

**YOU HAD
ME AT
HELLO
WORLD**

YOU HAD ME AT HELLO WORLD

RONA WANG

SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI



SIMON & SCHUSTER **BFYR**

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

For more than 100 years, Simon & Schuster has championed authors and the stories they create. By respecting the copyright of an author's intellectual property, you enable Simon & Schuster and the author to continue publishing exceptional books for years to come. We thank you for supporting the author's copyright by purchasing an authorized edition of this book.

No amount of this book may be reproduced or stored in any format, nor may it be uploaded to any website, database, language-learning model, or other repository, retrieval, or artificial intelligence system without express permission. All rights reserved. Inquiries may be directed to Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 or permissions@simonandschuster.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Text © 2025 by Rona Wang

Jacket illustration © 2025 by Heedayah Lockman

Jacket design by Laura Eckes

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS and related marks are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, LLC.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

Simon & Schuster strongly believes in freedom of expression and stands against censorship in all its forms. For more information, visit BooksBelong.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonsspeakers.com.

Interior design by Hilary Zarycky

The text for this book was set in Adobe Garamond Pro.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wang, Rona, author.

Title: You had me at hello world / Rona Wang.

Description: First edition. | New York : Simon & Schuster and Books for Young Readers, 2025. |

Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 12 and up. | Audience: Grades 7–9. | Summary: "A Chinese American teen navigates a high-stakes coding competition, sabotage, and first love when she is invited to a summer hackathon at MIT" —Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025010226 (print) | LCCN 2025010227 (ebook)

ISBN 9781534488519 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781534488533 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Programming (Computers)—Fiction. | Contests—Fiction. | Sabotage—Fiction.

First loves—Fiction. | Chinese Americans—Fiction. | LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.W3656 Yo 2025 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.W3656 (ebook)

DDC [Fic—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025010226>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025010227>

For Chris Hillenbrand

Chapter One

Lola swears this is legit and not like her TikTok “side hustle” that turned out to be a pyramid scheme. She just needs me to float her a hundred bucks.

Even though I’m still sussed out by any scholarship contest with an entry fee, I say yes because, well, she’s Lola. And I have enough cash. That’s not the problem.

The problem is getting past my stepdad.

Cue the *Mission: Impossible* soundtrack. As soon as the final bell goes off, I rush home. I figure that’s my best shot, since both Mom and Michael will be at work.

All my money is squirreled away in the shared bedroom. I kneel down and lift my mattress up with one hand. The manila envelope sits on the bedframe, all innocuous.

I grab the envelope and let the mattress fall back down. I try to shake out only a few bills, but my entire net worth comes clattering onto the floor. Coins spill everywhere. “Jesus fu—”

I cut myself off when I hear footsteps.

My heart drops.

I shove everything back into the envelope, but there's no time to stash the envelope itself before my stepdad, Michael, barges in.

So I'm an idiot, and now I'm trapped with an even bigger idiot. Maybe I could jump out the window. I bet he'd love that.

Michael's still in his pajamas, and his eyes are all bloodshot. He skipped the gel today, so his comb-over is basically a cry for help. I have no idea how Mom finds him attractive. Maybe she makes out with his bald spot.

Nope. Nope. Not devoting any more brain cells to that topic.

Anyway, maybe he's too out of it to notice anything weird.

Okay, here's the new plan: Act normal until he goes away.

"Hi, Michael," I say, but my voice comes out all neon-bright. I want to smack myself. Acting nice is decidedly not acting normal.

He narrows his eyes. "Char, you're home early."

Most afternoons I do homework at the Lucky Panda, the restaurant where my mom works. I get free pot stickers and we haven't had to call the cops on a customer in months, so it's kind of awesome. I shrug. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

Michael has some office job selling overpriced beachfront timeshares. Our town, Chinook Shore, is one of those places that is pleasant to visit for a single week every year and not a day longer.

"Called in sick."

"You don't look that sick."

He scowls. “Phantom pain.”

From what I know, phantom pain is like your limb finding new ways to torment you from beyond the grave. Michael lost his left leg in Iraq. There are days when he can’t get out of bed. Once, I found him scrunched on the floor, hands groping for flesh and bone that was no longer there.

I’m all caught up in guilt about Michael’s bleak existence. Major mistake. Never drop your guard around the enemy.

He snatches the envelope out of my lap before I can even react. “What’s this?”

“Nothing.” I make a grab for the envelope, but he holds it high. Freaking tall person privilege. We really don’t acknowledge it enough.

He peers inside. “Where did you get this? You been stealing from me?”

Nah, the casino’s already got that on lock, I want to say, but don’t. Instead: “I have a job.”

“What job?”

“Just some clerical stuff at school.” Okay, this isn’t really true—I run the school website—but I don’t want to get into it.

Anyway, Michael is way more interested in the money than the job, which is the same energy he’s got for his own career. He squints. “How much is in here? A grand?”

It’s \$2,192, from five hours a week for thirty-two weeks at thirteen-seventy an hour. Not that I’m about to tell him.

Greed flickers over his face as he eyes the cash. “If you’ve been

working, maybe you should be contributing to this household.”

There’s a sudden glitch in the part of my brain that usually keeps me from, like, walking into traffic. “More like contributing to your gambling fund.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly, but his face is all red and pinchy.

He shoves the envelope into his waistband. “You think you’re so much better than me?”

I mumble, “I don’t think that,” even though I definitely think that.

“Your mama gives me her paychecks and it all goes into one bank account. We share money. We don’t keep it to ourselves. If you live under my roof and eat the food I put on the table, you follow the same rules.”

And that’s when I know he’s not giving the money back.

I could totally run for it. Snatch the envelope and shove past him. Bolt out the front door, sprint down the street, and then . . .

And then what? This isn’t a Disney show. I can’t go, like, live among the squirrels. I’m only sixteen. I’d have to drag myself back here sooner or later.

I have no real choice but to let him win. Like he always does.

After my parents divorced, Mom had a few boyfriends. They didn’t stick around for long. Zhao was all sketchy crime-boss

vibes and eventually had to leave the country. Noah fell way deep into Buddhism and ran off to some monastery in Vermont.

One night, when my mom was on the evening shift at the Jade Garden, a man came by as I was helping wipe down tables.

“Sorry, we’re closed, sir,” I said.

He smiled. “You must be Charise.” That was when I realized who he was. Mom’s new guy.

“Here, let me do that.” He grabbed the washcloth and started wiping off the table.

Michael looked like Kristoff from *Frozen*. Hair the color of wheat. Broad shoulders; large, doughy hands. He seemed sturdy and unmovable, like a mountain. Reliable.

After we finished with the tables, Michael said he’d brought me a present. A bag of White Rabbit milk candy.

“*Baobei*, say *xiexie*,” Mom chided.

My *thank you* was mostly muffled by the candy in my mouth.

He asked me about how old I was (seven and three-quarters), what happened today at school (our class hamster escaped), and what my favorite subject was (lunch). The same boring questions every boyfriend asked me. My eyes wandered downward. Metal poked out of his pants where his left ankle should’ve been.

“Are you a cyborg?” My favorite show on Cartoon Network was about these part-human, part-robot superheroes.

Mom cringed. “Char, be polite.”

“Quinn, it’s okay,” he said. *Quinn*? That was the nickname

my mom used with customers instead of her real name, Qinxu. I didn't know she also used it with the guys she dated. Zhao spoke Mandarin, and Noah called her pet names like "pookie" or "honeybun," which made me want to barf.

Anyway, I was more interested in Michael's leg. "Does it have any powers?" On the show, someone had a bionic arm that could beam red lasers.

Michael rolled up his khakis to reveal titanium. "I lost my old leg in an explosion, so the government gave me a new one. But it's boring. It doesn't give me any superpowers."

"Are you going to marry my mama?" I asked. It would be awesome to have a cyborg stepfather.

"*Char!*" My mother's voice was a warning bell.

He let out a whooping, full laugh. Then he knelt down so we were at the same level, and his clear blue eyes were big and sincere as he said, "I hope so, Charise. I hope so."

Four months later, Mom and Michael got married in Portland's city hall. It was a gray, wet morning, the kind where the rain can't make up its mind. I carried the rings and Michael's daughter, Olive, scattered rose petals at our feet.

My mom looked so beautiful that day. She had borrowed a shimmering ivory dress. Her ink-black hair cascaded over her shoulders in ringlets. She was radiant and happy. I hadn't seen her smile like that since my father.

During the vows, I figured that as long as Michael stuck around, he would be better than all the other dudes.

I was so wrong.

Two months after the wedding was the first time Michael blew up. He flipped the table like some Marvel superhero attacking a perfectly innocent dish of three-cup chicken. Mom begged him to calm down. Olive and I hid in our shared bedroom and sat with our backs against the door as he went full Hulk on the plates.

Years later, my mom would explain that Michael was sick with a disease called PTSD, which could bring somebody nightmares even when they were awake. But at age eight, I didn't know that. All I knew was the plates shattering, a bright, clean sound, almost like the song of a wind chime.

Olive slipped her hand into mine. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to remember the kind man who had wiped restaurant tables and given me White Rabbit candy.

Chapter Two

After Michael leaves with my money, I spend a few minutes figuring out how to kill him. *Sorry, officer, he slipped and fell onto my knife!*

But murdering someone, even someone who deserves it as much as my stepdad, would probably mess up the rest of my junior year. At the very least, I should wait until after AP exams.

So I resort to texting Drew **wyd**.

Drew McVeigh is this senior in third period pre-calc. He's all scruffy-skater vibes: sandy hair, voice like the crackle of dead leaves, and a scar on his chin. You know. The type of cute that inspires girls to comment *I can fix him* on TikTok.

In February we got paired up for a project on parametric equations and we would half-work, half-procrastinate in his bedroom. While we were computing intersection points, he kissed me, and I decided that was fine. We've been fooling around ever since.

He's not the love of my life or whatever. He's not even my boyfriend. But he's heard of deodorant and has his own car—well,

access to his dad's girlfriend's car—which puts him squarely in the top ten percent of Chinook Shore High School guys.

Fifteen minutes later, Drew's parked in front of my house. When he sees me, the corners of his lips drag upward, revealing a gap between his front teeth. "Mulan. What is *up*." I've asked him not to call me that, and yet here we are. Maybe I should start calling him Mushu.

He reaches through the driver's window for a high five, which I don't return.

"Don't make me regret texting you," I say.

"Yo, what's wrong with the nickname? Mulan is straight fire. She's a total badass, and she's hot."

"And I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that she's also Chinese."

"C'mon, Char, don't be that way." He dangles his hand in the air, still waiting on that high five, and after a beat, I lift my palm to meet his.

Maybe I should give him more crap about the nickname, but it's hard to stay pressed at Drew. It's like being mad at a golden retriever.

When I open the passenger door, the seat is cluttered with empty beer cans.

"My B, lemme fix that." In one fluid motion, he swipes all the cans onto the car floor. Classy.

I sit and click the seat belt buckle into place. "So, your dad's place?" We usually make out in Drew's room.

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “Nah, we can’t go there today. He’s being annoying.”

In a burst of recklessness, I say, “Let’s go to Osprey’s Point.”

Osprey’s Point is a picnic area near the shore. Benches, sandy gravel, leafy green trees. Gorgeous view of the Pacific Ocean. Like the rest of Oregon, before it was Osprey’s Point, it had a different name and it belonged to Indigenous people.

Now it’s become an infamous hookup spot for Chinook Shore High School students, exactly as Lewis and Clark intended. Drew has offered to take me before, but I always shot him down. I was scared that saying *yes* was the same thing as agreeing to go all the way. And that was *not* on my junior year bingo card.

But right now I’m choosing chaos.

He cuts his eyes to me. “Serious?”

“Why not?” I try to sound bored, but my heart skips at the thought of losing my virginity. What if it hurts? What if I screw it up somehow? Would it be weird if I find a wikiHow on sex and sex-adjacent topics? That’s definitely weird.

After a beat, he nods and twists the ignition to life.

During the drive, Drew puts on a Pink Floyd album, which is fine by me, because my brain is still replaying the incident with Michael. Every time I think about him shoving the envelope into his waistband, how easily he claimed the one thing that was *mine*, bam. New surge of anger. New wave of homicidal bloodlust.

I guess it's good that I'm hanging out with Drew.

When we pull up to Osprey's Point, it's abandoned, although someone must've been here recently—there are seltzer cans littered across the ground. In the sunlight, their tabs gleam like rubies.

He asks, "Do you want something to drink? I have Coronas."

I hate the blunt taste of alcohol, but I find myself nodding anyway.

We find a clean-ish bench facing the water and crack open our bottles. He wraps his arm around me, and I lean into his shoulder.

It's almost romantic. The ocean is humming with sunlight, and there's a soft breeze coming in. A whiff of salt. Somewhere far away, a seagull shrieks. If we wait another hour or two, we could watch the sun dip below the horizon, the same way it does every day.

As we sip our beers, Drew yaps about his older brother David, who recently got out of rehab.

"Dad thinks my brother is this total disaster, but David's still kinda my hero," he says. "He was always so badass. For his senior prank, he and his friends got this cow onto the second floor of the school. They set up all these hay bales. It refused to go back downstairs, so the school had to bring in a farmer to help. It was awesome."

Wait, I saw this on the local news in seventh grade. There was so much mooing. "That was *your brother*? No way."

“Yes way.”

I shake my head, amazed. “Has your class decided on a senior prank?”

He smirks. “Wait and see. It’s going to be spectacular.”

Until right now, I didn’t even know David was in rehab. Around here, it’s not rare for kids to end up there, but it isn’t something that people openly discuss. Drew and I don’t really have a relationship like this, where we actually talk about things.

I remind myself that he’s leaving in September and I’m not out here trying to be besties with a guy who once joked about me eating his goldendoodle. He did apologize for that one, but still. We don’t need to start spilling our guts out to each other.

When I kiss him, he tastes like Corona Light and mint-flavored lip balm.

We do that for a while and I climb into his lap; then his hands start roaming toward my hips. I let them roam. His body is hard and bony beneath mine. When I first started kissing Drew, I thought there would be some hunger clawing through me, some ravenous and obvious *need*—but it’s always been more like a mildly interesting science experiment. Maybe I’m not the type to feel anything stronger than that.

I don’t know how far he wants to go. I don’t know how far *I* want to go. And maybe it’s bad to do this here, outside, in plain daylight. But I want him to keep touching me. I want to forget about the rest of my shitty life.

“Char,” he mumbles into my mouth.

“Mmm?” I don’t really want to talk. It gets in the way of making out.

“Char. Stop.” Then he pulls away. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You’re kissing me like you’re upset. Like you’re trying to get rid of your own feelings.”

“I’m not upset.” I lean in for another kiss, but he dodges me.

“Uh-huh.” He pushes me off his lap, and my butt slides onto the bench. “If we’re gonna, um, do it, I wanna be more serious.”

I give a faint laugh. “What, like, girlfriend-boyfriend or something?” Why would we define the relationship now? He’s going off to college in a few months.

“Not even that. But you never want to talk.”

“What? We’re talking right now.” Which is hardly the best use of our mouths, by the way.

He scrapes a hand through his hair. “Like, you’re obviously pissed off. You’ve been all stiff ever since you got into my car. But you won’t even tell me what’s wrong.”

A small white-and-brown puff of a bird—a sandpiper, I think—lands near our feet.

I point. “Look, a birb.”

He doesn’t even bother glancing in the direction of my finger. “It’s like there’s this great wall between you and the rest of the world.”

Great wall. He cannot be serious. He’s acting like I owe him a peek into the depths of my soul when he says dumb stuff like

this. Annoyance flares in me. “You want to talk about something? Let’s start with the fact that Mulan is a ridiculously racist nickname.”

He blinks in genuine surprise.

“I didn’t know that it actually bothered you.” When I stare at him, he adds, “Kay, fine, Imma stop calling you Mulan. Happy?”

It doesn’t feel like much of an apology. He doesn’t get that the problem is bigger than a stupid nickname. “Okay, but what about that time you joked about me stir-frying your *dog*?” Which didn’t even make sense. Drew knows I can’t cook.

“Stop doing that,” he says.

“Doing what?”

He shakes his head. “You’re trying so hard to find stuff to complain about when the real problem is that you don’t want me to know anything about you.”

I throw my hands up. “I’m *fine* with you knowing things about me!” He knows plenty of things. Sure, they’re mostly tongue-related things, but still.

“Oh, yeah? Then what happened with your dad?” He raises his eyebrows as if this is a big *gotcha*.

“Drew, that’s not some crazy big secret. He’s a selfish dead-beat. He cheated on my mom.” I haven’t seen him in almost a decade.

“Oh.” He has the decency to look embarrassed. “I’m sorry.”

“Yep.”

“So, what’s got you so bothered *today*?”

I fall quiet. Talking about my sperm donor is like reminiscing over a sad story that happened to someone else, some past version of Char that no longer exists. Talking about Michael, my current family bullshit . . . that feels different. That feels like handing Drew a knife that he could use to stab me.

The silence stretches between us like a taut rubber band ready to snap.

He nods. “Exactly.”

“It’s not that interesting,” I say.

“I’m sure.” He stands up. “Let’s just go back. I’ll drop you off.”

“You don’t want to . . . hang out for longer?” My chest tightens at the thought of returning to the house. Michael is there. Michael will *always* be there. I can’t avoid him forever.

“Nah, I should get home. And Char?”

“Yeah?”

His face is this mask, and I know what he’s going to say before it even comes out of his mouth. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this anymore.”

Chapter Three

So, yeah. Life is super great. And things don't get much better the next morning.

I find Mom standing in the kitchen. We greet each other in Mandarin Chinese. I'm not really fluent, but we use it when nobody else is around or if we don't want eavesdroppers to know what we're saying. It's kind of like having a secret language, except the secret language is spoken by over a billion people.

Sunshine-yellow scrambled eggs sizzle on the skillet. She's an amazing cook. She should have her own restaurant. Her food is utterly wasted on my stepdad.

"Remember when you used to make those with tomatoes?" I ask. A classic Chinese dish. But Mom hasn't made it in years. Michael has the palate of someone who thinks Applebee's is fine dining.

She smiles. "The most important ingredient is soy sauce."

When's the last time we even had soy sauce in the house?

Anyway, she seems to be in a good mood, so I decide

to ask. “Um, so, did Michael mention anything about my money?” Maybe this isn’t a total L. Maybe she can talk to him for me.

Her spatula freezes mid-scrape. “What money?”

I swallow hard. “I had this envelope with cash. He took it yesterday. He stole it.”

“How much was in there?”

“About two grand.”

Now she looks at me, lips parting in surprise. “Where did you get all that?”

“I have a job at school.” Maybe I should’ve told her. I guess it was just easier not to. I don’t know when I stopped talking to her about my life.

She turns back to the stove. “Money is hard lately. Some of Michael’s sales didn’t go how he wanted.”

“Mom.” My voice cracks a little. I can’t believe she’s making excuses for him. Well, no, I can, but I don’t *want* to believe it. “It’s *my* money. I earned it.”

“I know, *baobei*.” *Precious baby*. But I don’t feel like much of her precious anything.

She slides the eggs onto a plate. “But right now we can’t cause trouble. Your stepfather is very stressed. Just until—”

Just until what? Until Michael hits it big at blackjack? Because given how bad he is at gambling, we might as well start buying Bitcoin.

But I don’t get the chance to ask before my stepsister

traipses into the kitchen. “Hi, Quinn! Oooh, eggs.” She doesn’t acknowledge me.

Imagine you’re using a public bathroom and then a stranger slides into the stall right next to yours. All you can see are their Converse high-tops, but you’re getting a full symphony of toilet-related awkwardness. And after the flush, as they use the sink, you sit and wait for them to dip because you absolutely don’t want to put a face to the sounds you just endured.

Yep. That’s Olive and me. Two people who happen to be using the bathroom at the same time.

I don’t hate Olive or anything. It’s more that I don’t trust her anymore. When our parents first got hitched, we were total besties. I’d vent to her about how Michael was making Mom cook greasy crap I didn’t like or whatever. Then my complaints would magically trickle their way to Michael, and he’d get wasted and take it out on us.

So I learned to stop talking to Olive.

Anyway, if she’s up, Michael’s probably not far behind, and it’s better for everyone if I’m not around by the time he drags himself into the kitchen like a swamp monster. And enlisting Mom’s help is a lost cause. So I disappear out the front door.

I get to homeroom early, which means I hear way more tea than normal. Everyone’s buzzing about a sophomore named Thayer who got busted for dealing, but nobody is sure about the specific drug. I hear three different versions of this same story before

first period. By the time the bell rings, Thayer is apparently a peddler for pot, ecstasy, and something so illegal nobody even knows the name.

Anyway, I have to tell Lola about the money, even though I'd rather step on a Lego. Thank God my morning is AP Chemistry and AP English Language, since she's not in either. Life's looking grim if molecular orbital diagrams are the fun choice.

But I can't procrastinate this convo forever. At lunch, I spot Lola at our usual table.

Quick backstory: Lola Garcia and I became friends in sixth grade, after I walloped her in the face.

My family had just moved to Chinook Shore. Olive and I enrolled in school here, but we had different lunch periods, so I was doomed to the double-whammy friendlessness of being the new kid and the only Asian kid.

In the cafeteria, there was this boy; his name was John or James or something. He moved away years ago. So let's call him John, because who cares.

John's dream was to be like the president. Not to get elected president someday. But to be exactly like the current president, even though he had more in common with a garden slug than with a New York real-estate billionaire.

So John was squawking that Lola's mom, who worked at the school as a custodian, was gonna get deported.

Maybe it's bad, but these days, when people say racist stuff, I don't always call them out. It feels hopeless and overwhelming,

like moderating a Reddit community for incels. But at age eleven, I'd just moved from Portland, so I didn't get that blatant racism was accepted here.

So I went up to John and tried to windmill-kick him in the head, but he ducked and my foot connected with only air. (Why did I go for a kick instead of literally anything else? Probably I thought it'd look cool. There is literally no limit to how much a sixth grader will debase herself to look cool.) My arms flailed as I fought to regain balance.

Suddenly Lola clutched at her nose, wailing. I'd struck her with my elbow.

Anyway, even though she went to the nurse's office and I went to the principal's office and John got away scot-free (something he *did* have in common with the president), Lola decided that we were besties after that. I don't know. Eleven-year-olds are weird.

Fast-forward to now. Lola is drawing in her sketchbook with her right hand and shoveling food with her left. Next to her elbow sits the metal tin of Prismacolor pencils I got for her birthday last year.

She's working on her portfolio, the one she's going to submit for the scholarship. Right now she's doing a strapless spring-green slip gown that reminds me of Tinkerbell's dress. Seeing it makes my stomach twist.

For a wild moment, I consider seeking refuge with the other Advanced Placement nerds, who are huddled at the opposite end of the cafeteria. They're these guys from chem that I sometimes

check answers with, but I've been avoiding that crowd ever since I overheard them trying to guess my bra size. It wasn't even that they were being gross. It was that their estimations were completely off, which made me seriously question the credibility of their lab results.

Anyway. I'm no coward. I'm not going to flee. I'm going to talk to Lola.

"Hey," I say, plopping down my tray of UFOs (Unidentifiable Food Objects).

She glances up. "Did you get it?"

That's the thing about Lola. No bullshitting around. No *Hi, Char, beloved friend of mine, how are you on this lovely spring day?*

"No. I'm really sorry."

Her pencil stops scritchng. "But you said—"

"I know what I said." I fiddle with a loose thread on my sleeve. "Some family stuff. I couldn't get the money." Maybe she'd get it if I explained Michael. But I don't go there with anyone. It feels like letting them read my diary or something.

She's quiet for a sec. Then she sighs. "It's whatever. I'll ask Mari." Lola is the type to call adults—yep, even her mom—by their first names.

"Really?"

"Yeah." She shrugs. "I didn't want to because, ya know, with everything going on with her treatments and the medical bills . . . And I didn't want to tell her about the scholarship and, like, make it a thing."

“I’m so sorry, Lo.”

“Stop apologizing. Mari’s always saying I should let her help me anyway.”

I nod, not knowing what else to say. There’s this awkward silence, which Lola always hates.

“Okay! Change of topic. Lookie there. Why’s your man hitting up your stepsister?”

She jabs in a vague direction with Prismacolor Premier Colored Pencil in Spring Green, and I follow with my eyes. By the vending machines, Drew is all up in Olive’s space. Every so often, he throws his head back and guffaws. There’s no way my stepsister is that funny. She’s the kind of person who says “LOL” instead of actually laughing.

I shrug. “He can do what he wants.”

Lola slaps a hand over her mouth in exaggerated surprise. “Did you break up?”

“Kinda?” I don’t know if there was anything *to* break up. “He said he doesn’t want to make out anymore.”

“You can’t be *that* bad of a kisser.”

I stick my tongue out at her. “That’s not why. He asked to get *more serious*, whatever that means, and I complained about his casual racism.”

She kisses her teeth. “Rookie mistake, darlin’. You can’t accuse white people of being racist.”

“Lola, he called me Mulan.” And I guess I sat there and took it.

“Mulan *is* the best Disney Princess,” she says. “Well, after

Lesbian Elsa. And the Little Mermaid. Okay, she's top five."

"You rank Ariel over Mulan?" I shake my head. "Ariel loses her voice *for a man*. Mulan saves all of China!"

"Yeah, but consider." And then Lola launches into a rendition of "Part of Your World" in her rich alto voice. When people begin to turn and stare, I kick her in the shin.

"Oww!" She clutches her leg in mock pain. "But I get you. Did I ever tell you why I broke up with Sarah?"

"Because she kept posting Bible verses about homosexuality on her Instagram story?"

"No, that was Church Sarah. This is Hot Sarah."

"Oh. Then no." I try to recall Hot Sarah's face, but I'm pretty sure my brain's just defaulting to Sadie Sink.

"She wanted me to speak Spanish while hooking up. I don't know if she had a Latina fetish or she was too lazy for Duolingo or what. I tried to go along with it, because she was so absurdly hot. Case in point: she was a natural redhead. And she was obsessed with yoga, so her butt looked—"

"Lo," I say.

"Okay, sorry. The last straw was when she asked me to recite Pablo Neruda poems in bed. Girlie, I'm not even doing the required reading for English class, you think I'm gonna read something with line breaks *for fun*? So I had to end things."

"Tragic." Personally, I might've tried to stick it out with someone hot enough to earn the nickname *Hot Sarah*. But Lola has more self-respect than I do.

We watch Drew's fingers graze Olive's bare shoulder. She giggles and flips her blond ponytail. I imagine a nature documentary voiceover: *Here, we observe two American teenagers in their natural habitat, engaging in a primitive mating ritual.*

Lola scoffs. "That dude is. Pa-the-tic." She punctuates each syllable with a tap of her fork against her plastic lunch tray. "He's probably doing this to make you jealous."

"Probably," I say, more to placate her than out of any real anger.

Drew shifts, and I catch a glimpse of his face. He's got this dazed, dopey look.

I force my eyes away. Maybe I should be heartbroken. Like, I was fully ready to lose my virginity to this guy yesterday, and now he's trying to slide on my stepsister. That's messed up, right? So shouldn't this hurt more? Maybe something is wrong with me. Maybe I'm a heartless bitch.

But then I remember my mom, and how my dad broke her heart cleanly in two, and how my stepdad now chips away at whatever remains. Bit by bit, day by day. Maybe it's better to be a heartless bitch.

Chapter Four

After school, I drop by my guidance counselor's office. Mrs. Lombardi waves me in. She's rocking this fuchsia blazer with a chunky gold necklace. For an old person, her drip is always on point.

"Charise!" She gestures at the chair across her desk. "How can I help you?"

Here we go.

I sit down. "I want to quit the webmaster job."

Her eyebrows rocket up so fast I think they might escape her forehead entirely.

"But you've been doing great! Mr. Horowitz has spoken about how helpful you were in getting rid of that virus he downloaded."

Mr. Horowitz, our librarian, gets scammed by these pop-up ads that claim there are "sexy singles in your area." An obvious lie, since we live in Chinook Shore.

"I think, um, my family . . ." I trail off, because it isn't like Michael straight-up told me to quit. But working feels pointless

now. All those hours, all that cash, just *poof*, gone. And now that Michael knows about the job, I'd have to fork over whatever I earn. But I don't want to get into this with my guidance counselor. "I'm just busy."

She nods. "Everything okay at home?"

"Splendid," I lie. I don't even know where that comes from. It's probably the first time in my life I've said that word out loud.

A pause. I can't tell if she believes me.

"Charise, it's April of your junior year. You got a perfect score on your PSAT, a first in our school's history, and you have straight A's," she says. "Have you given any thought to college?"

College isn't the obvious path forward for Chinook Shore kids. Lots of people end up in farm or factory jobs, since our county has a major agricultural presence. Others go into timber. Some of the overachievers head off to a four-year university like Oregon State, and a few years ago the valedictorian—his name was Zach or Zane—went to a fancy school on a full ride.

"I was probably going to apply to some local places," I say.

"Why don't you consider going out of state?"

I shrug. It's not that I don't want to make out with an entire frat house or drink until I piss myself or whatever it is you're supposed to do in college. I'm not actually sure what people do there. I've heard they also attend classes and learn things, but that might be a myth.

But I don't see how I could afford elsewhere. "I don't want to take out loans." I don't want to owe anybody anything. My