you will."

"I'm not making any promises," she warned.

"And I wouldn't expect you to."

"But I'll give it a shot. I mean, at the moment *I'm* the capable one, so—"

He snickered and replied, "You can barely make toast without explicit directions in front of you."

"Yeah, but I make damn good cinnamon toast."

"I *guess*," he replied, with feigned reluctance and a grin. "Come on, help me up. You're making me hungry."

Notes

1. These groups can be found at the following URLs online: diversityinya.com, diversebooks.org, disabilityinkidlit.com, richincolor.com, gayya.com
2. Criticism about the casting of the movies is fairly widespread: see, for instance a 2012 opinion piece re-published by the Huffington Post, “‘Hunger Games’ Casting: Why Jennifer Lawrence Shouldn’t Play Katniss.” It’s also interesting to note that, while *both* Katniss and Gale are described as black-haired and olive-skinned, most of the criticism is aimed at the casting of Lawrence. Much of the discussion about the films’ erasure of disability in the novels appears to start with a post titled “So, How ABOUT Those Hunger Games?” on a blog called Tiger Beatdown.
3. This review is available on the Disability in Kidlit site, linked here: <http://disabilityinkidlit.com/2015/04/12/review-rules-by-cynthia-lord/>
4. The reading list is available here: <http://disabilityinkidlit.com/2013/08/01/recommended-reading-list/>
5. “Relapse and Rehospitalisation Rates in Patients with Schizophrenia: Effects of Second Generation Antipsychotics,” an article written by John Csernansky and Emily Schuchart and published by CNS Drugs in 2002, lists four studies that found that failure to adhere to a prescribed schedule of antipsychotics raise the likelihood of symptom relapse.

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