

The Boy
in the
Cast

TOBIAS MADDEN



Anything But Fine by Tobias Madden

Chapter Four from Jordan Tanaka-Jones's perspective

"**I THOUGHT WE WERE** hanging out today," Rhiannon says, and I can almost feel her glare through the phone. "My parents are out all day."

"I know," I reply. I'm standing out the front of Ballarat Allied Therapies. The last place I want to be on a Saturday. Especially when my girlfriend is home alone. "And you know I usually see Mark on Tuesday but this couldn't wait. This shoulder thing is ..."

Rhiannon huffs. "Can't you just go tomorrow?"

I reach up to massage my shoulder. I took two anti-inflammatories this morning, which I usually never do. I hate feeling like I'm letting an injury *win*. But I barely slept last night because the pain was so bad. Not that I'd ever say that out loud.

"Rhi," I say calmly, trying to stop this from turning into an argument, "you *know* I'd rather hang with you, but I gotta take care of this. Boat Race is only two weeks away. If I don't get my shoulder sorted by then, I'll be fucked."

“If you came *here*,” she says, her tone suddenly all syrupy, “maybe *I’ll* be the one getting—”

“I can’t,” I cut in. “I just ... not right now. Okay?”

I love Rhiannon—well, I don’t know if I’m *in love* with her, but I really like the girl—but sometimes I just wish she *got it* a bit more, you know? Got *me*.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Don’t bother,” she replies, “I’ve got plans now, anyway.”

I want to say, *You made new plans in the last thirty seconds even though we’ve been on the phone the whole time?* but I shake my head at the clear blue sky instead.

“Okay,” I sigh. “Have fun. I gotta go.”

“Whatever. Bye.”

The phone clicks and I say goodbye, even though I know she’s already gone.

I take in a long breath, shove my phone into the pocket of my exercise shorts, and walk through the automatic doors of Ballarat Allied Therapies.

I’m greeted by a new face at the reception desk. I’m guessing Linda doesn’t work Saturdays, because she definitely would’ve told me if she was quitting. I’ve spent so much time here in the last two years that I know every single thing that goes on inside these four walls. I’m practically part of the Ballarat Allied Therapies family. Not that I want to be. I’d much rather be injury free and actually *enjoying* my weekends like all the other guys at North.

“I’ve got an appointment with Mark at one-thirty,” I say, and the new girl—Shelby, according to her name badge—clicks away at her computer for a second.

“Jordan?” she asks. She’s a lot chirpier than Linda. Kind of cute, too.

I nod. “Yep.”

“Take a seat,” she replies. “Mark is finishing up with another client, he shouldn’t be too long.”

“Cool.” I smile back at her. “Thanks.”

I turn and head to the waiting area, the white walls lined with signed photos of local sportspeople. Kevin Tyler. Polly Nguyen. Tim ‘Peacock’ Wallis, my childhood favourite.

There was this one AFL grand final a few years back—actually, I was probably only seven or eight, so more like ten years—when Peacock kicked *ten goals*, leading the Cats to a one-point victory over the Swans. Dad and I weren’t actually at the game—we were just watching it on the telly at home, like the rest of Ballarat—but I’ll never forget that feeling.

And shit, if I could kick ten goals in a game this year—my last year at North—we might actually win a match. Who knows, we might even make it to the finals. We’d never win. Not against St Tom’s. But to be there at the very end? I could definitely think of *worse* ways to end my high school footy career.

The waiting room is empty today, except for a young guy sitting with a plaster cast wrapped around one leg. As I walk over to the chairs, I realise he’s kind of staring at me. For a second, I stare back. He’s probably a year or so younger than me. Thin but toned. Pale white skin. Short brown hair swept to one side. Dark eyebrows. Lips that look weirdly similar to Rhiannon’s. Those ones that have the little bow in the middle.

Not that I’m looking at this random guy’s lips.

He looks away, leaning forward to pick up a magazine from

the coffee table. I'm pretty sure the same four magazines have been sitting there since I started coming here in Year Eight, but I figure I'll let him discover that for himself.

I take a seat on the other side of the waiting area, weirdly conscious of this guy's presence. I feel like he's watching me, even though he's not. And I'm obviously not saying I *want* him to watch me, but ...

Look, I'll be honest, I'm highly aware that I've been blessed with Mum's pretty face and Dad's footy-player's physique, so I'm no stranger to random people staring at me. But this feels kind of different. It's almost like ...

I blink away the thought and pull out my phone. I start scrolling on Instagram to distract myself, but my eyes keep flicking up to check if the boy in the cast is looking at me. Then, before I really even know what I'm doing, I slip my phone away and say, "Hey man."

He takes a deep breath but doesn't look up. He just turns the page of his magazine, squinting, and leaning in a little closer.

Guess he must really like old Oscars outfits.

"What happened to your leg?" I ask, half waiting for him to tell me to piss off (because no one likes waiting room small talk) and half wondering what the hell I'm actually doing.

This time, though, he looks up. His eyes meet mine from under dark eyebrows. I smile. When he still doesn't say anything, I ask if his leg is broken, glancing down at his cast then back up to his face. He *kind of* looks like that old Hollywood actor ... the one James Franco played in that movie with the—*James Dean*. Like him, but younger. And a little more ... delicate?

But again, no reply. His cheeks burn red, and I worry that

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I've made him uncomfortable.

"Are you okay, dude?" I ask. "You look a bit ... flushed."

He clears his throat. Swallows. Take another deep breath.

"I broke my foot," he replies, and something almost like victory passes behind his brown eyes.

"*Oof*. How'd you do that?"

"Fell down a flight of stairs."

"Must have been a pretty good stack," I say, wincing at the thought.

"Well," he replies, one shoulder shrugging forwards, "I'm a perfectionist, so . . . if I'm going to do anything, I'm going to do it right."

I laugh. Injury humour. Nice one.

"I respect that," I say with a nod. "I'm the same, plus I'm majorly competitive. I might need to start avoiding stairs completely, just in case I try to outdo you."

He doesn't reply. I add a chuckle in case he didn't get the joke, but his eyes flick away from mine and he shifts awkwardly in his seat. He clasps his hands, pressing them into his lap, and—

Oh. I know that look. I spend ninety percent of my time with other guys—in class, in locker rooms, at parties, at the gym—so I know an unwanted boner when I see one.

For some reason, the thought of it makes my stomach do a weird little flip.

"How long do you have to have the cast on?" I ask, hoping to dissolve the tension—*regular* tension, definitely not the *other* kind of tension—that has suddenly filled the small waiting room.

"Six weeks," he replies, looking me in the eye for a split second before dropping his gaze down back to the coffee table.

I feel like I'm making this guy nervous. Or is it just the awkward erection thing? Or is he ... is he *into* me? That ... hasn't happened before. Not with a dude. Well, not that I know of. And not right in front of me.

"I broke my leg when I was six," I say, trying to move the conversation along. "It was balls."

Ahh ... probably shouldn't talk about balls right now...

"Yeah," he says, clearing his throat, "it's not great so far."

I can't help but notice he presses his hands down a little harder on his crotch.

"I don't know how I'm gonna last six weeks," he goes on. "My leg itches like crazy, and I only got the cast on yesterday."

"I used to stick my school ruler down mine so I could scratch my leg," I say, doing a quick mime demonstration. "The doctor told me not to, but it felt *so good*."

I laugh, and he smiles back at me.

"What are you here for?" he asks, still grinning.

"Ah, just this rotator cuff thing I've had for a while."

I reach up to massage my shoulder again. If I press on this one part of my deltoid at the front, I get a shooting pain back through the joint and all the way down my arm.

"The doctor said I've got bursitis," I explain, "but I'm pretending I didn't hear that. We're smack bang in the middle of rowing season, so I can't afford to take any time off. And then we go straight into footy season, so there's no time to rest." I find the trigger point with my index finger, the familiar pain almost comforting in a weird way. "It's my last year. So I gotta make the most of it, you know?"

"You're not gonna play next year?" he asks, frowning at

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me across the room. His eyes go a bit glassy, like he's suddenly somewhere else. After a second, he lets his hands drop to his sides, his frown replaced by a kind of dull sadness.

"I don't think they let you play for the school team once you've, you know, finished school." I smirk, and he snaps out of his daze.

"Oh," he says. "You're in Year Twelve?"

"Yep." I click my tongue. "Home stretch."

"I'm only in Year Eleven. I've still got an *eternity* to go."

"It goes so fast, trust me," I say, and it's true. I can't believe I'm almost done. Thirteen years of school, and it's almost *over*. I let go of my shoulder and run my hand through my hair. "Soon you'll be wishing you had more time."

He snorts. "I don't know about that. School's never really been my thing."

"What school do you go to?"

"St Tom's."

"Cool, cool." I nod. "Great rowing squad."

And when I say 'great', I mean fucking *unstoppable*. I can't remember a time when the St Tom's boys haven't won the annual Head of the Lake rowing regatta. My crew is good this year, but we don't stand a chance against them.

"Yeah, they're awesome," the boy replies, nodding back at me. "How 'bout you? What school do you go to?"

Just as I'm about to reply, Mark sticks his head out from the treatment room opposite me. "Jordan?"

I jump up from my chair, walk over to Mark, and shake his hand. He used to play footy for Richmond before he trained as a physio, so I've always been weirdly nervous around him. Like

I'm some eight-year-old fan, not his eighteen-year-old patient.

He heads back into his treatment room, and I find myself lingering in the doorway, wondering if I should turn around and say goodbye to the boy in the cast.

Would it be weird to say goodbye? Would it be weird *not* to? I mean, I don't even know this dude's name. And I definitely don't want to give him the wrong impression, but I just have this feeling I'm going to see him again. That, I dunno ... that I *want* to see him again.

A rush of nervous energy sweeps through my chest. Before I can overthink the whole thing—I swear I'm usually *very* chill—I turn and flash him my best and brightest Tanaka-Jones smile.

He grins back at me, and for a second—just one—I allow myself to enjoy the warmth of his smile, the feeling of his eyes on mine, the weird tension that's been flickering between us in the waiting room ...

And then I turn and walk away.

About the Author

ORIGINALLY FROM BALLARAT, TOBIAS worked for ten years as a dancer, touring Australia and New Zealand with musicals such as *Mary Poppins*, *CATS*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and *Guys and Dolls*. He now lives in Sydney with his husband, Daniel, and their Cavoodle, Ollie. In 2019, Tobias edited and published *Underdog: #LoveOzYA Short Stories*, which featured his first published work, "Variation." He also co-wrote the cabaret show *Siblingship*, which played to sold-out audiences around Australia. Tobias is a passionate member of the #LoveOzYA and LGBTQ+ communities, and he currently works full time for a major independent publishing company.