

The Side Project

Laurel Osterkamp

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A high school crush-turned-romance faces adult complications in the exciting contemporary novel The Side Project.

In Laurel Osterkamp's romance novel *The Side Project*, two reserved writers have complicated family lives that act as roadblocks to their mutual happiness.

Twenty-four-year-old Rylee feels stuck in Minnesota. Her father died ten years ago and her younger brother, Brandon, dealt with a cancer diagnosis. Despite these challenges, she finds some respite in writing and boasts three successful self-published romance novels to her name.

When Rylee's childhood crush—her best friend's older brother, Carson, who is now a teacher at Brandon's school—shows up in her graduate-level writing course, Rylee's old feelings for him resurface. But Carson comes with his own baggage: he and his high school girlfriend, Dana, share a child and are going through a hostile divorce. As Rylee and Carson's feelings for each other deepen, they are forced to decide whether hooking up with each other is worth losing their valued stability.

Rylee and Carson's connection begins in their creative writing class, leading to amusing metacommentary on self-publishing, romance as a genre, and literary tropes. The two also brainstorm story ideas together. The book's perspective alternates between them, and their thoughts and voices reflect a similar casual style. They use "WTF?!" and other colloquialisms; when they are angry, they speak in short, exclamatory sentences. At times, though, they are not distinguishable from each other because of the similarities in their voices.

Rylee and Carson's relationship progresses at a slow pace, but their first kiss is abrupt. Elements of the story strain credulity: Rylee's best friend tells Rylee to sit in her brother's lap at a crowded football game, and people often show up just as sensitive information is revealed about them, leading to awkwardness. In addition, some details are underdeveloped: Carson's mother is a teacher at his high school, which is set up as a potential source of conflict but has the total impact of provoking his minor annoyance.

While some important secrets are revealed early in the book, robbing portions of it of their tension, excitement reignites in its last third, when past secrets unravel and traumas come to light. While the actions of a rival of Rylee's seem malicious at first, the rival's sympathetic facets are revealed in time, resulting in new depth. The two form an unlikely friendship as the result of a shared workplace, leading to new, heady complications too. There's satisfaction in the discovery that Rylee may have more in common with her rival than she initially believed.

In the second-chance romance novel *The Side Project*, a high school crush reignites, spurring a romance—and unanticipated challenges.

LEAH BLOCK (August 9, 2024)

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