



A Careful Heart

Ralph Josiah Bardsley

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Violence in relationships can affect anyone, as A Careful Heart compellingly proves.

A Careful Heart is a romance novel by way of domestic abuse. Sound improbable? Perhaps, but Ralph Josiah Bardsley takes on that often-neglected subject within the genre well.

The book follows two best friends from childhood to early adulthood. One finds romance, and the other thinks he has but realizes that the “perfect guy” comes with a devastating price.

The novel opens in 2001, when Travis and Stephen are entering high school in their small New Hampshire town. Travis, the extrovert, and Stephen, the introvert, complement each other in every way as they suffer the ups and downs of high-school life. Their relationship is tested when Stephen discovers Travis's sexuality, but it ends up bringing them closer together. Bardsley crafts the family dynamics of both characters well, giving enough information to enrich the story without lingering too long on secondary characters.

Once Travis and Stephen head off to different colleges, they discover their own identities without the other. Strong scenes and authentic dialogue show particular finesse, as when Travis and Stephen see each other between semesters. The pace is well controlled, highlighting important moments and using exposition to summarize backstory. Once Travis and Stephen are settled in Boston as roommates, have their own jobs, and start dating, things get complicated. Stephen falls in love with a man, Gabe, and Travis begins dating an older man from the office, Benson.

The differences between each relationship are jarring—Stephen and Gabe have a supportive, sweet courtship, while Travis makes excuses for the bruises he comes home with after being with Benson. There are times when characters seem to be mouthpieces for issues, but the novel remains refreshing in its ability to show most characters as accepting and supportive of each other.

Violence in relationships can affect anyone, as *A Careful Heart* compellingly proves.

MONICA CARTER (LGBTQ+ 2017)

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