

"As always, Rachel Gold does cutting-edge fiction like no one else."

- Ellen Hart, author of *In a Midnight Wood*
and Mystery Writers of America Grand Master

Review Copy

curious
minds

rachel gold

Praise for the works of Rachel Gold

Being Emily

Winner – 2013 Moonbeam Children’s Book Award in Young Adult Fiction – Mature Issues

Winner – 2013 Golden Crown Literary Award in Dramatic / General Fiction

Finalist – 2013 Lambda Literary Award in Young Adult

Engrossed... Enchanted... Rachel Gold has crafted an extraordinarily poignant novel in *Being Emily*... The unique mechanism of depicting Emily’s speech as computer code is striking, defining the character distinctively. The careful and deliberate spacing of Claire’s chapters are extraordinary; resulting is a pacing of action that is gripping. There is definitely gold to be found in this well-constructed novel.

-Lambda Literary Review

It’s rare to read a novel that’s involving, tender, thought-provoking and informative... What’s impressive is Gold’s delicacy in handling the physicality of Emily’s story. She smoothly navigates the more intimate parts of Emily’s transformation. And the author can bring you to tears as you read about Emily’s struggle with gender identity.

-TwinCities.com

I couldn’t put it down... It’s not a sad or angst-ridden story at all. Instead it feels incredibly honest, and there are moments of joy, anger, and sorrow, laced together in a way that will make you cry and laugh along with the characters. It doesn’t shy away from the hardship but it also doesn’t make the claim that this hard stuff is all a trans person’s life is ever... All in all, I think this is an excellent book that captures an honest, painful, but ultimately hopeful and joyful story of a young trans teen.

-YAPride.org

Just Girls

Winner – 2015 Golden Crown Literary Award in Young Adult

The novel covers all manner of sex, sexuality and gender identities and is an excellent educational tool, as well as a very good read... This book sits particularly well in the teen/young adult audience category, but can be enjoyed and appreciated by a much older audience as well, especially those who are keen to expand their knowledge and try to understand a little more about what it means to be trans*.

-*Curve Magazine*

Brilliant, brilliant, and all kinds of brilliant... Written with a sure-footed and almost magical lightness... Like a great wine: a beautiful blend of different emotions and different people told with depth, and complexity. It is a richly layered novel, which leaves the reader enthralled and wanting more of this exquisite concoction.

-*Lambda Literary Review*

As I said for *Being Emily*, this is an excellent book for any young person to read as it is a story about people like them and unlike them, which is always the basis for a good tale... What comes across strongly is that, to use my favourite quote from that great woman philosopher Marge Simpson, “our differences are only skin deep but our sames go down to the bone.” This is also another fine read for any age – we were all young once and as I always maintain, still changing, still evolving.

-*Glasgow Women’s Library*

My Year Zero

Winner – 2016 Golden Crown Literary Award in Young Adult

Gold has skillfully written a story with timely topics for navigating the slippery approach to adulthood, ranging from

sex and sexuality, relationships, self-discovery, overcoming difficulties with authority figures, parental bullying and neglect, and bipolar disorder. *My Year Zero*...will appeal to both young and more experienced adults, meeting difficult topics head-on with a compelling story (and a masterful story-within-a-story) written to both inform and entertain.

-Lambda Literary Review

In the Silences

Winner– 2019 Moonbeam Children’s Book Award silver medal in Pre-Teen Fiction – Mature Issues

Winner – 2020 Golden Crown Literary Award in Young Adult

Rachel Gold has crafted a story that is both a sweet coming of age romance, but is also a treatise on societal issues that impact everyone. ... *In the Silences* is something I think could be and should be required reading for a number of people and could be used in a classroom setting. I absolutely loved this book and found myself learning new things. This book will leave you thinking and that is something that only great books can do.

-*The Nerdy Girl Express*

As many white people are starting a long-overdue education in whiteness and anti-racism, *In the Silences* is a great book to turn to. This is a YA novel equally about Kaz’s exploration of their nonbinary identity and their awakening to how racism affects their best friend (and love interest), Aisha, who is Black and bisexual. I loved how both Aisha and Kaz educate themselves to be better allies to each other—they support each other while recognizing that their struggles are different. ... For both the nonbinary rep and the exploration of whiteness, this is a perfect addition to any high school library or teen’s bookshelf.

-*BookRiot*

Synclair

Rachel Gold creates a conversation when you read one of her books. *Synclair* is no different as it is an intriguing talk about religion. I love the different opinions and ideas that Gold's characters engage in and express. It is actually a process that I am going through right now and Gold's book comes right on time.

Synclair is about more than religious introspection as Gold adds romance to the mix. Now is this done in a typical way? Heck no! It is a Gold book. First we have Kinz, the girl Synclair currently secretly crushes on and who just happens to be her best friend. Then her best friend from the past comes back and she is hot. She is not only gorgeous, but likes girls.

Easy triangle right? (laugh) Then there is an accidental kiss with someone else and talk about complications! I loved it. Gold takes on some controversial topics and does it splendidly!

-Phoebe, *NetGalley*

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rachel gold

Other Bella Books by Rachel Gold

Being Emily
Just Girls
My Year Zero
Nico & Tucker
In the Silences
Synclair

About the Author

Raised on world mythology, fantasy novels, comic books, and magic, Rachel Gold (they/she) is the author of multiple award-winning queer & trans young adult novels. Rachel is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Macalester College, a nonbinary lesbian, all-around geek and avid gamer. Their diverse writing career includes seven years as a reporter for a regional LGBTQ newspaper and fifteen years in corporate marketing. For more information visit: www.rachelgold.com.

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- Beta readers Lenny Prater and Raikha Patel.

And thank you, dear reader! Connecting with readers through books, events and online is part of what makes writing joyful for me. I hope that joy comes through in these pages.

For Macalester—thanks for bringing me back.
And especially for my students, who teach me so much!

CHAPTER ONE

Maze

I fell out of love with this party twenty minutes ago and can't tell if I'm more disappointed by the party or myself. College parties should be a pinnacle of excitement after an all-remote senior year of high school. Mixed reviews so far. I attended two last fall and only one was a disaster. I want this party to firmly swing the balance in favor of group social events with same-aged peers—but this is not happening. I'll give the party another hour to produce wonderment or fascinating disaster, then I'm leaving.

My room on campus is about a mile away from this house. I don't know who lives here, but from the cheap décor and psychedelic paint colors I'm guessing all students. I'm sitting on a couch that smells like wet cat and watery ketchup, but it's enthusiastically firm despite its age. The two couches in this bright, mustard-colored living room have been pushed against the walls to make room for dancing. I don't want to awkwardly watch the dancers that are crammed elbow-to-elbow through the middle of the room, but if I look down the length of the

room, I end up staring at the couple making out on the far side of this couch.

It's hard not to stare. One is dressed all in green, four different shades: sweater, shirt, jeans, boots. The greens in her shirt and sweater bring out the golden hue in her olive complexion. Her dark hair is about an inch long, so short I almost mistook her for my friend Bas—who invited me.

“Just show up for a few,” Bas had said. “Meet my girlfriend, eat free food, do whatever passes for dancing. Then you can go.”

Bas disappeared an hour or two ago. I'm assuming with the new girlfriend.

Three of the greens in this outfit I'm observing—the shirt, sweater, and jeans—match the necktie of the person whose lap she's in. That person is in a brightly flowered button-down shirt with a green and gold paisley tie—and wearing a “he/him” pronoun button that I appreciate. He's big-bellied and flat chested and has deep red hair in a short shag cut over tan skin with sepia undertones.

I'm imagining the coordination these two went through on the outfits. Did the paisley tie come first or the four tones of green? Did they text photos or get dressed together?

I could walk back to my dorm in the cold, but my roommate has her boyfriend over this weekend because I'm supposed to spend it at home with my moms. Except they figured I'd come in late and planned date night. They offered to change it to family movie night, but that means they'd still be trying to cuddle on the couch when I wasn't looking and I'd rather give them the space.

Plus I really did want to come to this ultra queer party since I dodged most of the official meetings last semester. Trying to decide now if I want to go to meetings this spring. Our school's lesbian lit treasure hunt is about to begin, which means there'll be literary madness and, honestly, that sounds great.

“You're staring,” Bas says from behind me, half-shouting over the music. As I jump-turn, she waves a hand in the direction of the oblivious couple. “Which I fully support, but when they notice, things could get awkward.”

Bas is an average sized white human wearing a probably ironic pink frilled shirt and a dark-gray wool pirate coat over skinny jeans and ankle boots. She keeps her light-brown hair buzzed to a quarter inch, which emphasizes her cheekbones and eyes—big and greenish.

“I’m trying to figure out what they fight about,” I tell her. “Personal space? Astrology? Matchy-matchy outfits? Is one of them secretly plotting to dump the other since we’re in the armpit of winter and everyone wants an upgrade?”

“Those two,” she says like she knows all about them. “Probably fight about moldy yogurts someone left in the fridge.”

I snort and apply that idea. Doesn’t fit, but I like it. I ask, “Where have you been? It’s hours.”

“Only if you round up,” she says.

“New girlfriend?”

“No, the rugby team just got here. I was checking the décor of all the rooms we’re not allowed in. But Kai’s here now. Have you seen the whole team together? Hot. But she’s hottest.”

I stand up and she leads me through the kitchen into the dining room where there’s food covering the long table. The room is packed with people because they get talking as they’re filling plates and then don’t move out of the room.

“How so?” I ask Bas as we weave between bodies wearing jeans and tees or sweatshirts. I’ve heard plenty about how Kai is hot, but not *hottest*.

She stops and faces me, making the human traffic jam so much worse. “She writes and it’s good! Plus she looks adorably cute running down the field. And she listened to me explain all the design choices I made in French House this year. Nobody does that. Except you.”

“Totally did,” I grumble as we get moving again.

When I started at Mindeburgh College last fall, I thought it would be easy and familiar. I grew up here in the Twin Cities—or at least in a suburb. But even though I was super smart in my high school I might only be average smart for this school. And last year being on video for classes all the time was nuts.

Bas and I met at the first queer group meeting in September and she stuck by me those scary, lonely first three months. Maybe she was as scared as I was, but she didn't show it. I cried on her a lot. In the middle of last semester, I thought we were best friends maybe on the way to dating. Then came the Halloween Party debacle of 2021 and we haven't talked much since then. I think she feels guilty but won't admit it—and the invitation to this party is part of her trying to apologize. Or she's trying to show me that she's got someone now and she's not going to try to hone in on my people. She doesn't apologize with her words a lot, but she's been bringing me random baked goods and inviting me to stuff the last few weeks. I think she missed me.

Plus all my high school friends went back to their colleges in other states after winter break. I'm the only one in our friend group who stayed in Minnesota for college. So I guess I missed Bas too.

Both of my moms say I need more real-world friends. I don't disagree. I had a good friend group in high school but they mostly stayed with my sort-of ex when we split up over the summer. It's been great being in person for school this year and I talk to plenty of classmates, I just don't stay interested in that many. I can't tell if my social muscles are out of use or if I broke something internally or if they're actually boring. I can't ask that, so I keep muddling through and trying to figure it out.

At least Bas isn't boring and I have high hopes for Kai, the new girlfriend. Bas navigates us through the mass in the dining room to the far side of the table. Three people in rugby T-shirts are trying to talk and eat. Bas comes up behind the shortest of these three, a stocky Black girl with green braids. She's wearing a Mindeburgh Rugby sweatshirt—our college logo with the word "rugby" in turquoise on a gold background—over what might be black-and-white plaid fleece pajama bottoms. This is Bas's new girlfriend, Kai. I've seen photos on Bas's phone of her bright smile, looking friendly and fun. Bas slides an arm around her.

Kai shrugs off Bas's touch and spins to face her.

“Hey, it’s me,” Bas says.

“I know it’s you,” Kai says.

“Why are you mad at me?” Bas asks, taking a cue from her tone and the tense line of her lips.

Kai asks, “Are you working for Mads Leland?”

Bas rocks back a half step. “Yeah, he asked me to be one of his spring research assistants. How do you know that?”

“On what project?” Kai’s eyes have narrowed, her lips pressed together, but still turning up, like she never completely stops smiling.

“Something about disability accommodations. Data stuff. Why?”

As they’ve been talking, one of the other rugby T-shirt folks, not much taller than Kai, purple hair shading to violet at the tips, has edged back to the table and turned her focus to the food. Now with a glance I see that the food was an excuse and she’s actually heading out through the kitchen, making an escape.

The other rugby person is a few inches taller than me, blond hair in a ponytail, broad-cheeked face that I half recognize. I don’t have a class with her, but I’ve been in rooms with her and I can almost remember her name. She’s leaning into this Bas and Kai conversation, maybe more than I am.

Kai says, “You need to quit—request another job. Do you know him?”

“Had two classes with him. He knows his stuff.” Bas is defensive, arms crossed, jaw tight.

“That research project is trying to prove that a lot of disability accommodations don’t work,” Kai says. “It’s utter shit.”

Bas shrugs. “That’ll show up in the results. Don’t you think there should be testing to figure out what does and doesn’t work?”

Kai’s eyes narrow further. “You sound like someone who knows more than a little about the project.”

“I read the summary. It made sense.”

“Are you *serious* right now?” Kai lifts her hands, palms up, like a shrug and then out, pushing away. “How much do you

even know about accommodations and Mads Leland? Have you read his bullshit think pieces?”

“You have?” Bas asks.

“Too many of them,” Kai tells her. “I was going to try to talk to you about this, but the way you’re defending this project, I don’t think we can date. It’s so far from what my life’s about.”

“What?”

“I’m breaking up with you,” Kai says, hands crossing and flicking outward, like a referee calling a foul.

I guess despite all those photos, her smile does go away. And her stare is pretty fierce. Bas glares back like they’re having a telepathic duel. The tension makes my skin itch.

The times Bas has come through for me, if I’m being honest, are more in number than the times she’s screwed stuff up—it only doesn’t feel that way because the screwups were so much bigger. I should stand up for her, right? She texted me about getting picked as a first-year student for this research assistant position, super excited. It sounds like a huge deal.

I say, “Don’t be too hard on Bas, that position’s a big opportunity. I don’t think she can get another one like it.”

Kai’s gaze flicks to me and whatever she reads in my posture or appearance gets a nod. She tells Bas, “You do what you have to do. But I’m not dating you. Can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Bas asks.

“Both.”

“Dick move,” Bas says.

The blond rugby player leans in more, close enough that her arm is touching Kai’s. She’s facing me as much as facing Bas. “Would you date someone who goes against your beliefs? Anti-queer or Republican or balls out for crystal healing, whatever it is you can’t do?”

“Bas is kind of a superlesbian like me,” I say. “I don’t think anti-queer folks are trying to date her.”

“How are *you* on her side?” this girl asks, like we know each other. Like she knows a bunch about me that I don’t. This is possible. I skip the meetings, but I post fairly often in the queer student online spaces.

Where do I know her from? Queer group meeting, probably, but I have a memory of facing her. Ah, orientation week. I snuck out of the tour and went to watch a panel that she was on.

“Felicity?” I ask and she winces.

“Lys, everyone calls me Lys. Please.”

“I’m Maze.”

“I know. Everyone knows who you are. I thought with all your queer theory, you’d be cooler about accommodations.”

A familiar feeling of sick vertigo rises in my throat. Once again, I’m in the middle of a fight I don’t understand.

“I am,” I say, though I’m not sure this is true. I don’t know enough about this. “But I’m also cool about people testing assumptions. If something can’t be tested, isn’t that just dogma?”

Lys blinks at me. “Are you assuming the testing is unbiased?”

“You’re assuming it is biased.”

“Given the state of the world, who do you think is more likely to be right?” she asks.

I turn to Bas, wanting to ask her what this professor is really like, but she’s still in that telepathic duel with Kai.

She tells Kai, “You can’t break up with me. We had, like, three, maybe four dates. We’re not even officially anything yet. You can’t break up a couple that isn’t.”

“Well then it doesn’t matter, does it?” Kai says. “I am not dating you, whether we were dating or not, especially not when you’re defending the most biased ‘researcher’ on this campus and I am using the term loosely because it is not research when you go to fill in your assumptions about how the world works.”

“I’m not asking you to date him!” Bas says.

“But you were asking me to date you?”

To me that sounds like a real question, but the way Bas’s jaw clenches, she heard it some other way.

“Oh fuck off,” Bas spits. She turns in a swirl of pirate coat and stomps out of the room.

The front door of the house slams and I turn toward the sound. Bas is my ride back to campus—or was. It’s so cold out and I didn’t wear my snow boots. I guess I can take a Lyft from here to my moms’ house. I’ve got my toothbrush in my bag anyway and there’s spare clothes and Adderall at the house.

Behind me, Kai sighs heavily. I expected her to stay angry, but the sound is resigned.

“Food?” Lys asks her.

“Dance for a song or two, then food, then...”

“Cathartically break shit?” Lys asks.

“Absolutely.”

I turn around to face them, wanting to know if they’re serious and where they’d go to break things. If that’s for real, can I join them? But they’re already walking away through a gap at the end of the table where all the veggies sit still piled high.

I do not want to walk back to campus. Maybe I can find an empty corner and doze for a bit, get a ride home after date night is safely concluded.

CHAPTER TWO

Lys

How did I end up under a boy in a strange bedroom at a queer party? Boredom. No, that undersells it. I do think he's cute, but cute for someone else's body to appreciate. I implicate compulsory heterosexuality in the decision-making process and the fact that I'd only dated girls in high school. Also I thought he was gay, but midway into our making out, I realize he's bi and I am not.

"Linc, I'm not into this," I tell him.

He's half listening, so I put my palm on his chest and push. He sits back, hands on hips, looking every bit as gay as I thought he was. Linc is a white guy with bushy brown hair and a patchy but impeccably groomed short beard. I'd never made out with someone bearded before and figured I wasn't likely to again, so why not.

This is why not: he's got his hands on his hips, while straddling my legs, saying, "I could *so* be making out with someone else."

"That's the idea," I point out.

He pouts with his entire face and shoulders. I consider kissing him a little more, for science. It wasn't a bad experience, only it didn't feel at all like kissing girls. I'd only kissed two girls but both times I felt that I'd charge through a wall to get back to the experience. If Linc were on the other side of wall from me—totally fine. I'd probably sit with my back against it and play games on my phone. Plus, I don't want anything else to happen. There isn't a place to go to from this kissing, not for me; he clearly wants this to go somewhere and has mapped that path onto our bodies already.

The door opens because Linc had not locked it the way he said he had—and a body outlines itself in the light from the hall. Hard to tell from lying down how tall or who, until she says, "Oh sorry," and I recognize Maze's voice. We were in that Bas vs. Kai argument/breakup downstairs an hour ago.

Maze is another first-year college student, like me. She'd stopped going to the queer and trans events by the time I started in late September, but kept posting on the student forums. I'd read her epic posts with warm enthusiasm, now chilled from her defense of Bas. And I was all set to like Bas. Kai had been praising her for the last two weeks for being clever and thoughtful about design and international politics, plus a good kisser.

"Come on in," I tell Maze, holding my hand out and waving her in. Linc and I are done here, so if she needs the room, she should have it.

Maze steps up to the side of the bed. I figure maybe she wants a make-out room, but she's alone. She's a bit shorter than me but from this angle she looks mega tall and casually elegant with a baby-blue bandana tied around her head and long, straight dark hair falling to her shoulders. She's got serious dark brown eyebrows and serious dark pink lips—a combination that makes me feel I can tell her things.

"Threeway?" Linc asks, hopeful.

"No," Maze says and wraps her fingers around mine.

I jerk with surprise and grab her fingers so she doesn't think I'm jerking away from her. Except now I'm holding her hand.

Are we supposed to be holding hands?

I mean, I want to—or wanted to until that conversation with Bas.

“Well you’re both awful,” Linc declares and climbs off his perch on my thighs. “But if you change your mind, text me.” He half-slams the door on the way out, like he meant to slam it but slowed it with his foot before it could.

Maze sits on the side of the bed, hand still on mine. “You okay?”

The casual bandana over her hair clashes with her dark-rimmed, oversized glasses, but is supported by the worn collar of her brown and tan flannel shirt. Under that is a Henley, most of its buttons open, showing a thin T-shirt. She’s a series of gift boxes waiting to be unwrapped.

Her mouth is set hard, lips pressed in. With my free arm I push up, halfway to sitting. She must think I was in a dire situation. I guess I would too if I walked into a bedroom and saw a guy on top of an uninspired girl in the middle of the night.

I try to explain. “I hadn’t kissed a boy and I wanted to try it. Not my thing, turns out. Thanks for the save, though, you’re very noble.”

She snorts. “Hardly.”

“I got bored,” I say, my chest burning with worries about what she thinks.

“Same,” she says. “Not enough to kiss boys, though. But no judgment. I’m still riled about the whole thing downstairs. I feel like I should apologize for Bas.”

“Cool. Thanks.” I don’t know what else to say or even which part I’m thanking her for because she’s still holding my hand and that feels shockingly familiar, but also brilliant and new, so all my attention is in my hand.

Bass from the living room vibrates the floor and bed. And me.

I find my voice. “You’re walking into bedrooms after midnight at a lackluster party and you were *surprised* to find people in the bed—what were you looking for?”

She says, “When action grows unprofitable, gather information; when information grows unprofitable, sleep.”

That sounds like a quote, so I ask, “What’s that from?”

“Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*.”

“Are you prepping for the literary treasure hunt?”

“Le Guin won’t be in it,” Maze says. “She doesn’t count as lesbian literature despite the queer themes in some books. Because also: husband. The treasure hunt doesn’t have enough science fiction, though.”

“How do you know? Nobody has this year’s books yet—not until we work through the clues.”

For the past six years, our college queer/trans group has hosted the most iconic lesbian, bisexual, and queer women’s literature treasure hunt. Only first-year students participate. At the start of spring semester, which is now, we sign up and pick teams. We’ll get the first book and first clue next Thursday.

We have to read the book and use the clue to figure out a location on campus that would point us to the second book and its associated clue. The hunt proceeds through six classic works of sapphic, lesbian, bi, and queer women’s lit—and if a team decodes the last work and its clue, they’ll get the combination to a lockbox with some kind of valuable collection in it. My roommate thinks it’s coins, maybe even gold coins.

The only catch—other than having to decipher six clues and six novels—is that the team also has to *find* the lockbox. Over the last six years, two teams have made it to the combination. No one’s found the lockbox. I bet Bas in her pretentious-ass pirate coat already thinks this treasure is hers and that adds to the whole pile of reasons why I need to win this thing.

I ask, “Do you know who else signed up? Whose team are you hoping to be on?”

“If I had signed up, I’d want to be on yours,” she says and my heart goes through two doomsdays and a cataclysm before being resurrected and ascending to the heights. I guess the dining room argument wasn’t enough to put me off this crush. She was defending a friend. That’s noble, right?

“Why?” I squeak.

I mean, does she even know me this well? We’ve only said hi in passing. The most interaction has been my rambling comments to her posts in the queer student forum.

Maze says, “I like how your brain works. Or were you asking why I didn’t sign up? Nobody’s going to win it. I don’t know if it’s winnable. Do you know two years ago they got all the clues and the combination, but they couldn’t find the lockbox?”

“Please sign up. We could be a team. You’d be great at it. You’re always putting smart quotes from books into your posts. You’re like a Wikipedia of queer literature.”

“I’m not sure I translate that well into the real world.”

Her words come out so dubious and sad that I don’t know what to say. Possible phrases flood my mind, but nothing fits, as if I’m the lockbox without the combination.

While I struggle with that, she answers the prior question. It takes me a moment to remember that I’d asked what she was searching for in her bedroom quest.

“I came in here hoping to find an empty bed,” she says. “Maybe doze for a bit before I go home for the weekend. My moms live in a western ’burb, but it’s date night and they’re going to be watching some sappy lesbian period piece and draping over each other in a way that I do not want to have to sneak past, so I’m waiting for it to be late enough that they’ll have gone to bed.”

I know Maze has moms. It’s the first fact I learned about her, the first fact anyone in Queer Club did. She’s our legendary second-generation lesbian! Rumor was there’d been no sperm donor, that through the miracle of modern science they’d combined eggs from both moms and she was a superlesbian who would save humanity. Suspect, I know, but we wanted to believe. I did *not* know that her moms still did date nights and I could only imagine the awkward.

“I’m going to head back to the dorms,” I tell her. “You can have my spot here.”

Honestly, I want to stay and nap with her, but we haven’t hung out before so that’s too big an ask. She is number three on my current crush list. The top spot still belongs to Kai. We had a situationship last September but then the semester got too heavy to keep dating. Maybe now that she and Bas aren’t trying to date... But with Maze right here, I’m bumping down the hot young psych professor to move her up to number two.

Maze says, “Should I be helping you get home? Maybe access campus services? Talk to someone?”

“About what?”

“Linc?”

I raise both hands, warding and reassuring. “Oh, no. He didn’t do anything I didn’t invite. If I looked upset it’s because I was bored, consented to kissing a boy and realized I was still bored. And it’s late and my brain is laggy but wired so everything is too much and not enough.”

“We could be talking on the way back. Do you want to share a Lyft?”

I don’t have the money for even half a Lyft.

“I’m going to walk,” I tell her. “I walk a lot and it’s good for my knee right now. It’s, like, the right level of reconditioning. I hurt it last fall. I mean, it was already hurt, but I made it worse. Long story.”

To make the point that I’m good at walking, even with this knee, which is both aching and braced, I sit up and search over the side of the bed for my shoes. One has been kicked under and my sweater with it. Getting down to reach under the bed without bending my knee is intensely inelegant. I hope Maze isn’t watching.

She is peering over the side, having scooted across the bed. She still has her shoes on—cute ankle boots.

She says, “I’ll walk you. I can get a Lyft from there or sleep over in my room and face my moms in the morning.”

“You sure? It’s cold.” I pull on my sweater and cram my feet into my big, unlaced boots.

“I grew up in Minnesota,” she says. “And I’m not sure how safe it is to walk back alone at”—she glances at the bedside clock—“1:17 in the morning. Plus you can tell me about your plan for the treasure hunt.”

I don’t have a plan, but do not want to admit that to Maze. We walk downstairs together, to the den where everyone has tossed their heavy coats over all the furniture. Mine is an old Carhartt that my dad got used from one of his work buddies. It still has a big logo patch sewn on it for Can-Do-It Electrical in

Lansing, Michigan. The patch reminds me of Dad, so I put all my queer buttons around it rather than over it.

Maze's jacket is one of those modular three-in-one styles with a down layer for deep cold and a waterproof layer for less cold. It's blue and silver and looks like it came from the future. Her scarf is thin, probably a space-aged microfiber something, not the big knit I have from my great aunt.

I put on my big fuzzy hat and Maze pulls up the hood of her jacket. We step into the extremely crisp air and head for campus. The temp almost got above single digits today, but has to be hovering around zero now given the way my nostrils are freezing every time I inhale. The last snow was days ago, so the sidewalks are well-shoveled, a mix of ice and salt crunching underfoot. Now it's too cold to snow, so we'll have more days like this. The streetlights are small against the wide, dark sky.

"I don't have a plan," I blurt before we've gone ten steps.

"Cool," she says. "I'll make one for you if you want."

"You make plans?" I ask, because my brain tends not to. I always have tactics on the rugby field, or did before I twisted my knee during the fall season. I get ideas when watching rugby too. But having ideas and actions never turns into making whole plans that work.

"I make..." She trails off and sketches a shape in the air like tree branches. It feels so familiar that I grab her hand, my mitten around her glove, hanging together in front of us. She drops hers to her side, pulling mine with it, so we're walking, holding hands.

"Associative networks?" I ask. I heard this phrase in psych class and keep returning to it because it's so perfectly about the way every thought I have leads to other related thoughts, creating a network that I can get lost in.

She stops and the tug through our joined hands makes me stop. Tingles zip up my arm. A few buzz into my heart, but more wiggle down to my stomach and lower. The faint lights from the houses nearby highlight the darkness of her eyebrows and thick eyelashes. She stares at our boots or maybe the ground under them.

She asks, “Like trees linking roots underground?”

“They do that?”

“Whenever they can.”

That also sounds like my brain, having big ideas and little ideas all connected together with roots. I might also need the trunks and branches and some squirrels to represent everything.

“My brain feels like a rugby team,” I tell her. “I mean, that’s my model for it. We have a small enough team that I play a bunch of forward positions, but I love being the open-side flanker. That’s how my brain is all the time. All. The. Time. Always moving, looking at the field, whatever players are in front of me, and seeing possible tackles, opening, opportunities.” Afraid I’m talking about myself too much, I ask, “Why don’t you translate into the real world?”

We start walking again and pass silent houses.

She says, “The inside of my mind makes sense in a way that the outside does not. The inside space has my attention because it’s more beautiful. The forest of thoughts, trees and their canopies and the roots and the mycelial network, all talking to each other, why *wouldn’t* I pay attention to that?”

“Oh.” My throat closes over the breath—an inverted sob I struggle to force back into my chest. That’s too beautiful and I can feel how that is—understand why I’ve loved the big posts she’s put in the queer online space, because they are rambling and branching, the way my thoughts are. “I wonder if trees are just rugby players moving in different ways.”

“Sounds like,” she says with a grin. The brown of her eyes turns infinitely deep in the low light.

She tugs my hand as we walk. With the glove and mitten between us, I only get the idea of her fingers, but they feel familiar. Maybe because of the way we’re talking.

“If trees are rugby players,” Maze says. “How long does a game take? Some might be hundreds of years long. But do they compete? Trees cooperate a lot.” Her voice turns half teasing, half serious. “I’m not sure they do sports.”

I have no idea how to answer that, but I love thinking about it.

“I’ll teach you rugby and you can tell me,” I suggest.

“Yeah, teach me.”

“Have you ever watched a game?”

“Nope,” she says. “I’ve walked by practice. Is it like football?”

I grin. “It *is* a full contact sport. The goal is to get the ball to the other side of the field to score, while other players use tackling to stop the ball. Unlike football, the ball can only be passed backward. Even if the ball hits your body and bounces forward, that’s not allowed.”

“Wow, harsh.”

“No, it’s fun,” I tell her and then nerd out about the scrum and the ways it breaks and creates opportunities for tackles.

We arrive at the bright door of my dorm. I reach into my pocket for—nothing. Oh crap! I check my other pockets to find tissues and cough drops and a bunch of random non-wallet items.

Maze pulls out her keychain, student ID attached, and swipes it so the dorm door unlocks. She tugs me through into the warmth.

“My wallet’s gone!” I tell her.

“Was it in your jacket?”

“Of course...no, wait, I had it in my sweater pocket and then in bed I took it out because it was bulky. That happened before I took off my sweater. I bet it’s still on the bedside table at the house. I have to go back and get it.”

“Okay,” she says. “Let me get my toes warm.”

“You don’t have to come with me. You were going home. Your moms have to be in bed by now.”

“Not leaving you to walk it alone. It’s not even a mile. You sure I shouldn’t get us a Lyft, though? They’d wait while you run in. Your knee?”

I’ve got it braced outside my jeans—a thick contraption of foam, metal and Velcro—so it’s obvious there’s something amiss. “I skipped PT this week and honestly walking a few miles is good for it. I really am okay walking alone. Not that I want to, I mean, I liked our walk here, but your boots are kind of skinny and maybe not the best in this cold.”

“Wool socks at least,” she says. “I’m warm enough if we keep moving. I’m a Minnesota native, honest. Plus we didn’t plan our treasure hunt approach. I insist.”

I set as fast a pace as I can manage safely on the patches of ice covering the sidewalk. The problem with my knee is probably early-onset arthritis—I’m waiting on the formal diagnosis—so I’m learning to keep it moving even when it hurts. Gentle movement like walking means less pain in the long run. Unless it turns out the surgery I got in high school messed up some nerves. Or it’s a combination of all those factors and that’s why I don’t know when to move and when to rest.

By the time we’ve gone two blocks, I’m starting to worry that I’m pushing it too hard. I wish I could say yes to taking a Lyft back. It can’t be more than a few bucks, but that means I won’t have a cushion for emergencies next week and I’m not willing to give that up to get driven a mile.

“What’s the starting book?” Maze asks as we walk quickly back the way we came. “They announced that last week, didn’t they?”

“*Zami*, Audre Lorde. Do you know the first dozen times the group talked about it, I thought they were saying ‘Zombie’ and I was kind of disappointed.”

“You haven’t read it,” she says. “You won’t be disappointed.”

“No zombies though.”

“Are you that into zombies?”

“Not when you put it like that. What’s *Zami* about?”

“Audre Lorde’s life and her early erotic awakenings.”

“How have I not already read this?”

“Straight parents?”

“Yeah. And they don’t have a ton of time for reading, so it’s mostly family TV when we can all manage it. Straight family TV, since I’m the only queer one as far as we know.”

“Sucks,” Maze says. “Though watching queer shows with sex scenes is deeply awkward with parents, just so you know.”

“Oooh, hardships on both sides.”