



**SIMON JAMES GREEN**

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# 1

I'm walking toward my destiny and I'm on top of the world. There's a definite bounce in my step as I stride down the hallway. It's *not* a sashay (dear god, I wish I could sashay, but I tried it in secret once and I looked like I needed urgent attention from the orthopedic trauma team), and it's not a *strut* (that would be way too arrogant), but it's *confident*. The sort of confident that only top-of-the-food-chain sporty guys can get away with without attracting comments, because why would a boy like me be happy and self-assured? Why would a "massive gay dork" (big thanks to Nico Murphy for that generous quote; I'll be sure to use it on my résumé) be feeling just a little bit good about himself?

I surreptitiously check (for the fifth time) that the fly of my chinos is done up, that my light blue oxford shirt (unbuttoned at the collar, so as to be neat but not formal) is tucked in, and clutch my leather (OK, *faux* leather, *you wouldn't know!*) folder tightly, like it contains sensitive government business. I mean, it kind of does, I guess. Along with the agenda for today's meeting, I've got the

blueprints I've been working on since the middle of last semester: the strategy for how I'm going to turn the LGBTQ+ Society around when, in approximately twenty-five minutes, I'm elected president. That isn't meant to sound arrogant. I usually have zero confidence that things will go in my favor. But I've studied the club, I've seen what it needs, and I've done the work to impress. It's like playing chess: You plan forward in order to win.

Of course, you can't always account for the other players' moves, no matter how much you play out the options, and this one was a surprise: Former president "Big Mandy" (an ironic name, since she is actually relatively small, both in stature and in ambition for the club) immediately resigned the minute she got her college offers in ("*Don't need to waste my time doing extracurriculars now—woo-hoo!*"), and now it's only the four of us left in the whole club. Bronte is running for president too, because she runs for everything (lacrosse captain, drama club artistic director, debate team leader: You know, fully over the top but somehow still cool). That leaves George and Maya, but they are my best friends, so they'll vote for me. Also, Maya used to date Bronte and can't even look at her since they split up, a couple of weeks ago. Since then, George and I have spent a lot of time sitting with Maya, eating tubs of Ben & Jerry's and making fun of Bronte's cruelty and heartlessness, so, you know, we're all pretty invested in her demise.

In any case, it's me the club needs, because I'm actually going to turn things around. The LGBTQ+ Society has four members. In a school of a thousand. Where there are definitely more LGBTQ+ kids, some of them out, a few of them dating, but

none of them wanting to join the club because it's seen as "tragic."

But I've never seen it like that.

It was midway through ninth grade when I first walked through the door of Room 120. There was a sign Blu-Tacked to the door—the club's motto:

YOU DON'T HAVE  
TO COME OUT  
TO COME IN

I'd done low-level surveillance on the club for quite a few weeks. It's important to scope out the state of play before making your move. I would stroll past the door multiple times during Thursday lunch, waiting at the end of the hallway, pretending to be rearranging the contents of my backpack, while checking to see which students were going in. *Were they like me? Was I one of them?* The gay guys I'd seen presenting TV shows were loud, and camp, and ostentatiously dressed . . . but I was quiet, and nervous, and disastrously dressed. I'd seen gay teenagers in movies . . . but they were American, and beautiful, seemed to be in their twenties, and liked boys in the most poetic and eloquent of ways. I was a British fourteen-year-old, traumatized by random boners on a daily basis, who whacked off to high-school wrestling videos on Instagram. Was I gay? Or just a hormone-addled mess?

Maybe I was both.

I didn't know anyone like me.

. . . Until I walked through the door of Room 120, with the

prepared excuse that I was looking for “Baking Club” if I got cold feet, which was stupid because Room 120 is a history classroom, not home economics, but I clearly wasn’t thinking straight. Didn’t matter, I didn’t need any excuses, because that afternoon I finally found my people. George and Maya were both in ninth grade too, but I’d never spoken to them before. I knew from my surveillance that they came to the club, but I think I’d convinced myself so *hard* that I was the only one that I was still kind of surprised to see them there—like, maybe they were just confused, and were only accidentally attending, mistaking it for D&D Club, or something. No sooner had I walked in on that first day than they were both headed straight over.

“Finally!” Maya grinned.

“Were you expecting me?” I replied.

“We saw you spying,” George said.

That was it. We’ve been best friends ever since. Bronte was in my year too (I *was* expecting to see her: She’s been out—very visible and taking no one’s shit—since seventh grade), Mandy was in tenth grade (when she could be bothered: She was constantly in trouble for her low attendance), and presiding over us all was twelfth-grader Ed Lester, who was fantastically handsome, supersmart, and dating a guy called Xander from Branscombe Boys—a private school about twenty minutes away. With their “European weekend getaways” and tales of wild LGBT parties, Ed was my idol—a shining beacon of what life might one day be like. So, sure, Mandy and Bronte were frustrating and irritating, respectively, and Ed was untouchable and basically from another

planet compared to me, but they were still somehow part of my squad, and they faced a lot of the same stuff as Maya and George and me. On some weird, deep level, we fought and bitched about each other (and in the case of me and Ed, some of us hero-worshipped each other), but we all got each other too.

I want the other queer kids in the school to find their people, too, with us. I've seen the way some students roll their eyes whenever anything LGBT is mentioned—like they're sick of us. "That's so gay" is still a phrase that rings around almost every classroom, even though the teachers are meant to challenge homophobic language. And sure, a straight couple getting with each other in school would cause a *ripple* (everyone loves a bit of gossip), but two boys, or two girls, would be an *earthquake*. So, *sorry, Mandy*, pinning some rainbow flags on our club bulletin board and raising money to give out buttons during Pride (which is all the club has really achieved in the last year, other than everyone sitting around eating Haribo) won't change anything. We need to unite and fight. Campaign. Be visible.

I think we can make things better.

We at least have to try.

And I have a *plan*. (Of course I do. I always have.)

I feel a hand squeeze my shoulder.

"You've got this, Barney!" George says, striding up behind me. He gives me a little wink. George is pure sophistication and class—tall (well, taller than me) and slim, his dark brown hair is styled in a side part and neatly coiffed hair. In eleventh grade, we're meant to dress "business casual"—a definition that is

interpreted very loosely by many, but taken to the next level by George, who today is sporting an impeccably tailored dark-blue suit with vest, starched white shirt, handcrafted brown brogues, and a burgundy bow tie. A cane would complete his dapper, man-about-town look. I might get him one for his birthday. “You’ve got this,” he repeats.

“You think? No, yes, *I have*. Haven’t I?”

“There’s no one who’d be better.” He sweeps his hands in front of him as we walk along. “Barney Brown—*President, LGBTQ+ Society*.”

“It’s got a ring to it,” I agree.

“You’ll need business cards.”

“Oh my god, stop.”

Then I suddenly *do* stop and turn to him. “OK, but what if—”

“*Barney*.”

“No, hear me out!” I glance up and down the hallway to check that the coast is clear, and lower my voice anyway. “What if Maya buckles at the last moment? Like, I know she *said* she’ll vote for me, but she was with Bronte for a few months . . . *They did things*. Things that might . . . ultimately forge a bond of loyalty with another person!”

George frowns. “What part of Maya throwing darts at a picture of Bronte when we were last at your place and screaming a list of obscenities, before burning the photo while chanting some kind of curse she found online, makes you think there’s a special bond between them?”



“People do and say things when they’re hurt—they don’t always mean them.” I sigh. “When my folks split up, Mom told Dad he doesn’t know how to satisfy a woman, and that’s in direct contradiction to some of the stuff I’ve had to hear through the bedroom wall over the years.”

“Well, that’s a gross thing that neither of us wanted to think about.”

“Sorry,” I mutter.

George puts his hands on both my shoulders. “You’ll get one hundred percent of the Black lesbian vote—Maya will come through. And you’ve got one hundred percent of the white trans guy vote.” He grins at me. “And assuming you also vote for yourself . . .”

“The white gay boy vote.”

“*Right*, that’s seventy-five percent of the total queer vote, which makes you president of the LGBTQ+ Society, so let’s just go and do this.”

“You’re right.”

George shrugs. “Always.”

We walk on, round the corner, and find Maya hovering outside the door of Room 120. She’s done her hair in two puffs, with big hoop earrings, and, if I’m not mistaken, a bit of smokey eye. She’s also wearing yellow overalls and Converse with rainbow laces. It’s a bold mix that straddles a line between playful and . . . children’s party entertainer.

“Bronte’s in there already, so thought I’d wait for you,” Maya says as we approach.

Her whole energy is “on edge.” This is partly Maya’s standard energy—she identifies as a “disaster lesbian,” and while I’m not sure that’s an official identity on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, I do get what she means, since I feel like a disaster gay most of the time. It’s a feeling of not quite fitting in, not quite getting it right, *them* never liking you back, general awkwardness, almost total messiness, and low- to mid-level anxiety about . . . well, most things.

“You look nice,” I tell her. I more or less mean it, but the time to question people’s fashion choices isn’t right before you want them to cast a vote for you.

“It’s not for Bronte’s benefit.” She gives me eye contact for too long. “OK, it is,” she relents. “But this is me saying, ‘I’m fine, I’m over you, I’m happy enough to wear yellow overalls and I’ve got some earrings in and a bit of eye makeup because I’m free and single and you and me are over and I’ve moved on—’”

“Maya, *breathe*,” George tells her.

She takes a breath, then exhales. “I hate her goddamn guts.”

“So I can count on your vote?” I ask.

Maya’s eyes widen. “Omigod, *yes!* Like you even need to ask, Barney! I’m not going to vote for *her*.”

George smiles, a satisfied look on his face, and gestures to the door. “After you, then, *Mr. President*.”