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By Anna Michels

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Kasie West meets Morgan Matson in this hilarious and heartwarming debut about a girl's summer mission to get over her ex-boyfriend by kissing her way through the alphabet.

Getting dumped by her boyfriend is not how Veda planned on starting her summer. When Mark makes it clear that it's over between them, Veda is heartbroken and humiliated—but, more importantly, she's inspired. So she sets out on the love quest of a lifetime: use the summer to forget about Mark, to move on, and move up. All she has to do is kiss twenty-six boys with twenty-six different names—one for each letter of the alphabet.

From the top of the Ferris wheel at her hometown carnival to the sandy dunes of Lake Michigan, Veda takes every opportunity she can to add kisses (and boys) to her list, and soon the break-up doesn't sting quite as much. But just when Veda thinks she has the whole kissing thing figured out, she meets someone who turns her world upside down.

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Editorial Review

Review

"26 KISSES is a perfect combination of summer, friendships, and kissing!" (Miranda Kenneally, bestselling author of CATCHING JORDAN)

"This breezy account of summer love is a good choice for collections where light romance is popular."
(*Booklist*)

About the Author

Anna Michels worked as a Norwegian language tutor, historical interpreter, farmhand, and waitress before building a career in books. She lives in the Chicago area with her husband. *26 Kisses* is her first novel.

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26 Kisses

CHAPTER ONE

Seth loved me first.

And maybe it was wrong of me, but I think I really did believe that, deep down, he would always love me best. Even when I started dating someone else, even as school and life and other friends got in the way, for some reason I assumed that because of everything that had happened between us, I would always come first for him. But now, as we're ducking through the crowd lining the street for the Dune Days parade, I see him look at Melinda the way he used to look at me. That look where his eyes go soft and his jaw relaxes, where the tension that's usually wound up inside him like a spring driving him forward, always on to the next thing, the next adventure, just . . . evaporates. The look that always made me pull away from him and turn my back because it was too intense. He gives her that look, and instead of being happy for him, all I can think is Oh shit. Because if my two best friends hook up this summer, where does that leave me?

A microsecond later Seth pulls himself together and takes a giant bite out of his churro, sending a cloud of powdered sugar floating into the air.

"Come on," he says over his shoulder, plunging straight into the thickest part of the crowd packing the street for the parade, his trademark dark clothes making him stand out from the tourists dressed in brightly colored T-shirts and hats. "We're not going to be able to see from here."

Mel hooks a finger around my belt loop as the crush of people engulfs us, and I fight the urge to shake her off, to disappear into the chaos. But Seth reaches back to grab my wrist, and the three of us end up sitting shoulder to shoulder on the curb, in a prime location to catch any freebies that might get thrown from the floats.

"Do you want some?" Seth offers his half-eaten churro to Mel, who shakes her head and turns away in disgust.

"Too much sugar," she says, running a hand through her short black hair, fingers tangling in her curls.

“It’s Dune Days,” I say. “What’s the point of life if you can’t have a churro or some ice cream?” I try to keep any tinge of annoyance out of my voice—it’s none of my business if Mel has recently decided that sugar is basically poison.

She shrugs and leans back on her hands, stretching her feet out into the street, the laces of her untied Converse dragging in the dust.

I try to catch Seth’s eye over Mel’s head, but he’s giving her that look again and totally ignoring me. Someone standing behind us knees me in the back, and I flinch.

“Do you want me to go get you some roasted Brussels sprouts from the organic truck?” Seth asks Mel, his voice light and teasing. “Maybe some wheatgrass juice? A kale salad? You know, something really parade appropriate.”

Mel smiles and bumps her shoulder against Seth’s. “Oh, shut up,” she says, and leans against him for a moment longer than is strictly necessary.

I pop the last bit of waffle cone into my mouth and try to think of a new topic of conversation—something that will make the two of them stop looking at each other like a couple of freshmen at their first homecoming dance. How long has this been going on, and why didn’t I notice it before? I must have been blind to miss seeing the tension between them—although I have been a little preoccupied lately.

I sweep my hair up into a ponytail, able to focus on only two things: how miserable I am right now, and how much more miserable I’m going to be for the rest of the summer if Mel and Seth disappear to do the boyfriend-girlfriend thing. Not that I don’t deserve it after having practically abandoned them for the past two years.

Seth finally tears his gaze away from Mel and looks across the street. His eyes widen. “Veda, is that . . . ?”

“What?” I squint into the sun.

“Um . . . nothing. Never mind.” Seth wraps the remainder of his churro in a napkin and sets it aside. “I think I hear the marching band.”

“Really? I can’t hear—” My voice falters as I realize what—who—Seth has spotted. “Oh God. We have to move.” I struggle to my feet.

“No!” Mel grabs my arm and pulls me back down. “What are you talking about? We’ve got great seats.”

I turn my head and put my hand in front of my face, shielding it. Seth frowns, his green eyes now locked on mine. I feel trapped inside the group of giddy, churro-eating tourists surrounding us. “Please, guys. Let’s get out of here.”

“It’s Mark,” Seth explains to Mel. “He’s sitting right over there.”

She cringes and leans forward, searching the crowd.

“Don’t look!” I duck my head down farther, but I also risk a glance to the other side of the street. My eyes are drawn right to the faded blue baseball cap I know so well. Mark is camped out with his parents and two

younger brothers, all of them leaning back in lawn chairs. A large, wheeled cooler sits at their feet, probably packed with the amazing sandwiches his mom is famous for. My stomach flips. A year ago I tagged along with them to watch this same parade, and Mark fed me potato chips as the mayor of Butterfield cruised by in an open-top convertible. The memory is close enough to touch, and I shudder as I remember the way Mark's eyes widened when I gently licked salt off his fingertips.

"Hey." Mel grabs my hand and laces her fingers through mine, her silver rings warm against my skin. "Screw Mark. It's totally his loss, right?"

"Right," I agree automatically. But that doesn't mean I can handle sitting within sight of him for the next hour without having some kind of public meltdown.

I close my eyes. It has been ten days since Mark told me he didn't want to "be attached" when he went off to college. That no one stays with their high school girlfriend forever.

No one stays with their high school girlfriend. It sounds like something that would be true. After all, what is high school but cross-country meets and three-minute passing periods and drinking Mountain Dew at midnight so you can stay awake to finish your pre-calc homework? High school doesn't matter. And high school girlfriends probably don't either.

Too bad my high school boyfriend meant everything to me.

I open my eyes. I cannot, under any circumstances, face Mark today. I'll just have to lie low, pretend to watch the parade, and then escape as soon as it's over.

"Uh-oh," Seth says.

Mark's mom is pointing at us and whispering in his ear. He tilts the brim of his baseball cap with one hand and raises the other in a tentative wave.

"God damn it." I drop my head and stare into the gutter, which is already filled with candy wrappers and ticket stubs, the universal debris of summer festivals.

"He's coming over," Mel warns, squeezing my hand tighter. "You're going to have to interact in three . . . two . . ."

"Hey, Vee."

I take a deep breath and look up into my favorite face on the planet. "Hi, Mark."

He looms over the three of us, blocking out the sun. The leather bracelet I got him in February for his eighteenth birthday circles his wrist. Why is he still wearing it?

"How's it going?" Mark's totally at ease, thumbs hooked around his belt loops, posture relaxed. As if we're friends—when in reality we're something so much more and also, now, so much less than friends.

"Okay."

Mel lets go of my hand and leans over to Seth, whispering something in his ear. They both ignore the fact

that Mark is standing two feet in front of them.

“My mom wanted me to say hi for her. And Kyle and Oliver were wondering why Jeffrey couldn’t come today.”

I wave at Mark’s mom, who gives me an enthusiastic two-handed wave back, and feel another pang of regret that I won’t be going over to Mark’s house for weekend bonfires or Ping-Pong tournaments anymore. “It’s my dad’s weekend, so my mom took him over there last night.”

Mark nods. “That sucks. Your dad didn’t want to come to Dune Days?”

I shrug. “You know my stepmom’s not really into crowds.”

Mark looks down and fiddles with his bracelet. Faint drumbeats float through the crowd, signaling the start of the parade.

“So . . . are you okay, Vee?” he asks, glancing uncomfortably at Mel. “About everything?”

I nearly laugh. It’s so like Mark to check up on me, even now that we’re not together. He hated it when we occasionally fought, could never drop me off at my house and go home until he felt like everything was okay between us. Even as I turned away from him in tears ten days ago, he reached out to comfort me, his fingers burning like a hot iron on my arm. “Sure,” I say, my voice cracking. “I’m fine.”

“Great. That’s good.” He looks like he wants to say more, but the sound of the marching band is getting closer. “Well, I better go sit down,” he says. “See you later. Maybe at work?”

“I quit,” I call to his back as he jogs across the street and collapses into his lawn chair, the only sign that seeing me here has rattled him at all. I’m surprised no one has mentioned it to him yet. The only reason I even got a job at the Butterfield Big 6 Cinema was so Mark and I could feed each other popcorn and make out in empty movie theaters while getting paid \$8.25 an hour. Now I’m pretty sure I’m never going to be able to even watch a movie there ever again, much less work right alongside Mark in the same building where he first told me he loved me.

“Asshole.” Seth says it loudly enough to get a few looks from the people standing around us. It’s not the first time Seth has used that particular word to describe Mark, but it is the first time I’ve kind of agreed with him.

“Good job, Vee.” Melinda high-fives me and leans forward, shoving her thick black glasses up on her nose. “You were totally cool. That wasn’t so bad for a first post-breakup encounter, right?”

“No,” I say as the Cheeky Cherry Basket float glides by, blocking my view of Mark. Mel puts her arm around my shoulders, leaning her head briefly against mine, and I almost believe my own lie. “Not bad at all.”



Seth is teaching a piano lesson this afternoon, so he disappears into Ellman’s Music while Mel and I walk to the car in silence.

“I hate parades,” she says once we’re in her old Buick, inching down Main Street. With the constant beach

traffic from Chicagoans fleeing to Michigan for the weekend and five different festivals between Memorial Day and Labor Day, it's pretty much impossible to drive anywhere in Butterfield during the summer.

"I know." I close my eyes and crank the seat back so I'm practically horizontal. "Why did you come?"

She shrugs. "Seth wanted to."

I remember the way he looked at her earlier, and I have to stop myself from reminding Mel that the only reason she and Seth even got to know each other is because I introduced them. I may be heartbroken, but I'm not a jerk.

It didn't take long for Mel and me to become friends after she moved to our tiny Michigan town from New York City. When she showed up in my math class on the first day of seventh grade, with her chunky bracelets and awkward smile, everyone else thought she was a little weird. I thought she was the coolest person I'd ever seen. It wasn't long before she started coming over to hang out at my house, and then I introduced her to Seth, who lives across the street and was basically my lifeline when my parents were getting divorced.

Together the three of us survived middle school and nervously edged our way into Butterfield High, but then I spent the better part of the past two years ditching Seth and Mel to spend time with Mark and his cross-country team friends. I can't count the number of inside jokes, Instagram photos, homecoming dinners, and movie nights I missed with my friends because I was too busy with Mark. I guess I didn't even realize how close the two of them had become, but it wouldn't be fair to resent their bond now.

Mel turns on the radio and hums along to the guitar riffs as I reach into my pocket and feel for my leather bracelet, the twin of the one Mark is inexplicably still wearing. It's worn smooth from nearly a year of use. I never took it off, not even to shower or swim—until the day he broke up with me. Now it stays hidden away, tucked into my pocket or bag but still always nearby. Mel would kill me if she knew.

I raise my arm to block my eyes as the tears start to flow, and it takes Mel a few moments to notice I've lost it again.

"Hey, whoa," she says, turning off the music and resting her hand on my knee. "You okay?"

I shake my head. I'm not okay—not okay with the fact that Mark dumped me approximately eight minutes after receiving his high school diploma, not okay with the overwhelming feeling that my life has suddenly veered off course in a potentially devastating way, and, worst of all, because it is entirely unfair of me, I am not okay with the possibility that Seth now loves Mel more than he loves me.

"Vee, you did great. We shouldn't have gone to the parade. We should have known Mark would be there."

I rub my eyes and swallow hard, trying to hold it together. "I just feel really stupid."

"I know, babe. But you shouldn't. He's the one who—" She sighs and drums her fingers on the steering wheel. "Never mind. There's no point in rehashing what a complete, total, utter ass that Mark is." She takes a deep breath. "I have to get over to work the Big Float. You still want to come?"

I don't respond, suddenly exhausted. Mel's dad owns Flaherty's Float & Boat, the biggest boat rental company in the area, and he sponsors a free inner tube float down the river every year for Dune Days.

Working the Big Float is a nightmare of yelling at kids who haven't put their life jackets on properly, seeing all the people from high school I'd rather avoid during the summer, and splashing fully clothed into the river to chase after errant tubes. It is not on my list of favorite things to do, but I always go and help out to keep Mel company—and the fifty dollars her dad throws in doesn't hurt. But today, just thinking about the chaos of the float makes my eyes well up again.

"You don't have to," Mel says. She lets go of the steering wheel and grabs my hand, shaking it until I open my eyes again. "Seriously, Vee. I'll just take you home."

With my brother over at my dad's house for the weekend, my mom will go into overdrive on chores, then abandon the tidying and dusting halfway through when she gets bored. I'll probably lie on the couch all afternoon, watching TV and repeatedly pushing Fat Snacks, my overweight cat, off my chest. Throw in some shameless stalking of Mark's Instagram account, and it sounds like the most depressing day ever.

I clear my throat. "It's fine," I say. "I'm not going to abandon you."

Mel glances over at me. "I don't want to be responsible for you having a complete breakdown," she says.

"I promise not to let the Big Float snap my fragile psyche."

Mel grins and bounces in her seat. "Good. And you'll get to meet Killian."

I stare out the window at the post-parade traffic, unable to muster up any enthusiasm for the newest male summer help at Flaherty's Float & Boat. Knowing Mel, she'll have him smitten within two weeks and then will just play mind games with him all summer—something she does with boys more often than she'd like to admit, and which she blames on her fear of commitment. A group of people darts out into the street in front of us, and Mel swears and slams on the brakes.

"Stupid idiots!" She honks the horn and rolls down the window. "Go home, fudgies!" Mel's intolerance for the vacationers who overrun our town every summer is legendary, but she secretly loves giving the tourists shit and would miss them if they were gone. She has even been known to intentionally give them bad directions or warn them about the sharks in Lake Michigan. Leaning on the horn, she swears under her breath and rolls her eyes at a family jaywalking through the intersection.

Despite myself, I smile.

Users Review

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