

# ALEXIS JOHNSON

## *The Reward for Loving Boys in High School*

*It's not going to end*, I thought to myself with an audible sigh the moment my eyes landed on Akilah in the band room. I wasn't in the mood, not now, but she stood when her eyes met mine and stopped me at the door before I could walk three steps in. She turned up the corners of her mouth, but her smile was a thin one, wavering and poorly put together. If she noticed me glance off to the side and pitch the wilting carnation I'd been carrying into the trashcan, she said nothing about it.

"Happy Valentine's Day," I said with a carefully constructed smile.

She nodded, but gave no reaction to this either. "We have a free day today," she said instead. "You wanna come with me to the bathroom?"

She peered down at me through a heavy gloss. I could see the tears building up just beneath the rims of her eyes. This was the same look I'd been getting for the past few months. But I was her friend, and however much I was tired of running with her to the bathroom when neither of us had to pee, it was my job to do something about that gloss, to stop the buildup of tears if I could. So I kept my smile and nodded and let her lead the way, sucking in every drop of patience I could on the way there.

The closest girls' room also happened to be the most disgusting. I don't care what gender stereotypes typically say. The truth is, high school girls are far more filthy and chaotic than high school boys, and I never had to step into a boys' bathroom to know that. Teenage girls live in high school bathrooms. It's where they do their make-up in the mornings, where they yank a curling iron from the depths of their purses and touch up their hair, allowing strands of weave to float carelessly to the floor, where they argue with vulgar messages scribbled on the walls and stall doors: "So-and-so fucked So-and-so," "X is a slut," "Y is the sexiest man alive," and "OMG I love him!" It's also where they throw miss the trashcan with their feminine

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products, and where all of the foulest gossip takes place. You can feel it in the atmosphere the moment you step through the door—it's what makes the air so thick and hard to breathe, because it's full of lies and heartache.

There were a couple of girls already claiming space by the sinks once we crossed the threshold. I only caught the tail end of their discussion, something about a boy who either forgot the significance of the date or was just the best boyfriend ever for surprising one of them with a billion roses. But once the girls glimpsed us through the mirrors, it was silently agreed upon that none of us wanted to breathe the same air, and so they sashayed out on high heels without glancing in our direction.

I found a suitable place to stand that would keep my shoes dry and leaned my back against the wall as Akilah ripped off half a roll of toilet paper from one of the stalls and watched herself in the mirror dabbing at her heavily painted eyes. Smudges of mascara and eyeliner came away with her tears, but she seemed okay with this so long as it wasn't smeared across her cheeks.

"It's just hard you know?" she said between sniffs. "Especially with today and being in the same classes as him and everything. And he's really nice, so I don't wanna like, ignore him or anything. It's just painful, you know?"

I nodded...I was already nodding. I glanced at my reflection over her shoulder to make sure I had the best pitying face I could muster. It wasn't that I didn't care that she was still mortified after her boyfriend of about two months had suddenly broken up with her what was now three months ago. Emotions were squishy, fragile things; I knew that. So I continued to nod and lend her my ear, the way I did every other day for every other girl friend who had problems like this...and all of them had problems like this.

"Have you talked to him?" I asked.

"Yeah, and we're still friends and all. It's just hard because like, I *love* him you know? I mean, I really thought he was *the one*."

I furrowed my brow with sympathy while inside my lungs deflated with an exasperated sigh—although, I wasn't sure if it was a sigh for her or for myself. It came attached to a sudden wave of bitterness as I got lost in the thought of my walk to the band room only moments before.

I'd been strolling alongside my best friend, chatting casually while

I did my best to ignore every happy little girl that bounced by with a stuffed animal she couldn't even fit both arms around. They all managed to though, all while holding the hand of some stoic boy who pretended he wasn't just as excited as she was. The best way to avoid it was to stare at the floor, which also served a dual purpose in keeping my eyes off of Collin who seemed not to notice any of this.

I'd stopped when my eyes fell upon the wilting carnation lying on the dusty tiles of the main hall. I bent to pick it up with a poignant sensation of sadness for the discarded flower, and yet I could feel myself smiling. I turned to Collin who'd hardly slowed his pace to wait for me and held out the carnation.

"Can you hold this for a sec?"

He took it without question and waited with it pinched between his fingers for all of one second before I held out my hand, palm up.

"Okay, now give it back."

He obeyed, and I forced a heap of brightness into my smile. "Aw, thank you!" I exclaimed, now gazing at the lost little flower with affection. "No one's ever given me flowers before!"

He gave a half-hearted little chuckle, almost as if he felt he had to, and said nothing. I had waited until he turned down a separate hallway to get to his next class before I'd let my phony smile fall to the floor.

"Do you *actually* know what love is?" I said to Akilah now. When I looked up to her, she was still rambling on about Arthur and everything that sucked about not being with him, and I realized I hadn't actually spoken the words out loud.

I didn't try to anymore. It sounded like something a parent would say anyway. At this point, I was a senior and abnormally mature for an almost-eighteen-year-old, but I wasn't grown, and I was almost hyperaware of that. I had no right to tell her what she did and didn't feel. Especially since I was the one of the two of us that had never had a real boyfriend. Besides, I was in love too—and fairly certain of it. Really the only difference was that I hadn't actually told Collin, mostly because that half-hearted chuckle made my muscles coil, and I hated hearing it. Plus, I would've never gone so far as to call him "the one."

"I just don't know what to do," she sighed, brushing her fingers through

her hair. She hadn't taken her eyes off of the mirror yet. "I just *really* want him back you know, but it's like, he's not interested. But he's so sweet and we get along and we still talk and everything..."

I tuned out again. Not on purpose. I knew what she was saying; it was the same stuff she'd been repeating for the last few months. The first week I'd full-heartedly put all effort into trying to comfort her. The second week I still offered what advice I could. After the first month, I fell into my routine of nodding and asking her the same questions while I let my eyes drift around the bathroom.

I glanced at my reflection again. Despite being about two years older, I was a good head shorter than Akilah. My skin wasn't as dark as hers, which made the irritated red bumps and blotches on my face stand out more. My hair was doing that annoying thing it did when frizzy curlicues pulled away from my ponytail and refused to stay down. She was a lot slimmer than I was, and I was aware of that every waking moment that I stood or sat next to her. She was a beautiful girl; she was a young girl; she was a nice girl, a cool girl, a fun girl. And yet, it would take her that much longer to understand that the stomach-turning giddiness she'd still had after dating Arthur for two months wasn't actually love. But who was I to suggest that? Weren't we both standing in the girls' bathroom?

I again looked away from my reflection to Akilah who was now leaning with her back against the sink. I wanted to smile sympathetically, but I'm sure it didn't come out right. I could've whined too, offered her solace with my opinion that Valentine's Day was stupid, said something like, "Boys just don't understand; they go to the bathroom alone."

Instead, I crossed the space between us with open arms. She fit herself shamelessly in my embrace and held me in return. I patted her back with a tender hand and said nothing because I knew there was nothing she could've said to me either.

She sighed. "You're a good friend."

I smiled, though I wasn't so sure if I should. "You are, too...It'll all work out. It is only high school. We've got better things to look forward to."