



from the authors of
Dear Hero

CHAT STORIES

Alyssa Roat
Hope Bolinger

Chat Stories

from the authors of *Dear Hero*

By

Hope Bolinger

&

Alyssa Roat

Chat Stories

All rights reserved. Except for brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form without written permission from the authors.

This story is a work of fiction. All characters and events are the product of the authors' imagination. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is coincidental.

© 2020 Hope Bolinger & Alyssa Roat

Table of Contents

Uninvited Visitor
The Red Hoodie
Small Talk
Out of Time
Sleepless
Come Alone
Move In
Freezer Burn
By Any Other Name
Macbeth in the Theater
Dino-mite
Pet Sitting
About the Authors

Uninvited Visitor

by Alyssa Roat

Chelsea: Could you quiet down a bit?

Drew: What?

Chelsea: I'm trying to sleep.

Drew: [eye-roll emoji] Don't tell me you can hear my music from the other side of town.

Chelsea: The other side of town?

Drew: Remember? I said I'd be out late tonight.

Chelsea: You're not home yet?

Chelsea: Mom is going to kill you when she finds out.

Chelsea: But then... who's banging around in the kitchen?

Drew: The kitchen?

Drew: Chels, I'm half an hour away. You can't blame me.

Chelsea: If you were going to be gone that long, why did you leave that note?

Drew: What note?

Chelsea: On the door. It said to leave it unlocked for you.

Chelsea: I saw it when I got home from rehearsal.

Drew: Because I write notes all the time [eye-roll emoji]

Drew: I'm not fifty.

Chelsea: I figured you had just gone across the street to Noah's.

Chelsea: It was already ten. I wasn't staying up for you.

Drew: I haven't been home since this morning.

Drew: I didn't leave that note.

Chelsea gets out of bed.

She opens the bedroom door.

She creeps to the banister and peeks downstairs.

A light flashes from the direction of the kitchen.

Chelsea: There is definitely a person in our house. I saw a flashlight.

Drew: Shoot. Is it Mom?

Drew: I'm dead if she catches me out this late.

Chelsea: Why would Mom use a flashlight?

Chelsea: Besides, she's out of town until Wednesday.

Drew: I don't know. Do you have a guy over or something?

Chelsea: Ha. Funny. I'm freaking out, Drew.

Chelsea freezes.

Chelsea: Drew. I just heard a man's voice.

Drew: For real?

Drew: You need to call the police. Now.

Chelsea: What if he hears me?

Chelsea: I don't want the intruder to know I'm awake.

Drew: Right.

Drew: Can you text 911?

Chelsea: Drew! Call for me!

Drew: The cops won't know where I'm calling from, right?

Chelsea: Are you at a bar or something?!

Drew: Forget it. I'll call.

Chelsea ducks back into the bedroom.

She hides behind the door.

She listens as the front door opens and closes softly.

Chelsea: I think he might have left.

Chelsea: Drew?

She slowly opens the door again.

She hears footsteps, then the front door opening and closing again.

Chelsea: Drew, I think there might be more than one person.

Drew: Hold on. Trying to get to someplace quiet enough to make a call.

Chelsea: Are you at that frat house again?

Drew: Irrelevant.

Chelsea: Do you know anyone who might have left the note?

Chelsea: They must know your schedule well enough to post it.

Drew thinks for a minute.

Drew: Only Noah.

Chelsea: So your best friend is trolling us?

Chelsea: I'm going down there.

Drew: No!

Drew: Whatever you do, don't go downstairs!

Chelsea: Why?

Drew: Remember how I told you Noah's dad just got back out of jail?

Chelsea: Yeah. So?

Drew: There have been a series of break-ins in the neighborhood.

Chelsea: Why didn't you tell me that?

Drew: You freak out about everything.

Chelsea muffles a growl.

Chelsea: Fine. But what does this have to do with Noah?

Drew: I think his dad is doing the break-ins.

Chelsea searches social media.

She sends a picture.

Chelsea: You mean this guy?

Drew: Yeah.

Chelsea: This six-foot something guy? With the giant biceps?

Drew: This is not good.

Chelsea: But why would he target us? You and Noah are friends!

Drew: Well... we were.

Drew: We kind of got in a fight.

Drew: And I beat him up.

Drew: All he would have to do is give his dad a tip.

Chelsea hears more footsteps and voices.

Something scrapes downstairs.

Chelsea: Drew. Who are these people downstairs?

Drew: I can't be sure, but I think they're members of his dad's gang.

Chelsea's heart pounds.

Chelsea: The same ones that were tied to those homicides?

Drew: I'm outside now where I can hear. Calling the police.

Chelsea peeks over the banister.

Two figures carry a television out the front door.

She retreats back to her bedroom.

She starts to close the door when she hears heavy footsteps.

Chelsea: Drew! Someone's coming up the stairs!

Drew: The operator says seven minutes.

Drew: Stay quiet.

Drew: Hide if you can without making noise.

Chelsea tiptoes across the room.

She crouches behind her bed.

Drew: Is your phone on silent?

Chelsea: Obviously.

Drew: If he comes in the room, keep the screen hidden.

Drew: The light could give you away.

Chelsea stares at the door.

The floorboards in the hall creak.

Chelsea: OMG, Drew, he's right outside.

Drew: The operator says five more minutes.

Drew: Just hang in there.

Chelsea pulls a blanket over her head.

She peeks out.

The doorknob turns.

The door swings open.

Chelsea stifles a scream.

A figure fumbles for the light switch.

Intruder: There better be something good in here.

The intruder finds the light switch.

He flicks it on.

Chelsea ducks as low as possible.

She types under the blanket.

Chelsea: He's in the room with me.

Drew: They're making great time. The operator says three more minutes.

The footsteps come closer.

Something scrapes and thuds.

Chelsea winces. He dropped her laptop.

Chelsea: Hopefully he leaves after taking the computer.

Drew: Two minutes.

Chelsea: This guy has a snake tattoo on his face.

Drew: On his face?!

Chelsea: Does that mean something?

Drew: The cops have been looking for him for years.

Drew: The gang calls him the "Snake King." At least five kills.

Chelsea tries not to panic.

Her phone slips from her fingers.

Before she can catch it, it hits the floor with a dull thud.

The blanket slips from over her head.

She and the intruder make eye contact.

He scowls and sets down her laptop.

He pulls a knife out of his belt.

It clicks open, revealing a six-inch blade.

As Chelsea shakily puts up her hands, sirens wail in the distance.

The intruder freezes.

He glares at Chelsea.

Intruder: You got lucky.

The intruder runs out the door.

Chelsea falls over in relief.

With shaking fingers, she texts.

Chelsea: Drew? I'm safe.

The Red Hoodie

by Hope Bolinger

I'd recognize that red hoodie anywhere.

It belongs to Brad Wolf.

My ex.

And he just walked into the bakery I work at.

I pull my "Grandma's Bakery" hat lid down to hide my face.

Maybe he won't recognize me.

Brad: Ruby Martin?

So much for that.

I pull the hat back up and give a sheepish grin.

Ruby: Brad, didn't see you there, hi.

My face is on fire.

Brad: Do you work here?

I can hear the contempt in his voice.

He doesn't have to worry about working food service.

Or any other minimum wage job.

Got a full ride to Michigan U.

And me...?

I'm taking a gap year and just barely making rent.

Ruby: Working for pocket change, you know?

I don't know why I'm lying to him.

That money goes toward rent and ramen.

Besides, it's not like he's going to take me back.

Brad: Sure. I do some tutoring on campus to pay for dates.

Oh, right. That's why I'm lying.

Because he has a super hot girlfriend now.

She wears that red hoodie all the time.

I've seen pictures on Instagram.

Ruby: Sure, yeah, um, me too. The money goes to dates.

Brad: What do you mean?

Ruby: I work here to pay for dates with my hot boyfriend.

I can't let him know that I haven't had a date since high school.

When we used to go out.

That was a year ago.

Brad quirks an eyebrow, doesn't believe me.

Brad: What's his name?

I turn my head to the left to avoid his gaze.

I see my coworker Graham doing side work.

He's cute, and a great listener.

But he's not Brad Wolf in a red hoodie cute.

But it's the only name that can come to mind...

I jab my thumb at him.

Ruby: I'm dating Graham.

Graham looks up at me confused.

I give him a pleading look.

He looks at me and then at Brad.

And then at the red hoodie.

I've told Graham all about the red hoodie.

He nods and cracks a grin, playing along.

Graham: Yeah, we've been dating for two months now.

Brad doesn't look convinced.

Brad: You make her pay for dates?

Ruby: We split the bill.

Brad snorts.

He was always one of those guys who thought just guys paid.

I'd call him a knight in shining armor if it wasn't for...

What happened on our last date.

Brad: I don't know if I believe you, Ruby.

Even his smile is cruel.

Brad: I mean, you've broken my trust in the past.

Brad: How do I know you're not bluffing?

He's asking us to prove it.

Graham steps toward me and turns to Brad.

Something about his stance seems protective.

We're good friends, but I didn't know he cared this much about me.

Graham: We've been dating two months, what more do you want?

Brad shrugs.

Brad: I'm just surprised it's been that long. She's a flight risk.

My face is on fire again.

He's right. There's a reason why I haven't dated anyone since him.

I don't trust guys anymore.

Graham's jaw tightens.

Graham: Well, she's stuck with me that long.

Brad sneers.

Brad: Prove it. What's her favorite color?

Crap, he's going to see if Graham actually knows me.

Graham: Red.

Wait, how does he know this?

He and I talk, but I didn't think he was paying attention.

Then again, he is a great listener.

Brad: Favorite movie?

Graham: Into the Woods.

Brad: Biggest fear?

Graham: Rejection.

Brad looks stumped.

Maybe he'll believe it and finally leave.

So I don't have to see that red hoodie anymore.

Then a smile crawls up Brad's face.

Brad: Kiss her.

Graham and I freeze.

Graham: Excuse me, what?

Brad: You've been dating for two months.

Brad: Surely you two would've kissed by now.

Brad: We'd been dating a month when we had.

He's calling my bluff.

He knows I haven't kissed anyone since him.

Graham balls his fists.

Graham: Look, we're not just going to kiss on command.

Brad: Then, I'm not convinced you two are dating.

Ruby: It's fine, Graham, we can do it.

My voice is cracking in my throat.

I'm not having Brad leave here thinking I'm a loser.

Graham looks at me, uncertain.

Graham: You sure?

No, I'm not.

Ruby: Kiss me.

He leans in, and suddenly I freeze.

I can't do this.

He looks just like Brad did.

The night of our first kiss.

I was wearing that red hoodie.

Anyone who dated Brad got to wear it.

It was a status symbol.

But he wanted more that night.

And I wasn't ready to give it.

So he took the hoodie back.

And broke off our relationship.

Ruby: I can't.

My hands are outstretched, holding him back.

A tear glides down my cheek.

Brad: I knew it.

I'm not looking at him.

But I can hear the sneer in his voice.

Brad: I'm glad you only wore the hoodie once.

Brad: I'd be embarrassed if people saw you in it.

Brad: A flight risk, being Brad Wolf's girl.

Graham lunges at him from behind the counter.

It looks like he's trying to grab a fistful of Brad's hoodie.

He misses.

Brad sneers at me one more time.

And then he leaves the bakery.

I break down crying.

Graham wraps me in a hug.

Ruby: Graham, I'm a loser.

Graham: What? Because you're not going out with that jerk?

Ruby: He was the most popular guy at school.

Graham: Ruby, he's a wolf who devours women.

Graham: You deserve so much better.

I bury my face into his chest.

Ruby: I don't mean to be a flight risk.

Ruby: I just like to take things slow.

He squeezes me tighter.

This feels nice.

Why didn't I date a guy like Graham in high school?

Graham: Take all the time you need, OK?

Ruby: OK.

We release and I glance at the clock.

My shift is over.

Ruby: I should probably head home.

Graham: Me too.

Oh, right, he gets off at this time, too.

He goes into the break room.

He comes out a moment later with his hoodie.

Graham: I hear it's pretty cold out there.

Ruby: Crap, I didn't pack a coat.

It was warmer outside earlier.

Graham: Well why don't you borrow this?

He hands me his hoodie.

It's red.

I take it and put it on.

It feels like a hug.

Graham motions to the door.

Graham: Shall we?

You know, I like his hoodie more than Brad's.

It's warm, smells great.

And it fits a whole lot better.

Small Talk

by Hope Bolinger

Scott: I can't do this.

Dakota: Can't do what?

Scott: I'm leaving.

Dakota: What do you mean you're leaving?

Dakota: You just got to the restaurant.

Scott: I can't do this.

Scott: Why'd you stick me in the farthest booth?

Scott: The exit sign is so far away...

Dakota: Dude, relax. You're blowing up my phone.

Two minutes later...

Dakota: OK, I didn't mean for you to relax that much.

Dakota: ...

Dakota: Did you leave the restaurant?

Scott: ...

Scott: No.

Dakota: Just breathe.

Dakota: It's just a first date.

Scott: It's not like that.

Dakota: Can't have you third-wheeling with Aleesha and me all the time.

Dakota: You cry too much at the movies.

Dakota: She likes a guy who cries.

Scott: ...

Dakota: Is she there yet?

Scott: No.

Dakota: 😏

Dakota: Yeesh, how late is she?

Scott: She's not...

Scott: I'm twenty minutes early.

Dakota: Are you kidding me?

Scott: The waitress said they'd cleaned off the table early.

Scott: I still had to talk to her.

Scott: You know I can't talk to women.

Dakota: 😏

Dakota: Just stay in that booth, OK?

Dakota: OK?

Thirty seconds later...

Scott stands to leave the restaurant.

Dakota: Sit your butt down.

Scott: How'd you know I just stood up?

Dakota: I'm sitting in the booth by the jukebox.

Scott: What jukebox?

Scott: Oh.

Scott waves to Dakota.

Scott: Why am I texting you?

Scott gets up to go to Dakota's table.

A female waitress stops by to take Dakota's order.

Scott sits down.

Dakota: Someone get this brave man a trophy.

Scott: Shut up.

Dakota: She's gone.

Dakota: You can come over.

Scott stands again.

A party of girls, probably a bachelorette party, follows a server.

They sit at the table right next to Dakota's.

Scott sits in his booth, defeated.

Dakota: You know what I don't get about you?

Dakota: You speak three languages. Three!

Dakota: Four if you count Klingon, but no one does.

Dakota: Aleesha also likes those Star Trek movies...

Scott stands again and makes a move toward the exit.

Dakota: Sit your butt down!

Scott stares Dakota down, defiant.

Dakota: Just because I'm being blocked by a table full of girls won't stop me from coming over.

Scott retreats to his booth and sits.

Dakota: Thought so.

Scott sighs and buries his face into the menu.

Dakota: I don't get you.

Dakota: You speak Spanish, ASL...

A waitress stops by Scott's table.

Scott turns red and points to a random spot on the drink menu.

Dakota: Yet, you can't even tell the waitress what you want to drink.

Scott: I just keep thinking about Amelia.

Dakota: Not this again.

Scott: You saw the screenshots.

Dakota: I deleted them.

Scott: Well, I'll send them again.

Dakota: Great.

Scott sends the screenshots:

Amelia: Don't contact this number again.

Scott: Please just tell me what I did wrong.

Amelia: You tell me.

Amelia: Oh wait.

Amelia: You can't.

Amelia: Because you can't tell girls anything.

Scott: Is it because of the stutter?

Amelia: The FAKE stutter?

Scott: Fake?

Scott: It isn't fake.

Amelia: Sigh. I've heard you talk with Dakota before.

Amelia: You two spoke in front of your locker.

Amelia: You never stuttered once.

Scott: That's different. He's—

Scott: I—

Amelia: Wow. Stuttering over text.

Amelia: Bye, Felicia.

Dakota deletes the screenshots.

Dakota: We all have rough first dates, bro.

Scott: I've had this stutter my whole life.

Scott: Maybe she heard a conversation where it wasn't there.

Scott: Sometimes I can go five or ten seconds without it showing up.

Scott: But never around girls.

Scott sighs.

Dakota: Believe it or not, Sami hasn't had much luck either.

Scott: Really?

Scott: Because she's gorgeous on Instagram.

Scott: She's way out of my league.

Scott buries his face in his hands.

Dakota sighs.

Dakota: I wasn't going to do this.

Dakota: But you've left me with no choice.

Dakota sends screenshots.

Scott: What are these?

Scott: Why are you sending me a conversation with Sami?

Dakota: Just read it.

Scott reads the screenshots:

Sami: I can't do this.

Sami: Please call it off.

Dakota: Are you in the parking lot?

Dakota: I can see your headlights in the window.

Dakota: Your car has the funky blue lights, right?

Dakota: Sami?

Sami: Look, I've been scrolling through his Insta.

Sami: I can't do this.

Sami: Not after last time.

Dakota: Don't pull out of the parking spot!

Dakota: Sami!

Sami: Fine.

Sami: There. Happy?

Dakota: So what if Brock ditched you five minutes into your first date with him?

Sami: Everyone does when they find out.

Dakota: When they find out what?

Sami: Don't play dumb.

Sami: I was born with it.

Sami: It doesn't matter how pretty I look.

Sami: They'll know right away.

Dakota: All you need's the right guy.

Sami: Tell him I'm sorry, but I think I'm going home.

Scott exits out of the screenshots.

Scott: That's awful.

Scott: She can't help if she's born with something.

Dakota: Just like you and your stutter.

Scott: When did she send that?

Dakota: Literally five seconds ago.

Scott: WHAT?

Dakota: I've been screenshotting them as she's been sending them.

Dakota: I think she's trying to back out again.

Scott gets out of his seat.

Dakota: Don't you try to leave, too!

Dakota waves for Scott to sit.

Scott bolts out of his booth and toward the exit.

Dakota: Scott, get back in here!

Dakota: Don't make me come after you.

Dakota tries to get up from his seat.

Just then, the table of girls gets up to give presents to the bride-to-be.

After a great deal of effort, Dakota skirts around them.

He stops when he almost runs into a couple holding hands.

He marches toward the exit.

He stops and turns around.

Dakota: Are you—

Dakota: Did you just—

Scott: Look who's stuttering now.

Dakota: You're holding hands with her?

Sami signs something to Scott.

Scott signs something back.

Scott: You never said she spoke ASL.

Dakota: Yeah.

Sami sits in the booth with Scott.

They share a smile.

They sign back and forth for a few moments.

Scott: You know the cool thing about ASL?

Dakota: What?

Scott: You can't stutter.

Out of Time

by Alyssa Roat and Hope Bolinger

Maria: Tell me if you got this text.

Emma: Yes? Are you in a bad reception area or something?

Maria: You could say that.

Emma: Where are you?

Maria: The question is WHEN am I.

Emma: What are you talking about?

Maria: I don't know much about dinosaurs...

Maria: Oh, shoot.

Maria: Yep, that's a T-Rex.

Emma: Are you saying that time machine you built worked?

Maria: I set it to the Jurassic Period, but I didn't think it would actually work.

Emma: Wow! Wait...can you get back to our time period?

Maria: That's... a great question.

Emma: Does it have a good answer?

Maria: Well, I need to find some coal.

Maria: The time machine runs on coal...

Maria: Because, you know, coal is basically dead dinos.

Emma: Did you run out or something?

Maria: Hey, this thing isn't fuel-efficient.

Emma: OK, well let's try to think where you can find some coal.

Emma: Without killing a dino, please.

Emma: You don't want to mess with timelines or anything.

Maria: Eek! This bug just bit me!

Emma: Yikes! Is it huge? Are you ok?

Maria: Now it's just a huge mess on my arm.

Maria: I smashed it. Ewwwww.

Emma: Yuck...also, something really weird just happened.

Emma: A bird just smacked the window, but it's strange...

Emma: Maria, the thing has four wings.

Maria: What? OMG... did I do that?

Emma: Let me take a look outside to see it.

Two minutes later...

Emma: Ummm, Maria, all of the birds have four wings now.

Maria: Killing one bug did that?!

Maria: I'm going to have to be really careful.

Emma: Yeah, I guess evolution's tricky or something.

Emma: Maybe that bug would've prevented birds from getting an extra pair of wings.

Emma: Now, let's figure out how to get you some coal.

Emma: Do you remember that old coal mine about a mile away from school?

Maria: OMG. You think the coal might be there in this time?

Emma: It's probably the best chance you've got.

Emma: Also, how is your cell phone working?

Maria: Does it matter? I'm trapped in the Jurassic Period!

Emma: Yeah, I guess not. Let me know when you get to that old coal mine location.

Maria: Text you in a few.

Ten minutes later...

Emma: Maria? Please tell me you didn't mess with the timeline again.

Emma: Because there's a mosquito the size of a cat trying to crash into my window.

Maria: I stepped on ONE dinosaur egg!

Emma: I guess that dinosaur you stepped on would've wiped out this giant mosquito species.

Maria: Crap! Momma dino is chasing me.

Maria: Eek! Compsognathus!

Emma: OMG, yeah that sounds worse. Run!

Five minutes later...

Emma: Are you ok??

Maria: I shook off the evil chicken dino.

Emma: How can you be so funny at a time like this?

Emma: Also, now three mosquitos are trying to break in.

Emma: Are you close to the coal?

Maria: Yes! I got here fast running from the little angry dino.

Maria: Dude, there is literally a cave where the mine is back home!

Emma: Awesome. Also, there's a problem here...

Emma: My glass is starting to crack.

Emma: Hurry back home!!

Two minutes later...

Maria: Got the coal!

Emma: OMG, the mosquitos just burst into my room.

Emma: I'm going to run outside to get away from them.

Emma grabs a tennis racquet.

She flings open her door and runs outside.

When a mosquito approaches her, she swats at it.

Emma: Any chance you can fix the timeline?

Maria: I'm on my way back!

Two minutes later...

Emma: Maria, why is there a dinosaur on my street??

Maria: Oh no... what kind?

Emma: The ginormous kind with two little arms.

Emma: Is that a T-Rex??

Emma's heart thunders in her chest.

Emma: Maria, I think it just spotted me.

Maria: Stay still! Maybe it won't see you.

Emma: I can't stay still with all these mosquitos diving at me!

Emma: I think I'm going to have to run.

Emma makes a break for the school a mile away.

Ten minutes later...

Emma: He got distracted by a pterodactyl, which apparently exist now too.

Maria: I'm so sorry! I fed a pterodactyl to make him leave me alone.

Emma: What part of do NOT mess with the timeline do you not understand?

Maria: I was scared, okay!

Maria: Oh, no.

Emma: What?

Maria: I think I just found your T-Rex's brother.

Maria: He's checking out my time machine.

Emma: Shoot, I think my T-Rex just spotted me hiding behind the dumpster.

Maria: No! My T-Rex is going to crush the time machine!

Maria: I have to get him away.

Maria: Time to get him to chase me.

Maria: This is my worst idea ever.

Maria jumps up and down, waving at the T-Rex.

It turns to chase her.

Emma: Shoot, he's running at me.

Emma darts for the track and field stadium.

Maria makes a loop, followed by a roaring T-Rex.

The dinosaur follows Emma, crushing the dumpster behind her.

Maria dives into the time machine, shoving coal in the fuel tank.

Emma reaches the field but is trapped inside the fence with the dinosaur on her heels.

Maria turns on the machine as a T-Rex's maw fills the window.

Emma screams when her T-Rex lifts its foot to crush her.

A time machine falls out of the sky.

The machine smashes into the head of the T-Rex about to crush Emma.

The T-Rex falls to the side and crashes into the fence, dead.

The machine lands in the middle of the field.

Emma races to it.

Emma: Maria, are you OK? Did you survive?

The hatch opens.

Maria's head appears, covered in soot.

She grins.

Maria: I took down a T-Rex!

Emma: Yes, but--

She points to the skies that are now filled with four-winged birds, mosquitos, and pterodactyls.

Emma: How are we going to fix that?

Maria: Time to get some coal and fire this thing up again.

Sleepless

by Hope Bolinger

I hate the graveyard shift.

You'd think, "Ah, yay! Almost no customers."

And you'd think, "Yay! Just me and my coworker/bff/crush Felipe."

That's where you'd be wrong, kiddo.

See, I've been working at the gas station store since 9 p.m.

And now it's 4 a.m.

And I have this fun little autoimmune disease.

Called POTS.

Postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome.

Yeah, I know what some of you were thinking...

But no, it's not that.

It's this fun little disease where all the blood in my head...

Drops to my feet.

And stays there.

Making me need to--

Anna: Oh gosh, I need to puke.

Felipe peeks out from an aisle he's been cleaning.

I'd normally take a long look at him.

He's not bad to look at. Mmmm, not at all.

But right now, I need to puke.

Anna: Or pass out.

Pass out sounds more likely.

See, when the blood escapes your head, you can't function.

You get stomach aches and dizzy spells.

Especially if you stand too long.

My boss knows that.

And yet, she keeps giving me graveyard shifts.

I grip the counter and clutch my stomach.

Felipe rushes over to me.

Felipe: Doing OK, Anna?

Anna: Mhmm.

A lie, of course.

I'm trying not to get vomit on that pretty face of his.

I manage to catch my breath.

Anna: Just need to sit.

Felipe: I'll go find a chair.

He bolts away.

But it's no use.

There aren't any chairs in the building.

I'd slide to floor to sit a while.

But Boss likes to check the security footage of the store.

Makes sure, "None of my workers are being lazy."

And if she saw me sit...she'd fire me.

I massage my calves to distract myself.

They're covered by compression socks.

These socks try to help the blood get out of my legs.

And back up to my brain.

It doesn't always work though...

Felipe: Here, maybe this will help.

He emerges from a back room.

Without a chair.

Shocker.

Instead, he places his phone on my counter.

And plays a YouTube video of my favorite movie.

Sleeping Beauty.

Anna: H-how did you know--?

Felipe: You talk about it all the time.

He gives me a wry smile.

I love that smile.

Gosh, why do we both work too much?

We watch the movie together.

It seems to make the nausea go away.

But suddenly, my eyes catches the camera right above us.

Boss won't like us goofing around.

I shove the phone away.

The moment I do so, my stomach hurts again.

Felipe: What's wrong?

Anna: Nothing, I'll be better soon.

I won't.

Felipe seems to follow my gaze to the video camera.

And then back at me.

Felipe: Boss threatened to fire you too, huh?

Too?

Felipe has been late for some shifts.

Still, that's ridiculous. He works hard.

Anna: Yeah, me too.

He quirks an eyebrow.

Felipe: What on earth does she have on you? You're smart.

He tallies off the points on his fingers.

Felipe: Hard working, and all the workers love--

He catches himself on that word.

His cheeks flush.

Felipe: I mean, we all like you. Not love...

Felipe has had a crush on me.

According to the other coworkers.

But I don't have time for dating.

He and I usually don't get the same shifts.

And we both work a lot of hours.

Plus I'm trying to keep up with apartment rent.

And if Boss fired me from this job...

I get woozy thinking about it.

Anna: Boss doesn't like it when I pass out.

Felipe: What?

Anna: Says it freaks out the customers.

Felipe: You can't help it.

Anna: I know, but--

Felipe: But nothing. It's a disability.

Anna: Yeah, well, she doesn't see it that way.

Although, it's true.

Loads of people with it can't even get up for work.

I'm lucky enough to be standing at this counter.

But I won't forget what she said to me in her office.

"A disability has to be visible."

Her spit caught me in the cheek.

"You don't look handicapped. So I'm not buying it."

She thought I was making the whole thing up.

To get easy hours or something...

I can't get fired from this job.

The last three fired me for passing out too much.

Felipe seems to read my expression.

He chews on his lip.

Then his face brightens.

He has an idea.

That's dangerous.

Felipe dashes away.

He returns moments later.

With something in his hand.

It's a bottle of cheese whiz.

Before I can ask what he's doing, he jumps on my counter.

And aims the cheese whiz at the camera pointed at me.

Anna: Felipe, no!

He's trying to cover the camera.

So I can sit.

But he can't risk getting fired for me.

My stomach hurts too much for me to stop him.

I'm doubled over.

He sprays the can until cheese covers the lens.

Then he jumps down.

Anna: Felipe, you're going to get fired.

Felipe: Worth it.

I'm getting light-headed.

I'm going to pass out soon if I don't sit.

Felipe: The princess needs a throne!

I roll my eyes.

Anna: You're ridiculous.

He hands me his phone.

It's still playing the movie.

He bolts behind me.

I hear his knees crack as he bends down to get something.

Felipe: All aboard.

I turn around.

And see him on his hands and knees.

He grins at me.

And pats his back.

Felipe: Your throne, your highness.

Anna: I'm not going to sit on you.

Felipe: Our cheap boss doesn't have any chairs.

Felipe: Something you, who has a handicap, needs.

Felipe: And you need to sit on something.

Darkness is beginning to cloud my vision.

He's right.

I gently sit on his back.

And focus on the movie.

The stomach pain seems to go away.

And the darkness appears to dissipate from my eyes.

Felipe: So, princess.

Anna: Yes, weirdo?

Felipe: Since I'm going to get fired and all.

He chuckles.

Felipe: For spraying cheese whiz on the cameras.

Felipe: What say you about going on a date?

What say I?

I smile.

Rose: How about tomorrow?

Felipe: Tomorrow?

Rose: After I've had a long night's sleep.

I'm going to need it.

Come Alone

by Hope Bolinger

Lia: Come alone.

Alina: Lia???

Lia: Do not call the police.

Alina: What are you talking about?

Alina: We haven't heard from you in months.

Alina: Where are you???

Lia: The gym at Pierce.

Alina: Where have you been since June?

Lia: Come alone.

Alina: David's been worried sick.

Lia: Do not call the police.

Alina: They issued a missing person's report.

Lia: Do not bring anyone with you.

Alina: This isn't Lia is it?

Alina: Lia puts an emoji next to everything.

Lia: 🖊️

Alina: The heck?

Alina: What have you done with Lia?

Lia: Do not contact anyone.

Alina: Who is this??

Lia: Come alone.

Lia: I will know if you've contacted someone.

Lia: You have thirty minutes.

Alina tries to call Lia's phone.

It goes straight to voicemail.

Alina paces around her room.

She stops when she sees the car keys on her dresser.

She glances back at her phone.

Alina: David? Are you there?

David: Yeah, what's up?

Alina sends screenshots from her conversation with Lia.

David: Shoot.

Alina: I don't know what to do.

David: Well, you contacted me.

David: You weren't supposed to contact anyone.

Alina: You're her boyfriend.

Alina: You have a right to know.

Alina: And... I'm scared.

David: Makes sense. Want me to pick you up?

Alina: You think I should go to school and meet with them in the gym?

Alina: Alone?

David: I was thinking I'd go with you.

Alina: It said to come alone.

David: It also said not to contact anyone.

David: Just let me pick you up.

Alina: No. I'm afraid something will happen to Lia if I don't come alone.

Alina: Besides, what are you going to do?

Alina: Hit the stranger with your slingshot?

David: Hey, it was the best one made in my engineering class.

David: You could knock out any of the guys on the wrestling team at just the right angle.

David: Again, you want me to come?

Alina: Maybe come but wait outside the gym.

Alina: Listen for a scream or something...

David: I'll be there in ten minutes.

Alina: Fifteen for me.

Alina grabs her car keys.

Fifteen minutes later...

Alina: Arrived. Where are you?

David: I parked all the way at the library entrance.

David: Figured I'd park somewhere far away in case they're watching the gym lot.

Alina: Weird. There aren't any other cars here.

Alina: Maybe they live close and just walked here.

Alina swallows hard.

Alina: Lia lived like two minutes away from the school.

David: So did that dude who used to stalk her.

David: Remember him?

Alina: Yeah, he used to sit behind me in Spanish.

David: I know. I sat by him. Remember?

David: I think his name was Noah.

David: Remember he'd wear that black hoodie that always smelled?

Alina: You think he's the one who has her phone?

David: Let's hope not.

Alina breathes deeply.

Alina: OK, I'm going in.

David: I'm right by the doors, on the other side of the building.

Alina gets out of her car and heads toward the gym.

She approaches the doors.

She opens them and squints into the darkness.

Her phone buzzes, and she jumps.

David: See anything?

Alina: You gave me a heart attack!

David: Sorry. Is there someone else in there?

Her eyes adjust to the darkness.

Alina: I don't think so.

Alina: There's something at the half court line.

David: What is it?

Alina walks to the half court line and picks up the item.

Alina: It's a Spanish flash card.

David: What's it say?

Alina: "Traición." It means betrayal.

David: Betrayal?

David: Didn't Noah have a thing with Lia freshman year?

Alina: Yeah, then I told her he was a jerk and she dumped him for you.

David: You think he felt betrayed by that?

Alina: We don't know if it's Noah.

Alina glances at the flashcard again.

Her phone buzzes.

Lia: Did you come alone?

Alina: Yup.

Lia: Did you find the flashcard?

Alina: Mhmm.

Lia: Meet me in the auditorium.

Lia: Come alone.

Lia: You have ten minutes.

Alina slips the flashcard into her pocket.

She sends David a screenshot of Lia's message.

David: You want me to come inside and go with you?

Alina: I have to "come alone."

Alina: There are windows outside the auditorium.

Alina: Do you think you can look through those without getting seen?

David: I'll have to do the farthest ones.

David: But my slingshot won't be any good at that far a range.

Alina: Let's hope you don't have to use it.

Alina: Heading over now.

Alina walks out of the gym toward the auditorium.

She enters, once again in darkness.

Her phone buzzes.

David: Anything?

Alina clutches at her heart.

Alina: I need to put this thing on silent.

Alina: There's a spotlight on the curtains.

Alina: I think I see something taped to them.

She goes toward it and removes the item.

She holds it in the spotlight to get a better look.

David: Another flashcard?

Alina: No, it's a program from Richard III.

David: You mean from May?

Alina: Yeah, our names are circled in red pen.

David: I remember Noah was pretty mad about me getting Richard and how you got Anne.

David: I think he wanted it to be him and Lia.

David: He talked a lot about that stage kiss.

Alina: Let's not relive that OK?

Alina: It was weird enough kissing my best friend's boyfriend.

Alina bites her lip.

Alina: Even if it was acting.

As Alina goes to put the show program on the ground, her phone buzzes.

Lia: Did you see the show program?

Alina: Yes.

Lia: Meet me at the tennis courts.

Alina: Will I actually meet you there?

Lia: Come alone.

Lia: You have five minutes.

Alina sends the screenshot to David.

David: Shoot, there's nowhere easy to hide on the courts.

David: I'd have to go all the way to the windscreen side.

David: That could take ten minutes.

Alina: I'll get there in five minutes if I run.

David: I'll sprint.

Alina runs to the courts.

Five minutes later...

Alina stops when she sees a hooded figure at the other end of the courts, texting.

David is nowhere in sight.

Lia: You didn't come alone.

The hooded figure walks toward Alina.

Alina: Here I am. Alone.

Lia: I saw the other car at the library.

The hooded figure is halfway across the length of the courts.

Alina: Maybe it's a janitor or something.

She glances at her phone's clock. 2:30 AM.

Lia: You broke the rules.

Lia: You have no time left.

The hooded figure brandishes a knife.

Alina swivels around and bolts toward the exit.

She hears a thud behind her.

She turns around and sees the hooded figure sprawled with a rock next to their head.

Halfway down the courts is David, panting, holding his slingshot.

Alina rushes over to the body.

The figure is still breathing.

Alina: It's Noah's hoodie. It always had a hole in the left shoulder.

David: I'll be over in a sec.

David: Just have to catch my breath.

Alina heaves over the body and gasps.

Alina: David...

Alina: It's Lia.

Move In

by Hope Bolinger

They say you know who your real friends are when you move to a new house.

Turns out, I have no friends.

At least, no one showed up to help me move boxes into this new apartment.

Oh wait, I hear knocking.

... it's Elijah, my best friend.

I thought he and his girlfriend were moving in together today.

He looks tired, but there's that goofy grin.

I feel my cheeks get warm. And my stomach tighten.

Why do I always feel this way around him?

Leila: Elijah, shouldn't you be clear across town? Helping Olivia with boxes?

Olivia's his girlfriend.

Thanks to her, I almost never see Elijah.

She's really protective of him.

Elijah: She's all situated. Thought I could help you unpack.

Leila: Are you sure? I'd hate for you to have to unpack twice in one day.

Honestly, I'd hate for Olivia to find out.

She didn't handle the last time I hung out with Elijah well.

Elijah: Are you the only one who's unloading all these boxes?

He gestures at the boxes piled all over the apartment.

I'm dreading having to unpack all of these. By myself.

Leila: My other two roommates bailed last minute.

They were dating and decided they wanted to live together.

And leave me out of the deal.

No idea how I'll handle the rent.

Elijah's legs are starting to wobble at the front door.

Probably tired from moving Olivia in.

Even though she hates it when I hang out with her boyfriend...

Can't let him pass out at my front door.

Leila: Why don't you sit? I set up the futon already.

He walks in and slumps on the couch.

Elijah: You moved this couch all by yourself?

Leila: Well, Cassie wasn't going to help.

Cassie's my dad's girlfriend.

She's the reason they evicted me. Wanted him to herself.

And I had to scramble to get an apartment.

To get roommates, who ended up bailing on me.

I bend down to pick up a box. Jeez, it's heavy.

Elijah: Let me help.

Leila: Stay seated. You look exhausted.

He looks like he wants to argue.

His phone buzzes, and blush crawls up his cheeks.

Leila: Is that Olivia?

Elijah: No it's... no one.

He's a bad liar.

I love and hate that about him.

Shoot, I shouldn't put the words "I" and "love" next to Elijah.

I'd stopped crushing on him four years ago when he started dating Olivia.

...right? Why's my stomach all tight?

Leila: Olivia has a "Leila Sense," you know. Especially after our last get together.

Our last get together: I was at a bar.

And some creepy guy kept hitting on me. Threatened to follow me to my car.

I didn't feel safe, and the bar was close to Elijah's parent's house.

I told the guy at the bar, "My boyfriend is coming soon."

Then I texted Elijah and asked him to pretend to be my boyfriend.

Elijah showed up, put his arm around me, and the guy backed off.

But someone else at the bar, a person from our class.

They took a SnapChat of him and me.

Olivia saw it... and that was the last time I saw Elijah.

I bend down to get another box that looks lighter.

Whoops, appearances are misleading. I need to take a break.

Elijah: You have to let me help you. Please.

He sounds desperate.

Leila: I can't let you do that.

Still, I set down the box.

He quirks a brow.

Elijah: Why not?

His phone buzzes again. He ignores it.

Olivia. That's why.

Leila: I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself.

Leila: Besides, I'm used to being the only person who can help myself.

Elijah: Lei, your dad kicked you out.

I blush at the sound of my nickname. Only he calls me that.

"Lei."

Elijah: Your friends bailed on you.

Elijah: And now you have to pay for rent with a retail salary.

Elijah: The least I can do is help you unpack, Lei.

I don't want to unpack.

Not with him around.

Unpacking is awful. They can see everything about you in these boxes.

Any time I'm vulnerable, Olivia catches me in the act.

And I hate how tight my stomach feels right now.

Elijah pushes himself off the couch.

And stumbles toward a box, one of the heavier ones.

Leila: Elijah, what are you doing?

He doesn't answer and bends down to scoop it up.

Leila: Elijah, stop.

With a grunt he heaves it.

Seconds later, his phone buzzes nonstop.

I see the word "Olivia" on the screen. She's calling him.

Leila: Her Leila Sense is going wild. You need to pick up.

Tears burn in my eyes. My stomach really hurts right now.

Leila: You need to help HER. Not me.

I'll just help myself. Like I always have to.

He glances at me, at the phone, and the box he's holding.

He sets down the box.

Great, Prince Charming is going to rescue Princess Olivia.

But he's turning off his phone.

And now he's picking up the box again.

Leila: What are you doing?

Elijah: The right thing.

Leila: What do you mean?

He sets the box on a countertop. Stares at me. Right in the eyes.

Elijah: After I helped Olivia unload her boxes, I mentioned you.

Elijah: I said everyone bailed and you needed help with moving.

Leila: What did she say?

Elijah: She flipped out. Said I couldn't see you again. Not after the bar incident.

Elijah: She said if I walked out that door, she would get a new roommate.

Elijah: And a new boyfriend. I guess she has one already lined up.

My jaw sinks.

Then everything sinks in.

Leila: You gave up a home, a girlfriend for me?

Leila: Why?

He doesn't answer, but there's that goofy grin again.

I could kiss him. My stomach isn't tight anymore.

He picks up the box again from the counter.

Elijah: Any chance you're looking for a new roommate?

I grin.

Leila: I think I can just squeeze you in.

We walk to a bedroom and set the box down.

Elijah: I'm wiped. What say we take a break and get a drink, Lei?

My cheeks warm a little.

Leila: I think I know just the right bar.

Freezer Burn

by Hope Bolinger

Zach: Bro, look what I found at work.

Zach sends a picture.

Jessie: The picture's so dark. Are you in the freezer?

Zach: Yeah, but I didn't want to turn the lights on.

Jessie: Why not?

Zach: You'll see after I send a pic with the flash on.

Zach takes a picture with his flash on.

Zach sends a picture.

Jessie: Is that a plastic body bag???

Zach: Yep, and it has someone inside.

Jessie: Do you know who?

Zach: I haven't unzipped the bag yet.

Jessie: That's so creepy! Why don't you want the lights on?

Zach: They were on five minutes ago...

Zach: But when I came back, they were off.

Zach: Bro, the body bag wasn't in here five minutes ago.

Jessie: You need to get out of there!

Zach: Don't you think I should check out who's inside the bag?

Jessie: Why would you do that?

Zach: If the police see footage of me on the cameras walking in here, they might think I did it.

Jessie: Oh, I forgot about the store cameras. Fine. But do it fast.

Zach unzips the body bag.

He shines his phone flashlight on the face of the figure.

His heart rattles against his chest.

Zach: Jessie, it's your track coach.

Jessie: Mr. Brady? Are you sure?

Zach takes a picture of the body and sends it.

Jessie: Why would anyone kill him? He was a nice guy!

Zach: I don't know, man, but there's something else.

Jessie: What?

Zach: Mr. Brady was walking around the store 30 minutes ago.

Jessie: He was??

Zach: Yeah, he thought I was you for a second. He called me "Jessie."

Jessie: He hasn't ever been good at getting twins straight.

Zach: That means someone had to have killed him in thirty minutes.

Jessie: Yikes. Is it clear how he died?

Zach shines his flashlight on the body.

Zach: I can't find any wounds.

Jessie: Does he have anything like hand marks around his neck?

Jessie: Like someone choked him?

Zach: No, but his face is all wet. Maybe he was sweating a lot.

Jessie: In this cold weather?

Zach: He looks kind of like Al did last January.

Jessie: Hey, you promised not to bring up that name.

Zach hears a noise outside of the freezer door.

Zach: Someone's trying to get inside the freezer.

Jessie: Shoot. Is there an exit?

Zach: There's only one door. The entrance and exit.

Zach looks around for something to hide behind.

He spies a large box.

He crouches behind it.

The freezer door opens.

Zach hears the sound of something dragging across the floor.

With a grunt, someone sets something against the metal wall.

Footsteps slowly diminish.

The freezer door closes.

Zach peers from over the box.

Jessie: Are you OK???

Zach shines his flashlight on the new item dragged into the freezer.

Zach: I'm fine. But Jessie, they dragged another freezer bag in here.

Jessie: Oh, God. Who is it now?

Zach approaches the bag.

He unzips it.

Zach: It looks like that guy you run the 4X400 with.

Jessie: Toby?

Zach takes a picture of the latest victim and sends it to Jessie.

Jessie: Shoot. Why does the killer keep targeting nice people?

Zach: Wasn't he the one who organized the Polar Plunge last January?

Jessie: Hey, what did we say about talking about that event?

Zach: Sorry. But it's hard to forget about what happened to Al.

Zach: I know it was a fundraiser for the team, but was it worth it?

Jessie: How were we supposed to know he'd get hypothermia?

Zach: I know, but it was just hard to see how it affected his family.

Zach: Especially since his twin sister died so young. Car crash, you know?

Zach: I mean, how would you feel if you lost your own twin?

Jessie: Can we please drop this?

Zach: Why?

Jessie: I quit the team last year after it, OK? I learned my lesson.

Zach sighs.

Jessie: From looking at the picture, I can't see any wounds.

Jessie: Is it clear how Toby died?

Zach scans the body again.

Zach: Again, his face is all wet. In fact...

Zach unzips the bag a little farther.

Zach: All of him is wet. It's like he drowned.

Zach's heart is beating very fast now.

Jessie: Bro, you need to get out of there now.

Zach: You're right. First, the police station. Then, straight home.

Zach goes to the door.

He tries the handle.

It's locked.

Zach: Shoot. They locked me in.

Jessie: What? You don't have a key with you?

Zach: You lock it on the outside, not the inside.

Jessie: Maybe the handle's just stuck? You are in a freezer.

Zach tries the handle again, harder this time.

The door makes a loud noise from his effort.

The metal freezer echoes as he stumbles back into a shelf in surprise.

Footsteps sound outside.

The door clicks open.

In walks a hooded figure with a flashlight.

The flashlight shines on Zach for a moment.

Zach shines his phone flashlight on the figure.

The figure is huge, far larger than the coach or Toby.

Zach recognizes the figure's face.

Zach: Y-you're Al's dad? Ryan, right?

Ryan squints at him for a moment.

Ryan drops the flashlight.

Then, Ryan lunges forward and grabs a fistful of Zach's shirt.

Ryan: I remember you.

Zach: You do?

Ryan: You're one of those boys on that track team.

Zach: Huh?

Ryan: The team that killed my son.

Zach: No, I'm not. You're thinking of my twi--

Before Zach can finish the word "twin," Ryan clamps his hand on his mouth.

Ryan pulls Zach out of the freezer and toward the exit door of the store.

He drags Zach to the pond out back.

Zach notices several body bags, dozens.

In fact, it looks like enough body bags for the whole boys' track team.

Ryan: I thought I was missing one member. You weren't on this year's roster.

Ryan: But when I saw your face, I remembered you.

Ryan: Thought you could quit the team and leave it all behind you, eh?

Ryan thrusts Zach under the water.

Fifteen minutes later...

Ryan pulls Zach's limp body out of the water.

Ryan: That's the thing about grief, Jessie...

Ryan: It just drowns you.

By Any Other Name

by Hope Bolinger

Great, the cheer squad stole the small gym again.

During our practice right before the basketball district finals.

The guys basketball team always takes the big gym.

So we're left to battle it out with the cheer squad for space.

And... ugh, of course.

Julian's running the squad through a routine. Figures.

He's the only guy on the team.

So of course he wouldn't GET how much this school hates girl sports.

I can't stand him.

I can't believe he and I got paired together for a project in English.

Now I have to spend a week straight with him.

For a project on Romeo and Juliet.

I hate that play almost as much as I hate him.

He sees me.

I march toward him, heat rising in my cheeks.

Rose: Our coach reserved this space today.

Speaking of, where is coach?

Probably running late, as usual.

Julian cocks an eyebrow.

Julian: School website said the gym was free to use.

Our school website is crap.

Thing hasn't been updated in, like, ten years.

Rose: Can't you practice somewhere else?

Julian: No can do.

His smile shows off his sharp jawline.

Dang, why does he have to have a nice jawline?

Julian: We have a huge cheer competition tomorrow.

The cheer squad makes various noises in agreement.

Julian: But if you're really angry about it, take it up with our coach.

Ugh, no thanks.

Don't want to mess with that lady.

She's vicious.

It's a good thing she always runs late too.

Julian smiles again.

Julian: Thought so.

Ugh, I'd walk away if this wasn't THE most important practice of the year.

We can't practice without basketball hoops.

Whenever we can't use the gym, coach makes us run around the school.

It's pointless.

But I gotta think fast before that cheer coach gets here.

Rose: I'll fight you for it.

Wow, those words slipped right out.

Silence falls over the gym.

Julian: What did you say?

I feel my face go red.

Rose: I meant, I'll compete against you to use the gym.

Julian: What makes you think I'd do that?

Rose: You'll have to deal with OUR coach when he gets here.

Julian goes pale.

Yep, there are two vicious coaches at this school, folks.

Rose: And I'd hate to see our coaches actually get in a fight.

There would be bloodshed.

Dang, that's extreme.

I need to stop reading that play from English class.

Julian considers this for a moment and then sighs.

Julian: Fine, what would you suggest?

I point to the three-point line.

Rose: We each shoot until we make a basket.

Rose: Whoever makes the basket wins.

He rolls his eyes.

Julian: That's unfair. You PLAY basketball.

Rose: Fine, we can do more than one competition.

Rose: But the first one is shooting the hoop.

He runs a thumb across his jawline.

Dang, those are some nice arm muscles.

I turn away and grab a basketball.

Stop gawking, Rose.

Who cares if you crushed on him freshman year?

That was two years ago.

And he's probably into one of the girls on the cheer squad.

They're more his type, anyway.

I walk to the three-point line and shoot.

Swish, a perfect shot.

I retrieve the ball and smirk at him.

Rose: Your turn.

I bounce it to him, a little too hard.

He shoots.

Misses.

Rose - 1, Julian - 0

Julian blushes.

Julian: Fine, but I get to pick the next competition.

Rose: Whatever.

Julian thinks about it for a moment.

Julian: Whoever does the best cartwheel wins.

Rose: Cart-what?

Is he serious?

Julian: Thought I'd go easy on you.

Julian: Figured a back handspring was a bit out of your wheelhouse.

Rose: Yeah, no, I can do a cartwheel. No big deal.

I can't do a cartwheel.

But of course I sound more confident than I feel.

As captain of the team, it's sort of become a habit.

Julian: Ladies first.

Rose: Then I guess that means YOU have to go first.

He turns beet red again.

It kind of looks cute on him.

Stop it, Rose.

It's already bad enough you have to do that project with him.

Julian relents and motions for the teams to make a pathway.

When they clear, he raises his arms.

And does the world's cleanest cartwheel.

Shoot.

He spins around and smirks.

Julian: Your turn.

I try to stop myself from shaking.

I can do this.

I raise my arms, shut my eyes.

And I launch myself forward.

Next thing I know, I'm flat on my back.

Gonna take a wild guess:

His cartwheel was better.

Rose - 1, Julian - 1

Laughter from the cheer squad rings in my ears.

I open my eyes and see Julian hovering over me.

He looks concerned.

He bends down and whispers.

Julian: Gosh, you really want this gym, don't you?

Rose: More than anything.

Laughter still echoes from the squad as they chatter.

Julian: Why?

Rose: The biggest game of my basketball career's tomorrow.

Rose: We need this practice more than anything.

Julian bites his lip.

Then it hits me, so does he.

Rose: How big's that cheer competition tomorrow?

He doesn't answer.

I'm guessing pretty big.

He offers an arm to help me get up.

Dang, he looks really cute.

No, not taking the bait.

I force myself up and refuse his hand.

Rose: We need one more competition.

Rose: Best two out of three wins the gym.

Julian: But it can't be basketball related.

Rose: Or cheer.

I think about it for a moment.

Whenever we don't get the small gym, coach has us run laps.

Bet the cheerleaders can't run as fast as us because of that.

I've been preparing for this all season.

Rose: *I'll race you from one end of the gym to the other.*

His mouth drops as he glances at his legs.

Yep, those bad boys have some decent muscles.

But I'm going to win this.

I have to, for my team.

He at last nods, and we walk to one end of the gym.

Our teams wait on the sidelines.

One girl calls out on your mark, get set ...

I barely hear the "go" because I'm already running.

But, dang, he's fast.

He's advancing past the half court line before me.

Shoot, he's going to win.

All of a sudden he stops and drops to the ground.

I race past him and to the other end.

Rose - 2, Julian - 1

I turn around and see he's nursing his ankle.

Shoot, did he twist it?

No, it looks fine.

He looks at it, then at me, and winks.

Did he just lose on purpose for me?

I rush over to him.

Julian: I think it's ok.

Rose: What the heck?

Julian: So I guess the gym's yours.

Julian: Best of luck at your game, tomorrow.

Wow, my heart's going really fast now.

Julian: But since we're working on that project together.

Julian: How about we talk about the project over coffee?

Oh, shoot, is Julian asking me out?

Maybe that's why he purposely lost.

He's been crushing on me too.

I hold out a hand to help him up.

Rose: Fine, but I'm paying.

He takes my hand.

Julian: We'll see.

Macbeth in the Theater

by Alyssa Roat & Hope Bolinger

Des: Why aren't you picking up?

Jessica: We're watching a movie.

Jessica: What's up?

Des: Jess, someone locked me in the props loft.

Jessica: What even is that?

Des: It's a storage room where we keep the props for plays.

Des: It only locks from the outside.

Jessica: OMG!

Jessica: Can you breathe?

Jessica: Are you running out of air?

Jessica: Will you DIE?

Des: OMG, calm down.

Des: I swear you're more dramatic than the other theater kids.

Jessica: Is it a prank?

Jessica: Who should I punch?

Des: I don't know.

Des: They all seem to hate me, so maybe...

Des: Especially our stage managers.

Des: But everyone knows it's haunted.

Des: So, like, why would anyone do this?

Des: OMG something just moved.

Jessica: Just wait there!

Jessica: I'm coming for you!

Jessica: OMG where are my keys?

Des: Speaking of, you'll need keys to get me out of here.

Des: Shoot.

Des: I think I saw it move again.

Des: Hurry! There are lots of sharp props in here!

Jessica: Found my keys!

Jessica: I'll be there in fifteen minutes!

Jessica: Hang in there!

Des: OK, I'm going to go hide behind the prop sofas.

Fifteen minutes later...

Des: Jess, are you almost here??

Jessica: Your director talks a lot.

Des: WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO MY DIRECTOR?

Jessica: Trying to get the keys.

Jessica: But he started singing about keys.

Jessica: Then told me about his past.

Des: Jess, why didn't you tell him I was in here??

Jessica: Oh, yeah. Good idea.

Two minutes later...

Des: Jess, I think there are two people (or ghosts) in here.

Des: Another one just moved by all the prop swords.

Des: Is the director coming?

Jessica: Des.

Jessica: I have bad news.

Jessica: He lost the keys.

Des: WHAT?

Des: How?

Jessica: They're just gone.

Jessica: MAYBE THE GHOST TOOK THEM!

Des: OMG. No.

Des: Whoever locked me in here probably has them.

Des: OK, well there might be a spare in the woodshop.

Des: Can you see if Angeline, our ASM, put them in there?

Jessica: What is an ASM?

Jessica: Angry Snake Monster?

Des: No. It means Assistant Stage Manager.

Des: Angeline signed up for it when she didn't get a part.

Jessica: I will go to the woodshop.

Jessica: I will save you.

Jessica: Hang in there!

Des: I'm going to try to climb up this ladder to where the cabinets are.

Des: Better hiding place...

Five minutes later...

Des: Jess, it's literally right by the stage.

Des: What is taking you so long?

Two minutes later...

Des: Jess, both people in here are moving toward me.

Des: They're in like cloaks or something.

Des: I can't tell. It's dark in here.

Des: Are you almost here??

Des: WHY DID I CLIMB UP HERE?

Jessica: Lots of sharp objects in the woodshop.

Des: Umm, yeah, there's electric saws and stuff.

Des: You gonna saw down this door or something?

Des: Jess? Are you OK?

Jessica: It would really suck if something happened to me.

Jessica: With a sharp object.

Jessica: In the woodshop.

Jessica: Like in horror movies.

Des: You need to stop watching all those movies.

Des: Is there some reason why you can't get over here?

Des: Did the director trap you with his singing again?

Jessica: Bzzz. Bzzz. Saws.

Des: OK, while you're being a weirdo, let's try to figure out why someone would lock me in here.

Jessica: Maybe to teach you a lesson.

Des: The cloaked figures are now going for the prop swords...

Des: Shoot. WHAT?

Des: Jessica, this doesn't sound like you at all.

Des: ...all right, who's texting me from Jessica's phone?

Jessica: Very astute.

Jessica: Wouldn't you like to know?

Jessica: Do you know how pointy prop swords can be?

Jessica: Very pointy.

Des: Yes. I know. We're doing the Pirates of Penzance.

Des: Curtis sliced his hand the other day.

Des: His girlfriend had to get him a Dora the Explorer band-aid.

Des: Classic ASM. Always at the ready.

Des: Even if she is annoying when she sings the songs backstage...

Des: What did you do to my friend?

Jessica: She's fine.

Jessica: Screaming about ghosts.

Jessica: But fine.

Des puts her phone down.

Des whispers to herself.

Des: There has to be a prop somewhere in here I can drop on those people.

Des: Especially since they're moving to climb up the ladder now.

Des looks around.

She sees a metal anchor for a prop ship.

She shrugs.

Des: That works.

Des grabs the anchor and moves toward the ladder.

The cloaked figures are now climbing up the ladder.

She drops it on them.

They collapse.

Des scurries down the ladder.

She turns on her phone flashlight and shines it on the face of a figure.

Des: Who are you?

Stranger: Shouldn't have said Macbeth in the theater.

Des: WHAT?

The stranger and the other hooded figure disappear into thin air.

Des grabs her phone.

Des: Jessica! It was actually a ghost!

Des: OH wait, right, you're not Jessica.

Des: JESSICA, WHEREVER YOU ARE! I WILL GET OUT OF HERE!

Des: I WILL USE THE PROPS TO BREAK DOWN THE DOOR!

Des reaches for the anchor.

Des starts to hack at the doorknob.

Seven minutes later...

Des breaks out and runs to the woodshop.

Des screams for Jessica.

A tall guy holds Jessica's phone above his head.

Jessica jumps up and down to reach it.

She is short.

Des: Curtis?

Des narrows her eyes at Jessica.

Des: Really? Jessica. Kick him in the knees.

Des: You've spent twenty minutes jumping up and down?

Jessica: Des!

Jessica runs to Des.

Jessica almost knocks Des over with a hug.

Des: Yes, yes, I love you too.

Des: OK, Curtis, what the heck?

Des: Why wouldn't you give Jess her phone back?

Curtis: Why wouldn't you let Angeline have the part?

Des: What?

Des: That's not how casting works!

Des: Plus, your girlfriend can't sing for beans.

Des: Trust me. The director can sing better than her.

Des: Were YOU the one to lock me in the props loft?

Curtis: Didn't I say it was to teach you a lesson?

Curtis: This is Angeline's last year.

Curtis: This is her favorite play.

Des: No one knows what the heck the Pirates of Penzance is.

Curtis: She does.

Curtis: And you took it from her.

Curtis: You stinking sophomore.

Jessica: I'm gonna kick you!

Jessica: In the knees!

Jessica winds up for the kick.

Curtis steps to the side.

Jessica falls over.

Des: Well, I learned my lesson.

Des: We'd all die in a horror movie.

Jessica: But wait, who was in the closet, then?

Jessica glares at Curtis.

Jessica: Who were your foul accomplices?

Des: Yeah, like, how'd you make friends with ghosts?

Curtis: Oh, no.

Curtis: I guess I learned my lesson too.

Curtis: Shouldn't have said Macbeth in the theater.

Dino-Mite

by Hope Bolinger

Sarah: Why is there a guy in a dinosaur onesie at my front door?

Sarah: And why is he the only one to show up to my party?

I'd posted about the event on all my social channels.

Granted, it was kind of last minute, but still. It's a Friday night.

Who doesn't like a party on a Friday?

I open the door.

He looks like he's my age. Did I invite him?

The name "Allen" is stitched onto his onesie.

Sarah: Can I help you?

Allen: Hi, miss. I'm looking for a tri-SARAH-tops.

Sarah: It's just Sarah. Who sent you?

He rubs the back of his neck.

This is awkward.

He might be cute if that beautiful head wasn't covered by fabric spikes.

Allen: A person named Ethel sent me.

Allen: Said Sarah was celebrating her sixth birthday.

I pinch my nose.

Sarah: Sixteenth. It's my sixteenth birthday.

Aunt Ethel is really bad at enunciating on phone calls.

Allen looks amused.

Allen: She said you were REALLY into dinosaurs.

Sarah: Paleontology.

Allen: And that she was sad your parents were out of town for your birthday.

He looks in at the empty house.

I WASN'T sad about the parent thing.

Epecially since I used up my data early this month and they won't pay for more.

They told me yesterday about the last-minute conference Dad had to go to.

So I planned a party, that no one came to.

Allen: So she sent me to cheer you up. I do kid's birthday parties.

Sarah: Well, sorry to disappoint. I guess you'll have to head home.

A car speeds out of the driveway.

Allen: That's my ride... Mom won't come back for half an hour.

He shivers.

Allen: Mind if I come in? Might as well, since Ethel already paid me.

I chew on my lip.

Might as well before the neighbors call the cops on dino-boy.

Sarah: Fine, come in.

He steps in and admires the decorations.

Allen: When does the party start?

Sarah: It was supposed to half an hour ago.

He opens his mouth and closes it again. Expression of pity.

Allen: What were your plans for tonight?

I roll my eyes.

Sarah: What is with you and all the questions?

He shrugs.

Allen: Sixteenth birthdays are a big deal. Come on, spill.

Yeah, they're SUPPOSED to be.

My party plans... my cheeks catch on fire.

Sarah: I don't know if I feel comfortable saying.

Allen: I'm in a dinosaur costume. You can't be more embarrassed than me.

I glance at him and then back at the door.

Well, we do have half an hour to kill.

Sarah: I wanted to start the night off with some karaoke.

I gesture toward the TV in the family room.

Sarah: Then I wanted to do some dancing.

... with a special someone.

Sarah: And then... I wanted to kiss Darren.

He looks confused.

Sarah: A guy I've been crushing on since freshman year.

Sarah: I hoped he would show up...

Sarah: And then we could dance together.

Sarah: And he would finally notice me.

Allen frowns for a moment. Then he brightens.

Allen: I can't promise that last one, but why don't we do the other two?

Sarah: Karaoke and dancing?

I wince.

Sarah: I don't know, Allen.

Allen: Come on, we might as well. Your aunt booked me for half an hour.

I glance at the door again.

Well, no one else is coming.

And he did come all this way in a dinosaur outfit.

I click the remote for the TV and pull up Spotify.

Weird, it's not working.

Allen: Maybe there's something wrong with the TV?

That figures, my parents buy pretty banged up stuff.

Sarah: We can forego karaoke. I'm a bad singer anyway.

Glad Darren never heard me sing. That would send him running.

Allen: But you sort of need music for the next thing you wanted to do.

Oh right, dancing.

He reaches into the pocket of his onesie. It has pockets?

And pulls out his phone.

Allen: I think I have enough data for a few songs.

He plays a song. It sounds like a waltz.

Sarah: Oh, no. I was thinking more of an exciting beat.

He quirks an eyebrow.

Allen: If you want to get a man to kiss you, you want the song to be slow.

Fire crawls up my cheeks.

Sarah: I don't know how to ...

Allen: It's easy, I'll teach you.

He places his hand on my shoulder.

I notice his eyes. They're brilliant. Too bad the onesie hood covers them.

Then he puts his hand on my hip.

His hands are warm. Something inside of me tingles.

I glance up at him, shaking a little.

He offers a reassuring smile.

Then we dance.

We dance and talk for a few songs.

Surprisingly, I love talking to him.

I wish he went to my school. I want to spend more time with this dino-boy.

Allen: You're a natural. Darren is one lucky guy.

Sarah: Yeah... I don't think he knows I exist.

Allen gives me another look. It's either sadness or pity. I can't tell which.

Sarah: Which is weird because we've had so many classes together.

Sarah: We even did group projects together.

Sarah: ...I did all of the work. I hoped he would like me if I did it for him.

Allen frowns.

Allen: He doesn't deserve you.

Sarah: What?

Allen: You're smart, you're beautiful, and he can't even show up to your party.

Allen: I mean, you're one dino-mite gal.

He flushes.

Allen: Sorry, this job requires me to make dinosaur puns.

I giggle.

Sarah: I think I'm glad you came.

Sarah: Darren can't even dance. I've seen him at Homecoming.

Well, he can dance... but not slow dance.

He would never be caught dead waltzing in my living room.

The music stops.

My stomach plummets. I want to keep dancing with dino-boy.

Allen: Huh, must've run out of data. What's the Wi-Fi password?

I show him a picture of our password.

He enters it and frowns at his phone.

Allen: It says your Wi-Fi is down.

I glance at his screen. Sure enough, no Wi-Fi.

Maybe that's why no one came. The invitations never posted.

I look at the time on his phone. Half an hour already passed.

I guess we danced to more than a few songs...

Sarah: You should probably go.

A car horn sounds from the driveway.

Allen: We didn't do everything you wanted to tonight.

Sarah: Oh, karaoke would've been a bust.

Allen: I didn't mean karaoke.

Oh... the kiss.

Sarah: It's probably too low for your pay grade.

Allen: Sarah, I don't want to kiss you because your aunt paid me.

Allen: My time is up already. We're 31 minutes past.

The car horn honks again.

Allen: I want to kiss you because you're dino-mite.

Warmth spreads throughout my body.

You know what? I want to kiss dino-boy too.

So I hoist myself on my tiptoes and plant one on him.

Oh yeah, best sixteenth party ever.

We stop kissing and he has this ridiculous grin on his face.

Allen: So I'll see you around?

Sarah: Yes, but...

I pull the hood off of his onesie.

Sarah: Next time, please come in a different outfit.

Missing Something

by Hope Bolinger

Ugh, what is my ex doing here?

I'm supposed to be pet sitting for Mrs. Samuel.

I pull into the driveway of her house.

But my ex's car is here.

And he's inside it.

He steps out at the same time I do.

Bethany: Can I help you?

Aaron: What are you doing here?

I hold up a bag of doggie treats.

Bethany: What does it look like? Pet sitting.

His eyebrows shoot up.

Aaron: Funny. Because that's what I'm here for.

Aaron: Pet sitting.

I roll my eyes.

Bethany: Yeah right.

Aaron: I see you still don't trust me.

Yeah, that's why we broke up after all.

Actually, I can't remember why we broke up.

He made me mad, and now we're exes. I think?

Aaron: Anyway, I have a text message to prove it.

He shows me his phone.

Huh, those blocky texts, all caps.

Our elderly friend asked Aaron to pet sit, too.

Maybe she got confused and accidentally asked two people to do it.

I guess the two of us will have to watch a dog together.

Bethany: Whatever, let's just go inside and see what we're up against.

I tap the code to open the garage door.

We step inside.

Weird, I don't hear any dog barking.

Maybe Mrs. Samuel has a chill dog.

Aaron: The instructions for the dog are supposed to be on the front door.

Bethany: Yeah, yeah, I got the same text you did.

Bethany: I know where the instructions are.

We head to the front door.

And we read the first item on the list.

"1. Make sure the family room is clean. The dog likes to mess up the room."

That's the only thing on the list.

Aaron scratches his chin.

Aaron: I thought there would be more instructions.

I shrug.

Bethany: Maybe there's more instructions in the family room.

We walk to the family room.

It's clean.

Except there's a single table with two candles.

They're lit.

Bethany: We should probably blow those out.

Aaron nods.

Aaron: Don't want the dog knocking them over.

We each go to a different side of the table.

We catch each other's eyes.

His eyes are pretty in candlelight.

No, stop it, Bethany. Don't think about his eyes.

He looks away and blushes.

I think he admired my eyes in the candlelight too.

And for a moment, it was like we were dating again.

We blow out the candles.

There's a note on the table.

It's from Mrs. Samuel.

"2. Make sure the kitchen is clean. Don't want the dog eating people food."

Aaron: Are all the instructions going to be scattered all over the house?

I shrug.

Bethany: Maybe she wanted to make sure we follow the instructions carefully.

Bethany: If she had them all on one sheet, we might skim.

We head to the kitchen.

There's chocolate everywhere.

Plates and plates of chocolate.

Did Mrs. Samuel even clean the house before leaving?

Bethany: We have to clean this up.

Bethany: Aren't dogs allergic to chocolate or something?

Aaron: Yeah, chocolate can kill them.

We both begin cleaning up.

Oh man, it has to be my FAVORITE kind of chocolate.

The kind Aaron and I liked to share on Valentine's Day.

Aaron: You know, these are still in the wrappers.

Aaron: Maybe she wouldn't mind if we ate them?

They are. We could eat them now.

Just me and him, sitting here and eating chocolate.

I smile at the idea.

And then shake away the thought.

Bethany: We need to follow the instructions.

Bethany: We're here to pet sit.

Not reminisce.

We collect the chocolate and put it in a pantry.

Taped on the pantry door is another note from our friend.

"3. Be sure the back door is closed. The dog likes to run away."

Right then, I feel a draft.

Like a breeze. I hear the wind, too.

Oh no, did Mrs. Samuel leave the back door open?

Aaron and I share a look of shock for a moment.

Maybe that's why we didn't hear the dog when we walked in.

It ran out the back door.

We rush to the door.

Sure enough, it's open.

I chew on my lip and glance at Aaron.

He looks back at me with an expression of reassurance.

It's like he knows I'm about to cry.

Bethany: Do you think the dog ran away?

He glances out the back door.

Aaron: Maybe it didn't get far.

He points at the backyard.

Aaron: See? There's a fence. Maybe the dog is still in the backyard.

I nod and a warmth floods my stomach.

I miss that reassuring smile.

Why did I break up with him again?

It was probably over something stupid.

I remember now... it was something stupid.

We walk into the back yard.

There's no dog.

But there are rose petals scattered all over.

Bethany: Maybe the dog was back here?

Bethany: And it tore up a bunch of roses?

He frowns.

Aaron: Dogs do like to destroy plants, but...

Aaron: I don't think the dog arranged the rose petals into a heart shape.

What?

I look at the petals again.

Sure enough, they're forming a heart.

In the center, there's a slip of paper with a rock on it.

The rock is holding the paper down because of the wind.

I stoop to pick the paper up.

I unfold it and read the note.

"4. I don't have a dog."

Bethany: What?!

There's another note at the bottom of the page.

"P.S. I hope you two had a good date."

Aaron looks confused at my reaction.

I hand him the paper.

He reads it.

At first he looks mad.

And then he laughs.

Wow, I missed that laugh.

Maybe I should give that laugh another chance.

Aaron: Mrs. Samuel did always want us to get back together.

You know what, that doesn't seem like the worst idea in the world.

I smile at him.

Bethany: Well, it would be a shame to let those candles go to waste.

He nods.

Aaron: And those chocolates in the pantry.

We make eye contact.

Bethany: And these rose petals.

I guess we won't be pet sitting after all.

About the Authors

Hope Bolinger has worked for various publishing companies, magazines, newspapers, and literary agencies and has edited the work of 300+ authors such as Jerry B. Jenkins and Michelle Medlock Adams. She's a theater nerd, occasional runway model, is way too obsessed with superheroes, and may be caught in a red cloak, fairy wings, or a Belle costume in her downtown, for no reason. Her favorite way to procrastinate is to connect with her readers on social media (@hopekbolinger). Check out more about her at hopebolinger.com

Alyssa Roat grew up in Tucson, Arizona, but her heart is in Great Britain, the inspiration for her YA contemporary fantasy *Wraithwood*. She is a multi-published author and has worked in a wide variety of roles within the publishing industry as an agent, editor, writer, and publicist. She has four black cats who allegedly have never been fed in their lives and occasionally help her write by walking across the keyboard. Her name is a pun, which means you can learn more about her at alyssawrote.com or on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook as @alyssawrote.

Hope Bolinger and Alyssa Roat are the co-authors of *Dear Hero*, a YA superhero chat fiction romance.

Check Out *Dear Hero*



Cortex and V need a new nemesis.

Up-and-coming teen superhero Cortex is on top of the world—at least, until his villain dumps him. If he’s going to save his reputation, he needs a new antagonist, and fast.

Meanwhile, the villainous Vortex has once again gotten a little overeager and taken out a hero prematurely. Will any young hero be able to keep up with her? Maybe she should work on finding a steady relationship with an enemy she won’t kill in the first round.

So the two turn to Meta-Match, a nemesis pairing site for heroes and villains, where they match right away. After throwing punches at each other behind coffee shops, practicing their fight choreography, and hiring henchmen to do their bidding (mostly just getting them coffee), they begin to realize they have a lot more in common than just names that annoyingly rhyme.

But not everything in the superhero world is as it seems. Who are the real heroes and villains? And just how fine of a line is there between love and hate? When darkness from the past threatens them both, Cortex and V may need to work together to make it out alive.

[Click to read more!](#)