

Twenty-four Seconds from Now ...

JASON REYNOLDS

LOVE
a love story

A Caitlyn Dlouhy Book



NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO
SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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**Just twenty-four
seconds ago ...**

I was rushing to the bathroom and shutting the door behind me. And taking a deep breath, then another deep breath, then another. And giving myself a piece of my mind.

But just before all that, I was peeling my lips off Aria. Off her mouth and her neck and her face and her shoulder and her other shoulder and her face and her neck and her mouth. And her forehead. Because I even kissed her there, which wasn't really my smoothest move because don't nobody be kissing foreheads but fathers. I know this because my dad kisses me and my sister on our foreheads whenever he's in his feelings, and I've even seen Aria's dad do the same. So it's clearly a dad thing. But I'd be lying if I said it wasn't also a me thing. It is. And I'd be lying twice if I said Aria's forehead was the first forehead I'd kissed. It wasn't.

I also kiss my grandmother, Gammy, on her forehead every day. It's how I say good morning to her and also goodbye before I leave for school. It's also how I remind her fading mind that we love it and want it to stay as long as possible.

"Ain't that right, Gammy?" I ask, peppering her forehead, *muah* after *muah*.

"That's right!" she says, all smiles.

Aria, on the other hand, ain't no old lady even though she sometimes acts like one—a million pieces of candy in her bag, big hugs, and the look she gets whenever she knows you know better than to do whatever it is you think you about to do. Despite all that, Aria's far from a grandma. But she smiled when I kissed her forehead too. Not some wholesome smile like Gammy's and not a fake I'm-just-trying-to-be-nice smile either. This smile was welcoming. And mischievous. And sexy. Very ungranny-like, that's for sure. It was such a simple gesture, but it made me feel like I'd done the right thing. And I wanted to do the right thing. All the right things.

And just before the forehead kiss, I'd grown a few extra

hands, and explored the back of Aria's neck and the small of her back and her butt but tried not to focus too much on her butt because my sister told me to remember to not be so damn predictable. Even though, unpredictably, Aria grabbed mine. I won't lie, it made me laugh a little because ain't nobody ever grabbed my butt before, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it but ain't feel enough about it to tell her not to do it, and instead minded the business of my own hands, searching for everything. But trying not to find anything. Because to find something, to focus on something for too long, would turn Aria into a body. *Just* a body. Another note from my sister.

"Okay, so what you thinking about now?" Aria asked, her hands still back there, her lips whispering the smell of tender into my nose. She'd already pushed her sweatpants to the floor and stepped out of them like she was breaking free from a heather-gray cocoon. As if she were hiding wings. Next went the T-shirt over her head, the ponytail the last thing loose. My jeans and shirt were already gone, a wrinkled mess down the hallway where all this began.

We pressed against each other, skin on skin except for

the skin separated by three thin pieces of cotton. Mine, the most blah of the bunch, had an exhausted waistband and was way looser than it was supposed to be but growing tighter and tighter by the second. Hers were mismatched, which was so Aria.

We'd been here before. Not exactly like this, and not in Aria's bedroom, which looks more like a hotel room. Or a guest room. Stale. Bland. But not her fault. Or her taste. Aria's about color. About pattern and playfulness. About homeyness. Fly. But her mother, Mrs. Wright, ain't about none of that. She's more . . . drown. Drown in *Be somebody else!* Drown in *You're not focused enough!* Drown in *How come you can't be more like . . . and like . . . and like . . . ?* So Mrs. Wright is the tidal wave that makes sure Aria knows that as soon as high school is over, she'll be washed out of this house, and her room will become a space for visitors. Even though there were never any visitors. And probably would never be any visitors. Because her house—well, her *mom*—isn't really the visitor type. Either way, Aria can't wait to be a goner, to leave home and never have to deal with her mother's *never enough-ness* again, which is

why she ain't really care that her room had already been prepped for her exit.

It's decorated with a platform bed, low to the ground, with one of those headboards that look more royal than relaxing. There are framed pictures of musical instruments above it. And above the desk. And on the other side of the room is one of those closets that's . . . outside of the closet. A clothing cabinet, which is like a treasure chest of cozy sweats and hoodies, and I'm sure some other things too. And underneath it all, there's an area rug I swear be in every area of every house with a guest room. Blue, burgundy, and gold. Next to it, a plant I used to think was real, but I should've known better because Aria's entire bedroom looks like it's been staged for a photo in one of them furniture magazines. Like something straight out of a showroom.

My bedroom looks like something straight out of a *showdown*. It still has all the stuff of a thirteen-year-old—movie posters and action figures—even though I'm a seventeen-year-old, which means absolutely nothing because the only difference between thirteen and seventeen

is that thirteen is when the horny starts, and seventeen is when you're lucky enough to do something about it. Maybe. And that fact alone made me occasionally line up the sneakers that were strewn across the floor, or make the bed, or organize the dresser drawers, which acted less like dressers or drawers and more like cubbies to hide the clothes I never folded and the socks that had lost their mates and had now been turned into cotton crackers after cleanup on the nights (and mornings) I'd dreamed of this moment with Aria.

I'd always imagined that this me-and-Aria thing, this connection, would happen at my house, which now seems like the most unromantic thought ever. And the fact that we'd fooled around there so many times feels like a miracle now that I think about it, and like an act of desperation now that I *really* think about it.

Me and Aria wanted each other. No other way to say it. We wanted each other, bad. And we'd made out so much that, after a while, we were over it. Okay, not *over* it, because nobody ever gets *over* making out. But after a while, *out* became the norm. I lived in *out*. We lived in *out*. Been in *out* for the last two years. Eventually, the only thing

the two of us could think about whenever we were making out was, how we could make *in*.

Like I said, we'd been here before. Not exactly like this, and not in Aria's house, but in mine. And in my sister's car—funky with vanilla tree—on a backstreet when my mother was asleep. And at our friends' houses, using parties as excuses for rendezvous. And also in the movie theater—greasy-lipped from fake butter—“watching” a film where these sorts of scenes play out way different than what's happening right now in Aria's room.

If this were a love scene in the movies, the music would already be playing by now. It would've come out of nowhere, a soft piano and sweeping horn, and me and Aria would've started kissing in rhythm to the song as if it were playing in each of our minds and could be heard through the holes in each of our ears. In the movies, kisses always seem so aggressive. So hungry, like the lovers be trying to eat each other's faces. Always tearing at each other's clothes, and either one person pushes the other onto the bed, or, in full embrace, they fall onto the mattress like a chopped tree into a pile of leaves.

And no one ever stops to get a rubber. No one ever stops.

But this wasn't the movies. This was really happening. There was no music playing yet. Our kisses were careful. Taking off our clothes—at least the first layer—was a simple process without snags or holes. We hadn't quite made it to the bed and instead were standing, hot and cold, in the middle of the room. The soon-to-be guest room. And I felt like one, a visitor, who wanted to make himself at home but was still figuring out which light switch did what.

If this were a movie, there would've been beams of moonlight cutting across our faces. And our bodies would've become shadows dancing on the wall. Perfect silhouettes. Seamless choreography.

But for us, there were no directions, no directors saying how and where to move.

"Tell me what you thinking," Aria repeated.

"What I'm thinking right now?"

No one to yell, *Action!*

"Right now," Aria said, eyes on eyes.

No one to yell, *Cut!*

TWENTY-FOUR SECONDS FROM NOW...

Because this was real life. And in real life, as excited as I was for this moment, I also felt like I might, I might, I might stop . . . breathing. Keel over and go to heaven right before I get to heaven.

“I’m thinking . . . I’ll be right back.”