



Romeo  
for Real

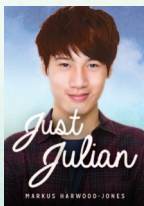
MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES

# Will Romeo be able to take pride in who he is and whom he loves?

On the surface, Romeo has it all: success on the basketball court, a group of good friends, the companionship of the beautiful Rosie. Deep down, he knows something is missing: all he feels for Rosie is friendship, and all he feels for his friends' intolerance is guilt. Everything changes when he meets the openly gay Julian at a party and finds himself sharing a kiss with him. In spite of their obvious attraction, Romeo now feels less sure of himself than ever, and leaves without even telling Julian his name.

With Rosie's support, Romeo begins exploring his sexuality — and ends up running into Julian again. Romeo begins to see the world in a whole new light, and he and Julian begin to fall in love. But his homophobic friends and family can't accept him as gay. After a violent confrontation with one of his old friends, Romeo becomes determined to prove that his love for Julian is real and right.

**MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES** is a writer, visual artist and documentary filmmaker. He is the author of the short story collections *Confessions of a Teenage Transsexual Whore* and *Everything & All at Once*. His film, *Mosaic*, tells the story of his journey across Canada and the United States to learn more about the trans community. He lives in Toronto, Ontario.



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*For you.*





01

# Sweet Victory

SMOKE TRICKLED OUT of the car into the night air. It followed the sounds of three young men's voices as they cruised the street. It was Friday night, and they were winners.

“Coach almost blew it,” said Ben as he tossed a cigarette butt out the driver-side window. “Should have had me guarding 22 for the whole game.”

“Did you see the look on his face at the

buzzer?” Marty grinned from ear to ear. “I swear, he was gonna cry!”

Ben took a quick glance over his shoulder and changed lanes. “That guy’s gotta learn to have a little faith. Oh, and Rome, that was a nice three-pointer you stuck in at the end.”

“Thanks.” Rome leaned back. “For a sec I thought I’d short-armed it. The guy’s hand was right in my face. Thanks for the pass.”

The car slowed as Ben eased into the fast-food drive-through. “It’s what I do.” He laughed. “That and give nightmares to sissies like 22!”

Still leaning into the back seat, Rome watched his friends and sighed. Ben was lazily resting one hand on the wheel. Marty pulled on a joint in the front seat, laughing loudly. His braces made his grin glint silver. *Remember this moment, Rome told himself. This is the one you want to hold on to.*

This was it. Every drop of sweat and extra hour of practice had been worth it. Now there was no doubt their team would go down in high-school history.

They had the matching team jackets, a new banner for the gym, and class rings glittering on their fingers. Rome tried to smile. He couldn't figure out why his eyes were welling up instead. *Must be the smoke*, he figured. He wiped his face with his sleeve before his friends could see.

A shaky voice from the drive-through speaker asked for their order.

“What do you want?” Ben asked, leaning back to catch Rome's answer. Rome just shrugged.

“Fine, you'll have what I'm having,” Ben decided. He turned to the speaker. “Two double cheeseburger combos, extra ketchup.”

“And a fish burger!” added Marty with a shout.

“Fish burgers are gay,” Ben teased as he pulled around to pay.

“Screw you,” Marty barked back. “They're not gay, they're kosher, dickhead.”

At the window, a bored-looking brunette waited with their food and drinks. Ben gave her a wink and said, “And how much to take you home?”

Her face remained blank as she passed over their meals.

As they sped away, Ben flashed a smile. “She was totally into me.”

“Yeah, right,” laughed Marty. Rome noticed he already had bits of fish burger caught in his braces. “Pretty sure it was me she was scoping.”

Rome reached forward and plucked the joint from Marty’s fingers. He silently judged his friends. *I swear, any time we’re around a cute girl these two just lose their heads. Grow up already, guys.*

The window was open a crack, and Rome could feel a touch of cool air. As they passed over the bridge he watched the Winnipeg skyline and the dark waters of the Red River swirling below. His head began to feel fluffy, his thoughts looser. A smile crept to his lips.

“Thanks for the food, Ben,” Rome said, unwrapping his burger.

“Anytime,” Ben replied.

Rome bit into his burger and let his mind slip away. He soaked in the mindless chatter of the evening.

Marty and Ben told and retold details of their own athletic feats. They relived every moment of the last game, then went over the whole season.

“You remember that bank shot I made back in first year?” Ben bragged.

Marty rolled his eyes. “You were a total bricklayer back then.”

“First day of PE,” Ben continued, as if Marty hadn’t said a word. “That’s when Coach told me I was his first choice for power forward.”

“That’s bull!” Marty groaned. “You were benched most of first year, just like the rest of us!”

“I threw off my ankle, right before the first game,” Ben replied lightly. “But Coach said he wanted me at his side, even if I couldn’t play.”

“As if!” Marty laughed.

The two bickered, their stories becoming as repetitive as the scenery. Squat apartment blocks, dollar stores, fast-food joints, and laundromats ran up and down the streets off St. Mary’s Road. Rome looked up at the empty, overcast night sky, then down

at his class ring, which shimmered in the city's bright lights. *This is it*, he thought. *This is the last time it'll ever be like this.*

Marty's voice broke into Rome's thoughts. Prodding his knee, "What you daydreaming about back there?" Marty asked, prodding his knee.

"What is he ever thinking about? I bet it's Rosie again, isn't it?" Ben teased. He caught Rome's eye in the rear-view mirror. "Bet you're gonna get it tonight, eh, buddy?"

Rome felt himself start to grow red. Damn, why did he have to blush so easily? He ran a hand through his thick hair.

"Where was she tonight, anyway?" asked Marty.

Rome coughed and tried to find his words. "She, uh, actually —" But before he could say any more, Rome was interrupted. Ben waved to get his friends' attention and pointed to some people on the sidewalk.

"Check it out," Ben said in a loud whisper. "Couple of body-builder butt-munchers!"

Rome followed his friend's gaze and spied two massive guys, both bald. They wore tight-fitting black tank tops and walked side by side. They would have been relatively uninteresting if it wasn't for one fact — they were holding hands! Marty started to giggle at the sight. But Ben didn't look so pleased. When the car pulled up to a red light, the couple were barely a stone's throw away, and getting closer.

Ben got a wicked look. He motioned for Rome to pass up his fast-food trash. "Watch this," Ben grinned. He crumpled up their used napkins, wrappers, and empty bags. He told Marty to take the lid off his pop and dipped it all in.

Rome played along, welcoming the distraction. He leaned out the back window to whistle. "Hey, boys!"

As the two large men turned their heads, Ben pelted them with the wads of sticky paper. Following suit, Marty grabbed his drink and threw it in the couple's direction. All three boys in the car laughed as the cup exploded over the men in a marvellous

sticky mess. They sped away as the light turned green, squealing off into the night.

Rome's laughter was just as loud as Marty's and Ben's. But it left a foul taste in his mouth. His stomach began to clench, and his hands grew sweaty. *Catholic brainwashing, I guess*, he thought. *Always feeling guilty for having fun.*

Rome stuck his head into the cool breeze coming through the window. He let the lights of the city blur together. A sigh escaped him and was swallowed up by the rush of air. Feeling teary again, he closed his eyes. He wouldn't break down — not tonight. This was a night to celebrate, to make memories that would last a lifetime. He would not let himself ruin it.