Boys like Harvey Ledger don't
date boys like Alfie Parker ...
Or do they?

The Big Ask



SIMON JAMES GREEN

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For everyone out there with questions.
Take your time. You'll work it out.

CHAPTER 1

FOUR DAYS TO PROM

"Epic news, right?!" Jasminder says.

She's grinning at me, her eyes wide, hardly able to contain her excitement at whatever the news is.

I'd assumed that the urgent hammering at the door was my McDonald's delivery. Obviously I didn't want to miss *that*, which is why I shot straight downstairs. And which is why I'm standing here in just my T-shirt and boxers.

"What's happened?" I mutter.

Jas squints at me. "You haven't heard?" she says. "Seriously, Alfie? You haven't heard? It's all over social media!"

I shrug. "Is someone dead?" I ask.

"It's bigger than that," Jas replies, pushing past me into the hall. "This is … *a revolution*."

I shut the front door and wipe the sleep from my eyes. (OK, I *may* have dozed off after ordering McDonald's on my phone and, yeah, it's noon, but don't judge me.) I follow Jas into the lounge, where's she's pacing about in front of the fireplace.

She watches me flop down on the sofa and scowls. "Why aren't you dressed?" Jas asks. "It's, like, midday."

"I was up late," I say.

"Doing *what*? Exams finished last week."

I shrug because the truth is I went down a rabbit hole of videos featuring posh kids trying to rap. It was utterly cringe, but I couldn't look away … apparently for three hours.

Jas shakes her head like I'm an eternal disappointment. It's all right for her – she's standing in my living room wearing actual clothes and smelling all fragrant, like a normal human. Jas has her shit together, you know?

Jas knows what she wants to do with her life (be a doctor), whereas I don't.

Jas has a range of interests that give her reasons to get up and make plans (orchestra, politics, *archery*). Whereas I have more limited hobbies (sleep, food, a bit of gaming) that mean I have no reason to leave my bed.

Jas has even asked someone to prom – Joe Chan, no less! Jas is confident and funny and had the guts to ask one of the hottest boys in our year to be her prom date. Joe said yes, because when you're Jasminder Cheema, life just seems to work out.

Whereas I am going by myself like the tragic little loner I am. But here's the thing: I've made my peace with that. I'm happy sitting back, watching the world get on with life. Who needs the stress of participating? Or even just working out what to wear in the mornings?

I sigh. "What's the news then?" I ask.

Jas smiles at me, her eyes twinkling. "Harvey Ledger and Summer Gray …"

I roll my eyes. Harvey and Summer are the school's golden couple. They've literally got it

all – the looks, popularity, money. I mean, you could easily hate them, except Harvey's actually really nice (by which I mean he's hot AF and I really fancy him – not that anyone knows that). Summer … well, Summer's ghastly, but she's president of the prom committee, so we all kinda have to tolerate her.

Anyway, whatever this news is, it's probably some minor prom drama that Summer's blown out of proportion, because that girl *loves* drama.

I glance back at Jas, whose eyes are wide to the point of popping out. "They have split up!" she chirps.

I did not hear that right. "Huh?" I say.

"They've split up. Harvey and Summer have split up. They are no more. *Finito!* Their relationship is over. Ended." Jas leans towards me. "Do you understand?"

The news filters into my brain and none of it makes sense. "They can't have," I mumble.

"They have."

"They've been together since Year Eight!"

"And now they're not," Jas says.

I feel like the rug's been pulled from under me. Harvey and Summer were born within an hour of each other. They have been eternally bonded in everyone's minds ever since, like the main characters in a fantasy novel.

Their parents immediately became friends, of course. There are pictures of baby Harvey wearing a romper suit that says "Ladies Man" on it. Next to him is baby Summer wearing one reading "My Guy!" with an arrow pointing at three-week-old Harvey.

Their parents would refer to Harvey and Summer as "boyfriend and girlfriend" even at the birthday parties we had as little kids – the ones before "popularity" became a factor in getting an invite. By Year Eight, they were official.

The rest of us were flailing around in the grip of hormones, breaking voices and general awkwardness in Year Eight. Meanwhile, Harvey and Summer were a full-on couple, showing us what life could be like if we'd been luckier when the good genes had been handed out.

Summer and Harvey became the one constant in all our lives. Teachers came and went, parents got divorced, puberty happened … But during

all the changes, there'd always been Harvey and Summer. They were like royalty, gliding above it all – our romantic heroes.

"What are you thinking?" Jas asks.

I blow out a breath. "That they'll probably get back together?"

"Summer is *fuming*," Jas replies. "She's told everyone it's over and changed her social media profiles from 'taken' to 'single'."

My eyes widen. So it's serious? Prom's in four days. This isn't the time to be messing about with dates. It's a time to be organising outfits, getting haircuts, and waxing hair in sensitive places, just in case you get lucky.

More importantly, Harvey and Summer suddenly being single might send the school's social structure into meltdown. I know about ten lads in Year Eleven who would drop *everything* to take Summer to prom – including the poor girls those lads are meant to be going with.

"What are you thinking?" Jas asks again.

"What a mess, huh?" I say, blowing out another breath. "I guess that's change for you. What did Mrs Harper tell us at our last assembly?

‘So much is going to change in the next few months!’ Guess she was right!” I shake my head. “Scary. I’m not sure I like change.”

“Well, sure,” Jas replies. “But change can also be an *opportunity*.”

“How come?” I say.

Jas lowers her voice. “Harvey is now single. He might want a date to the prom. And you, Alfie, could ask him.”

“Why would I do that?” I say quickly. “It’s not like I fancy him.”

“Lies!” Jas trills. “You were far too fast to deny it!”

“I’ve never told you I fancy Harvey!” I protest.

Jas grins at me. “You don’t need to *tell* me. It’s obvious from the way your eyes go all big whenever you look at him, like a sort of pining puppy.”

“I can’t help what my eyes do!” I say.

“Remember that time he came over in Science to ask if he could borrow a ruler?” Jas says. “You were so flustered you dropped your entire pencil case all over the floor!”

I shrug. "So?"

"And then Harvey gave you the ruler back later, and you thought I didn't see, but I saw you *stroke* it. You *stroked* the ruler, Alfie."

"No," I say.

"And then you smelled it," Jas goes on. "And that's when I *knew*."

I laugh, despite being horrified she saw all that, obviously. "None of that matters, because he's not gay," I tell her.

"You don't know that."

"He's been going out with Summer for years!"

"So?" says Jas. "Maybe Harvey's been working out his sexuality? Maybe he's bi, or pan! I saw him order an oat-milk latte once."

"Maybe it was for someone else, not because he's LGBTQ+!"

"He walks fast."

"He plays football – he's an *athlete*," I say.

"Gay people walk fast."

"No we don't. Well, not always. OK, mainly we do, but I still think …" I groan, frustrated. "Harvey Ledger is not going to be my date to prom. Boys like Harvey Ledger do not date boys like me. Have you seen me?" I extend my scrawny arms and pull up my T-shirt, revealing my skinny, white, untoned body, no six-pack in sight. "I'm a wreck."

"A *tragic* wreck who stays in bed all day," Jas adds.

"There you go."

"So it's time to change that. You should ask Harvey. Ask him, else you'll never know."

I laugh again and say, "Sure, sure."

"Else one day, on your deathbed, you'll wonder: *What if?! What if I'd asked Harvey Ledger to the prom – would my life have been totally different?*"

I take a deep breath and shake my head. If I didn't know Jas better, I'd say she was high.

"I just want you to have a nice time at prom, Alfie," she says.

"I will."

"And what else did Mrs Harper tell us in that leavers' assembly?" Jas asks.

"Anyone smuggling alcohol into the prom will be asked to leave immediately," I say.

"Not that."

"Hiding alcohol in the toilet cisterns won't work either – we're wise to it?" I try again.

"She said, '*Shoot for the stars!*'" Jas has a wistful look in her eye as she sweeps her hands out in front of her. She turns back to me. "Alfie Parker, it's time for you to shoot for the stars. And who knows, maybe you'll—"

"Miss and fall flat on my face?"

"Do you want …" Jas looks me up and down. "*This*?"

Oh my god, my best friend thinks I'm tragic. I mean, *I* think I'm tragic, but I don't expect other people to be quite so … *obvious* that that's what they think too. Whatever happened to telling white lies?

"I just think you could have so much more," Jas says. "You're a nice guy. You *should* have a date to prom."

"Jas, if Harvey's suddenly single, half the year will have asked him by now," I point out.

She shakes her head. "Everyone's probably thinking that, so no one actually has. Nobody had asked Joe Chan before I did – everyone just assumed he'd have a date."

The doorbell rings.

"That'll be my Big Mac," I mutter, heaving myself up.

"It's not your Big Mac," Jas replies, giving me a wicked smile. "It's Harvey Ledger."