

NOBODY IN PARTICULAR

SOPHIE GONZALES



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Nobody in Particular is both my oldest child and my youngest. Eleven years ago, I met someone, and in the high of romantic bliss I wrote a 94,000-word manuscript in fifty-four days. I knew exactly what I wanted it to be, and the queer twist on the “royalty falls for commoner” trope poured out of me faster than my fingers could type it. I queried it and received an offer of representation within a matter of days, and I allowed myself to hope that this would be it. The book that would make me a published author.

Yet, it wasn't. Over the next year I saw it taken to acquisitions again and again, only to be told repeatedly that there was no audience for a queer royal romance. It was a niche topic, by all accounts at the time. No matter how many times I edited it—and it went through more than its fair share of edits that year—this feedback remained the same. And so, I shelved it.

As any voracious—or even casual—reader can tell you, time eventually proved that there was, in fact, an audience for a queer royal romance. Many of them, even. And while I never forgot my beloved firstborn, the concern in my mind by this point was that my once-unique story had suddenly nosedived from “too niche” to “overdone.” One piece of media in particular followed the original plotline so closely I feared people might accuse me of copying it

should I ever publish my own—predated—version. But when a few friends asked to read it in 2021, and I combed through it to “tidy it up,” I realized two things. One, I still loved this story intensely. Two, experience and fresh eyes had given me insight into how to update the plot somewhat, preserving the original heart but expanding it in a way that made it new again.

So, no longer an infant author, I took my manuscript and helped it grow up. I didn’t think it was possible to love it more, but here I am. I love it because it’s the story I wrote when I met the man I now call my husband, filled with that longing and hope and yearning. It’s the story I wrote when I was barely out of my teenage years myself, and the story I recrafted with the confidence that only comes from thinking through a manuscript for more than a decade. I don’t say this often, but I am proud of it. I’m proud, and so excited for it to finally move past the small group of passionate supporters it found years ago and make its way into the world.

This book has existed alongside me for more than a third of my life. I hope you enjoy it. I really do. It took a mammoth effort by countless people pushing for far too long to get it into your hands today.

And I am so glad the world it’s being sent out into has improved in so many measurable ways from the world it was conceived in.

Love,
Sophie

ONE DANNI

I'm about halfway through my tour of Bramppath College when I get the sneaking suspicion I've dropped myself smack in the middle of shark-infested waters. And growing up in Boulder, Colorado, I never even learned how to swim.

Bramppath College is a stupidly prestigious boarding school, full of stupidly rich kids who all own Porsches, or BMWs, or whatever. Some of my classmates will be royalty—literally—and the rest will be *nothing* like my friends back home.

I belong at a red brick school, with desks decorated in permanent marker, and paint chipping off the walls, and everyone old friends with everybody else in their class. But now I'm enrolled in a place where the students sit around roses and honeysuckle, and eat at mahogany tables, and don't look at girls like me unless it's down.

Hellene, the bubbly woman who works in the uniform shop and is our temporary tour guide, is nice enough, I guess. But that's no reason to let down my guard around rich people just yet. She doesn't exactly seem like she drove a Porsche to work. Still, she's either high-key obsessed with the school, or she's being paid a decent amount to pretend to be, because she's been rattling off facts about the buildings like she's on speed. Mom's super into it, though. The two of

them are walking way ahead of me, talking like they met fifteen years ago instead of fifteen minutes.

I trail behind them, staring around as we walk. The grounds are enormous. My entire suburb at home could fit on top of this school, I swear. We duck under a neat hedge arch, hop down some stone steps, and then cross through a flower garden. To our left is yet another towering building that Hellene says was built centuries ago, and I crane my neck to take it all in until I pull a muscle.

Even my body knows I don't belong here. Too bad my mind didn't figure that out until it was way too late.

Until today, the whole moving countries thing was sort of exciting. Mom met this guy, Dennis Baker, online like two years ago, and as it turned out, he wasn't a catfish. He's actually a pretty great guy. My biological dad dipped when Mom got pregnant, and she stayed single pretty much my whole childhood, so I never had any kind of father figure to compare Dennis to. Still, I'm pretty sure he's one of the better ones. When he and Mom got serious, he even offered to move to Boulder at first, because he thought I should finish high school in my own country. But then Mom went to visit him in Henland and got all googly-eyed over it, and fast-forward a year and a half, here we are.

When all this went down—back when I was young and naïve—the first thing I thought was, *Holy shit, I get to live in Henland?* It might be a small country, but it's freaking stunning, and it's within driving distance of places like Paris and Brussels. Seriously, I could drive south from Boulder for longer than either of those trips and still be in Colorado. The second thought was, *Wait, isn't Bramppath there?* Bramppath College (*college*, it turns out, can confusingly also mean *high school* in some countries) is famous for being one of the best schools in the world for pumping out musical geniuses. Maybe, I thought, I could be one of them.

I don't think Mom and Dennis were exactly psyched about the idea of me going to boarding school, but they let me apply for a scholarship anyway. In hindsight, I'm pretty sure they thought I'd never get it in a million years.

Then I got short-listed. And accepted.

Which brings me to today. Touring Bramppath in person for the first time, as out of my depth as a rubber duck in the ocean.

“The ballroom is to the right of the tennis courts,” Hellene says to Mom, who makes her “impressed” noise. “The main piano is there,” Hellene adds, pointing, and I perk up. “You can book practice slots online, but I believe you’re the only serious player at the school at the moment. It’s all about the strings this year. You should find it mostly free.”

Mom pumps a fist in the air at me. I pump mine back, and hope she can’t tell that I’m panicking.

The thing is, I didn’t have the best start to high school. Things have been better recently, but that’s thanks to my best friend, Rachel. Rachel, who lives in Boulder, and won’t be here to have my back if the Bramppath kids decide they hate me. And they might. It wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened to me.

At the end of the tour, Hellene takes us into a small room near the main office. “Just wait out here for a moment,” she says, going through a door that leads into an ominous black stairway. “I’ll grab your uniform.”

Mom and I exchange a glance. Shrugging, I sit down on one of the dozen or so wooden chairs lining the wall. There’s one other person here, a girl about my age with perfect lips and a sharp chin who looks like she might be East Asian. She gives me a distracted smile and pushes her bangs out of her eyes, showing off straight, high-set brows.

I don’t know how to tell if her clothes are expensive without referring to labels, and I can’t see any of those, but something about them looks expensive, anyway. She’s dressed in head-to-toe neutrals, her bag is all floppy like real leather, and her shoes are spotless.

I bet she has a Porsche.

Hellene comes up the stairs clutching a box. She grunts under the weight of it, and I jump up to give her a hand, but Mom gets there first. When they haul the box onto the desk, Hellene steps back, catches her breath, and notices the other girl. “Oh, Molly. Senior cape, right? I’m sorry, we’re running a little bit late.”

Molly shrugs. “I’m not in a rush.”

Satisfied, Hellene starts unloading the box. “The compulsory uniform is covered by the scholarship,” she says, handing me a mountain of clear, individually wrapped packages, all in varying shades of dark green and white. “I’ve got your shirts, skirts, vests, and socks. . . . Here’s the school tie, the school jumper, your formal dining gown—this one’s heavy—and the senior cape.”

“What, no emblazoned underwear?” Mom jokes, and I concentrate on melting into the floor. If probably-owns-a-Porsche Molly didn’t peg me as an outsider before, she sure knows now.

The bundle, which is roughly as tall as I am, starts forming a leaning tower of packages in my arms almost as soon as Hellene hands it over, so I transfer it to a nearby chair. For a beat, I think it’s going to hold its balance, but then it topples over, littering the room with plastic-sealed clothing.

Amazing.

With poker-hot cheeks, I start snatching the packages up, and Molly covers a laugh behind her hand. I wince, and she stops.

Hellene goes on to Mom: “There’s also a rugby jumper, but as it’s an optional purchase it’s not covered.”

“That’s fine. How much is it?”

“A hundred and fifty.”

Euros? I snap my head up. “It’s fine,” I say to Mom. “Seriously. I have, just, *so* many sweaters, I don’t need another one.”

Mom bites her lip and folds her arms. I think by trying to give her an out, I’ve accidentally embarrassed her. “It’s fine, honey.”

“I can get one later, right?” I ask Hellene in a squeaky voice. “If it turns out I do really want one or whatever?”

Something that looks a whole lot like relief sneaks across Mom’s face. “Is the sweater decorated with precious jewels, by any chance?” she asks Hellene, who breaks into a peal of laughter.

Something moving next to me catches my eye. Molly has crouched down to my level to help me gather the packages. I smile, half grateful, half wary, as she dumps them back on the empty chair. “Thanks.”

“No worries,” she says, before lowering her voice. “I wasn’t

laughing at you. I was laughing at Hellene. I'm pretty sure she's flirting with your mum."

Hellene's leaning over the desk while she explains the forms to Mom, right up in her personal space. Maybe my "she's putting on an act for her job" theory was only half right. Molly and I sit down next to each other, and I whisper back, "You think?"

"I'm ninety-nine percent certain."

I'm not sure if the joke is how awkwardly obvious Hellene's being, or if Molly just thinks the idea of a lesbian is hilarious. Please let it be door number one. If I meet a student who actually seems nice, only to find out they're homophobic? I might walk out that door and keep going until I reach Colorado, swimming abilities be damned. "She's taken," I reply carefully.

She clicks her fingers in a "dang" sort of way. "Hellene will be so disappointed. She divorced her wife last year and we've been telling her to get back out on the dating scene. Guess she finally listened to us."

There's something about the way she says it that gives off major green flags. I've had years of practice paying attention to how friends and family talk about the queer people they know, trying to gauge if they'd be safe to come out to one day, when I'm ready. So, I'm not psychic, but I'm at least able to make a pretty educated call here. This girl doesn't seem to be awful *or* a homophobe. Even better, she doesn't seem to find me especially unbearable.

The panic I felt during the tour has eased up. Like, a lot.

Molly nods at the uniform pile. "Senior cape, huh? Fifth or sixth year?"

"Fifth." Otherwise known as junior.

"Oh, same as me," she says. "This your first time boarding?"

"Yeah. First time in Henland at all, actually."

She gives me an overexaggerated look of surprise. "What? I would've never called it."

"Nothing gave me away at all?"

"Could be a local for all I know." She scrunches up her nose as she says this, and I grin.

Mom glances toward us, and gives me an encouraging thumbs-up. I pray to sweet baby Jesus Molly didn't notice her.

"Is it weird? Moving to a totally different country?" she asks.

"A little. I was excited to see everything, but my mom and her hus—my stepdad—have been busy with moving and immigration stuff, so I haven't had anyone to do anything with. I've pretty much stayed holed up in my room the whole time."

I regret the words as soon as I say them, but I can't suck them back in. I sound like an antisocial loser with no life.

Thankfully, Molly doesn't seem put off. "I'm actually having a get-together at mine after lunch on Saturday for a few of the fifth years. You should come by if you get tired of your room."

I can't disguise my look of surprise and Molly must notice my face, because she clarifies. "You'd be doing me a favor. I need an excuse to spend less time with . . . certain people."

I want to ask why she's inviting people to her house if she doesn't want to be around them, but I decide to leave it. Bring on the rich-people daytime rager.

"Well, obviously, my social schedule's packed," I say airily, and Molly grins. "But, yeah, weirdly enough, I might be free."

"Cool," Molly says. "You'll be able to meet some of the girls from our class."

"Is Princess Rosemary in your class?" Mom asks. I hadn't even noticed she was eavesdropping. "I mean, does she attend with everyone else?"

"She doesn't have a contagious disease, Mom," I say, pleading with my eyes for her to stop before Molly uninvites me.

"Princesses have tutors," Mom says, getting all defensive.

"Rose attends normal classes," Hellene cuts in. She does not look happy to be left out of the conversation. "I'm sure Daniela will get to meet her."

"Oh, *really*?" Mom drags the word out and wiggles her eyebrows like she's implying this is great news for me, personally. Like I'm a social climber who moved countries so I could hang out with the princess of Henland.

This is right at the upper limit of my embarrassment tolerance.

I'm gonna have to go ahead and disown my own mom now, which is obviously not great, because I really liked her before this conversation.

Dying inside, I mouth "sorry" to Molly. She looks . . . not exactly pissed off, but definitely grim. All the friendliness has been zapped from her face in one hit.

I'm doomed.

"Will the princess be at the party?" Mom prods her, because she wasn't done with the humiliation just yet, I guess.

Molly darkens even more, somehow. "Yeah, she will," she says in a clipped way. Finally, Mom takes the hint, and turns back to Hellene.

I don't know what it's like to grow up with a monarchy, but I'm pretty sure some people feel strongly about the royal family here. There are magazines dedicated to them by the grocery store check-out, and bumper stickers with the royal crest stuck on the back of cars, and the immigration office has a floor-to-ceiling portrait of the king and queen hanging in the entrance hall. But if I had to take a safe bet, Molly doesn't seem to be one of those people.

"Woo, royalty," I say in a quiet, mocking voice. Sorry, Mom. It's every girl for herself out here, and if I get uninvited from this party because my mom has no chill, I will nurse that grudge until my dying day.

Luckily, my bet is right on the money, because Molly sinks into her seat as all the tension leaves her shoulders. "Everyone's coming over around one-thirty," she says. "Can I grab your number? I'll text you the address."

Across the room, Mom catches my eye and raises her shoulders in excitement.

As Molly lowers her head to use her phone, I shoot Mom's happy gesture right back at her.

TWO ROSE

My guards, Theodore and Sidney, stand silently on the porch of Molly Kwon's mansion, one eyeing me through the window, the other monitoring the front yard. They're huddled together, instead of patrolling like they usually would, in an effort to keep dry. I avert my eyes, succumbing to a pang of guilt for causing them to stand out there, stranded. They're sheltered from the heavy rain, but not from the unseasonal cold.

If I thought it would make any difference, I would insist they come inside in shifts to watch from the warmth of the kitchen with a cup of tea. The problem is, they don't much respect what I have to say when Father's given a direct order. Today, Father's orders were to watch from the front yard, and remain there unless I'm in imminent danger, and that's that. Their comfort doesn't matter, and I certainly don't have the authority to issue supplementary or contradictory commands.

Although, to be fair, I don't expect they would relish the opportunity to take a cup of tea from me, even if they were free to. The last time I made them tea, I was so high I mistook the salt for sugar.

I watch the scene with lazy eyes from my usual vantage point, the nearest leather armchair to the entranceway. Eleanor Kowalczyk, one of my closest friends, drapes herself over the top of my chair. She dangles a half-smoked joint in front of my face as though I'm a horse

she's enticing with a carrot. I swat at her hand, disguising my rush of irritation with an easy laugh.

"You're serious about it, then?" Eleanor asks me, nodding at the joint in her hand.

"When have you known me to break a promise?"

On a nearby couch occupied by a handful of guys, a tall boy with thick dark curls climbs onto his knees and holds out a hand to Eleanor. Alfie Paget-Harrington. Alfie clicks at Eleanor, who takes a drag before handing the joint over. He rolls it between his fingers and cocks his head at me. "Luckily," he says in his slow, deep voice, "the rest of us made no such promises."

"The rest of you," I remind him, "had no incentive to."

"There are no cameras around, Rosie," Alfie says. "You know everyone in the room."

I hold his gaze steadily until he relents. "More for me," he says, bringing the joint to his lips.

"For us," Eleanor protests, and Alfie cries out as she darts forward to wrestle it from his grasp.

Across the room, Molly glances up at Alfie's laughter. At first, she looks everywhere but at me. Eventually, however, she cracks and steals a peek, only to find me staring right at her. I raise a single brow the moment our gazes lock. It's all that's necessary. Should she continue to snub me now, there won't be any plausible deniability left for her, and Molly certainly isn't as confrontational as all that. Even if she is trying to prove a point.

And she *is* trying to prove a point, I'm quite sure of it, as she hasn't spoken a word to me since I arrived, other than to greet Eleanor and me as one.

Instead, she's spent the entire gathering by the side of a girl with long, dark blond hair I can only describe as a peculiarity. She's wearing an ill-fitting puffer jacket, and jeans that fit her worse still. Her shoes are muddy, her skin is shockingly pale, and she hasn't unfolded her arms in about half an hour. I should know. I've been watching her.

She's clearly uncomfortable, and unsurprisingly so. She looks so out of place, I could almost believe she stumbled upon the party by accident. I can't imagine where Molly found her. Or why, for

that matter, my best friend is apparently so taken by this awkward stranger that she can't find a spare minute to introduce her to Eleanor and me.

Even if it's just to convince anyone watching that everything is fine between us.

Molly says something to the stranger, and the two of them head in my direction as Alfie leaves us. Molly selects a flute of champagne from a refreshment table as she passes it, and then holds it out to me. "Rose," she says as I accept the glass. "This is Danni. She's in fifth year, too."

"Oh," I say. "Which school?"

Molly shoots me a look as though I'm being purposely obtuse. While it's possible I am being obtuse, in my defense, it's certainly not on purpose. "Bramppath," she says, and I realize my misstep too late. This girl must be attending under one of the music scholarships. They're the only scholarships available that offer a fully funded place. They're quite competitive, too.

"A musical prodigy," I remark. "I'm sure we're lucky to gain you. What do you play?"

Danni opens her mouth as though to answer me, but then she falters. "Piano, but . . . how do you know I'm a musician?"

Two mistakes in a row. It's a blessing Mum and Father aren't here to witness this, or I'd be in for a lecture. Remarking upon class differences is classless; those would be Mum's exact words.

Molly watches me with curiosity, apparently in no hurry to save me. So, I make my best effort to recover myself. "You have piano hands," I say. Stealing a glance at Danni's fingers, it's not a word of a lie—they *are* long. "Have you had the chance to meet everyone here, then?"

It's a dig at Molly that goes right over Danni's head, as it's designed to. Molly meets my eyes but says nothing. At least I've let her know I noticed her speaking to practically every person at the party *except* for me.

"I think so," Danni says. She speaks with a thick American accent, untouched, as far as I can tell, by any Hennish cadence. A recently immigrated scholarship student, no less. "I'm never going to remember all these names."

“Well, if you can remember anything, try to focus on surnames,” I say. “They’re generally more important in this crowd. And if all else fails, remember Kwon and Kowalczyk, and you’ll be in good hands.”

Eleanor climbs onto her knees to hang over the back of the couch and nod at us. “Kowalczyk would be me,” she says to Danni, reaching out for a handshake.

“Got it,” Danni says with a nervous smile. “And who’s Kwon?”

“Who’s Kwon?” I repeat, unable to keep the bafflement from my tone. I point a helpful finger at Molly. “That’s Molly Kwon,” I stage-whisper.

“Okay, Rose,” Molly snaps. Defensive of her new best friend, it would seem. “I didn’t tell her my surname yet.”

“I hope I didn’t just give away a secret, then.”

Does Molly not want Danni to know she’s a minor internet celebrity? Or does she not want Danni to look her up for another reason?

I realize, too late, that this might very much be the case. If Molly’s new friend doesn’t know what happened in Amsterdam yet, perhaps she’s hoping to keep it that way for the time being. I may not have many lines I wouldn’t cross when it comes to stirring someone up, but even I know Amsterdam is off-limits.

“It’s not a secret, it just didn’t come up.” Molly’s tone is about as tense as I’ve ever heard it, and I must not be the only one who notices, because Danni jumps in with a hasty subject change.

“So, everyone here is from, like, a mega-rich family?” she asks.

Eleanor and I exchange an incredulous glance. Even Molly cracks a reluctant smile.

“Quite,” I say faintly, and Eleanor chokes on her laughter.

Molly jumps in. “All Rose means is, surnames are how we figure out our mutual connections. It’s not all snobbery.”

“Only ninety percent or so,” Eleanor adds with a mischievous grin.

“Like,” Molly goes on, “Eleanor’s a Kowalczyk, and half the families at school are represented by Kowalczyk and Nought. The law firm,” she adds, when she notices Danni isn’t following along. “Or Alfie over there. His mum’s Helen Paget-Harrington, and the Harringtons are one of the oldest families in the country.”

“And the Pagets are . . . nobody in particular,” Eleanor says. She

shoots me a guilty glance—she is, after all, talking about close family friends of mine—but I give her a curt nod of agreement, so she continues. “Alfie’s dad immigrated from London ages ago and clawed his way up the ladder here.”

Danni gives an uneasy laugh. I’ve only just met her, so it’s possible I’m misreading her expression, but she appears to be studying Eleanor and Molly as though they’re an alien species. “Huh,” she says. “I don’t even know what most of my friends’ parents do for work.”

Molly touches her arm gently. “You don’t need to know this stuff. You’re not getting quizzed on it or anything.”

Danni tilts her head. “I guess I’m pretty much like a Paget. My last name doesn’t really mean anything.”

“Maybe not,” I say with a shrug. “Best to share it anyway. You’ll stand out less that way.”

She locks eyes with me so sharply I wonder if she somehow forgot I was sitting here. “Fine,” she says. “Whatever. Then I guess I’m Daniela from the nobody-in-particular Blythes.”

“Well,” I say, “it would seem you’re now Daniela from Brampath. That’s something, at least.”

Molly glares at me, apparently objecting to my teasing tone. Danni, however, appears to take it as I mean it, because she breaks into a deeply dimpled grin. Suddenly, all traces of nervousness have vanished. She’s blossomed into a different person. “It’s something,” she agrees. “Now, I already know your name, but maybe you could introduce yourself anyway?”

“Rosemary.”

“Rosemary or Rose?”

“That depends how much we end up liking each other,” I say.

“I’ll monitor it. You didn’t give me your surname,” she points out.

“I don’t have one.”

“Do you just like to stand out? Or are you not important enough for one?”

I rest my cheek on my balled fist, surprised at her gall. “Both, actually.”

Molly jumps in before we start having too much fun. “I ran into Danni when I got my senior cape,” she says. “She’s from America.”

My annoyance with Molly is at the forefront of my mind again, and it seeps into my tone as I grip the wet flute of champagne with the tips of my fingers and sit up straighter. “Oh, you’re from the *American Blythes*,” I say, feigning recognition. “Why didn’t you say so to begin with?”

“Rose, don’t be a shit,” Molly says blankly. “She can’t tell when you’re joking yet.”

“Do you get to pass off digs as a sense of humor when you don’t have a last name?” Danni asks.

If I was surprised at her gall before, it’s nothing compared to how shocked I am right now. I’m rather used to strangers and acquaintances politely pretending to find my jibes hilarious. “It’s one of the many perks,” I say finally.

Molly turns to Danni. “Well, we’d better finish getting everyone to tell you their surnames,” she says in a tone that tells me she thinks I’m being unfathomably rude. I would argue Danni seems perfectly capable of dishing out just as much as she’s served, but I keep that argument to myself. I am, it’s rather apparent, on considerably thin ice with Molly as it is.

I raise my eyebrows in place of a goodbye. Danni moves to follow Molly, but then she pauses and glances at me. “Nice to meet you, Rose,” she says, before turning her back to me. I stare after her for several seconds.

Eleanor flips around on the couch again and follows my gaze. She gives a knowing “hmm,” and I jump, embarrassed to be caught staring.

“What?”

“She’s definitely acting odd,” she says. It takes me quite a bit longer than it should to realize she’s referring to Molly.

“I told you,” I say. “I think she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Eleanor says, but it’s far from convincing. “She’s just grieving.”

Yes, that’s how I’d justified it, too. *She’s just grieving*, I told myself when she avoided me at the funeral. *She needs space*, I reasoned when she kept to herself throughout the end of the school term. *She’s distracting herself*, I rationalized when she started posting on social media again while ignoring my messages over the summer holidays.

There does come a point, I think, where denial starts to feel an awful lot like lying.

“You should just ask her what’s going on,” Eleanor says when I don’t reply, and I give a curt nod.

“I will,” I say. Unlike Eleanor, I’m well-practiced in the art of sounding just as convincing as I mean to. “Just not here. There’s no reason to ruin her party.”

Of course, I know deep down what the matter is, even if I don’t want to know. She blames me for what happened in Amsterdam in June, and so she should. I would hate me too if I were her.

By the window, Harriet Tomas grabs onto Danni’s arm as she and Molly pass, tugging them into the group conversation. Harriet was there that night, but Molly seems perfectly amiable when she says hello to her.

Something acidic and dark bubbles in my core, and I shove it back down before the emotion fully announces itself.

Alfie, who’d been watching us from afar with a measure of curiosity, saunters over to join Eleanor and me once more.

“Who’s that, then?” he asks, without any other indications. It’s obvious enough who he means.

“Her name’s Danni,” Eleanor says.

“Right, but *who is she?*” Alfie presses.

And Molly thought my surname advice was mere snobbery. I have half a mind to reach out to Molly later and tell her what Alfie just said, to prove my point. Only, she wouldn’t reply to my message, would she?

Danni glances over and catches the three of us staring at her. She tears her eyes away while her long piano fingers fiddle with the cuff of her sleeve.

“Nobody in particular, apparently,” I say to Alfie.

As though she somehow hears me across the din, Danni looks back. This time, her eyes land on mine.

I hold her gaze until she tears it away only a heartbeat later.

Poor little blossom. Our world is going to break her.

THREE DANNI

When Mom and Dennis finally drop me off at Bramppath, I'm surprised at the lump that keeps forming in my throat. I've been so busy thinking about what life at Bramppath will hold in store for me, I forgot one of the things that'll be missing from it. Family.

There aren't going to be family mealtimes, or family movie nights, or family walks anymore. Now, I'm gonna be doing all that stuff with a group of strangers. Are they strangers who'll end up feeling like family soon? Will I wish I didn't have to leave by the time term's over? Or am I going to be counting down the days until I can escape this place, and the people in it?

I try to remind myself that I already have a good reason to believe it'll be okay. I know Molly now. And a bunch of my classmates' last names, to boot.

I'm going to be fine.

Just breathe.

As we walk, Dennis makes a huge deal out of the size of the school. He goes on and on about the turrets and arches on the main building, and the ivy snaking over the windows of the residential halls, and the gray-brick masonry he explains was only used during a certain time period. I ask if he's sure he doesn't want to move into my dorm room with Mom, and they laugh, but it's only sort of a joke.

The wheels of my suitcase scrape over the uneven cobblestone path as we wind through the grounds toward my hall. Dozens of girls and their parents are darting all around us like squirrels setting up for winter, lugging suitcases and decorations, blankets and bags. You wouldn't think I'd even get noticed in all the chaos, but, oh, they notice me. Over and over again a student or parent will catch sight of me, scan my clothes and my hair and my face and decide that I haven't made the cut. Then their noses wrinkle, and they raise their eyebrows, and move on with what they were doing without even nodding at me.

Okay, *this* is what I'd worried Bramppath would be like. If this was my first time seeing any of the students, I probably would've made a beeline back to the car and shut myself in the back seat until Mom and Dennis agreed to take me back home.

The fifth-year girls all live in the same building: Dewitt, named after some teacher. Hellene told us in the tour but it was right around the time I was entering full panic mode, so I don't remember all the details. It's one of the most centrally located buildings, smack in front of a sprawling marble fountain. The more senior you are, the closer you live to the main entrance, which leaves us with the second-best real estate.

I'm on the ground floor, in room eleven. Bramppath sent me a key card in the mail a couple of weeks ago, and we slot it into the door a few times until the chip's accepted and the lock flashes green. Dennis whistles again as we head inside. The rooms at Bramppath are all private, and they've even managed to squeeze a full bed in here—just. That, a wardrobe and desk—both made of a dark cherrywood—and a leather desk chair, and that's it for furnishings. The walls are a plain, washed-out cream, and the carpet's a dark gray color, perfect for hiding stains. I try not to think about what might be camouflaged under my feet right now.

It's plain, and it's cramped, and it smells like disinfectant.

I love it.

After a couple of hours we manage to get my room looking less like a fancy prison cell and more like an Ikea display room. After a stern lecture from Mom to keep on top of my piano lessons, followed

by a long goodbye that we have to repeat several times because Mom keeps chickening out from leaving the room, suddenly, they're gone. And I'm alone.

I'm totally alone.

I wander around my room for a bit, folding my arms across my chest. There's basically nothing familiar here. When Mom offered to take me on a Target shopping spree so I'd have all new things at Bramppath, I jumped at the chance. I figured the more new, glossy stuff I have the better, so I'll stand out less. But now I'm regretting it. I'd take my old, striped, faded, cat-hair-covered sheets over new and glossy any day.

Besides. Target stuff won't impress the students here. I was kidding myself.

Before the homesickness has a chance to really get started, I message Molly to tell her I've arrived.

It turns out her room is on the next level up, on B-floor, so she's down in less than a minute. She spends a while politely admiring all the Target stuff, then she plonks on my bed and spreads her body into a starfish position while she bounces. "It's so good to be in the senior cycle, you have no idea," she says, patting the bed. "The small doubles we had last year were not okay."

I straddle the desk chair and lean my chin on its back. "Is that like a twin XL? Because honestly even that would've been an upgrade for me from home."

She props herself up and gives me a pitying look. The kind of look I would probably have taken offense to if I didn't know Molly meant well. "How did you survive?"

"People survive sleeping on twins every day, Molly."

I think that's when she notices how she sounds, because she ducks her head. "Sorry. That was very 'Rose' of me."

I let out a laugh, thinking back to the conversation I had with Princess Rosemary at Molly's party. She's far from the meanest person I've ever met, but she wasn't exactly warm, either.

I'm still not sure what I think about our interaction at the party. On the one hand, it was the first time that day I did anything except smile and answer questions politely and panic that I was making a

shitty first impression. On the other, I think Rosemary might have just triggered my fight-or-flight response, which is definitely not the same thing as coming out of my shell.

So, what was that all about? Was it my gut instinct recognizing her as the same sort of bully that terrorized me last year? That's sort of how Maddison and her gang functioned, after all. They'd make little comments that sounded friendly and innocent, like asking my opinion on something, or complimenting my appearance. But then if I took them at face value and answered normally, she and her friends would burst out laughing, like it was hilarious I could've thought they were being nice to me. The only safe way to reply to those girls was silence, or coldness. They couldn't laugh at that. On the other hand, it made me look like a nasty person to anyone in earshot. I could never win, and they wanted it that way.

But that was last year, and there was no group of girls laughing at me at Molly's party. So, I have to give Rosemary the benefit of the doubt for now, right? Just because she's got a prickly sense of humor doesn't necessarily mean I've met my new future-bully. I hope not, anyway.

Meanwhile, Molly has shifted. Her jaw and fists seem to be competing over which can clench the tightest. Her fists are winning, for the record.

I noticed the same tense body language when Molly spoke to Rosemary that day. So, while we're talking about her, I decide to ask Molly the question that's been bugging me since her party. "Hey, um, when we were at your house, people kept asking you about Rosemary."

She nods and starts rolling her shoulders, stretching her neck as she does.

"It sort of sounded like everyone thinks you're friends," I say. "Like, good ones. But I don't get that vibe from you."

Molly pretends to look shocked. "You *don't*?"

"I know, don't freak out, I'm just *super* observant," I say dryly. I'm smiling at the joke, but also with relief. If Rose does turn out to be a piece of work, I'll want to stay out of her way, which might be kind of tough if she's best friends with my only friend.

“Yeah. It’s a long story. Rose and I were best friends, but now we’re . . . I don’t know.”

“Did something happen?” I ask. “Or is she just, like, a shitty person?”

I figure even as I’m asking it that it might be too personal, and Molly proves me right by shaking her head. “Yeah, look, some stuff happened, but it’s . . . a lot. I’ll tell you another time. If you don’t find . . . anyway. She’s not a shit person. She’s just . . . look. The thing you need to know about Rose is, she’s the princess, and everything comes second to that. And I mean everything. You can see how that might become toxic, yeah?”

“Sure.”

“We have a lot of friends in common, so I don’t want to start an all-out war or anything. I’m just trying to keep my distance a bit these days, you know?”

So when Molly said I’d be giving her a good excuse to avoid people at her party, she didn’t really mean people. She meant Rosemary.

“Anyway,” Molly says, perking up. “Can we get a quick moving-in photo for my story?”

Molly kneels beside me and I pose for the camera, and then she gets to work on editing the photo. “What’s your handle?” she asks. “I’ll tag you.”

A few seconds later my phone buzzes with the notification. I click on her profile, ready to add her as a friend, but I catch sight of her follower count and I’m so shocked I forget what I’m doing completely. For a second, I swear my eyes aren’t working right. There’s way too many digits.

“That’s why I prefer texting,” she says when she notices my face. “My DMs can get a little crowded.”

“Whoa. What are you, an influencer?” I ask, flipping through her profile. It doesn’t look like anything special. Just your run-of-the-mill mix of selfies, scenery, and activity photos. It all looks pretty unstructured and casual. Or maybe it’s carefully curated to look that way. It’s hard to tell.

“I hate that word,” she says. “If I ever call myself an influencer

unironically, you have my permission to roast me until I screw my head back on.”

“But you *are* one,” I say, tipping my phone screen to her like she needs the evidence or something.

She shrugs reluctantly, her cheeks reddening. “My dad was the prime minister when I was a kid, and he used to take me to press conferences and stuff. He passed away before he finished his term—no, it was years ago, Danni, don’t look all sad for me, and *please* don’t tell me you’re sorry. Anyway, the media got kind of obsessed with me in the fallout. I guess people know me from that; I don’t have any talents or anything.”

Well, I *am* sorry to hear about Molly’s dad, but she asked me not to say so, so I breeze past it. “You obviously put a lot of work in,” I say instead. “I’ve made, like, twenty posts in my lifetime. I’m impressed.”

“Not really. Mostly I just post videos from my day, or giving my opinion on whatever I’m thinking about. I’m never going to be the type of person who has a proper setup or a brand or anything. Honestly, I only do it because it pays well and I don’t get a lot of pocket money.”

After half an hour or so of hanging out in my room, Molly offers to give me a tour of Dewitt. She tells me which shower stall to use in the bathroom (“The middle ones always get hot faster.”), the unofficial rule around door etiquette (“If you leave your door ajar it’s implying you’re open to people swinging past to chat.”), and the bulletin board by the entrance (“You play piano, right? You can sign up for performance evenings here.”).

I study the board, which is already filled with notices regarding clubs and camps. In its center is a giant drug-use PSA poster, stating LIFE’S HIGHS DON’T NEED CHEMICAL TIES with a cringey illustration of a group of teenagers skipping away from a smoking joint in a field. “I remember seeing something about snow trips,” I say hopefully, searching for a possible sign-up sheet. Winter’s coming up, after all.

“That’s only for fourth and sixth years, unfortunately. Rose tried to drag me along with her last year, but it’s not my thing.” She says it with a laugh, but it vanishes as soon as she remembers who

she's talking about. Tucking shiny black hair behind her ear, Molly changes the subject. "I'll come by and grab you for breakfast in the morning. You'll need to be ready at ten past seven at the latest. It's first in, best dressed, so if we get there too late we won't get a seat with the rest of the girls."

I say thank you, but the words don't seem big enough for how freaking grateful I am. What would I be doing tomorrow morning if I hadn't met her? Heading on over at 7:13 and awkwardly hanging out at the end of a table full of girls who'd grown up together, had never met me, and wouldn't want me there?

But I did meet her. And if the whole reason Molly got to know me in the first place was to fill a vacant spot left by Princess Rosemary? Then I owe her one.

Whatever the hell she did to lose Molly as a friend, her loss is my gain.