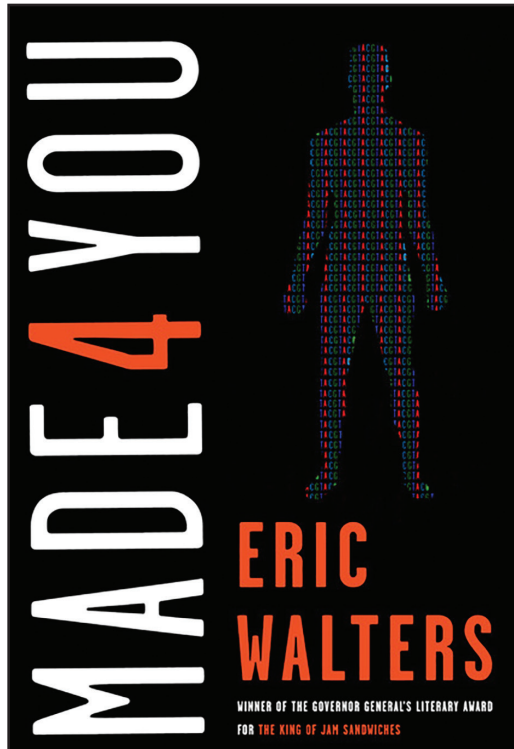


Excerpt from *Made 4 You*
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“Dad, you can just drop me off here,” I said.

“Don’t be silly, Becky, your school is just three blocks away.”

“You know how busy the drop-off lane can get, and I don’t want you to be late for work.”

“We’re still early, but you have to admit it’s a pretty fancy traffic jam with all those BMWs and Porsches. I think our minivan stands out like a sore thumb.”

“I like Betsy.” That was the name I’d given our van when I was six. I hadn’t expected her to stick around this long.

“I was hoping to have traded her in for something newer by now, but, well, you know.”

I did know. My father had been laid off from his job the previous year and had only gotten recalled to work a few months ago. Finances had been tight. My parents tried to keep that sort of thing away from me, but I wasn’t a kid. I was seventeen.

When my father lost his job, my mother started working more shifts as a personal care worker at the nursing home. Even now she kept up the extra shifts. I thought they were trying to make up for money lost.

“The cars would be different if I was dropping you off at Central,” my father said.

Central was the other high school in town. I would have gone there if there hadn’t been a boundary change in eighth grade. A couple of streets in our neighborhood got shifted, and suddenly we were going to the same school as the kids from the big houses with rich parents. Most of the friends I’d grown up with and gone to elementary school with went on to Central, and a few of us were shipped to Westfield.

My parents were born and raised in this town and had met

when they went to Central. They were high school sweethearts who got married and raised a family. I wasn't going to repeat that pattern unless a boyfriend materialized over the next eight months — not that I was looking for one. I had more important things to take care of during my senior year, especially if I wanted to get a good scholarship.

There was one thing — actually, one person — who'd allowed me to survive the change in high schools: Liv. She was my best friend and one of the few kids who came along with me. We lived two streets apart, and I'd known her since before I even had memories. She'd just always been there.

My father turned in to the sweeping driveway that cut through well-maintained lawns leading to the main entrance. It looked like every Hollywood version of what an upscale high school should

look like. There were vehicles, but the traffic hadn't started to back up yet.

"I can't believe parents allow their kids to borrow their expensive cars just to drive to school," my father said.

He didn't seem to know that most of these cars belonged to students.

We came to the drop-off zone. I leaned back and grabbed my backpack. It was heavy with books.

"Thanks, Dad." I undid my seatbelt, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and jumped out.

He started away, leaving behind a slightly blue cloud of exhaust. I looked around to see if anybody had noticed and then instantly felt bad for doing it. I didn't want to care, but still, I did — another reason I was looking forward to getting out of this school, and out of this town.

I walked up the stairs and saw that Liv was sitting by the door, so focused on her phone that she hadn't noticed me. I gave her a

little tap with my foot on the sole of her shoe, and she looked up.

“Why are you here so early?” I asked.

“I had to hand in an assignment that was due yesterday.”

I looked at my watch. “I have to go to the guidance office. I better get going or I’ll be late.”

“So what if you’re thirty seconds late?” she asked as she got to her feet and fell in beside me as we entered through the main doors.

“It’s never smart to keep the person who controls your destiny waiting.”

“Destiny?” Liv asked.

“Okay, a little dramatic, but having the guidance counselor as one of the references for university applications is really good.”

“First off, it’s September, and second, you have lots of other people who’ll say nice things about you.”

“She’s even offered to help me with filling out scholarship applications.”

“Don’t worry, your marks are good.”

“My marks are very good,” I corrected her and then realized how that sounded.

“Okay, so your marks are great.”

“Not great, just very good. Great would be a ninety-seven or ninety-eight,” I explained.

I was in the high eighties. That was good enough for some scholarship money, but I needed a full ride.

“And with all the studying you’ve been doing and prep work as well, you’re going to ace your SATs. You’ve done really well on the practice tests.”

“Practice tests are only practice tests, and the real tests are less than six weeks away. Which reminds me. Are you coming over on Saturday?”

“Can we do it Sunday instead?”

“I’m working at the nursing home.”

I’d been doing volunteer work with seniors at the place where my mother worked. I liked helping, but mostly I was doing it to pad my college applications. Volunteer work went a long way with scholarship committees.

“Do you have something better to do on Saturday?” I asked.

“No. But I also know you really don’t need to be doing so much,” Liv said. “Besides your marks and the volunteer work at the nursing home, you’re in the social justice club and the school band, and you’re the manager of the boys’ basketball team.”

“I needed that athletic component on my application.”

“Some of the guys are really hot.”

“That’s not why I’m doing it,” I said.

“I know, but with all of that, do you really think you need to be hosting a new student?”

“Look, Mrs. Evans asked me, so I couldn’t say no.”

Liv grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to a stop. “You have another headache.”

I realized I was rubbing one of my temples. “It’s not bad.”

I’d been having headaches on and off for a couple of years, but in the last six months they’d become so much worse. Some were so bad that I had to stay in bed.

“What did your doctor say?”

I’d just had another examination. “He said it’s all in my head.”

“Funny. What did he really say?”

“He said the MRI was good.”

I’d had three MRIs over the last eighteen months. They didn’t hurt or anything, but it was scary to slowly slide inside that big white and chrome machine. It felt like I was being eaten alive. There was nothing to do but lie there, trying not to move because

that would spoil the image. Trying not to worry was even harder.

I had some medication to ease the pain, but I avoided it unless a headache was really bad. Today wasn't bad enough.

"Did they tell you again that you might be getting headaches because you're pushing yourself too hard?" Liv asked.

"I'm pushing myself as hard as I need to."

"Becky, do you really need to do this too?"

"What's so terrible about helping a new student feel welcome?"

"What do you know about the person you're hosting?" Liv said.

"He's from New York."

"That's a good start. Anybody from someplace else is better than somebody from here. The guys in this school seem to be only interested in fancy cars, basketball, hair products, and football."

"Wait, you love football and basketball?"

"Of course I do. Everybody in Indiana loves the Colts and Packers, but still, the guys here are so, well, *basic*."

"Don't you think you're simplifying things a little bit?" I asked.

"Do you think I'm wrong?"

I shrugged. It didn't matter. I didn't have time for any guy from here or from anyplace else. Not that I'd been beating them off with a stick.

I stopped at the door of the guidance office. "See you later."

Liv gave me a long hug, like she wasn't going to see me again.

"Could you take a picture of him and send it to me?" she asked.

"Goodbye, Liv."

There were four other people in the office, and I knew them all. That was no surprise since everybody in this town knew, or knew of, everybody else. My head was now throbbing a little harder. With my thumb and one finger of my left hand, I rubbed both temples. That was often enough to help.

Then I noticed that Mrs. Evans' door was closed. I looked at

my watch. It was 8:32 — I was two minutes late; had they started without me? I walked over to knock, and the door popped open.

“Becky! Please come in,” Mrs. Evans said.

She ushered me into her empty office. I took off my backpack and sat down as she took the seat behind her desk.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to do this.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“Our new student will be here in a few minutes.” She leaned in closer. “There are things about him that I think you need to know.”

Oh goodness, what was she going to say?

“And I need you to keep all of these things in the strictest of confidence.”

“I will. I promise.” What had I gotten myself into?

“This is a special situation, and we needed somebody special to make it work. Our principal specifically wants you to be the host.

He said he’s willing to put his name on your applications as well.”

“That’s great.” Having both the guidance counselor and the principal was big.

“That means it’s even more important that you really invest in this and do your best.”

“I will. You know that.”

“I do. Our new student is named Gene.”

“I thought it was a guy.”

“He is. Gene is spelled G-E-N-E. Now, what’s so unusual is that he was homeschooled, so this isn’t just his *new* school, this is his *first* school.”

“Wow.”

“Everything is going to be new and strange. And it’s not like this is a small school.”

We had more than 3,500 students, which made it one of the biggest in the state.

“I need you to stay very close to him, especially for the first week or two. I think he’s going to need more than a host.”

I’d agreed to be a host, and now it looked more like I was going to be a babysitter.

“He’s going to be in three of your classes,” Mrs. Evans said. “Since he’s missed the first six weeks of school, I hope you could perhaps offer some tutoring if he needs it.”

Which meant more time, more commitment, and more involvement. My mind spun around, looking for a way out, but there was none.

There was a knock on the door. Mrs. Evans called out, “Come in!” and the door started to open.