

ANYTHING
But OKAY

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CHAPTER ONE

“Life seems so much better in black-and-white.”

I draw this conclusion as the end credits to *Casablanca* roll.

“I mean, even *war* looks better,” I continue, picking through the remnants of the popcorn bowl. My favorites are the cracked but not fully popped kernels. “Not to mention so much more romantic.”

“Romantic?” my best friend, Farida, says with one graceful eyebrow raised. I wish I could do that. “What’s romantic about Rick and Ilsa not being together in the end? It’s so sad. I mean, I’d rather it be like *Mockingjay*. You know, like it’s not all rainbows and butterflies and happily ever after because they’re both affected by the war they lived through, but they’re *together* and they’re finding whatever happiness they can.”

It’s true, the two main characters in the film who are sooooo in love go off in different directions at the end. I guess I can see the argument for that not being romantic. But still . . . I was definitely shipping Ilsa and Rick.

Farida got pretty into the movie, especially during the scene where the refugees in Rick’s café started singing *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, as an act of resistance to drown out Nazi officers singing some German song. Farida’s parents came to

America as refugees from Iraq after the Gulf War, or as we call it in my house, *the war where Mom and Dad met*, so I totally get why that's a powerful moment in the movie.

I have to admit to swallowing a lump in my throat once or twice. Even our other best friend Ken brushed his sleeve across his eyes, but he swore it was just allergies. It was all so brave and patriotic.

"Sure they're not together, but they'll *always have Paris!*" Ken says, quoting one of the most famous lines from the film and clutching his heart dramatically. I swear, Ken should be on stage. I tell him that all the time. He says he prefers to remain behind the scenes.

"But that's just memories," Farida says. "They're never going to see each other again."

"Yeah, well, Rick's going off to fight. He might die," I point out. "But at least now he's going to die knowing that she loved him, I guess."

"Die!" Farida exclaims. "Stella, come on. The ending was tragic enough. Do you have to make it worse by making me think about Rick *dying?*"

Ken gives me a *Why did you have to go there?* look and I reply with a *What?* look.

I feel bad, but in wartime, dying is always a possibility. I'm from a military family, so I know that all too well. My brother, Rob, left the marines for civilian life a month and a half ago after serving two tours in Afghanistan. During both of Rob's

deployments, the fear of him not coming home was constantly at the back of my mind—and often front and center.

Now that he's home . . . well, I'm here with my friends trying really hard not to think about that. Thinking about Rob is a major downer these days.

"Sorry, Farida," I say. "But that's kind of what happens in war." I bite my lip, remembering about all the times I've freaked out about my brother dying.

"I know, Stella. But he's home now," she says, getting what I'm not saying. "You don't have to worry anymore."

That's what you think.

I don't tell anyone, even my best friends, that although my brother is back in our house physically, he's not back. Not really. At least, not the same brother he was before this last deployment. It was bad enough after the first deployment. He'd joined the combat club. My parents were already members. They both served in the Gulf War, Dad in the 3d Marines and Mom as a navy surgeon. That makes me the odd one out in the Walker family—the only one who hasn't served our country.

It's even worse now, though. This time he's so different from the brother who left it's like he was possessed by an alien from one of his favorite sci-fi movies while he was over there. But I came here to forget about that for a while, which I'm obviously not doing very well.

"Yeah," I say, shrugging. "So on a scale of one to ten, how do you rate *Casablanca* for the Keeping It Reel rankings?"

“I’m thinking a nine,” Ken says. “It’s got meme-worthy lines, great acting, and I’m officially in love with Ingrid Bergman, even though she died before I was born. Does that make me weird?”

“It’s okay, we already know you’re weird,” I tell him. “It’s part of your charm.”

“Gee, thanks,” Ken says, tossing a pillow at me. “You guys are the best.”

I laugh and catch the pillow, then ask Farida, “So what’s your rating?”

“I don’t know,” she says slowly. “I loved it for all the reasons Ken said but . . .” She fiddles with the corner of the pillow she’s holding on her lap.

“But what?” Ken asks.

“Well, it’s supposed to be Casablanca. In Morocco. Which is in North Africa,” Farida says. “But everyone in the film is white—except for Sam, the piano player.”

Ken gives me a quick glance from the corner of his eye.

I wonder if he noticed. I didn’t. And that makes me feel like a bad friend.

“Well, it was filmed in Hollywood in 1942,” Ken says. “I looked up all this stuff about it before we watched. You know the scene where they sang *La Marseillaise* and people were crying? A lot of the actors were actual refugees from Nazi Germany, so they weren’t pretending to cry.”

“Okay fine, but . . . are you telling me that they could only

find one person of color in all of 1942 Hollywood?” Farida asks. “Just one?”

“Well yeah, that does seem kind of ridiculous when you think about it,” I admit. “I feel terrible that I watched the whole movie without even noticing that.”

“That’s because white’s your default,” Farida says. “So it’s not going to seem out of the ordinary for you the way it does for me.”

I wonder how many other things are “default” for me, but Ken is still arguing the race issue.

“Yeah, but this movie was filmed before civil rights and all that,” Ken says. “It’s a film of its time. We have to judge it in its historical context.”

“If you’re telling me that its ‘historical context’”—Farida does air quotes with her fingers—“means that it was whitewashed, then okay, fine.”

“You’re right,” I say. “I guess I was too caught up in the story to notice. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not like I want to be your travel agent for an extended white guilt trip,” Farida says, flopping back on the couch. “It is a great story. But . . . I can’t turn off noticing when something’s not the way it’s supposed to be like you can. Just like I can’t turn off having brown skin and dark hair and eyes.”

“And like I was born wearing white girl goggles,” I admit.

“Look, I get what you’re saying,” Ken says. “And I get that it’s

wrong. But what are we supposed to do about it?" He sounds annoyed and defensive. "This movie was made before we were born," he continues. "Before our parents were born. I'm not even sure if my *grandparents* were born yet."

I hope this doesn't turn into an argument, like it often does when Farida points out something to do with racism that the two of us have both completely missed.

If I'm honest, I have to confess that the first time it happened, I was pretty defensive, too. I took it personally, because I felt like my best friend was calling me a racist.

It was in fifth grade, before we started hanging out with Ken. We were having a sleepover at Farida's house and flipping through channels to see what was on TV. *Aladdin* the cartoon movie was on the Disney Channel.

"Oh, let's watch that!" I said.

"Ugh, no way," Farida said, skipping past it. "It's racist."

I stared at her, openmouthed. "What's racist about *Aladdin*?"

"Well, they sing about the Middle East: 'It's barbaric, but hey, it's home,'" Farida said. "How would you like if they sang that about America in a Disney movie?"

"That's different," I said without a second thought.

Farida stared at me, hurt evident in her brown eyes. "Different? How?" she asked me. "Do you think *I'm* barbaric? And my parents?"

"No, I—"

"What about Yusef? He's only seven but is *he* barbaric?"

I was taken aback by how angry and upset she was. I was too clueless to understand both what was wrong with *Aladdin* and why what I'd said was hurtful. I mean, I'm still clueless sometimes, obviously, but I'm trying to be better.

What I felt back then was defensive. Like my best friend suddenly thought I was a terrible person.

"Wait, so you think I'm horrible?"

"I didn't before," she said. "But right now you sound it."

I was so upset I almost called my parents to pick me up to take me home. It was Mrs. El-Rahim who talked us through it. She came in to bring us some baklava and saw that Farida and I were sitting on opposite sides of the room, not talking to each other and looking miserable. Mrs. El-Rahim helped me understand where Farida was coming from. She explained to me that Farida didn't bring up these things because she thought I was a horrible person, but so that I could understand her better. She was trying to help open my eyes to things that I might not notice because I'm from the dominant culture. It was *because* we were friends that Farida felt that she could talk to me about such difficult things, so we could be better friends, even closer.

Then Farida said how hurtful it was when I said, "That's different," and I started feeling defensive again, but Mrs. El-Rahim talked us both through that, too.

I'm not saying it's easy to have these conversations, or that my first reaction isn't always to be on the defensive and try to argue it like Ken is doing now.

Ken wants to work in TV or movies someday, and he's really into the history of film. He has an almost encyclopedic memory of old movies, which he supplements with rapid use of IMDb and Google to launch into the historical context defense whenever Farida makes any comment about lack of genuine representation.

It's true there's historical context. But one thing I've learned from being friends with Farida is that still doesn't make it any better.

Farida has gone silent. Ken and I might feel uncomfortable when we're called on having white as our default, but Farida has to live with that being the way things are in pretty much every movie she sees and every book she reads. And in her everyday life, which is way worse.

"I just want you to *notice*," she says finally, sitting up. "That's all. I'm not an idiot. I know you can't go back and change what's wrong with a classic movie—well, unless Dr. Who left the TARDIS in Argleton somewhere. But you *can* change whether you notice it or not. And you can recognize that Hollywood is still making the same mistakes today. For every Black Panther movie, there's, like, ten white Spider-Man movies."

There's an uncomfortable silence and I'm holding my breath, hoping that Ken doesn't keep trying to persuade her with "historical context" and just hears her.

"Oh," he says. "Fair enough."

I exhale a sigh of relief.

"And not just with movies," Farida adds.

“Got it,” Ken says.

“And even . . .” Farida hesitates.

“And even what?” I ask.

“Well, like, being more aware of stuff that’s happening at school. You don’t seem to have noticed that there’s more than the usual level of *we don’t like brown people* crap going on since school started this year.”

I glance over at Ken to see if he knows what Farida means, but he looks just as clueless as I feel. We’ve only been back at school for, like, a week. What could we have missed?

“Like . . . what?” he asks.

“Well, did you hear that yesterday, when Dev Iyer showed Isaac Taylor the schematic for his latest robotics project, Scooter Douglas reported him to the school resource officer for building a bomb?”

“What?” I exclaim. “That’s ridiculous. Between Dev Iyer and Jenny Moss, our school has won practically every robotics prize going for the last two years!”

“You know that. I know that. Anyone who knows Dev or reads the school newspaper beyond the sports section knows that,” Farida says. “But there are a lot of people at school who aren’t in either category. Do you think Scooter would have reported Jenny Moss for building a bomb?”

“Not likely,” Ken says. “And that’s wrong.”

“Knowing Scooter, he’d probably make some stupid crack about how girls aren’t capable of building bombs,” I say. “Or robots, for that matter. Even though he can’t do either himself.”

“Scooter ended up getting himself a two-day suspension,” Farida says.

“Serves him right,” I say.

“That’s not all. Some of Chris Abbott’s friends are taking his dad’s anti-immigrant stuff to heart,” Farida says. “Wade Boles and Jed Landon told Yonas Ambaye he should go back to his country the other day. Yonas said Chris was right there with them. He might not have said the actual words, but he didn’t do anything to stop them.”

Chris’s dad is the mayor of our town, and Chris is my greatest rival at debate club. His dad is running for governor of our state on a campaign that appears to consist of telling us that the state’s economy is a mess and he’s the only one who can fix it, and that immigrants and refugees are to blame. Chris and I don’t agree on very much. But Chris is smart, which is more than I can say for some of the guys he hangs around with.

“No way!” I exclaim.

“Yes way,” she says. “Like, what, brown people can’t be born in the US? Yonas was born here in Virginia.”

“I haven’t heard anything like that,” Ken says.

Farida doesn’t say anything, but her silence speaks volumes.

“Wait . . . is this another thing I’m not noticing?” he asks.

“Well, it’s not like they’re going to say any of that stuff *to you*,” Farida says. “But if they say it in *front* of you, I hope you *will* notice.”

“Of course I’d notice,” Ken says. He sounds really offended.

“But will you *say* something?” Farida asks.

“Of course we will,” I assure her. “You’re our friend. We’ve got your back.”

“Not just if it’s me,” she says. “If it’s anyone.”

“Well . . . yeah,” he says slowly. “Anyone.”

“Wrong is wrong,” I say.

Farida leans back against the sofa cushions and smiles. “It’s good to hear you say that,” she says.

I keep thinking about Chris and his friends telling Yonas to go back to his country when his country is *this* country. Where do they get off? I want to talk to Mom and Dad about it when I get home, but as soon as I walk in the front door, I can tell something’s wrong.

Clue #1: Our dog, Peggy, doesn’t greet me like she usually would. Clue #2: Mom and Dad are sitting close together at the kitchen table, speaking in low, clipped voices.

The tension is suffocating. I want to turn and go back Farida’s, but she’s working a shift at her family’s restaurant, Tigris, this evening. So I force myself to walk into the kitchen.

“Hey, I’m home,” I say in a tentative bid for my parents’ attention.

“Hi, Stella,” Mom says. “Dinner will be ready at six thirty. Why don’t you go do your homework?”

In other words, *get lost and let me finish talking to Dad*. I'm about to do what she tells me to, even though it's Saturday and my homework's done, when I notice Dad's icing his hand.

"What happened? Did you hurt yourself?"

Dad doesn't answer. If anything, his lips compress into an even thinner line, as if I'm some kind of enemy interrogator instead of his kid just wanting to know what's going on.

"Can someone tell me what's up?" I say. "Because it's pretty obvious something's not right around here."

The seconds of silence before Mom finally opens her mouth to speak feel like an eternity.

"Your brother has been having a difficult time since he got back," she says.

"Yeah. Tell me something I don't know."

"I really don't need snark on top of everything else right now, Stella," Mom snaps.

"Sorry," I mumble, but that's a lie. I'm annoyed, not sorry. "So what's his problem?"

"We don't know exactly," Mom says. "And until we can get him to admit he's got a problem, we're struggling to figure out how to get him the help he obviously needs."

"So you're telling me I just have to suffer until he figures it out?" I say.

"Stella, the world doesn't revolve around you," Dad says. "It's something we all have to learn sooner or later. You might as well learn right now."

My parents have no clue. They just don't.

“Dad, I already know that. In this family, the world revolves around Rob.”

With that, I storm out of the room and head upstairs. I get better answers from stupid Siri than my parents these days.

Hey, Jason—

How's reentry to the real world treating you?

I know it's only been a few months, but it hasn't exactly been a breeze here in the land of Rob Walker.

My mom wanted to throw me a big welcome home party, and she got all hurt and upset when I said no. She's a Desert Storm vet herself, but she didn't seem to understand why I would rather get a filling without Novocain than be around a lot of people asking me what it was like over there. Even Dad didn't understand. I don't know, maybe their war was different? Dad came home an injured hero. He's got a Purple Heart and a huge ugly scar to show for his wartime service.

Sometimes I almost think I'd rather be in a firefight than back here having to make small talk about stupid crap—except for the part where one of my buddies doesn't make it.

Pretty messed up, huh?

When I was over there, all I could think about was being back here, and now that I'm back here . . . I feel like a Star Wars fan at a Star Trek convention.

Like I don't have any idea how to "Live long and prosper."

Yeah, I know. I can hear you laughing right now and saying "There's a reason we called you ThunderGeek, Rob. Emphasis on geek."

To top it all off I saw Sandra last week. Remember that girl I thought I was going to come back to? She was at church with her

fiancé, Scott. Yeah, she's gonna marry the guy who stole her heart while I was over there dodging bullets and IEDs. Isn't that special?

Sandra told me I looked well and said she was happy I was back safely. No thanks to you, I was thinking the whole time, remembering how messed up I was the day I got her Dear John letter.

Scotty boy and I shook hands, and it was all very civilized 'cause we were at church, even though I wanted to punch him for taking away the imagined future that had helped keep me going.

Well, enough of me complaining. What have I got to complain about? I'm not still stuck in Walter Reed like Travis, learning how to walk again on prosthetic legs.

Or dead like Reyes.

Anyway, how are you doing?

Hope it's smoother sailing at your end.

ThunderGeek out.