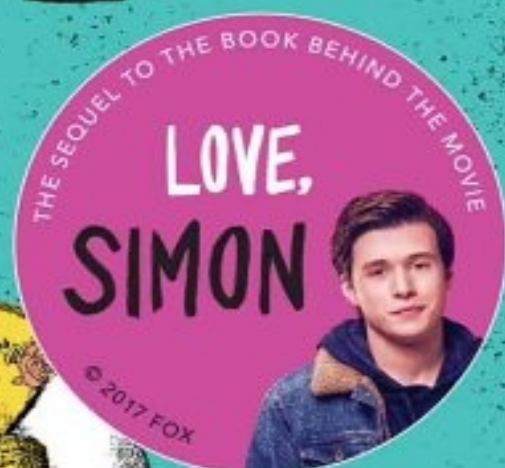


Becky Albertalli:

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF,
SIMON VS. THE HOMO SAPIENS AGENDA

LEAH
on the
OFFBEAT



LEAH
on the
OFF BEAT

by Becky Albertalli

BALZER + BRAY

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

For the readers who knew something was up, even when I didn't

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Acknowledgments

Excerpt from What If It's Us

About the Author

Books by Becky Albertalli

Back Ad

Copyright

About the Publisher

1

I DON'T MEAN TO BE dramatic, but God save me from Morgan picking our set list. That girl is a suburban dad's midlife crisis in a high school senior's body.

Case in point: she's kneeling on the floor, using the keyboard stool as a desk, and every title on her list is a mediocre classic rock song. I'm a very tolerant person, but as an American, a musician, and a self-respecting human being, it is both my duty and my privilege to blanket veto that shit.

I lean forward on my stool to peer over her shoulder. "No Bon Jovi. No Journey."

"Wait, seriously?" says Morgan. "People love 'Don't Stop Believin'."

"People love meth. Should we start doing meth?"

Anna raises her eyebrows. "Leah, did you just—"

"Did I just compare 'Don't Stop Believin'" to meth?" I shrug. "Why, yes. Yes I did."

Anna and Morgan exchange a capital-L Look. It's a Look that says *here we go, she's about to dig her heels in.*

"I'm just saying. The song is a mess. The lyrics are bullshit." I give a little tap on the snare for emphasis.

"I like the lyrics," Anna says. "They're hopeful."

"It's not about whether they're hopeful. It's about the gross implausibility of a midnight train going, quote unquote, *anywhere.*"

They exchange another Look, this time with tiny shrugs. Translation: *she has a point.*

Translation of the translation: *Leah Catherine Burke is an actual genius, and we should never ever doubt her music taste.*

"I guess we shouldn't add anything new until Taylor and Nora are back," Morgan concedes. And she's right. School musical rehearsals have kept Taylor and Nora out of commission since January. And even though the rest of us have been meeting a few times a week, it sucks rehearsing without your singer and lead guitarist.

"Okay," Anna says. "Then I guess we're done here?"

"Done with rehearsal?"

Welp. I guess I should have shut up about Journey. Like, I get it. I'm white. I'm supposed to love shitty classic rock. But I kind of thought we were

all enjoying this lively debate about music and meth. Maybe it went off the rails somewhere, though, because now Morgan's putting the keyboard away and Anna's texting her mom to pick her up. I guess that's game over.

My mom won't be here for another twenty minutes, so I hang around the music room even after they leave. I don't really mind. It's actually nice to drum alone. I let my sticks take the lead, from the bass to the snare and again and again. Some fills on the toms. Some *chhh chhh chhh* on the hi-hat, and then the crash.

Crash.

Crash.

And another.

I don't even hear my phone buzzing until it pings with a voice mail. It's obviously my mom. She always calls, only texts as a last resort. You'd think she was fifty or a million years old, but she's thirty-five. I'm eighteen. Go ahead and do the math. I'm basically your resident fat Slytherin Rory Gilmore.

I don't listen to the voice mail, because Mom always texts me after—and sure enough, a moment later: **So sorry to do this, sweetie. I'm swamped here—can you catch the bus today?**

Sure, I write back.

You're the best. Kissy emoji.

Mom's boss is an unstoppable robot workaholic lawyer, so this happens a lot. It's either that, or she's on a date. It's not even funny, having a mom who gets more action than I do. Right now, she's seeing some guy named Wells. Like the plural of *well*. He's bald and rich, with tiny little ears, and I think he's almost fifty. I met him once for thirty minutes, and he made six puns and said "oh, fudge" twice.

Anyway, I used to have a car, so it didn't matter as much—if I beat Mom home, I'd just let myself in through the garage. But Mom's car died last summer, so my car became her car, which means I get to ride home with thirty-five freshmen. Not that I'm bitter.

We're supposed to clear out of the music room by five, so I take apart the kit and carry it into the storage closet, drum by drum. I'm the only one who uses the school kit. Everyone else who plays has their own set in the finished basements of their personal mansions. My friend Nick has a customizable Yamaha DTX450K e-kit, and he *doesn't even drum*. I could never afford that in a billion years. But that's Shady Creek.

The late bus doesn't leave for another half hour, so I guess I'll be a theater groupie. No one ever cares if I wander into rehearsal, even though the show opens on Friday. Honestly, I crash rehearsal so often, I think people forget I'm not in the play. Most of my friends are—even Nick, who'd never auditioned for anything in his life until this. I'm pretty sure he only did it to spend time

with his sickeningly adorable girlfriend. But since he's a true legend, he managed to snag the lead role.

I take the side hallway that leads directly backstage, and slip through the door. Naturally, the first person I see is the peanut himself, my number one bro, demolisher of Oreos: Simon Spier.

"Leah!" He's standing in the wings, half in costume, surrounded by dudes. No clue how Ms. Albright talked so many guys into auditioning this year. Simon shrugs away from them. "You're just in time for my song."

"I planned that."

"You did?"

"No."

"I hate you." He elbows me, and then hugs me. "No, I love you."

"I don't blame you."

"I can't believe you're about to hear me sing."

I grin. "The hype is real."

Then there's a whispered command I can't quite hear, and the boys line up in the wings, amped and ready. Honestly, I can't even look at them without laughing. The play is *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and all of Joseph's brothers are wearing these fluffy fake beards. I don't know, maybe it's in the costume notes of the Bible or something.

"Don't wish me luck," Simon says. "Tell me to break a leg."

"Simon, you should probably get out there."

"Okay, but listen, don't take the bus. We're going to Waffle House after this."

"Noted."

The boys shuffle onstage, and I step deeper into the wings. Now that the flock has cleared, I can see Cal Price, the stage manager, stationed at a desk between the curtains. "Hey, Red."

That's what he calls me, even though I'm barely a redhead. It's fine—Cal's a cinnamon roll—but every time he does it, there's this hiccup in my chest.

My dad used to call me Red. Back when he used to call me.

"Have you seen this one?" Cal asks, and I shake my head. He nudges his chin toward the stage, smiling, so I take a few steps forward.

The boys are lurching. I don't know any other way to describe it. The choir teacher bangs out some French-sounding song on the piano, and Simon steps forward, hand on his heart.

"*Do you remember the good years in Canaan . . .*"

His voice is shaking, just a little, and his French accent's a disaster. But he's funny as hell up there—sinking to his knees, grasping his head, moaning—and I don't want to oversell it or anything, but this just may be the most iconic performance of all time.

Nora sidles up to me. “Guess how many times I’ve heard him sing this in his bedroom.”

“Please tell me he has no idea you can hear him.”

“He has no idea I can hear him.”

Sorry, Simon, but you’re too precious. If you weren’t gay and taken, I’d totally marry you. And let’s be honest, marrying Simon would be amazing—and not just because I had a sad, secret crush on him for most of middle school. It’s more than that. For one thing, I’m totally up for being a Spier, because that family is literally perfect. I’d get Nora as my sister-in-law, plus an awesome older sister in college. And the Spiers live in this huge, gorgeous house that doesn’t have clothes and clutter on every surface. I even love their dog.

The song ends, and I slip out and around to the back row of the auditorium, known among the theater kids—aspirationally—as Makeout Alley. But I’m all alone back here, and only halfway participating. Surveying the action from across the room. I’ve never been in a play, even though Mom’s always trying to get me to audition. But here’s the thing. You can spend years drawing shitty fan art in sketchpads, and no one has to see it. You can drum alone in the music room until you’re decent enough for live shows. But with acting, you don’t really get to spend years stumbling along in private. You have an audience even before there’s an audience.

A swell of music. Abby Suso steps forward, wearing a giant beaded collar and an Elvis wig. And she’s singing.

She’s amazing, of course. She doesn’t have one of those limitless voices like Nick or Taylor, but she can carry a tune, and she’s funny. That’s the thing. She’s a straight-up goofball onstage. At one point, Ms. Albright actually guffaws. Which is saying something—not just because who knew guffawing was an actual thing people did, but because you know Ms. Albright has seen this thing a thousand times already. Abby’s just that good. Even I can’t take my eyes off her.

When the show ends, Ms. Albright herds the cast onstage for notes. Everyone drapes themselves all over the platforms, but Simon and Nick scoot to the end of the stage, next to Abby. Of course.

Nick slides his arm around her shoulders, and she tucks up closer to him. Also of course.

There’s no Wi-Fi in here, so I’m stuck listening to Ms. Albright’s notes, followed by an unsolicited ten-minute monologue from Taylor Metternich about *losing yourself* and *becoming your character*. I have a theory that Taylor literally gets off on the sound of her own voice. I’m pretty sure she’s having tiny secret orgasms right before our eyes.

Ms. Albright finally shuts it down, and everyone streams out of the auditorium, grabbing backpacks on the way—but Simon, Nick, and Abby

wait in a cluster near the orchestra pit. I stand and stretch and head down the aisle to meet them. And a part of me wants to spew praise all over them, but something stops me. Maybe it's just too painfully sincere, a little too fifth-grade Leah. Not to mention that the thought of fangirling over Abby Suso makes me want to vomit.

I high-five Simon. "You killed it."

"I didn't even know you were here," Abby says.

Hard to know what she means by that. Maybe it's a secret diss. Like, *why are you even here, Leah?* Or maybe: *I didn't even notice you, you're so irrelevant.* But maybe I'm overthinking this. I've been known to do that when it comes to Abby.

I nod. "I heard you guys were going to Waffle House?"

"Yeah, I think we're just waiting for Nora."

Martin Addison walks by. "Hey, Simeon," he says.

"Hey, Reuben," says Simon, looking up from his phone. Those are their characters' names. And yes, Simon plays a guy named Simeon, because I guess Ms. Albright couldn't resist. Reuben and Simeon are two of Joseph's brothers, and I'm sure this would all be adorable if it didn't involve Martin Addison.

Martin keeps walking, and Abby's eyes flash. Honestly, it's pretty hard to piss Abby off, but Martin does it just by existing. And by going out of his way to talk to Simon, like last year didn't happen. It's so fucking audacious. Simon doesn't even talk to Martin that much, but I hate that he does at all. Not that I get to dictate who Simon talks to. But I know—I can just tell—that it bugs Abby as much as it bugs me.

Simon turns back to his phone, clearly texting Bram. They've been dating for a little over a year, and they're one of those vomitously happy couples. I don't mean that in the PDA sense. They actually barely touch each other in school, probably because people are prehistoric dickwads about gay stuff. But Simon and Bram text and eyefuck all day long, like they can't even go five minutes without contact. To be totally honest, it's hard not to be jealous. It's not even just about the true-love-heart-eyes-get-a-room-dudes fairy-tale magic. It's the fact that they went for it. They had the balls to say *fuck this, fuck Georgia, fuck all of you homophobic assholes.*

"Are Bram and Garrett meeting us there?" Abby asks.

"Yup. They just got out of soccer." Simon smiles.

I end up in Simon's passenger seat, with Nora in the back, digging through her backpack. She's wearing rolled-up jeans, covered in paint, and her curls are tied back in a messy knot. One ear is pierced all the way to the top, and she has a tiny blue nose stud she got last summer. That girl is honestly too adorable. I love how much she looks like Simon, and I love that they both look like their older sister. They're a total copy-paste family.