

HE HAD THE POWER. SHE HAD THE VOICE.



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A NOVEL IN VERSE BY TAMI CHARLES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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MUTED

TAMI CHARLES



SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

Readers should be aware that this book explores issues including abuse, eating disorders, divorce, manipulation, and rape.

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**TO EVERY ARTIST, EVERYWHERE:
MAY YOUR GIFTS ALWAYS BE HEARD,
LOUD AND CLEAR**

You know you're VIP
when you roll up to the airport
with a pilot at your side.

Papi, you sure know
how to make a girl feel special.



PART ONE: CHECK-IN

Monday, December 23
Atlanta International Airport
Time: 8:13 a.m.
Destination: Home

AIRPORT LINES

are the worst—
'specially during holidays.
But that's not the case for us,
right, Captain Lafleur?

We hustle past the bustle,
sight unseen,
straight to the holding room,
where we'll wait . . . and wait some more,
before being escorted to the plane . . . first.

Pilot perks.
Also: *boss moves!*

This leaves plenty of time
—one hour, forty-four minutes—
for me to explain how it all went down.
I'm gonna say some stuff
you ain't gonna like.
But you've done some stuff
I didn't like either.
So maybe you'll get it.

And I'm sorry, Papi.
For lying. For leaving.
But not for the music.

Even though it took some time
to open my eyes,
I fixed everything, you'll see.
I muted the monster once and for all.

And now . . .
I get to go home.
With you.
Just like you, and Gwen,
and Ma wanted.

But first, I gotta start
from the beginning.

SATURDAY, MAY 11

Inside the great white tent
in the community center parking lot,
an emcee tapped and screeched
into the microphone . . .

“Singing India Arie’s
‘Beautiful Surprise,’
give it up for our next
Corn Festival talent finalists . . .
Angelic Voices!”

Slow claps simmered
from the small audience
as three brown girls
took their place in the spotlight.

Fingers plucked F#m chords
three voices, three harmonies
powered through verse and chorus,
as onlookers looked on,
and over,
and *at*
anything else
but the magic unfolding on the stage.

It wasn’t the first time
we sang and dreamed
and wished upon a star,
every wish, every prayer unanswered.

But for me,
I longed for the day
when hustle
turned to gold.
Show it to my family.
Show them who I really am.

That night, as we celebrated our win
—fifty bucks and a bushel of corn—
three amigas lay on a blanket
in the grassy meadow of Shohola Falls.

“We *rich* rich now, y’all!”
I fanned my sweaty face
with my cut . . . a whole seventeen dollars.

“Even Black Jesus knows
that ain’t enough to do enough.”
Shak half laughed, half groaned.

And she and I high-fived
our measly-ass thirty-four dollars
beneath a silver moon.

“I’m so done with
this small-time mierda,”
Dali cursed at the blue-gray skies.
“We need a stroke of luck.
Like . . . if y’all could sing for anyone
in the universe, who would it be?”

“Kirk Franklin.” Shak didn’t hesitate.

“Queen Yeli, J. Lo, but most of all . . .”

Dali and I locked eyes and belted
“Sean ‘Mercury’ Ellis!!!” in perfect harmony.
We’d been stanning homeboy since third grade.

“The King of R&B?
Wouldn’t that be something?” Shak smiled.

And on that night,
three brown girls,
three heartbeats colliding,
laughed and laughed
at that dumbass dream.

But as the sky grew darker,
the stars undressed themselves,
and the universe whispered ever-so-softly,

*Some wishes are granted
only to the bold . . .*

FRIDAY, JUNE 7

YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS THIS!

Sean "Mercury" Ellis at the Prudential Center in Newark, NJ!

Grammy Award winner; hit maker, pop-R&B superstar!

You comin' or nah?

It's going down Friday, June 14 at 7 p.m.!

Top fan comments:

denverlee01: Calling @dalisaybabe @ballershak, behold . . . A SIGN!

Samiam24: #nah Merc is #sketchyAF #ImGood

Cutierock14: We bow down to #MercEllis all day, errrday!

dalisaybabe: Damn @denverlee01, what kinda brujería did you do? You literally conjured this man up! Right @ballershak?

ballershak: Word. Black Jesus came through on the prayer front! Hallelujerrr! This is gonna be fun!

ANGELIC VOICES . . .

lyrically known as *Whew, those girls can SAAANG*,
locally known as *But, who really gives a damn?*

Talent dripped through our pores,
dreams of fame as real
as starlight,
but none of it mattered in
that town,
 that school,
 those mountains,
 my family.

In Shohola,
nobody won Grammys
 or Billboards
 or VMAs.

That's why soon as I saw
that my *favorite artist of all time*
was gonna be just two hours away,
it was obvious this was meant to be,
so my goals were hella clear:
Be bold. Get seen. Be heard.
This was our chance.
How'd I know?
Because the universe told me so.

FRIDAY, JUNE 14

Last day of junior year
and Mr. Andrade had the NERVE
to be at the board . . . teaching!

Dead smack in the middle of
THE most boring discussion
about . . .

“What was he saying again, Shak?”
Shak started to tell me,
always the good girl I’d never be.

But I didn’t hear a damn thing,
cuz right on time
Dali appeared outside
the science lab door.

Pretty as an angel,
a smile like the devil himself,
no one ever suspects Dali.

Left eye winking,
lips puckered up,
Dali mouthed, “*It’s go time, muchachas!*”

But before we could get a word in—
RIIIIIIIIING!!!

Fire alarms blazed,
crowds gathered,
feet scattered

students
teachers
principals
huddled outside
in beautiful
utter chaos . . .
a perfect melody
in the key of
diStRacti0n.

OPERATION BOUNCE

was in full effect!

Sunroof open,
AC on full blast
school clothes tossed
an in-the-car makeover

of epic proportions
for two, not three:
lip gloss
midriiffs
cutoffs

For them . . . not me.

Wasn't catching my stomach
hanging out like that

I dressed myself
in the usual:

too-big jeans,
too-big tee,

chest
skin
island hips
dipped invisibly

Yeah, my body was big
but my voice was even **bigger**.

All I had to do was get to the concert
to prove my point.

JUNE 14, 10:09 A.M.

Ma: DENNY, I GOT A FIRE DRILL ALERT FROM YOUR SCHOOL.

Me: It's over now. Headed to calculus. Then hanging out at the Falls. Dali's after. I'm sleeping over, k?

Ma: HANGING OUT? GWEN WOULD BE DOING SOMETHING MORE PRODUCTIVE. LIKE FINDING A SUMMER JOB!

Me: It's the last day of school, Ma.

Ma: YOU CALL ME AND CHECK IN, OK? PICKING UP ANOTHER SHIFT IN THE ER. PAPI COMES HOME TOMORROW MORNING. DON'T BE LATE.

Me: Turn the caps lock off.

Ma: HUH?

Me: Never mind. See you in the morning.

Ma: BRIGHT AND EARLY FOR PAPI. DON'T TEXT AND DRIVE!!!

Me: K, Ma. Got it.

I PUT THAT PHONE ON VIBRATE

turned the music up,
let the sound
drown the anxiety rising
bone-to-skin,
laughed,
and sang
in the key of
IDGAF!
Because right then,
right there
I had zero fucs to give.

Not when . . .
summers were made for music.

(not annoying parents)

Mini concerts in the park,
jam sessions in the basement,
hitting up the Apple Valley on Route 6,
to enter the talent contest,
where we'd sing our hearts out,
and pray to win that hundred dollars.
Not each though—
that was a three-way split.

Not enough to do enough,
Shak would say.
But every summer,
we did that (& more) anyway.

Hoping, praying, dreaming
of seeing a talent scout
a record exec,
or get THIS . . .
our *parents* in the crowd.
But *I* we were never enough, I guess.

That's why I had to
make it happen,
nervous as I was.

So we sped off in my Honda Civic,
three tickets in hand,
didn't care 'bout those nosebleed seats,
'cause I had a plan.

And there I was
driving-driving-driving,
while Shak and Dali sang the roof off
as I begged the universe
to make my wish come true.

Because deep down I knew
that moment
that highway
that summer was made
just for me.

(us)

KNOW WHAT ELSE

summers were made for?

Dreams.

Intergalactic,

out-of-this-world,

fly me to M

ER

C

U

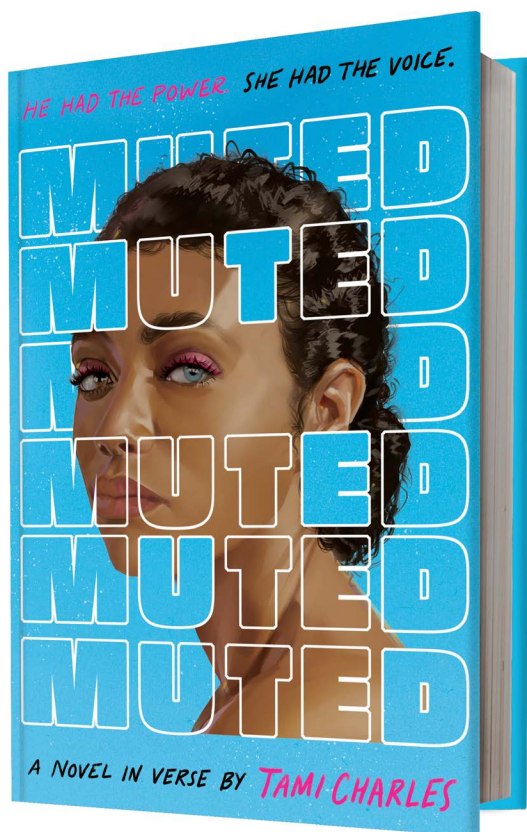
R

Y

and back

kinda dreams.

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