



Calli

JESSICA LEE ANDERSON

Calli

Also by Jessica Lee Anderson

Border Crossing

Trudy

Calli



JESSICA LEE ANDERSON

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Circumstances don't make a person,
they reveal him or her.

—*Richard Carlson*

Calli

HOW IT STARTED



A GIRL RUSHES TO THE TALLEST GUY in tenth grade and reaches up to drape her thin, muscular arms around his neck. The girl's shirt rises up while her baggy khakis slide down over her narrow hips, revealing the strings of her red underwear.

The guy keeps his hands tucked in his pockets as the girl tilts her head slightly. She leans in to kiss him.

She kisses him.

Cherish kisses Dub.

My foster sister, Cherish, kisses my boyfriend, Dub.

Oh. My. God. He's not stopping her.

My blood feels like crude oil bubbling in a refinery furnace.

Inside me, the crude oil separates into toxic fuel. I want to yell at them to stop, to push each other away, but my words are trapped. My eyes and ears hurt from the pressure of holding back the tears. The hallway is full of students watching me, waiting for my reaction.

Like Cherish told me before, I'm a chicken turd. She thinks I won't do anything. But she's wrong.

MELTDOWN: PART I

Thursday, April 17



I'M TOO MUCH OF A MESS to do anything now, so I run. Down the hall. Out of Building A. Past the exhaust of the school buses and past #72, which I should be boarding.

My pace slows once I'm far enough away from school and the line of buses. The long way home is the only option. Too many people have already witnessed the humiliation of Calli Adora Gilbeaux.

I'll have to face their whispers at school tomorrow.

Did you see Dub's mouth all over Cherish? Are they together now?

Yeah, Calli was there to witness it.

She ran away like a big, fat baby.

Worse than facing the gossip, I have to go home soon. Where Cherish lives in the room next to mine. At least my mom and her partner, Liz, don't make us room together.

The sun's pounding down on me and the top of my head is burning hot. I'd give anything for a breeze or a cloud. The sky is a stretch of never-ending blue and there

are so many trees that it looks like a wall of green closing in on me.

I wish I had the nerve to stick out my thumb and hitch a ride away from Lake Charles, Louisiana. As far away as the driver would be willing to take me. But when a truck zooms by on Opelousas Lane, my hands stay by my sides. I'm such a chicken turd that I even tuck them into my pockets.

Heading home isn't an option. Besides, I don't want to be responsible for my mother being sicker than she already is. I overheard Mom tell Liz that her lupus has started acting up because of the stress of Cherish and me fighting all the time.

I keep slogging on. Twenty minutes. Thirty minutes. Forty minutes. The water in the ditch reminds me of how thirsty I am.

The last bell of the day at Calcasieu High School seems like it rang hours ago. Sweat drips down my stomach and soaks into the waist of my pants. My whole body aches, but I drag on for another fifteen minutes.

I can't get their kiss out of my mind. And then the next thought. Dub kissed me this morning.

His lips tasted sweet—like maple syrup. The taste reminded me of the pancakes Mom cooked that morning for breakfast. Everyone in the house had gotten up early. My mother said she wanted us to have a sweet start since Cherish had an important algebra test. She'd been helping Cherish study all week.

Liz makes peppermint tea every day for Mom, and this morning she made some for me and Cherish too. I prefer orange juice, but the tea was soothing, minty but

not too minty, hot but not too hot. We politely passed the pancakes, butter, and syrup to each other like we were a normal, happy family. Cherish even helped me do the dishes without making her usual snarky comments.

When I considered becoming a foster sister awhile back, this is what I imagined.

My boyfriend's maple-syrupy kiss topped my perfect morning. As I grabbed books from my locker, Dub quietly walked up to me. His breath felt hot against my neck as he leaned in to whisper, "Missed you." I turned around, tripping on his large, worn, green and white All Stars. He caught me, and before I could say anything, he pressed his soft, syrup-flavored lips against mine. I closed my eyes and kissed back, touching my tongue against his. Warmth and excitement zipped through my body.

But now I feel like I've been punched in the stomach. I hang onto the guardrail near the ditch full of cattails and I throw up.

I stay bent over until the nausea passes. I have to swat away a couple of enormous, buzzing flies.

Another truck passes. This driver honks. Lovely. I keep my face low to the ground, and I can't hold back the tears any longer.

I wanted to be a foster sister, but this isn't what I had in mind.

MELTDOWN: PART II

Thursday, April 17



LIZ IS PROBABLY SCOURING the neighborhood streets searching for me. The skin on Mom's neck has surely broken out in a rash by now. She most likely has a fever too. For my mom's sake, I pick up the pace even though my legs shake and my toes feel numb in my All Stars. Red and white, to complement Dub's.

I hate worrying my parents. Especially since stress makes Mom's weak immune system flare up.

Mom and me. We were a team before she met Liz. Then it was Mom and me and Liz.

My father left when I was a baby and moved back to France. He barely knows I exist. To me, the "F" word isn't just the four-letter word found in most R-rated movies; it's the six-letter word—French. Mom made me sign up for freshman French this year to be more in touch with my heritage, though I'd given up on that idea long, long ago.

The word "French" and almost all French things

disgust me, except for a few things like croissants and beignets.

French 'em all—my father, Dub, and especially Cherish.

Sweat continues to ooze from my pores and pools in the thick rolls of my skin. I'm probably burning thousands of calories. I imagine being able to fit into an adorable little bikini on our summer vacation, only two months away. Four days in New Orleans will be amazing, but it won't be just Mom, me, and Liz. Cherish will be there, plus a new foster sibling if everything works out.

Dub's volunteered to watch our dog, Sassy, while we're away. My stomach flip-flops. What was Dub thinking when he kissed Cherish? Have they been talking? Seeing each other? Doing more than just kissing at school?

Across the street from my house, the Wilsons' roof is still covered with a blue tarp because of the hurricane damage from over a year ago. Mom says the Wilsons don't have insurance. I think everyone should have some kind of insurance to fix what's broken, even if it's your family and life.

Finally I inch one foot in front of the other up the driveway of our plain brown, rectangular house. Mom's gray Hocus Focus, as she calls her nonmagical car, is parked under the aluminum cover of our front patio, but Liz's unnamed station wagon is not. The corner section of our patio cover looks like a ripped sheet of paper because of the hurricane's high winds. Liz could have fixed the damage, but after the storm she said, "Let's keep it like this to remind us of how lucky we are." I certainly don't feel lucky.

My hand holds the tarnished doorknob for several seconds before I slowly open the door and sneak inside.

The house is quiet and dark except for a night-light in our den. Sassy approaches, barking a low, unwelcoming bark. “Brrrrruff.”

“Hi, girl!” I quiet her by slipping my fingers into her coat and sailing them across her back. Sassy’s skin twitches as I follow the arch of her spine.

Mom should be lecturing me about being late, but instead her door is closed and a toy monkey with stretchy arms dangles from the handle. I gave it to her the first time she was hospitalized a couple of years ago. Mom now hangs it when she naps so we know when she’s sleeping.

My mother’s lecture would be better than this silence. Sassy yawns and then jumps onto the couch, folding her feet over like a teacher monitoring a class. I almost wish she’d start lecturing me too.

Cherish’s door is closed and the space underneath is dark. Is she out with Dub? Is he telling her all the things he told me on our first date: his favorite color (blue), his favorite food (fried shrimp with ketchup), and how he’s an only child like me?

Cherish is probably making fun of me and my moms right now. Maybe she and Dub are doing more than talking. If I don’t stop thinking about this I’ll get sick again.

The hinges whine as I open the bathroom door, and the scent from a berry candle is so strong a sneeze catches me by surprise. I turn on the faucet and let the water trickle to avoid disturbing Mom more than I already have. The water feels cool as I splash it over my face.

After freshening up and blotting my skin on a coarse towel, I head straight for my stash of 3 Musketeers in my room. Liz secretly buys them for me. After Mom was

diagnosed with lupus, she got rid of most sweets in the house. Anytime I begged for chocolate bars, she'd say, "An unhealthy child is likely to be an unhealthy adult. How about an apple instead?"

After weeks of this, Liz broke down and started sneaking me candy bars—3 Musketeers, my favorite. Mom hasn't caught on. Cherish told me Liz buys her makeup sometimes, the heavy-duty eyeliners and bright lipsticks Mom doesn't like us wearing.

Just as I sink my teeth into the foamy, soft chocolate, the front door opens with a loud clunk. I swallow the sweet bite and then shove the candy bar back underneath my bed.

"Calli? You home?" Liz calls out in a low voice. Sassy barks wildly.

There is no point whispering after Sassy's noisy welcome. "Yes, ma'am!" As much as I want to stay in my room and devour the chocolate, I meet Liz by the front door. My jaw clenches as soon as I see Cherish standing next to her. Cherish has applied a fresh layer of magenta lip gloss. Sick. Dub's mouth touched those lips. She smirks at me as if she can read my mind.

Liz may have been driving around looking for me, but she doesn't seem frantic. When she's stressed, she has a tendency to tug at her gray, short hair until it spikes, but right now her hair is perfectly slicked back. "Oh, good. Your mom was resting, so I left work early to pick Cherish up from school. She called because she missed the bus looking for you. Care to explain?"

"I . . . I, uh . . ." *What the French fries? Cherish was looking for me?*

After tossing her backpack to the ground, Cherish clears her throat. Her heavily lined brown eyes squint, as if daring me to say something about what happened this afternoon. Liz doesn't have a clue about the mind games Cherish plays with me.

"Someone said they saw you running from school. Did you fail a test again or something?" Cherish asks, sounding completely sincere.

"What's this?" Mom asks from the hallway.

Why does she have to wake up *now*? Mom wraps her bathrobe over her T-shirt and jeans. My mother and I lock eyes. She has dark rings underneath them. Can she tell that I've puked and bawled? I don't want to stress her out any more than she already is. "Uh, you know, it was a warm day and you, uh, keep talking about being healthy, so I figured I'd walk home."

"Good idea," Cherish says way too enthusiastically.

I glare at her, and before I have a chance to say something back, Mom says, "Next time you choose an adventure, let the rest of your family know."

The word "family" stings. "Yes, ma'am."

Without saying anything else, Liz heads to the kitchen to brew some peppermint tea. Mom trails her.

I storm off to my room, but Cherish whispers loudly, "You never told me that Dub is such a good kisser."

"Shut up, you—"

"Shh—you don't want your mummies to hear you say a bad word."

"Shut up!"

"Girls?" Mom calls out. Her immune system may be weak, but her hearing isn't.

“Nothing,” Cherish and I answer together.

When I slam the bedroom door, my U.S. history and French textbooks slide off my desk. Where is my iPod?

I dig around on my desk, smashing a dried red rose. I kick the French book, *Français: Bienvenue*. I know Cherish stole my iPod. She probably sold it like she hocked my DVDs she stole. She didn't give me the money she made off of them either. Mom and Liz reimbursed me, but that's not the point.

A million curse words run through my mind, all too horrible to say out loud.

I'm not going to take her crap anymore.

NO!

MORE!

CHICKEN!

TURD!

THE DAY AFTER THE MELTDOWN

Friday, April 18



IF LUPUS WERE CONTAGIOUS, I would've faked sick like I had the inflammatory autoimmune disorder this morning to ditch school. *Oh, my joints! My skin! My fever!* But I wasn't going to let Cherish win that battle. She thinks I'm just accepting things and sulking like I normally do.

"Everything will be fine, just wait and see," my best friend, Delia, says as we walk down the hall together. But the only thing I see is about five people gathered around my locker.

Dub is scribbling something on the face of it. "What are you doing?" I yell. First the kiss, and now this? The crowd turns to look at me. A jerk named Gunner points his phone in my direction and takes a photo. Delia flicks him off.

When I'm closer, Dub moves in front of the locker in an attempt to block the black marks scrawled all over it. "I didn't want you to see this, especially after what happened yesterday," he says. I step close to him so I

can get a better look at what he's trying to protect me from.

Delia gasps.

I've been friends with Dub for so long that part of me wants to bury my head against his clean, familiar smelling body and forget all of this. And then I see a drawing of a large bull with a ring through its nose and the letters "CALLI IS A BULLDY."

Dub had used his pen to cross out the "k" and the "e" at the end of the sentence.

Gunner laughs and takes another cell pic. We've never gotten along. . . . Did he write this? I doubt he'd be documenting my humiliation right in my face if he had, plus there's a more likely suspect. Cherish stayed late after school yesterday, supposedly looking for me. I'm not sure how she could've pulled off defacing my locker with teachers roaming the halls, but the girl's sneaky and has motive. She always says how weird it is that I have two moms, and how I'm probably a "lez like them."

This means war.

As if two pictures weren't enough, Gunner snaps another. I can only imagine where these photos will end up. On the Internet for the entire world to see I'm sure.

It's like Dub can read my mind because he straightens up and tells Gunner, "Put that freaking thing away."

Gunner scowls in return. "Or what?"

Dub responds by shoving him. Gunner's phone flies out of his hand, and Dub dives after it. He seizes the phone and presses a few buttons.

Delia's mouth is still hanging open, and the rest of the students around us back off like they're uncertain

what Dub might do next. I'm confident the pictures are long gone and Gunner won't dare take another. I appreciate that Dub's looking out for me, but half the campus has probably already seen the damage. Not to mention the damage Dub caused me yesterday.

"Give me my phone back," Gunner says in a demanding voice. I notice that when he extends his hand, it's shaking the slightest bit.

Dub makes a fist around Gunner's phone and raises his arm like he's going to toss it down the hallway.

I pull at his elbow. "Dub, don't." His skin feels just as familiar as it smells.

"What's going on?" an approaching teacher asks.

Dub hands Gunner's phone back like there was never an issue between the two of them and explains the situation. "Someone messed with my girlfriend's locker."

Gunner doesn't say a thing. A few other people make comments to support what Dub has said, but their voices fade as I replay Dub's comment with an emphasis on the word "girlfriend." He still thinks of me as his girlfriend after what happened yesterday?

Before I have a chance to mull this over, the teacher moves forward to inspect the graffiti. This teacher has no idea who I am, which makes the humiliation even worse.

I sneak away, and Delia follows. I glance back at Dub and we lock eyes for a moment. It's hard to read his expression, but I want him to still care about me as much as he used to.

Delia and I stay in the bathroom even though the tardy bell has just rung. She's coloring on fresh eyeliner and

eye shadow for me after my first application smeared off post-locker incident.

“I can’t believe Dub was so pissed!” Delia says.

I’m more surprised about my vandalized locker than I am about Dub’s response. He’s always looked out for me. When I try to explain this to Delia, she says, “Shh! Calli, close your eyes.”

Why would anyone do something so mean? Mom and Liz love each other. I’m their daughter. What have we ever done?

Not like this is the first time I’ve had to deal with similar crap.

When I attended the Academy of the Holy Rosary in elementary school, there was a big stink because some parents thought I might morally corrupt the other students since I had two “intrinsically disordered” moms. I dropped out and went to public school.

I’d hoped that everyone would be more accepting in public school, but I was delusional. When people found out I had two moms, there were all kinds of rumors about them, and me too. Even Dub assumed I was a lesbian based on the things he’d heard. None of them was true, of course—I’ve always been attracted to the opposite sex.

“Stop squinting,” Delia says.

“Fine.”

When we walk out of the bathroom a few minutes later, the hall is empty except for a janitor who’s scrubbing the front of my locker. I have to give it to Dub for taking care of this disaster, though I refuse to forget that he created yesterday’s.

I have a chance to thank him after first period when he's waiting for me in the hallway. He has my entire schedule memorized, and he usually walks me to all my classes.

"Calli, you should know I feel horrible about everything's that happened." Dub tries to hug me, but I push him away even though it's incredibly hard to do.

"Thanks for looking out for me, but it doesn't change the fact that you kissed Cherish. I need my space." And just like I walked away from the scene this morning and ran home yesterday, I leave Dub standing there. This time I don't look back at him.

THE DAY AFTER THE MELTDOWN,
CONTINUED

Friday, April 18



THIS LONG SCHOOL DAY is finally over. Delia and I cram onto bus #72 like farm animals, which reminds me of seventh grade when Gunner got some people chanting “Moo! Moo!” after I spilled milk down the front of my shirt in the cafeteria.

Gunner mooed at me every day in the cafeteria for weeks until a cute, tall eighth grader with chopstick-thin legs got in his face and told him to shut it. A fight would’ve broken out if a teacher hadn’t stepped in. After that, plus a trip to the office, Gunner left me alone . . . for the most part.

Back then I couldn’t believe Dub would stand up for me. I had no clue he knew I existed, or someone cute like him would care enough to stop Gunner’s bovine antics. We became friends after, and on May 31 of last year, we went to Spar Waterpark in Sulfer together. I slipped on some steps, falling so hard I scraped layers of skin off my

knees. Dub picked me up, and when I started to cry, he hugged me. Then that hug turned into a kiss. My very first kiss. We've been together since.

Our anniversary is next month, which makes it hurt even worse that he kissed Cherish. I was going to give him a pair of green All Stars with red racing stripes.

I. Must. Stop. Thinking. About. Dub.

My eyes mist up. I play it off the best I can by sniffing like this old bus is aggravating my allergies.

Delia leans in to ask if I'm upset. I shake my head no even though we both know I am.

"You'll be fine," she says, loud enough that her friend Torey turns around.

I fake a sneeze.

While we wait for the line of students in front of us to settle into their seats, Delia digs through her bag and pulls out a pack of fluorescent green gum. She offers me a piece but I decline. Braces and gum don't mix.

Before we slump into a seat in the middle of the bus, I scan the rows out of habit—Cherish usually sits near the emergency exit with the juniors and seniors. Ninth graders usually don't hang out in the back, but that girl has one heck of a reputation.

Thank God she has some appointment with her case-worker, Michelle, so I don't have to deal with her. Cherish has additional appointments tomorrow. I'm not sure about all of the fostering details, but I do know Mom and Liz drive her to quite a few places. Our lives seem to have been taken over by fostering.

After Mom and Liz sent in the paperwork to foster, folks from the Department of Children and Family

Services interviewed us and inspected our house. It was like my moms were becoming spies with all the FBI and police background checks, plus training. Becoming spies probably would've been less traumatic.

I didn't think Mom and Liz would be allowed to become foster parents because there are laws in place regarding gay people and stuff like marriage and adoption. At least Louisiana isn't as strict as other states. My moms met the qualifications to become certified even if they got attitude from a few people. I think it might've helped that Liz grew up in the foster care system, "aging out" at the age of eighteen without ever getting adopted.

My mother's illness was a concern too, but lupus isn't communicable and her doctor approved the documentation. We all had to prove we were free from contagious diseases. I never thought the certification process would end, but here we are now. One big happy family.

The bus is warm. Stuffy. Delia pulls her wild, curly hair into a ponytail. Her curls are so tight and thick that the hair on top of her head looks like waves from the Gulf of Mexico. She smacks her gum and then whispers, "Well, you survived today."

I'm still fighting back the tears, so I nod again—this time yes.

"Want to hang out?" Delia asks as the bus gets close to her stop on New Orleans Street. Delia doesn't know about my plans. She'd tell me to let it go.

"Thanks, but my mom's forcing me to study French." It isn't a complete lie.

"Okay," she says as the bus brakes. "I'll call you later about the Intervention."

“Sure.” I watch as she sidesteps past all the knees jutting out in the bus aisle. After I broke down on the phone with her last night, Delia made plans for her mom to take us to Prien Lake Mall tomorrow at noon. Mom said fine as long as she didn’t have to drive us since she has plans with Cherish. I’ve been hearing that a lot lately.

The bus driver takes off quickly after Delia and another girl exit, throwing my head back on the seat. I can’t wait to get home. Only three more stops and one day before the Intervention. I start picturing pretty gowns.

Delia’s sister, Rashell, took the two of us shopping for her senior prom. She let us try on dresses too and listened to our opinions about which gown she should buy. When Rashell moved to New York for college, Delia and I had our first Intervention, trying on prom dresses in her honor at JCPenney. We named the shopping trip an Intervention after watching some after school special about a girl who intervened in her best friend’s drug abuse. Delia isn’t a meth addict (gum maybe) or depressed, although she did keep crying about how no guys were ever interested in her and how lonely it was without Rashell.

“Mom?” I call out as I unlock our front door. Whew! No answer. Fortunately Mom and Cherish are still dealing with foster stuff. Liz is busy at work.

“Hi, Sassy.” Her tail turbo-wags when I toss her a Milk-Bone from underneath the kitchen island. Before eating her treat, she tosses it in the air and rolls on it first.

My stomach grumbles and even Mom’s flaxseed oat snacks sound tasty, but time is ticking away.

I don't dare flip on the light in Cherish's room, though it isn't technically *her* room. It used to be my grandmother's room, my mother's mother, when she visited. This wasn't often because she didn't agree with Mom and Liz's lifestyle. If she were still alive, she'd freak out that they're foster parents. I can almost hear her hoarse voice say, "That's not right. Unnatural, I tell you."

A small spray of sunshine peeks through the closed blinds revealing neatly arranged piles of paper on Cherish's desk—my old desk. I dig through the stacks to find my iPod. I could ask Mom and Liz to reimburse me like they did before with the DVDs, but they had saved up for weeks to buy it for my birthday. I know they get money for being foster parents, but they're constantly buying stuff for Cherish. At her last foster home, she didn't have many things, so Mom and Liz make sure she has everything she needs and more. From what they've said, her previous foster mother would feed her biological kids first, and it was too bad if there wasn't food left over for Cherish and the other foster kid. Cherish had never had brand-new clothes before coming to our house. Liz took her shopping the very next day. Despite her rough past, I still think Cherish should be responsible for her actions.

In Cherish's homework pile, I find a handwritten essay Mom has helped her write about François Barbé-Marbois. He may have negotiated the Louisiana Purchase, but to me his French name is like nails on a chalkboard. I crumple the essay.

Going through her stack of things, I also find an engraved pen that used to belong to my father. Mom had passed it on to me so I'd have something of his besides

genes. I hadn't realized it was missing. I stuff it into my pocket.

I try not to shuffle the tubes of lipstick or lip gloss in her organized makeup drawer. I keep the furniture in place so it won't look obvious someone raided her stuff. But I still can't find my iPod. It's probably long gone by now, so I'll have to take something valuable of hers.

There's a whole stack of untouched school supplies Mom bought for her when she moved in. Things weren't nearly as complicated then. Delia's sister, Rashell, was home from college for Christmas break and I was still excited about fulfilling my dream of becoming a sister and making a difference in someone's life. Mom and Liz had wanted to foster younger children, but they got word about a special teen, same age as me, in desperate need of placement. From what I could gather, the girl had been abused by her stepfather in the past and didn't exactly mind my family's "special" circumstances. She liked that Liz had been in foster care most of her life too. Things moved forward, and I wanted more than anything else to be the sister this girl desperately needed. We even had cute sistery names: Calli and Cherish.

In the closet Cherish's new clothes are grouped by school colors. Hunter green. White. Navy blue.

There isn't anything valuable enough of hers to lift. I get so frantic that I dig through her underwear drawer. She has a colorful collection of thongs. My moms must not care. Delia's mom lets her wear thongs, but my mother told me I can't wear them until I'm at least sixteen. Too mature, she said. I'm mature, but Mom doesn't seem to agree.

Digging carefully through the lace and the zebra patterns, I find something valuable enough. When I grab the necklace and dangle it from my hands, I realize there's a locket attached. The picture inside is hard to make out, a faded image of an older woman.

Even in the darkened room, the gold necklace sparkles. I wonder how much I'll get for it at a pawn shop.

I swallow hard and leave her room as organized as I found it.

Back in my room, the crumpled essay shreds easily, reminding me of the hurricane shredding the aluminum on our front porch. The wind didn't have a purpose, but I do. I'm finally fighting back.

So why don't I feel better about it? Ripping the essay should've been satisfying, but there is a knot in my throat.

I've never done something so wrong on purpose.

I bury the essay remains deep in my trashcan. Liz will be surprised when I volunteer to dump the trash tonight.

My fingers clasp the necklace until the metal is the same temperature as my hand. After thinking about it, I decide the perfect hiding place is the 3 Musketeers box under my bed.

I eat a chocolate bar so fast I can barely taste it, and I set the necklace inside of the silvery wrapper to disguise it.

The candy settles heavy.

To read the rest of Calli's story, please
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