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‘Soars with hope and heart.’

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*School Reading List*

‘A hard-hitting story which powerfully navigates vulnerability  
and romance. It stayed with me long after the final page.’

Jasbinder Bilan

# About the Author

A British-American citizen of Italian heritage, Alexia Casale is an author, script consultant and academic. After an MA in Social & Political Sciences and then an MPhil in Educational Psychology & Technology, both at Cambridge University, she took a break from academia and moved to New York. There she worked on an award-winning Broadway show before returning to England to complete a PhD and teaching qualification. She now works as Programme Leader and Reader in Writing for Young People, on the renowned MA Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, as well as supervising PhD students and undertaking research, such as the ‘Literature across Borders’ project. Her books for adults and teenagers have received multiple awards nominations and critical acclaim and include *The Best Way to Bury Your Husband* for adults and *The Bone Dragon*, *House of Windows* and *Sing if You Can’t Dance* for young adults.

# Not That Kind of Hero

ALEXIA CASALE

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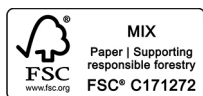
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*For my father – Dad, thank you for introducing me to the world of the theatre and the magic that happens there.*

*And for my favourite teenagers (and nearly/recently teenagers)  
– Katja and Alexia; Sophie and James; George, Aidan and Kieran; Naomi and Will; Micah; Toby and Amber; and Ally – wishing you a lifetime of chasing happy dreams and finding that sometimes along the way an even better dream catches you.*

# ACT 1

## Heroes & Sidekicks

+ *A Scheme*

+ *Chaos & Carnage*

+ *First Day of Our Last Year of School*

= *An Inciting Exciting Incident*

# Saturday 28th August

## Heroes & Sidekicks

There's a poster on our kitchen wall (half covered by layers of The Brood's artwork) that insists, *If you want a happy ending, you first have to be the hero of your own story.*

I hate that bloody poster.

Mum found it in the recycling at one of the offices she cleans, and it became the first bit of decoration in the flat when she Blu-Tacked it to the wall.

Mum and Raim stood staring at it as if it was the *Mona Lisa*, then they hugged for ages. Or at least what passes as ages in a house where any amount of waking time spent being still is about as rare as time alone. When they moved away, Roks took their place, mouthing the words over and over.

That was more than four years ago now, but Roks still lives

and breathes those words, marching through the world as if every step has a purpose, whether it's working on her A-level coursework or helping our best friend, Ven, with choir stuff, or helping our mums with the household paperwork. While I spend most of my life somewhere between 'don't know' and 'don't really mind' whether the question is 'What do you want for breakfast?' or 'What do you want to do with your life?', Rok's has all the answers.

And I love her for it. Rok's throws herself at life as if she's in competition with it and knows she's going to win. The problem is she thinks the stupid motto should apply to me the way it applies to her and Mum and Raim and even The Brood. Rok's little sister, Jas, and my younger siblings (all five of them, aged not-quite-six to almost-ten-and-a-half) are pure hero material. It's me who's the odd one out.

But just because I'm not a hero-style person doesn't mean I appreciate being told that means I'm destined for unhappiness. It's not true. Or at least I don't think it's true. I *hope* it's not true. But even if it *is* true, there's not much I can do about it because I AM NOT A HERO-STYLE PERSON!

I'm a born sidekick, best friend, secondary character – and I'm perfectly happy about it. Or I would be if not for snidey posters and well-meaning but IDIOTIC semi-sisters who won't accept me for who I am.

'You've *got* to *do* something with your life!' Rok's says now, as if determined to prove the most unhelpful bits of my internal monologue right – because that always makes a person feel better, doesn't it?



‘You can’t live vicariously through the rest of us,’ she adds in that earnest, well-meaning way that makes me want to hug her then perhaps bludgeon her to death. ‘I’m grateful that you’re willing to give up so much so I can pursue my dreams, but you count too.’

*Do I? Do I really? Oh, thank you so much. I wasn’t quite sure till you confirmed that,* says my inner monologue.

I *know* I count. But can’t I just count in a quiet, small, Orla sort of way? Heroes are always focused on the future, on aspiration and inspiration. Sometimes I wish I had that in me, but rather than be sad that I don’t, I try to embrace my sidekickness. My big dream since Before became After has been a happy home where everyone I love is OK. Now I’ve finally got that, isn’t it healthy to be content instead of instantly turning to the next thing?

When we met Roks, Raim and Jas at the shelter, joining forces was a matter of solidarity and necessity, but along the way solidarity and necessity were replaced by friendship – Mum and Raim, me and Roks, uniting to hold each other up and look after the little ones. And suddenly we weren’t two families, but one.

It was Cait who coined the terms full-sibs and semi-sibs to describe the relationships between us, but it was me and Roks who dubbed the little ones The Brood. That makes it sound simple, though of course it wasn’t.

For five years we teetered on the brink of one disaster then another. Now there’s finally a stretch of safe ground between us

and the cliff edge. For so long it felt as if we'd never get here, but we have, and all I want is to enjoy it.

'It's not OK for you to have no life just so the rest of us are happy.' Rok's words are accompanied by a gesture of pure frustration that I feel in my soul.

Heroes and sidekicks need each other, but the understanding-each-other thing is a one-way street.

'I mean, that cute guy was flirting with you in the market the other day and you said there was no point flirting back because you don't have time to date. It's bad enough you're helping pay for me to be at uni next year—'

And here we go again. Apparently my life is over because I'm not going to uni. Even. Though. I. Don't. Want. To. I mean, maybe in another life I would. But in this one, the very last thing I want is to be a squillion pounds in debt when I've no idea what to study. I'm perfectly happy swapping school for a job that fits alongside the rest of my life and seeing what happens. I mean, the bills will be paid, and The Brood looked after, and I won't have exams. What's not to love? Except—

'If you're going to be denied all those opportunities, you've got to be able to have some sort of fun, romantic or otherwise.' Rok is absently picking a label off a jam jar, scattering shreds of paper across the cluttered kitchen table.

Two scraps drift towards me. *Extra basic*, the universe tells me. As if I didn't already know.

I scoop the mess into my hand and pour it into the recycling, then set about making a clatter in the sink in the hope it'll drown

Roks out. Sidekicks sometimes do get a love life – a reward for being the hero’s support act – but it’s never a Love Story For The Ages. I’m just not that fussed about some pointless kissing with someone who sort of likes me and I sort of like him – at best it’s nice and at worst you get murdered so that the hero has a new plot twist: avenge the murdered best friend.

Super-dark tangents aside, I don’t care about dating. Look at Mum and Raim and how shit their lives were with love – or at least marriage – in them. The difference between Before Mum and After Mum is purpose and confidence and happiness and things I can’t even name. It’s like she’s filled out into her edges somehow – she’s her whole self – so, despite everything that’s hard about After, I have never, ever wanted to go back to Before.

We’re not always happy, but we *are* all safe and warm and well fed and, thanks to our high school choir, over the last eight months Roks and I have gained an amazing set of friends to add to our amazing family. That is more than enough.

I rattle a stack of plates into the sink before Roks can, once again, tell me otherwise.

‘For goodness’ sake!’ Roks says, pulling the sponge out of my hand. ‘Enough with the Cinderella act. I feel bad enough as is. You don’t have to rub it in.’

‘You’re making me feel like a failure,’ I snap, storming to the other side of the kitchen (yes, FOUR! WHOLE! PACES!) to sift the junk mail out of the day’s post so it can go in the recycling because my Super-Exciting Plans for the evening centre on putting out the rubbish. If that doesn’t scream ‘not a hero’ (and

also ‘not likely to get a boyfriend any time soon’), I don’t know what does.

‘I’m not you, Roks. Just because we can’t both go to university doesn’t mean I’m missing out. Stop making me feel bad about something that should just make you happy. It’s not as if you’re moving away and abandoning me.’

She folds into a chair with a groan, raking her hands through her – always ridiculously glossy – hair. (Honestly, it’s just rude – we use the same supermarket-brand shampoo and conditioner, with the odd splurge on a shared bottle of fancier stuff when it’s on offer, but whereas my hair is routinely meh, Roks looks perma-ready for an ad campaign.)

‘I just worry you feel like you don’t have a *choice*. You know how much I want this, so you’re suppressing any thought of what *you* really want.’ She sniffs. ‘I don’t want to take advantage of you.’

I drag a chair next to hers and we tuck ourselves into each other. ‘You’re not, and I wouldn’t let you.’

She settles with a sigh that says she’s not convinced.

I’m just starting to think happier thoughts when she drags the family laptop in front of us. ‘Would you at least look at something for me?’

She bungs in the PIN – a precaution to ensure The Brood can’t use the internet unsupervised – and draws up her Google profile. A web page is open next to her inbox. She gives me a look of earnest hopefulness as she introduces what she clearly sees as *A Loving Plan To Save Me From A Fate Worse Than Death* (i.e.

being happy with my life). Who'd want to be happy, after all, when your loved ones could well-meaningly make you miserable instead?

‘You’ve always loved drama best of everything at school, and I’ve never seen you happier than when you got the main part in the play in Year 8, and The Brood always want you to read their bedtime story because you do all the voices, and I just thought . . .’ Even Roks has to pause for breath there. ‘I thought that if you did have a dream – maybe one you weren’t admitting even to yourself – that it had to be acting, so I’ve been looking around and I found this.’

‘This’ turns out to be the Sienna Leighton Theatrical Intensive.

I look up at the poster on the wall. If I were a hero-style person, a frisson of electricity would run through me about now, telling me that destiny is calling. Instead, I’m hit with the realisation that there’s a hole in my sock and something sticky on the kitchen floor.

# Saturday 28th August

## A Scheme

‘Where are you going?’ Roks yanks me back into my chair the moment I move to stand.

So much for escape. I’m starting to wonder if I’ve got it in me to be a villain, because right now all I want to do is brain Roks with the toaster.

‘I’ve spent *hours* researching this for you. All I want is five minutes to tell you about it.’

I glare at Roks. So what if I liked being in the school play in YEAR 8? OK, there *was* a little pang when the audition list went up for Year 9 and I hovered in front of it, and hovered some more, then walked away because by then Roks and I were running a lunchtime nail biz during the week and helping on the stall at weekends and there was no way rehearsals would fit around that.

It's not like I ever seriously thought about making a career of it, whereas Rok's has wanted to study Art History so she can get a job in a museum for as long as I've known her.

It's sort of sweet, and I want to be grateful that Rok's has clearly spent more time thinking about my next steps than I have, but it's hard when it makes me feel so small.

Still, I pull the laptop closer, because that is what a sidekick does. Even when she's really, REALLY pissed off.

It's all downhill from there. Everything about the Sienna Leighton Theatrical Intensive website screams, *Posh! Money!* There might as well be a flashing GIF warning that, *If you need to ask the price, you DEFINITELY can't afford it.* Has Rok's lost her mind?

'So when's the guy in fancy livery turning up to announce that my great-great-uncle, the Earl of Wallop, has died and Mum's next in line to the fortune? Because if we're suddenly rich enough to afford this, I've got to be honest, I've got better ideas for how to spend the money.'

Rok's circles the mouse angrily around a paragraph halfway down the page.

*Thanks to a private benefactor, one place on the midwinter programme will be awarded to a disadvantaged young person from London and the South East. Age 16+ only.*

'Duh,' she tells me encouragingly, then stomps off to turn on the kettle.

I smile as I hear the rattle that signals she's pulling down the battered old tin with the peeling handwritten *TAXES* label.

Under a drift of old receipts, Mum and Raim keep a stash of sweets and chocolate that we've had permission to raid since our first month running the stall at weekends to help pay the rent.

'We henceforth authorise emergency sugar rushes at your discretion,' Raim announced, when she and Mum let us in on the secret.

'Though if you allow The Brood to find out, there will be words and some of them will be shouted,' Mum added, fishing a bag of Maltesers from the bottom and sharing them out as we sat around the table with the family ledger in the middle and a big red tick next to the month's rent.

Now Roks follows my eyeline across the kitchen to where the hero poster peeks out from behind a collection of Bunny, Finn, Harry and Issie's drawings, with Cait's school certificate for Best Art Project of the Year and Jas's latest glowing report bracketing it all. Her face softens into a smile as she sets down a pair of steaming mugs, then rips open a KitKat, snapping it in half and giving me the piece that came away with extra chocolate. 'I'm going to make sure you have a happy ending too,' she promises, misunderstanding everything in my expression.

*Your idea of my happy ending,* I can't help thinking.

I turn back to the laptop, letting the sweetness of the chocolate soothe the sting in my chest that the person who knows me best in the world sometimes doesn't know me at all.

I scroll down to see what Roks thinks my secret big dream looks like. Apparently, it's a two-week training programme,



with an opportunity at the end to audition for an Acting degree scholarship. On the plus side, although the location is in the closest big city, it's at the near edge so the journey wouldn't be impossibly long and my bus pass would cover it, but . . .

'Roks,' I groan. 'It starts on December twentieth! We've still got two days of school. Why are you being so pushy about something I can't do anyway?'

She makes a face. 'Private schools finish early, so they're probably working off that schedule, but it doesn't matter—'

'Of course it does! Everyone applying will have been getting lessons in reciting Shakespeare since they were three!'

I shove the laptop away, but Roks draws it back. Bitter experience has taught me that I might as well give in since all whining will do is delay the inevitable. This doesn't stop me fuming on the inside because why can't she see that if I *were* the type of person to want this, I *wouldn't* be letting her trample all over me in the first place? Talk about the worst of both worlds.

'So what if they know more Shakespeare than you do?' Roks is saying coaxingly. 'You'd be there because of your talent, and they'd be there because they can pay.'

I cross my arms and try to fix Auntie Fionnuala's infamous Evil Eye on Roks. She doesn't even notice.

Our entire family is made up of heroes, not to mention our friendship group – Ven, our shared best friend, is probably the most determined (and stubborn and bull-headed) person in the world – literally the only time she's not chasing her dreams is when she's unconscious, thanks to a horrifying range of health issues.

Why can't Roks appreciate that the area *I* excel in is looking after all the heroes around me so they can be amazing and I can just . . . be. After all—

I cut off the voice in my head. It's one thing to have an inner narrator; I draw the line at an internal *moanalogue*.

'If I skip school, Mum'll get in trouble. It doesn't matter that it's only two days – it'll be super obvious I'm bunking, not sick, right before the holidays.'

Roks gives me what Auntie Fionnuala would call a 'cat got the canary' grin, full of satisfaction and trouble. 'You've only got music on Monday. That won't be a problem because Ms Meade will understand. So it's just Tuesday, and Ms Walker will definitely let you off one measly lesson of business and psychology for an opportunity like this, especially when all we're doing is recap sessions for the mocks in January.'

I take another bite of KitKat because my stomach might as well be full of chocolate if my afternoon is going to continue downhill. 'I'm not wasting a day schlepping into the city to audition for a programme I don't want to do in the first place.'

'You don't have to!' Roks crows. 'It's just a self-tape – a five-minute video about who you are, why you want to do the intensive—'

'Like I just said – I don't want to do the intensive.'

'—then a three-minute monologue or reading. We've got an hour before everyone gets home, so why don't you run a brush through your hair, throw on the green top that makes you look like a goddess and we'll get started.'

The problem with being a sidekick is that you always – *always* – end up following the hero's plan.

Even when it sucks.

# Saturday 28th August

## Chaos & Carnage

The door smashes open on a piercing wail of ‘Bunny threw up in my HOOD!’

Technically, ‘Bunny’ is Bonny, but since her first mangled attempts at saying her own name happened in front of both Finn and Harry, the permanent switch was inevitable.

As Mum steers Bunny into the bathroom, Roks manoeuvres Issie’s arms out of her coat while I hold the sick-filled hood still, leaving Jas to sort out the other three, who are clamouring for food as if they’ve spent the day in the wilderness rather than the mall.

‘I HATE her!’ Issie sobs, smearing snot all over her face.

‘No one wants to throw up, but you could choose not to snot your entire face, so that’ll be enough name-calling, thank you,’ I

tell her. Roks and I exchange a feeling look as Issie is finally freed from the coat. We don't even have to discuss who deals with the Snot Factory and who is Puke Patrol – it only took two months of knowing each other before we realised Roks will happily tackle extra instances of snotification provided I take the rarer, but generally grosser, episodes of pukage.

How Roks can know me this well and *still* think I want to spend an hour making a 'self-tape' is a mystery too complicated to unravel amid the current level of chaos. I push down the disappointment that I can't even start the film I've wanted to watch for weeks, or curl up with the book on the Golden Age of Hollywood Roks got me for my birthday ... Yes, I get that it's further proof she might secretly be right, only she's NOT. I just like films. And the idea of glamour. Is it really so surprising when most of my life involves copious snot and puke?

Two sets of shrieks echo down the hall as Bunny is rinsed under the shower and Issie thoroughly wiped with a warm flannel, but soon the volume in the flat drops until there's just the odd hiccupping sob from the bathroom and, 'There's a *pea* in my *hair*.'

'Gone now,' says Mum in her best 'I shall be soothing at all costs' tone.

'This bit's carrot.' At least Bunny sounds cheered by the range of foodstuff she's identifying.

Screwing up my face, I tip the sick from the hood into the bin, trying not to get caught up in seeing if I can spot the same food items Bunny is calling out. Rinsing the hood in the sink, I

shove the coat into the washing machine then cram in as much as possible from the overflowing laundry basket without risking the ancient contraption dying on the spot. I pat its top comfortingly as it chugs into action, then hurry to tie up the bin liner and take it out to the rubbish chute before it can stink up the whole flat.

I get back just as Jas eases a laden tray around the door to the living room. There follows a loud cheer, then immediate squabbling.

‘I want the blue one!’

‘I touched it first!’

‘There will be no dessert if CERTAIN SMALL PEOPLE don’t start practising their manners,’ says Mum.

I learnt the ability to speak in CAPSLOCK from her. Roks and Jas keep trying, but it’s obviously in the blood – or at least can only be acquired through exposure since birth. Thankfully, my full-sibs are still too little to quite strike the balance between tone and volume. It doesn’t stop them trying. As if a household with six kids under thirteen needed more yelling.

I escape to the kitchen, Jas at my heels.

‘Apart from the hood-puke, everything OK?’ I ask as she starts making a round of tea while I set out ingredients for dinner.

‘Meh.’

Roks squishes past, taking her place at my right hand. Soon the deep, sweet smell of cooking onions is wafting through the flat, replacing the fug of sick and detergent. I only realise I’m humming under my breath when Roks joins me and the sound of our latest arrangement for The Singers fills the tiny kitchen. The

bridge of the song still isn't right, but before we finish our second attempt, we're cut off by Finn and Cait exploding into the kitchen, Finn cackling while Cait powers after him. I grab Finn and trap him behind my back, while Roks clamps her arms around Cait's shoulders.

'Finn,' I say in my most frighteningly gentle voice.

Sticky fingers press a book into my hand. 'I just wanted her to tell me the story,' pipes up his grumpy little voice from behind me.

'I'm not your servant!' Cait hisses.

'You're meant to be my sister! You're meant to have fun with us, not sit on your bed and ignore us all day long!'

'Well, books are interesting and you're boring and I don't like you!' Cait spits at him then bursts into sobs about how it's too loud and she can't wait till she can go away and live on her own and never see any of us ever again.

'Swap,' I tell Roks wearily. 'Jas—'

'I can finish dinner now you've done the onions,' she says as I release Finn.

Roks guides him away down the hall for a telling-off while I sit down and drag Cait (who's getting altogether too big for it) into my lap. She flops over me, weeping tiredly as I stroke one hand up and down her back, holding her sweaty little palm with the other and pressing a soothing rhythm into the back of her wrist.

After five minutes, she slithers off and presses a kiss to my cheek. 'I love you, Orla.' Then she flings herself at Jas and hugs her around the waist.

‘You want to go back to your room, or come and have a story with me and the others?’ I ask.

She frowns for a moment, then puts her hand in my pocket. ‘I get to pick the book,’ she growls.

Five minutes later, I am pinned to the sofa by the five-piece-set of my full-sibs. Raim is finally home from her Saturday shift on the market stall, having taken over for me and Roks at 4 p.m. after her morning-shift at the cafe. The smells wafting from the kitchen as she and Jas murmur quietly over the stove have my stomach grumbling, but it won’t be long until dinner, which is never late because Mum only has a forty-five-minute window between getting back and leaving with Raim for their night shift at the cinema.

‘If you’re not reading, I want to watch TV,’ whines Harry.

Finn slaps away Bunny’s hand as she reaches for the corner of blanket he’s hugging around himself.

‘Shhhhh!’ Cait hisses at her most cat-like.

The others go still: hissing is not infrequently followed by scratching and/or biting when it comes to Cait. However, stillness from The Brood only ever lasts a few seconds unless they’re distracted, so I open the book and clear my throat.

I pause for a moment – it’s all The Brood will allow, but I want to relish the moment: all of us squished together in a tumble of limbs and mess of hair and knobbly knees and love.

I just have time to entertain the thought that I should read a picture book for the self-tape Roks will definitely force me to make later when I realise that she’s leaning in the living-room doorway, her phone up, ready to record.



I want to be pleased that Roks thinks more of me than I think of myself, but it feels like a punishment for not being more than I am.