

KIKI
AND
JACQUES

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Susan Ross

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*To William, Erik, and Sarah—
filling our lives with love,
laughter, and stories.*

I

“I’m not going out there.” Jacques Gagnon shook his head, curls flying, and planted his feet at the dressing room door. “I know that girl!”

Grandmère Jeannette lifted a long white wedding dress from the rack. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do this alone . . . grab the train and make sure it don’t drag.”

Jacques’s heart was pounding in his ears. He’d helped out in Grandmère Jeannette’s bridal shop ever since he could remember; that was no big deal. But now, Monique St. Hilaire, the coolest senior at Lakemont High, sat with her mother on the old leather couch in the salesroom. Monique and Jacques both went to church at St. Francis; nearly every boy in his confirmation class had a crush on her. Her straight blonde hair was divided with a red streak, and she was quietly chewing on purple colored nails.

Grandmère Jeannette straightened her glasses and stormed ahead. “I have a real special wedding gown for you.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Monique glanced up without smiling.

“This one’s super hot!” Jacques gagged on his tongue. He swallowed hard and held his breath, waiting for Monique to say how stupid he sounded.

But Monique simply crossed her long legs and turned away. She didn’t seem to notice him at all.

Jacques’s face was steaming as he bolted up the narrow steps to the office loft above the sales floor. He could hear Monique moan, “Let’s get out of here,” before the shop door slammed shut. Hoisting himself onto the old oak desk, Jacques thwacked the wood with his heels and gazed through the windows to the street, his heart still thumping with humiliation.

“Grandmère—look!” Two black women dressed in long skirts and flowing shawls were leaning against the display window, peering in.

“What is it, *mon cher*?”

“Some African ladies. They have scarves around their heads.” Over the past few years, refugees from Africa had come to southern Maine, but for the first time, at the beginning of the summer, a group of Somali families had moved to Lakemont.

“Are you sure? You suppose they want to buy something?” Grandmère Jeannette went to the window as Jacques scrambled down the stairs, but the women were gone.

The front door jingled, and Sammy Baker stepped inside, a soccer ball under his arm. Sammy was short, with brown hair and a mouth full of braces. The boys

had been best friends since kindergarten, maybe even preschool.

“Hey dude, you ready to go?”

“I still have some stuff to put away.”

Sammy rolled his eyes. “Soccer tryouts are next week, and you’re busy sorting dresses?”

Jacques shrugged and took one hopeful step toward the door.

“Scoot before I change my mind.” Grandmère Jeannette smiled as usual with her pink lips shut. Jacques knew she was shy about showing off the large gap between her teeth. “Be home early. I might’ve baked a pie for dinner, seeing how it’s your birthday tomorrow. Father Lazar asked me to run the Bingo game at church tomorrow night, so we’ll celebrate this evening.”

Jacques grinned, and Sammy licked the edge of his mouth.

“You come too, Sammy—I’ll phone your folks.” Grandmère Jeannette winked and tapped Jacques’s backside with a rolled magazine as the boys ducked out the door.

They started down Main Street, past the Army Navy Store and Yvonne’s House of Pizza. The cracked sidewalks were lined with small shops, some with signs in the window, *Ici On Parle Français*, but there were hardly any shoppers.

Across the road from the Army Navy Store, a teenage boy in a dark hoodie stood beside a fire hydrant, smoking. He had thick black hair and a thin line under his nose. When he spotted Jacques, he tossed the

cigarette in the gutter and side-kicked the hydrant for no reason.

“Let’s head the other way. It’s quicker,” Jacques said.

“No, it’s not.” Sammy looked puzzled; then he noticed the older boy. “Isn’t that Duane? I thought he was in jail or something.”

“I wish,” Jacques muttered.

Duane lived in the neighborhood and went to church at St. Francis, but he was mean and unpredictable. Most kids kept clear of him. Duane had dropped out of high school last winter, a few months before graduation. The rumor was he’d been arrested for stealing cars; no one had seen him all summer.

Duane raised one arm and shouted, “Hey Gagnon, get over here!”

“Stay away from us.” Jacques darted across the street with Sammy trailing after him.

“What was that about?” Sammy asked.

Jacques shook his head. “I’ve got no idea.” Jacques was afraid to tell anyone—even Sammy—that Duane had stopped him in front of the library a week ago and asked him to sell pot at school. Jacques had refused and run away.

Jacques stopped and grabbed Sammy’s arm. “Look over there!”

The two Somali women stood a few feet away. The shorter lady lifted her head, and Jacques realized that she wasn’t a woman at all, but a girl about his age. The girl met his gaze for a second, and he thought he saw her smile. She had smooth brown skin and large dark

eyes. Her hair, neck and shoulders were completely covered by a wide blue scarf.

Sammy nudged Jacques. “We better go.”

“Wait a minute.” Jacques took another look. Beside her left eye, a long jagged scar shimmered down the side of the girl’s face. The older Somali lady caught him staring. She swung her arm and pulled the girl away. It sounded like she was scolding, though Jacques couldn’t make out any of the words.

“Did you see the scar?” Sammy asked.

“What’d you think happened to her?” Jacques paused, balancing the soccer ball on one knee.

“I dunno. . . . Something bad.” Sammy tilted his head. “She’s kinda cute, though.”

“I didn’t notice.” Jacques grinned.

“Yeah, right.” Sammy grinned back.

2

As the boys approached the soccer field, Jacques could see a huddle in the distance. Coach Morrin was off to one side, checking his clipboard.

“Listen, don’t mention the thing at the shop to anyone, okay?”

“You mean the fact that you sell wedding dresses to hottie high school girls?”

Jacques knocked his shoulder into Sammy’s back, but Sammy simply laughed. “What’s the matter, maybe you like Monique a little?”

“It’s just weird that she’s getting married! I wonder who the dude is?” Jacques frowned. “Doesn’t Monique want to go to college?”

Frank Boucher broke out from the pack and dribbled the ball toward the goal; in a minute he sliced it in. Boucher was tall, and broader than most of the kids. His bleach-blond hair was spiked marine-style, making him look even larger.

“Holy crap.” Jacques whistled. “That wasn’t bad.”

“You’ll be captain,” Sammy said. “Don’t worry. Boucher’s got muscle but your footwork’s better. And nobody trusts him.”

“Wait up—who’s that kid?” Jacques nodded toward the far end of the field. “That big dude . . . is he one of the Somalis?”

A slim black teenager was dribbling toward them. Fast and accurate, the ball skipped effortlessly from side to side. The boy balanced the ball between his shin and knees, spun around and took a wild shot from mid-field. Tim O’Shea knocked his glasses off trying to stop it, but the ball slipped right past him into the goal.

“What the . . . !” Jacques exclaimed.

“Whoa.” Sammy clasped his face in his hands. “That was insane.”

“Hey Gagnon!” Boucher jogged over. “You seen the Somali dude yet?”

“Yeah, we see him alright.”

“Moved here last month. My dad says a lot more Africans are coming to Maine. He says Somali kids are gonna be at school this year.”

“You’re kidding,” Sammy said.

“The dude can kick, but he barely speaks English.” Boucher spit on the ground.

“That kid’s got a heck of a foot. He just hit the goal from thirty yards.” Jacques spit too.

“I guess,” Boucher said. “But he won’t understand the plays. I doubt Coach will let him on the team.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Jacques could see the new kid driving the ball toward the opposite goal. He was fast, wicked fast.

Suddenly, Boucher ran back on the field. Lunging ahead of the new kid, he slowed and threw his weight into his side. For a moment, the boy lost his balance, and it looked like he might go down, but with a half twist, he pulled the ball away and soared down the field, gone.

Jacques's mouth hung open. "Boucher chucked him his hardest, and he didn't even drop."

Coach Morrin blew the whistle and waved the boys in. Boucher was panting as he held his hands to his ribs, but the new boy was breathing slow and steady.

"I want you all to work hard this year, but help each other out, too." Coach Morrin surveyed the group. "A winning team means teamwork."

Jacques sucked on his cheek, while Boucher yawned loudly. Tim O'Shea took off his goalie gloves and fiddled with his glasses. Coach Morrin taught science at the high school. He was fair and steady, but prone to making lengthy speeches about sportsmanship. The boys had heard this all before. The tryouts were what mattered.

The new kid stood apart, staring straight ahead. He didn't even blink.

"One more item. . . ." Coach Morrin cleared his throat. "We got a fresh recruit here today." Jacques and Sammy glanced at each other. "This is Mohamed—he's

just movin' into the area, but judging from what I've seen so far, we can definitely use his skills."

No one said a word. Coach Morrin turned his head toward the new boy, who didn't speak or smile.

Jacques looked carefully at Mohamed. He was tall, even taller than Boucher, and he had muscles bulging beneath his T-shirt that made Jacques feel puny.

"Now get on out there!" Coach Morrin exclaimed. "You guys have exactly a week to show me what you got."

3

“He wasn’t that good,” Sammy mumbled as they headed home from practice.

“No, he was only amazing.” Jacques kicked a stone off the sidewalk.

“You’ll still be captain!” Sammy exclaimed. “The new kid can’t just show up and take over, and anyway, Boucher’s right, he barely said a word.”

“He’s crazy fast, way faster than me. How much jabbering do you need for that?” Jacques shook his head, thinking what to say when he got home. Dad expected him to be captain.

The boys walked in silence past a row of brick tenement buildings. Laundry hung off the fire escapes, and the parking spaces were littered with hubcaps, broken bicycles and pieces of toys.

Jacques and his father lived with Grandmère Jeannette at the end of the block on the top floor of a shingled two-family house with a small yard. His grandparents had moved into the apartment as soon

as they'd gotten married; Grandmère Jeannette kept it after his grandfather died. Dad was an only child, and Jacques's bedroom was the same room his father had grown up in. There was a narrow bed next to a closet and a window set over built-in pine drawers. From Jacques's window you could see the old Lakemont Mill, shuttered and decaying, rising above the neighborhood park with its cracked pavement and creaky swing set.

"There's Duane again." Sammy slowed down.

Duane was alone at the far end of the park, shifting from one foot to the other. His hands were stuffed deep in his pockets.

"I bet he's selling drugs," Sammy whispered.

Jacques grunted, his stomach starting to churn. "C'mon, we're already late."

Duane pulled out one hand, and for a split second, a glint of steel flashed before disappearing back into his hoodie.

"Was that a knife?" Sammy exclaimed.

"Let's go." Jacques gulped and pushed Sammy, up the stairs to the apartment.

As they walked in the door, he spotted a pile of gifts on the floor. Jacques wanted a soccer jersey for his birthday, and he wanted it bad. His favorite team was Arsenal, and everybody knew it.

"Hey, the birthday boy's home." Dad lay sprawled on the living room couch watching TV, a beer can in one hand. Donny Gagnon had heavy arms and a wide neck, and his stomach peeked out from the bottom of his shirt.

“Hi, Dad.” A white rabbit with a brown nose hopped into the room. “Pelé!” Jacques scooped the rabbit into his arms, and Sammy scratched behind its ears. Jacques had named Pelé after his favorite soccer player, the greatest striker of all time.

“Watch out that bunny don’t poop on the couch.” Grandmère Jeannette appeared from the kitchen. “*Mon père*, may he rest in peace, he liked a good *lapin* stew.”

Jacques shot Sammy a “she’s insane” look, but smiled as he rubbed Pelé’s back. Grandmère Jeannette loved the rabbit nearly as much as he did. She was always feeding him bits of carrot or apple peels and talking to him about her *lapin*-shooting father from Quebec.

“How was practice?” Dad got another beer from the fridge and handed the boys Cokes as they sat down to dinner. The dining room and living room were barely separated by an open arch, so Jacques could see Pelé hop onto the faded green couch and make himself comfortable—Grandmère Jeannette was obviously pretending not to notice.

Dad took a slug of beer. “You’re a shoe-in for captain this year, am I right?”

“There’s a new Somali kid,” Jacques said. “He’s good.”

“No kiddin’.” Dad scratched the stubble under his chin.

“Not just good,” Sammy added. “The dude is awesome.”

“Huh,” Dad grunted.

“Jacques saw some Somali ladies outside the shop today.” Grandmère Jeannette set a platter of fried

chicken wings and drumsticks on the table. "Strange, Africans moving up here when everybody knows that Lakemont's mostly French Canadian."

"Grandmère," Jacques interrupted, "Sammy's family isn't Canadian." Sammy was Jewish, and his parents were from Cleveland, not Quebec. But Jacques had to admit that most of his friends had relatives from Canada and went to church at St. Francis, where the late-afternoon Mass was held in French on Sundays.

Grandmère Jeannette's cheeks flared. "I'm real sorry, Sammy!"

Dad picked up a chicken wing and turned to Jacques. "You'll be showing this new kid a thing or two, right?"

Jacques felt a sharp pain hit his stomach. "I dunno, Dad. . . . Like I said, the new guy's talented."

"You're not going to let this kid move in and make captain," Dad replied. "No way."

Jacques looked down at his plate, silent. What was he supposed to do?

"Wait 'til you see my pie." Grandmère Jeannette rose and hustled toward the kitchen. "It's called Triple Threat Chocolate. I got the recipe from Lucy Labelle's aunt." She returned with a pie smothered in fudge and topped with twelve slightly dented red and yellow striped candles. The same candles from Dad's cake last month, Jacques realized.

"That Lucy's a sweet girl, don't you think?" Grandmère Jeannette winked.

“She’s okay, I guess.” Now Jacques was the one feeling his face go red.

It was finally time to open presents. The first package was soft and squishy, and Jacques glanced at Sammy with a surge of hope. As soon as he pulled off the wrapping, though, he realized how stupid he’d been.

“Thanks for the fleece. My old one was way small.”

Dad had found work last spring in the back office of L.L. Bean. Jacques was the most warmly dressed kid at school, but he longed for stuff that wasn’t bought with an employee discount. He ripped through the rest of his gifts: two flannel shirts—one that still had a tag that said “returned”—a bag of socks and a gym bag. He sighed and searched beneath the pile of gift wrap, just in case.

“Wicked cool gear” Sammy whispered. Jacques kicked him under the table.

“Somethin’ wrong?” Grandmère Jeannette lifted her glasses.

“No, it’s just that . . .”

“Money’s real tight right now, *mon cher*.”

“That’s enough; you don’t need to worry the boy.” Dad spoke sharply, then turned toward Jacques. “Listen, buddy, I’ve been thinking about this Somali kid. It’s high time you toughen up. If your coach was workin’ you hard, like when I was playing ball, you’d be rock solid by now.”

“I’m plenty tough, Dad! Kids at school don’t mess with me or anything.” Jacques squirmed. He wished for

a moment that he played football like his father had. Dad had been on varsity all four years of high school, as well as an all-state quarterback. Every fall he played in a reunion game where perfect strangers slapped him on the back with admiration.

But Jacques didn't play football. He liked soccer—the feel of the ball as it smacked off the strike zone of his cleats, and the rush as he raced past the defenders, risked a shot and hit the goal clean.

Jacques picked at his food and glanced at the photograph of his mother on the dining room hutch. Her long brown hair was pulled back, and her crystal blue eyes jumped straight out at him.

Dad used to say that Mom was far and away the cutest cheerleader ever to attend Lakemont High. They had started dating junior year. Dad had gone off to college on a sports scholarship, but after a month, he broke his ankle and couldn't play football. Without the scholarship, there hadn't been enough money to keep him at school.

Mom had four brothers and two sisters. Both of her parents had worked at the Lakemont Mill, and after it closed down, she couldn't afford college either. Mom's father found a new job in Rhode Island, but when the family moved to Providence, Mom stayed behind to marry Dad. Grandmère Jeannette was happy to have Mom join her at the bridal shop, and Dad got a good job driving an eighteen-wheeler.

When Jacques was little, they'd go as a family to

watch the high school football team. Mom knew every cheer, and for homecomings, Dad wore his old team jersey.

Jacques smiled to think how his mother always yelled the loudest at the football games, but when they got back, she would take him to the park and let him kick around a soccer ball. She'd liked whatever he liked, and that's what he missed most of all.