

BOY
Queen

G E O R G E L E S T E R

MACMILLAN

For Jordan <3



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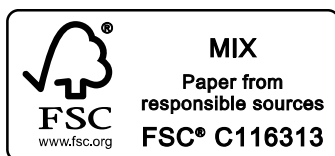
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ONE

The music is so loud I can feel it pulsing through the floor, the rhythm creeping up through my feet and running through my entire body.

‘Do you want me to go over it one more time, or have we got it now?’ Miss Emily calls out from by the sound system, not turning round as she pulls her mass of curly black hair into a ponytail. There is not a single soul in this room that will ask her to go over it again. We *j’adore* her, we *j’can’t* get enough of her, but we know when she just wants to crack on.

I’m sweating. The whole class is sweating. I look in the mirror, which also appears to be sweating, to see my light brown hair stuck to my forehead, my pasty, ghost-white face absolutely dripping. I look a sight. There are many girls (even some of the boys) in this class who manage to make it look more like a glow than anything else, but I am not the one. Priya, for example, is standing next to me in a sweat-soaked grey crop top and leggings, but the pop of highlighter on her cheeks hasn’t moved.

‘Robin, how far will we get before she turns it off and screams again?’ she says, untying and retying her hair.

‘First chorus,’ I say.

She snorts. ‘We won’t even get through the first verse.’

‘Give us some credit.’

‘Where do you know it to?’ she asks.

‘I know the whole thing,’ I reply.

She raises a perfectly drawn eyebrow.

‘End of the first chorus.’

‘Same.’ She laughs.

‘Front and back lines swap over!’ Miss Emily calls out as she starts the music again. We have about sixteen counts before this is going to turn into absolute carnage and while I see in the mirror that my mask of confidence has slipped to reveal the panic behind my eyes, Priya swaggers to the front and hits a pose so fierce I swear the room actually quakes from the sheer level of fabulous she exudes.

Priya is bigger than the other girls in our jazz class. They tried to give her shit about it once upon a time, but after they saw her dance it was all over. What could they say? She dances rings round every other person in the class, but is never cocky about it. She just lets the work speak and knows her damn worth. Every day I try to be a little more Priya. It definitely helped during auditions.

‘You coming, or are you chicken?’ Priya calls out, eyeballing me in the mirror.

I hurry to the front just as Miss Emily starts clapping and shouting, ‘Five, six, seven, eight!’

And we move.

It’s like I can see the music around me as I dance, drifting on the air, sparkly, metallic, glittering before my eyes with every step. The dynamic changes, and we all shift with the music, like it’s controlling us, or we’re controlling it, and it feels like nothing else. It’s the same rush I get when I sing, when I act, any time I’m performing. I’ll go from wanting to chew my own hand off rather than step out on to the stage, to getting my absolute life in a matter of seconds. Once you take that leap, the pay-off is sheer joy. It’s like flying, I swear.

That is until Emily shuts off the music.

‘Once more from the top!’

We all know that’s a damaging lie – it won’t be once more. We’re tired, we’re sweaty, but there isn’t a single face in that room that doesn’t have a smile so wide painted across it you’d think it would split in two.

‘What did I say?’ Priya says as we leave the dance studio half an hour later, our faces glistening, the cooler air of the corridor a welcome alternative to the humidity of the studio.

Even Priya looks to have got a proper sweat on tonight, so she might be human, after all. Thank goodness for that.

‘You were right, you were right,’ I reply.

‘And you didn’t know it to the end of the first chorus—’

‘I knew it when there were people in front of me doing it,’ I interrupt.

‘The ultimate test,’ she says. ‘So long as you didn’t do that at your LAPA callback, you’ll be fine.’ She looks at me expectantly, like I’ve been keeping news from her.

‘I’ve not heard,’ I say. ‘Believe me, if I’d heard, I’d be in here screaming my tits off about it.’

‘You’re going to be fine,’ she says again. ‘Dan and Tyler don’t have a patch on you.’

‘But I’m not just up against them, am I?’ I say. ‘It’s everybody else in the country that—’

‘We’re not doing this again,’ Priya says. ‘Let me shorthand it for you. You’ll go into a tailspin about not getting in, I’ll remind you how good you are and that there is only one Robin Cooper in the freaking world and you just so happen to be a-ma-zing.’

I can’t stop the smile spreading across my face. September is so full of possibilities that I can hardly stand it, but until I get a yes (or a no) from LAPA (London Academy of Performing Arts) there’s no way of knowing what my future holds, and it has a tendency to drive me completely

insane. Priya knows that, so Priya knows just what to say.

‘Remind me why you didn’t audition again?’

‘Because this is fun for me,’ she says with a shrug. ‘It’s a hobby – I just so happen to be good at it. If I try to monetize my recreation, it might become less fun, and I don’t want to risk losing it.’

‘It never has for me.’

‘Which, my love, is why you’re going to be a star and I’m going to ride your coat-tails all the way to the top so I can get an actor husband and undermine him by being way more successful.’

‘A much nobler dream.’

‘Can’t have these theatrical types getting too big for their boots,’ she says with a wink. She pulls her phone out of her bra and her eyes widen a touch as she looks. ‘Mum’s outside – see you next week?’

‘Sure.’

‘And if you hear *anything*, you’d better—’

‘I’ll message you,’ I say. She pulls me into a hug before she vanishes out of the door and into the night. The breeze is so welcome on my skin I can’t help but let out a sigh. The more I think about the possibility of drama school, the more I feel like I am losing my mind. It’s all I’ve wanted for as long as I can remember, so the fact that I am within touching distance is almost too much to bear.

‘Watch your back, daydreamer.’ Miss Emily appears at the studio door, dragging a ballet barre behind her. ‘Get the other end of this, would you?’

I drop my water bottle and rush to help. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Studio Three,’ she says.

We shuffle through the lilac corridor to the smallest of the four studios that make up Fox’s Theatre School, putting the barre next to the mirrors.

‘So, how was the callback?’ Miss Emily has fixed her stare on me, that stare she uses when she’s asked you the definition of a *coupé* and all your ballet terminology has left your brain.

‘Was the ballet barre a ploy to get me here to talk about it?’

She leans on the barre and a smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. ‘I didn’t think you’d want me calling you out in front of the whole class. Though if you’d rather, some of them are still in there—’

‘No, no, no, point taken,’ I say. ‘It was fine.’

‘Fine?’

‘Good!’

‘Good or fine? They’re two different things, Robin. I’m going to need a little more.’ She laughs.

‘They asked me to change my song for the callback,

which I did,' I say. 'Went for something a little less done. And the dancing was . . . hard.'

'But you managed it?'

'Every time,' I say. 'They saw it three or four times and I think I got it.' And it almost hurts me to say it out loud because it feels too much like tempting fate, but I say it anyway. 'I couldn't have done anything else. Like, I gave it everything I had. I took on the notes I was given in the first round and . . . I don't know . . .'

'Have you heard?'

I scoff. 'No, not yet,' I say. 'They said it will be within a week so naturally the last few days have felt like eighty-four years.'

'You'll be fine,' she says. 'You can stop worrying.'

'I can't stop worrying,' I say. 'It's too important.' It sounds dramatic, but that is how it feels. I have a lot riding on LAPA. My auditions at The Arts Centre and Hillview were fine, but not perfect. At The Arts Centre, I psyched myself out in the singing round. I didn't connect; I didn't put the songs across in the way I knew I could. Didn't get a callback. At Hillview, the dance was so freaking hard that I couldn't get it into my exhausted brain. Rejection. But LAPA was different. It couldn't have gone better. The dance was hard, but I got it. The singing round was tough, but I got through that too and they gave me notes. To even get a callback makes me feel like

it's going to be the one. This is what I'm meant to be doing come September – I know it is. Anything else just wouldn't feel right. It just *has* to work out.

'Well, you did a great job tonight,' Miss Emily says, ushering me out of the studio. 'How did you find it?'

'As soon as I was at the front, it left my head.'

'Which is why I moved you to the front,' she teases, a smile creeping across her face. 'I'm not about to let you off easy, hiding at the back because you're tall.'

'I want everyone else to be able to see!'

'You want everyone else to learn the combination, to your detriment,' she groans. 'You need to be seen. Take up some room for once, Robin. Especially when you're at LAPA in September.'

We've made our way back to outside the changing rooms. The rest of my class have vanished, replaced by the adults taking Miss Emily's next torture session. It's a totally different vibe.

'Miss Emily, what if—'

'Uh-uh – no, we're not doing that again,' she says, holding up a hand. 'If you go down this road, you're going to make yourself more anxious . . . and I've got a class to teach.' She winks at me and calls for her students to follow her into Studio 2 while I slip into the boys' changing room.

I quickly get changed out of my shorts, vest and jock into

clean clothes and pull on my jacket before hurrying out of the building to my bike.

I've barely switched my phone back on when it rings. I jump and nearly drop it.

'Hello?'

'She lives! SHE LIVES!' Natalie crows down the phone. 'Honestly, babes, I've been trying to get hold of you for the last half an hour. I need your notes from English today – Mrs Finch wouldn't stop going on and I missed most of the class. I thought dancing finished at eight?'

Natalie is a British Grenadian pocket rocket who I have known for most of my life. Her mum's an English teacher, hence the essay panic, and her dad's a lawyer, so her aspirations are as sky-high as my own, but with added parental pressure for good measure. She was also the first person I told I was gay and her reaction was to hug me and tell me, 'When you wanted to do an Angela Lansbury marathon for your thirteenth birthday, I kinda knew.' So she's kind of the best.

'It did, but I was chatting to Priya and then to Miss Emily and then—'

'Honey,' she interrupts, 'I'm going to stop you right there, because all I'm hearing is excuses and what I want is your dulcet tones in my ear and your English notes in my inbox. Are you home yet?'

‘No.’

‘You’re *still* at dancing? Why are you never around when I need you?’

‘I’d be home a lot quicker if my hands weren’t tied up with this phone call,’ I reply. ‘Hang on.’ I plug in my headphones and unlock my bike. It’s only as I push down on the pedals that I realize just how much my legs are burning. Miss Emily really went in on us tonight, that much is clear. ‘OK, you can keep talking.’

‘Oh, don’t let me interrupt your ride home,’ she says.

‘But you want to.’

‘I *totally* want to,’ she says, and I can hear her shuffling about on her bed. ‘So you’ll send me your notes?’

‘They’re probably not nearly as detailed as you would have done, but at this stage I’m pretty sure you know more about *Hamlet* than Shakespeare did, so . . .’

‘Thank you,’ Natalie says. ‘Honestly, applying for university is so stressful.’

‘Really?’

‘Pressure from all sides, Robin,’ she says. ‘Parents in one ear, Mrs Finch in the other, my law teacher chiming in—’

‘How many ears do you have?’

‘Missing the point!’ she exclaims. ‘At least the applications are done now. I’ve made my choices and everyone can stop asking me.’ There is noise in the background.

‘What are you watching?’

‘*Drag Race.*’

‘Season?’

‘Six, duh, best one.’

‘Tea,’ I say. ‘Although arguably Season Four is . . . Wait, I thought you were working?’

She groans. ‘Girl, I need your notes!’

‘Sorry, I’ll send them when I get in, I swear.’

‘Good,’ she says. ‘So, have you heard from lover boy?’

‘Christ, that’s a subject change. Where did that come from?’

‘Your *secret boyfriend*,’ she stage whispers.

‘Nat!’

‘Wait, come on, I had one more,’ she begs.

I sigh. ‘Fine.’

‘You’re jacked up, jocked up—’

‘You can just call him Connor, you know,’ I say, though even I can’t help shifting my gaze around as if someone might be listening. Connor is a complicated thing in my life. We go to the same school and have known *of* each other for years, but never hung out. Then we wound up chatting in detention late one night last term and one thing led to another and now we’re sneaking around and seeing each other whenever we can. Natalie even changed his name to SB (Secret Boyfriend) in my phone, partly to protect his

identity, partly so she could make jokes.

‘Oh please, you know how obsessed with you my mum is – if she hears me talking about him she’ll want to know all about it, and this is meant to be a sexy secret,’ she says. ‘So, what’s new with him?’

‘Nothing since the weekend,’ I say. ‘But I don’t know if he’s messaged because I’m on the phone to you.’

‘You trying to get rid of me?’ she says.

‘I don’t think you’d let me even if I wanted to,’ I say. Natalie is my best friend in the whole entire universe and we tell each other basically everything. We plan on living together from September when I’m at LAPA and she’s off being a fancy-pants lawyer-in-training. ‘But he seemed fine at school today. A bit distant, but that’s sort of the game.’

‘Not my kind of game, babes,’ she says.

‘And what *is* your kind of game?’

‘Ignoring advances from all genders until I’m all lawyerly and stunning,’ she says. ‘Though, knowing my luck, the second I decide I can take my eye off the ball, everybody will be taking their eyes off me. That’s the thing, isn’t it? They want you when they can’t have you and as soon as you’re available, *poof*, away they go.’

‘What did you call me?’

‘Oh, she’s a funny girl now!’ Natalie snarks. ‘Greg

wanted me to tell you that he missed you today.’

‘What?’

‘He was being all studious and good over lunch so didn’t see you in the common room, and when we were walking home I was telling him we had birthday chats and he was sad he missed out.’

‘Natalie—’

‘You have to do something for your birthday, Robin. I swear, if you try and go to a dance class—’

‘We’ll do something – I told you at lunch. I just don’t know what.’

‘Well, we’re going out on Friday whether you like it or not and, frankly, I need an excuse to let my hair down now that the uni application madness is over,’ she says. ‘You, my love, are my excuse. Congratulations.’

‘What privilege!’

‘You’re welcome,’ she says. ‘Anyway, Greg missed out and felt bad.’

‘And you made him feel worse?’

‘I may or may not have rubbed it in,’ she says, and I can hear her grinning from ear to ear. She knows she can get away with it with Greg. They have a lot of history. They used to be together but then realized they were better as friends. Now it means she rips into him at any given opportunity and he sort of rolls over and takes it . . . most of the time.

But Greg is sweet. He's our token straight white boy. Every group needs one. He's ours. And he's better than yours, trust and believe.

'I'll give him a hug tomorrow morning,' I say.

'Bless the hetties, so simple,' Natalie says. 'Anything else to report?'

And I know what she's getting at.

'I've not been home yet, so I don't know,' I say. 'But Mum would have messaged if something had shown up while I was at school.' I sigh. 'The waiting game continues.'

'Wait all you like, hun, but this time in nine months we'll be exhausted and praying for death to release us from our workloads in London, *instead* of Essex, in our very own freaking flat and it's going to be blissful,' she says. 'OK, I'm ditching now – you should focus on riding your bike. I don't want to be the cause of death of a future superstar.'

'Why? Who am I crashing into?'

'Oh, the comedy, oh, my sides,' she deadpans. 'Love you, queen, see you tomorrow.'

'See you tomorrow.'

I hang up the phone and keep riding, ignoring the buzzing in my pocket that could be Connor trying to reach me. My heart thrills at the thought.

I ride the old country lanes into my town, the same route I've taken for six years, until I spot our little house

on the corner. The unkempt front garden that Mum says she'll fix every summer is overgrowing on to the path, the ivy-covered fence that runs along the side of the pavement starting to look more like a barrier than a border.

The house is pitch dark. Mum's car isn't parked out the front, so she must be working later than she thought. I ride my bike to the gate and wheel it into the garden, leaning it against the fence before heading in through the back door.

'Mum?' Nothing comes back, not even an echo. The house isn't big enough for an echo.

The light on the answering machine is flashing, so I press the button to listen as I kick off my shoes and rummage through the post on the table. Still nothing.

'ROBIN!' It's Natalie's voice and I look up. Why the hell is she leaving me a message? 'You might wonder why I'm leaving you a message on a freaking answering machine like it's the middle ages. Reason one, you actually have one, which makes me question your mum's usually impeccable taste.'

Truth be told, Mum bought it as a gag because her mum used to have one and she always liked the idea of people leaving messages. The reality of the situation was that not many people did. Natalie certainly didn't. Ever.

'Reason two, you never bloody text back. Turn your phone on! I need your notes. P.S.: feel free to ignore this if I actually managed to reach you. No doubt you will have

about seven thousand frantic messages from me when you take your phone off I-Have-Dance-Class-So-I'm-Dead-To-The-World mode. SEND ME YOUR DAMN NOTES! See you tomorrow.'

I love her in all of her weirdness. The machine beeps and moves onto the next message.

'My angel-faced boy.' Mum's voice comes through the machine. This can't be good. 'It's eight thirty here and I'm nowhere close to being done. They offered me the overtime and I took it. I could use the extra hours anyway. Don't wait up. I love you lots. There are leftovers from last night in the fridge. If you're still up when I get in, I'll be annoyed. Go to bed. Hope you had a good class. Text me so I know you've got home safe. Please. Do it now so you don't forget. I'll see you in the morning. Bright and early!'

I grab my phone and swipe past the slew of notifications, most of which are from Connor, so I can quickly text Mum. This happens a lot. There are days that go by where I just won't see her because she's working and I'm at a class and all we'll have are texts and answering-machine messages. But it's been like that for so long I don't know any different.

I don't really feel all that hungry, so I skip the leftovers and am about to get ready for bed when I notice the post by the front door. As I pick it up, I see, nestled amongst a stack of leaflets, a giant white envelope.

Shit.

It must have come after Mum left for work.

And it's the big envelope. Everyone says the big envelope means good news – holy shit, *holy absolute shit*.

I take a breath and open the seal, trying not to cause damage, trying not to wreck whatever is inside, and, holding my breath, I pull it out.

My heart sinks.

School report.

Winter term school report.

'Absolutely NOT!' I say to the dark, putting it back in the envelope and on the dining table.

I grab a Post-it from the little table where Mum keeps the phone.

School report is here. I'll see you in the morning for the debrief. Hope work wasn't too hellish. Leftovers are still in the fridge. Xx

I chuck my dance gear in the washing machine then bound upstairs and throw myself on to my bed. I turn on my bedside lamp, the orange glow lighting up my little room and illuminating the clothes strewn over the floor, the papers on my desk, the unopened textbooks and, most importantly, my phone.

I do my duty as a good friend and send my notes to Natalie, then flick through my apps to read the messages from Connor, the goofiest smile spreading across my face as

I scroll. It's the kind of smile that Natalie teases me about, but she's happy I'm happy, and there's something about Connor that makes everything a little bit brighter, like when Dorothy steps into Oz for the first time.

Are you about tonight? x

Shit. Forgot you had dancing, never mind.

I missed you. The weekend was fun, we should do that again. I'll find out when my parents are next away, and you can come over.

If you want to.

I mean, of course I want to. If he asked me to come over now, I'd be there like a shot. Christ, he has such a hold on me.

I guess I'll see you tomorrow.

The next thing I see is a picture of him with his shirt off in front of the mirror in his bedroom. The lighting is great, his body is perfection, from his broad shoulders to his big chest that is so damn good for cuddling – I honestly can't cope with it. He's pouting a little, midway through running a hand across his dark, close-

cropped hair. Stupidly handsome boy.

Are you still up?

I wait a few seconds for those magical three dots that make my heart skip in my chest, but they don't come. So I start to scroll back, through weeks upon weeks of messages, from one-word answers that were enough to give me heart palpitations to paragraphs that I could probably quote word for word at this point.

It's not lost on me how sad it is to do this. But I spend so much time struggling to believe that it's real that if I didn't have these I'd swear I was imagining the whole thing. But I'm not. It's real and I can see it because it's right here in my hands.

I know he deletes the messages afterwards. He's protecting himself in a way that I don't really have to. Natalie and Greg know all about it. Mum doesn't know I have a boyfriend, if I can even call it that, but I don't think she'd mind all that much. I told her three years ago that I like boys and it might be nice to get specific. But if Mum knows she'll want to meet him and . . . she can't meet him.

I try not to overthink it. No matter how much I care about Connor and no matter how much he cares about me (or seems to, I mean, I have the receipts), September is

going to change everything. And it's exciting and new, but we've not even talked about what will happen next. I'm just trying to enjoy the moments we have, because each one is a little touch of sparkle in my life.

By the time I've scrolled to the top of our message chain, the first 'Hey' that I can hear in his gruff voice, it's way past midnight and my body is crying out for me to lie down and let the world slip away.

So I do.