

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.