

FINDING JUPITER

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Kelis Rowe



CROWN
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.
ISBN 978-0-593-42925-9 (hardcover) — ISBN 978-0-593-42926-6 (lib. bdg.) —
ISBN 978-0-593-42927-3 (ebook)

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Adobe Caslon Pro.
Interior design by Andrea Lau

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

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To my mom and my son, Zack.
Momma, you always made me believe I could be anything.
I believed that you believed it. Which made me want to
be something amazing. Zack, thank you for gently
asking how my writing was going in the days, weeks,
and sometimes months that you saw me not-writing.
I hope I make you proud.

I suppose you've got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends—in the modern world."

Angry as I was, as we all were, I was tempted to laugh whenever he opened his mouth. The transition from libertine to prig was so complete.

"I've got something to tell you, old sport—" began Gatsby. But Daisy guessed at his intention.

"Please don't!" she interrupted helplessly. "Please let's all go home. Why don't we all go home?"

"That's a good idea." I got up. "Come on, Tom. Nobody wants a drink."

"I want to know what Mr. Gatsby has to tell me."

"Your wife doesn't love you," said Gatsby. "She's never loved you. She loves me."

"You must be crazy!" exclaimed Tom automatically. Gatsby sprang to his feet, vivid with excitement.

"She never loved you, do you hear?" he cried. "She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved any one except me!"

At this point Jordan and I tried to go, but Tom and Gatsby insisted with competitive firmness that we remain—as though neither of them had anything to conceal and it would be a privilege to partake vicariously of their emotions.

"Sit down, Daisy," Tom's voice groped unsuccessfully for the paternal note. "What's been going on? I want to hear all about it."

"I told you what's been going on," said Gatsby. "Going on for five years—and you didn't know."

Tom turned to Daisy sharply.

"You've been seeing this fellow for five years?"

"Not seeing," said Gatsby. "No, we couldn't meet."

I was complete
to know your love, automatically.
Do you hear?
I was tired of waiting for a loved one.
I tried to conceal emotions,
unsuccessfully,
for the paternal.
I didn't know we couldn't meet.



ONE

Ray

22 DAYS

I'm finding poetry in the pages of *The Great Gatsby* this summer. My copy from middle school has started to fall apart, so I've ripped out my favorite set of pages and have glued some of the finished pieces into my journal. Gatsby's life was utterly unfair, and it came to an end because of circumstances that were far out of his control. I can relate. For my found poetry, I'm drawn to the parts of stories where the writing is on the wall and there's nothing anyone can do about it. Gatsby's goose is cooked. He'll never get what he wants most.

What do I want? Just once I'd like today to be about the day I was born, not the day my father died.

Sitting in the tree house he built for me, I push away thoughts of him dying while I was entering the world. I unravel my turquoise earbuds, start my James Taylor Essentials playlist, and try to focus.

A calm washes over me as I study the page that I've taped to a piece of lined paper. On this page, Tom Buchanan is closing

in on Gatsby's lie, quizzing him about his days at Oxford as Daisy interjects about a mint julep. Shit's about to hit the fan.

Mr. Nobody.

I write it in pencil on the side of the page. I go back to the top of the page and scan, waiting to find words about Mr. Nobody. I list them as I go.

smiling, snapped, politely, content, desperately, nowhere, alone . . .

I read the list over and over again, until some words fall away and others seem to float above the page. With each pass, more words join in, calling out to me as the poem makes itself known. Then, finally, the found poetry has found me.

*Smiling faintly,
I'll wait desperately to please Mr. Nobody.
Me, with him,
Standing alone.*

I draw cloudy circles around the words that call to me, in order as they appear on the page. An image of a girl standing alone comes to me and I begin to sketch. When I'm done, I'll use black ink pens, oil crayons, and a Sharpie to finish it, but that will have to wait. It's almost time for me to pick up my roommate, Bri, from the airport. In three years of boarding

school, this will be her first time coming here. I'm excited to see her, but nervous, too. My neighborhood is worlds away from her fancy Maryland digs.

I'm almost finished packing my things away when I hear Momma's voice.

I pretend not to hear her. I know she's standing at the foot of the tree-house ladder, but I wait for her to call twice before I shuffle to the entrance and look down. I keep my headphones on, on purpose.

She smiles at the sight of me, which has the annoying effect of making me smile back. She taps her ear. I take the hint but make a show of stopping my playlist and tugging at the cords, popping one of the earbuds out of my ear.

"Happy birthday, baby." She holds up my favorite tumbler, purple with pink stars, filled with fresh lemonade.

"Thanks, Momma. One second." I toss my pencil pouch into my backpack and climb down the ladder. She kisses my cheek as I take the cup.

"I can't wait to see what you're working on. I've always been amazed at how you turn those words into art," she says.

I take a sip of lemonade and avoid making eye contact with her.

"You excited about Bri coming today?"

"Yes," I mumble as I remove the other earbud and wrap the cord around my cell phone.

"What time you planning to head to the airport?"

I shrug and check the time on my phone before shoving it into the back pocket of my jean shorts.

“You call yourself trying to give me the silent treatment or something with all these short nonanswers?” There’s a smile in her voice.

“Maybe.” I take another indignant sip of lemonade.

Momma chuckles and pinches my cheek with the backs of her fingers.

“Ray, you are something else—a ray of sunshine this morning,” she teases. “Come on.” She bumps her arm to mine. “Come help your old momma pick some lavender. You still have a little time before you have to go?”

I follow her through the opening of the garden. The air is thick with the scent of rosemary, lavender, and lemon blossoms. We make quick work of cutting lavender stems and laying them in a basket. My mom ties the cut end of three sprigs together with a small piece of silver ribbon, for my father’s headstone.

“Can I go now?” I ask, with a hint of exasperation.

“Ray, I haven’t asked you to visit your dad’s grave since you turned twelve.” I can tell she’s about to go into one of her long monologues, but I refuse to feel guilty for not mourning a person I never knew.

“This is your last summer in high school. You might not even be here next summer. I wish you’d go to the cemetery before you head back to Rhode Island. Those visits used to mean so much to you.”

“The first few years you took me there, I thought I’d get to meet him, maybe get to know him.”

I was clueless. He was a nurse. He liked Bob Marley and Caribbean food. That’s all I know about him. She’d told me he’d become a star in the sky the night I was born, and so we’d

stargaze and pretend to talk to him. Then on my birthday we'd make this big picnic to go visit Daddy. When I was really little, I thought he'd come out of his grave once a year like Santa coming down from the North Pole. I felt ridiculous when I realized the truth.

"Momma, you knew him. I never will. I don't see why I should go."

My mom doesn't look up from her hands, and I feel like shit. "If you hurry, maybe Bri won't have to wait for you too long outside baggage claim," she says.

"You sure you don't want me to drop you off on the way?" I offer as an olive branch.

"No, baby, I'm good. It's on the bus route to work. I'll be fine. You go on and get Bri. Y'all have fun skating tonight."

I want to explain to her that I don't think she's weird for returning to his grave every year. I get it—her life changed more than anyone's that night. She became a widow and a mother in a single moment. I want to tell her how much it sucks that my birthday can never just be about me. I walk away and look back as she absentmindedly wraps silver ribbon around more lavender. I've said enough. Instead of telling her that she's already made one of those, I head inside the house.

"Best birthday ever," I say *after* I slide the patio door closed.



Briana is all gloss and polish against the dingy backdrop of the Memphis International Airport—like a colorful image cut from a fashion magazine, fixed onto newspaper, and then

shellacked. It's only been two months since we left school, but it seems longer. She notices me waving and, just like that, she's three-dimensional again, waving excitedly and picking up her carry-on. I don't even make it around to open the trunk before her arms are around me.

"Hey, girl, hey!" Her mass of curly hair presses into me. Briana usually smells like something sweet or edible or both. Today it's wildflowers. "Scent is tied to memories," she said on move-in day freshman year, while unloading her arsenal of perfumes onto her hutch. "I want to be unforgettable."

Bri is taller than most girls, but still not as tall as me. Her hair is a glorious mass of tumbling coils down her back, and I've never seen a more radiant smile outside of a Disney animated prince. And she laughs like a charming hyena. She's unforgettable the moment you meet her. Why she thinks she needs the help of a fragrance is beyond me.

She squeezes me and I squeeze her before shoving her suitcase in the trunk. She's already in the car by the time I'm behind the wheel.

"Nice ride! A red Jeep Cherokee—so retro! I'm excited to be here and see what these Memphis streets talkin' about! Happy Birthday. Queen!" She does a little dance.

I smile and shake. "Okay, so, tell me about your fancy summer camp. The girls, the horses, the *boys*?"

Bri *collects* stories about boys. And I could really use the distraction. Anything to get my mind off how my mom looked before I left the house. Anything to get my mind off that stupid graveyard.

Bri only knows that my father died when I was little. That's enough. It's easier to keep things light. I don't want her to know *everything* about me. My sob story would draw her in.

And I don't do *in* with other people.

I'm totally fine with just being Ray Jr., the tall girl from Memphis with the braids that stay poppin'.

"Camp was camp. I met a super dope girl who came all the way from Ireland, and bump my camp boys, Ray—where the Memphis boys at? What are the plans for the birthday turnup?"

"We're going skating. Wherever the boys are, I'm sure you'll find them." I laugh and she shoves my shoulder playfully. "When we get to the house, we'll have just enough time for you to figure out your costume change before we dip. They close at eleven, and I need to catch as much wind as possible tonight."

Bri fans herself with a piece of junk mail from the armrest.

"Sorry my mom's AC is out. I meant to warn you about Memphis summers. It's always hell degrees outside."

"It's fine. Glad I didn't straighten my hair. This Memphis humidity is not playing." She rolls the window down farther. "But, uh, boys. Who's your summer boo?"

"I'm not hooking up with anybody this summer."

"No summer love this year? That's new, do tell."

"Summer *fling*," I correct her. "Love is for the birds. Keep that drama away from me. There's way more honesty in cutting to the chase."

"Why you always frontin', Ray? I see you watching *The Notebook* repeatedly. You love romance, admit it."

"Correction. I'm *entertained* by romance."

“Whatever. Romance is everything.”

“Romance is a waste of time.” I see Bri’s head whip in my direction out of the side of my eyes.

“Girl, you trippin’.”

“I’m just a girl with satisfied needs and peace that comes with not caring if he’s gonna call the next day or ever.”

Bri shakes her head. I shrug.

“Moving on. I live in Whitehaven, near Graceland. We’ll go past where Elvis lived. It’s kind of a tourist requirement.” I exit the highway and hang a left. Small shopping centers, houses that’ve been converted into businesses, and old apartment complexes line either side of the street. I glance at Bri to get a read on her first impression.

“*Whitehaven?*” She says the name of my neighborhood like it leaves a bad aftertaste.

“Yes, Whitehaven . . . and it meant exactly what you think, back when the neighborhood was settled. Welcome to the Dirty South,” I say, gesturing at the clusters of local businesses and ancient apartment complexes that line the road. The scent of fried chicken fills the air as we approach KFC. “Ironically, Whitehaven is a very Black neighborhood now. White flight was real. We call it Blackhaven, unofficially.”

Bri’s eyebrows are still raised in shock.

“Graceland is coming up on your left. All the souvenir shops, his private jet, and his famous Cadillac will be on the right.” Bri stops her fanning, sits up in her seat, and cranes her neck.

“Okay, so these are the first white people I’ve seen since the airport.”

“Those are tourists.”

My eyes fall on the ever-present flower shrine near the front gates of Graceland, and my mind goes back to the lavender Momma will leave on my father’s headstone today. Why’d she have to suggest I go to that grave after all these years? What is even the point?

“Well, that was underwhelming,” Bri says, distracting me from my thoughts. I nod.

My stomach sinks. What is she going to think of my tiny house? Bri’s family is loaded. The first time I went to her house, I was shocked by the size of the windows and the amount of food they had stored away. There are only three of them, and their pantry is an actual room with cabinets and a sink. It’s like a corner store in the kitchen. Sometimes I wonder if we would be friends if we hadn’t been the only two Black girls in our freshman class.

There’s something about being captive at boarding school in middle-of-nowhere Rhode Island that forces a bond between girls who feel like home. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t extremely nervous about her being in my little house with its small windows and normal amounts of food. We enter the cove and roll to a stop in my driveway.

“Home sweet home,” she sings.

I gnaw my lip and watch Bri scan the area. There used to be a housing project walking distance from here. It was nicknamed P. Valley because it was a hot spot for the world’s oldest profession. But it was closed down years ago, so I feel like my neighborhood is coming up.

I still my fidgety hands and remind myself that a real friend wouldn't trip because of where I live. "Welcome to my humble abode," I say in my best English butler impression. "What it lacks in size and youth, it charms with snacks, hot water, and a plethora of fragrant handmade soaps and essential oils, courtesy of the lady of the house."

I bow my head and she throws hers back, cackling. Fortunately, she doesn't seem uptight about my place. Bri starts to say something but then whips around mid-sentence. I turn and see Cash, my forever next-door neighbor. Cash and I became easy friends the day I started walking home from school—when my mom started working at the hospital. We were nine years old. One day he shoved a frog in my face. I laughed and asked if I could hold it. He seemed impressed that I didn't scream and run away and told me he liked my *Star Wars* shirt. We've been like cousins ever since.

Flashing her toothiest smile, she waves as he walks past my driveway. "You didn't mention that the boy next door was *fine* with a capital *I*, honey."

"I sure didn't," I say, nudging her toward the house. "You know how long it takes you to get ready to go anywhere?"

Cash tilts his chin in a *what's up*.

"Hey, Cash. Bye, Cash. We'll see you tonight at Crystal Palace."

Bri's gonna be disappointed when I break it to her that Cash is practically married. Thankfully, tonight of all nights I plan to be too lost in the music to care.



It was a good call to shoo Cash away at the door. It took Bri a record low number of three outfit changes before she decided on the first one. We hit up the Wendy's drive-through and ate in the car in the Crystal Palace parking lot, which was already packed when we arrived.

As soon as we step through the doors, the scent of buttery popcorn welcomes us. I've been away far too long. Looking up at the giant, sparkling disco ball hanging from the center of the ceiling and hearing the music blaring, I instantly regret the lost time. Neon strobe lights create colorful patterns on the rink's glossy wood floor—practically calling my name.

I wait in line with Bri to pick up her rental skates. I don't recognize the rap song that's playing, but it's bass-heavy and I can't help but bounce to the beat.

"I see you, Ray, turn up!" Bri says, dancing with me.

I watch a little girl whose mother is squatting to tie the strings on her skates. Her smile widens when I smile back at her. They remind me of Momma and me. We spent so many nights here. She taught me to skate, but once I got to middle school I'd come here with Cash and his girlfriend, Mel, instead.

"I think it's so cool that you actually own a pair of roller skates," Bri says, rental skates now in hand. "You must be really good."

She's talking to me as she scans the room. Wearing mint-green skinny jeans and a snug powder-blue T-shirt with a rainbow across the chest, Bri may not have skated in a while, but she looks the part.

"I'm pretty good," I say, holding up my well-worn bright

turquoise skates with magenta laces and matching wheels. “You see how close this place is to my house? We used to walk up here all the time. It didn’t make sense to keep renting skates.”

Bri nods, eyes still roaming.

Every time we go anywhere together, she surveys the area to identify cute single guys to potentially talk to—and cute girls who could potentially be her competition. It’s a sport for her. She rarely even dates any of the boys. She just collects them, her small army of admirers.

She’s tried to get me in on it, but much to Bri’s disappointment, I mostly just focus on volleyball, classes, and art in my spare time. Cory, Bri’s neighbor, is the only boy in my life, but we just hook up whenever I go home to Bri’s over breaks. He isn’t needy or aggressive, and he never really tries to get inside my head. All I know about him is that his parents always travel for work, he plays basketball, and he can really work his way around a girl’s body. I might be a loner, but I’m also a girl with needs. Cory always obliges, and, most importantly, afterward he leaves me alone.

Bri and I find a spot and put our skates on. Just as we’re done, I spot Cash and Mel, holding hands, walking away from the lockers. Those two are the only reason I have faith that love might actually be worth it. They’ve been together, drama-free, since elementary school. Cash sees us, too. The glow from the lights makes their dark skin look like deep brown pearls as they move toward us. He towers above just about everyone in the place, including me, and I’m six feet tall.

“Hey, Mel,” I say, bending down to hug her, then reaching up to hug Cash.

“Happy birthday, Ray. Loving those ombré braids, girl,” Mel says.

“My birthday braids?” I toss my ombré hair forward over my shoulder and dramatically stroke the length of it to my waist. They’re black at the roots and fade into pastel pink, pale turquoise, and silvery blue on the ends. “Thank you. They come out before I head back to school.”

“This is my roommate, Bri. Bri, this is my neighbor Cash, and his girlfriend, Mel.”

“Yeah. Happy birthday. It’s been a while since we were all here,” Cash says to me. “This was the spot.”

“Remember they used to give out those free passes at school some Fridays?” Mel says, and we nod.

“We all went to elementary school together.” I answer the question on Bri’s face.

“Wait. So *all* you guys own skates?” Bri studies Mel’s pink bedazzled skates with neon laces. “I’m jealous. I haven’t skated in forever. I hope I remember how.” She laughs; then her gaze fixes somewhere across the room.

It’s some lanky dude with broad shoulders. She’s found her boy for the night. Good luck to ‘em. Cash and Mel boo’d up and Bri trying to be. I’m just here to skate.

“Ray, do you mind putting my shoes in the locker with yours? I’m gonna go ahead and get some practice rounds in before trying to keep up with you pros. Thanks.” Without looking back at us, she’s off.

Mel and Cash exchange amused looks. I shrug.

“Babe, let’s go tell the DJ we have a birthday girl in the building,” Mel says, and drags Cash away.

I'm relieved to find myself alone for a moment. I skate-walk across the carpeted floor toward the lockers. Bri is struggle-skating solo, but looking like she's having a great time. Her long coily hair is catching all kinds of wind as she goes. She turns heads without making an effort.

I hang back on the sidelines, watching all the action in the rink. The skate crews are here in numbers, easily spotted by their matching shirts or head-to-toe outfits. Little kids and families take it easy in the center island. Lots of solo skaters, young and old, are lost in their own worlds, gliding around the rink. I'm about to get out there and into my own world too when I see Cash and Mel skate-walking toward me, smiling like they have a juicy secret.

"What's with the faces?"

"Listen," Mel says.

"What am I listening for? I—"

She shushes me. "Eighth grade, first weekend of summer. You, me, Cash."

I recognize the rhythmic music from the intro to "Crank That" by Soulja Boy. The room is bouncing to the beat. They want to do one of our old skating routines.

"It's been so long. Do y'all still remember the steps?" I'm already being pulled onto the floor by Mel, so there's my answer. Cash is skating ahead of us. When we're all finally skating in the same direction, I catch up to Mel, who is skating in step directly behind Cash, who is a mountain on skates. The music transports me right back.

I begin side to side, in step to the beat, as Soulja Boy finishes the rap intro. We make our way around the rink a couple

of times in line, taking the curves with our footwork in sync, warming up for the dance. I can feel the music in my bones, my body gliding to the beat. Cash smiles back at Mel and me as we round the curve, and then the bass drops. It's about to go down.