

Dear Reader,

Riddle me this: what do six author-friends who've cowritten two successful interconnected romance novels—one set in summer, the other in winter—decide to do for their third trip around the narrative block (pun very much intended)? A third collection of interconnected love stories, perhaps set during the sweetness of spring or the coziness of fall, would make the most sense, yes? Hello, #CuffingSeason!

Which is precisely why we made things incredibly hard on ourselves and went in a totally different direction. Gotta keep y'all on your toes or whatnot.

That's exactly what the book you're holding attempts to do. It's twisty and turny and head-spinny and murderly. The tea is hot and it gets spilled (alongside the blood ☹️). And while there's humor (shout-out to Angie), kissing (Hey, Nicola!), lush descriptions of food (looking at you, Dhonielle), betrayal galore (thanks, Tiffany!), prose so gorgeous it'll make you teary-eyed (an Ashley signature), more parenthetical asides than you'll know what to do with (gotta love that Nic), and romances blooming like roses through cracks in concrete—it wouldn't be an Out book without all of those things—you'll also be on the edge of your seat with every page turn.

Why? Well . . . why not?

At the heart of *Breakout* was our desire to do something we hadn't seen done before: to cocreate a novel full of kids none of us had ever seen on the page. Kids who are wealthy. Intellectually gifted. Well connected. Socially powerful. Full of confidence and bravado (and messiness). And most importantly: Black.

We wanted to tell a story that hasn't been told. To create a world that's vastly different from the ones Black kids are typically permitted to inhabit in books. To craft a tale where the enemy isn't racism or oppression but one's own secrets and the pressure to keep up appearances.

We wanted to give you something new.

Hope you survive it.

With love (always!),
Dhonielle, Tiffany, Nic,
Angie, Ashley, and Nicola

Breakout

ALSO BY THE *BREAKOUT* TEAM

Blackout

Whiteout

Break out

Dhonielle Clayton

Tiffany D. Jackson

Nic Stone

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Nicola Yoon





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To the ones who have learned to maneuver.
We see you. Keep it up.

PRESENT DAY

N O E L L E C L A R K E

April 6
2:16 p.m.

A LIE TASTED delicious. A cherry ice pop on a hot day or a pumpkin-spiced latte as the weather cooled. There were as many flavors of lies as there were of the petit macarons in the glass windows of Noelle Clarke's favorite patisserie in Georgetown. Some lies were savory, with bits of pistachios and matcha, the truth folded into the fabrication to make them more sincere. Some were even gory, like her father's signature dish at Red Bone, his world-renowned restaurant: a luxurious beef bone, sliced open to reveal the decadent marrow inside, pomegranate reduction drizzled on top, like blood.

But the lie leaving Noelle's mouth was thick and salty, like burnt caramel crystallized along the edges of an expensive saucepan.

"I didn't do anything, you know?" she told the nurse who was slipping a blood pressure cuff around her bicep. "It wasn't me."

The red-faced woman didn't glance up from her chart. "I'm just here to get your vitals, honey."

"Then I can go home?" Noelle searched the woman's face for the truth. Every person she'd encountered since leaving the boat was lying. The sweet kind of lies. And she knew it.

“Of course. You’ve all been through a trauma. We have to run tests to make sure you’re both physically and mentally okay. It’s just terrible what happened.”

Noelle didn’t need a reminder that the last few days had been awful—monstrous, in fact. She’d barely made it out. “But how long will it take?” Her front teeth nibbled her bottom lip until she got what she was after: blood. She felt bad about breaking the skin, but only a little bit. The *nasty habit*, as her mother called it, should’ve been “fixed” by now with all the expensive therapy appointments, stinging objects, and menthol-laced lip gloss her parents had invested in to deter the compulsion. But as the first metallic pearl oozed through the cut, throbbing with heat, Noelle was reminded that she was still alive. That she’d survived what had happened on that godforsaken island.

The nurse shook her head. “What did I tell you about doing that?” She handed Noelle a piece of gauze to apply pressure before wiping it with stinging antiseptic.

Noelle flinched as her skin sizzled. “I want to go home.” This was probably the hundredth time she’d said it.

“The officers will be back soon, and we need the results of your bloodwork and tests. Some of you were in such bad shape . . .” The nurse’s statement had a question underneath: *How did you get hurt like this?*

The machine beeped. They watched together as Noelle’s heart rate spiked. She didn’t know how to respond. She didn’t know where

to begin. She didn't know if she even wanted to.

So she avoided eye contact, instead surveying the small hospital room again, counting each item like she did when she'd prepare to bake one of her award-winning creations. (She'd won the Washington, DC, Capital City Junior Bake-Off Championship two years in a row.) She'd assess each ingredient, making a mental inventory of what she was working with. In this current reality: a tiny bathroom with a leaky faucet she could hear when the room got too quiet; one wobbly chair; a hospital bed that she reluctantly occupied; a single window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean (a body of water she never wanted to see again if she could help it); and one door leading to a hall clogged with police officers, detectives, and security. Aka, her only exit led right to the people who wanted to keep her here.

The machine beeped again, and the blood pressure cuff pulled her focus back to the nurse. The woman's blue gaze was fixed on Noelle's injuries with curiosity. Noelle wondered if she could see deeper, beyond the cuts and bruises, down to her heart where the real damage lay. Noelle knew if she caught a glimpse of herself in the small wall mirror, she'd see just how terrible she looked. Her brown skin boasted a constellation of bruises. The whites of her eyes were streaked with red. Dried blood crusted in the stitches holding the gash in her chin shut. And her twists had unraveled, releasing her thick curls: a lion's mane dirtied with sand, salt, and seaweed.

"Your blood pressure is higher than it should be," the nurse reported. "You need to rest and try to stay calm." She rubbed Noelle's

shoulder. “I may need to add something to your IV to help.”

Noelle bit her bottom lip again, the weak, half-formed scab easily giving in to her anxieties. “They’re going to lie about me,” she said as fresh blood hit her tongue. “They always do.”

The nurse’s eyebrows lifted. “Who?”

Noelle glared out the window. “My friends.”

“Well, if they’re *good* friends, they won’t.”

Noelle gritted her teeth. “You don’t know them. They’re—”

The door swung open. A man entered, a gun at his hip, and a streak of sunburn on his white nose noticeable against his all-black clothes. “Are you ready to talk now?”

“I’ll be back to check on you later.” The nurse patted Noelle’s leg, then nodded at the detective and left the room.

Noelle stared forward, eyes fixed on bursts of lightning illuminating dark storm clouds rolling in over the ocean. A week ago, she would’ve been in awe of the view.

The detective dragged the chair closer to the bed, and the screech of the legs set her nerves on edge. “I’m Detective Franco. We can start at the beginning.”

Noelle crossed her arms and refused to look at him. “I don’t have anything to say.”

“Oh, that can’t be true. Not when each of your friends called you the ringleader.” He tapped his notepad.

Noelle squirmed, fixating on the storm outside. It grew closer and closer by the minute. “Yeah, okay . . .”

He flipped the pages and read. “They said you control everything. That you run the crew . . . the Six, is it?” He gazed up, and Noelle felt his eyes burning into her. “Oh, and Keisha White was your best friend?”

“Keisha White is dead,” Noelle replied matter-of-factly, willing her mind not to summon images of Key’s dead face. The bulge of her pretty heterochromic eyes, one blue and one green. The blue tinge in her full lips. The graying of her light brown skin.

“She died last year around this time, right? Very sad. Heartbreaking for everyone involved, I’m sure. Very sorry for your loss.”

Noelle gulped down the lump in her throat. “I don’t want to talk about her.”

“Maybe you’ll want to talk about Anthony Brooks, then?”

A shiver raced across Noelle’s skin. She shoved her hands beneath her thighs to keep them from trembling and forced herself to meet his eyes this time. “Like I told you before, I didn’t do anything. I don’t know anything.” She looked away. “I want to talk to my parents.”

“They’re on their way now that those twin hurricanes have passed. Boarded a plane from Washington, DC, thirty minutes ago. In the meantime, we need some answers.” The man clicked his pen. “Anthony was your boyfriend, yes?”

Tears welled in her eyes despite her attempts to fight them. “Yes,” she muttered.

“Mm-hmm . . .” Noelle didn’t know what he was scribbling, but

it made her neck itch. “So, what happened on the island, Noelle?” he pressed.

She clenched her jaw.

“The Six—your crew—all of them said you were to blame. That *you* did this.”

Noelle’s head snapped up, her breaking point reached. “They’re fucking lying!” she screamed. “They’re terrible people, all of them! They’ll never tell you what *really* happened!”

She pulled her knees to her chest and rocked back and forth, willing her pulse to slow, but it galloped. As the man asked more questions, her ears filled with the beeping of machines and the slamming of doors and the crashing of thunder outside.

The storm inside Noelle raged, mirroring the one through the window. People always said they wanted to know the truth. They told lies about how revealing your secrets would set you free. But what happened when the truth was ugly? No one actually wanted to know how a person’s neck snapped like a twig or how their lungs filled with water or how they choked to death. No one wanted the details of what it was like to watch the light leave a person’s eyes.

At seventeen, Noelle understood that humans preferred their truth sweetened and softened with lies like brown sugar melted into butter. So she would bake the most beautiful lies.

She had no choice.

THE WEEK BEFORE

SPRING BREAK

SUNDAY

CHAPTER ONE

A N T H O N Y

8:48 a.m.

AS THE GROUP piled out of the Sprinter van into the late afternoon sun, Anthony Brooks exhaled and let his shoulders drop.

“Bruh, I’m not a road trip guy *at all*, but I could go some places in that joint,” Dwayne said, looking back at the glistening black vehicle. “The hours flew by. Is everything in your life that smooth?”

Ant smiled but didn’t respond. Just inhaled deep. The sun was high and bright in a cloudless sky, and the ocean-salted air was cool and fresh. Everything was going according to plan.

“Ant, that’s *you*, dawg?” asked Quintin. Or Quatro, as everyone called him. “Damn, son!”

Ant grinned. His dad’s yacht was impressive for sure: The *Nocturna* was all black with clean lines, chrome accents, and a wraparound ebony deck that never got too hot to lie on. There was a plunge pool in the front and a hot tub in the back, and Ant had no doubt everyone would lose their minds when they went down into the belly of the boat and discovered the movie theater and game room: billiards, air hockey, pinball, Pac-Man, and six different

gaming consoles all hooked up to an eighty-five-inch TV. With surround sound.

He loved that they'd just gotten off a private jet from DC to Key West, but everyone still had room to be impressed. And all with him.

"Mmmmm . . . that sure is a lot of water," Noelle said, materializing on Ant's right side. She grabbed his hand, but he wasn't really in the mood for the PDA. He needed to keep a little distance for his own sake.

"I'm the varsity swim captain, babe," he said, pulling away and giving her a pat on the back. "You know I'm not gonna let you drown."

Ant fixed his gaze back on the yacht and let the rest of the tension melt from his broad shoulders. Though not the favorite—that honor went to a McLaren convertible his dad had won off a bet with an oil magnate in the UAE—the yacht was, by far, Kelvin Brooks's most expensive toy. And he'd stuffed it to the gills with his preferred sources of entertainment from his late-twentieth-century childhood. In truth, Ant hadn't been entirely sure the yacht was going to be docked: Dear ol' Pops could be a little wishy-washy when it came to his only son, especially when said son's requests involved the use of Pops's precious things.

But it seemed like sending his father the list of names, which included the offspring of politicians—two of whom were trying to land the Democratic nomination for president—as well as the son

of an NFL Hall-of-Famer and the daughter of their illustrious private school's founder, had done the trick. Did Ant have a backup plan in case the yacht hadn't been waiting for them? Of course he did. And a backup to the backup. Obviously. He knew how to flex and impress. And he had big plans that needed to go perfectly.

He was relieved everything seemed to be working out. Ant knew how difficult it was for Pops to resist anything that smelled like a networking opportunity, especially for his "progeny," as he referred to Ant, and Ant couldn't have been more thrilled that the name-dropping tactic had worked.

It felt like a good omen, and Ant was thankful. He needed all the luck he could get to pull off "the week of a lifetime" he'd promised his new friends.

He let the rest of the group pull a little bit ahead of him as they made their way down the port. When Ant had initially pitched the idea for this little spring break getaway at Kuzimu, an all-inclusive resort on a private island in the Florida Keys—both of which were owned by his "Hospitality King" father—he wasn't sure any of his classmates would bite. Yeah, he'd been at Thurgood Marshall Academy since the beginning of the school year, and he'd had at least one class with all but two members of the final spring break crew, but he was still the new kid. One who hadn't even been able to come up with a dope enough backstory to wow them. He'd realized too late that the lie he told people was actually really boring: he'd moved to DC from Atlanta because his mom wanted a change of scenery, and

they already owned a home in the nation's capital.

And though Ant had managed to form a couple of decent acquaintanceships, he—and everyone else on that campus—was well aware that one group of kids held sway over just about everything Thurgood-related: which classes were offered, which other schools were invited to their annual gala, what kind of food was served in the cafeteria, and which events would make it onto the school social calendar.

The Six.

Noelle Clarke. Sydney Davis. Quintin McCallum IV. Dwayne Harris. River Reynolds. Keisha White.

And most of them were right there in front of him. All but Keisha—or *Key*, as he'd heard them refer to her. She'd passed away the previous year, but despite having been the proverbial queen bee of their group (or so was the word around school), no one ever wanted to talk about her. At any rate, what once had been the Six was now the Five. And even without Key, they were still the most powerful kids at Thurgood Marshall Academy.

Ant let his eyes roam over their heads and smiled. It was *his* family's yacht they were about to board. He'd actually pulled it off. Which both blew him away and scared the shit out of him. He'd spent seven months learning as much as he could about them: The Six had met in kindergarten. They'd gone to some super-exclusive private elementary school full of diplomat offspring and had been the only Black kids in the building. So their parents bonded. Noelle's

mom, a PhD-level, National Hall of Fame educator who'd been on *Oprah* back in the early 2000s, decided enough was enough and started Thurgood Marshall Academy with Keisha's mom, a tech titan who'd left San Francisco to work for the government.

The story was so well known, it might as well have been on a plaque near the school's entrance.

For as long as Ant could remember, Pops had drilled one thing into him: *People couldn't care less about what you know until they know who you know.*

Ant had *plans*, and the Five had all sorts of access. And knowledge. It was a no-brainer. He had to impress them. He had to know them. He'd already made himself invaluable to each of them in different ways. Now, he just had to continue to deliver on all his promises.

There was a burst of static before a female voice crackled through a two-way radio: "Johnson, I'm gonna head onto the vessel and do a sweep. Hold the group back until you get the all clear."

"Roger that," said a giant of a man clad in all black hovering just behind Ant's left shoulder. He'd almost forgotten ol' dude was there. The reminder dampened Ant's mood. As thrilled as he was that they'd all come, accomplishing that came with some unfortunate stipulations. Like the inclusion of a literal security detail for two of the members. ("This is what happens when your mom is a damn senator," Sydney told Ant when she let him know there would be two "executive protection agents" with them on the trip. One for her and one for Dwayne, the kid of a governor.)

In the long run, though, Ant guessed it didn't really matter: once the yacht left the port, there'd be no turning back. It was go time, and follow-through was paramount.

This *would* be the trip of a lifetime. And no one would ever forget it. He'd bet the boat in front of them on that. He was *that* good.

Ant absentmindedly adjusted his gold rope chain so the clasp was centered at the back of his neck. He let his gaze lock on Noelle, whose waist-length twists were already swollen from the Florida humidity. She was up near the front of the group now and had just thrown her head back in laughter, likely telling an unfunny joke in an attempt to try to get one of them to talk to her again. The sound hit Ant's ears as powerfully as the drop of his favorite hip-hop beat—neurotic as she sometimes could be, Noelle could light up a room with her smile—so he took his laptop from his backpack. He had to stay focused. Having the playlist queued up so he could turn it on in the rec room as they entered (to show off the surround sound) was non-negotiable. Yes, he'd gotten in with the Five as intended, but there was far more he wanted—no, *needed*—to learn.

“Man, that chain don't make your neck itch in all this heat?” Quintin—Quatro—asked as he looked at Ant over his shoulder. “No doubt it's *real* considering the water castle we're getting on, but don't sweat plus metal—even if it's precious—cause some sort of reaction?”

Ant shrugged and started his ultimate playlist. “Never been a problem for me before. I even swim in it when I'm allowed to.

Brings me luck.”

Quatro and Dwayne smirked in tandem. “Of course you do,” Dwayne said.

Ant debated sniping back, but the moment he opened his mouth, the two-way radio beeped on Johnson’s shoulder.

“We’re all clear,” came the voice of the female bodyguard. “All aboard, I guess.”

“Ten four,” Johnson said.

Ant grinned and let Dwayne’s little dig drop. It wasn’t important. Not anymore. The sound from beneath his feet changed as they shifted from walking on concrete to the wood of the dock. They were almost there.

“Oh my God, this yacht is *sick*,” called out one of the girls as she entered the boat.

Ant smiled so hard, he looked at the ground so no one would see. That approval was the last vote of confidence he needed.

Go time, baby.