

Today on The Lerner Podcast we asked Edgar Award-nominated author Sasha Dawn to read a chapter from her latest young adult novel, *Panic*, which is out October 1, 2019. Kirkus Reviews called *Panic* “compelling and captivating.” Here’s Sasha.

Chapter 1

Saturday, April 29

Who would leave a purple paper moon behind?

I stare at it. It may as well be a neon sign.

I should leave it there, wedged between the window and the snack counter.

But I can’t help it. It’s not every day you find an origami moon at your favorite coffee shop, right near your usual seat, where someone carved I was here into the weathered and worn counter. (And how existential is that? If you’re reading it, it applies to you, because you were here, too. Brilliant.)

I set down my books and sweep the moon into my pile of weekend homework. But the moon beckons me from atop my statistics text, as if to say: Unfold me, Madelaine.

Slowly, I obey.

The paper is thick, and it’s a rare shimmery purplish green. If we’re talking Crayola, it’d be sort of Thistle woven with Seafoam.

When I catch sight of a typewritten font on the underside—Times New Roman, I think—I nearly gasp. There are words inside. I don’t know if I’m more excited to see what message is here, or anxious that I could be invading someone’s privacy, which I really hate to do.

The words inside the moon are beautiful. It’s a poem of sorts. About the tide, maybe. Or perhaps it’s a metaphor, but the words are mesmerizing. Waves of stars, and saves and wars.

Behind me, I hear the hiss of whispering.

I glance over my shoulder.

Great.

The Sophias (yeah, they’re both named Sophia) are here. They accompanied me—courtesy of my dad’s wallet—to a Vagabonds show a couple years back, way before the band’s hiatus. We got along for a while, the Sophias and me. We hung out, talked about the band, stocked up at Sephora together, and binged on coffee and scones. Then one day, on a text they didn’t realize was a group text, I caught them talking about me.

Sophia 1: She’s kind of weird isn’t she?

Sophia 2: We’re all sort of weird.

Sophia 1: But she’s like not a GOOD weird.

Sophia 1: She thinks she’s so cool cuz she’s been on stage.

Sophia 2: She’s not even that good.

Sophia 1: Must be nice to have Daddy hook you up for the rest of your life.

Sophia 2: And can you say obsessed? Is she capable of talking about anything besides Broadway and bands and sheet music?

Um . . . obviously I'm capable, but what else of importance is there to discuss? Did I complain about their constant chatter about this guy or that guy, or mascara this, or lipliner that? It's not like the Sophias can handle a debate about the economy. What else were we supposed to talk about?

Let me pause for a second here.

You know the Sophias.

Both their profile pictures are close-ups of them together because they do everything together. Occasionally, one of them will post a picture with a guy, but the other is always in the frame, too. Their pages are littered with posts about their latest haul—miniskirts, makeup, hair accessories, shoes. Their bios read something like: If you're looking for the brightest star in the universe, you found me. Location: on top of the world.

After I saw those texts, I realized they probably just wanted me around for Dad's concert connections, anyway. Fool me once. I haven't spoken to them since.

God, I wish I'd never brought them here, to the café at the Factory, when we were all friends. Just their being here makes this place feel mainstream. And I liked that this coffee shop was mine, that it was a little slice of hipster heaven outside the boundaries of queen bees and wannabes.

Sophia 1 cups her hand over Sophia 2's ear. For not more than a third of a second, our glances meet, and just after, the two of them erupt in laughter.

Rationally, I know they're probably not talking about me. And even if they are, it can't be anything of substance. But their secrets, their laughter . . . the situation feels like judgment, like criticism. Because they are what they are—stick thin, gorgeous, cool, as if even the rain can't cramp the style they have by the boatload . . . and I am what I am—weird and alone.

I shrink a bit lower in my seat. Maybe if I duck low enough I can simply disappear.

I yank the sleeve of my too-large sweater over my hand and use it to wipe away the condensation on the window for a clearer view of the street outside.

Minnesota Avenue is awash with pink as a horde of wedding guests hustles past with umbrellas in varying shades of it.

I snap a picture and post it to my Instagram with a caption: This storm is a downpour of peonies.

Now that the image is cemented into my stream, I think maybe I should have looked more closely before I posted it. I see my own reflection in the glass in the picture: my black beanie, adorned with the logo of my favorite band and shoved atop my chin-length waves, the smudge of mascara under my left eye . . . not to mention the mirror-image of the coffee shop's name, hand-lettered on the window before me, spanning across my reflection's forehead.

I don't usually post pictures of my whole face.

Maybe if I were one of the Sophias, I wouldn't worry that people might find my image not good enough . . . my hair too frizzy, my eyeliner too thick. But being me, I worry about these things. The last thing I

want is for someone, somewhere to dig up an old image of me, an old opinion I once posted, and decide who or what I am.

I open the diary app on my phone and jot down what I'm feeling—on display, judged.

A second later, my phone pings as my usual supporters on Instagram chime in with little heart icons, validating me. It's a great world we live in where one's self-esteem is boosted by something so incredibly unimportant as likes on social media, right?

My older half-sister, Hayley, weighs in with virtual hugs. One good thing about the world's obsession with putting our lives online: it's like Hayley's still involved in my daily routine, even though she's all the way across town at DePaul, a safe distance from the turmoil our family life has become since Mom and Dad ceased all civil communication.

Hayley: Get ready to be fabulous in 5, 4, 3, 2 . . .

Hayley always remembers when I have an audition, and she always makes sure to pump me up beforehand. I've been performing since I was practically a toddler, and Hayley's been there to support me every step of the way.

Hayley's the one person I never feel discombobulated around. Even though we hardly hang out anymore, and she's on to the next phase of her life—which has very little to do with me—she's still my best friend. She's been there for me since I was tiny.

She was there for me when I was being torn in opposite directions by the two entities who vowed to keep me whole. She was there for me while I watched my parents' marriage slowly and angrily disintegrate, and then again as they battled in court for years before the divorce was final. I don't know what I would've done without her. My parents weren't thinking of me unless they were arguing over who'd gain control of the trust that holds my earnings.

Now, my parents don't speak to each other. Ever. They communicate through me, which is to say they throw shade at each other through me, and it's exhausting. Why can't they just get it together and be decent to each other?

Heart palpitations. I can't think about it all right now.

I breathe. Relax. Sink into the music.

The alerts on my phone add to the symphony surrounding me.

The murmur of fifty conversations echoes around the room.

Raindrops spatter against the copper awning outside.

The occasional crash of thunder reverberates through the walls of this old building.

It's all percussion. Drums and cymbals.

The rattle of the elevated train across the street. The screech of its brakes as it jolts to a stop at Division.

And the voices of drenched bridesmaids passing on the sidewalk outside may as well be the woodwinds.

So far, I've counted six maids in varying shades of pink—carnation, salmon, tickle-me-pink, cotton candy . . . all the standards. They're rushing by in bare feet. High-heeled sandals dangle from their fingers, and tuxedo jackets, with pink rose boutonnieres pinned to lapels, are tented over their heads.

They're all confident, even in the midst of the downpour.

Then again, if they're bridesmaids, they obviously have friends. Tonight especially: they're the elite, the chosen ones at the head table, elevated above the other wedding guests. Except maybe that one there.

I fix my gaze on one girl who's hanging back a little. No groomsman cups her under the elbow to guide her around puddles. She's making her own way.

She's the only one not having an absolute ball in the rain, seeming in deep contemplation, as if she doesn't get the punch line of a joke everyone else thinks is hilarious. Maybe she's the obligatory cousin in the lineup. I recognize the way she's lingering just a step or two behind, being present without engaging. Doing so is an art form, and I would know. I feel like the obligatory "cousin" pretty much everywhere I go.

But if I tune out the whispers behind me, if I lift the Sophias out of the equation, I'm riding out this storm in my happy place.

This is one of the oldest buildings in Wicker Park, the Chicago neighborhood where I live. As a whole, this place is called the Factory: art galleries and shops, including the café, on the first floor; studio space on the second; and, on the third, with a separate entrance off Minnesota Avenue, a wide-open event space, chic and lofty, where today someone's obviously hosting a wedding reception.

I pull the beanie off my hair, which would fit right in with the wedding party's color scheme. The box was labeled Rose Gold, but it's basically pastel pink tinting my not-so-natural blonde hair. Although it's subtle, Sister Mary Angela hates it. When she first saw it earlier this month, she remanded me to lunch in the dean's office, which I think is bogus, but I can deal. It's not like I want to eat with my contemporaries anyway.

Last week, my sentence was suddenly lifted. Although I didn't know until Hayley told Mom and me, Dad offered a donation to make the "problem" go away.

Out of principle, and out of respect for my mother, I decided to continue with the dean's office routine.

See, despite what the almighty Sister Mary Angela thinks, I didn't dip my head in pink tint as some act of rebellion. Generally, I like rules. I just also like a little variety. And this color has an underlying purpose: My mom's a breast cancer survivor, and next week is the two-year anniversary of her kicking its ass.

I'm not sure even Mom made the connection, but that's all right. Like I said, I didn't do it to get attention. It's a private tribute to my mother's strength and perseverance.

The barista calls from the counter, "Order for Madelaine." Only she says it more like Madelynn, ignoring the long A, so I don't get up right away. There could be two of us waiting out the rain here. It's awfully crowded.

"Mocha roast? Two pumps of peppermint?" she says. "With a butter croissant?"

Yeah, she means me.

I don't bother correcting her when I collect my second cup of the afternoon. She's not the first person who's mispronounced my name. But she could at least smile and make me feel like my seven-dollar mocha roast is worth the price, couldn't she?

I return to my seat at the window-side counter.

And for a second, I lock gazes with a man on the other side of the window. He's in a black raincoat, hood up, but somehow I know he's looking at me.

Judging.

Spying.

A chill runs up my spine.

Hunting.

Panic is available October 1, 2019.

Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.