

# IS THERE A BOY LIKE ME?

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*To all the boys who want to be themselves,  
including the younger me, who finally  
figured it out.*

*- K. C.*

# CHAPTER 1

**A**ll the boys are lined up against the wall. Most of them are in blue or black jeans and white T-shirts marked by colourful designs. Their school bags are tossed carelessly on the ground, and from the finish line it looks like a bunch of friends ready to head out on a camping trip.

The schoolyard is crowded with students and teachers standing off to the side. Parents who have already picked up younger kids are in the parking lot on the other side of the fence, putting off stepping into their cars so they can see the race.

At the edge of the line of boys, leaning against the wall with one knee bent, is London Mitchell. He's still wearing his sweatpants from gym class and has his Blue Jays fitted flipped to the back with his braids

still peeking out. London sneaks his phone back in his pocket when he notices Naya Daley walk out to the centre of the yard with a small megaphone.

“Ready!”

Earlier in the day in Mrs. Stanley’s class, Chris Johnson told London that he’d share half of his lunch if London lost the race on purpose.

“Did your mom forget to cut the edges off, Chrissy?” London shot back. “Is that why you’re trying to give your lunch away? Or are you already quitting?”

“Set!”

Naya’s voice sounds sterner through the megaphone. The boys simultaneously lower into start position, knees bent and arms curved at different angles. London adjusts his hat one more time while Naya waits for Mr. Beckford to check that all the boys’ heels are touching the wall. He gives her the thumbs-up.

“Go!”

London fires off the wall. His strides are long and patient, but he’s covering the most ground. None of the other boys can take two strides without turning their heads to the side to glimpse the competition. On the other side of the line, Chris is picking up speed. His steps are short and choppy, but halfway

through the race it's hard to tell who's ahead.

Most of the students on the sidelines have their phones out, tracking London on their screens like a celebrity down a red carpet. Naya turns around as the boys flock past her and race for the finish line. Her fingers are crossed and her attention is centred on London's arms and legs pumping.

Christine and Karla are on either end of the finish line holding coloured ribbons that they knotted together to stretch nearly the width of the yard. They came up with the idea of creating a colourful finish line and were excused from class all morning to get it done. Both of them worked from the smaller, empty gym where students poked their heads in to sneak a peek at the progress.

When the ribbons fall to the ground, London raises his arms and keeps running to the end of the yard. He climbs halfway up the fence, turns back to face the crowd, and waves a small Canadian flag he pulled out of his pocket.

Mr. Beckford shakes his head and smiles at the new teacher beside him. "Gotta love him."

Naya uncrosses her fingers and exhales.

London hops off the fence and hands the flag to one of the younger students who are starting to crowd around him.

“Good race,” Chris says. “But you really lost out on a peanut butter sandwich.”

Both boys laugh and go into their handshake.

“You should come over tomorrow,” Chris says. I got that new VR set. You gotta check it out.”

“I’ll ask my dad, but it should be cool. He’s taking me somewhere today, but I don’t think we have anything else planned this weekend. I’ll message you.”

The schoolyard looks like a flea market as teachers make their way back inside and students file out to the parking lot. Mr. Beckford and the new teacher stay off to the side.

“That’s always fun,” says Mr. Beckford.

“This happens every year?”

“The first Friday of every school year.”

“And how long has it been going on for?” asks the new teacher.

“About four years. It kind of started by accident. The first time it happened was because the boys were having an argument in class about who was the fastest. Mrs. Stanley said they should settle it outside after school, and they did.”

“And it just kept going after that?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Stanley said she liked that all the boys were into it, even the ones who weren’t athletic. It’s

something just for them and she thought the boys needed that kind of camaraderie. Grade eight can be a weird time for kids.”

Naya walks over to London. “Good race, neighbour. The whole jumping on the fence thing, though . . . really?”

“It felt like the right thing to do.”

Naya gently punches his arm and London pretends it hurts.

“You ready to go?” Naya says.

“Yeah, just let me grab my bag.”

Naya and London have lived on the same street since fifth grade. They would see each other walking to and from school, but it wasn’t until the next year that they really became friends. That’s when London’s dad got sick, and London started walking by himself a lot. Naya’s mom, a personal trainer, helped Mr. Mitchell with his recovery. Naya was the only one at school who knew what was going on with him.

The first time they walked home together, London didn’t say anything until they reached Naya’s house and waved bye. Naya had waited outside the school doors she knew London came out of. She stayed back in case he was with his regular group of friends, but when he came out alone, she stepped in front of him.



“Hey,” London said, looking around at everyone passing by.

“Hey. I’m walking home. You’re walking home. It just makes sense, right?”

The longer Naya and London stood there, the more eyes London could feel as kids walked past. After a deep breath, he motioned his head toward the parking lot and told Naya to lead the way. They’ve walked home nearly every day since.

“How did it feel knowing you were gonna win that race?” Naya asks. They’re almost at her door, both of them holding on to the straps of their knapsacks.

“I didn’t know I was gonna win. I mean, I did, but not really. It really wasn’t that serious.”

Ms. Daley, Naya’s mom, is in the front yard watering a bed of pink lilies. She waves at London and he waves back.

“My mom’s cooking lasagna tonight. You gonna stay and eat?”

“I would, but my dad made plans for us. He won’t tell me where we’re going but he said we’ll be out for a while.”

“Okay. Message me when you’re back?”

“Yeah.”



At home London is greeted with slow R & B. His mom and dad are shuffling across the living room like they're at a private concert. Mr. Mitchell twirls his wife, who's dressed and ready for work, and catches her before noticing London rolling his eyes.

"Is it too much to ask to have normal parents?" London jokes.

"If we were normal, you would be too," says Dr. Mitchell. She eases into a thin sweater then grabs her purse from a chaise close to the front door. "And who really wants to be normal?"

It's Dr. Mitchell's third of five night shifts in a row at the hospital before she's off for one day and on call for the next. It's a schedule that's become more consistent since London started middle school. When he was younger, it felt like time with his mom was a privilege. She worked six days a week and wouldn't even come home some nights. Mr. Mitchell had explained to London that it made more sense for her to sleep at the hospital sometimes. That learning how to save lives takes a lot of practise, and that's what his mom was doing.

"I heard you boys have some plans tonight," Dr. Mitchell says as she heads for the door.

"Yeah, Dad says he's taking me somewhere, but I don't know where we're going."

“Wherever you go, make sure your father behaves.” She winks and shuts the door behind her.

The music’s still playing when London’s dad tells him to get changed and meet him in the car.

Upstairs, London passes the game room and is tempted to duck in for a few minutes. The controller is stacked neatly on top of the Xbox and the screen is big enough that he can invite his boys over to watch anime, which London’s dad lets him do some weekends. But it’s not the Xbox that’s sucking London in. The real temptation is the bookshelves that take up nearly all the wall space with stories covering every row arranged by colour. The books that aren’t arranged by colour are organized by series. Everything from *Diary of A Wimpy Kid* to *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* — books he’s read since the kindergarten teacher caught him pronouncing words from one of the novels on her desk.

Hidden against the back wall in straw baskets with square lids are piles of sketchbooks. Pages and pages filled with odd shapes, characters and half-finished stories from years of drawing are inside those sketchbooks. London grabs three from the top of one basket — their covers worn or missing completely — and brings them to his room.

London’s room is next to one of the guest rooms,

which is beside the game room. His parents' room is on the other end of the hall, the door open like it always is. They've lived in this house since London was eight. Back then he would run from his room straight through the open door, jump on his parents' bed, and slide under the covers, waving his arms and making spooky ghost noises.

With all three sketchbooks tossed on his bed, London considers which one he should bring with him as he takes off his school shirt. He can tell what's inside each of them just by looking. The one he grabs still has half of a dull blue cover. Inside are faces with different expressions that London sketched over the past year.

“You're coming with me.”



Inside his father's Tesla, London is hunched over sketching with a pencil, his attention on an eyebrow.

“You had that race thing today, right?”

“Yeah, it was after school,” he answers.

“Did you win?”

“I guess. Wasn't really about winning. Everyone was just having a good time.”

“But you won?”

“Yeah, Dad. I won.”

Mr. Mitchell smirks before pulling into a parking spot on a side street London doesn't recognize.

“Where are we?”

“Get out and you'll see.”

London and his dad walk side by side to a building that looks like a supersized barn. Outside, food and drink tents are set up beside picnic tables where groups of adults are sipping coolers and eating bites of vegan cheese. When they get to the entrance, under a large sign that reads “Artscape Wychwood Barns,” Mr. Mitchell holds up his phone to scan two tickets for a host dressed in a powder blue blazer and purple bowtie.

Inside the building are two off-white Ferraris on either end with a stage in between. On the stage are six easels with a canvas and paint brushes beside each one.

“Dad, is this Art Battle?” London looks around at the setup. “It is, right? How'd you know about this?”

Mr. Mitchell keeps his hands in his pockets. “I'm guessing this is a good surprise?”

“This is the best surprise. This is way better than what I thought you had planned. Like some boring restaurant or something.”

“Oh, we’re still doing the restaurant,” says Mr. Mitchell, “but I know how much you like these artsy things. Thought it would be a cool thing to do. I do have one question, though: what’s up with the cars?”

“They’re gonna paint those, Dad. Okay, let me tell you how this works. So, like, two artists are gonna be painting the cars for two hours. Then on the stage right there, six artists will paint for three rounds. Every round is like thirty minutes and we get to vote on our favourites after the round is done. Then you can buy any of the pieces. You, like, bid on them or something.”

“Let me guess, all of this happens on your phone?”

“Duh. How else would it work?”

A voice from close to the stage interrupts their conversation and lets everyone know the event is about to begin. The artists are introduced and four of them are called up on stage. The other two take their place beside the Ferraris. Once the painting begins, London circles the stage, stopping behind each artist for a few minutes before continuing to the next painting. His eyes widen when he sees one of the painters creating a portrait that he instantly recognizes as Toni Morrison.

“You like how that one is shaping up?”

“Do you know who that is, Dad?”

“I’m not that out of touch. Of course I do.”

“Can you bid on it once they’re done? Please, Dad?”

Mr. Mitchell smiles and pulls London under his arms.

London has never seen anyone paint cars before, so he leads his dad over to watch the artist, whose name tag says ‘Moses,’ draw intricate gold spirals on the driver-side door. When he checks out the other car, the design feels more chaotic. Yellow and turquoise and green shapes cover the hood. It almost looks like giant pieces of an engine.

“I wish I knew how to paint,” London says.

“You know how to do a lot of things. Appreciate that. Don’t get caught up in the stuff you can’t do.”

For the rest of the show, London only looks at his phone to vote after each round. When he and his dad are in the car heading to dinner, he scrolls through missed DMs and texts from Chris, Naya and a few randoms on TikTok.

“Can we skip dinner, Dad?”

“Why? Not hungry?”

“Yeah, I kinda just wanna grab a burger or something and eat at home.”

“We can do that.”

When they get home, London and his dad spread the burger wrapping on the table and throw fries on top. There's a small hill of ketchup on the wrapping that they use to dip the fries and London uses to dip his burger.

“Dad, do you like the classes you're teaching?”

“Yeah I do. I have mostly first-year students, so I'm teaching intro-type business classes. But it's fun speaking to kids so young and eager to learn. Most of them, anyway.”

“Is it still weird when people call you Professor Mitchell?”

It's Mr. Mitchell's second semester teaching university after a year spent travelling and listening to every podcast and audiobook recommendation from friends and business associates. The one-year break wasn't by choice. It was an order from his wife when she found him collapsed in his home office. Not going back to sixteen-hour workdays was non-negotiable, but when a family friend suggested teaching, both his parents were open to the idea.

“No, I'm used to it now. I think I kind of like it.”

London takes a sip of his strawberry shake and wonders if this is the right time to tell his dad what he's been thinking. He knows that every day that goes by is only going to make it that much harder



for his dad to swallow. It's better to do it now and get it over with, but his lips don't leave the straw.

"What about you? This is your last year of middle school. You looking forward to starting high school?"

London sits up straight and tries his best to sound convincing.

"I guess. Doesn't really feel like a big deal. A lot of my friends are going to the same high school, so it's gonna be like grade eight all over again, except we'll be at the bottom of the cool chain."

"The cool chain? I'm not even going to ask. It's good that so many of your friends are going to be at the same school, but remember that you have a goal. You just spent an entire summer at coding camp so you can be the best. That's what your mother and I expect from you. Nothing but the best."

London forces a smile then gets back to sipping his milkshake.