

HOLD
MY
HAND



Michael Barakiva

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark
First edition, 2019

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiercereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barakiva, Michael, author.

Title: Hold my hand / Michael Barakiva.

Description: First edition. | New York : Farrar Straus Giroux, 2019. | Sequel to: One man guy. | Summary: As his relationship with boyfriend Ethan is tested, high school sophomore Alek takes a stand to make his orthodox Armernian church more progressive.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019007464 | ISBN 9780374304867 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Gays—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. | Love—Fiction. | Armenian Church—Fiction. | Armenian Americans—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.B229538 Ho 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019007464>

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To my exes:

Gail

Kim

Linsay

Ricky

Raymond

And, of course, Rafa

1

KISSING ETHAN.

Kissing Ethan rocked.

Kissing Ethan was like taking a rocket to outer space, floating in zero gravity, and marveling at the incomprehensible beauty of the creations of the universe. Kissing Ethan was sweet like the last piece of baklava, drenched in honey, snatched from the bottom of the box. Kissing Ethan was the answer to an unasked prayer.

And then there was being kissed by Ethan.

Being kissed by Ethan was not the same as kissing him.

Being kissed by Ethan was rapture, surrender. Being kissed was surfing a wave of joy, unpredictable and uncontrollable, that could break any moment and send you tumbling, an endless series of surprises.

Being kissed by Ethan was endorphins kicking in two hours into a tennis match, transforming pain into euphoria. It was

being a ship in a violent storm, hoping you wouldn't be torn apart as the ocean churned beneath you. It was feeling like your skin, your very body, would explode because it couldn't possibly contain all the joy pulsing through it.

Alek brought Ethan's face back up to his own. He kissed Ethan back.

Kissing Ethan was safer than being kissed by him.

"Whoa." Alek pulled away, gasping for air, as if he'd just edged out a victory in the tiebreaker of a five-set tennis match, full of baseline strokes, cross-court slams, and net game saves.

"Come on," Ethan purred. "We're just getting started."

Hundreds of half-naked men stared at Alek from the images Ethan had plastered around his room, cut from magazine ads—a kaleidoscopic homage to homoeroticism. The effect was dizzying as wall and ceiling and floor merged, seemingly seamlessly, with sculpted torsos and abs and chests and calves.

"I promised my mom I'd help get ready for Thanksgiving." Alek retrieved his bright purple shirt with plaid-gray details from the chair by Ethan's desk, the only pieces of furniture in the room other than the bed, where Ethan remained.

"I hate to point out the obvious, but Thanksgiving isn't for another week." Ethan rolled over. "Or is this some weird Armenian thing, like Christmas, that you celebrate at a different time than everyone else in the whole freakin' world?"

"We Armenians celebrate Thanksgiving just like everyone else in this country, thank you very much. Although, did you know that Canadian Thanksgiving is celebrated on the second Monday in October?"

"No, I did not know that." Ethan sat up, surrendering to

Alek's departure. "You're going to your grandma's for Thanksgiving, right?"

"That was the plan." Alek finished the last buttons on his shirt and grabbed his leather book bag, groaning under its nearing-midterms weight. "But then Nana twisted her ankle, so she decided she wasn't up to hosting Thanksgiving. I will try to spare you the political saga that ensued as my dad and his two siblings negotiated who would assume the mantle, but suffice to say it involved three instances of blackmail, two of coercion, the reemergence of a fight from twenty years ago when my dad and his older sister were in college that had something to do with a cat, tears, apologies, more tears, and a complicated negotiation involving a credenza that both my dad and his younger brother would like once Nana finally passes to the next world. We're talking backroom deals that would almost put 45's presidential administration to shame."

"And this is sparing me the saga?"

Alek nodded. "The long and short of it is that we will be hosting Thanksgiving this year, so yes—seven days is barely enough time to prepare. My mom took the week off from the UN. THE ENTIRE WEEK. Because she knows that hosting her in-laws is a prime opportunity for Nana to judge my mom's cooking, housekeeping, and child-rearing. In fact, one of the Sunday-morning news shows theorized that Nana intentionally twisted her ankle just to have the opportunity to criticize whoever was fool enough to step up."

Ethan rolled over on his back, defeated. "Are all Armenian families this complicated?"

"From what I hear at church, we're on the simpler side. My

mom has six siblings who all live in the same town in Southern Cali. I'm amazed they haven't had a *Romeo and Juliet*-style feud spring up there." Alek finished tying his shoes. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

"'Wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?'" Ethan asked, eyes batting innocence from the bed.

"'What satisfaction canst thou expect?'" Alek flirted back. "See, I can quote R and J, too, but I'm still outta here."

Ethan hopped out of bed and threw on a plaid flannel that hung open on his wiry frame. He kissed his boyfriend goodbye. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

As Alek pedaled his way home, he tried to imagine what his life would be like if he hadn't met Ethan last summer. They had lived in the same township for the entirety of their lives, but Ethan was a badass skater boy who hung out with other badass skater boys, and Alek was a geek/nerd combo with honor roll aspirations. They hadn't met until they found themselves in summer school last June: Ethan because he'd failed Standard Geometry as a junior, and Alek to raise his C in Freshman Algebra to an honors grade.

Alek jumped the curb, landing lightly, his body hovering in midair, before lowering back down on the frame of his bike. Soon, it would be too cold to ride and he'd exile his bike to the shed until spring rolled around to liberate it. He adjusted the secondhand leather backpack that Ethan had found for him during one of their clandestine trips into NYC, early in their relationship.

It was easy to imagine what life would be like without the external stuff that had come from Ethan, like the backpack

and the haircut and the clothes infinitely hipper than the suburban fare to which his mother had restricted him. He wouldn't have any of those things if Ethan hadn't strutted into his life. But those weren't important.

It was the emotional stuff that had wrapped itself around his very being, like ivy around a building, that was impossible to untangle from his imagination. For one thing, he probably wouldn't have come out if not for the super-chill pixie skater boy who made his insides yearn every time they were within arm's reach. And if Ethan hadn't taken Alek into New York City, Alek would've never discovered the one place where he truly felt himself, unlike the suburbs where he'd spent all 14 and 11/12 years of his life. It wasn't that Ethan had changed Alek: rather, he'd helped Alek discover who he was. The alternate-universe Alek who'd never cut summer school to go with Ethan into New York on that first fateful trip would have no way of knowing how unrealized he was. But luckily, Alek wasn't that Alek anymore.

He pulled up to his house, depositing his hybrid bike in front of the three stairs leading to the front door. The sun was setting earlier and earlier now, and within a week or two, it would be dark even at five o'clock. Normally, his mom would still be at the United Nations, having rejoined the workforce last year, deeming her teenage sons old enough to grow up without her full attention. She usually caught the 5:37 p.m. train that would have her walking through the Khederian front door approximately one hour later. But her red Toyota was docked in the garage today, as it would be for most of the following seven days leading up to Thanksgiving. Alek didn't bother locking

his bike up, just as his family didn't bother locking the front door to their house. South Windsor, New Jersey, might've only been fifty miles from New York City, but it may as well have been another universe.

Even from outside, Alek could smell the odors of deliciousness wafting from the kitchen. Although his dad had assumed most of the domestic responsibilities since he got laid off last year, when it came to the major cooking events, he served as sous chef to his wife.

Alek made his way through his parents' old-world living room: doilies hand-knit by both grandmothers adorned Queen Anne-legged furniture, proudly standing on authentic Persian rugs, with coasters aplenty to protect every surface from possible water stains. He dropped his leather backpack on the banister leading upstairs, took a deep breath, and braved the kitchen.

"There you are, Alek." His dad was furiously scrubbing the black onyx kitchen counters they'd installed a few years ago. Every detail in the kitchen renovation, from counter material and color to cabinet hardware, had been selected with more agony and care than most parents spend on selecting their children's names. The entire room sparkled.

His mother was taping recipes to the cupboards along with the master schedule for the next week, which she had created as a three-page Excel document with color-coded timetables. She applied the final piece of tape and appraised the room with a combination of determination and satisfaction. "Let's get to work."

* * *

The next seven days were a blur of cooking, interrupted by school, homework, and explaining to Ethan why Alek was too busy to see him. The battalion of Armenians who would descend on the house to celebrate the most American of holidays included Nana (paternal grandmother) and both of his dad's siblings: (older) Aunt Elen and (younger) Uncle Samvel. Elen's husband, Hayk, was coming, of course, with their children Mariam, Ani, and Tigran. Uncle Samvel was on his second wife, who (luckily) was even more Armenian than his first, and he was bringing the kids from his first marriage (Nare and Milena), along with her kids from her first two marriages (Davit, Anahit, Erik, and Mary). It would be, in other words, a full house.

No room in the house was safe from the whirlwind of activity. In the dining room, the table was extended to accommodate both leaves, the good china was removed from its boxes, and the silverware still needing polishing was laid out like soldiers awaiting marching orders. In the bathroom, every surface had been sterilized. The furniture in the living room underwent deep cleaning, which felt perhaps like overkill to Alek since it was kept enshrined in plastic when it wasn't in use (on average, 361 days of the year). But this was the first time the Khederians would be hosting this holiday, and his mother wasn't taking any chances.

Charts, schedules, and recipes were added over the next few days, taped to every available cabinet, transforming the perfectly coordinated, granite-countered, oak-cabinet-lined kitchen into the headquarters of a complex military campaign.

And then there was the cooking, which resumed the moment

Alek and his older brother Nik returned home from school and went late into the night. Even with the entire week of preparation, however, not a single dish was ready to be served an hour before the guests were scheduled to arrive.

Which was why Alek was so perplexed when his mother took a break from cooking and started making calls from her landline, hanging up a moment later.

“What’s she doing?” Alek asked Nik.

“Have you ever wondered why we get prank-called every time we have to go to a family function?” Nik was showing no signs of halting his growth spurt. The effect, in Alek’s humble opinion, was that Nik resembled a wannabe hipster beanpole, all legs and arms and trying-too-hard accessories, like the chunky glasses he was sporting today.

“Now that you mention it, it does seem weird.” Alek removed the soaking carrots from the bowl in the sink and began peeling them. “And they always just hang up the second we answer.”

“This is the time-honored tradition of our family: call the homes of your guests, and if they pick up, you know they haven’t left yet.”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to text?” Alek asked.

“These Armenians . . .” Nik trailed off.

“These Armenians indeed,” Alek agreed.

When Alek’s mother finished her phone reconnaissance, she gathered her family and addressed them like a general might her platoon. “I have good news, everyone! I’m estimating that our first guests won’t arrive for at least two hours, maybe even three, which gives us just enough time to get everything done.

I've already removed the turkey from the malt/beer brine and put it in the oven to roast, but we'll need to flip it in ninety minutes. The apples for the dressing are peeled but still need to be cored. The sweet potatoes have been boiled but not peeled. The chestnuts have been roasted and peeled but not chopped, and the cranberries have been soaked but not boiled." Alek's mom paced back and forth in the kitchen as she recited the litany of work remaining. "Nik, have you trimmed the Brussels sprouts and chopped the parsley?"

"Yup." Alek's older brother, like all the members of the family, wore a crisp, clean apron whose daily stains had disappeared into the washing machine every night for the last week. "But I still haven't peeled the pearl onions because Dad said he was going to show me a trick."

"Cut a small 'X' on the root side with a paring knife, then drop them into boiling water for thirty seconds. They'll pop right out." Alek's father chopped the winter-squash varieties as he talked, never taking his eyes off the task at hand.

"Got it, Dad."

"We could just use frozen pearl onions, you know." Alek was only being half serious. The other half wanted to see how his mom would respond.

She didn't disappoint, inhaling sharply and clutching her imaginary pearls. "You know that there is only one vegetable we use frozen."

"Peas," Alek and Nik intoned in unison.

"And why is that?"

"Because frozen peas actually taste better than fresh peas."

“Only when fresh peas are out of season,” Mrs. Khederian amended. Then, to make sure that aliens hadn’t abducted her children and replaced them with changelings, she asked, “And when are peas in season?”

“Spring,” her sons replied in unison.

Satisfied that Alek and Nik were her own flesh and blood, Mrs. Khederian continued. “Now, Alek, have you finished the mushrooms for the gravy?”

A heap of soiled paper towels smeared with dirt from the mushrooms Alek had wiped clean surrounded the pile of quarter-inch-sliced creminis on his cutting board. “I still think it would be easier to rinse them out.”

“The water content in mushrooms is already high, which is why they take so long to cook down. It makes rinsing them simply impractical.” Alek’s mom relished the opportunity to educate her sons on anything, and especially on all items culinary. “Okay—Nik, I’m going to have you peel the sweet potatoes for the gratin, and the parsnips and carrots that I’m going to throw in with the turkey. Alek, you’re going to get started on the kale, then I’ll need you to stir the farro as it cooks.” Mrs. Khederian issued the orders with the effortless confidence of a master. “And all we need to do for the pies is whip the cream. Although I do wish we had made another one yesterday.” Mrs. Khederian wrung her hands, tormented by the most frightening of all Armenian bugbears: running out of food. “Are we sure that six pies are enough? We could still bake one more before the guests arrive. Two, actually, if we put them in together and increase the cooking temperature, of course. We could even use the convection setting!”

“Six is plenty, mom,” Alek reassured his mother. “That’s forty-eight slices.”

“Watch out, PSATs,” Nik mumbled just loud enough for Alek to hear.

“I’m just saying, we’re expecting fourteen people, right?” Alek continued, ignoring his older brother. “Plus the four of us—that means everyone could have two slices and we’d still have a pie and a half leftover.”

“Yes, but what if all your cousins decide they want a second slice of the chocolate pecan and all we have left is pumpkin?” This doomsday scenario tipped Alek’s mom over the edge. “Boghos, would you roll out another two crusts, just to be safe?”

Alek’s father nodded wordlessly. He rose from behind his pile of now-peeled winter squash and fished out two fists of dough from the fridge, replacing them with two from the cache in the freezer. Alek was impressed that he’d been able to find them so quickly. Between the terror of running out of food and the refusal to throw out anything even possibly edible, Armenians’ relationships with their freezers was the stuff of which reality TV hoarder shows were made. Alek theorized that since the genocide over a hundred years ago, all Armenians were programmed to have enough food on hand at any given moment to survive six months of unexpected calamity.

For another family, the seven classic Thanksgiving dishes (three-day-brined roast turkey with root vegetables, corn bread dressing, mashed sweet potato gratin, Brussels sprouts with pearl onions and chestnuts, cranberry relish, braised kale with sautéed bacon, maple-roasted squash) and eight pies (four chocolate pecan, two pumpkin, two apple) might’ve sufficed.

But not for the Khederians, who believed that any holiday meal should be prepared as if twenty uninvited guests might show up unannounced. This must've happened plenty in ye olde times, Alek decided, since it had never happened once during his own life.

In addition, lest they be accused of assimilation, every traditional American dish needed to be matched with its Armenian counterpart. Alek removed the kale from the fridge, eyeing all the other dishes his family had prepared over the course of the last week.

"I don't think there are any accounts of the pilgrims and the Native Americans sharing a fifteen-pound turkey *and* two legs of lamb."

"Still, it's nice to have options," Alek's father answered happily, sprinkling flour on the counter. "Hand me the rolling pin?"

Alek dug it out from under the counter. It was a classic French tapered cylinder, not the rotating contraption with handles that his parents scoffed at "these Americans" for using.

"Sure, options are nice, but did we need to make six kinds of buregs? And stuff all those peppers *and* roll all those grape leaves *and* bake the kufteh?" Alek rinsed the kale, stripping the leaves from the stems.

"That reminds me . . ." Alek's father expertly rolled out the dough, picking it up and rotating it forty-five degrees after every stroke so it wouldn't stick to the counter. "Do you think you'll have time to make some hummus? I want to make sure that there's something to snack on when the guests arrive."

"Good thinking, Dad," Alek said. "With only three hors

d'oeuvres and four appetizers, our guests might die of hunger before the four entrees and eighteen side dishes hit the table.”

“I’m glad you agree!” Mr. Khederian was apparently deaf to sarcasm.

“I’ll do it, Dad.” Nik had just popped out the last flash-boiled, X-sliced pearl onion. He retrieved chickpeas and tahini from the pantry, then opened the latter and began the laborious process of stirring it with a long cocktail spoon to reincorporate the liquids and the solids.

Somehow, in a repeating miracle that Alek still couldn’t fathom regardless of how many times he’d witnessed it, every dish transformed from impossibly-far-from-done to perfectly garnished by the time the first guest rang the doorbell two-and-a-half hours later, at 3:30 on the dot.

“Tell them I’ll be down in a minute,” Alek’s mom yelled, untangling curlers from her hair as she disappeared upstairs.

2

FIVE HOURS AND TWICE AS MANY COURSES LATER, after serving the soup (Armenian lentil, of course), almost burning his fingers making sure the buregs were hot enough, toasting the marshmallows for the sweet potato casserole, watching his father and uncle fight about how to carve the leg of lamb and then repeat the fight exactly ten minutes later about the turkey, hoping his mother didn't notice the lumps in the gravy that resulted from his failure to whisk the thickening agent thoroughly enough, enduring his grandmother's criticism about the lack of dessert options, saying goodbye to his aunts, his uncles, five real cousins, four step-cousins, doing the dishes, putting away the silver, and packaging up the leftovers, Alek mustered the courage to ask to be excused.

"Ask your grandmother," his father responded.

Alek made his way to the living room, where his nana sat by herself, sipping cognac. “Nana, may I be excused?”

“Ask me in Armenian,” she instructed him.

“Gnerek, paytz bedke ganouch tsehem aysor?”

“Close enough, although I wonder what they’re teaching you in Saturday school if you don’t know how to conjugate a simple verb.” Nana crossed her legs and placed the cognac down on a coaster. “And where are you going this late on Thanksgiving?”

For a moment, Alek considered dodging the question, since he hadn’t actually come out to his grandmother yet. But instead, he took a breath, then another, and said as evenly as he could, “To my boyfriend’s.”

“And why didn’t you invite Ethan over? Isn’t it time I met him already?” his nana asked without missing a beat. “You guys have been together—what—almost six months?”

Alek regarded his grandmother anew. “And how do you know that, Nana?”

“You think I don’t have Instagram? How adorable the two of you are! I set it up so that I get a notice every time he posts. Like that one from Asbury Park last month, on the abandoned carousel?” Nana leaned and whispered conspiratorially. “I wish my other grandchildren were doing as well in this department. Thank goodness things didn’t work out between your brother, Nik, and that Nanar girl. And have you met Ani’s boyfriend? He looks like a gangster.” His grandmother continued to criticize every one of Alek’s cousins’ significant others, revealing a familiarity with social media and their personal lives that left Alek amazed.

But not as amazed as he was by how unconcerned she appeared to be about Alek having a boyfriend. It wasn't like he had any reason to believe that his grandmother was homophobic. At the same time, he didn't have any reason to believe that she wasn't, either. And perhaps, if she didn't have a grandson who came out by age fourteen, her thoughts on the issue would be different. But she did. And between that and a familiarity with Instagram that would put most people Alek's own age to shame, his grandmother had apparently joined the twenty-first century.

Finally, Alek was excused to go to Ethan's house. He flew out of the house, onto his bike, pedaling so quickly past piles of corn bread, pumpkin, and cranberry-colored leaves, that he almost missed the turnoff for Taylor Street. He took the turn sharp, the back wheel of the bike skidding behind him. The slight slope allowed him to coast on momentum until he arrived at Ethan's house. He knocked on the door, a formality he'd been told repeatedly that he could forgo, and let himself in.

"Hey, Mr. Novick," Alek called out from the foyer. He held out the bag of Tupperwares he'd carried over. "I brought you guys some leftovers."

"Thanks, Alek—how considerate of you." Mr. Novick took the bag from Alek and placed it on the side table next to the front door. Earlier, this kind of behavior would've caused Alek great anxiety. Mr. Novick was a professor at NYU—surely he understood that the leftovers would spoil unless refrigerated. Why wasn't he putting them in the fridge immediately? Who leaves a perfectly good container of food out at room temperature?

But now, more than five months into the relationship, Alek knew what to do. He plucked the bag from the side table and navigated his way through the piles of books, records, newspapers, and magazines that surrounded the Novick furniture, heading into the kitchen. “Did you guys have a nice Thanksgiving?” he called over his shoulder, opening the sparsely populated fridge. He placed the Khederian leftovers on the same shelf as three takeout boxes and a plastic takeout soup container that had been repurposed as a condiment receptacle, teeming with mini soy sauces, duck sauce, hot sauces, spicy mustards, and ketchups. For good measure, Alek threw away a carton of milk that had expired around Halloween but left the half-and-half after a quick whiff. He knew the chances of it being used before it went bad were slim, and he was tempted to salvage it by pouring the cream into an ice-cube tray and then, on his next visit, emptying the frozen cream cubes into a ziplock bag, as he would’ve done in his own house, but he ultimately decided against it.

“We went to the Prestige again.” Ethan’s dad had already resettled into his reading corner, adjusting the lamp and then his glasses. “I guess it’s really becoming something of a Thanksgiving tradition for us.”

Alek could already imagine his mother’s horror at the idea of celebrating the holiday with canned cranberry sauce, mashed potato mix, and a possibly previously frozen, most certainly not-organic turkey that someone else had made.

“Ethan’s up in his room,” Mr. Novick called from inside. “It’s good to see you, Alek. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“You too, Mr. Novick.” Alek climbed up the stairs. He

entered Ethan's room and was greeted by the sight of his boyfriend, shirtless, sitting at his desk with his back to the door, feet propped up, slowly grooving to whatever music pumped out of his chunky headphones, oblivious to Alek and everything else in the world. Alek waited, watching, taking in the wiry frame, almost entirely smooth body, and wavy, sandy hair, all of which pointed to Ethan's Western European mutt ancestry.

Alek admired Ethan's absolute ease. Even alone, Alek didn't believe he achieved a fraction of his boyfriend's effortless, his absolute lack of self-consciousness. Ethan carried it around like a force field, making him impervious to the anxieties of the world. And when they were together, that force field enveloped Alek, too.

Slowly, Alek closed the door, approached Ethan, and laid his hand on his bare shoulder. Alek would've startled at the surprise of an unexpected presence, but Ethan didn't even flinch, as if he had been expecting Alek to do exactly that exactly then.

When the song ended, or when Ethan deemed that enough time had passed, he slid the headphones off. "You're what I'm thankful for, boyfriend." He arched his neck up and kissed Alek long and deep.

"I feel like this is the first time we've been together in, like, forever." Ethan caressed Alek's face. He kissed his lips, his face, his ears.

"I know," Alek whispered back.

Kissing Ethan.

Kissing Ethan rocked.

Alek shifted, pulling Ethan up, away from the desk, and

down onto the bed. They lay next to each other, legs intertwined, punctuating words with kisses.

“I love it when you’re like this,” Ethan purred.

“Like what?” Alek asked innocently.

“Frisky.” Ethan’s mouth traveled down Alek’s neck. Alek squirmed under the onslaught of pleasure.

“Well, it’s been a whole week since . . .” Alek trailed off.

“. . . since we’ve been alone?” Ethan finished for him, between kisses.

“Uh-huh,” Alek managed.

Alek thought, all the time, about what he and Ethan did when they were alone together. Whenever he zoned out, in class or in church or in the back of his parents’ car, that’s where his mind would inevitably wander. He’d recover from those daydreams abruptly, returning to reality aroused, terrified that technology had been invented that could project thoughts into image and that everyone around him had been witnessing his carnal meanderings.

But during these daydreams, Alek didn’t just reminisce: he also tried to make sense of it. Where did the urge come from? Was it as primal and necessary as eating, drinking, or sleeping? What happened to priests or other celibates who abstained? Did a part of them shrivel up and die? Or did they get some special insight, some wisdom from their abstinence, like martyrs’ hallucinations while fasting in the desert? And most importantly, what triggered the chemical reaction that made it impossible for him and Ethan to keep their hands off each other when they were this close? What was the nature of that kind of basic,

carnal, human, undeniable attraction? And how did it compare for Ethan with the other guys he'd been with, like his ex-boyfriend, Remi? Was it more, or less, or just different?

Sometimes, when Alek and Ethan hadn't seen each other for a while, like when Alek visited Nana over Labor Day weekend, their making out was urgent, hungry, and desperate. Their bodies communicated on an atomic level infinitely more efficient and direct than words could ever be, drawn to each other like metal to a magnet.

Other times, it would be leisurely, like on a Sunday after church, when neither one of them had anywhere to be. They'd kiss, then they'd listen to music, then they'd kiss some more. But regardless of its nature, their making out was always effortless, the antidote to reality.

Until it wasn't.

"You wanna do it?" Ethan asked suddenly.

"Do what?" Alek asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"Have sex."

And there it was, the question, hovering between them like an enemy drone, threatening to destroy everything beautiful they had built.

"I think—" Alek stammered, pulling away abruptly, groping for words that weren't there. "Not yet," he finally managed to get out.

"That's cool." Ethan kissed Alek again, quickly, lovingly. But underneath it, Alek could feel Ethan's disappointment lingering the rest of the night, tainting their time, like an otherwise perfect dish spoiled by a single rotten ingredient.

3

ALEK WANTED TO TELL BECKY. HE WANTED TO TELL his best friend about Ethan's proposition when he saw her the next day, on that funny Friday after Thanksgiving that wasn't actually a holiday but that everyone treated as one. But he didn't know where to start.

"You haven't been paying attention to a single word I've been saying, have you?" Becky asked him at the end of a long story about the Thanksgiving she'd had to spend at her crazy grandparents' house, with intricate detail of the process her grandfather underwent to remove his dentures after eating and impressions of other family members that would normally have Alek howling with laughter.

Alek examined his options. Lying to Becky was a dangerous business—her BS-ometer was finely attuned, especially to him. As options went, however, telling her that he had spaced out was only slightly more promising.

“Sorry, I’m distracted,” he admitted, trying to split the difference. Alek adjusted himself on the long, brown fold-out sofa that had been banished to the basement after the Boyces got a new furniture set for the living room a few months earlier.

Becky scrunched up her nose, as if she could tell he was holding something back. But she didn’t pursue it.

Every time Alek came over to Becky’s, her parents claimed they were finally going to finish the basement, where he and Becky spent most of their hanging-out time. But with the exception of the corner where an entertainment unit had been set up, the rest of the basement remained rough and raw, bare concrete with a hodgepodge of unpacked and often unlabeled boxes and discarded furniture, separated by sheets of exposed drywall. Only the near corner, defined by a bright green square of cut carpet just large enough to house the sofa and entertainment system, was inhabitable.

“And what could possibly be distracting you?” Becky removed an Honest Tea from the mini-fridge next to the sofa, which had previously been stocked with Diet Dr Peppers until Alek’s mom began forwarding Becky articles about carcinogens in artificial sweeteners.

Alek almost blurted out the truth. Maybe, if Becky had been a guy, he would’ve. Or maybe his best friend’s gender didn’t play a factor in his decision to chicken out. Maybe he just couldn’t find the words.

“Are you going to say anything or just sit there like a fish with your mouth hanging open?” Becky asked.

“I have to finish my ‘What Being Armenian Means to Me’ essay for Saturday school.”

“I still can’t believe you have to attend Saturday school on top of Sunday school. Isn’t that, like, a bit overkill?”

“We Armenians, we can’t help ourselves. We have to do more. And that more, in this case, means Saturday school, at eight a.m., which my parents have decreed that every young Khederian must attend beginning their sophomore year. So even though everyone else, including the Jews and Muslims and atheists and other non-Armenian Christians all over the world, get to sleep in, the Armenians have devised a whole new way to torture the next generation: a school to teach teens about the language, culture, and heritage of being Armenian.”

“I wanna tell you something, Alek.” Becky sipped her Honest Tea thoughtfully. “If my people had been genocided over a hundred years ago, the last thing I would make them do is wake up early on a Saturday. Haven’t you all been through enough? It’s like rubbing lemon juice into the wound.”

“You know you’re supposed to roll a lemon before you juice it?” Alek asked. “It increases yield.”

“You increase yield.”

Becky was the kind of girl who tended to blend into her surroundings: Caucasian, light-brown hair and eyes, average build that had just broken the five-foot threshold, and dressed like most of the other Gap/Old Navy girls in their tenth-grade class. Everything about her appearance was normal. But to assume her average appearance belied an average personality would be a tragic mistake. “Well, I guess you get to list Saturday school as an extracurricular when you’re applying to colleges. Isn’t that exactly the kind of thing Ms. Schmidt is telling

us admissions officers are looking for? That's why I've been hitting those competitions every weekend."

"Really? I thought it was so that you could exact your revenge on Dustin."

She tried to play it cool. "Oh, please. I don't even think about that guy." But then, as Alek had anticipated, she couldn't help herself. "But if I did, I'd probably think about how I outscored him in the last three competitions in a row!"

"So you're totally over what happened in September?" Alek enjoyed getting Becky riled up about Dustin Chinn, a Chinese-American junior who was one of Ethan's skateboarding buddies and the only person who had outscored Becky at the meets she'd begun entering since returning from rollerblading camp in August.

"September was a total fluke! And the judges must've been blind—everybody said so. You were there! You saw that my plasma spin was perfection, while his nollie was painfully basic. And don't even get me started on how superior my switch-ups were. Why do you think I outscored him at Plainsboro, Cherry Hill, *and* New Hope? I'll tell you why. Because my alley-oop into makio combos were like *boom!* That's why I haven't given him a single thought since!"

"I'm going to pretend that I understood even a fraction of what you just said so that you don't repeat it." Alek leaned back against the overstuffed arm of the sofa, catching a patch of sunlight from the small landscape windows at ground level. "I'd much rather be at those competitions, cheering you on, than at stupid Saturday school. And as if having to get up that early isn't bad enough, they're giving us homework, too."

“Seriously, I would picket.” Becky produced a bag of Haribo Fruit Salad candy seemingly from midair and began munching. “Can’t you just repurpose one of your English essays?” She offered the bag to Alek.

“I wish,” Alek said, although they both knew that even if he could, he’d never do that. He picked out a grapefruit wedge, speaking while chewing that disgusting and delicious Haribo sweet-and-sourness. “I’ve got to finish my essay so I can email it tonight.”

“And you don’t have anything else going on?” Becky squinted in the way she did when she felt like she wasn’t getting the full story.

Alek considered, again, telling her all about Ethan. But something stopped him. “I think you’re underestimating the magnitude of the assignment. And I know I could just write about the famous story of Armenia’s conversion to Christianity, or the genocide, but I just don’t want to.”

“The famous what?”

“You know.” Alek got up and began pacing, the way he did when he talked on the phone. Not a cell phone, of course, since his parents still insisted that he didn’t need his own and could just borrow theirs when he needed to. “The Armenians were the first nation to convert to Christianity.”

“I did not know that.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Everybody knows about that,” Alek scoffed. “The famous story of how King Trdat III converted the nation, back in the third century of ‘our lord.’”

“Never heard of it.” Becky propped her legs over the side of the sofa and stretched.

“I’m sure that when I start telling you, you’ll recognize it.”

“Oh my God, Alek Khederian, I’m sure I won’t!” She rotated her ankles, making small circles in the air. “I’m sure that it’s one of those weird things that only Armenians know, like the recipe for stuffed grapevine leaves. Which I can’t help but point out you haven’t made for me in weeks.”

But Alek remained unconvinced. “You’re telling me you don’t know the story of how King Trdat III became obsessed with this nun, Hripsime, and when she rejected him he killed her and everyone else in the abbey where she was hiding? And then, as divine punishment for his crime, God started turning him into a boar, but his sister Khosrovidukht had this dream that their old friend Gregory the Christian, who the king had banished into a pit twelve years earlier, could save him from the curse of lycanthropy? So they save Gregory from the pit and he’s, like, miraculously still alive, and he and the boar-king kneel in prayer and then the king’s humanity is restored and he converts the entire Armenian people to Christianity? You’re sure you never heard that one?”

“I’m sure I would’ve remembered a story of obsession, rage, murder, of turning into a boar, for God’s sake—”

“Lycanthropy.”

“What?”

“It’s called lycanthropy.” Alek resumed his position on the sofa. “When a human turns into an animal. Sometimes they can turn back, as is the case with werewolves. Other times, the

transformation is permanent, like in *Elder Scrolls*. Unless you're Dragonborn, of course, in which case . . ."

Becky regarded Alek for a solid moment. "I've often wondered how you've ended up the way you are, Alek Khederian." She popped a Haribo sour cherry into her mouth. "Were you exposed to cosmic rays as a youth, and instead of developing superpowers you just developed super weirdness? Or was it being brought up in your foreign house where your parents still don't own a microwave because they're convinced the rays make food radioactive and you're not allowed to watch more than thirty minutes of television a day—"

"—when I turn fifteen next month, my parents said they'd consider increasing it to forty minutes."

"Has anyone told them that THERE ARE NO SHOWS THAT ARE FORTY MINUTES LONG?" Becky almost-screamed before regaining her composure. "But now I think I understand. And in some small way, it's almost a wonder you aren't more messed up. So can we watch a movie? Or is there something else you need to tell me?"

There was, of course, something Alek was dying to tell Becky. About last night and Ethan and the proposition. But he couldn't. At least not yet.

4

ROUTE 95, WHICH DOUBLED AS THE NEW JERSEY Turnpike in certain sections and was its own entity at others in a mysterious anastomosis that even most New Jerseyans didn't understand, was a real highway running north-south—the spine that held the state together.

The secondary highways ran more or less east-west, parallel to each other. Route 95 more or less bisected them all, making the state's road map look like a vintage tie rack. Route 33, smack in the middle of those east-west parallel secondary highways, was what the Khederians used to get to church: a mere four lanes, divided by a strip of land that would've been green in a different season, framed by wires strung high above either side of the road, connecting the part of New Jersey that bordered Pennsylvania with the part known for its boardwalks and funnel cakes and unfortunate MTV shows.

Classical music played as Alek's dad sat behind the wheel,

driving his family to St. Stephen's Armenian Orthodox Church. The Khederians were a reliable twenty minutes late to Saturday school, just as they always were to Sunday services. Their reason for tardiness changed weekly, like the specials at a diner. But for the last few trips, one topic had been so charged, so contentious, that it and it alone reigned supreme: the heated debate Nik always lost about whether or not he'd be allowed to drive.

"I got my license two months ago, but you *never* let me behind the wheel."

"That's not true." Mr. and Mrs. Khederian stood next to each other, presenting a united front. "You drove just last Tuesday."

"To the 7-Eleven. Which is three blocks from our house. And both of you came with me," Nik responded.

Alek suppressed a chortle as his father responded. "But you have so little experience. How are we supposed to trust you behind the wheel?"

"But if you don't let me drive, how'm I going to get any actual experience?" Nik tightened the loop on his skinny plaid tie. "It's the ultimate catch-22!"

Popcorn was the only thing missing from making the spectacle even more enjoyable to Alek. Now Nik sat in sullen silence next to him in the back seat as they made their leisurely way to St. Stephen's Armenian Orthodox Church.

South Windsor and its surrounding townships had plenty of places to worship: a plethora of churches, the largest of which was the Catholic brick and glass St. Anthony of Padua; a handful of synagogues, such as Beth El, with its Hebrew letters

proudly marching across the facade; the Islamic mosque, adorned with its perfectly polished gold dome; and even a Baha'i House of Worship. But every weekend, the Khederians passed these local holy places and drove ninety minutes east on Route 33 to the nearest Armenian church.

With all of the spots in the adjoining parking lot claimed by the less-tardy Armenians, the Khederians had to settle for the secondary overspill lot, a solid five-minute walkaway, Alek believed, intentionally to punish latecomers. Alek stuck his thumb out when they began the trek, parodying a hitchhiker's plea, but no one in his family seemed amused.

When they finally arrived, he and Nik bid goodbye to their parents, leaving them upstairs in a sea of pale-white skin and dark hair and eyes to drink coffee and catch up with the other Armenian parents who made the pilgrimage from all over New Jersey. Downstairs they went, to the basement of the church, where Saturday school classes were taught in rooms created by partitions that everybody claimed were movable, although Alek had never actually witnessed the gray monoliths reconfigured.

The Khederian brothers passed the elementary and then middle Saturday school classrooms before settling into their high school section.

In eager anticipation of her favorite season of the year, their teacher, Mrs. Stepanian, had decked out the classroom with Christmas paraphernalia. Trees and wreaths made out of green construction paper decorated the walls, the doors, the windows, even the ceiling of the otherwise drab basement classroom.

Even though they were late, class hadn't started yet, which

felt to Alek a perfect metaphor for the entire Armenian existence. He sat on the far side of the room, behind Nik, who made a point of taking a front-row seat to illustrate his maximum nerdiness. Around a dozen other high school students, ranging from awkward freshmen to near-adult upperclassmen, checked their phones or chatted with one another while Mrs. Stepanian organized papers at the front desk. She always wore dark jackets over white blouses and even darker skirts that came down to her ankles, like she was auditioning to be an extra in *The Sound of Music*. A few minutes later, just after Arno, a freshman with deep, sad eyes, ran into the classroom, mumbling an apology for his tardiness, Mrs. Stepanian decided that now would be a good time to start.

“I know you’re all very excited to get back your ‘What Being Armenian Means to Me’ papers that I graded this morning, especially because the student with the highest score will be awarded the privilege of reading their paper at our Christmas Eve service!” Mrs. Stepanian was clearly more excited than the rest of the class combined. “But I’m going to save that for the end of class. Now, for the language section of class, we’re going to read a Christmas pageant out loud. In Armenian!”

Mrs. Stepanian handed out photocopies that appeared older than even she. Once the roles were assigned, the students fumbled their way through the text. Alek could almost hear the groans of their Armenian ancestors with every butchered sound and syntax.

The major impediment to completing the exercise was Shushan, a senior from Red Bank, who proved her inanity in new and exciting ways in every class. Last week, for example,

she consumed thirty minutes of class with a presentation about why Kim Kardashian should be the next Catholicos of the Armenian church. This week, the seventeen-year-old from two school districts away, who was reading the Virgin Mary in a bold casting against type, stopped every two lines to ask a question.

“Um, Mrs. Stepanian?” Shushan interrupted the reading again, for the seventh time in five minutes.

“Yes, Shushan,” Mrs. Stepanian replied wearily.

“How come some kinds of incense are more honest than others?”

Mrs. Stepanian sucked in her breath, eager to return to the reading of the pageant but knowing that as an educator, she had an obligation to engage her inquisitive pupil. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Well, the second wise man brings *frank* incense?” Somehow, Shushan’s gift for upward inflection made every sentence sound like a question.

“It’s one word—*frankincense*.” Alek tried, to the best of his ability, to keep the judginess out of his voice. “It just describes the incense’s odor. Not its moral quality.”

“Oh.” Alek saw Shushan’s brain trying to process the information. Whether or not it succeeded was up for debate. “Can I ask another question?”

“Myrrh is a kind of perfume,” Alek responded in anticipation.

“Wow—everyone must’ve smelled horrible in biblical times if two of the three gifts to the baby Jesus were about BO.” Shushan shuddered as she conjured her worst nightmare:

ancient personal hygiene. “Thank God we have, like, toilets and things today? And breath fresheners?”

In the moment before Alek could perform his signature exhale and eye roll, he heard a chortle from the corner of the classroom. He and Arno locked eyes, sharing a quiet moment of existential absurdity at the phenomenon that was Shushan Keshishian.

“Is there something the matter, Alek? Arno?” The teacher’s question shattered their little spell.

“No, Mrs. Stepanian,” the boys said at the same time.

“Very well, then.” She managed to arch an eyebrow at each of them, even though they were sitting at opposite ends of the room. “Let’s continue, then.”

For the rest of class, every time Shushan or one of the members of her gaggle butchered the Armenian language, Alek and Arno shared a secret smile across the classroom. The surprise at finding an ally in Saturday school almost trumped Alek’s confusion about how Shushan could have survived in the world this long being so challenged. Almost.

Alek and Arno had only been in the same Saturday school since the start of the school year; Arno had just graduated into the high school section. He had thick, dark Armenian hair like Alek’s, but not as curly, and eyes like bottomless pools that made him look older than his thirteen years. The only thing Alek could remember about Arno was that he was the youngest of a large family—maybe five or six siblings who’d passed through St. Stephen’s.

Alek wasn’t sure who was happier that the class finally reached the end of the play: the teenagers themselves or Mrs.

Stepanian, who felt it necessary to correct every mispronunciation, leaving her to interrupt just about every student on every line. She collected the ancient photocopies after they had reached the end then stored them in the file cabinet as if they were precious artifacts. Then she returned to her desk and produced a stack of papers, like a magician finishing a trick with a dramatic flourish. “I wonder who will be chosen to read their ‘What Being Armenian Means to Me’ paper at the Christmas Eve service?” she said, as if she didn’t already know.

Traditionally, the nerdiest senior won this great honor, and in Alek’s mind, his brother, Nik, was a shoo-in. He’d even heard Nik telling his mom how honored he’d be if he were chosen, in that humblebrag way that made Alek want to gag.

Mrs. Stepanian deposited Nik’s paper on his desk. He held it up so that Alek could see the big fat A on top, written in a thick green marker. Alek only hoped his own paper wouldn’t be graded much lower, since his parents’ passive-aggressive disappointment would be annoying at best and maddening at worst.

“The student reading is my favorite part of the service,” Mrs. Stepanian confided as she continued handing papers back—to Shushan, to Arno, to Voki, a jockish boy from Neptune, one town south. “Hearing you young people talk about being Armenian on Christmas Eve—it’s just the perfect way to start the year!”

Nik positively beamed as he flipped through his paper, pretending to care about the comments that had been written in the margins.

“I’m sure that Mr. and Mrs. Khederian are going to be

especially proud this Christmas.” Mrs. Stepanian handed Alek’s paper back to him, finally, facedown.

He handled the paper carefully, like it might be booby-trapped, bargaining with a God whose existence he doubted. *I’ll learn all my Armenian verb conjugations if you just give me a B-. And if we can get into the B+ range, I’ll even memorize my vocabulary list.*

“Congratulations, Mr. Khederian,” Mrs. Stepanian announced to the entire class, as if it were some big surprise.

Nik cleared his throat to deliver the speech he no doubt had prepared to appear incredibly spontaneous.

But Mrs. Stepanian cut him off. “Alek, you will be speaking at this year’s Christmas Eve service!”

Alek flipped his paper over, blinking away disbelief at the A+ that indicated his perfect score.

Nik refused to speak to Alek after class. And after Alek brokenly told his parents that his essay had been chosen, he felt Nik’s simmering fury turn to a full boil as their parents heaped praise upon Alek. They trekked back to the car, which was buried in the inch of snow that had fallen since they entered their house of prayer.

“We’ll read Alek’s essay while you boys tend to the car.” Mr. Khederian popped open the trunk, handing his sons the ice scraper and brush.

“I left it inside,” Alek admitted, relieved.

“Then go back and get it!” Mrs. Khederian put her purse in the trunk and opened the passenger door.

“I’ll just print it out again when we’re home,” Alek said.

“But then we won’t be able to read Mrs. Stepanian’s comments,” Alek’s father said.

And see your A+ with our own eyes, Alek added mentally.

“Hurry on up, Alek.” Mrs. Khederian stepped into the car, cranking the heat up to high. “I’m sure Nik won’t mind scraping the car.”

His brother was radiating so much anger, Alek suspected he could just melt the snow and ice entrapping their mom’s red Toyota with pure fury. He turned, half walking, half jogging back to the church.

The side door that was only open on Saturdays was still unlocked, thankfully, and Alek took two steps of the yellow linoleum stairs at a time, hurling himself down to the basement, turning at the kitchen, and sprinting past the bathrooms to the little room where Mrs. Stepanian tortured them weekly.

He swung the door open and found Arno, sitting alone, in the far corner. A memory of Arno singing in the children’s choir last year popped into Alek’s consciousness. He’d never heard Arno speak because he was painfully shy. But in the choir, his tenor solo had soared through the sanctuary.

“Hey, Arno.” Alek swiped his essay from the bin underneath the chair where he suffered every Saturday. “What’re you still doing here?”

Arno’s silence was the first sign that something was wrong. Even though making his family wait would annoy them, or maybe because it would, Alek waded through the desks to the boy sitting in the corner by himself. That’s when he saw the

word, written on the inside cover of Arno's textbook in the thick, black streaks of a Sharpie.

Gyot.

Alek froze.

He couldn't remember the first time he'd encountered that word. It must've been in church, or maybe during a family function where his cousins were present. Alek had been called many things in his life: nerd, geek, dweeb, douche, pussy, choad, tool. In the same way that he couldn't remember when he learned what those nastier words meant, he couldn't remember when he first learned that *gyot* was the Armenian slang for "faggot."

Of course, Alek had been called a faggot, too, although, ironically, less since he came out last summer. And no one dared to whisper it under their breath when Alek and Ethan walked hand in hand down the hall together, because of Ethan's school-wide reputation as a badass, solidified during the infamous food fight he instigated last year. But when Alek was by himself, he'd still heard it muttered as an upperclassman "accidentally" clipped his shoulder during the hurried five minutes between periods.

And yes, it hurt. And yes, life would be better if he didn't have to deal with that shit. But also, he didn't really care. To worry about what people like that thought would be like engaging the people who denied that the Armenian Genocide happened. He didn't need or even want the approval of people who chose to live in a close-minded world.

Alek closed the book so they wouldn't have to stare at the

offending letters. “You have to remember that when someone does something like this, it’s because they hate themselves, and hating on someone else makes them feel better, you know?”

“It’s such an ugly word.” Arno tried to keep a brave face, but Alek could tell what it was costing him.

“Totally.”

Arno’s voice dropped down to a whisper. “Tell me that it gets better,” he pleaded.

“What does?”

“You know. This.”

And then Alek understood that Arno was coming out to him.

Although Alek had come out to various people over the last six months, this was the first time someone had come out to him. He knew firsthand how much this moment meant to Arno and how important his response would be.

None of the people Alek had come out to responded in a way that would qualify as horrible: no disowning, no Bible-fearing “You’re damned to hell,” none of that after-school-special, old-fashioned bullshit. But certain responses, nonetheless, had been better than others.

The worst was probably from his former friend Matthew, who lived around the corner.

“I always suspected.” The condescension dripped off his voice, like ever-wise Matthew had been just waiting for Alek to figure out what was so obvious to everyone else. Well, Alek was happy to find an excuse to unfriend Matthew and his bad breath.

The totally unfazed responses weren't much better. The people who were just like, "Okay—is that all?" felt like they were working too hard to show how little it mattered to them. And besides, Alek hated having to wonder if they hadn't actually heard his coming out or had mistaken it for something else. *Are they trying to show how cool and accepting they are?* Alek would have to wonder for the rest of the conversation. *Or are they just hard of hearing?*

On the other side of the spectrum, and equally irksome, were the people who made a huge deal about it and how accepting they were, like his guidance counselor, Ms. Schmidt. "I guess except for discovering that I'm a homosexual, nothing else really interesting happened over the summer," he had blurted out.

Ms. Schmidt responded with a clearly prepared multi-minute monologue about how accepting she was of queer identity, and how she would support him in all his school endeavors, curricular and extracurricular, before adding a discreet "Be safe" in that disturbingly ominous way, as if being queer was, in and of itself, a way of becoming HIV positive. The whole time Alek was in Ms. Schmidt's office, he felt like all he was, in her eyes, was queer. And yes, sure, Alek was queer. But he was more than that, too.

Alek tried to give Arno the kind of response he appreciated most: chill, supportive, interested, and not too precious. "Of course it gets better. We can, like, start a gay Armenian club." Alek assumed a radio broadcaster's voice. "Genocided and homosexual? We know your plight!"

Arno chuckled his wry, dry laugh. "Does it even count? It's not like I've even—you know—done anything."

“That’s so cool, Arno. I didn’t know until, well—my lips were actually planted on my boyfriend’s.”

“Ethan?” Arno asked.

“Yeah—how’d you know?”

“I follow him on Instagram. Everyone follows him on Instagram.”

“Including my grandmother, apparently.”

“He’s got, like, four thousand followers. You two are, like, celebrities in the Central NJ queer teens scene.”

Alek laughed. “(A) That can’t possibly be a thing. And two, I think it’s awesome that you know yourself enough to be out. And don’t let the ass-wipe who did this change that.”

Arno fingered the pages of his script. “You know, it’s not even an Armenian word.”

“No?”

“It’s Turkish.”

“Big surprise.” Alek went for the cheap laugh and got it—nothing like two Armenians sharing a racist joke about the country that continued to deny the genocide it had committed over a hundred years ago. Alek undid his scarf and tossed it on the desk. “I had no idea. Just like when I first met Ethan, I had no idea he was gay.”

Arno laughed. “You didn’t know Ethan was gay?”

“I can be sort of blind sometimes, okay?”

“Sort of?”

“Okay, mega-blind. Ethan was this supercool badass skater boy who’d convinced me to cut summer school and go into the city with him. But when we were together I just felt—I don’t know—free. Free to be myself. And then we were alone in his

room and before I knew it . . .” Alek trailed off rather than risk TMI. “The first mini-fight we got into was when he used the word *faggot* before I knew he was gay and I got all kinds of offended. But he showed me how we can control the power that words have over us. Just like now you and I can make *gyot* into whatever we want it to be.” Alek stumbled over the word, his tongue resisting those letters in that combination. “It’s just a word.”

“But it’s a bad word.”

“And saying it can take its power away. Watch and listen, young one.” Alek interlaced his fingers and cracked his knuckles, then gave himself a moment to stretch, as if he were preparing to perform a challenging physical feat. “Okay: you can be such a . . . *gyot* sometimes.” Alek tripped over the word, just a little, before playfully punching Arno on the arm. “Now you try.”

Arno cleared his throat. “*You—*”

“You have to warm up,” Alek instructed him.

The younger boy stood up and played along, stretching his hands up above, over his head. “*You* are a total *gyot*.” Arno punched Alek back on his arm, equally playfully.

“See—screw whoever did that. I’m going to make sure that that never happens again, to you or me or any other *gyot* who has the unique misfortune of having to attend this Saturday school.”

Arno’s eyes widened. “How’re you going to do that?”

“I’m going to talk to Mrs. Stepanian about it, obvi.”

“Seriously?”

Alek nodded.

“I don’t know, Alek. Maybe it’s just easier to let it slide, you know? Who cares?”

“It might be easier, but that doesn’t mean it’s right. How old are you, Arno?”

“Thirteen. And a half.”

“Well, I’m about to turn fifteen, and let me tell you what wisdom I’ve amassed in those eighteen months. If we don’t do anything, then, in some ways, we’re just as bad as the people who did this. Think of all the future up-and-coming *gyots* who’re going to have to sit through endless boring hours in this Saturday school. That’s torture enough. It’s our duty to make sure they don’t have to deal with even more agony. Evil is what happens when good people do nothing.”

Alek got up to leave the classroom.

“Hey, Alek.”

“Yeah?”

Arno stood up and handed Alek his now-twice-forgotten essay, their fingers brushing for the briefest of moments. “Congratulations, by the way. What a great honor.”