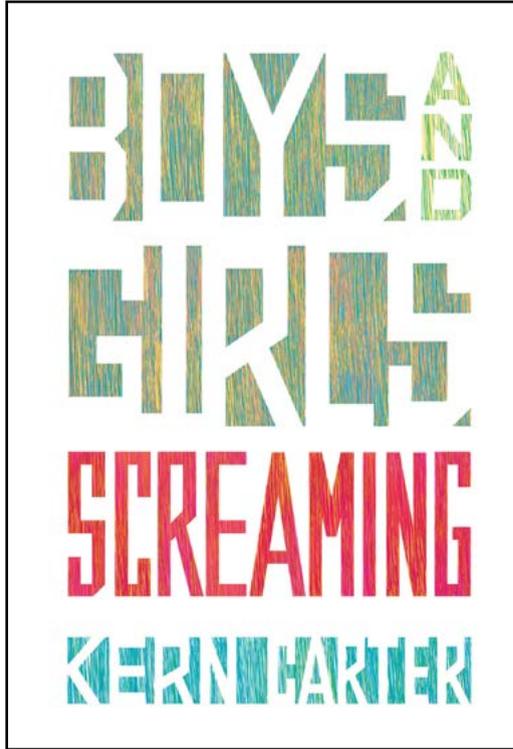


**Excerpt from *Boys and Girls Screaming*
by Kern Carter**



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CANDACE

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“Why would I have a problem? I’m not sick.” I don’t get this girl sometimes. She’s by far the smartest person I know, but the things that are right in front of her face are the furthest from her mind.

I slept on Ever’s bed every night for a month when her dad died. She cried herself to sleep the first two weeks. When her mom had a stroke, I was at the hospital that same day. Ever was sitting beside Jericho shaking like her body just couldn’t get warm. Jericho was staring at her. I could tell he was just as scared for Ever as he was for his mom. The neighbors that followed the ambulance with Ever and Jericho in the back were pacing close by. They were a younger couple which was weird for where we lived because most adults in our area already had some grays. These two looked like they still made out in public.

I wrapped my arms around Ever right away while my mom spoke to the neighbors. Ever was still sitting and didn’t even look at me. I remember thinking that she wasn’t this broken when her dad was in the hospital, but I think pain was still new to her then. Both her grandparents were still alive (Ever never knew her dad’s parents, neither did he from what I heard), she never got broken up with by a boy she liked, I don’t even think Ever’s been stung by a bee. So when it finally sunk in that her dad was gone, then a few months later her mom suffered a stroke, she had more than enough reason to be blank-faced and trembling when I saw her in the hospital that day.

And that’s what I’m trying to tell her now; maybe she’s the one with the problem. I was only five when my fake mom left and I still get mad thinking about her. If the stuff that happened to Ever hap-

pened to me, I don't know what I'd do.

"I know you're not sick. Not like that, anyway. I'm just saying that maybe your mom getting sick so soon after you losing your dad is hard for you to deal with."

"Of course it's hard. It's fucking impossible. But what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Talk to someone," I say. And as I say it, I already know Ever's reaction. We know about those girls. Those girls who talk to people. Professional people. We don't talk about it unless they do and when they do we tell them how brave they are, how much we support them and that we're sorry they have to go through that.

In our mind, though, we convince ourselves that we'll never be them. That there's nothing that would ever push us to open up our lives and our feelings to some stranger. Someone outside of the friendship that Ever and I have built. "We have each other," Ever says, and holds her left hand out, palm down. I put my right hand over it and we'd say "sisters," in unison.

"You know that's never gonna work," Ever says. "Talking to someone isn't gonna fix anything."

"Yeah, you're probably right, but ... I don't know. Maybe you should think about it."

As I'm directing these words to Ever I wonder how much of it is really meant for me. I know I say I don't care about my fake mother, and I don't, but I still think about her. I always have. Even though I'm in my last year of high school and haven't seen her since I stopped peeing my bed, something's still there.

Mom tries her best to create a shield around me. I can't blame her. I would be protective too, if I had walked into an apartment and held a five-year-old child who'd been alone for two days. What would it take to rip the memory of my fake mother out of my head? The weird thing is the older I get, the angrier I get. When I was

eight or nine I didn't even care. The only person I'd ever speak to about her was Ever, and that stopped once there wasn't any more to tell.

"You can be mad, Candace." That was Mom when I was still in grade six. She picked me up from school and had that concerned parent look on her face. Apparently, I said something to my teacher about having a fake mom. The teacher looked at me like my mom was looking at me parked in the schoolyard and thought it wise to call her. "Being mad is normal. Especially with what you've been through."

"I'm not mad, Mommy. I don't care about my fake mother. I don't even think about her."

That wasn't enough to stop the prodding. Mom asked me about how I was getting along with my friends at school, if I ever felt left out, if she ever made me feel like I didn't belong. When we got to our driveway, she shut off the car, took off her seatbelt, and turned her whole body towards me.

"I don't ever want you to feel like you're not special, Candace. If there's ever something bothering you or if you don't feel happy about something in your life, just let me or your dad know."

It's funny because when I hear Mom tell her friends this story today, she always tells it as a joke. Probably because the last thing I said to her when she went all helicopter mom on me was, "Mom, I go horseback riding. My life is fine."

And it was. How many little girls have fucked up parents or no parents at all and have no choice but to endure it? They have to swallow the poverty and the depression, the violence and the neglect. It's exhausting. Then here I come and for whatever reason, I was taken out of that miserable life and given a way better one.

I always knew how lucky I was. Because that's all it was; pure luck. Mom hated hearing that.

“You weren’t supposed to be possible, Candace.”

It was the same day as the school thing. Mom and I were eating popcorn in the living room after watching one of those Jason movies. She hated getting scared and closed her eyes through most of it, but was always the one suggesting we put it on.

“Our family, this family, none of this was supposed to happen. I didn’t find you in that room, you were given to me.”

She doesn’t ever want to let that go. That moment meant so much to her. So much so that she made a conscious decision not to have any more children. Even though there’s nothing wrong with her physically, Mom made a choice that I would be her only child. When I got into my teenage years and started asking her why she never had any more kids, she always said, “because God gave you to me.” She’s been protecting me ever since. And not just my body, Mom protected my psyche just as aggressively.

Protect your mind.

She posted this saying on the inside of my bedroom door when I first moved in. I had no idea what it meant for the first few years, but I kept it. It’s still here now in alternating yellow and green block letters.

“People can take everything away from you except your mind. Protect it, Candace. At all costs.”

Mom is full of these doomsday quotes. When I accuse her of being nihilistic, she says she can’t be because hope is at the center of her soul.

I get it though. I know why she taped that quote up on my door. She wanted me to be ready. When the guilt and hatred started pulling me to a place I knew I didn’t want to be, I repeated my mother’s words.

But actually getting help? Speaking to a therapist? That’s not something I’m up for. Or at least I don’t think I’m up for it. Be-

cause what do I really have to complain about? Even in sixth grade I knew my life was privileged. Yet here I am telling Ever to get help dealing with her dad dying and with everything going on with her mom.

“We’re sisters, right Candace?” How long was I zoned out for? I almost forget we’re still in Ever’s room.

“Of course.”

“No matter what?”

“Why you talking like this?”

“I’m just saying. If you found out I did something really messed up, we’d still be sisters, right?”

“You can kill someone and we’d still be sisters. But I’m not burying any bodies.”

“That’s good to know.” I’m waiting for Ever to say more, but she stops. There’s something, though. I don’t know what it is, but it’s something.

The next morning, I wake up to four missed calls from Ever. We never call each other so I know something’s up. But it’s Saturday morning and whatever it is can wait. At least that’s what I think till Ever barges through my bedroom door.

“I got it,” she says. I cover my face with my blanket, but Ever pulls it off. “Did you hear what I said? I said I got it.”

Ever’s standing at the foot of my bed waiting for me to say something. She hustles to the drapes and pulls them open and that gets me to sit up.

“OK, let me hear it.” Even though I’m still tired and annoyed and my eyes are barely open, I can’t help but share some of Ever’s excitement. I have no idea what she’s about to say, but there’s not too much that gets her energy up like this so it must be something big.

“Boys and Girls Screaming,” she says.

“What are you talking about?”

“Boys and Girls Screaming. That’s what we’re gonna call our group.”

“What group?”

“The group we’re gonna start. We’re actually gonna call it BAGS for short, but that’s what it stands for. It’s gonna be our own support group. Like, who needs therapists. We can help each other.”

I don’t know what my face looks like right now but Ever’s is beaming. She still has her head-tie on, the yellow and green one of course, and is wearing the sweatsuit I bought for her birthday last year.

“OK. So we’re starting a support group?”

“Something like that,” Ever says. “I’m not sure if that’s the right terminology or whatever, but yeah. It’s gonna be us. Kids helping kids. Trust me, this is gonna work.”

If any other teenager said this, I would grab my blanket and go back to bed. But this is not any other teenager. Ever’s someone who actually follows through on the stuff that she talks about. Like that time she said she’s going to get fluent in French before her parents took her to France. This had to be grade seven. I didn’t even remember she said that till a month before the trip when I heard her speaking to one of our school friends on the phone in full Français. She did that in less than a year. I tried for a week after that before deleting all those language apps on my phone.

That was five years ago. Over that time, she’s also managed to gather a small army of followers on social media. I thought she had fans in middle school, but now her Instagram’s almost into the six digits.

@EverAfter. Don’t ask me how she got that handle. It’s actually strange being her friend sometimes. We’d go out somewhere and someone from a different high school recognizes her, or she’d get

invited to listening parties in New York even though she can't go. Sometimes she gets free tickets to these random bands we've never heard of, but when we go to their show, hundreds of people are there singing along to every single song.

So yeah, if she says she wants to start this group, we're doing this group.

"Who are we supporting in this group?" I ask. "Can anyone join?"

"Of course not. This group is for kids who've gone through some kind of trauma. Like me and you, know what I mean. Maybe they lost a parent or were abandoned by a parent. Or maybe they came from another country or something where they saw people get shot and killed and it's still messing with them."

"OK, and only kids?"

"Only high school kids," Ever says. "And we're gonna choose the ones we ask to participate. At least at first. We have to see how it goes before we open it up to more people."

Of course she has everything figured out. She tells me she stayed up all night working out the details.

"We're gonna use your basement because it has the right vibe. You should probably let your mom know. I've already picked out four kids in our school who fit the criteria. Plus, you can ask that girl you tell me about, the one you met at that photoshop class you take. She sounds like she could use some help."

Ever's scrolling through notes on her phone while she's pacing around my room. I'm up now too, feeling more energized than I should at eight in the morning.

"We should probably have some rules, right?" I say. "So everyone knows what to expect and no one feels like their business is gonna be all over school."

“I thought about that and came up with a few. Whatever we say in the group stays in the group. That’s the first rule. No drinking or anything else during the session. We wait till after till we do any of that. And the only other rule I came up with is that no one should feel pressure to say anything. If they wanna sit there and be a spectator until they’re ready to open up, then so be it.”

“Those are good ones. How often are we gonna meet?”

“I’m thinking, like, once a week. Maybe after school so we’re not asking anyone to give up time on their weekends.”

Ever says we’ll meet for an hour, but if we need more time then we’ll take it.

“However long it takes for someone to get through their shit. We’re not treating these people like patients on the clock. If it takes three hours for someone to say what they have to say, then that’s what it is.”

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I wanted to DM everyone, but Ever said we have to do it in person. I’m regretting letting her convince me. Even though we spent Sunday practicing our lines.

Hey Lindsay, Ever is starting this group called BAGS. It’s for kids like us who’ve been through some kind of family trauma. Like a support group so we can talk and help each other out. Because who knows what we’re really going through better than us, right?

Simple enough, but when I see Lindsay at her locker, I can’t remember anything I have to say. She’s watching me, watching her with her blue school jacket on. Lindsay’s hair is long enough to cover the crest on the chest of her jacket and blonde enough that she’s never had to bleach it. There are only a few minutes before last period starts and I know talking to her after school won’t work.

“You OK, Candace?” Lindsay asks. “You look like you’re holding your breath.”

“Yup, I’m good. Actually, I need to ask you something.”

When I finally spit it out, Lindsay’s staring at me like I was staring at her a few seconds ago. She looks around and moves in a bit closer.

“You mean like group therapy?”

“Not exactly. Well, kinda. We don’t really think of it as therapy. It’s more like ... I don’t know what it’s like because we haven’t really done it yet. But Ever thinks it can help kids like us and I think it’s worth a try. If you have some of the same thoughts that I have, then I know it won’t be a waste of time.”

Lindsay gives a hesitant nod while I’m talking. She’s still looking over my shoulder with every other word. I’m starting to realize just how crazy this plan really is. And trying to convince other kids to come join us to do God knows what might be the craziest part of this plan.

The bell rings, but I can tell Lindsay still has a million more questions.

“Listen,” I say. “We’re meeting at my house after school on Wednesday. Just come by if you can. I’ll add you to our IG group so you can ask all the questions you want.”

Lindsay closes her locker and walks away to class. Before I go the other way, she turns around and asks the one question that’s safe enough to ask out loud.

“Why is it called BAGS?”

“Boys and Girls Screaming.”