

# CHAPTER 1

I hadn't spoken to Whitley Lansing—or any of them—in over a year.

When her text arrived after my last final, it felt inevitable, like a comet tearing through the night sky, hinting of fate.

Too long. WTF. #notcool. Sorry. My Tourette's again. How was your freshman year? Amazing? Awful?

Seriously. We miss you.

Breaking the silence bc the gang is heading to Wincroft for my bday. The Linda will be in Mallorca & ESS Burt is getting married in St. Bart's for the 3rd time. (Vegan yogi.) So it's ours for the weekend. Like yesteryear.

Can you come? What do you say Bumblebee?

Carpe noctem.

Seize the night.

She was the only girl I knew who surveyed everybody like a leather-clad Dior model and rattled off Latin like it was her native language.

“How was your exam?” my mom asked when she picked me up.

“I confused Socrates with Plato and ran out of time during the essay,” I said, pulling on my seat belt.

“I’m sure you did great.” She smiled, a careful look. “Anything else we need to do?”

I shook my head.

My dad and I had already cleared out my dorm room. I’d returned my textbooks to the student union to get the 30 percent off for next year. My roommate had been a girl from New Haven named Casey who’d gone home to see her boyfriend every weekend. I’d barely seen her since orientation.

The end of my freshman year at Emerson College had just come and gone with the indifferent silence usually reserved for a going-out-of-business sale at a mini-mall.

“Something dark’s a-brewin’,” Jim would have told me.



I had no plans all summer, except to work alongside my parents at the Captain’s Crow.

The Captain's Crow—the Crow, it's called by locals—is the seaside café and ice cream parlor my family owns in Watch Hill, Rhode Island, the tiny coastal village where I grew up.

Watch Hill, Rhode Island. Population: You Know Everyone.

My great-grandfather Burn Hartley opened the parlor in 1885, when Watch Hill was little more than a craggy hamlet where whaling captains came to shake off their sea legs and hold their children for the first time before taking off again for the Atlantic's Great Unknowns. Burn's framed pencil portrait hangs over the entrance, revealing him to have the mad glare of some dead genius writer, or a world explorer who never came home from the Arctic. The truth is, though, he could barely read, preferred familiar faces to strange ones and dry land to the sea. All he ever did was run our little dockside restaurant his whole life, and perfect the recipe for the best clam chowder in the world.

All summer I scooped ice cream for tan teenagers in flip-flops and pastel sweaters. They came and went in big skittish groups like schools of fish. I made cheeseburgers and tuna melts, coleslaw and milk shakes. I swept away sand dusting the black-and-white-checked floor. I threw out napkins, ketchup packets, salt packets, over-21 wristbands, Del's Frozen Lemonade cups, deep-sea fishing party boat brochures. I put lost cell phones beside the register so they could be easily found when the panic-stricken owners came barging inside: "I lost my . . . Oh . . . thank you, you're the best!" I cleaned up the torn blue tickets from the 1893 saltwater carousel, located just a few doors down by the beach, which featured faded faceless mermaids to ride, not horses. Watch Hill's greatest claim to fame was that Eleanor Roosevelt had been photographed riding

a redhead with a turquoise tail sidesaddle. (It was a town joke how put out she looked in the shot, how uncomfortable and buried alive under her plate-tectonic layers of ruffled skirt.)

I cleaned the barbecue sauce off the garbage cans, the melted Wreck Rummage off the tables (Wreck Rummage was every kid's favorite ice cream flavor, a mash-up of cookie dough, walnuts, cake batter, and dark chocolate nuggets). I Cloroxed and Fantasticked and Mr. Cleaned the windows and counters and door-knobs. I dusted the brine off the mussels and the clams, polishing every one like a gemstone dealer obsessively inspecting emeralds. Most days I rose at five and went with my dad to pick out the day's seafood when the fishing boats came in, inspecting crab legs and fluke, oysters and bass, running my hands over their tapping legs and claws, barnacles and iridescent bellies. I composed song lyrics for a soundtrack to a made-up movie called *Lola Anderson's Highway Robbery*, drawing words, rhymes, faces, and hands on napkins and take-out menus, tossing them in the trash before anyone saw them. I attended grief support group for adolescents at the North Stonington Community Center. There was only one other kid in attendance, a silent boy named Turks whose dad had died from ALS. After two meetings he never returned, leaving me alone with the counselor, a jittery woman named Deb who wore pantsuits and wielded a three-inch-thick book called *Grief Management for Young People*.

“The purpose of this exercise is to construct a positive meaning around the lost relationship,” she read from chapter seven, handing me a Goodbye Letter worksheet. “On this page, write a

note to your lost loved one, detailing fond memories, hopes, and any final questions.’”

Slapping a chewed pen that read *TABEEGO ISLAND RESORTS* on my desk, she left. I could hear her on the phone out in the hall, arguing with someone named Barry, asking him why he didn’t come home last night.

I drew a screeching hawk on the Goodbye Letter, with lyrics to a made-up Japanese animated film about a forgotten thought called *Lost in a Head*.

Then I slipped out the fire exit and never went back.

I taught Sleepy Sam (giant yawn of a teenager from England visiting his American dad) how to make clam cakes and the perfect grilled cheese. *Grill on medium, butter, four minutes a side, six slices of Vermont sharp cheddar, two of fontina*. For July Fourth, he invited me to a party at a friend of a friend’s. To his shock, I actually showed. I stood by a floor lamp with a warm beer, listening to talk about guitar lessons and Zach Galifianakis, trying to find the right moment to escape.

“*That, by the way, is Bee,*” said Sleepy Sam. “She does actually speak, I swear.”

I didn’t mention Whitley’s text to anyone, though it was always in the back of my mind.



It was the brand-new way-too-extravagant dress I’d bought but never taken out of the bag. I just left it there in the back of my

closet, folded in tissue paper with the receipt, the tags still on, with intention of returning it.

Yet there was still the remote possibility I'd find the courage to put it on.

I knew the weekend of her birthday like I knew my own: August 30.

It was a Friday. The big event of the day had been the appearance of a stray dog wandering Main Street. It had no tags and the haunted look of a prisoner of war. He was gray, shaggy, and startled with every attempt to pet him. A honk sent him skidding into the garbage cans behind the Captain's Crow.

"See that yellow salt-bed mud on his back paws? That's from the west side of Nickybogg Creek," announced Officer Locke, thrilled to have a mystery on his hands, his first of the year.

That stray dog had been the talk all that day—what to do with him, where he'd been—and it was only much later that I found my mind going back to that dog drifting into town out of the blue. I wondered if he was some kind of sign, a warning that something terrible was coming, that I should not take the much-exalted and mysterious Road Less Traveled, but the one well trod, wide-open, and brightly lit, the road I knew.

By then it was too late. The sun had set. Sleepy Sam was gone. I'd overturned the café chairs and put them on the tables. I'd hauled out the trash. And anyway, that flew in the face of human nature. No one ever heeded a warning sign when it came.

My mom and dad assumed I was joining them at the Dream-

land Theater in Westerly for the screwball comedy classics marathon, like I did every Friday.

“Actually, I made plans tonight,” I said.

My dad was thrilled. “Really, Bumble? That’s great.”

“I’m driving up to Wincroft.”

They fell silent. My mom had just flipped the Closed sign in the window, and she turned, wrapping her cardigan around herself, shivering even though it was seventy-five degrees out.

“How long have you known about this?” she asked.

“Not long. I’ll be careful. I’ll be back by midnight. They’re up there for Whitley’s birthday. I think it’ll be good for me to see them.”

“That’s a long way to drive in the dark,” said my dad.

My mom looked like I’d been given a prognosis of six weeks left to live. Sometimes when she got really upset, she chewed an imaginary piece of gum. She was doing that now.

“Part of the grieving process is confronting the past,” I said.

“That’s not the point. I—”

“It’s all right, Victoria.” My dad put a hand on her shoulder.

“But Dr. Quentin said not to put yourself in stressful situations that—”

“We’ve established that Dr. Quentin is an idiot,” I said.

“Dr. Quentin is indeed an idiot,” said my dad with a regretful nod. “The fact that his name is one-half of a state prison should have been a red flag.”

“You know I don’t like it when you two gang up on me,” said my mom.

At that moment, someone—some red-faced weekender in seersucker shorts who'd had too many stouts at O'Malligan's—tried to open the door.

"We're closed," my mom snapped.



That was how I came to be driving my dad's ancient green Dodge RAM with the emphysema muffler fifty miles up the Rhode Island coastline.

*Wincroft.*

The name sounded like something out of a windswept novel filled with ghosts and madmen. The mansion was a sprawling collection of red brick, turrets, gardens, and crow gargoyles, built in the 1930s by a Great White Hunter who'd supposedly called Hemingway and Lawrence of Arabia his friends. He had traveled the world killing beautiful creatures, and thus Wincroft, his seaside estate, had never been lived in more than a few weeks in sixty years. When Whitley's weird ex-second-stepdad, Burt—commonly called E.S.S. Burt—bought it in foreclosure in the 1980s, he gut renovated the interiors in an unfortunate style Whitley called "if Madonna threw up all over Cyndi Lauper."

Still, it wasn't unusual to open a chest of drawers in the attic, or a musty steamer trunk, and find photographs of strangers gripping rifles and wearing fox furs or some weird piece of taxidermy—a ferret, red frog, or rodent of unknown species. This gave every visit to Wincroft the mysterious feel of being on an archaeological expedition, as if all around us, inside the floors,

walls, and ceiling, some lost civilization was waiting to be unearthed.

“We are our junk,” said Jim once, pulling a taxidermy lizard out of a shoe box.

Leaving the interstate, the road to get there turned corkscrewed and dizzying, as if trying to shake you. The coast of Rhode Island—not the infamously uptight Newport part, with the stiff cliffs and colossal mansions smugly staring down at the tiny sailboats salting the harbor, but the rest of it—was rough and tumbledown, laid-back and sunburnt. It was an old homeless beachcomber in a washed-out T-shirt who couldn’t remember where he’d slept the night before. The grasses were wiry and wasted, the roads salty and cracked, sprouting faded signs and faulty traffic lights. Bridges elbowed their way out of the marshes before collapsing, exhausted, on the other side of the road.

I still had their phone numbers, but I didn’t want to call. I didn’t even know if they’d be there. All these months later their plans could have changed. Maybe I’d knock and Whitley wouldn’t answer, but her ex-second-stepdad, Burt, would, E.S.S. Burt with his too-long, curly gray hair; Burt, who a million years ago had written an Oscar-nominated song for a tragic love story starring Ryan O’Neill. Or maybe they would all be there. Maybe I wanted to see the looks on their faces when they first saw me, looks they hadn’t rehearsed.

Then again, if they didn’t know I was coming, I could still turn around. I could still go join my parents at the Dreamland for *His Girl Friday*, afterward head to the Shakedown for crab cakes and oysters, saying hi to the owner, Artie, pretending I didn’t

hear him whisper to my dad when I went to the bathroom, “Bee’s really come around,” like I was a wounded racehorse they’d decided not to euthanize. Not that it was Artie’s fault. It was the natural reaction when people found out what had happened: my boyfriend, Jim, had died senior year.

Sudden Death of the Love of Your Life wasn’t supposed to happen to you as a teenager. If it did, though, it was helpful if it was due to one of the Top Three Understandable Reasons for Dying as a Kid: A. Car accident. B. Cancer. C. Suicide. That way, after you selected the applicable choice, the nearest adult could promptly steer your attention to the range of movies (many starring Timothy Hutton) and self-help books to help you Deal.

But when your boyfriend’s death remains unsolved, and you’re left staring into a black hole of guilt and the unknown?

There’s no movie or self-help book in the world to help you with that.

Except maybe *The Exorcist*.

If I was a no-show tonight, my old friends would come and go from Wincroft, and that would be that. Not showing up would be the final push of that old toy sailboat from my childhood, the one shove that would really send it drifting out toward the middle of the lake, far from the shoreline, forever out of reach.

Then I’d never find out what happened to Jim.

I kept driving.

The twisting road seemed to urge me onward, yellowed beech trees streaking past; a bridge; the sudden, startling view of a harbor where tall white sailboats crowded like a herd of feasting unicorns before vanishing. I couldn’t believe how easily I re-

membered the way: left at the Exxon, right on Elm, right at the stop sign where you dined with Death, run-down trailers with strung-up laundry and flat tires in the yard. Then the trees fell away in deference to the most beautiful kiss of sky and sea, always streaked orange and pink at dusk.

And there it was. The wrought-iron gate emblazoned with the W.

It was open. The lamps were lit.

I made the turn and floored it, oak branches flying past like ribbons come loose from a ponytail, wind howling through the open windows. Another curve and I saw the mansion, the windows golden and alive, all hulking red brick and slate, crow gargoyles perched forever on the roof.

As I pulled up I almost laughed aloud at the four cars parked there, side by side. I didn't recognize any of them—except for Martha's Honda Accord with the bumper sticker HONK FOR GENERAL RELATIVITY. If pressed I could, with little trouble, match the other cars with their respective owners.

I had changed so much. From the look of these cars, they had not.

I checked my appearance in the rearview mirror, feeling immediate horror: messy ponytail, chapped lips, shiny forehead. I looked like I'd just run a marathon and come in last. I blotted my face on the roll of paper towels my dad kept in the door, pinched my cheeks, tucked the loose strands of dark brown hair behind my ears. Then I was sprinting up the stone steps and rapping the brass lion knocker.

Nothing happened.

I rang the doorbell, once, twice, three times, all in one crazy, deranged movement, because I knew if I hesitated at all I'd lose my nerve. I'd sink, like some lost boot caught inside a lobster trap, straight back to the bottom of the sea.

The door opened.

Kipling stood there. He was wearing a chin-length pink wig, blue polo shirt, Bermuda shorts, flip-flops. He was extremely tan and chewing a red drink stirrer, though it fell out of his mouth when he saw me.

"Good Lord, strike me down dead," he said in his cotton-plantation drawl.

## CHAPTER 2

Grand entrances don't happen in real life. Not the way you want.

What you want is something between a Colombian telenovela (screaming, faces agog, running mascara) and a Meryl Streep Oscar™ Moment (crackling dialogue, hugs, the whole world coming together to sing in harmony).

Instead, they're awkward.

My sudden appearance at Wincroft was a poorly aimed torpedo. I had misfired, and now I was drifting aimlessly, explosive, but without a target. Standing in the foyer under the chandelier in my jean cutoffs, sneakers, Wreck Rummage-stained T-shirt, faced with their freshly showered, glam selves, I felt ridiculous. I shouldn't have come.

They were heading to a sold-out punk rock concert at the Able Seaman in Newport, the beachfront dive bar where we'd

spent many a weekend senior year with fake IDs and weekend passes, so they were greeting me, but also getting ready to go. So there was an awful feeling of distraction and poorly dubbed conversation.

First Kip hugged me. Then he surveyed me politely, as if he were on an art museum tour and I were the tiny, underwhelming painting some guide was blathering on and on about.

Whitley came running over.

“Oh, my God, Beatrice.” She air-kissed me. “You actually came. Wow.”

She was even more jarringly beautiful than I remembered: thigh-high stiletto jean boots, oversized sweatshirt with a sequin mouth on the front, black fringe cutoffs, perfume of gardenia and leather. I was at once hit with the magazine ad that was her presence and also finding it impossible to believe she used to be my best friend. Countless nights at Darrow-Harker School in Warwick, Rhode Island—home of the Crusaders—we sat up illegally after curfew, cheeks polka-dotted with zit cream, wool socks on our feet. I had told her things I hadn’t told anyone. Now that seemed like an out-of-place scene cut from some other movie.

“How are you, Bee?” she asked, squeezing my hands.

“Good.”

“This is the *best* surprise. I mean, I could—I’m— Oh, *shoot*. The patio cushions need to be brought in. It’s supposed to rain, right?”

And then she was racing away, long blond hair carouseling her back. “Kip was right,” she called out as she vanished into

the kitchen. “He said you’d show up out of the blue like some presumed-dead character in a movie starring, like, Jake Gyllenhaal, but we told him he was nuts. I thought you’d rather die than see any of us again. Now I owe him, like, fifty dollars—”

“One hundred dollars,” interrupted Kip, holding up a finger. “Do not try to renege. Ghosting on debts is one of your worst qualities, Lansing.”

“What? Oh, wait. We have to give Gandalf his Prozac or he’ll pee everywhere.”

“Gandalf is depressed,” Kip explained to me with a prim nod. “He also suffers from multiple personalities. He’s a Great Dane who thinks he’s a lapdog.”

“I know Gandalf,” I reminded him weakly.

*“Beatrice.”*

Cannon was jogging barefoot down the staircase, Puma sneakers in hand. At the bottom he stopped, surveying me with a warm smile.

“I can’t believe it. Sister Bee in the flesh. How’s God?”

“Funny.”

He looked different too. He was still sporting his signature gray hacker’s hoodie, but it was no longer misshapen and dusted with orange Cheez-Its powder after wearing it two weeks straight in the arctic subterranean computer room at Darrow. It was cashmere. Cannon had become semifamous when, sophomore year, he discovered a bug in Apple’s OS X operating system: when you accidentally tapped certain keys, your screen froze, and your desktop turned into the surreal winter scene of Apple’s Blue

Pond wallpaper. He christened the bug Cannon's Birdcage, and it landed him on the front page of a million Silicon Valley blogs. Last I'd heard, he was attending Stanford for computer science.

He jumped off the stairs and hugged me. He smelled like expensive wood flooring.

"How's college? How's your mom and dad? They still run that little ice cream parlor?"

"Yes."

He stared at me, his expression intense and unreadable. "I love that place."

"Hello, Bee," called a solemn voice.

Turning, I saw Martha. She was blinking at me from behind her thick, mad-scientist glasses, which gave her the all-seeing, telephoto-lens stare for which she was famous. She'd given up her khakis and boxy Oxford shirts for ripped black jeans and an oversized T-shirt proclaiming something in German: TORSCHLUSSPANIK. She'd also dyed her thin brown hair neon blue.

"Hi," I said.

"It's absurd how you haven't changed," drawled Kip, his smile like a tiny button on formal living room upholstery. "You freeze-dry yourself in some cryogenic experiment? 'Cause it isn't fair, child. I got crow's-feet and gout."

Whitley was back, avoiding eye contact, grabbing her flesh-colored Chanel purse.

"You're coming with us, right?"

She seemed less than thrilled by the idea, now shoving her manicured feet into Lanvin flats.

"Actually, I—"

"Of course you are," said Cannon, throwing his arm around my shoulder. "I'll scalp you a ticket. Or I'll scalp someone for a ticket. Either way, we'll figure it out."

*"Laissez les bon temps roulez,"* said Kip, raising his glass.

There was a Texas-sized stretch of silence as we filed outside, the only sounds our footsteps on the pavement and the wind ransacking the trees. My heart was pounding, my face red. I wanted nothing more than to sprint to my pickup and take off down the drive at a hundred miles an hour, pretend none of this had happened.

"We taking two cars?" asked Martha.

"We're five," said Whitley. "We'll squeeze into mine."

"Promise you'll glance in that rearview mirror at least once, child?" asked Kip.

"You're hilarious."

We piled into her hunter-green convertible Jaguar. Whitley, with a severe look—which I remembered meant she felt nervous—pressed a series of buttons on the console screen. The engine did an elegant throat clear, and the top half of the car began to peel away like a hatching egg. Then we were speeding down the drive, Whitley accelerating like a veteran NASCAR driver, swerving into the grass, mowing through rhododendrons. I was in the backseat between Kip and Martha, trying not to lean too hard on either of them.

Kip tossed his pink wig into the air.

"Ahhhhh!" he screamed, head back, as the wig landed in the driveway behind us. "After a long absence, the band is back together! Let's never break up again! Let's go on a world tour!"

*What about the lead singer?* I couldn't help wondering as I looked up at him.

*Aren't you forgetting Jim?*

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The opening band had already started when we arrived. There wasn't time to talk. There was only this anxious pushing through the packed crowd outside while Whitley approached the bouncer. Martha went in to secure the table, and Cannon went around asking guys with buzz cuts and Budweiser breath if they had an extra ticket, all of which left me crammed pointlessly against the side railing.

"You guys go in without me!" I shouted at Kip, who'd materialized beside me.

"Hush." He linked his arm through mine. "Now that we found you again, we're never going to let you go. I'm your barnacle, child. Deal with it."

I laughed. It seemed like the start of the first true conversation that night.

Kipling and I had always been close. Tall and lanky, with rust-red hair and "an ancient gentleman face"—as he described himself—he was the most fun stuffed into a single person I'd ever met. He was eccentric and strange, like some half-broken talisman you'd find on a dusty shelf at the back of an antiques store, hinting at a harrowing history and good luck. He was gay, though claimed to be more interested in a story well told than in sex, and saw Darrow more as a country club than as any institution in

which he was meant to learn something. A study date in the library with Kipling meant constant interruption for his anecdotes and observations about life, friends, and the host of colorful characters populating his tiny hometown of Moss Bluff, Louisiana—like we weren't holed up in muggy cubicles stressed about SATs, but relaxing on a porch shooing flies. While he was as rich as the others ("defunct department store money"), he had had what he called a "busted childhood," thanks to his scary mom, Momma Greer.

Little was *actually* known about Momma Greer, apart from the details Kipling let slip like a handful of confetti he loved to toss into the air without warning. When he was a toddler she locked him alone for days in Room 2 of the Royal Sonata Motel ("ground floor by the vendin' machines so she could sneak out without payin'"), nothing to eat but a stash of Moon Pies, no company but Delta Burke selling bangles on QVC. Her negligence had led to a pit bull, chained up in a backyard, attacking Kipling when he was five, biting off three fingers on his left hand, and leaving him with a "mini shark bite" on his chin—disfigurations he paraded like a Purple Heart.

"Just call me Phantom of the Opera," he'd say, gleefully fanning his severed hand in front of your face. When the court finally removed Kip from his mom's custody, sending him to live with an infirm aunt, he kept running away to try to get back to Momma Greer.

Last I'd heard she was in a mental institution in Baton Rouge.

I wanted to ask how his year had been, but at that moment, Whitley, in true Whitley fashion, came over and without a word

grabbed my wrist, pulling me through the crowd. She'd come to some understanding with the doorman. He let me in without a ticket, stamping my hand, and then we were all at a reserved table in the front watching a girl with stringy hair pretend she was Kurt Cobain.

It was strange. The drummer looked like Jim. I wasn't sure anyone else noticed, but he looked like Jim's younger brother, all milk-chocolate eyes and bedhead, the rueful air of a banished prince. It was deafening inside, too loud to talk, so all of us just stared at the band, lost in the swamps of our thoughts.

Maybe I was the only one lost. Maybe they'd all had amazing experiences in college, which had shrunk what had happened to us in high school, turned even Jim's death into a faded T-shirt washed ten thousand times.

Once upon a time at Darrow, they'd been my family. They were the first real friends I'd ever had, a collection of people so vibrant and loyal that, like some child born into a grand dynasty, I couldn't help but be awed at my luck. We'd been a club, a secret society all the other students at Darrow eyed with envy—not that we even paid attention. Friendship, when it runs deep, blinds you to the outside world. It's your exclusive country with sealed borders, unfair distribution of green cards, rich culture no foreigner could understand. To be cut off from them, exiled by my own volition as I had been for the past year, felt cheap and unsettled, a temporary existence of suitcases, rented rooms, and roads I didn't know.

Jim's death had been the earthquake that swallowed cities.

Although I had spent the past year certain my friends knew much more about it than they'd let on, I also knew with every passing day the truth was drifting farther out of reach. I'd checked Whitley's Snapchat and every now and then I saw the four of them together. They looked so happy, so nonchalant.

*Like nothing had happened.*

Yet now, I could see that the dynamic between them had changed.

Kip kept drumming his disfigured hand on the table. Whitley kept checking her phone. Martha seemed to be in an unusually bad mood, throwing back shots the bartender kept sending to our table—something called the Sinking of the *General Grant*, which tasted like crude oil. I caught her staring at me once, her expression faintly accusatory. I smiled back, but she turned away like one of those jungle plants that shrivel at the faintest touch, refusing to look at me again. Once, as Cannon leaned forward to whisper something to Whitley, he tucked her hair behind her ear, which made me wonder if they were back together. Then it seemed more habit than anything else.

When the opening band finished, I wanted to disappear. I wanted to take a taxi back to Wincroft, climb into my dad's truck, drive off, and never look back. What had I expected—for the truth to be right there, obvious as a giant weed growing among tulips, waiting for me to yank it out?

But I stayed. I stayed for the next band, the band after that. I drank the Moscow Mules Whitley put in front of me. I let Kipling pull me to my feet, and I danced the Charleston with him, and the

fox-trot, letting him spin me into the beach bums, and the prepsters, and the Harley-heads under the shaking paper lanterns and posters of sunken ships.

*Just a little while longer, I kept thinking, and I'll bring up Jim.*

When the next band finished, Whitley wanted to go back to Wincroft, only no one could find Cannon. As it turned out, he was in the bar's back alley, helping a girl who'd had too much to drink and was passed out by the fire exit.

"Here comes Lancelot," said Whitley.

Perched along the railing, we watched while Cannon tracked down—with the efficiency of a lobbyist working Capitol Hill—the girl's missing friends, purse, sandals, and iPhone. He even located her hair clip, which he used to gently pin back her hair so she'd stop throwing up on it, which led the girl's newly located, equally drunk friends to stare up at him in wonder.

"Are you human, dude?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Who *are* you?"

Cannon ran a hand through his hair. "I'm Batman."

"Here we go again," sighed Whitley.

Cannon was not handsome. He was slight, with dirty blond hair and pale, out-of-focus features. But he had atomic intensity, which never failed to shock and awe when unleashed upon the world. Moving like a highly charged ion, capable as a machine gun, the first week of freshman year Cannon hacked Darrow's intranet to display its flaws (becoming the school's de facto tech guru). He revamped the decrepit sculpture garden and the wrestling gym. He was class president, and organized marches, mara-

thons, and fund-raisers for endangered species and girls' rights. Cannon was the first to admit that his outgoing, sociable nature and activism was compensation for being a tongue-tied computer geek as a child, worshipping Spielberg movies, eighties pop songs by the Cure, and Ray Kurzweil, no friends to speak of but an imaginary fly named Pete who lived inside his computer. He was adopted, raised by a single mother, a judge in the superior court of California. And while at first glance having Whitley Morrow as his girlfriend—besting Darrow's country club boys who were IIIs and had middle names like Chesterton—seemed like a mistaken case of the princess accidentally ending up with the sidekick, the more you knew Cannon, the more you realized the role of prince was far too trivial for him. He was the king—at least, that was what he was aiming for. He was the most silently ambitious person I'd ever met.

"Any more distressed damsels you need to save?" Whitley asked as Cannon strode back over, having helped the girl and her stumbling friends into an Uber.

He held out his arms in mock triumph. "The bartender looks like he's coming down with a head cold. But no. My work here is done."

"Thank the Lord, 'cause I need my beauty sleep," said Kip with a yawn.

We piled into the Jaguar.

The problem was, no matter how many times Whitley pressed the buttons on the console screen, the convertible top wouldn't go up. It wouldn't go up manually either.

Cannon volunteered to drive, but Whitley insisted. It began to pour, so hard there was more rain in the air than air. The

thirty-five-minute ride home was this terrible ordeal, all of us in the backseat hunched together, drunk and freezing. At one point Martha threw up all over her feet, all of us shivering under E.S.S. Burt's creepy London Fog trench coat, which Whitley had found in the trunk. Whitley began to cry that she couldn't see the road. Tearing around a curve, we nearly collided with a tow truck.

The driver blared his horn. Whitley jerked the wheel, tires screeching. Everyone screamed as we barreled off the road, bouncing to a halt in a ditch, Kip hitting his head on the seat. Killing the engine, Whitley started to sob, screaming at Cannon that it was all his fault, that as always he'd needed to impress a bunch of girls just to massage his screaming insecurity for five minutes and now we'd almost died. She snatched his baseball cap off his head and threw it into the dark. Then she scrambled out, shouting that she was finding her own ride home, running into the woods. I sensed her tantrum had to do with the rain and almost ending up in a car accident—but also with me, how I'd shown up out of the blue.

Cannon went after her. A few minutes later, he brought her back. She was crying and wearing his hoodie. He tucked her carefully, like some wild bird with a broken wing, into the front seat, whispering, "It's gonna be all right, Shrieks."

It was Cannon who got us home.



As the five of us went clambering into Wincroft, dripping wet and drunk, it felt normal for the first time. It felt like the old days. Thank goodness for the defunct top on that convertible.

Our brush with death had thawed the ice. We were giddy, teeth chattering as we pulled off our wet clothes, leaving them in a soggy pile on the floor, which Gandalf kept circling while whining. Whitley disappeared upstairs. Martha was on her hands and knees in front of the fireplace, moaning, "I can't feel my legs." Cannon went down to the wine cellar, returning with four bottles of Chivas Regal Royal Salute, and poured shots in pink champagne glasses. Whitley dumped a giant mound of white terry-cloth bathrobes on the couch like a pile of dead bodies.

"I've never been so scared in my whole life," she said, giggling. That was when the doorbell rang.

We all sat up, staring at each other, bewildered. Mentally counting. We were all here.

"Someone call Ghostbusters?" slurred Martha.

"I'll go," volunteered Cannon. A sloppy salute, and he disappeared into the foyer. None of us said a word, listening, the only sound the rain drumming on the roof.

A minute later, he was back.

"It's some old geezer. He's two hundred years old."

"It's Alastair Totters," said Martha.

"Who?" Cannon snapped.

"Time-traveling villain in *The Bend*," mumbled Martha.

"No, no," whispered Kip, gleeful. "It's the proverbial kook with Alzheimer's who wandered away from his nursing home during Elvis Social Hour. *Without* his medication. They're always without their medications."

"I'll invite him in for a nightcap?" asked Cannon, sighing, a mischievous wink.

“No,” hissed Whitley. “That’s how horror movies start.”

“Chapter three,” Martha muttered.

“Hey,” said Cannon, pointing at Wit. “That’s not very nice. *I’m* inviting him in—”

“NO!”

Then we were all racing, giggling, tripping over each other as we bumbled to the foyer to see for ourselves, tying up our bathrobes, taking turns to check the peephole, bumping heads. I assumed Cannon was somehow playing a trick on us, that no one would actually be there.

But there he was. An old man.

He was tall, with thick silver hair. Though I couldn’t make out his face in the shadows, I could see that he was dressed in a dark suit and tie. He leaned in, smiling, as if he could see me peering out.

Cannon opened the door with a bow.

“Good evening, sir. How may we help you?”

The man didn’t immediately speak. Something about the way he surveyed us—methodically inspecting each of our faces—made me think he knew us from somewhere.

“Good evening,” he said. His voice was surprisingly rich. “May I enter the premises?”

No one answered, the question being too presumptuous and strange. I gathered he was not senile. His eyes—deep green, gleaming in the porch light—were lucid.

“Oh, you live next door,” said Whitley, stepping beside Cannon. “Because if this is about Burt’s sailboat, the *Andiamo*, being marooned in front of your dock, he told me to tell you he had

problems with the anchor and he's working on getting a tow next week."

"I do not live next door."

He stared at us another beat, his face expectant.

"It's really best if I come inside to explain."

"Tell us what you want right there," said Cannon.

The man nodded, unsurprised. It was then that I noticed two bizarre things.

One: he looked like Darrow's musical director, Mr. Joshua. For a moment my drunken mind believed that it *was* Mr. Joshua, that something terrible had happened to him in the year since I'd last seen him. He'd suffered some tragedy and aged twenty-five years, his hair going silver, his face growing tattered. But it wasn't Mr. Joshua. Mr. Joshua was slight and rosy, quick to laugh. This man was bony, with a hawkish face, one that would look at home on foreign currency or atop a monument in a town square. It was as if he were the identical twin brother of Mr. Joshua, as if they'd been separated at birth and had totally different life experiences, Mr. Joshua's nurturing and this man's harrowing, bringing him to look the way he did.

Two: there was no car in the driveway, so the question of how he'd come here without an umbrella yet remained perfectly dry hung in the air, vaguely alarming, like a faint odor of gas.

"You're all dead," he said.