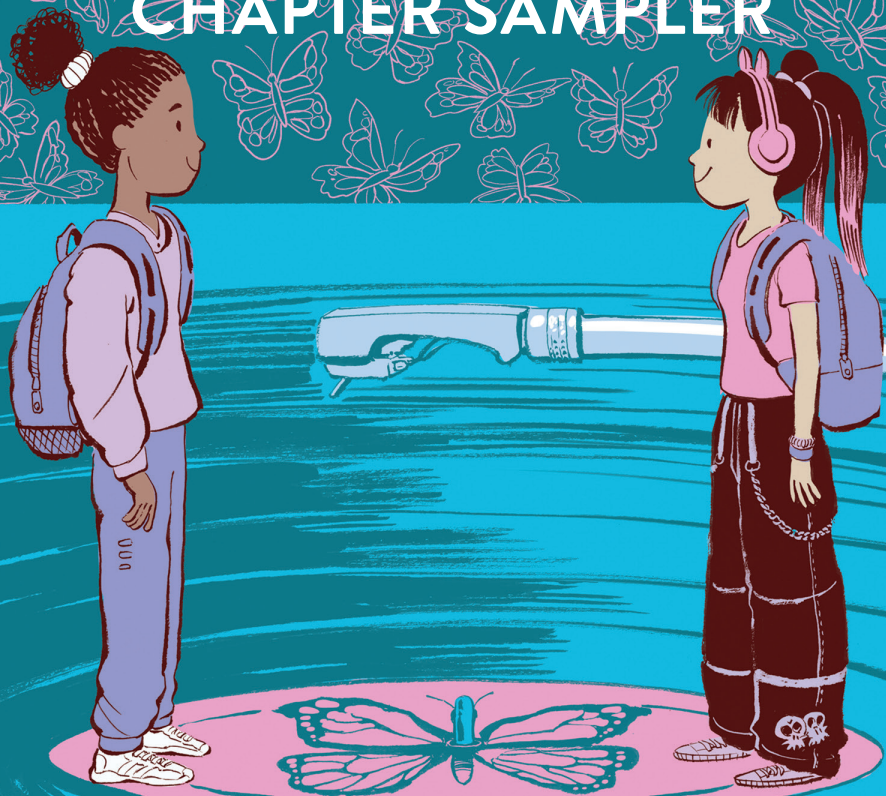


# CHAPTER SAMPLER



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Melanie Florence



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*For my awesome K-pop friends.  
You make my life infinitely more fun.*





# ONE



Jazz was sucking in a mouthful of mango dragonfruit lemonade from Starbucks—or Starbee’s, as the It Girls referred to it—through a paper straw when Abbi with an *i* slid into the vacant spot beside her.

“So...what do you think of Robert?” Abbi asked, daintily nibbling on a pink cake pop.

*Robert? Who the heck is...oh! HELL no!*

“Bobby Zucker?” Jazz choked on the bits of dehydrated dragonfruit.

“Your tongue is bright pink,” Abbi said, ignoring the look Jazz was giving her. “And he’s not that bad.”

“Yes. He is. He’s absolutely that bad. He’s worse than ‘that bad!’” Jazz said. “He’s legitimately repulsive.”

“Well, he asked Tre to ask me to ask you if you want to go to the movies.”

“With him?” Jazz asked, her jaw dropping.

“Obviously.” Abbi rolled her eyes. “He likes you.”

“He literally told me I looked like a gerbil two days ago,” Jazz said.

“That’s what boys do when they like you,” Abbi said, as if she had years of experience under her belt and not just a handful of dates with Tre. “They tease you. Didn’t your mom ever tell you that?”

Jazz looked down. She didn’t like talking about her mom.

“Oh.” Abbi remembered suddenly. “Right. Sorry, Jazzzi.”

“It’s fine,” Jazz said, not really meaning it. “But listen, Abbi, I can’t stand Bobby Zucker. I’ll never like him. If he was literally the last boy on the planet, I’d date...I don’t know. But no. The answer is no.”

“Fine.” Abbi made a face. “Forget it. I’m sure there’s someone else I can set you up with.” She used her phone’s photo screen to check her face for cake-pop crumbs. “Hey, what about Xander?”

Jazz stared at her. Was she serious?

“You’re joking, right?” She could still feel the snap on her back from when he’d pulled her bra strap in front of the entire cafeteria—and the humiliation she’d felt when everyone laughed at her. Was Abbi seriously suggesting she date that mouth breather after *that*?

Abbi rolled her eyes. Jazz hated when she did that.

“That was, like, *ages* ago.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t feel like it to me,” Jazz told her.

Abbi gave a dramatic sigh. “Well, there must be someone you like. You don’t want to be sitting at home, crying into a bag of Cheetos and posting sad TikToks, while the rest of the group is out at the movies or whatever.”

Didn't she? Because if the alternative was to spend the evening paired up with a Neanderthal like Bobby Zucker or freakin' Xander pawing at her, Jazz would gladly scroll TikTok alone all night in her pajamas. And she most definitely wouldn't be sad about it.

Jazz didn't really get the It Girls' absolute desperation to have boyfriends. Well, she *got* it. She watched all those rom-coms with Abbi and Isla and the other It Girls. And if she was being completely honest, her unrequited crush on Jason Lieberman still stung a tiny bit. Especially since he seemed to be hanging out with Lo an awful lot lately. But still. She didn't feel like Abbi and the others, like she absolutely *had* to date someone. Especially if she was disgusted by the very thought of them. Because if she had to choose between sitting through dinner with Bobby Freakin' Zucker chewing with his mouth open, laughing like a donkey at all his own jokes, or sitting at home with a bag of Cheetos, she'd pick the Cheetos every single time. Yeah. She was definitely not that desperate. Even if it meant she was left out of stuff with her friends because of it.

"Anyway," Abbi said, standing up and pulling the hem of her denim skirt down, "just think about it. You don't want to be the last one in our group without a boyfriend."

"Where are you going?" Jazz asked, shaking her drink to get the ice to melt faster.

Abbi tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked down at Jazz.

"I have a date."



## TWO



Dating.

*God.*

Jazz rolled her eyes, a habit she had been trying really hard to break. She absolutely hated when Abbi did it. Lo used to tell her that her eyes were going to get stuck like that. Maybe if they got stuck, her friends would stop bugging her to go out on dates with cretins like Bobby Zucker.

What was the big deal with dating anyway? Why was everyone so eager to pair up and go to the movies together? She literally couldn't think of anything worse than holding Bobby Zucker's sweaty lobster claws.

Well...maybe one thing. The thing she really didn't want to think about.

Her mother leaving.

And not just leaving. But leaving her dad and Jazz—for her yoga instructor.

*God.*

Could she be any more of a cliché?

As if on cue, Jazz's phone buzzed and vibrated, doing a little dance on the table.

I hope you're having a good day. I miss you. Love Mom.

Jazz rolled her eyes again. She got different versions of this text every single day. And she ignored it every single day. Her dad said she didn't have to respond until she was ready but then asked her all the time if she'd talked to her mom yet. Jazz put her phone face down, like she did every time she got one of these texts, and then wondered, like she always did, if her being silent hurt her mom as much as it had hurt Jazz when her mom had packed her stuff and left.

Jazz felt her eyes prickle and shook her head. No. She wasn't going to think about that today. If all her friends were going to be at the movies tonight, she may as well spend *her* Saturday night pampering herself a little.

Jazz tossed her empty Starbucks cup into the trash and headed to Sephora, where she splurged a little on a rose-gold face mask that was supposed to give you glass-like skin. Which sounded kind of weird, but she'd watched enough K-dramas to know what they meant. She scrolled on her phone while she stood in line, then finally reached the cash.

"Did anyone see what she's buying?" Jazz heard someone whispering behind her and wondered momentarily who they were talking about. Some dumb beauty influencer on TikTok probably.

"Ohmygod, she has the most amazing skin. I'm going to ask her," someone else whispered.

“Don’t! You can’t talk to her!”

What was going on back there? Jazz turned slightly and glanced at the girls, who were getting progressively louder.

And closer.

“Umm, Jazz?” One of the girls had broken away from the pack. Jazz looked at her questioningly.

“Hi,” Jazz said. She had no idea who this girl was. Maybe she looked a little familiar. Like she had passed her in the hall a few times. The girl was staring at her. They were all staring at her.

“Ohmygod, she said hi to us!” one of the girls hissed and was immediately shushed by her friends.

“Umm, hi,” the first girl said, blushing and looking around wildly. “So...I was just wondering what mask you bought? Like, we were going to do masks tonight too,” she said, gesturing toward her friends, who were all nodding like a bunch of bobblehead dolls. “But, like, we don’t know which one to get, so...” The girl trailed off, turning more red by the second. She looked like she was about to have a coronary.

“Oh! Well, I heard this one was good.” Jazz held up the mask she had chosen for the girls to see.

“OHMYGOD!”

“I heard about that one!”

“Your skin is amazing,” one girl said.

“Oh, thanks!” Jazz said, smiling at the girls, tapping her card on the reader and taking the bag from the cashier. She smiled at the girls again and then turned to leave.

“We’re all going to try that one,” the first girl called out. The others were all nodding again.

“Great! Well, have fun,” Jazz said.

She thanked the salesperson and wandered back out into the mall, smiling to herself. Before she’d become an It Girl, no one would have stopped her to ask for skincare advice or what products she used. And they definitely wouldn’t have been afraid to talk to her. She felt like some kind of celebrity. People treated her a lot differently now that she was one of the most popular girls in school. And she had to admit, she kind of liked it.

She walked past the shops, swinging her black-and-white-striped bag idly by the handles, and glanced around. What else did she need for a night in?

She thought of the It Girls and their constant banter about exercising and fitting into the ridiculous beige clothes at Brandy Melville and made a defiant sharp left through the food court toward Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory. A bag of chocolate-covered sour keys would be perfect for a movie night. And maybe she’d grab a bag of Doritos on the way home too, she thought. What the It Girls didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. She’d never admit it to anyone, but before she was an It Girl, she had gone months without eating sugar to try to look more like them, hoping they’d notice her and ask her to be one of them. And she had made it. She was one of them. And there were definitely some perks. But if she really thought about it, she actually liked the way she’d looked before, when her hip bones weren’t so visible. She’d enjoyed her life a lot more when she ate sugar, too.

“Jazz!”

She turned at the entrance to the candy store and saw Lo waving at her. Jazz grinned. It wasn't so long ago that she and Lo were barely speaking to each other. Things were definitely different than they used to be. But they were okay now. They were good.

They were friends again.

Just maybe not BFFs.

"What are you doing here?" Jazz asked as Lo threw her arms around her, sending her careening backward into a cute blond guy who was staring at his phone. "Sorry! Lo, calm down!" she giggled, hugging Lo back.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in ages. Are you getting chocolate?" Lo asked.

"Yeah. I'm in desperate need of movie snacks."

"Movie night with the It Girls?" Lo asked, leading the way into the store and stopping dead in front of the display of chocolate-covered cheesecake.

"Nope. Just me. Unless you want to come over?" Jazz asked. "I'll even let you pick the movie." She glanced at Lo nervously to see her reaction. She was really hoping they were back to a place where Lo would be open to this again.

Lo smirked. "Are you sure about letting me choose? Because Jason has been trying to get me to watch more horror movies."

Jazz felt her heart drop a bit at the mention of her former crush, but she smiled and grabbed the chocolate-covered sour keys off the shelf.

“As long as you let me hold your hand, I’m ready to go. I just have to go somewhere for an hour first. But I can meet you after that.”

“Deal,” Lo said, grinning and plopping a bag of chocolate licorice on the counter.

Jazz smiled back and wondered for the millionth time why she had been so obsessed with being an It Girl and fitting into their perfectly pretty lives when chocolate, horror movies and lounging in her pj’s with Lo sounded like a much better option on a Saturday night.



## THREE



The magazines in Dr. Vee's office were new. She liked to switch them out regularly.

"Going to therapy should be a positive experience," she'd told Jazz the first time she came in for an appointment. "That includes good magazines to read while you wait."

"And candy?" Jazz had asked, pointing to the various bowls of mini treats strewn around the room.

"Therapy should be a positive experience," Dr. Vee repeated. "For some people that means chocolate."

"Or Starburst," Jazz said, unwrapping a cherry-flavored square and popping it into her mouth.

"Exactly," Dr. Vee had said.

She was okay, really. Not at all what Jazz had imagined a therapist would be like. She was young, for one thing. She rode a motorcycle to the office. She had a choppy black bob and wore old-band T-shirts under a black leather jacket. And she never made Jazz feel dumb or like what she was feeling

wasn't okay. She knew she could tell Dr. Vee anything and not be judged. Jazz wasn't dumb. She knew the doctor got paid to listen, but she really felt like a friend.

"Jazz?" Dr. Vee poked her head out of the inner office door. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Jazz stood up and grabbed her backpack, smiling at Dr. Vee as she ducked through the doorway into her office and threw herself down onto the overstuffed couch, pulling one of the soft throw blankets across her legs.

Dr. Vee's office was comfy. That really was the best word for it. Big cozy chairs and a sofa you could sink into. Fluffy blankets and throw pillows were on every seat, and scented candles burned all around the room. There was a record player in one corner with a shelf full of records and a PLAYING NOW sign that held whatever record she had been listening to between patients. Today Jazz noticed it was a blue record cover with four regular-looking guys standing looking at the camera, the word *Weezer* across the top. The group's name, she figured.

"So." Dr. Vee settled into her own chair and tucked her feet underneath her. "How have you been this week? Scale of one to ten."

"Umm...solid seven-point-five," Jazz said.

"Okay. That's pretty good. One bad thing, one good thing?"

They always started this way. It was kind of comforting, knowing what to expect every week, and it helped her ease into talking about other stuff.

"All right. So the bad thing, my friends are all dating, and they're trying to get me to date too."

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Dr. Vee said.

“I guess it wouldn’t be if I actually liked any of the guys in our group.”

“Ah. Okay. That’s fair. What about a good thing?”

“Well, I’m seeing Lo tonight,” Jazz said, smiling widely.

“That’s amazing! So it sounds like things are going well with her.”

“I think so. I mean, we’re getting there.”

Dr. Vee’s expression turned pensive. “Have you been talking to her about your mom at all?”

“No.” Jazz shook her head. “I mean, she knows everything. We’ve talked about it before.”

“But not now?”

Jazz shook her head again. “Not really. We’re still getting back to where we were, you know?”

“So do you have anyone else you can talk to?” Dr. Vee asked.

“I can talk to you,” Jazz pointed out.

“Always.” Dr. Vee smiled at her. “I’ve been thinking it might be helpful for you to communicate how you’re feeling about your mom to a peer—a friend.”

Jazz pressed her lips together. She definitely wasn’t going to talk to Abbi or the others about this.

“And what about your mom?” Dr. Vee asked.

“I don’t want to talk to her,” Jazz said, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them.

“I know you’re not ready for that yet. And I respect it. But maybe there’s a way you could communicate without talking to her. *Yet.*” Dr. Vee looked at her pointedly. “I want to get you to

the point where you feel you *can* talk to her again. You know that. But for now, maybe you could try writing to her.”

Jazz thought for a moment. “Like, emails?”

“Like a journal. You could write letters to your mom in there.” She raised her hands before Jazz could say anything. “Not to send to her. Just for you. Sometimes we can write things down that no one will ever see. It’s a lot easier than saying them out loud.”

Jazz nodded. “And no one would ever read them?”

“Not if you don’t want them to. Here.” She reached over and took something off the side table. She held it out to Jazz. “I picked this up for you.”

Jazz took the notebook from her. It had the coolest holographic cover, which said *I’d rather be listening to K-pop* on it. Jazz loved it immediately.

“Cool!”

“I knew you’d like it the second I saw it. I want you to try writing in it. See if maybe it’ll help you say the things you can’t say to anyone else. Even me.”

“Do I have to show it to you?” Jazz asked.

“Of course not. It’s just for you.”

“Thanks, Dr. Vee.” Jazz ran her hands over the cover and tried to imagine what she’d write.