

CAT BAUER



HARLEYS

NINTH

by  
**GAT BAUER**



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SUMMARY: Now sixteen and living with her biological father in New York City, Harley Columba prepares for the first exhibition of her paintings under a cloud of worry that she is pregnant, while a trip to her hometown brings major surprises, both good and bad.

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First Edition

Per Paolo,  
il mio equilibrio



... That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height.

—Paul the Apostle



Creative writing  
Mr. Alberti  
Room 225  
Autobiographical incident

LOVE WITH A BACH TEAR  
by Harley Columba

We are on top of the bed. My father is not home. It is hard to find a place to honor your love when you are sixteen and there is a Nordic god right next to you. A home without a grown-up is a moment to be stolen. This is why we are on top of the bed.

Evan is irresistible, with arms as hard as Odin himself, strong biceps that encompass me with shelter. He kisses me the way he does, blond hair tumbling across my face, gray eyes touching my insides. "I love you too much," he says.

"I love *you* too much," I say. We laugh and he kisses my nose. He brushes the hair off my face and kisses my lips. The September sun crowns the back of his head with a halo the color of bullion. Outside the window, the sparrows on the bird feeder chirp their approval. "We have an audience," I say.

Evan unbuttons the first tiny button on my white summer sweater. "Let them watch."

My room is off the kitchen, more like a closet than a bedroom, with only a futon sofa to sleep on and a skinny dresser for my clothes; a nightstand and lamp are next to the bed. It had been the workroom of my father, Sean

Shanahan, until I moved in with him last month, the place where he sketched his drafts—he is designing the Broadway set for *Answers*, that Nicholas Raftner play.

“The man is an alchemist,” Sean said. “His words turn my wood into gold.” Now Sean’s draft table is in his studio at the other end of the apartment, along with his scale models and the Tony Award he won for his last play. My easel is crammed into his corner; if it bothers him, he hasn’t said.

On top of the dresser is my portable, playing Bach, magic music. Outside, the sparrows chirp as if they know the tune.

Evan unbuttons the second button, and then the third. I close my eyes. He moves his tongue inside my mouth, very lightly, very sweetly; it is so familiar, like going home. His hand slides under my sweater and inside my bra. His lips brush against my neck, pause, then move down, and down again. I slide my fingers like a comb through his hair and press his head against me. Sometimes he seems like a little boy when I hold him like this.

He sits up and takes off his shirt. I shrug the straps of my bra off my shoulders, spin it around, and unhook it. I put on a show. I toss my head like a fashion model, pouty lips, lion eyes. My mahogany hair spills across my shoulder; the sun hits my highlights and turns my brown curls to red. Evan laughs. He slides his hands over my breasts and holds my waist. “We need a photo.”

I giggle. “Of both of us. We are too beautiful. We must preserve the memory for when we are old and fat.”

“We will never be old and fat. Old, maybe, but not fat.” Evan eases me onto the pillow. He kisses me again. “Oh.”

This time the kisses start sweetly but transform into something other, kisses that reach past my mouth and into my depths. Our breath is quicker than time; it is another rhythm from a different heaven. Evan yanks at my belt and unfastens the buckle. He pulls down my jeans; I kick them off. He takes off his jeans, and I see he is wearing the black briefs I bought him. I am wearing the white lacy thong he bought me. He touches me. I am a river. I touch him. He is a stone.

“Do you have a rubber?”

“I’ll pull out.”

I hesitate. “Are you sure?”

His eyes are deep and gray. “Sure.”

Danger. Danger. I should resist, but we are on top of the bed, an honorable venue, and he is like chocolate. He melts into me. The music changes. An oboe and a violin begin a duet with notes so pure, octaves direct from the sun to the moon.

I am the oboe. Evan is the violin. The violin speaks. The oboe answers. The musical instruments fill the intervals with each other’s tones; the tones have matching colors. Red. Gold. Silver. Evan’s body is somewhere above me; it has turned to ether; I can only smell him. . . . A light appears like a beacon, a white light tinged with violet. It is only Evan’s eyes I see, and the light. His eyes connect to mine, gray to blue, and I am gone, up to the cracks between the stars.

“Harley? Harley, are you home?” Sean’s voice is outside the door and I tumble back to earth.

“Damn!” Evan pulls away and leaves a puddle of consequences on my pelvis.

I grab a tissue out of the box on the nightstand and

clean myself off. I tug on my jeans and yank my sweater over my head without the bra. When my head pops out, Evan is already dressed.

“Yeah! In here!” I grab my sketch pad off the top of the dresser and flip it open.

There is a knock at the door and Sean sticks his head in. His mahogany hair is as thick as mine; his blue eyes echo my own. He sizes up the situation: Evan and I sit next to each other as if we have been there for hours. We zone in on my drawing of a wild rose like it is better than van Gogh.

“Hey, Sean.” Evan looks up and tries to be casual.

“Hey, Evan.” Sean grins. He has a raspy voice that sounds like the wilderness. “Am I interrupting anything?”

I hope my hair is not a shambles. “I’m just showing Evan my new sketches.”

“Yeah. Right. I’ve used that line, too.” Sean winks. I watch the thoughts reel across his face. A teenager in the house is foreign to him, and he is rusty in the discipline department. He decides on leniency. “I’ll be in my studio.” He slowly closes the door until it makes a soft click.

We listen to the floorboards squeak beneath Sean’s footsteps as he passes through the kitchen and down the hall, and then we collapse into a huddle of silent laughter.

**Today, OCTOBER 9<sup>TH</sup>**

**8:00** A.M.

It is the ninth and I am five days late: that is all I can think as I jog down to the Hudson River. Five days late. Five days feels like forever when you're female and linked to the whimsies of the moon.

Today happens to be John Lennon's birthday, October 9th. Sean said he would take me to an exhibit of John Lennon's artwork down in Soho that Yoko has arranged to celebrate the day. It also happens to be Saturday, which is a good thing because tomorrow is Sunday and I have another day before I have to go to my creative-writing class. I want to rewrite my paper. Now that I am five days late, a romantic interlude starring Evan seems somehow inappropriate.

I wrote my essay, "Love with a Bach Tear," when it was assigned, two weeks ago. Mr. Alberti had issued a challenge and said: "Autobiographical incident. Anything goes." My fellow seniors at my chic Manhattan school grouped together and decided we would be bold. Natasha Silver, who loves to shock, proclaimed she was going to write her own "private moment" disguised as a Georgia O'Keeffe iris. Livingston Smith said he would counter with a sonnet, "Ode to Little Livingston"—you can only imagine. They have already read theirs out loud, and both were hilarious. My new school is up front and in your face; you would be branded forever in Lenape



the edge of the river. I flip one leg, then the other, over the rail directly across from the old Erie-Lackawanna Railroad trestle on the Jersey side, and stretch. Then I jog out toward the pier, keeping the Statue of Liberty, which is far, far in the distance, in my sight.

I want to achieve liberty. I want to achieve peace of mind. I want to imagine all the people living life in peace. But it is difficult to rein in your brain when you are five days late and, in addition, have your *first art exhibition in a major New York gallery tonight*, and, honestly, I am slightly hysterical.

I turn right onto the pier and jog past the freshly mowed, industrial-strength, genetically altered grass, so green and lush it seems artificial. There are white-purple clouds in the sky, ponderous and fluffy, set against a clear aqua blue backdrop; that, too, seems computer generated.

I get to the end of the pier and stop. There is a cute black guy on a walkie-talkie standing in my corner, chatting with his friend, whose name seems to be Adonis. I listen. The static is loud and Adonis is asking ridiculous questions like: "It's sunny here. Yo, Nigel. Is it sunny there?" It is not much of a conversation, and Nigel is in my sacred spot, unknowingly aligned with the torch of the Statue of Liberty beaming between the sun and moon. He is loud, he is happening; the benefits of the position don't seem to be affecting him in the least.

The irritation bubbles inside me like little goose bumps on the wrong side of my skin. I stop about five feet to the left of Nigel and hold on to the rail, but, of course, now the configuration is off; I am not in direct alignment with the torch of the Statue of Liberty and I am five days late. Then I recognize that my interior goose bumps are



not goose bumps at all but strange hormones bouncing inside my body, and I am positive I am pregnant.

"Is that Staten Island? Is that Staten Island over there?" I realize that Nigel is talking to me. He is pointing to New Jersey.

"No. That's New Jersey. Staten Island is over there, past the Statue of Liberty." Apparently, Nigel is not from these parts. Apparently, he is unfamiliar with the Code of Behavior at the end of the pier, where one goes for quiet contemplation in quest of liberty and justice for all. And why has he got a walkie-talkie instead of a cell phone? The rest of the world should not have to suffer because he won't pay for a line.

"That's the Statue of Liberty? I didn't even see it! Cool." He presses a button on the walkie-talkie. "Yo, Adonis, guess what? I can see the Statue of Liberty. You gotta come out here, man. You gotta see this thing."

I take a deep breath. I try to block out the static of the walkie-talkie, but at the other end Adonis crackles: "How do you get to Staten Island?"

Nigel asks me, "How do you get to Staten Island?"

"You take the ferry. You take a subway all the way downtown. You get off at South Ferry and the ferry is right there. It takes you to Staten Island and it's free and you go right past the Statue of Liberty. You should go."

"Yo, Adonis, we gotta go to Staten Island. We gotta take the ferry. We gotta go—"

"Excuse me!" My hormones trickle all over Nigel. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm a little antsy today. I've got a lot on my mind. I could really use some quiet."

Nigel does not get defensive. Nigel actually looks a little wounded. "I'm sorry," he says.



Now I am sorry that I said something. "No, no, I'm sorry." After all, the poor guy is just out enjoying the water and the sun. "This is not my personal pier. It is your pier as much as mine, and you were here first."

"No. It's okay. Really. I understand," he says, as if he senses my distress. Maybe the Statue of Liberty's torch has finally hit him with her beam of enlightenment.

"Are you from New Jersey?" I recognize his accent.

Nigel hesitates. New Yorkers are notorious for their disdain of the bridge-and-tunnel crowd. "Yeah . . ."

"It's okay. I just moved to the city. I'm from New Jersey, too."

Nigel brightens. "Oh yeah? Where?"

"Lenape Lakes."

"Never heard of it."

"No one has. Totally white picket. Not far from Paterson."

"Me, I'm from Asbury Park."

"Bruce." I say this low and long, like *Broooooce*. Bruce Springsteen is the Zeus of New Jersey.

"The Man." Nigel grins, and now we are comrades.

Nigel moves away from me, over to where the silver chairs are that nobody ever steals. I am sure everyone thinks about stealing them, the silver chairs and matching little round tables, because they are so nice, but if you carried a chair past a certain point, say, close to West Street, you might get tackled by the passersby, who would protect them. It is something hallowed that they leave chairs out completely liberated in a city like New York, unhampered by chains or bolts, chairs that have achieved liberty and justice for all, and I would like to believe that the passersby would leap to shield their sanctity.



Nigel is still talking to Adonis over by the silver chairs, but I can no longer hear him. I step into the corner spot at the end of the pier where the handrails come together and form a point. I place my hands on either side of the rails. I am the third side of an equilateral triangle. The sun is to my left, a brilliant globe of boiling energy that nobody seems to notice. I think it is strange that there is this thing in the sky that is impossible to look at because it is so bright it will blind you, this thing up there every morning and nobody ever talks about it.

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The moon is to my right. Today it is a half-moon, and you can clearly see that the sun is reflecting off this other peculiar object in the sky; there is almost a definite line down the center of the moon where the dark side starts. The silvery moon is another sphere just hanging up there that should be a topic of discussion down here on the planet. It is very apparent that the tug between the sun and the moon is controlling the water today; you can feel the pull and the waves reacting to the magnetic field. Gold and silver; silver and gold. I can feel the sun and the moon inside of *me*, yanking at my fluids. The river gulps and burbles as it strikes the wooden pier; it spits out froth from between the piles supporting the center.

Far away in front of me, I can see the faint glow of the torch of the Statue of Liberty. Her arm is stretched high toward New York City, holding that shining torch like a permanent blessing from the Freemasons in France, just daring the terrorists to knock it out of her grip. Now that I am aligned properly with that flaming torch of reason, I can think.

I feel myself expand. I can get a little more than

halfway across the water today, closer to the Jersey shore. Not bad, considering the circumstances.

I watch the birds fly. Again, I think that it is too strange that we don't talk about this: that there are prehistoric creatures flying through the sky at all hours chortling and screeching and entertaining us with melodies and we never say a word about them. There's a lot of stuff up in the sky that we should be discussing past the age of eight, but only the kids are curious about these topics nowadays; if you try to bring up these subjects, people think you are weird.

I breathe. Relax. Gaze at the water. I go over the scene again in my mind. Even now, I can still feel Evan's sperm entering me from the outside, swimming upstream—rocketing upstream—a mad dash up to my egg, flurries of sperm so desperate to get there that I am almost positive that I am pregnant.

And if I am? *And if I am?* What will I do? I am sixteen and do not wish to be a mother. I wish to be an artist. There is a part of me that loves Evan so much, I wish to have his baby, but there is a pragmatic part that knows it would be disastrous. After all, that's how I landed on earth, when Sean and Peppy, my mother, had their fling. Fling! Tossing love around as if it were a boomerang.

Evan is not a fling, not after two years. But his band is close to a record deal. And I have my exhibition opening tonight over at the Beatrice Snow Gallery in Chelsea.

It has been nine months since I got the call. Certain phone calls are heavy, not cellular, and need the weight of a cord; the memory of this one sucks me off the pier in New York and drops me in the kitchen in New Jersey.

