WHEN OUR WORLDS COLLIDED

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DANIELLE JAWANDO

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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London
WC1X 8HB

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-4711-7879-5
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-7880-1
eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-0008-2

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Typeset in the UK by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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For Julie Jawando,
for always being there

1

JACKSON

I lean back against the metal railing and look around the Arndale Centre. It's packed. It always is on a Sunday. I'm on the first floor, near this walkway that runs between Victoria's Secret and the Apple store. I'd been waiting outside Victoria's Secret at first, but I didn't want Aimee to think that I was some sort of perv. Just hanging around watching girls buying underwear. So I decided to move further along. I take a deep breath and pull my phone out my pocket – *15.40.*

She's already ten minutes late.

I try not to overthink it. Maybe her bus got held up coming into town. Or maybe she's just pushing her way through all the crowds outside. Or maybe, when she messaged me to tell me

that she was leaving, she hadn't even left the house. I click on WhatsApp, but she hasn't sent me anything since:

Leaving now. Meet u in the arndale xxx

I think about messaging my mate, Harrison, but I know that he'll only take the piss. Especially if he thinks Aimee's stood me up. I shove my phone back in my pocket and try to look as cool as I can. *Casual.* But my palms are starting to sweat and my heart is going a million times a minute. If I'm honest, I'm bricking it. What if she doesn't show up? What if she's decided that she ain't feeling it after all . . . that she ain't feeling me? Not that I could blame her. I still can't believe that Aimee Portas, the hottest girl in school, who could have her pick of any guy she wants, decided to go on a date with me. I pull at the sleeve of my jacket and I'm hit with this strong smell of aftershave. It almost knocks me out. I mean, maybe I overdid it a bit, but I read somewhere how girls like it when a guy smells nice, so I pretty much emptied the whole bottle over myself. It was probably a stupid thing to do, but I want to impress her. Never in my life did I think that Aimee would say 'yes' to me, so I can't screw this up. There's no way I'm going down in history as *that guy.* That guy who had a chance with Aimee, then blew it.

I look around, to try and calm myself down. I turn and lean forward on the railing. I can see all the people below me. Just going about their normal lives.

There's groups of girls spilling out of River Island, teenagers hanging outside JD Sports. People hunched over small tables in

Starbucks, kids crying, mums shouting at toddlers. I see a few security guards moving on a couple of boys who are standing beside the cash machine, then I feel my phone vibrate in my jeans pocket.

I pull it out quickly, praying it ain't Aimee telling me she can't make it. My heart quickens as I open WhatsApp, and a small part of me doesn't even wanna look. Then I see the words:

Soz, bus was longggggg. In town now, where r u? Xx

I breathe out, and I feel this grin spread across my face. I don't care if I look like some sort of goofy idiot either, because Aimee's coming. She's here, in town, on her way to meet *me*. I type a reply, then shove my phone in my pocket again. The nerves are back. What if I don't know what to say to her? Or it just feels proper weird between us? Then there's the end bit – she might want me to kiss her. Not right away or nothing, but if it goes well . . . I think about what it would be like to kiss Aimee. How her lips would feel . . . I've thought about kissing her for time. *For three years.* Ever since she first sat next to me in R.E.

I pat down the sides of my hair, and I'm about to turn back around, so that I'm facing in the direction that she'll probably be walking in, when something catches my eye. At first I think it's just some kids messing about. I hear shouting, and then I hear someone scream. And I don't know why but it goes right through me and I can tell that it's more than people mucking around.

There's a spiral staircase blocking most of my view, but I see this boy in a bright red puffa jacket, running. I can't see his face or nothing, only the top of his head. But I watch as he frantically pushes his way through the crowds, barging people out of the way, and knocking this woman over. He doesn't even seem to notice that people are pissed at him for pushing past them, he just carries on running. Looking behind him, like he's trying to put some distance between him and something else. And then I realize: he's being chased. A group of boys run after him. One of them shouts something, but it's so loud inside the shopping centre that I can't make out what they're saying. The boy in the puffa jacket jumps over this metal partition thing and runs down a ramp that leads to one of the exits. The other boys run after him and disappear down the ramp as well. Then, it's almost like it never happened. Like I'd just imagined it . . . and everything seems to go back to normal.

I feel two warm hands cover my eyes and I jump. Almost stumbling backwards.

'Guess who?' a voice says.

I try not to smile too widely, as I move her hands away and turn to face her.

'You took your time,' I say, and I can't stop staring at her. I'm proper nervous now. More nervous than I've ever been in my *whole* life. I've only ever seen Aimee around school or when we have classes together, and if I thought she was outta my league then, well, this is a whole other level. This is God-would-have-to-be-on-my-side-for-her-to-even-fancy-me-back type of level. Aimee moves her hair away from her face and I

have to look away, because I don't want her to see how much I'm checking her out.

She leans down over the balcony bit, and I think, *Jackson, man. Just tell her how nice she looks. Nah, more than nice, you idiot. Tell her she looks gorgeous, or something . . . just open your mouth.*

'You got another girlfriend down there or something?' Aimee asks.

'Nah,' I say quickly, and I feel myself getting warm. 'I ain't got a girlfriend. Why would I have a girlfriend? I mean, I ain't saying that I don't want one or anything like that. 'Course I want a girlfriend . . . not that I'm tryna ask you or nothing. I mean, that would be a bit much on a first date . . . what I'm saying is—'

Aimee shakes her head and even though she's looking at me like I'm from a completely different planet, she's laughing. *That's gotta be a good sign, right?*

'Jackson,' she says. 'Shut up!' I do as I'm told, because I've already made myself look like a right idiot and I should probably quit while I'm ahead. 'You're pretty weird, you know that?' she continues. 'But in the best way . . . it's kinda cute.'

I feel myself go all hot. 'Erm, was that supposed to be a compliment?' I ask. Aimee moves closer and I clear my throat. 'You look . . .' I say, and I try to find the right words, but she shakes her head.

'Yeah, I know!' she interrupts. 'Now are we just gonna stand here staring at River Island all day, or are you actually taking me out?'

I laugh. 'I'm taking you out,' I say, and I gesture towards the

spiral staircase at the other end of the walkway and I start to relax a bit as we make our way towards it.

'Good,' she says. 'Cos it took you long enough. I was beginning to think I'd have to ask you out myself.'

I pause. 'You mad?' I say. 'Been wanting to ask you out for *ages*, I thought you'd shoot me down . . . and y'know I'd never hear the end of it if that happened . . .' I smile. 'I don't think my heart could take it either,' I say, moving my hands to my chest.

Aimee shakes her head. 'You're full of shit and you know it,' she says. But as we reach the bottom of the stairs, she glances at me. 'You really don't have a clue, do you?' she says. 'I like you, Jackson. Why else d'you think I'm here?'

I swear, I almost go into cardiac arrest. And for a minute, I wonder if I've heard her right. Did Aimee just say that she liked me? Not only that, but she'd been waiting for *me* to ask *her* out? Harrison, Sam and Elliot are actually gonna lose their shit when they find out. And now I really can't stop smiling. I try to think of something else to say, but my throat feels proper dry. We reach the set of double doors that lead out of the Arndale, the same ones that boy in the red puffa jacket ran through and I pull on the handle, holding the door open for Aimee.

She raises her eyebrows. 'Awww,' she says. 'You don't do this in school – you really trying to impress me, or what?'

I smile as we head outside, but I still can't look at her properly; I can't keep eye contact for too long, because of how much I like her. I shrug and I hope she can't see how awkward I am just being around her.

'Well, I'll make sure I do from now on,' I say.

It's cold outside and a sharp gust of wind hits me in my face. Aimee links her arm through mine and I swear I almost pass out. I must be looking at her funny, because she says: 'You don't mind, do you? It's freezing.'

'*Nah!* No!' I say, a bit too quickly, and she laughs. So much for trying to play it cool. There's some large stone steps that lead away from the Arndale and towards the other side of town, and we head down them. A tram makes its way noisily past us and Aimee turns to face me.

'Where is it we're actually going?' she asks.

Up close, I still can't get over how pretty she is. It's mad. She's got these grey flecks in her eyes that I've never noticed before and I feel myself looking down, towards her mouth. Her lips are sticky and shiny with gloss and I catch myself thinking about kissing her again—

'Jackson?' she says. 'Hello??!'

'Sorry,' I say. 'Printworks. I thought we'd go there – there's like Nando's and the cinema and—'

Aimee smiles again. 'I know what's inside the Printworks, Jackson,' she says.

I clear my throat and I feel myself getting hot, again. 'Oh, right, yeah. Soz,' I say. I suck in a sharp breath and I wish we could rewind and start again. All I've done since Aimee got here is make a complete fool of myself. I can just imagine Harrison and the others pissing themselves when I tell them later. Aimee nods but neither of us moves. I see her glance towards my mouth and wonder if she's thinking about kissing me too. But surely she wouldn't want me to do it in the middle of town? In

front of all these people. She lingers for another moment, and if that was my chance to make a move, it's gone, because she tugs at my arm.

'Come on, then,' she says, as we start walking again.

'All right,' I say. 'Keep your hair on.'

'Wow!' Aimee says and she bursts out laughing. 'You actually talk like someone's ninety-year-old grandma sometimes, y'know that.'

I bring my free hand to my chest and I pretend that I've been shot there. I even stagger about a bit. 'Ouch!' I say. 'You ain't playing today, are you? I mean, are you actually on this date cause you like me, or have you just come to take the piss? So far, I'm weird and I talk like someone's granny. Any more insults you wanna throw my way? You might as well get 'em out your system . . .'

Aimee laughs. 'Oh, stop fishing!' she says. 'I already told you I like you, I'm not saying it again.' She moves her hand along my arm, then links her fingers through mine. 'There's still time, though,' she adds, and she gives me that look again. Like she's thinking about kissing me too. I try not to make a big deal outta the fact that Aimee's holding my hand. Or that she's flirting with me. Is she flirting with me? There are a few shops and cafes dotted about outside, opposite a large, concrete square. A Caffè Nero, Foot Asylum, Selfridges. We take a left, beside this massive Next on the corner and I nudge Aimee playfully.

'Can't wait,' I say. 'Y'know there's nothing I want more in life than to be ripped to shreds by you!'

Aimee smiles. 'I knew it!' she says.

We make our way along the pavement, and at first I don't get what's going on. Maybe it's because I'm too distracted by Aimee and the fact she's holding my hand. And I'm concentrating far too much on making sure that I ain't holding it too tight, or that my hand ain't too limp or clammy or anything like that. I see a woman a little bit in front of us, dragging her small kid away from something by the hood of his coat. I hear her say: 'Sweetheart, come over here. Don't look! Come with Mummy . . . don't look!' The kid starts to cry and she picks him up and covers his eyes, walking away from the pavement, in the middle of the road that the tram runs down. There's something about the way she says it, something in her tone . . .

And then it's like everything else shifts into focus. I see all these people moving away from the side of the shop, or walking into the road like that woman did, and it's like I can feel it then. The fear and panic bubbling up all around us. I don't even know how to explain it, but you just know, don't you? You can tell. When something awful's about to happen. People are staring or turning their heads, another kid is crying. I see someone gasp, and a few people with their phones out, taking pictures . . . no, *filming*. But everyone's moving away from something on the floor. A knot tightens in my stomach and I feel Aimee freeze next to me.

'Oh my god,' she says. 'Oh my god, oh my god.' Aimee lets go of my hand and I see how much she's shaking as she moves her fingers to cover her mouth. She makes this weird sound, halfway between a scream and a sob, then she turns to bury her face in my neck. My eyes go to the spot that everyone seems to

be walking past. The faded concrete squares to the side of Next. And that's when I see it.

The red puffa jacket, in a heap on the floor.

The same one that was weaving its way through the shopping centre while I'd been waiting for Aimee. I stare at the boy. At his brown skin and fade. At the massive tear down the side of his jacket, and the way his body's sprawled on the pavement. He looks proper young, he can't be more than fourteen. If that. There's a girl kneeling beside him, pressing something onto his stomach. An old cloth or something, like she's trying to stop the bleeding. But there's so much of it. So much blood – *everywhere*. I move my hands to my head and I step away from Aimee and I don't know if I want to cry, or scream, or run, or throw up.

My whole body feels weak, and even though I know that there's people around me, it all seems to wash over me. All I can hear is my quick breath and the loud thumping of my heart in my ears. There's a sharp, twisting pain deep inside my chest. I see Aimee leaning over me and I hear her say: 'Jackson, are you okay? Jackson?' But I can't speak. I can't stop shaking, or feeling like I can't breathe. I don't want Aimee to see me like this. I put my hands to my chest to try and stop the pain and I feel Aimee's hand on my back.

'Hey,' she says, but all I can do is stare at the ground. 'Just breathe,' she says. 'I'll do it with you, come on . . .'

Aimee breathes in and then out slowly, and I copy her, as she nods and keeps her hand on my back. The pain starts to ease and I feel the thumping in my chest slow down. The sound around

me goes back to normal and I straighten myself up and suck in another deep breath. I half-expect Aimee to look at me like I'm the most pathetic boy in the whole of Manchester when I straighten myself up, but she doesn't.

'My sister has panic attacks,' she says, and she tugs at my arm. 'Come on,' she continues. 'Let's go the other way around, I'm sure someone's already called an ambulance . . .'

I don't move. I can't stop staring at the boy in the red puffa jacket. There's tears and snot running down his face and I can see how frightened he is. Everyone else, apart from this one girl, just walks past him. People are crossing over to avoid that bit of the pavement or staring from a distance, and I'm suddenly angry. Why is no one helping him? Is it because they're scared? Or they don't care? Or do they just see this young Black boy and think the worst? That he somehow brought it on himself?

'Jackson!' Aimee says. 'Come on! It's like awful, it really is . . . but we don't know what happened . . . it could be gang-related, or anything.'

I look at Aimee, but I can't even deal with what she just said right now. *Gang-related.* If it was a white kid who had been stabbed, would she be saying that it was 'gang-related' then? I shake my head. I can't walk off and leave him. I can't walk off and do nothing like everyone else is doing. I take a deep breath and I feel myself start to tremble again. I've never seen anything like this, just a few fights in school, but I know . . . *I know* I can't leave him.

'Nah. I can't . . . I can't do nothing,' I say, and I head towards the boy.

Aimee doesn't follow me and I don't know if it's because she's too scared to get involved, or if she thinks that it's not her problem. Either way, I push it to the back of my mind. Up close, I can see that there's even more blood than I thought and I'm suddenly worried I'm gonna have another panic attack. The girl's trying to stop the bleeding with a scrunched-up T-shirt, but I can't even tell what colour it used to be. The boy turns his head and he catches my eye. The tears are streaming down his face and into his mouth and I see it then. *The fear.* Just how scared he is. He lets out a whimper and even though it's faint, I can tell how much pain he's in.

The girl glances up at me. She looks scared, but she presses down harder on his wound.

'Thank fuck,' she says and her voice is shaky. 'D'you know how many people have taken one look over here, then pissed off? I don't get what's taking the ambulance so long either . . .'

The boy starts to cry harder. 'It's all right, Shaq,' she says. 'The ambulance'll be here soon, yeah?'

But he's losing so much blood. He's already lost so much blood.

'I don't wanna die,' he says. 'I don't wanna die . . . Please don't leave me . . .'

The girl shakes her head. 'I won't,' she says, and she glances up at me.

I feel my chest tighten and I kneel beside this boy – beside Shaq – because I don't know what else to do. I'm not a paramedic, what *can* I do? Apart from try to make him feel less alone. Less scared.

I move my hand towards his and I'm not even sure if it'll make a difference because all I am is a stranger. But he reaches his hand out and wraps his fingers though mine. Like just holding onto me is enough to help him survive.