

For Maud - K. L.

The Boy I Am contains content some readers may find triggering, including sexual aggression, trafficking, murder and surgical procedures.

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THE
BOY
I AM



K. L. KETTLE

LITTLE TIGER

LONDON

THE HOUSE OF BOYS

We blind ourselves to beauty.

Our speech is sacred.

To love is illusion.

1

My name is Jude Grant and I am alive.

Centre stage, I face the deafening crowd.

And I smile.

“Tonight’s final lot!” Mr Walker, Head of the House of Boys, introduces me over the theatre’s loudspeakers. “Number one hundred and fifty.”

Pinned in the spotlight, I squint. I shade my eyes with one hand and wave with the other. Cheers from the audience smack into my chest hard, skewering skin through to stomach, stomach through to spine, spine through to sparkling scenery behind me. Can’t tell if it’s the floor or my knees that are shaking more.

Smile number one we call *gracious-without-being-smarmy*. That’s what I’m aiming for, to hide my locked jaw. Sweat crawls from my hairline. As I adjust my collar, cold dread snakes down my neck.

Pose. Wave.

Offstage, Walker reads out my stats. “Age sixteen,” his disembodied voice hums.

Too old, drones the voice in my head. These days it always sounds like *your* voice, Vik. Are you trying to make me laugh?

You've lasted longer than I did.

"Five foot nine," Walker says.

Too short. Your voice. I was taller.

"One hundred and forty pounds."

Too fat.

Shut up, I want to say and I laugh like the ghost of you is right there, thinking you're so funny, and proud you got me to react even if it was in my head. My performance slips; for a second, I'm not in the mouth of the Great Theatre, being sold for the dark-hours to the highest bidder, reserved for purchase at the auction. For a second, it was the two of us, back in the kitchens below ground, laughing. For a second, you were alive.

Smile one makes my face hurt but it's easy to hide behind.

Squinting into the darkness, I look for *her* – the Chancellor. Remembering the vast layout of the underground theatre, how it's not so scary with the house lights up. The endless rows of frayed red chairs, ancient, worn carpet, dusty chandeliers and her balcony, now in the dark, in the centre of the dress circle. Dead ahead. Above it all. Is she there yet?

A woman in the audience drops a glass and the theatre goes awkwardly quiet. My silk-slipped toes curl, squeaking against the rubbery stage floor.

Walker coughs. "Yes, so, lot one fifty is a fourth year at the House of Boys. Last year available for auction."

After I turn seventeen, they'll pack me off to the mines. There aren't many boys who survive even a year working down there – the heat, the hate, gangs scraping for minerals, fighting over

food, water. That's a few weeks from now.

Walker keeps going. "No previous reserves on the books so I'm pleased to announce the House of Merit can offer a discount on request."

"Oooooooooooooooooo," goes the audience.

"A much-improved lot on his previous years, I'm sure you'll agree."

The audience laughs and the spotlight moves forwards, a cue for me to follow. There are bugs that thrive in the dorms below. They fizz and pop in the blue lights they chase.

In the glow of the limelight, low-lit tables in front of the stage swim into focus as I step forwards and bow. The women lean closer. Hungry shadows. Their faces completely hidden behind blank white masks. There must be hundreds of them in the stalls, thousands in the surrounding seats. Rumours are that the richest of them, the ones that live on the top floors of the Tower, get the front tables. They pay the most merits for a spot to judge us best.

Time to deploy smile two. *A-little-bit-defiant.*

Bad choice. The masks retreat, disappointed, into the darkness.

Another drop of sweat slides between my eyebrows, along the inside of my eye socket. It's salty. Stings like needles.

Pull it together, says the part of me that sounds like you, Vik. And it's strong like you were, brave like you were. It's the voice of the boy I want to be. *You owe me*, it says. *You're still alive.*

Wiping my eye, before I turn to find my place among my brothers upstage, I make sure the women see the kind of smile you said would make them all reach for their merit books.

Number twenty-nine. You called it the *I-just-need-you-to-fix-me* smile.

“*Awwwwwwwwwwww*,” goes the audience.

See, you can do this.

I know.

All I have to do is kill the Chancellor.

2

Upstage is stacked high with glittering platforms. The band plays me to my mark: the furthest platform, back row. There's that familiar push and pressure behind my head. I'm holding my breath, my teeth locked. I'm doing this for you, Vik, for freedom I remind myself. If I count the beats in the music, focus on that, there's some relief. Tapping my thumb against my index finger, hoping they don't see.

My place is last in the line-up behind 149 other boys displayed, choir-like, on sparkling stage terraces, in matching grey suits. Our outfits were designed by students at the House of Expression again and I swear this year the theme must be discomfort. Whoever made them has never worn a suit. With high-necked collars, jackets with boning in the back, every one of my brothers seems taller they're standing so straight. It makes for a strong jawline, the House Fathers said, complementing the look.

It's hard to be graceful while weaving between my brothers. But that's the second I get to turn my back, to slip a finger between my neck and the stiff collar, stretch my jaw and try to loosen the knots in my stomach. That second is everything.

Walker's deep voice continues. "Ladies, when Chancellor Hyde asked me to host this year's auction, I did what any sane gentleman would do..."

Walker is normally onstage but usually one of the madams actually hosts the auction events – choosing the theme, the showcase event, stuff like that. It was meant to be the Gardener – Madam Dunn – hosting again this year. Did that change last minute?

A man, even Walker, hosting alone – it's not normal. Something's wrong.

Clunk! Up go the stage lights, full beam, swinging, sweeping over the boys surrounding me, all grinning, waving and cheering like their lives depended on it.

"I said to myself: one hundred and fifty handsome young men?"

Slicing my own smile into place, I wave too. I should come up with my own numbers and names for the smiles now you've gone.

"I picked out my outfit and I said yes please!"

All you have to do is...

Swoosh! Spotlights move from us and into the crowd.

You ran, they said. You attacked the Chancellor and then you ran. You gave in to your urges, your base animal instincts. More likely you were scared. There's no air in my lungs. I wonder if they'll say the same about me?

There, ahead, the distant silver fabric drapes of the Chancellor's balcony gleam. All I have to do...

Walker was the Chancellor's only ward last year, when she reserved you. No one ever believed she'd take another ward but she took pity on you they say.

Who says?

Everyone. But you were a bad one, corrupt. You must've just broken, the ladies say. They hear that can happen and it's been happening too much, they say. It's our hormones; we just can't help ourselves.

Bitter bile jumps in my throat. Before I can even try to swallow, snap, the view is gone. Spotlights creak, flooding the stage as the silhouette of Walker sashays between us and the audience. They all coo at the sight of him. That's Walker: perfect smile. Perfect poise. Perfect man. In the light, his sleek silver pinstripe gleams. The Chancellor's man.

Next to me, lot 149 leans close. "Is it true you know him?"

"No," I lie.

Walker leads the applause. "Let's give a big hand for this year's boys." His painted nails shine black but his hands are starting to look old. If I've noticed, so have the women. Two in the front row whisper to each other, giggle. The Chancellor bought him to be her ward when they were both my age. Reserving another ward may have surprised the ladies last year, but not the House Fathers who care for us. Perfect as he may be, they say she's been looking for a younger model to replace Walker for years. She's never settled on one, though.

Until now, you say.

I can't do anything stuck onstage. I have to get the Chancellor

on her own. She has to bid on me. I lose my grip on smile three: *patient-not-too-bored*. It's not going to work. I'm the final lot, like you were. But there are cuter, hotter, taller, thinner, more muscled boys with better skin, squarer jaws.

I've a powerful need to scratch my neck but I'm meant to stay still so I clench my fists. She's never going to bid, not after last year. This is a stupid idea. Could I run?

I ran.

Walker's still going, of course. "So, ladies, you know the drill: tonight you get one evening with your personal favourite." The women whoop and whistle at his classic *this-one's-for-the-girl-at-the-back* wink. "Generous bids, please. Your merits tonight set our gentlemen's opening dowries at auction."

Walker jokes. "I have to say, the rumours are true: the Gardener and the House of Life keep breeding our boys cuter. Where is she?" He looks into the audience as the light searches the seats for the head of the scientists who made us all.

"Oh well, I'm sure she's busy planting up a new batch. Let's hear it for the House of Life, our ladies of floor one ten." He stops. The audience cheers and whoops as the spotlights catch something else in the dark aisles.

They're the shadows that the shadows hide.

"Why..." Walker pauses. Is he trying to be dramatic? "They'll be giving yours truly ... a run for his ... merits soon enough." He has a habit of odd pauses but he never, ever fluffs his lines.

There are Lice in the dark. That's what you called the police. You said they made you itch.

The audience laughs, but not as much as before, as Walker draws the light round the stage, tidying the corners of his slender moustache as he goes. He does that when he's thinking.

"A show of hands – how many debutantes do we have here tonight?" he asks.

The house lights go up. Hands lift above a sea of bright dresses, smart suits, identical masked faces, but I don't count. Surrounding the hundreds of women in the stalls, the circle, the gods, there are swarms of Lice. They're at every exit. Wrapped in black fabric and strapped into scales of armour. The fog mask air filters they never take off hang like stretched snouts.

Walker coughs. "Well, aren't you just gorgeous?" he says as the house lights go down. *Clank.*

"So what are we waiting for?" Walker coughs again, stalling because of the Lice. My fingers pick and scratch at my nails. There's a metallic ache in my throat. If I run, they'll catch me, like they caught you.

No way out, you say.

There are Lice in the wings too, watching, their filtered air sucking in, pushing out.

The women aren't cheering. They know. They see. They're expecting something.

"Oh yes!" Walker clicks his fingers, full of confidence, as if he's just remembered the most important thing. The masked faces of the women snap back to his razzle-dazzle as he cups his hand to his ear. "You want me to announce this year's programme?" He side-smiles, pretending one of our potential guardians has asked

him personally. A wink. “Well, after tonight’s Reserves, there’s your favourite talent show...”

Pause for effect. Drum roll.

“Swimwear!”

No one cheers, someone coughs, but Walker doesn’t blink. He continues full tilt.

The stage screens light up with pictures of past events and words I’ve never been taught to read. Images of a thousand boys of the past fly by, yours too. Your scarred face. The pucker in your cheek below your right eye, through your top lip, that you wore because of me.

I want to crunch my eyes closed, imagine myself fighting the Lice dead, standing on top of piles of them, triumphant. I’d bow, then run. Into the desert like we’d always planned. “Ha ha!” we’d cry and fight monsters, survive on our wits. And the Chancellor would find us in the desert and apologize and offer us anything we wanted. And we’d take all the other boys into the desert and start a new world.

But the light’s on me now and I have to smile, an *it’s-OK-this-is-OK-I’m-OK* smile. Call it number thirty-one.

“Next week we’ve the Unmasked Ball for those gentlemen lucky enough to get reserved tonight!” Walker lays it on thick as if any of this is a surprise, as if it’s not the same schedule every single fogging year.

Reserves, talent show, ball, auction.

Thanks to last year’s disaster, when Madam Bocharov cancelled my reserve, I’ve never made it to the talent show, let alone the

rest of the events. Now I never will. Neither will you.

Truth is I do know Walker. Today's the only day for months I've not had his company, preparing for tonight. I wanted freedom, I said. Not fake freedom being warded off to one of these faceless women. Real freedom, like you and I dreamed of, Vik, remember? Outside in the desert. Walker said he can't give me that. No one can. But when I kill the Chancellor it'll make that ache in my head better, that urge to kick and hit the world until the pressure behind my skull goes away. Revenge, Walker called it. It's the only freedom on offer.

It's still there, pounding, as the audience applauds and Walker turns towards us, tidies his suit, his silver-sided dark hair – Saints preserve him from having anything out of place. Now he catches my eye, checking I can do this.

He nods, slight and deft, cranking up his speciality smile. Number ten, his *this-is-the-best-thing-ever-and-it's-even-better-because-I'm-pure-charm-doesn't-it-make-you-squirm?* smile, before he spins back towards his audience.

If you were still here, I wouldn't have wanted to hurt anyone, let alone the Chancellor. But she had you killed. That's what I've got to hold on to. She's a murderer.

There's a flicker of light in the silver-swagged balcony dominating the dress circle above. Movement, I think.

She's here.

The Chancellor. 'Top Floor', the Single Most Important, Most Merited, Most-Most at Everything EVER. But why should that matter? We all live; we all die. Sure, she didn't grow up

in the tunnels. Sure, she's seen the sky. Sure, she's a woman, in charge, and I'm just a boy, but ... I bet she bleeds the same as us.

Despite the heat, the bones in my spine shiver.

Not knives, Walker and I decided. A fall. It's the cleanest way. She has to fall, which means I have to push.

3

There's a sign above the stage we can't read but we know when it flashes there's applause. The women clap as lot one twenty is led from the stage, some kid from B-dorm. We all shuffle forwards.

Despite the ache prickling behind my eyes, I maintain smile eleven, my best. Walker calls it my *butter-wouldn't-melt* smile. He gives them names, like you did. Did he pick that up from you, or maybe it was the other way round? The reserve bidding's almost done: boys led one by one from the stage for their 'interviews'. We all know what that really means.

With each bid, my guts tighten. What if the Chancellor wants someone else? What if the Lice arrest me before she decides?

Walker reaches the last row in record time. Less than twenty of us left winding our way into the spotlight.

Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen...

One of your old dorm gang steps up. In all his muscled glory, Toll says, "My name is Hector Dent," as he slicks his hand through his dyed golden hair. Side-smiling and winking like a pro. Roids brush up OK for the auction events. 'Roids', that's what your old friends have taken to calling themselves, on account of the pills they get slipped in their appointments by the

women who favour them.

No one has ever given me drugs in my appointments. Every day, from lights-up to dinner, it's the same. Hours of tuition in dance, decorum, deference. Except for when the women pay the House of Entertainment for our private services. Of course we're not allowed to see them, so – with a lot of practice – we learn to serve tea, dance the old dances, ask them about their day and make them feel special, beautiful, interesting, all while blind to the world. Apparently, it's a real privilege to spend time with us, costly too: only the top-floor women can afford it. A luxury. Tell that to the boys who come out of their appointments crying or bruised in places the House Fathers can hide.

Walker leans away from the stink of Toll's cologne.

"This is the best day of my life," Toll oozes. "I've been training hard, very hard, really hard. It'll be an honour, a real honour, to be with any one of you."

Bet you the Chancellor can tell I'm distracted. She'll buy Toll, or Aye-Aye, one of the beefcakes. Whatever he promised, there's no way Walker could make sure she'd reserve me. No way. I told him he should've put me on steroids too. He said he needed my mind perky, not my pecs.

Half the top-floor women in the pit raise their hands before Toll finishes speaking. There are bids from the madams in the balconies too. The reserve settles at 300 merits, to Madam Van Gelder, Chief of Entertainment. Toll winks at Aye-Aye, next in the queue, and strolls into the wings, grabbing his crotch in the dark to make his friends laugh.

The candlelight in the Chancellor's balcony doesn't even flicker.

Only ten left. If it wasn't for Walker, there wouldn't be a sound between bids. With the Lice there – not normal – everyone's waiting for something.

Nine...

Revenge, I remind myself, not murder. There's a difference, right? Taking her out on to her Pent House balcony, right at the top of the skyscraper towering above us, saying I'd like to look over the edge, getting scared to make her feel as if I'm vulnerable, need her help. It's OK, she'll say, let me show you, it's not so scary, and she'll look over the edge and that's when I'll do it. Just one push. All the way down.

Eight...

We move closer. As Walker interviews the boys near to me, I can smell the oil in his hair, feel the heat coming from his skin.

Seven...

Imagine the Chancellor up close: her skin, her bones, her breath and her blood. She'll be real. Like Walker, like my brothers, like me. Could I push Walker?

Three...

No. Walker didn't have my best friend murdered.

Two...

My only friend.

One...

Lot 149, who introduces himself as Paulie, gets reserved by Madam Cramp, Chief of Expression. Lucky kid – every boy

says being chosen by Cramp is about as close to freedom as you can get.

My throat tightens as Walker gets to me.

We've practised this. Don't look him in the eye. Focus on the balconies. Keep smiling. Don't panic.

"And now our final gentleman this evening," Walker announces.

I swear the Lice take a step forwards. But I can't hear them breathing any more.

Clearing my throat, I bite my lip and peer into the crowd. My brain's actually died. Right here. Right now.

"I... My..."

Walker gave me a speech! I have to use the exact words! What were they?

Shit.

In the pit, a scratch echoes across the floor as a chair moves. I flinch, expecting a surge of police. And yes, they're moving but not towards me. They're closing in on the middle of the stalls. They're here for someone else. There's whispering, movement, getting closer, closer. Walker peers through the glare of the lights.

"Get off," a voice says.

A top-floor voice, brittle. She sounds familiar. The police push towards her. Other women try to pull the girl into her seat. Plates and glasses clatter. Women snap, "Sit down!" But she keeps moving. Closer. In the limelight, I can see the blood-red colour of her hair. There's only one debutante I've heard of who has hair like that.

"Leaving so soon, Ms Vor?" Walker asks. The audience laughs. A drop of sweat appears on his perfect forehead. I have *never*, not

once, not ever seen him sweat.

When she stops, the Lice stop.

Walker presses on. “Were the gentlemen on offer tonight not good enough for you?”

No one embarrasses Ms Romali Vor. We’ve all heard the stories. If you believe them. There’s one that claims one of her mothers, the one who was the Chief of Exploration, had her after meeting some Hysteric in the desert. They made a daughter so unstable that her mother would rather stay in the desert than come back to the monster she produced. And that’s not to mention that the mother who raised her is the Chief of Peace, the woman in charge of the Lice. We hear it from the ladies in our appointments. Rumours sink down to our basement dorms like heavy air.

Ms Vor’s answer is muffled behind her mask. Strong muscles in her neck tense like string pulled tight, angry. What right does she have to be angry? Shuffling in my spot, heat crawls up to my ears.

“Do you want to bid?” says Walker slowly as if each word could push her back into her seat. It never could. No lady could be told what to do by any man, even Mr Walker.

She’s right at the edge of the lime-lit stage. The Lice try to move in but she puts out her hand and again they stop. Even they’re afraid of her!

In a flash, I remember my speech, lean into the mic and let the garble begin. “My name is Jude Grant and I—” Distracted by the sight of her – she hardly seems the monster the gossip made her out to be – the last words of my speech are lost. Stop it. Pull it together! “And I?”

Swallow. Start again.

“My name is—”

Ms Vor interrupts, breathless, almost panicked. “Wait!”

Recognition hits me like a wall. I do know that voice. You don’t forget something like that when it’s all you have of someone.

“Ms Vor?” Walker prompts.

The spit in my mouth is sticky, so I swallow. That voice can’t belong to Romali Vor, can it?

Behind her bright white mask her eyes are as green as broken bottle glass. She’s staring at me.

“You heard me. Wait,” she says, firmer now.

Wild and changeable. I know that voice from my appointments. Once a week, every week this year.

Hurriedly, she reaches behind her head, pulling at the knotted ropes of her hair, hair I’ve combed into buns and plaits and twists.

It can’t be her, can it? The girl that came once a week? The girl that never paid for food, or drink, or entertainment, only my time. In my appointments, I’d know it was her because of her perfume. It made my head dance. Fresh rain, she told me, from the storms Outside. We spoke but of course I never saw her, not one inch.

Even if I don’t believe the gossip about the Chief of Exploration, Romali Vor is still the Chief of Peace’s daughter too. Madam Vor: leader of the Lice. The officers who caught you, that beat boys found out of their dorms in the dark-hours, that blind boys who break their oaths, that deliver all flavours of the Chancellor’s mercy.

“Ro—” Walker begins but cuts himself off with a shout as something comes hurtling through the dark towards me.

I swerve out of the way as it slices through the light.

The stage flats behind shake as it hits them. Bouncing back, it smashes on the stage. Shards of porcelain fly in different directions.

After the silence, I stand. Find my light. Try not to let them see me shake.

The shattered thing on the ground is a mask.

Romali Vor stares up at me as the whole audience gasps. Rain Girl talked about how much she hated the auction process, how it was a joke. Said she'd smash her mask, mock the show of it all...

Her large green eyes blink.

Given the rumours about her birth, I can't help but stare, expecting some beast to look back.

I never knew what to imagine when I pictured a woman's face. I thought they'd look different under those masks, but they're not that different to us. So why hide?

Beneath her stare is a blunt nose. Dark freckles mottle her skin. Beneath that her smile. A gap between her front teeth and smile twelve: *the-look-of-a-person-who-won-a-fight*. Relaxed. Satisfied. A hint of pride.

I've broken the first law.

Hers is the only female face I've ever seen. I should be afraid. I should be worried about the Chancellor, about the Lice, about Walker, about being thrown in the cells, a million things. Men can't control themselves, we're told; to look at a woman is to lose our innocence. I don't feel any different. Searching for the fear I've felt all year, the ratcheting ache in the pit of my stomach, it's not there.

Walker steps between us, blocking the audience from my view. I peer round him to keep looking at her.

Are you stupid?

“Now you’ve *got* to arrest him,” Romali tells the Lice.

Unblinking, her wide eyes wild, she points at me, her voice shaking. She looks up to the balconies and shouts towards where Madam Vor must be. “Go on! Arrest him then!”

Anger and fear flood in a wave and I can’t move. All this time, Rain Girl was Romali Vor ... and now she wants me arrested?

The swarms of Lice in the wings move closer to me. Confused, the Lice surrounding her turn and begin to climb the stage towards me too.

“No, wait, I—” I begin and bite my tongue. No need to break another law. Speak when spoken to, Jude.

Romali shouts her order over and over as Walker tries to calm the audience, talking fast. But I can’t hear because my heart is going to explode, because as the Lice turn from her they move towards me. I’m going to be dead whatever I do. Run, I’m dead. Don’t run, dead. Madam Vor’s Lice kick and crunch the broken pieces of mask. With every step, all I hear is the sounds my bones will make as they shatter beneath their black boots—

A soft voice from above sighs. The sound slices through the terror, turning my blood cold. The tap of a finger on a whistling microphone.

Even Walker goes quiet. No gasps. No coughs. No creaks in seats or shuffling of feet. The silence makes my jaw clamp tight.

The sigh swims over the speakers again. Long and round and tired.

The audience of faceless women stands as if shot through with electricity. They knock glasses and cutlery. Tables shift on the ground. The whole theatre shakes as if the ancient Tower has pulled its spine up from a slump.

A third sigh, and the women all sit with a thunderous thud. The spotlight moves fast, juddering in the rafters. The light traces the heads of the crowd up, and up, until its glow floods the Chancellor's box.

She's too far away to see clearly. A curving shape that shifts and curls, swimming smoke in the light.

Walker steps aside, catches my eye with his burning blue glare before snapping back into the showman the women know. By then, I've remembered his instructions on what to do when the Chancellor stands.

I want her to want me. I want this, I remind myself, trying not to look at Romali Vor and how she keeps staring at me.

No. Focus on the Chancellor. I bow, full charm turned up, squeezing down the fear in my gut. This is about you, Vik.

The Chancellor's sweet, slow tones offer her reserve. "One merit," she says.

The silence is loud enough: no one's going to outbid her.

I think the woman I'm meant to kill may have just saved my life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Made in Birmingham, K. L. Kettle lives, works and writes in London. *The Boy I Am* was shortlisted for the SCBWI 2018 Undiscovered Voices competition. She has won competitions and been highly commended for her flash fiction, including being longlisted as part of the 2017 Bath Flash Fiction Award.

When not writing Kathryn can be found traveling and working around the world working to solve big technology problems.

Kathryn has a husband and twin children.

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