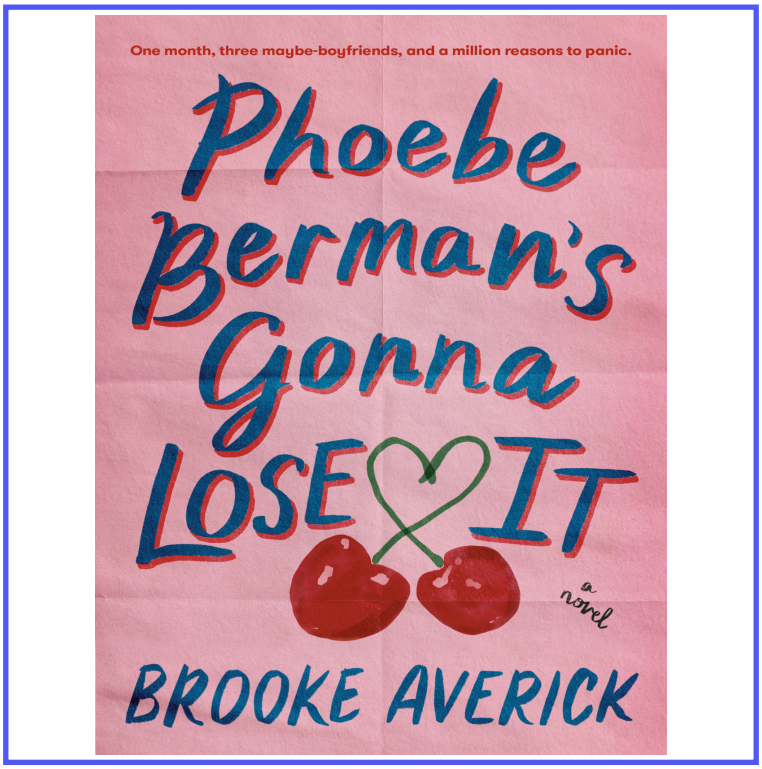


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About the Author

For the nervous pukers

Author's Note

Much like the character in the book you're about to read, I love love. Rom-coms and romance novels are the greatest source of comfort for me, which is ironic, because sex and dating are the two things that cause me the most stress and anxiety in real life. Getting lost in a fictional love story has always been my preferred way to self-soothe, but recently, I've been finding it increasingly challenging to relate to the sexually empowered female leads in so many of my favorite books.

Physical intimacy seems to come naturally to most of the characters in these stories, and while reading them, I always find myself wondering: Where's the part before the first date where our main character can't get off the toilet thanks to a bout of anxious diarrhea? Or the part where she freaks out and cancels the date altogether? And what's going on with these sex scenes? Are we just omitting the pre-sex panic attack for the sake of pacing? I know I'm not the only one who struggles with these types of anxieties, but so rarely do we see them advertised proudly in the romance section of our local bookstores. And so, when I started writing about Phoebe, my initial hope was that a book centered around a character with crippling intimacy anxiety would find its place on the romance table sandwiched in between an Emily Henry and an Abby Jimenez title.

It took me writing all of five pages to realize why we haven't seen narratives like Phoebe's in the romance section. Simply put, anxiety is not romantic. It's messy and uncomfortable and funny and sad, and all these things make it incredibly difficult to create a modern-day fairy tale.

So, what you're about to read may not be as traditionally flirty and sexy as what you're used to, but I'd like to think it's a love story for the ages.

Prologue

All I ever thought about was falling in love.

There were approximately one hundred and fifty boys in my grade at Manhasset Central Middle School. By the time I turned twelve, I had been in love with at least one hundred and twenty-five of them. If I didn't have a crush, I didn't see the point of getting out of bed in the morning.

I devoured Nicholas Sparks and Sarah Dessen novels like they were my death row meal. The Pottery Barn bookshelf in my childhood bedroom overflowed with neatly organized stacks of young adult romances. The spines were cracked and the pages torn, and my copy of *The Fault in Our Stars* was missing its cover. Sometimes, while I was rereading one of my favorites, a chunk of pages would fall into my lap. My dad would help me glue them back in with a special adhesive from his toolbox.

I kept the more mature romances hidden under my mattress so that my mom wouldn't find them. After school on Fridays, I'd visit the thrift store down the street, where the owner, Mrs. Wilson, would be waiting with a stack of mass-market paperbacks she thought I'd enjoy. I'd buy however many I could afford with my leftover lunch money from the week and run home to stash them with the rest of my collection. I only read those in the dark, under the blankets with a flashlight.

Every night, I'd daydream myself to sleep. I would scan through my mental Rolodex of boys I liked from school and pick one to star as my leading man. Sometimes two or three, if the fantasy called for multiple lovers fighting over me. But usually just one. I thought about what our first kiss would be like. Would he tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear before he leaned in? Or maybe he would place a gentle peck on both my eyelids before finally brushing his lips against mine? *"I love you, Phoebe,"* he

would say. *“From the moment I first laid eyes on you, I have always loved you.”*

These are the types of scenarios that I played on repeat in my mind and read over and over again in my books. But despite all my romantic longing, by the time seventh grade rolled around, I was the only one of my friends who hadn’t had their first kiss. Sometimes I wondered if it was because I wanted it too bad.

And then, finally, things started to look up.

It was the first week of school. Determined to look my best, I woke up an hour earlier than usual. With the concealer I’d swiped from my mom’s makeup drawer, I dabbed at the small bumps that had recently started popping up across my forehead. The pale beige shade was too light for my olive skin and only made the pimples look more pronounced, but at least they were no longer an irritated shade of red. A win for me at the time. I slicked my curls back into a high ponytail with a bottle of foamy mousse and coated my lips with a layer of the stickiest lip gloss I could find. For the first time, I used the tool that my dentist had given me to floss in between my braces. My gums had just barely stopped bleeding by the time the bus dropped me off at school, right on time for our annual welcome-back assembly.

The entire student body was crammed into the musty auditorium. I was sitting in the far-left section of the back row, the area that was infamously obstructed by a giant pole. Making out with someone back there was a rite of passage, one that I was so sure thousands of pages of romance novels had prepared me for.

Lucas Johnson was sitting next to me. My friends knew I liked Lucas, his friends knew he liked me, and that’s all it took for them to corner us into sitting together. As Principal Roxbury droned on and on about the importance of academic integrity, all I could think was *I’m about to have my first kiss.*

Lucas’s hairy thigh was pressed up against my much hairier thigh, a recent development from over the summer. (“She must take after you,” my mom not-so-subtly whispered to my dad when they picked me up from

sleepaway camp, her eyes fixed on the thick black hair covering the exposed skin below my bedazzled jean shorts. And when I finally asked her to teach me how to shave, she refused to let me shave above the knee. “It’s a different type of hair up there,” she had said. “Once you start shaving it, you’ll never be able to stop.”)

(Wasn’t that the point?)

Lucas didn’t seem to mind my thigh hair, though, as his sweaty hand rested on top of it. In my fantasies, Lucas would hold my hand, rubbing gentle circles around my thumb as he looked into my eyes and whispered, “Gosh, Phoebe, you’re so beautiful.” His damp hand certainly *would not* be pressed against my upper leg like this, and he definitely *would not* have a whitehead in the corner of his nose that looked like it could burst at any moment.

The air in the room was ripe as the bodies of hundreds of adolescents packed together like sardines. I thought about Prince Damon, the protagonist from the latest book I’d bought from Mrs. Wilson. Despite being captured and tortured for information, he never gave up the location of his beloved, the lost princess of Alencia. He died protecting her. But I was sure that if you had forced the prince to withstand the smell of this auditorium for more than five minutes, he would have talked. Lucas, who I’m pretty sure opted for Abercrombie & Fitch body spray in place of deodorant, was partially to blame. I subtly leaned toward him and took a whiff, wondering if I could at least detect notes of sea salt and summer, like Nicholas Sparks said I would.

Instead, my eyes watered from the smell of onion.

Principal Roxbury queued up a welcome-back-to-school montage, a collection of photos from years past thrown into iMovie and set to “Good Riddance” by Green Day.

Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road, the song began.

Lucas put his arm around me. I expected the pressure to feel like a weighted blanket, that specific kind of heaviness that makes you feel safe. But instead, his touch sent a chill through me.

My insides started to shiver.

Wasn't I sweating just a minute ago?

An iciness spread across my palms. I tried wiggling my fingers, hopeful that the movement would restore some warmth to my hands.

But they were frozen solid.

I turned to Lucas, prepared to ask him if he, too, was experiencing the sudden drop in temperature. When I opened my mouth to speak, the words were stuck, blocked by a giant lump in my throat.

I can't breathe.

I became desperate to get rid of the lump. I kept trying to swallow, over and over and over again, but it was impossible. My mouth had gone completely dry.

My breath started coming in uneven, shallow spurts.

My throat is closing up.

I tried focusing on Principal Roxbury's presentation, but I was consumed by the weight of Lucas's arm wrapped around me. He started rubbing circles on my shoulder, faster and rougher than the ones I had imagined him tracing gently along my thumb. I could feel my heartbeat in the center of my clammy palms, I could hear it ringing in my ears, and I could see it in the corners of my eyes as my vision started to blur.

I'm dying.

Was this what it was supposed to feel like before your first kiss? I thought back to my books. Not once was there a mention of something like *this* happening to any of the characters leading up to a kissing scene. This wasn't right.

And for the first time, I thought: *There's something really wrong with me.*

The tighter Lucas's grip around me became, the larger the lump in my throat grew, until I was convinced he could see it poking out of my neck. Cheers echoed through the room as my classmates spotted themselves on the screen, blissfully unaware that there was a seventh-grade girl about to die in the back row, and as the song started on its final refrain, Lucas leaned in. I kept my eyes trained on his whitehead as I sat completely still, bracing myself.

His mouth was only inches away from mine when an image of the cereal I'd had for breakfast popped into my head.

How odd.

My stomach churned. Our lips didn't even have a chance to make contact before I projectile vomited.

All over him.

He screamed.

Every head in the auditorium swiveled away from the presentation at the front and toward the chaos in the back. Lucas got up and ran to the exit, still yelling and covered in the contents of my stomach. The speakers blasted the song's final line, *I hope you had the time of your life*, as the doors slammed shut behind him.

I wondered how long I could get away with staying behind the pole. Forever wouldn't have been long enough.

—

It's been seventeen years, and I'm still haunted by the memory of my regurgitated Frosted Flakes slowly dripping down Lucas's face. I live in constant fear of something like that happening again, of slipping into a state of total panic and losing control of myself.

I've spent thousands of dollars in therapy trying to figure out what went wrong that day in the auditorium and why it's kept happening over the years, why the lump in my throat comes back at the thought of getting physical with someone. Or even going on a date.

I still have no answers.

But despite not knowing why I am the way that I am, I'm absolutely sure of two things:

1. I'm going to be thirty in a month.

This one is a given.

2. I’m still a virgin.

This one, though, I’m determined to change.
Starting now.