

CANDICE
CARTY-WILLIAMS

*Empress
& Aniya*

EXCLUSIVE SAMPLER

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& Aniya*

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Some of us are Empresses; those latchkey girls who are raising themselves, unknowingly desperate for the love they deserve but are too defensive to understand – or even receive – it.

And some of us are Aniyas. The girls who are raised with love, and are able to, in turn, give and show that love to those who don't know it.

This story is for the Empresses; you are loved.
And this story is for the Aniyas; we are grateful for you.

Chapter One

‘Aniya, please can you actually *move over* and let Empress sit down, thank *you?*’ Miss Tribble shouted across the classroom. She watched as Empress shuffled through the rows of desks and dropped her rucksack on the floor by the empty chair next to Aniya.

Without looking at Empress, Aniya – dark-skinned with black hair slicked back into a neat bun, slightly chubby and with a dimpled face that was often described as ‘cute’ – sighed and scooped her pens, hairbands, glasses and headphones over to her side of the double desk with her arm.

Satisfied that Aniya, who was one of the smartest in the class but could often be *quite* challenging,

was going to let Empress actually have at least fifty per cent of the desk space, Miss Tribble turned back to the board and carried on explaining the exam schedule for the coming weeks.

Empress, brown-skinned and slim, with a face that was often described as 'older than its years', pulled the chair out and threw herself down on it. Her long black braids almost hit Aniya as she sat down. Slowly, she reached down to her bag and pulled out a pen she'd stolen from the newsagent and a battered notepad she'd found in a cupboard at home.

'Is that your actual notebook?' Aniya asked Empress.

Miss Tribble turned back to the girls. 'Actually, Aniya, if you could spend the first couple of days with Empress, that would be good. Thanks.'

'But Miss!' Aniya shouted. 'I don't know her!'

'But you will by the end of the week,' Miss Tribble replied. 'That's the point. Thanks again, Aniya.'

Aniya rolled her eyes before she could stop herself.

'You don't even know me,' Empress said quietly, still facing the board. 'Why are you being so rude?'

Aniya turned to look at the side of Empress's head and blinked slowly. She actually wasn't sure why she'd said that. Her mum always encouraged her to 'say a bit less'. *Maybe* this was one of those times, she thought.

'Well. I *don't* know you. I guess. So maybe I... I don't know, really,' Aniya spluttered. She wasn't used to being called out.

'I won't get in your way or anything,' Empress said. 'I can walk behind you for a bit just to figure out where everything is. I just need to know where I'm going. I don't need any friends.'

Aniya felt a bit embarrassed by the way she was being. She'd been feeling this way for a while, though. All these weird feelings, mainly confusion that came out as anger, jumping out without her realising. It had been going on for a few weeks. At first, she'd wanted to talk to her parents about it, but, when she went to say something to them, she got really angry at something small her mum had said in response instead and ended up storming off to her room. After that, she didn't bother bringing it up again.

'Everyone needs friends,' Aniya said.

'Not me. Just need to know where I'm going,' Empress repeated.

‘Okay. Well. We’ll see. What’s your first class?’

Empress pulled the schedule she’d been given from the inside pocket of her blazer and scanned it with her eyes.

‘Maths. Double.’ Empress said. ‘In block C, room... seven?’

‘Oh, same as me!’ Aniya smiled. ‘Top set. Very impressive!’

‘Why is that impressive?’ Empress turned to Aniya to ask.

‘Well, no, it’s because...’

‘You think cos I’m here on scholarship I’m not as smart as you?’

‘I didn’t say that!’ Aniya spluttered. ‘Don’t be so defensive!’

‘Well. You were thinking it.’ Empress sighed as the bell went, signalling the end of form time. ‘Let’s go to maths, I guess. As I said, I’ll walk behind you.’

* * * *

It was lunchtime and the canteen was *busy*. Empress had never seen anything like it. Kids sitting on tables, kids jumping over chairs.

This was meant to be a *private* school, she thought. She expected to walk in and see everyone sitting down reading while they ate, or whatever posh kids did. But nobody was really even eating, it was like everyone had just gathered in this large, old, dusty-looking hall to make as much noise as possible. She grabbed a grey plastic tray and stepped into the queue for food, while she carried on looking around the room. Empress liked to watch people more than she liked to talk to them.

She’d done enough people-watching by the time she got to the front of the queue to have understood who to avoid and who was harmless. She could see the people who were loners, the people who needed to be the centre of attention, and the people who actually were like the posh kids she’d imagined. They were the ones in the corner who would pause reading or writing to take a quick mouthful of food.

By the time the queue had moved forward, to the point that she was close to the menu and price list, she stopped people-watching and did some calculations in her head.

‘What can I get you, darlin’?’ The canteen server, a blonde woman who looked a little bit older than

her mum and had kind green eyes, asked, jolting Empress out of her thoughts.

Empress knew that in the pocket of her blazer that had been itching her all morning, she had enough money for chips. Well, she had money for more, but if she bought more, it meant that she wouldn't have enough to eat for the rest of the week.

'Just a portion of chips please,' Empress said quietly, as she eyed the rest of the food on offer. It all looked incredible. The mashed potato looked creamy, the crunchy greens looked fresh, the salmon looked juicy, the chicken looked plump and crispy. Empress couldn't eat dairy, but she was even ready to risk it all for the stuff covered in cheese. She was so *hungry*. Her stomach felt like it was going to eat itself.

'Nothing else, darlin?'' The canteen server asked, spooning chips on to a plate. 'That's not enough to get you through the day!'

'I'm not a very big eater,' Empress lied, reaching out for the plate and putting it on the tray carefully. She just wanted the conversation to be over. She felt like people were listening and watching and she was already braced for new girl attention.

'Okay, well, I've given you some extra.'

'Thanks!' Empress took the plate and practically ran over to the till to pay for her food. She wanted this whole experience over and done with. She thought about how she would have rather just brought packed lunch and eaten it in the playground, but there wasn't any food in the house, so that was out of the question.

She kept her head down as she moved through the canteen. Not an easy thing to do when you're looking for somewhere to sit. Head still slightly bowed, she headed towards a quiet corner of the large and chaotic room.

She sat down by herself and started eating her chips. She put on her cheap headphones, connected her phone to the school WiFi and started listening to music to drown out the noise of everyone and everything.

She was sort of enjoying herself, lost in her own world, until a tap on the shoulder made her jump. She looked up and saw Miss Tribble standing over her.

'Eating by yourself, Empress?' Miss Tribble asked.

'Er,' Empress looked around at the empty table, 'yeah.'

‘Well, that can’t be very fun, can it?’

‘It’s fine.’ Empress shrugged. ‘I used to eat alone in my old school. I’m used to it.’

‘Well, we can’t have that,’ Miss Tribble smiled. ‘Where’s Aniya?’

‘I dunno!’ Empress had no idea. She didn’t care, either.

Miss Tribble pulled a chair out and sat next to Empress, who had to fight everything in herself not to ask her form tutor why she’d sat down.

‘I know, I know, teachers are annoying and boring, I know. To you, yes we are. And don’t worry, I’m not sitting down to have lunch with you,’ Miss Tribble assured Empress. ‘But look, coming to a new school is hard. And isolating yourself is much harder. And I know you’re probably not doing it on purpose, but I put you and Aniya together for a reason. She’s very kind and her heart is in the right place. She can be a bit... outspoken sometimes, but, you teenagers can’t help it.’

Empress wondered when Miss Tribble was going to stop talking.

‘Anyway,’ Miss Tribble said. ‘Just keep in mind what I said. You don’t have to be alone, Empress.’

When Miss Tribble finally left, Empress thought about how much easier it had always been to be alone. Nobody let you down that way.

* * * *

The next day, Empress made her way through the assault course that was the canteen again. It was somehow even louder today.

‘Empress!’

Empress almost dropped her tray at the sound of someone shouting her name across the canteen. She followed the direction of the voice and saw Aniya sitting with four of her friends at a table right in the middle of all the chaos. At the heart of the noise.

Empress did not want to walk into the centre of that. So, she nodded at Aniya and went to walk ahead.

‘Empress, come and sit with us!’ Aniya shouted.

‘So, you want everyone in this school to know my name?’ Empress sighed under her breath.

‘Come, come!’ Aniya smiled.

Empress took a deep breath and headed over, gripping her tray tight. She just wanted to be by herself.

‘Okay, so this is who I was talking about. The new girl. My assigned friend. Miss Tribble said that I should look after her,’ Aniya said when Empress arrived at the table. ‘Sit down, sit down!’

Empress tried to figure out if Aniya could be trusted. She’d changed her tune from yesterday. Empress wondered if their form tutor had said something to her.

While she tried to work out Aniya’s change of heart, she attempted to figure out where to sit. Two of the girls were sitting on the table and the other three were on chairs. Should she sit on the table and balance the tray on her lap, or just sit in the empty chair and put her tray on the table? Trying to figure out how to be in the first week of school was exhausting. Tired of her own thoughts, she sat in the empty chair opposite a girl with a friendly face and deep dimples and nodded at her.

‘I’m Empress,’ she said to the girl. ‘You okay?’

‘I’m Emma.’ The girl with the friendly face smiled.

‘I’m Bridget,’ another of Aniya’s friends said. ‘How’s your second day going?’

‘Is your name actually Empress?’ *Another* friend of Aniya’s asked, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder.

Empress nodded. ‘Yeah,’ she said, putting a chip that had already gone cold into her mouth. ‘What’s yours?’

‘Danielle,’ the girl said, ‘but everyone calls me Dani.’

‘Mmm.’ Empress put another chip in her mouth and chewed it slowly. ‘And are either of those your real names?’

Dani jerked her head back. ‘Yeah? What do you mean?’

‘Nothing, don’t worry.’ Empress smiled.

‘I was just *saying*, Empress sounds more like a nickname.’ Dani shrugged.

‘Well, it’s not,’ Empress just wanted to eat her food. ‘I’d show you my passport as proof, but I don’t have one.’

‘Let’s let her eat,’ Aniya said finally. ‘Anyway. Where are we all going on holiday this summer, girls?’

‘Nigeria with my family as usual.’ A girl Empress had earlier understood was called Bolu said. Bolu was in the same maths class as her and Aniya, and seemed to be unbelievably good at fractions. Still not as good as Empress was, though.

‘Really nice,’ Bridget said. ‘I think we’ll be going to the south of France this year. Dad has bought

a place there and has been renovating it for the last couple of months. Hopefully it'll be ready by summer break. You guys should def come out if you want.'

'I would, but I'll be in Jamaica and then Trinidad,' Emma shrugged. 'Obviously we usually do one or the other, but this year mummy wants us to do both. Should be fun though. My skin needs the sunshine.'

'We'll be in New York,' Dani smiled smugly. 'I love it so much there, it's basically, like, my second city. How about you, Empress?'

Empress almost choked on her chips.

'Me?' she asked.

Dani smiled and nodded. Empress wondered if Dani was trying to draw her out.

'I'll be in and around South London for my summer.' She smiled.

'Oh that's such a shame!' Bolu said. 'Why? Has something happened?'

'What do you mean 'why'? ' Empress laughed. 'My family don't go on holiday.'

'Wait,' Dani cut in. 'When you said you didn't have a passport you weren't joking?'

Empress shook her head.

'So... you've never left England?' Emma asked.

'Nope.' Empress shook her head and pushed her tray away from her. The chips had gone too cold to eat by now and this line of questioning had taken her appetite away. She knew this would happen at this posh school. She knew that if she talked to anyone, they'd end up asking her questions about how poor she was. She just didn't realise it would happen this quickly. She thought she'd at least have a week to settle in before they realised she didn't belong at Chancellor School for Girls.

'Not even... for like a school trip or something?' Bridget checked.

'She said she hasn't been on holiday, girls! Just leave it,' Aniya said firmly. 'Anyway, Empress. You can come with me and my family this year, if you want! We're going to this cute little village in Italy. One of my dad's partners has a house there that doesn't ever get used, apparently.'

Empress smiled politely. She definitely was not going to a cute little village in Italy in the summer.

'What?' Dani asked. 'I usually come on holiday with you! How come suddenly your *assigned friend* is the one invited?'

You'll be in New York,' Aniya reminded Dani. 'Besides, I'm trying to be nicer this year. My hormones and mood swings aren't going to take me over. Not anymore.'

'Hormones and mood swings?' Bridget snorted. 'I swear you've only said, like, three horrible things all your life.'

'Yeah, but even that's too much.' Aniya said. It was the horrible things in her head she was more worried about.

“At a time when so much writing is cut through with cynicism, it’s a genuine joy to read something so big-hearted and empathetic.”

Bethany Rutter, author of *Melt My Heart*

“It isn’t often I read a story about pure friendship. One not clouded by ego or possessiveness, but instead driven by empathy and a non-judgmental commitment... Beyond a refreshing story, she’s gifted us characters that stick – two new homegirls, and two new heroes.”

Jason Reynolds, winner of the CILIP Carnegie Medal 2021

“I love the idea of Empress and Aniya swapping bodies so that they can literally walk in the other’s shoes for a while... I genuinely hope this won’t be the last YA book that Candice writes.”

Malorie Blackman, bestselling author of the *Noughts & Crosses* series



Candice Carty-Williams is a writer and author of the Sunday Times bestselling *Queenie*, winner of Book of the Year and Debut of the Year at the British Book Awards in 2020. In 2016, Candice created and launched the Guardian and 4th Estate BAME Short Story Prize. Candice was the Guardian Review Books Columnist for 2019-2020 and has written for The Guardian, i-D, Vogue International, every iteration of the Sunday Times, BEAT Magazine, Black Ballad and more. She will probably always live in South London.

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“So honest, funny, heart-breaking and uplifting, all at once.” **Tanya Byrne**

When *Empress* starts at Aniya’s school, they’re not exactly best friends. But, when the two teenage girls accidentally cast a spell on their 16th birthday and end up switching bodies, they quickly learn that friendship is the most important magic of all.



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