

Carina Press Blog Tour Program: *Just Like That* by Cole McCade

Excerpt

“Extinguisher first, then sand,” the voice ordered. “Dr. Liu, if you insist on getting in the way, at least make yourself useful and remove anything *else* flammable from the vicinity of the blaze. Quickly, now. Keep your mouths covered.”

Summer’s entire body tingled, prickled, as if his skin had drawn too tight. That voice—that voice brought back too many memories. Afternoons in his psychology elective class, staring down at his textbook and doodling in his notebook and refusing to look up, to look *at* anyone, while that voice washed over him for an hour. Summer knew that voice almost better than the face attached to it, every inflection and cadence, the way it could command silence with a quiet word more effectively than any shout.

And how sometimes it seemed more expressive than the cold, withdrawn expression of the man he remembered, standing tall and stern in front of a class of boys who were all just a little bit afraid of him.

Summer had never been afraid, not really.

But he hadn’t had the courage to whisper to himself what he’d really felt, when he’d been a hopeless boy who’d done everything he could to be invisible.

Heart beating harder, he followed the sound of that voice to the open doorway of a smoke-filled room, the entire chemistry lab a haze of gray and black and crackling orange; from what he could tell a table was...on fire? Or at least the substance inside a blackened beaker was on fire, belching out a seemingly never-ending, impossible billow of smoke and flame.

Several smaller fires burned throughout the room; it looked as though sparks had jumped to catch on notebooks, papers, books. Several indistinct shapes alternately sprayed the conflagration with fire extinguishers and doused it with little hand buckets of sand from the emergency kit in the corner of the room, everyone working clumsily one-handed while they held wet paper towels over their noses and mouths with the other.

And standing tall over them all—several teachers and older students, it looked like—was the one man Summer had returned to Omen to see.

Professor Iseya.

He stood head and shoulders above the rest, his broad-shouldered, leanly angular frame as proud as a battle standard, elegant in a trim white button-down tucked into dark gray slacks, suspenders striping in neat black lines down his chest. Behind slim glasses, his pale, sharply angled gray eyes flicked swiftly over the room, set in a narrow, graceful face that had only weathered with age into an ivory mask of quiet, aloof beauty.

The sleek slick of his ink-black hair was pulled back from his face as always—but as always, he could never quite keep the soft strands inside their tie, and several wisped free to frame his face, lay against his long, smooth neck, pour down his shoulders and back. He held a damp paper towel over his mouth, neatly folded into a square, and spoke through it to direct the frazzled-looking group with consummate calm, taking complete control of the situation.

And complete control of Summer, as Iseya’s gaze abruptly snapped to him, locking on him from across the room. “Why have you not evacuated?” Iseya demanded coldly, his words precise, inflected with a softly cultured accent. “Please vacate the premises until we’ve contained the blaze.”

Summer dropped his eyes immediately—habit, staring down at his feet. “Oh, um—I came to help,” he mumbled through the collar of his shirt.

A pause, then, “You’re not a student. Who are you?”

That shouldn’t sting.

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But then it had been seven years, he'd only been in two of Iseya's classes...and he'd changed, since he'd left Omen.

At least, he hoped he had.

That was why he'd run away, after all. To shake off the boy he'd been; to find himself in a big city like Baltimore, and maybe, just maybe...

Learn not to be so afraid.

But he almost couldn't bring himself to speak, while the silence demanded an answer. "I'm not a student *anymore*," he corrected, almost under his breath. "It's...it's me. Summer. Summer Hemlock. Your new TA." He made himself look up, even if he didn't raise his head, peeking at Iseya through the wreathing of smoke that made the man look like some strange and ghostly figure, this ethereal spirit swirled in mist and darkness. "Hi, Professor Iseya. Hi."

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