

‘Felix is like the story itself – boldly empathic, hopeful, and full of love. **Top-notch** . . . sticks its landing at every turn.’

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

‘A **firecracker** of a book. Teens need this one.’

Casey McQuiston, bestselling author of

Red, White & Royal Blue

‘**Definitely not a book to be missed.**’

Buzzfeed

‘An **unforgettable** story of friendship, heartbreak, forgiveness, and self-discovery.’

ALA Booklist (starred review)

‘I’ve never read a book that more perfectly balances hardship, hope and happiness.’

Nic Stone, bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

‘Full of warmth, love, and support, this is an important story and an **essential** purchase.’

School Library Journal (starred review)

‘**Smart and engaging.**’

Horn Book Magazine

‘**Beautiful** exploration of friendship, new love, and self.’

justin a. reynolds, author of *Opposite of Always*

‘This book is a **gift**, from start to finish.’

Becky Albertalli, bestselling author of
Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda

‘An **intricate love story** for the ages.’

CNN Underscored

‘Felix is an open, warm, engaging character who extends far
off the page. A **great** candidate for school libraries.’

them.

‘Callender brings **vibrance** to a story that
desperately needed to be told.’

Jackson Bird, author of *Sorted: Growing Up, Coming Out, and
Finding My Place*

‘An **emotional roller coaster.**’

NPR

‘I can’t talk about my love for this book enough –
it’s going to change lives.’

Mason Deaver, bestselling author of *I Wish You All the Best*

Felix Ever After

KACEN CALLENDER

faber

First published in the US by Balzer + Bray,
a division of HarperCollins Publishers in 2020

First published in the UK in 2021
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House, 74–77 Great Russell Street
London, WC1B 3DA
faberchildrens.co.uk

Typeset by Michelle Cunningham
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

All rights reserved
© Kacen Callender Inc., 2020
Published by arrangement with the Gallt and Zacker Literary Agency, LLC.

The right of Kacen Callender to be identified as author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with
Section 77 of the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of
trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that
in which it is published and without a similar condition including
this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

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

ISBN 978–0–571–36801–3



2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

For trans and nonbinary youth:
You're beautiful. You're important. You're valid.
You're perfect.

ONE

WE PUSH OPEN THE APARTMENT BUILDING'S GLASS DOOR, out into the yellow sunshine that's a little too cheerful and bright. It's hot as hell – the kind of heat that sticks to your skin, your hair, your freaking eyeballs.

'Christ, why did we sign up for this again?' Ezra says, his voice hoarse. 'It's so early. I could still be asleep.'

'I mean, eleven isn't technically *early*. It's – you know – about halfway through the day.'

Ezra lights a blunt he pulls out of I-don't-know-where and offers it to me, and we suck on the last of it as we walk. Reggaeton blasts from a nearby park's cookout. The smell of smoke and burning meat wafts over, along with the laughter and screams of kids. We cross the street, pausing when a man on a bike zooms by with a boom box blasting Biggie, and we

walk down the mould-slick stairs of the Bedford-Nostrand G stop, sliding our cards through the turnstile just as a train rumbles up to the platform.

The train doors slide shut behind us. It's one of the older trains, with splotches of black gum plastered to the floor and messages written in Sharpie on the windows. R + J = 4EVA.

My first instinct is to roll my eyes, but if I'm honest with myself, I can feel jealousy sprouting in my chest. What does it feel like, to love someone so much that you're willing to publicly bare your heart and soul with a black Sharpie? What is it like to even love someone at all? My name is Felix Love, but I've never actually been *in* love. I don't know. The irony actually kind of fucks with my head sometimes.

We grab a couple of orange seats. Ezra wipes a hand over his face as he yawns, leaning against my shoulder. It was my birthday last week, and we got into the habit of staying up until three in the morning and lying around all day. I'm seventeen now, and I can confirm that there isn't much of a difference between sixteen and seventeen. Seventeen is just one of those in-between years, easily forgotten, like a Tuesday – stuck in between sweet sixteen and legal eighteen.

An older man dozes across from us. A woman stands with her baby stroller that's filled with grocery bags. A hipster with a huge red beard holds his bicycle steady. The AC is blasting. Ezra sees me clutching myself against the ice-cold air, so he puts an arm over my shoulders. He's my best friend – only friend, since I started at St. Catherine's three years ago. We're

not together like that, not in any way, shape, or form, but everyone else always gets the wrong idea. The older man suddenly wakes up like he could smell the gay, and he doesn't stop staring at us, even after I stare right back at him. The hipster gives us a reassuring smile. Two gay guys cuddling in the heart of Brooklyn shouldn't feel this revolutionary, but suddenly, it does.

Maybe it's the weed, or maybe it's the fact that I'm that much closer to being an adult, but I suddenly feel a little reckless. I whisper to Ez, 'Wanna give this guy a show?'

I nod in the direction of the older man who has straight-up refused to look away. Ezra smirks and rubs his hand up and down my arm, and I snuggle closer to him, resting my head on his shoulder – and then Ez goes from zero to one hundred as he buries his face into my neck, which – okay – I've never actually gotten a whole lot of action before (i.e. I've never even been kissed), and just feeling his mouth there kind of drives me crazy. I let out an embarrassing squeak-gasp, and Ezra puffs out a muffled laugh against the *same damn spot*.

I look up to see our audience staring, wide-eyed, totally scandalised. I wiggle my fingers at the man in a sarcastic half wave, but he must take that as an invitation to speak. 'You know,' he goes, with a slight accent, 'I have a grandson who's gay.'

Ezra and I glance at each other with raised eyebrows.

'Um. Okay,' I say.

The man nods. 'Yes, yes – I never knew, and then one day

he sat me down, and my wife, Betsy, before she passed, and then he was crying, and he told us: I'm gay. He'd already known for years, but he didn't say anything because he was so afraid of what we would think. I can't blame him for being afraid. The stories you hear. And his own father . . . Heartbreaking. You'd think a parent would always love their child, no matter what.' He pauses in his monologue, looking around as the train begins to slow down. 'Anyway. This is my stop.'

He stands as the doors open. 'You would like my grandson, I think. You two seem like very nice, gay boys.'

And with that, the man is lost to the platform as the woman with the baby stroller follows him out.

Ezra and I look at each other, and I burst out laughing. He shakes his head. 'New York, man,' he says. 'Seriously. Only in New York.'

We get off at Lorimer/Metropolitan and walk down and then back up a bunch of stairs to get to the L train. It's June 1 – the first day of Pride month in the city – so there are No Bigotry Allowed rainbow-coloured signs plastered on the tiled walls. The platform is filled with pink-skinned Williamsburg hipsters, and the train takes forever to come.

'Shit. We're going to be late,' Ezra says.

'Yeah. Well.'

'Declan's going to be pissed.'

I don't really care, to be honest. Declan's a dick. 'Not like we can do anything about it, right?'

By the time the train arrives, everyone's fighting to get on, and we're all packed together, me crushed against Ezra, the smell of beer and BO slicking the air. The subway rattles and shakes, almost throwing us off our feet – until, finally, we make it to Union Square.

It's a typical crowded afternoon in the city. The sheer amount of people – that's what I hate most about Lower Manhattan. At least in Brooklyn, you can walk down the street without being bumped into by twenty different shoulders and handbags. At least in Brooklyn, you don't have to worry if you're literally invisible because of your brown skin. Sometimes I try to find a white person to walk behind, just so that when everyone jumps out of that person's way, they won't knock into me.

Ezra and I inch our way through the crowd and past the farmers' market, the smell of fish following us. We're dressed pretty much the way we always are: even though it's summer, Ezra wears a black T-shirt, sleeves rolled up to his shoulders to show off his Klimt tattoo of *Judith I and the Head of Holofernes*. He has on tight black jeans that're cut off a few inches too high above his ankles, stained white Converse, and long socks with portraits of Andy Warhol. He has a gold septum piercing, and his thick, curly black hair is tied up in a bun, sides shaved.

Whenever I'm around Ezra, eyes usually skip right over me to stare at him. I have curly hair, a loose grey tank that shows my dark scars on my chest, darker than the rest of my

golden-brown skin, a pair of denim shorts, smaller random tattoos that I'd gotten for twenty dollars down at Astor Place – my dad flipped out the first time, but he's gotten used to them now – and worn-out sneakers that I've written and drawn all over with a Sharpie. Ezra thinks I've ruined them. He has a thing for keeping the *purity of the designer's intent*.

We walk through the crowds of people who idle in front of the farmers' market stalls selling jars of jam and freshly baked bread and flowers with bursts of colour, men in business suits shoving past, dogs on leashes and toddlers on three-wheeled scooters threatening to trip us. We make it out of the farmers' market and up the path that cuts through the green lawn where a few couples laid out on blankets. Some kids show off on their skateboards. Girls in summer dresses and shades lounge on benches with books that they aren't really reading.

'Why'd we decide to do this summer programme again?'

Ezra says.

'For our college applications.'

'I already told you. I'm not going to college.'

'Oh. Then, yeah, I have no idea why you're doing this.'

He smirks at me. We both know he's probably just going to live off his trust fund when he graduates. Ezra is part Black, part Bengali, and his parents are filthy rich. So rich that they bought Ezra an apartment just so that he can live in Bed-Stuy for the summer while he's in the arts programme. (And these days, apartments like Ezra's are just about a million

dollars.) The Patels are the stereotypical Manhattan elite: endless champagne, fund-raisers, gala balls, and zero time for their own son, who was raised by three different nannies. It's fucked-up, but I have to admit that I'm jealous. Ezra's got his entire life laid out for him on a golden platter, while I'm going to have to claw and scrape and battle for what I want.

My dream has always been to go to Brown University, but my grades aren't exactly stellar, my test scores are less than average, and their acceptance rate is 9 percent. It isn't that I haven't tried. I studied my ass off for the tests, and I write down every word my teachers say in class to stop my mind from wandering. Like my dad's said, my brain is just wired differently.

The fact that I almost certainly won't get into Brown sometimes makes me feel like there's no point in even trying. But people have gotten in despite shitty test scores before, and even if my grades suck, my art doesn't. I'm talented. I know that I am. The portfolio counts even more for students applying to focus on art, and since the St. Catherine's summer programme offers extra credit, there's a chance I could raise my grades up from Cs and Bs. I might still have a shot of getting in.

Leah, Marisol, and Declan are already on the Union Square steps for the fashion shoot. St. Cat's is on a different schedule from most NYC schools, and the summer programme officially began a few days ago. St. Catherine's likes to kick off the summer programme with projects so that we can get

to know the students from other classes. Ezra and I signed up for a fashion shoot, using some of his designs. Leah, with her bushy red hair and super-pale skin and curves and tank top and slightly revealing booty shorts, has her camera, ready to take photos. And, of course, Marisol is the model. She's just as tall as Ezra, olive skin and thick brown hair and Cara Delevingne eyebrows. Just seeing her makes my nerves pump through my chest. Her hair's a giant nest, and she has green feathers glued to her eyelashes to match her lipstick. She wears the fourth dress in the lineup we'd planned: a sequin-portrait of Rihanna.

Declan Keane is running this whole thing as the director, which really just annoys the crap out of me. He doesn't have any experience as a director whatsoever, but somehow, he always manages to weasel his way into everything. It doesn't help that Declan acts like it's his only mission in life to treat me and Ezra like shit. He talks crap about us every chance that he gets. He hates us, and he's on a crusade to make everyone else hate us, too.

Declan's busy talking to Marisol when he sees us coming. His eyes flash. He clenches his jaw.

'So nice to see you,' he calls out to us as we walk over, loud enough that a few people lounging on the steps turn their heads. 'Ezra, thanks so much for coming.'

Ezra mutters beside me, 'Told you he'd be pissed.'

Declan gives a slow clap. 'It's an honour – no, really, it is

– to have you come to your own fucking fashion show.'

Ezra holds up a fist, pretends to crank it, and slowly lifts his middle finger. Declan narrows his eyes at Ez when we get closer.

'Are you *high*?' he demands, and Ezra turns his face away. 'Are you fucking kidding me? We've all been waiting here for over an hour, and you've been getting *high*?'

I try to step in. 'Jesus, relax.'

He doesn't even bother looking at me. 'Fuck off, Felix, seriously.'

There's no point in even trying to explain that our train was late.

'You're right,' Ezra says. He nods at Leah and Marisol, who're watching us from the stairs. 'Sorry. We lost track of time.'

Declan rolls his eyes and mutters, 'Fucking ridiculous' under his breath – like he's never been late for anything in his life. There was a point, before he decided he was too good for me and Ez, when all three of us would walk into class thirty minutes late together, high as fuck – and now, suddenly he's the Second Coming? God, I can't stand him.

'We're already halfway done anyway,' Declan says, smoothing a hand through his curls, as if he doesn't actually give a shit whether we're here or not. Declan's mixed – his mom is Black and Puerto Rican, his dad a white guy from Ireland – so he's got brown skin, lighter than mine, and loose

brown curls with glints of red that fall around his ears, dark brown eyes. He's a little stockier, with broad shoulders – a jock in Old Navy clothes: pink graphic T-shirt, baggier faded jeans, flip-flops.

He turns his back on us. 'Let's hurry up and finish. I don't want to be here all day. Felix, go hold that reflector.'

I don't move. I can't willingly make myself do whatever Declan Keane tells me to do. Not with that dismissive tone.

Ezra whispers, 'Come on, Felix. Let's just get this done.'

I roll my eyes and walk up the stairs, snatching up the reflector from the stack of supplies. Declan still hasn't even bothered to grace me with a single glance.

'All right,' he says, 'let's get back to it. Marisol, I don't think you should smile for this one – the juxtaposition of the Rihanna portrait with a serious expression . . .'

I zone the fuck out. About 99.9 percent of the time, Declan's speaking to hear the sound of his own voice. The shoot continues, Leah circling Mari with her camera as Marisol twists and turns, staring off at the sky (which is good, because it's easier to avoid eye contact with her), until it's time for the next outfit. I have to hold up a sheet around Marisol, staring hard at the ground, as Ezra helps her get changed into another dress he made, this one covered in manga panels from *Attack on Titan*. When she's ready, Declan barks his orders.

'Leah, position yourself a little more to the right. Felix, hold the reflector still.'

Marisol shields her face. 'And can you get the light out of my eyes, please?'

Mari and I used to go out. For, like, two weeks, so it really isn't that big of a deal, but still – I can't help but feel a little riled up around her, I guess, even after all these months. Marisol just acts like absolutely nothing happened between us, sprinkling a dash of salt onto the wound. The way she broke things off doesn't help, either.

Declan snaps his fingers at me. Literally, hand to God, *snaps his fucking fingers at me*. 'I said to hold the reflector still. Christ, pay attention.'

I hold the reflector up higher. 'Fucking bullshit,' I mutter to myself.

'Sorry, what was that?'

I must've spoken a little louder than I thought – because when I look up, everyone's staring at me. Leah bites her lip. Marisol raises an eyebrow. Ezra shakes his head from across the set, mouthing, *No, no, please, Felix, no*. That kind of pisses me off, too. Why does Declan get to treat us like crap, and we're just expected to take it, no complaints? I ignore Ezra and look right at Declan. 'I said: Fucking. Bullshit.'

Declan tilts his head to the side, crossing his arms with the smallest smile. 'What's bullshit?'

I shrug. 'This.' I wave the reflector at him. 'You.'

His smile becomes a laugh of disbelief. '*I'm* bullshit?'

'You don't know anything about directing a fashion

shoot,' I tell him. 'You're just here because you're rich and your dad donates a shit ton of money to the school. It's not like you earned this.'

I can see Ezra's eyes flicker to the ground, and I feel a pinch of guilt.

Declan hasn't noticed. He grins at me, like he knows it'll piss me off more. 'You're just mad because you're not the director,' he says, 'and you don't get to add it to your Brown application. *Reflector boy* isn't exactly as impressive, is it?'

I hate that he's right – I *am* mad that I can't describe being the director on my application while Declan gets to use this, along with his perfect grades and almost-perfect test scores and family pedigree . . . I know he's applying to Brown, too. I know it's his first choice, because back when we used to hang out, we'd both planned on going to Brown and getting our dual degree with RISD. Ezra would chime in and say he'd move to Rhode Island with us, and it'd be the three of us, like always. That plan didn't exactly last long.

On top of that, Brown University has had a tradition of giving one St. Catherine's student a full scholarship. I can't afford college. My dad won't be able to pay the tuition. I'll have to take out a shit ton of loans and probably be in debt for the rest of my life, just to pursue illustration – while I can't think of anyone who would need, or deserve, that scholarship less than Declan fucking Keane. Just the thought of him getting that scholarship makes me want to stab pencils into my eyeballs.

Declan smirks at me. 'What? Nothing else to say?'

'Leave it alone,' Ezra tells me.

But I can't leave it alone. People like Declan are so used to getting their way. Acting like he's so much better and more important than everyone else. That's what he does to me – to Ezra. Ez acts like it doesn't bother him, but I get pissed off all over again every time I see Declan and remember the way he's treated us – the way he betrayed us.

'You know what?' I tell him. 'Fuck you. You act like you're better than everyone else, but you're nothing but a fucking fraud.'

Ezra's shaking his head, like he's annoyed with *me*, as if he thinks I'm overreacting even though he knows that Declan is being an asshole. Leah and Marisol awkwardly stand to the side, glancing at Declan to see what he'll do or say next.

Declan clenches his jaw. '*I'm* the fraud? Really?'

Ezra points at Declan. 'No. Don't go there.'

Declan rolls his eyes. 'Christ. That's not even what I meant.'

But the insinuation is there – implication made. It sours the air. Declan lets out this heavy sigh, not bothering to look at me, and out of the countless fights I've had with Declan Keane, I know I've won this particular battle. Even if his last words are still twisting through my gut. I've won, and in any other circumstance, I'd be happy to stay here and bask in the glory – but Marisol and Leah are staring anywhere but at me, and Ezra has these worried-filled eyes, and I know he'll

whisper, 'Are you okay?' every five minutes if I stay.

I drop the reflector. 'Forget it.'

I'm halfway down the stairs when Declan says that he isn't surprised. That's the kind of crap I always pull. I just flip him off and keep going.

TWO

THE TRIP FROM UNION SQUARE ISN'T AS BAD AS FROM BED-Stuy, but it's still about an hour before I get off at the 145th stop in Harlem. I've only been living here half a year. My dad and I used to live pretty close to where Ezra is now, on Tompkins. I miss the hell out of Brooklyn, but our landlord raised the rent, and my dad just couldn't afford it. He works most weeknights as a doorman for a luxury condominium in Lower Manhattan, and some days he'll try to take up extra jobs, like making deliveries and walking dogs. I'm on a talent-based scholarship, and even then, all his money goes into me and St. Catherine's – just so that I can pursue my passion for art. The pressure to get better grades, to pull off an amazing portfolio and college application, to make all the sacrifices worth it and actually get into Brown . . . it can fill me up