

SWIMMING TO CHICAGO

by

David-Matthew Barnes



A Division of Bold Strokes Books

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Praise for David-Matthew Barnes

Swimming to Chicago

“[A]n interesting contemporary novel...I found myself unable to put it down...”—Sara Power, *Books Your Kids Will Love*

Mesmerized

“Barnes’s young adult novel about two boys suddenly, deeply in love has a fairy-tale tone, but it will strike all the right notes for YA readers as the boys dance into the hearts of The Showdown audience.”—Richard Labonte, *BookMarks*

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“[A] timely work that will resonate with readers for its portrayal of society’s perception of the GLBT community.”—*Out & About*

“[A] teenage love story, but it’s between Brodie and Lance... it explores grief and loss—particularly the difference between having a loved one murdered and choosing to reject someone for being gay.”—Kel Munger, *Sacramento News & Review*

By the Author

Mesmerized

Accidents Never Happen

Swimming to Chicago

JILLIAN

Summer started like a seduction. They saw glimpses of it in late May, peeking through windows and dancing across every lawn in Harmonville. It snuck into their lives, flirting and tempting them with freedom from school, boredom, and homework. It was thick with promises of excitement, and hot possibilities of romance and sex.

Like parolees, Jillian Dambro and Alex Bainbridge lapped up the start of summer vacation with a frenzied desire to explore all they'd missed while confined by nine months of high school. Every second of every day was filled with as much activity as possible. They were making up for lost time as though terrified of dying at the age of seventeen. But by the day the season officially began in the third week of June, their lust for life had faded. Apathy arrived like an uninvited houseguest. They slept late, watched too much television, and ate whatever they wanted—while doing their best to dodge questions about college applications.

Jillian noticed Alex was avoiding *everyone's* questions—even hers.

She knew something was wrong. After eleven years of friendship, she could just tell. She secretly cursed herself out for not having the courage to casually bring up her concerns in

their daily conversations. *I'm a shitty friend*, she told herself. *I need to stop being so selfish.*

A hollow coldness had crept into Alex's eyes, and it scared Jillian. There was a sense of anger shadowing him, like an imaginary friend playing a cruel and constant game of piggy-back. He carried bitterness around with him. His hands gripped everything they touched with frustration. The edges of his words ended with a bristling sharpness, carrying an unspoken caution that he shouldn't be challenged. It was in every step he took—his stride was mean and severe as he pounded the earth in his favorite pair of black and white Converse shoes. The rage seemed permanent, as if he were possessed by something trying to escape from his body. It seeped out of his soul through an insensitive stare.

Jillian became crippled with fear her friendship with Alex was falling apart, and she couldn't figure out why.

She was overwhelmed by this abrupt sense of loss one Friday afternoon. She sat on the sofa wearing a pink and white gingham tank top and white Capris, remote control in hand. The opening theme music to *The Young and the Restless* blared from the outdated television set. Her bare feet were resting on the lip of the marred coffee table. She wiggled her freshly painted toes, noticing the new sandals she'd bought last week were giving the tops of her feet a strange V-shaped tan line. She tightened her ponytail by grabbing two thick strands of her honey-colored hair and pulling firmly. She'd been toying with the idea of changing her image. She wanted to dye her hair jet black. And get colored contacts—green, probably—because she was tired of her brown eyes. All new makeup, and all new clothes.

She wanted to become a new person.

Jillian reached for an ice-cold bottle of Wild Cherry Pepsi on the lamp table to her right. She unscrewed the cap, took a

sip, and welcomed the sweet burn of the soda in her throat. She was craving a cigarette but had to wait until her mother left for work so she could smoke in peace, without the risk of getting grounded again. “Hurry up,” she said quietly, hoping the hushed words would somehow urge her mother to get out of the house.

“Baby!” Delilah Dambro called from the other room. Jillian cringed at the sound of the husky, throaty voice. Her mother had a knack for destroying the English language with her tacky euphemisms and out-of-control Southern accent. “You seen my purse, buttercup?”

“You left it in the car.”

“What’d you say, sugar?”

“You left it in the car!” Jillian practically screamed.

She could hear her klutzy mother stumble down the hallway before stepping down into the sunken living room. “Darlin’, I really wish you wouldn’t yell like that.”

Jillian didn’t take her eyes from the television screen. “I didn’t realize you were teaching etiquette lessons now.”

Delilah sighed a little. “You, little girl, have the manners of a dairy cow. Get your filthy feet off of my coffee table.”

The realization hit Jillian then. It swept over her like an allergic reaction. Her eyes narrowed, suddenly sensitive to the sunshine tumbling in from the front window and spilling all over the worn carpet of the living room. Her chest burned and her breath caught in her throat. Her pulse throbbed and pounded in her wrists and temples. She felt sweat forming on the back of her knees and a slow, growing wave of nausea in the pit of her stomach. *Alex is hiding something from me. Something serious.*

Jillian sensed her mother’s look of concern. “You all right?” she asked.

“Yes...”

“You don’t look well.” Delilah folded her arms across her chest. She quickly unfolded them, saying “Dang gone it” when she smashed her waitress name tag against her left boob. She shot Jillian a wide-eyed look. “Good Lord, you’re not pregnant, are you?”

Jillian rolled her eyes, and said through a smirk, “Must’ve been all the whiskey I drank last night.”

Delilah didn’t blink, trying to appear in control of the situation. “Good for you, sister. Drink yourself to death like your granny did. She was a party girl, too.” Delilah returned to the task of finding her missing purse. She sauntered off. Seconds later, Jillian could hear her mother’s black high heels scuffing across the kitchen floor. The door leading from the house to the garage creaked open. “That cheap stuff always kicks you in the ass, honey bee! Jesus Christ, this garage is a filthy mess. Look at all this crap. Useless junk left behind by a useless man.”

Jillian sat up, placed both feet on the floor, and tossed the remote control aside. “My God...I’m losing my best friend.” She stood up, scanning the room for the black cordless phone.

Delilah came back into the room, her right hand wrapped through the shoulder strap of her faux leather purse. She smoothed out a few wrinkles in her uniform. “What’s the matter? You lose somethin’?”

Jillian stopped for a moment and took a deep look at her mother. Jillian thought her mother was way too thin. As usual, Delilah also had on too much blush, and her cheap perfume swam around the room. “I think so,” Jillian breathed. “But you wouldn’t understand.”

Delilah ran a few fingers through her burgundy-tinted hair. Her long nails, painted a vibrant shade of peach, snagged

on a couple of fresh curls. Jillian thought her mother looked like a sad clown, an escapee from some cruel circus. “I look all right?”

Jillian purposely avoided her mother’s eyes. “Have you seen the cordless? My cell phone died and I forgot to charge it.”

“It’s in the bathroom. I was talking to Conner while I was curling my hair.”

Jillian couldn’t help herself. “You’ve got too much blush on.”

“I do?” Delilah opened her purse, searching for her compact. “I might be home late tonight, buttercup. Conner wants to take me out...for drinks. Ain’t that sweet?” She studied her reflection in the round mirror. She rubbed a little at her cheeks. “There...that’s better.”

“Sure it is,” Jillian said with a forced grin. She moved past her mother, went inside the bathroom at the end of the hall, and shut the door.



Jillian sat on the edge of the bathtub, her feet and toes sinking into a bubble-gum pink shaggy floor mat. She looked over to the cluttered sink and noticed her mother had forgotten to turn off her curling iron. She picked up the black cordless phone, dialed a memorized number, and waited for an answer.

“Hello?” he said, gruff.

“You were sleeping.”

“I know. My mom’s on my ass about it, too. She says we gotta find something *productive* for me to do this summer.” Jillian could hear the frosty edge to his words and the

frustration in his breath. She was determined to have a normal conversation with him. She needed to, so her fear they were drifting apart could be dismissed.

“Tell your mother she needs to mind her own business.”

“You know she’s been depressed, Jilli. I’ll just try to avoid her until August. I want to avoid everyone.”

Jillian wondered if he meant her as well. She swallowed and said, “The summer is going by too fast. Only nine and a half more weeks.”

He sighed, bored. “I just wanna get the next year over with.”

Jillian stood up, went to the mirror above the sink. She opened her mouth, running an index finger across her teeth. She felt nervous, fidgety. “My car’s still in the shop. They’re holding it hostage until I pay them a ridiculous amount of money. I’m tired of walking everywhere and bumming rides from people. I need to find a job.”

“Yeah, well, I wish I could quit mine.” Just a week ago, Alex had gushed over his new job, thrilled about an unexpected raise. Jillian was more certain than ever that something was wrong. She knew they needed to spend more time together, to prevent the distance from growing.

“Hey,” she said with feigned enthusiasm, “ask Mr. Freeman if he’ll hire me. Tell him I’ll even consider going out with his bonehead son if he does. It can’t be that difficult to make a pizza.”

Alex coughed, cleared his throat. “Sue Ellen already beat you to it. She’s waiting tables.”

“Ah, nepotism has found its way into the lovely state of Georgia.” Jillian opened the medicine cabinet, reading the labels on her mother’s bottles of prescribed drugs. Too many tranquilizers. “I hate Sue Ellen Freeman. That bitch told me I looked like a boy.”

“That was almost three years ago.”

“So?”

“So, you’ve got tits now.”

Jillian glanced down at her chest. “Yeah,” she said, with a small laugh. “Barely.”

Alex cut right to the point. “Why are you calling me?”

She winced a little, shut the medicine cabinet, and turned off her mother’s curling iron. “Can’t I call my best friend on a Friday afternoon?”

“If you want me to come over, just say so.”

She held her breath for a moment before asking, “Will you?”

Alex was silent for a second on the other end. The pause scared Jillian. They’d always talked about everything. There had never been secrets between them. Ever. “I got some stuff I have to do around the house first. I think my mom’s lonely. I need to help her with a few things. Keep her company for a while.”

“My mom went to work,” she offered.

“The Queen of Applebee’s?”

“She loves that place. She gets to make waitresses younger than her feel like shit five days a week.”

“Maybe you should get a job there.” His words cut deep. Alex knew how much Jillian disliked her mother’s working-class ways, and the fact she’d settled for a boring, routine life in a boring, routine town.

She tried to control the venom in her voice. “I’m not exactly waitress material. I’m saving myself for life in a big city.”

Alex moved in for the kill. “You can always work at Value Mart.”

Jillian wasn’t sure what she’d done to deserve that. “I’d rather die than work there.”