



THE  
INNOCENCE  
OF  
WESTBURY

**BOOKS BY FREDERIC MARTIN**

**The Vox Oculis Series**

Not Alone

The Innocence of Westbury

Forest

# THE INNOCENCE OF WESTBURY

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A VOX OCULIS NOVEL: BOOK TWO

FREDERIC MARTIN



NTHSENSE BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*To Elizabeth Cady Martin  
for being a delightful and dedicated spouse,  
not to mention a ferocious proofreader.  
;^)*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to *The Innocence of Westbury*, the second book of the “Vox Oculis” series. In the first book, *Not Alone*, you met our heroes Will Woods and Blue DuBois. Before you begin reading *Innocence of Westbury*, I feel a quick lesson on French pronunciation is required as most of you are probably not from Vermont or France or Quebec or the host of other French speaking countries. Blue’s last name is French in origin and pronounced natively as “doo-bwah” and that is Blue’s strongly preferred pronunciation. Vermonters are very accustomed to native French pronunciations as our northern border is shared with Quebec, the province in Canada that is most rigorous about preserving its French heritage, to the point of requiring all outdoor signage to be in French with the option of having English translation in smaller font below the French. In fact, many visitors to Quebec would be shocked to find that there is a small, but significant, portion of its residents that do not know a scrap of English. Quebec is so emphatic about its French heritage that it has gone as far as having several referendums on seceding from Canada and getting darn close to actually succeeding (in seceding . . . ;^).

Being adjacent to Quebec means Vermont gets a lot of visitors from Quebec (and vice-versa) and a lot of those visitors find a nice

Vermont boy or girl and fall in love and wind up settling in Vermont. As you might guess (as this has been going on for generations and generations) there are a lot of French surnames, business names, road names, even town names here in Vermont. And yet, Americans being Americans, and even Vermonters, some of these names eventually wind up being pronounced in literal Americanish. For example, the name “Charlebois” (shar-luh-bwah) gets Americanized to “charley-boys” and “LaVerdière” (la-ver-dee-air) becomes “luh-ver-dee-ur”. As you can imagine, Blue’s surname often gets pronounced “dew-boys.” Many folk go along with the American pronunciation (even some in the Charlebois family go along with “charley-boys”) but Blue is fairly insistent on the native pronunciation. In fact, she would be disappointed if, as you read this book, in your head you pronounced her name “*dew-boys*” instead of “*doo-bwah*” and furthermore, she would probably know if you did, if you are a leaker, as I imagine many of you are, though you may not yourself know it. Yet.

Also another minor tidbit, something that might be more familiar to many of you, is that there are several different ways of writing those six characters which include: “Du Bois”, “Dubois”, and of course “DuBois.” My own given name is realized in all of the following forms: “Fredrick”, “Frederick”, “Fredrich”, “Fredric”, Frédéric, and of course the *correct* English version (ahem) which is “Frederic.” You get the idea and probably many of you have names that face the same nightmare of misspellings and mispronunciations and are familiar with having to live with it your entire lives. If you do, I hope you have sympathy for the suffering that Blue and I go through almost every day.

So with that explanation, you may do as you please, but both Blue and myself would be most appreciative if you adopt our preferred pronunciations and spellings as you engross yourself in the pages that follow. And, by the way, I pronounce my name “fredrick”, not “fred-e-rick”. Go figure.



## AUGUST, 2031

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*“In my talk I have mentioned ‘perception of reality’ several times and I will mention it many times more because that is what this talk is really about. Yes, we have seen that people with vox oculis can communicate verbally with their eyes. Yes, we have explored the physiology of that sensory capability. Yes, we have found that many of us have vestigial vox oculis tissue and yes, that tissue can functionally leak some of our thoughts to those that have true vox oculis.*

*All of this is very challenging to comprehend and for many, astonishing. But we have only scratched the surface of the implications of this ability because it is not necessarily this extra sensory perception alone that alters the reality for a person with vox oculis, it is the neurobiology that we all are blessed with that can take this extra sense and integrate it with our entire neural-chemical system that includes not only our five basic senses, but our gut-brain axis, reflexes, adrenal glands, logical centers, emotional centers, memory, and even technological advances such as AR implants and simstim.*

*What happens when we put all these together? What is the*

*reality? Is it just what you see? Is it just what you hear? Is it just what you ate? No, of course not. It is not 'just' any one of these things, it is all of them blended together to give you the experience you are having right now. Maybe your eyes are closed and you are picturing something in your head that is a synthesis of what you are hearing. Maybe you are half asleep and daydreaming something totally bizarre yet totally realistic. Maybe you have to pee and are trying to get the image of a waterfall out of your head.*

*Now imagine you had one additional neural input that could eavesdrop on not just the verbal thoughts, but the fully processed reality—images, emotions, physical comfort—experienced by the people sitting around you now. What images would be forming in your head? What would your internal dialog be? What would your emotional state be? And the most interesting question of all: exactly how much of their reality becomes part of your reality?"*

— FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON GENETIC  
VARIANCE, CASTLETON UNIVERSITY, AUGUST 14TH, 2031

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**AUGUST, 2011**



## PROLOGUE

**N**YPD Detective Rodney James contemplated the abstract nature of his half-eaten sausage and cheese breakfast sandwich as it sat nestled in the oddly symmetrical folds of the grease-stained foil paper. He imagined it as a bloom cut from some alien tree that grew breakfast sandwiches, hanging like foil coated fruit from steely branches in the streets of Manhattan, plucked by herds of trendily-dressed creatures whose faces were permanently set in an expression that could only be defined as “out-of-my-way-I’m-on-my-way-somewhere-exceedingly-important.”

His musings were interrupted with the slap of a case folder flopping on the only clear spot of his overly cluttered cubicle desk. He had plenty of lukewarm cold-case folders skewed about already, but a new one was always a bit of a thrill. Each one held the potential of an exciting discovery leading to resolution of some decades-old mystery. It was a treasure hunt. Gambling, really. Frustrating 99.9 percent of the time, but with that intoxicating 0.1 percent possibility of hitting the jackpot. One in a thousand. To some, those were terrible odds. Not to him.

“Are you going to eat the rest of that? If not, I’m starving.”

Rodney looked up into the face of Chief Detective Daniels and said, “You shall starve, then. What’s in here?”

“Well, depends on how you look at it. Ice cold case if you look at it like a normal detective, but glowing warm if you knew who it came from.”

“Harris?”

“You know,” the chief grabbed the breakfast sandwich and took a large bite out of it but kept on talking while he chewed, “Harris pointed this one at you very particularly. You should be flattered.”

Rodney picked up the folder and thumbed through the contents. “WITSEC<sup>1</sup>? Witness protection? Why isn’t this going to the U.S. Marshals?”

“It came *from* the Marshals, you idiot. Read it but remember you have to keep it very tight. They don’t let this info out unless it is a very good reason. Look at the other files.”

Rodney flicked through until he came to one labeled “Babineau.”

“That fucker, Babineau.” He looked up at the chief. The chief nodded. “How did Harris get all this? I thought he was retired.”

“He’s retired *and* he’s a legend. He gets info he wants. You don’t stop being a detective just because you retire. The last piece you need to look at is this.” The chief pulled a newspaper clipping out of the folder. It was from yesterday’s New York Times. A drug related kidnapping in Vermont. He read it and as he did, he felt a tiny rush of adrenaline. It was a stretch, but if it came from Harris, it probably wasn’t. Harris had uncanny instincts about these things. He looked back up at the chief, who nodded.

“This is to be kept between you and me and Harris *only*. You got that?”

He nodded. He didn’t have to be told. Witness protection was taken extremely seriously—not even to be shared with colleagues. A leak could kill someone. Did kill someone. More than one. This was his case five years ago when he worked on it in cooperation

with the State Police. It was Harris's case twelve years ago when it was a sting code named "Gambrel."

He looked back at the article and stared at the one name that, along with the name "Babineau" was the axis that this whole case turned around, the one that Harris spotted out of the avalanche of information that poured out of every outlet, every hour, every day. Harris had sussed out that name and made the connection and pulled together the file that he was looking at now. The notion that this one article could revive such a dead dog as Gambrel was intoxicating. All it took was that one name.

DuBois.

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1. WITSEC: Federal Witness Security program. Also known as WPP: Witness Protection Program.





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## NEW NORMAL

Will's eyes were closed. He had closed them so he could enjoy the sensation of the intense morning sun that streamed through his window and pressed his body into the soft folds of his comforter like a big warm hand. A late-summer breeze sifted through the window screen and danced lightly up his legs, skipping over his bare torso to his face, where it brushed lightly across his eyebrows and forehead. He took in a long, slow breath, feeling his chest expand and stretch, pulling his skin tight, causing it to tug on the crisscross of still-fresh scars, reminding him that if he moved too much, too fast, the confusion of damaged tissue in his upper left chest would protest. But if he didn't move, just breathed slowly in . . . then slowly out . . . he could pretend he was the same undamaged boy that he was at the beginning of the summer. Care-free, pain-free, fame-free, guilt free.

It was nice.

His mind felt free, too. It was quiet and relaxed for the first time in weeks. And exhausted. It had been so clenched up from the non-stop barrage of interviews, phone calls, text messages, emails, and snail mails that his brain cells felt like they had been balled up like a knotted snarl of tangled Christmas tree lights. And there were the

follow-up appointments at the hospital and the tense day when he woke up with a headache and a teeny-tiny fever and his mom freaked out and rushed him to the emergency room terrified that it was an infection in his wound. It wasn't, of course, it was just another sideshow in this crazy circus of the past couple of weeks.

But now, it was a beautiful morning, he was alone in his bedroom, it was quiet in the house, and he had the whole day to himself. For the first time, he felt like he could finally turn the page on this chapter of his life. It had certainly been an exciting chapter. The climax was, of course, two weeks ago. He had been shot. With a handgun. Point blank. The bullet had entered his body at terrific speed, careening off a rib, causing it to miss his vagus nerve (thank God, now that he knew what that was) and taking an alternate route through the tip of his left lung (thanks a lot), causing the lung to collapse (gradually—a little bit more with each breath). Somewhere along that path, the bullet managed to clip a small artery before it bounced off his scapula and made a tumbling exit out his back, tearing a hole in his muscle and skin as it went. It had finally clattered to the floor somewhere in the room behind him, deformed and spent, all of its energy having been used to create havoc inside his body.

The clipped artery had refused to stop bleeding, probably because he refused to stop trying to rescue his friend, Blue. Instead, a steady flow of his blood, and life, seeped through the exit wound onto the floor behind him. Blood loss is what almost killed him. Dead. Gone. The tragic death of a teen not yet even fully grown into manhood. Never to excel in college and grad school and realize his dream of becoming a preeminent scientist. Never to experience the euphoria of falling in love. His only lasting legacy being the heroic rescue of a helpless orphan girl from clutches of a cold-blooded drug dealer. Will Woods—dead teen hero. Mourned by a grieved community. Memorialized with a giant statue in Jefford's Park.

Yeah, right—get a grip, Woods, he thought. A bag of ashes in a

brass urn and an obituary in the Westbury News-Press was the best he could expect.

But he wasn't a bag of ashes. He was still a very live bag of living, breathing bone and protoplasm. He took in another deep breath and let it out slowly, enjoying the sensation of air going in . . . and then out. He thought about how billions of humans around the globe were doing the exact same thing. Air going in . . . and then out . . . and then in . . . and then out. He wondered how many of those people had read about him or seen the news clips. Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Millions? How many times had the story been posted and shared and tweeted and retweeted? That was one of the weirdest parts of the whole thing—his story going global—now a permanent part of his electronic legacy. Wherever he went from now on it would be, “Oh yeah, I remember that story. That was *you!*” It was already weird enough just around town. Even strangers would walk up to him. “Hey, Will, how are you doing? Did it hurt, getting shot?” Did it hurt. What do you think? Of course it frigging hurt! Here, let me demonstrate (pulls out a gun, shoots the questioner in the shoulder). There! How are you doing? Did that hurt?

The funny thing was that some people acted almost jealous. He remembered being jealous of kids in casts who had broken an arm or leg. Why was that? Who would ever be jealous of someone going through so much pain? It was weird. He figured it was all the attention. People are so kind to you and generous, even the annoying strangers. And in the beginning, all that attention felt really great, but after about a week, it started to get a little tiring, and then it got really annoying, and now he'd reached the point where he just wanted to lock the door and tell them all to kindly fuck off. He had never really appreciated being a nobody before, but now he did. Now there was no more anonymity. Everyone knows you. People who had never given you the time of day before suddenly start acting like they're your best friend.

And then there was this whole “hero” thing. They kept calling

him a hero. Somehow being shot made him the hero. How did they figure that? Blue was the real hero. She'd been the one with the courage to go after the drug dealer (and single-handed at that, thanks to Will's cowardice). It was because of her that their town was now rid of that psychopath. And she was the one who'd suffered the most, enduring twenty-four hours of captivity, beaten, bound, gagged, isolated, and alone, sure she was going to die. And now, instead of her being the hero, people were treating her like she was the victim—damaged goods. Even worse were the idiots on Facebook that were pushing complete lies; that she was an addict, that she was the dealer's lover, that it wasn't an abduction it was part of some S&M thing. What the hell was wrong with those people? He'd blasted them back but instead of listening to the truth, these morons wove him into their whole alternate narrative. They were so wrapped up in their own non-reality that it was impossible to talk any sense into them. He had finally given up and just thanked God that Blue didn't do FB and didn't see all this crap. Nobody needed to see that, especially her. Jesus, after what she'd been through she needed everyone's support instead of being beaten-up even more. And the way she had been acting lately, it seemed like she could use a lot of support. He thought a therapist like his mom could help, if only Blue didn't have a pathological hatred of therapists or anyone with a "Dr." in front of their name. In fact, Will wasn't sure there was anyone she trusted enough to let them inside her head. On the other hand, she *had* reached out to him at the homecoming party.

Will sighed. His whole body had tensed up and now his shoulder was hurting again. Damn. Why did he care so much anyway? Yeah, she was the first person he had met outside of his family that shared their secret special ability, *vox oculis*, and maybe that accounted for some of it, but it wasn't all of it. It wasn't physical attraction, though she was lithe and graceful and had a classic profile that had the potential for great beauty if she ever relaxed her semi-permanent state of grim seriousness. No, she was still more of

a tom-boy than a teenage girl, at least in Will's mind. Hard to imagine a romantic relationship developing there. As for her volatile personality, it wasn't exactly what you'd call "sparkling," though there was an undeniable quality of honesty and camaraderie about her when they were together.

Nope, he had no idea why he did, but there it was. He cared about her. And was amazed by her. Blue, the survivor. Her whole family gone and yet here she was, still plugging away, tough as nails and brittle as glass.

He took one more deep breath and let it out like a deflating balloon. So much for the brief delusion of peace and normalcy. He wondered if he could ever just relax and not worry anymore. Blue, reporters, physical therapy, nousey well-wishers, trolls . . . and on top of that, the coming onslaught of sophomore year. He was hoping to fly under the radar at high school, for a while at least, but that was probably just a pipe dream.

He closed his eyes and tried to refocus on the sensation of the warm sun and recapture that feeling of being at peace, but the sun had moved on and he was too wound up now. Just get up, Woods, he told himself. His body stubbornly refused. It wanted to stay on the bed, sun or no sun, but now even the bed refused to cooperate. It tried to eject him with a sudden giant bounce. He opened his eyes and found himself staring directly at an upside-down face.

*"HEY THERE, BIG UGLY BROTHER."*

*"HEY THERE, DEMENTED LITTLE SISTER."*

His sister's *vox* flowed through her eyes into his and her words rang in his head with the most irritating tone Rose could muster, but to Will they had a comforting familiarity.

Rose looked at his shoulder. *"UGH! WHAT A MESS! WHY'D YOU TAKE THE BANDAGE OFF?"* She scooted around so that she was lying next to him and leaned her head on his good shoulder. "Does it hurt much?" she said out-loud.

"Nah, not anymore. Just kind of tight and achy."

She reached her arm across and hugged him. "I'm just glad you're still here."

"Aww, you're so sentimental."

"I'm just practical," she said. "If you were gone, I'd have to do the dishes every single night."

"Very funny. You're asking for a tickle attack."

She sat up suddenly, "No, don't! I don't want you to hurt yourself!" She wasn't laughing. "*WILLY! DON'T! PLEASE!*"

A tiny surge of anxiety tickled his stomach like a frantic butterfly. That feeling wasn't coming from him. He looked her in the eye. "*I WON'T. DON'T WORRY, LITTLE MEERKAT.*"

She stared at him, but her expression relaxed. "*YOU BETTER NOT!*" She slumped back down next to him.

That tickle of anxiety he felt from Rose—those sensations had been happening more and more lately—ever since the night he'd been shot. His mom in the hospital, Blue at the homecoming party, and now Rose. When he brought it up with his mom, she told him he should ask his dad about it when he was ready. He'd been puzzling about that one for a while. Why his dad and not his mom? Was this some kind of birds and bees talk? A little late for that, it seemed.

"Willy! Talk to me."

"Blah de blah blah blah blah. And don't call me Willy."

"Don't make fun."

He gave her a little squeeze. "I'm okay, really. I'll be one-hundred percent soon."

"You'd better be. Blue better be, too. Sam said she's acting more like she did at the beginning of the summer. She even skipped dinner once."

Sam was Blue's younger foster brother. What Sam said to Rose just reinforced what Will had been thinking.

"Do you think she's okay?" Rose asked.

"Hey, don't worry, you. Blue is made of tougher stuff than us. She just needs a little more time."

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Rose sighed and tucked her head under his chin, “I hope so. I like Blue a lot.”

“Yeah. You and me both.”

That’s all Blue needed was a little time, he thought. A little time and . . . a little help. If he could *just* get her to talk to his mom. Right. Like that worked out spectacularly last time he tried. It was easier rescuing her from being kidnapped than talking her into seeing a therapist—maybe because she was tied up and unconscious when she was captive. Maybe that’s what he should do—knock her out and tie her to a chair in his mom’s office.

Rose lifted her head and looked at Will. “*WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING ABOUT?*”

He smiled at her. “*NOTHING. DON’T YOU WORRY ABOUT BLUE.*”

“*WHY NOT? YOU ARE!*”

“*AM NOT!*”

“*ARE TOO!*”

“All right, maybe a little,” he said and gave her another squeeze. Yeah, maybe a little, he thought. Maybe a lot.

**BLUE'S BATTLE**

**H**er breath was coming in short gasps, but they were steady at last, and she could exhale without feeling like she might explode. Quick breath, exhale. Quick breath, exhale. Slow it down. A little deeper now, longer exhale. Deep breath, long exhale, repeat. She could feel her pulse calming down. Her face felt warm, as of course it would the way it was pressed into her knees which she had hugged tightly to her chest. She rocked back and forth to the rhythm of her breathing, her bed creaking slightly from the motion. Her brain started to engage again, now that it was no longer focused solely on suppressing the volcano that threatened to overcome her with an eruption of tears and hysteria. And the question her brain asked was the same one it had been asking for over a week, “Why? Why does this keep happening? When will it stop?” That last question was growing more and more ominous. She kept expecting each episode to be the last and that made the next episode even more excruciating.

Her rocking settled into a slow sway, and she kept it going because it was comforting. She was breathing steadily now, with just an occasional snuffle. She had settled enough that she could think clearly again. She went over in her mind everything that had



happened since the kidnapping, looking for a reason, a solution, anything that she could cling to that would help her make sense of what was going on. Right after she returned from the hospital, things had seemed to return to a nice norm. There had been some media attention early on, but recently it had swung away from her, and now most of the focus was on Will, and that was fine with her. She was fed up with answering annoying questions like, “How did you feel? Were you scared?” God, how are you supposed to answer that? “Oh yes, I was a terrified, helpless, pathetic, weak little girl!” And then their answer would be, “Oh you poor dear sweet innocent little damsel!” Screw you. Leave me alone. Let me go back to my house, back to my room, back to what was starting to be the first period of peace and stability I have felt in almost five years.

Thankfully, they did. With most of the attention on Will, Blue was free to settle back into the comfort and security of the O’Day household. And that was great, except for one thing.

*This started happening.*

The first hint of it was at the homecoming party when the Woods family and the O’Days were getting ready to watch the interview about the kidnapping on TV. She had felt the inklings of it coming on, but she had instinctively moved next to Will and grabbed his hand. It was a little awkward, holding his hand, but he didn’t let go, and it had worked. It quelled the panic. And it felt good . . . holding someone’s hand. Will’s hand. Anyway, that time it didn’t erupt into a full blown episode and she figured it was a one-time thing.

But it was just getting started.

The first full blown attack, Will wasn’t around. Neither was the only other person who might have helped, her older foster brother, Wu. The cause was the armchair in the dining room. She had sat down to start reading a book, and as soon as her arms touched the chair, her body jumped reflexively straight up, and she nearly screamed. The sensation of being bound to a chair, helpless, hopeless . . . it returned like a lightning bolt. She nearly lost it. Sobs

erupted so hard that she had to hold her breath to keep them from exploding into cries. She squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears back while she gasped for breath. She managed to hold it in and slip up to her room unnoticed until she recovered.

Since then, the episodes became frighteningly frequent and familiar. They started as a flutter in the middle of her diaphragm. The flutter crawled up into her chest, and once there, it formed a surge of pressure that rose quickly up her neck to her face and, like a volcano, threatened to erupt through her eyes in a massive flow of tears. She felt like she would come apart at the seams. She had to fight like the devil to keep that from happening. So far she had managed, but just barely.

She had tried different strategies to stop it. She stayed away from the armchair, but then other things would trigger it. Surprising things. A noise, or a smell, or the sound of a car going by. She had no idea what triggered this latest one. It had come completely out of the blue. It was so frustrating! Ridiculous! Childish! It pissed her off because she couldn't seem to make it go away. She was also getting exhausted with being constantly on guard, not knowing when it would happen again. Even worse, she was sure Ma Beth had started to notice.

She finally stopped rocking, lifted her head, and took a deep almost-normal breath. It seemed the worst had passed, and she was almost fully recovered, but she knew she would have to wait at least half an hour before she could go out of her room again. That would allow time for the redness and wateriness in her eyes to subside and for the rest of her to calm down enough so she could venture back out and pretend like nothing was wrong. But before even ten minutes had passed, she heard the sound of footsteps coming up her stairs. It was too soon! She sat frozen on the bed. Please don't knock, please don't knock, please don't knock . . .

There was a knock on her door.

"Blue? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied, too quickly. Ma Beth's voice was usually a

welcome comforting sound, but now Blue was terrified that she would come in and see her in this state. She could sense Ma Beth's hesitation on the other side of the door. The seed of panic started to flutter in her chest, but she battled it back down. The door didn't open, but the footsteps didn't retreat down the stairs either.

"Blue, I have to go out and run an errand. I will be gone for about an hour, but Wu is here, downstairs in his room. Will you be okay?"

She wasn't sure she'd be okay. She knew no one else was home except Ma Beth and Wu. Deep down inside a part of her craved to tell Ma Beth to please not leave her, but a larger part of her got angry. She shouldn't be afraid to be alone! She had never been afraid to be by herself. Ever. This feeling was stupid. She could handle it. She'd be fine.

"Blue?"

"Don't worry, I'll be fine." She said it firmly and with conviction. Her anger at herself was giving her confidence again.

"All right," said Ma Beth after another moment of hesitation. "I'll be back soon."

Blue heard Ma Beth slowly descend the stairs. After a few moments, the front door opened and closed. Then car doors opened and closed. Doors? Plural? Wasn't Ma Beth going alone? Blue dashed to the window and looked down to the driveway to catch a glimpse of what—an arm resting on passenger door? Had Wu decided to go with her at the last minute?

Before she knew what she was doing she flung herself downstairs to the second floor and flew down the hallway to look through the bathroom window for a better view of the driveway. She was breathing fast, and she felt the dreaded flutter in her chest start to creep up again. She was wrong! She did not want to be alone! She got to the window. The car was starting to pull away and Blue couldn't see if anyone was inside with Ma Beth.

"No no no no, don't go!" She turned and bolted for the stairs and ran smack into Wu.



“Oooff! Whoa there, Little Fox!” said Wu. He had been working on his computer but heard the footsteps on Blue’s stairs and then her rapid footsteps in the hall. He had stepped out of his room to see what the commotion was and ended up right in her path.

Blue acted stunned for a second, but then she looked up at him. He looked back at her half amused, and half concerned. Then his face turned to all concern.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay. I’m here! Are you okay?” asked Wu.

Blue just grabbed him and hugged him.

Wu put an arm around her. After a minute he said, “You want to stay with me here while I do my summer book report?”

He felt her head nod, so he guided her into his room.

“You can sit on the bed, or you can use Sam’s computer. Here let me log you in.” He went over and typed a few characters on Sam’s computer and turned around. “There you go. You can just . . .” he stopped. Blue was curled up with her eyes closed at the foot of his bed.

Wu scratched his head, put a pillow next to her, and covered her with a corner of the comforter. She didn’t even stir. Wow, thought Wu. She’s exhausted. Not only that, her hair was matted and she smelled like she needed a bath. He turned back to his work.

After a while, Wu turned to check on her, but she was gone. Despite his concern, he couldn’t help grinning a little and wondering out loud, “How does she do that?”

He went upstairs to make sure she was okay. Her door was closed. Wu knocked and said, “Blue, are you okay?”

Blue, as usual, said, “I’m fine.”

To Wu she didn’t sound usual or fine. He decided he was going to talk to Ma Beth as soon as she got back.

## INEVITABLE

“Blue, we need to talk.”

Ma Beth had knocked on Blue’s door and by the sound of it, Blue could tell that this was all business. It wasn’t unexpected. She knew she couldn’t keep hiding the fact that something was wrong. And now Wu knew. She probably freaked him out enough that he would’ve said something to Ma Beth. And Blue was starting to admit to herself for the first time that maybe she needed help. And she didn’t like it. She had to let Ma Beth in, but some remnant of stubbornness was trying to convince her that she could handle this on her own.

“May I come in?”

Blue’s stubbornness gave way. “Yes,” she said.

Ma Beth opened the door and stepped in. The look on her face was calm and resolute but still kind. It was as if nothing in the world could erase the background of kindness in her expressions.

“Blue, I think it is time for you to talk with someone. I have a very good friend coming by today who is well-regarded and highly recommended.”

Blue swallowed. The friend was no doubt a therapist, or some-

thing worse. She knew this was coming, and, for Ma Beth's sake, she was not going to freak out about it.

Ma Beth continued, "She is a doctor. An M.D. Her degree is in psychiatry, but she is also a psychotherapist. Goodness, there are so many terms for it."

Blue knew all the terms intimately. They were all "psychos." Psychologist, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, psychoanalyst, even psycho-pharmacologist! From crystals and yoga and aromatherapy to full-bore shrink. She had not met one of them that she didn't loathe. And psychiatrists were the worst. They were the ones that could prescribe drugs. Blue wasn't sure she could take this, even from Ma Beth, but before that thought could get a good hold, Ma Beth spoke again.

"I know you don't like therapists and you don't trust doctors, but I want you to give her a chance. Don't turn her off." She gave Blue a moment to process this and then said, "Look at me, Blue."

Blue raised her eyes.

"Please do this for me? Give her a chance. Will you do that for me?"

"OH, BLUE."

A jolt of sorrow passed from Ma Beth's eyes into Blue's and nearly caused her to gasp. She felt a little dizzy. She wasn't quite sure what had just happened. She had never felt someone's *chiss* do that to her before. Maybe I am going crazy, she thought.

"Blue? Will you give her a chance?" repeated Ma Beth

Blue looked at Ma Beth. She felt her will crumbling. Her head started nodding before she even realized she was doing it. It was as if her head knew better than her mind what was right for her. And right now, her mind was reeling from the confusion of emotions that filled it. Maybe someone else could fill it with something better.



It was afternoon. After her exchange with Ma Beth that morning, Blue had spent the entire time sitting cross-legged on her bed, staring out the window. She scanned the view inch-by-inch, concentrating on little details. Each one was a little distraction—a desperate little diversion to keep her brain occupied and her panic at bay.

There was a streetlamp down the block, one of the old-fashioned kind. The frosted glass dome, covered with bird droppings, reminded her of a white rock covered with lichen. The dark green lamp post leaned ever so slightly from being perfectly vertical. The base of the lamp post was ornate and looked freshly painted. It made her wonder—who paints lamp posts? Maybe invisible little men that come out at night, like leprechauns?

The sound of footsteps on the stairway snapped her out of her reverie. There was a knock and then a voice. “Blue?”

Blue was confused. It wasn’t Ma Beth, but it was an oddly familiar voice. Ma Beth had said the psychiatrist was a very good friend, but it couldn’t be . . .

The knock came again, “Blue, may I come in?”

“Okay . . . I mean, yeah. Sure.”

The door opened and in stepped Will’s mom.

Blue’s confusion turned to shock. She stared at her, open-mouthed.

Mrs. Woods smiled back reassuringly and began, “Hello Blue. I can see Ma Beth didn’t tell you it was me that she wanted you to talk to. You probably didn’t know that I am a Doctor of Psychiatry, as well as the school counselor. Not many people do. I try to keep a low profile. Is it okay if I sit?”

Blue managed to croak out an “um . . . sure . . . I guess.”

As she watched Mrs. Woods—Dr. Woods—sit down on the desk chair, she realized her mouth was hanging open. She snapped it shut. Her defense mechanisms were caught off guard. She didn’t like that. She didn’t like feeling that she was out of control.

Dr. Woods continued, “Blue, have you experienced sudden

attacks of intense crying or sobbing that seem to come out of nowhere?”

She felt her mouth drop open for the second time. “How could you know?” she whispered.

“Blue, you were a hostage, and hostages often suffer from a condition called PTSD. Have you learned any biology in school?”

Blue thought for a minute, still confused. “PTSD?”

“PTSD,” said Dr. Woods, “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is a psychological and physiological reaction to a traumatic experience. The reason I am telling you this is that it is important for you to know that this is your body’s reaction to a terrifying experience. The terrifying experience is the ‘traumatic stress’ and the body’s reaction to being over-stressed is the ‘disorder.’ It is a disorder that we don’t fully understand.” She paused and then continued, “Your body and your mind were traumatized, and they are reacting to it. I can help you heal that trauma.”

Blue started to realize where this was going—some kind of drug therapy, and she was not going down that road again. She started to shake her head, but before she could protest, Dr. Woods made an unexpected statement.

“Blue, next time it happens—the impulse to cry your eyes out—don’t fight it. Let it happen. Give in to it completely. It will keep happening until you stop fighting it.”

Now Blue was totally off balance. This was not at all what she was expecting. The last thing she wanted to do was to not fight it. That was giving in to it—losing control. Giving up. She started shaking her head again, ready to say something, but she wasn’t sure what.

Dr. Woods reached into her bag and pulled out some bottled water and a couple of other items and put them on Blue’s desk. She turned back to Blue, looked directly in her eyes and voxed, “*YOU CAN’T CONTROL IT, JUST LIKE YOU CAN’T CONTROL WHO YOU ARE. YOUR BODY NEEDS FOR YOU TO STOP FIGHTING IT. DON’T FIGHT IT. YOUR BODY*



*WILL LET YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO. LISTEN TO IT, AND LET IT DO WHAT IT NEEDS TO DO. WILL YOU DO THAT?"*

Blue looked back. Dr. Woods had that same look as Ma Beth. You just couldn't resist. It demolished her defensive armor like the blast from a magic ray-gun. She found herself nodding again. "OKAY," she replied.

Dr. Woods nodded and as she stood up she gave Blue one last significant look, "*AND YOU COULD USE A SHOWER!*" She smiled and then as promptly as she came in, she was gone. The door was closed, and Blue was alone again.

Dr. Woods hadn't even been there for five minutes. Blue sat there for . . . for who knows how long. She was still shaken slightly by the whole incident. It was taking her a while to process everything. Dr. Woods said that Blue had no control over something her body was trying to do. Blue considered herself a master of control, yet she had found her head nodding in response, almost on its own. And then there were the other times her body had reacted without thinking. It seemed like it knew what to do every time. It was always trying to rescue her, and now it was trying to heal itself. And Dr. Woods said she should let it.

She also said that Blue needed a shower.

Blue dug out a mirror that was buried in the mess on top of her dresser and the face she saw staring back at her nearly caused her to drop it. Hair tangled and matted, shirt wrinkled (when was the last time she had changed it?), and her face still had the pale remnants of a bruise from where Bronco had smacked her. A small scab still adorned a corner of her nose. There were even a couple of very faint hints of red where the duct tape had been across her mouth.

The duct tape. Blue stared at the marks with their oddly straight edges and uniform color. The tape had made it hard to breathe through her bloodied nose, and she hadn't been able to cry out for help. She looked down at her wrists where the zip ties had dug in

that first night. There had been bruises there, though now they had faded into barely discernible purplish-yellow shadows. The memory of the room and the chair, and the terror after blurting out her captor's secret, a secret that had been projected, unbidden, into her brain when she stared into his eyes, and the ache from being bound and motionless for hours and hours, a helpless animal, unable to hide, to escape, to control the situation—it all came back to her with way too much reality. The emotion drove over her like a hot wave, an uncontrollable wave, too much like the hot wave she had felt when she thought she was dying. She *had* been dying! She had let that wave carry her away. She looked back in the mirror and saw tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. Don't fight it, Dr. Woods had said. Don't fight it. Let your body do what it needs to do.

So she did.



Dr. Woods had warned everyone in the O'Day's house that at some point Blue might fall apart, and that it would be a good thing, but when it actually happened, everyone stopped what they were doing. The house was old and its solid beams, plaster walls, and hardwood floors allowed sounds to echo throughout. And now it reverberated with the sound of Blue's heart-wrenching cries. Even though Dr. Woods had prepared them, no one was untouched by the pain and sorrow embedded in those rhythmic, involuntary wails of anguish.

Blue's storm of emotions peaked and then gradually subsided, finally settling into a muffled, sobbing punctuated with a small hiccup from time to time. After a solid ten minutes, it became quiet again. Ma Beth climbed the two stories and quietly opened Blue's door. She was lying on her bed, hiccupping but asleep. Ma Beth touched Blue's head tenderly and gently covered her with a light blanket and then closed the door before quietly walking back downstairs.



Blue opened her eyes. She looked out her window. It was dusk. She wondered how long she had been lying there. Her covers were over her, so Ma Beth must have come in. Blue felt warm, but there was a cool spot on her cheek. Her pillow was still wet from where she had been sobbing into it, trying to muffle her crying earlier. It was more than wet, it was soaked.

God, how she had cried. She had never felt anything like that in her life. It wasn't the same as the crying she had experienced when she was captive. That was crying from fear and despair. This was the crying of letting go. It was a purging, a release of all the collected pieces of grief and sorrow that had built up for . . . for who knows how long? She had always hated how girls bawled in the movies, how they would lose control of themselves. And yet now she had done it herself. But she wasn't ashamed. All she felt was relief.

And thirst.

In fact, she was completely parched. She remembered the bottled water that Dr. Woods had left. She got up and went over to her desk, grabbed it, and drank it down. The water felt so fresh. Then she noticed what was next to the water bottle—two Snickers bars. Man, they looked good. She opened the first one and wolfed it down, and then she ate the second one only slightly slower. She gulped more water and was amazed that she hardly noticed the Snickers bars. She could usually barely eat one, and now after two she felt like she hadn't eaten a thing. She looked for more food and noticed a towel Dr. Woods had left. Suddenly she felt she couldn't wait another second to get in a nice hot shower.

She froze. Dr. Woods had anticipated everything—the breakdown, the thirst, the hunger, the shower. Blue felt she should be angry. She didn't like therapists messing with her. Instead, she was impressed. Even grateful, maybe. She might have to make some

adjustments to her feelings about therapists. No, she reconsidered, not all therapists. Only Dr. Woods.

It sounded like the family was eating dinner downstairs, so Blue slipped down to the bathroom, closed the door, and took a long hot shower. She was amazed at how it felt. She must have taken hundreds of showers in her life, but this was the first where she noticed the individual streams of water hitting her scalp and shoulders and running down her skin. She could feel them shifting randomly as they sought the most efficient route down the curves of her body to her feet. Blue stayed in that warm rain until she felt thoroughly purged of any remnant of anything that had come before, leaving nothing but a fresh, new skin.

She dried and dressed and even ran a brush through her hair. She took a satisfied look at herself in her mirror and as she did, she noticed her wrists again. Hmm, she thought. She rummaged around in her dresser drawer and dug out some of her long neglected bling. She held up her decorated wrists and turned them back and forth. There, that's a damn sight better than staring at bruises all the time, she thought. She finally felt she was ready. She walked as nonchalantly as possible down the stairs and into the family room.

Nate, her oldest foster brother, was watching television, Wu was reading, and Sam was on the computer. Pa Bill was reading the paper, but looked up and said, "You hungry? There's still some lasagna in the kitchen."

Lasagna! She went to the kitchen, where Ma Beth was cleaning up. As Blue walked in, Ma Beth paused from her cleaning and pulled out a hot plate of lasagna and green beans from the toaster oven. She slid it onto the kitchen table and said, "Careful, the plate is hot. Dig in, girl. You look famished!"

Blue looked at Ma Beth's broad smile and said, "Thanks. I am, and . . . and thanks." She looked down at the food and then couldn't think of anything else. It may have been the best lasagna she had ever tasted.



A half-hour later, Ma Beth poked her head into the family room. “Nate, could you take this girl up to her room?” Blue had fallen fast asleep at the kitchen table. Her head was on her arm next to her plate. She was breathing evenly and didn’t even flinch as Nate slung her arms around his muscular shoulders, scooped her up, and gently carried her up to her room.

## LAST RENDEZVOUS

“**S**O WHAT SHOULD WE DO?”

Will sat side-by-side with Blue on the grass. There was no moon. The only source of light was a window shining faintly from a house nearby. Other than the normal night noises, it was a very still and peaceful evening. It was their first nighttime rendezvous since before “that” night—the night that nearly became the last night on earth for both of them. They hadn’t really talked about it much since then. In fact, Will realized that this was the first time they had even had a chance to be alone since then. And it looked like it might be their last, since school was starting next week, and because they were under a very tight rein. No chance of a secret rendezvous. If they had even tried that and gotten caught, it would’ve probably resulted in grounding for life. Even to get this one sanctioned night had been a tough time convincing parents. They only agreed under strict conditions. They were to stay in the neighborhood, the park was out of the question, and they had a curfew of 10 pm. It was tame compared to their secret excursions earlier that summer which at times went until two in the morning, but he was more than content to have any time at all.

"I DON'T KNOW," replied Blue. "IT JUST FEELS SO GREAT TO BE OUT OF THE HOUSE."

"YEAH, AND ALONE FOR ONCE," replied Will. No reporters, no officials, no parents, no sibs, he thought. Just the two of them. Neither of them said anything for a while. Blue sat and picked at the grass, deep in thought.

After a while, Will broke the silence. "So, how are you? Are you doing okay?" he asked.

She didn't look at him as she replied. "I'm fine . . . I mean, I'm okay." It seemed like she wanted to say more, but she was silent.

"That's good to hear, because you had me . . . well, you had all of us worried for a while. You seemed kind of 'off' since the party. You seem a lot better now."

"You know your mother came to see me." She looked up at him and voxed, "SO NOW ARE YOU GOING TO SAY, 'I TOLD YOU SO?'"

"MY MOTHER CAME TO SEE YOU? YOU MEAN LIKE FOR THERAPY? SHE DIDN'T TELL ME."

"IF YOU SAY SO." She looked away.

"Hey, I'm telling the truth. My mom can't tell us about what she does. She has to keep everything confidential. She's probably being extra careful because of . . . well because of you and me." Blue just kept looking away. He wanted her to look at him. He reached out and touched her shoulder. "Hey." She turned. "I'LL NEVER LIE TO YOU ABOUT THIS. I REALLY DIDN'T KNOW. REALLY. AND I'LL NEVER TELL ANYONE."

She looked down again. After a moment she said, "Well, you *were* right. Your mom is good. She helped a lot. I . . . I think I'd like to see her . . . to talk to her again."

"Hey, that's great," he replied. He debated a moment before going on. "You know, you can talk to me, too, if you need to . . . that is, if you think it would help . . ."

"I don't *need* anyone," she said with a flash of annoyance. "I just said she helped! That doesn't mean I asked for the cavalry to come charging in."

Will sighed. He was hoping that tonight could be a night that revived the good times they had on their night rendezvous earlier that summer. Now he wasn't sure.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know you don't *need* help," he said, while in his head he was thinking, "You don't seem to need or want anybody." What he said out loud next, though, was, "I was just trying to be a friend and offer an ear if you needed it." Now he turned away and started picking at the grass. "Maybe we should just go back inside." Even though he said it, he didn't move.

Blue didn't move either. They both sat there uncomfortably while the wind rustled through the branches above them. A mockingbird went through a noisy medley somewhere nearby.

Will felt an elbow jab him and he looked over at Blue.

"Look, I don't *need* your help. That doesn't mean I don't want to talk to you. Just don't try to be Mr. Fix-It-Man."

"I'm not trying to be Mr. Fix-It Man. All right, maybe a little, but Jesus, Blue, I still don't know squat about you. After all we've been through, you'd think I'd know something. I don't know where you were born, where you grew up, who your parents were, how many brothers and sisters you had. And what about the fire? Every time we get even close to talking about that stuff you become Miss Stone-Faced-Silent Girl. Are you going to be this way the rest of your life?"

Blue glared at him. "It's easy for YOU to be Mr. Happy-Chatty-Good-Listener Guy. Look at the life you have! Just for once imagine that Rose was dead! Your mom and dad are dead! And every other kid you know has a nice happy family. They don't know what it's like, but they nod their sympathetic faces and say, 'you poor girl,' and, 'I understand.' They don't understand a thing!" She paused. "Look, I didn't mean you're the same as them. You're not. It's just that I get so fucking tired of people trying to help me when they don't have a clue."

They sat there in an awkward silence. Even the mockingbird



had given up. Will didn't know what to say. Blue's words had left him a little dazed. They both seemed a little dazed. Neither of them said anything for a while.

Finally Blue spoke, "There, I talked to you. Happy now?" She didn't say it in anger. She actually sounded a little relieved.

"Did you just call me Mr. Happy-Chatty-Good-Listener Guy? God, Blue, that's harsh."

A little "ka-huh" sound came from her and she gave him a shove. "VERY FUNNY." But through the darkness, he thought he could see the corner of her mouth twitch up ever so slightly.

He went on. "*LOOK, I DIDN'T MEAN TO PUSH IT. IT WOULD JUST BE NICE TO KNOW YOU BETTER.*" There was something more that he wanted to say, but he wasn't sure how she would react. The way things were going tonight, it could be anything. What the hell, it may as well be the night of confessions. "*HEY, I'VE NEVER SAID THIS TO YOU, BUT I'VE WANTED TO: I'M REALLY SORRY ABOUT YOUR FAMILY.*" He paused and looked down at the ground, "You're right. I don't know what it's like. I don't know what I'd do if I lost my parents. Or Rosie. Especially Rosie. I'd probably go insane."

Another long period of silence went by. It ended when she bopped her shoulder against his. "You wouldn't go insane. You've got me to talk to."

He looked at her in amazement. Had she really just said that?

"Look, let's change the subject," she said. "We're in danger of getting sappy here. There is something else I wanted to ask you about." She looked at him, "*I WANTED TO ASK YOUR DAD FOR SOMETHING, BUT I ALREADY LOST HIS NIGHT VISION CAMERA, AND I DON'T HAVE ANY WAY OF REPLACING IT.*"

Will smiled, "*JEEZ, DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT! AFTER WHAT HAPPENED? REALLY, NO ONE CARES ABOUT THE CAMERA. MY DAD CAN GET ANOTHER ONE, IT'S NO BIG DEAL. IT'S WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE.*"

Blue jumped.

"What was that? What did I say?"

“Nothing, nothing, sorry, I just . . . nothing, I just . . .” she looked a little rattled, but she recovered and went on, *“I WAS WONDERING IF HE COULD MAKE ME SOME GLASSES. THE SPECIALLY COATED KIND.”*

Ah, that was all, Will thought. She wanted some coated glasses for school, like the ones he and Rose had, to filter out the buzz of the *chiss*, the thought ‘leaks’ that came from normal people. He didn’t know how she had survived this long without glasses. *“GEEZ, BLUE, I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING DROP SOMETHING REALLY HEAVY ON ME. I’M POSITIVE HE WOULD MAKE SOME GLASSES FOR YOU, OR YOU COULD PROBABLY USE A PAIR OF MINE OR ROSIE’S. HE MADE A BUNCH OF THEM BECAUSE THEY’RE ALL JUST PLAIN—NO PRESCRIPTION. ANY OF US COULD WEAR THEM. I SHOULD HAVE PROBABLY OFFERED THEM TO YOU SOONER. THEY REALLY HELP AT SCHOOL, ESPECIALLY HIGH SCHOOL. GOD! YOU THINK KIDS HAVE WEIRD THOUGHTS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, JUST WAIT UNTIL HIGH SCHOOL.”* Will shook his head just thinking about it.

*“THANKS. I MEAN THANKS FOR EVERYTHING.”*

*“HEY, WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?”*

They sat silent again, listening to the late summer sounds. Now that the tension had cleared, it was easy sitting there with her, at least that hadn’t changed. He always felt comfortable with her. Even when things got awkward or tense, it was just blowing off tension, for both of them. Then it resolved into just an easy companionship. That wasn’t true of many people, he realized. He wondered what it was, this quiet companionship.

He felt a light touch on his shoulder. “Your . . . wound . . . how is it healing?” There was a tinge of guilt in her voice.

“It’s going to be fine. Really. I hardly notice it now except when I stretch my arm way out,” he said.

*“CAN . . . CAN I SEE YOUR SCAR?”*

*“WHY NOT? EVERYONE ELSE ON THE PLANET HAS SEEN IT.”* He tugged at his collar to try and pull it down to show her his shoulder, but he was covered in too many layers. He finally gave up and pulled his T-shirt, sweater, and jacket over his head in one big wad and sat there

bare-chested in the chilly night. There was a time he would have felt self-conscious about sitting there half naked in front of a girl, but after his hospital stay, he had few remaining inhibitions. It seemed like his whole body was on public display when he was there. He looked down at the pink fleshy lump where the bullet had entered. It looked so small. It was hard to believe something so small could cause so much damage. The incision line from his operation was still highlighted with bits of scab and little pin holes like snake bites where the stitches had been, and his skin was adorned with purple-blue swirls of bruises. Blue reached out and touched the scars gently.

*“DOES THAT HURT?”*

*“NAH. IT IS JUST A LITTLE TINGLY WHEN YOU TOUCH IT, BUT IT DOESN'T HURT.”*

She put her whole hand on his shoulder. It felt warm against his skin. It felt healing.

*“I . . . I . . .”* she faltered. She looked down.

*“Hey,”* he said. *“Hey, look at me.”*

She turned back, a guilty look on her face.

*“IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT. IT WAS MY FAULT. IF I'D COME WITH YOU THAT NIGHT NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED AND BRONCO WOULD PROBABLY BE IN JAIL. I WAS A COWARD.”*

*“THAT'S NOT TRUE! YOU WERE NOT A COWARD!”* Her expression had turned from guilty to stern. *“IT IS MY FAULT! THIS SHIT JUST HAPPENS AROUND ME ALL THE TIME. I DON'T KNOW WHY. WHEREVER I GO, JUST WHEN IT LOOKS LIKE LIFE IS FINALLY GOING TO BE NORMAL AGAIN . . . WHY? WHY DO BAD THINGS KEEP HAPPENING AROUND ME?”* She turned away. *“Don't bother trying to tell me it isn't true. You don't know what happened at the other places I've been.”*

*“Well, I won't try and change your mind, but don't bother trying to tell me I'm not a coward either. Deal?”*

In answer, she just huffed.

He kept going, *“Just answer this one question. In the wake of*

this horrible wreckage you've left behind you, does anyone have a cooler scar than this?" He gestured to his shoulder.

She turned to him, her face struggling to convey annoyance before it finally gave in to her half smile. "OKAY, THEN I GUESS YOU OWE ME FOR THAT."

Will laughed. He rocked sideways and nudged her with his shoulder. She nudged back.

"Hey, we've got a half an hour left. The park's not an option. We should do something." As he said this he struggled back into his clothes.

Blue was quiet for a moment. "How about we do something completely different?" she said. "What if we just went for a walk. Like normal people. No stalking, just walking?"

"You mean, just walk down the street? Talk out loud like normal people? Talk about normal stuff?"

"Yeah, but how about we don't even talk? At all. Just . . . walk."

"No vox?"

"No vox."

He considered this for a moment, then gave her a thumbs up. Then he made a zipper motion across his mouth. She smiled. A real smile this time. Rare. He motioned for her to lead on. They both got up and started down the sidewalk side-by-side.

The mockingbird had resumed, but there were other night noises, too. Some of them were natural—the rustling of the leaves, the *cht cht cht* of squirrels, the chirps of the robins and thrushes. Some of them were manmade—the rush of a distant car, a door shutting somewhere, faint music from some open window, a conversation from a couple sitting on their porch. And there was the sound of their footsteps—quieter than most people's, but loud enough to let them know that they were two people walking easily next to each other.

They filled the full time left to them walking down familiar streets in the crisp air of the early-autumn night, moving in and out

of the shadows and light, occasionally bumping shoulders or brushing arms. Each contact might have lingered longer than might have been accidental, long enough that Will could feel the warmth and presence of the girl walking beside him.

Neither of them seemed to mind.

## SUMMER'S SUMMER END

**W**estbury Police Chief Summer Hannah sat at her beat-up desk munching on a roast beef sandwich. The horseradish mustard was trying to get her attention, but she was so distracted by what she was reading that she didn't even notice the burning rush climbing up her sinuses. That was how a lot of her lunches had been lately. Eating like a robot while she pored over the file on the DuBois abduction.

The State Police had pretty much hit a dead end. Kidnapping with safe recovery and cold trail of the suspect. Those cases tended to slip into the murky depths of obscurity until some random bit of coincidence turned up a new clue. That clue would then have to make its way through the various agencies and into the head of someone who could recollect the case and had the motivation to dive down and revive it. Chief Hannah was determined to be that person.

The horseradish finally got her attention. She glanced up from the file and looked at her sandwich. It was one of her favorites. She'd eaten almost the whole thing and not taken a moment to enjoy it. C'mon, Summer, it's okay to take a break, she thought to herself. She took another bite, closed her eyes, and let her mouth

absorb the savory saltiness of the beef and the crunch of lettuce and zing of horseradish.

It made her think about the other things in life she hadn't had time to enjoy. Like love. How long had it been since she went out on a date? Months? Years? Too long, that's for sure. It's not like she didn't have her share of romantic interludes and eager suitors (a female in police uniform being a brazen seductress in the eyes of certain men), and she did yearn for a more permanent companion, but she had a certain standard that made for a much smaller fishpond. More like a fish puddle. In a desert. Sometimes she wished men were more like sandwiches. You could make your own and put in it just the right amounts of the stuff you liked.

She was envious of her college friend April Chastain, now Dr. April Woods, who had managed to snag Ash Woods. Summer was one of the only people who knew about the Woods' secret trait. She was glad to help them keep it secret. It was clear that they were in love, and who would want to spoil that for them? What luck, falling in love with one of your own rare kind. What are the chances of that these days? Pretty long odds for Summer Hannah, now thirty-eight. And the likelihood of generating progeny? Even more iffy.

But Ash and April had children, and one of them was on her mind every time she looked at this case. Their son Will had almost died. And though no one faulted her, Chief Hannah felt responsible. It was her job to protect the people of the town and she let them down. And she felt a special need to be protective of that family, and of Blue DuBois.

These thoughts danced around her head as she chomped steadily on the remains of her sandwich. She swallowed the last bite, sighed, and turned back to the file for the umpteenth time. The suspect had vanished, and his only known identity, 'Bronco' Bob Kelly, had evaporated with him. She had since discovered it was fake, and that he had used it to register a car, rent an apartment, and open a bank account. All without raising a single red

flag. The account was now empty, the apartment abandoned, and the car had vanished.

The detectives had found some DNA and partial prints, but no matches turned up in any database. No facial recognition from the police sketches or the ones Blue had made. Chief Hannah assumed he had probably shaved his beard to alter his identity, and he probably had plenty of cash to get transportation. That meant no electronic payment trail to follow.

The guy had slipped through the system and out into the world. That did mean they had gotten rid of a dangerous drug dealer, but it had left behind a vacuum in the drug community that was surely being filled by the next 'Bronco,' the next heroin dealer. Or meth dealer. Or crack dealer. Or prescription opioid fence. Or all of the above. She was as frustrated with what Bronco represented as she was with the fact that he had escaped and that drugs were flowing almost unimpeded through her town. Why was this quiet little town—a town filled with prosperous common-sense people, and a nationally ranked college for God's sake—a place where people felt like they needed to turn to these deadly drugs? It just did not make sense to her. There had already been two overdose deaths in Westbury, and they were sensible people! One had been a father of two high school kids and a respected carpenter. The other was a college athlete. An athlete. Unbelievable. And how were they getting these drugs?

She knew very well how, she thought. She had barely enough people on her staff for 24-7 single coverage, and just two beat-up cruisers. Her only hope was input from public sources, people coming forward voluntarily. Even then, unless the police had enough information for a warrant, they weren't going to get any help from any other agency.

What was really pathetic was that her best public source so far was one obsessed fourteen-year-old that nearly got herself killed. Why was it that the only helpful people were the ones who were the most innocent and most vulnerable? It seemed like she was



always picking up the pieces after some good-hearted person did something that put themselves in harm's way. She was supposed to be preventing that from happening, not cleaning up afterward.

The Chief let out a long slow sigh and took a bite of carrot. Her brain kept going despite the loud crunching. One thing is clear, she thought. Bronco was out there, waiting to be caught. Maybe, if she could just find one damn decent lead, she could get him. And maybe, on the way, she would find something that would help rid the infestation in her town.

**SILENT WORLD**

**T**he imposing bulk of the high school loomed through the sentinels of oak and maple that surrounded it as Blue approached down the sidewalk. She stopped outside the entrance and watched the mob of teenagers lurching and loping past like a motley herd of young Neanderthals as they crowded through the glass doors of the brick and granite entrance of Westbury High. Well, here it goes, she thought. Unto the breach. Into the crowd. Time to see how bad it is in there.

The glasses that Mr. Woods had given her were sitting in her backpack, just in case. She had almost put them on but then thought she should at least feel out the crowd first—see if she could cope. She had done it in middle school all the way up to the end of eighth grade. Almost. Not quite to the end. One too many crude, cruel observations leaked from one too many stuck-up daddy's-girls, and before she knew it, she was on probation, missing eighth-grade graduation and being uninvited to her third family in four years. She left behind some very bruised bodies and egos, so it wasn't an entirely unsuccessful eighth grade, all things considered, but everything was different now. Uninvited was not what she wanted this time around. She hesitated and reconsidered the

glasses. How bad can it be without them? She might as well find out now. She took a breath and then plunged into the fray and was instantly awash in a flood of *chiss*.

*"WHY IS HE LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT . . ."*

*"OOOH! CAMEL TOE . . ."*

*"GOD, HE SMELLS GROSS . . ."*

*"... NICE TITS . . ."*

*"... PLAID WITH STRIPES? REALLY? . . ."*

The tsunami of teenage hormones poured down the entrance hall and nearly stopped her in her tracks. Will was not kidding. It was unbelievable! Middle school was bad, but it was way more innocent than the surge of teen brain angst washing over her now.

*"... DAMMIT! THE CELL COVERAGE HERE SUCKS! . . ."*

*"... MIKE'S PANTS ARE SOOO TIGHT . . . NICE PACKAGE . . ."*

*"... GAWD! BRENDA'S DRESSED LIKE A SLUT . . ."*

*"... I DEFINITELY SHOULD'VE GOTTEN STONED BEFORE I WALKED IN HERE . . ."*

All right, maybe this is too much, too soon, she thought. She yanked off her backpack and dug the glasses out and put them on. The silence was so sudden and dramatic, she almost gasped out loud.

That must have been what drowning felt like, she thought. She didn't know why the onslaught of thoughts caught her off guard. She knew it was coming, but the intensity of it was crazy! And it wasn't that it was that loud—non-vox were never very loud—but it was so pervasive! And the content was so . . . so raw! She was used to personal stuff, of course; no one was very discreet when they thought no one could hear, but this! Wow.

She took a minute to stand in a corner and experiment. Looking out on the busy entrance hall with traffic going everywhere, she lifted her glasses . . .

*"... UGH, SPAGHETTI FOR LUNCH . . ."*

*"... OH GOD, THERE'S SEAN. LOOK AT ME, SEAN, LOOK AT ME . . ."*

“... *I THINK I'M GOING TO PUKE. DON'T PUKE, DON'T PUKE, DON'T . . .*”

“... *HIS EYES ARE SO AMAZING . . . AND THAT GRIN! . . .*”

And then she lowered the glasses back onto her nose.

“Sarah, what do you have first period?”

“History. Bor-ing”

“Couldn't be worse than English first period.”

“Is there any class that's good first period?”

Glasses up . . .

“... *GOD, HER SKIRT IS SOOO SHORT . . .*”

“... *WHY CAN'T YOU LOOK ME IN THE FACE, DWEEB, I'VE GOT MORE THAN BREASTS . . .*”

“... *OH SHIT, I FORGOT MY LUNCH . . .*”

“... *DAMN, I'M OUT OF TAMPONS . . .*”

Glasses down . . .

“Hey, David, how was your summer?”

“Great, how 'bout yours?”

“A month in Colorado!”

“Awesome!”

Thank you, Mr. Woods, Blue thought. She wondered how long she could have survived without the glasses. She finally lifted up her bag and started walking down the corridor, picking her way through the halls and upperclassmen as she headed to her home-room. She realized that for the first time ever she could walk with her head up and her eyes wide open. Her strategy before was to keep eyes down and halfway closed. It was the only way she could avoid the fog of *chiss* and concentrate on anything.

Now, as she walked, she noticed something else strange and new. The *chiss* silence made everyone seem like animated mannequins. There were mannequins before, of course, people that didn't *chiss*, people whose thoughts were hidden from her. But those were a minority, like silent extras in her life-movie. The real actors were, and always had been, the ones that *chissed*. Their thoughts painted a rich and complex picture of the person behind

them. Anyone else who didn't *chiss* or didn't talk was just a body moving around. Some smelled of too much perfume, some not enough, and some were in bad need of a shower. But now, with the glasses, they were all extras. Even the talkers were only half as interesting. She got the initial inklings of a feeling like she couldn't trust people as much, like they were hiding things from her that they hadn't before.

She also noticed that although it was quieter, it was noisier, too, in a different way. In place of the brain chatter, the background noises that had been obscured now asserted themselves with a new prominence. The slamming lockers, the rustling papers, zipping book bags, shuffling feet. They created a new backdrop, like a change of scenery in a stage drama.

The overall sensation made her feel a little unsteady. It was like she was missing an extra sense to help her keep her balance. But it was also kind of fun. She imagined that this was what it was like to be drunk or stoned. Of course, she could take the glasses off whenever she wanted. She could also sneak a peek over the top of the glasses. Will said he often took his off between classes. He warned that if you do, you have to remember to put them on in class. He said kids are experts at spotting fakes (like she didn't know), so you have to be diligent. Not a problem for her. She was an expert at faking a lot of stuff. She faked being "fine" all the time. But for now, having the glasses on was kind of mind-bendingly cool.



"So how was the first day at WWHS?" asked Wu. They were walking home together, Wu, Will, Blue, and a couple other kids from the neighborhood.

"WWHS? Don't you mean WHS?" replied Blue.

One of the other girls said, "No. We like to use the real name: Wacky Westbury High School."

“Or you could use ‘weird’ or ‘wild’ or . . . ‘weediculous,’” said one of the other kids.

“Yeah,” said Wu. “You can fill it in with almost anything. Except ‘wonderful.’”

They all laughed. A group of them broke off and turned down a side street leaving just Wu, Will, and Blue walking by themselves the rest of the way home.

“So how was it?” asked Will.

“I survived,” she replied.

“Obviously,” said Wu. “But how was . . . you know,” he looked cautiously left and right and then dropped to a whisper, “It? Vox? With the new glasses and everything?”

She looked at Wu over the top of her glasses. Then she looked at Will. “*YOU EXPLAINED THIS TO HIM?*”

“*YEAH,*” replied Will. He had taken his glasses off already. “*HE KNOWS ALL ABOUT THE SPECIAL COATING AND EVERYTHING. PLUS I’VE BEEN HELPING HIM LEARN TO CONTROL HIS CHISS.*”

Blue looked back at Wu, who had been studying them both while they voxed. “It was quiet. It was weird,” she said.

“Wow,” said Wu. “You thought it was quiet? That mad house between classes?”

“Just take that mad house and turn it up a notch, and then imagine it following you into the classroom even after class starts. Without our glasses, it’s non-stop,” said Will.

“Wow. I mean yeah, that could drive you bananas.”

“Aaaannnd . . . yeah,” said Blue.

Will knew what she was talking about. She had confided in him about her stint in a psych ward, so he quickly steered the subject away from that. “Hey, Wu, show her how you can control your leaks.”

“Don’t you mean *chiss*? When you say ‘leaks,’ it makes it sound like I piss myself.

“Sorry, force of habit. My dad calls it ‘crepantis’ sometimes, but we usually say leaks or *chiss*.”

“What does *crepantis* mean? It sounds like an insect . . . or crapping your pants. All your names sound like pissing or crapping,” said Wu.

Will heard a “kah-huh” and looked at Blue. She had her hand over her mouth and looked like she was going to choke. Will wondered if she was actually laughing.

“No! Nothing bad. It’s Latin and it means ‘rustling’ like rustling leaves.” As he said it, he kicked at a small pile of golden and red leaves that had collected on the sidewalk from some early turning tree.

“It’s perfect,” said Blue. “Rustling. Falling leaves. That’s it exactly. It’s like rustling leaves. All the time.” She walked into the pile of leaves and tromped around. The leaves were dry and rattled and rasped as her feet thrust through them. “And then you close your eyes, or put these glasses on and . . .” she stopped tromping. The rustling stopped. The ensuing silence was dramatic.

“Wow. It’s really like that? All the time?”

“Any time we’re around a lot of people,” said Will.

Wu was quiet as they reached the house. He stopped and then said, “So what is it. Am I voxing, leaking, chissing, or crepantising?”

Will, tilting his head back and forth thoughtfully. “Well, you’re not really voxing like we do, but if you can control it, you’re not leaking . . .”

Blue snorted and started convulsing.

“What? What did I say?”

“Nothing!” Then she lost it and started laughing hysterically. She gasped and said, “Thank God you’re not leaking anymore, Wu!” She started laughing so hard that tears started coming out of her eyes.

“Wow, you’re in rare form today!” said Will. He looked at Wu, who just shrugged.

“So, when you are done with your seizure, Wu can try it out on you. Controlling his *chiss*, that is.”

“Yeah, okay. Sorry, just a second . . .” and then off she went again.

Wow, thought Will. I have never seen her like this before. A giggle fit? Maybe she is getting better. Or she’s gone insane.

Wu looked at Blue, who was calming down again, and said, “Are you ready now?”

She nodded, wiping her eyes. “Yeah, sorry Wu. I really do want to hear you control your *chiss*. Can you, for real?”

“Yeah. Will taught me a real useful exercise. Let me try it and tell me what you can hear and what you can’t. Ready?”

“Okay, I’m ready, really, Wu.”

“Okay. Here it goes. He looked at Blue. “ONE . . . THREE . . . FIVE . . . SEVEN . . . NINE . . .”

“You’re reciting odd numbers from one to nine,” said Blue, looking slightly puzzled. “And you paused between each one.”

“All right, Wu! That was great!” said Will.

Wu was pumping his fist saying, “Yessss!”

Blue said, “Why do I feel like you’re screwing with me?”

“No, not at all!” said Wu. “Will came up with this brilliant exercise. I count from one to ten in my head, but I only *chiss* the odd number and then I *think* the even number to myself, but keep them buried, not on the top of my head. Will said *chiss* is only the thoughts you almost say out loud, but don’t. That really helped. I just counted to ten in my head, but I only *chissed* the odd numbers! It was really hard when I first tried it, but I think I’m getting the hang of it!”

“Really good actually.” Blue looked at Will in a way that seemed like she saw something for the first time.

Will turned to Wu. “Yeah, really good. It’s a relief, really. It’s hard to not pay attention to people’s *chiss*, especially your friends. It’ll kind of be nice not having to ignore your *chiss* anymore. Do you find it weird that I’ve been hearing you all this time?”

“Nah, you’re my best friend. Whatever you heard, you sure



managed to keep to yourself. Though there are some things I sure hope . . .”

“Ahh, yeah. Let’s not get into detail. And don’t worry about it. You never even came close to leaking some of the crap I’ve heard from other people.”

“Wow. Yeah. I mean . . . whoa, I sure hope you didn’t catch—”

“So are we going to just stand here worrying about who leaked what, and who heard what, or are we going to go inside, so I can get some homework done?” interrupted Blue.

“Yeah, I’ve got a crap-ton to do.” Will pushed the gate open.

“Got that right,” said Wu. “*LATER?*” He held up a fist.

Will smiled. “Nice *chiss*.” He bumped Wu’s fist. Wu turned his fist to Blue and so did Will. She gave them both a wry look and then reached out and fist bumped them both, bop-bop. She glanced at Will. “*I’M GLAD YOU DID THIS FOR WU.*” And then she turned and vanished up the walk and into the house. Will felt a smile come to his face. He turned to Wu, who was staring at him.

“It’s kinda weird watching you two. She voxed you just now?”

“Yeah,” said Will. “Sorry, it’s rude.”

“I suppose it would be rude to ask what she said, too,” said Wu.

Will looked at his friend, “Let’s just say that you lucked into a good foster sister.”

Wu looked up the walk toward the house. “Yeah, I agree with that. It’s just going to be interesting trying to adjust to this.” He turned to Will and gave him a last fist bump and headed up the walk and into the house.

Will turned and headed home thinking, yeah, this is going to be interesting.

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**JORDY**

**W**ill crammed his gym stuff into the bottom of his locker and pulled out books for his after-lunch classes. Pretty convenient having a locker right across from the lunchroom, he thought. On the other hand, it was noisy, and the busiest part of the hallway. Not a lot of privacy. He looked over the heads of the packed lunch crowd and spotted Wu who waved. It looked like he had saved a seat for him.

A sudden bang close-by turned Will's attention. About ten feet away he saw a kid leaned up against the lockers rubbing his shoulder. He looked like a freshman. A couple of guys were walking away down the hall, laughing. One of them said, "Good to have you back Georgie-boy."

Will recognized the freshman. It was Jordy Willis, a kid he'd known since grade school.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked.

Jordy looked over at him shyly. "Yeah, I guess."

"Those guys are jerks. Don't let them get to you."

Jordy turned back to his locker and a pile of books fell out. He kicked one of the books.

Will watched him. He looked like he needed a friendly gesture.

“Freshman year will kind of suck, especially the beginning, but it’ll get better.”

Jordy crammed the books back in the locker and slammed it before they could fall out again and then walked over to Will. Without looking up, he muttered, “Thanks.”

“Hey, no problem. Welcome to high school.”

“Did it hurt? When you were shot?” Jordy blurted out.

There was that question again. Why was that always the first thing people asked? During the first few days of school it seemed like every kid in school wanted to know. He had tried to answer seriously at first but after a while, answering again and again got exhausting and then irritating and eventually he came up with a variety of one-line answers that varied from a smart-ass, “no, it tickled,” to the final, most effective one-liner: “yes.” He looked at Jordy and opted out of the one-liner.

“Not at first,” he said. “It felt more like a punch. Then it started burning, and then it hurt like hell until it kind of settled into a constant pain. I was sure glad when the medics got there and gave me some pain meds.”

“It was a .22, wasn’t it?” asked Jordy.

“Yeah, it was.” Will always felt defensive about that fact. A .22 was an unimpressive looking bullet. “But it was high velocity and almost point blank. The doctor said it’s not the size, but how fast it’s going and what it hits.”

“Point blank. You’re lucky it wasn’t a nine-milli. My dad has one. I’ve shot it before, and it’s got a real kick. You really have to hang on to it,” Jordy said.

“Yeah, I guess that’s something to be happy about. If a .22 almost killed me, a 9mm . . . well, we probably wouldn’t be talking now.” Will was anxious to end the conversation. He’d had too many like it over the last few weeks. “Hey Jordy, I gotta go. I can talk to you more some other time. It’s good to see you, man. Hang in there and don’t worry about those jerks.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Guess I’ll see you around.”

“Cool.”

Will wove his way through the sea of lunch-eaters to Wu’s table.

“Hey, man, was that Jordy Willis?” asked Wu through a mouthful of sandwich.

“Yeah, he got pushed into his locker by a couple of jackasses.”

“Yeah, I saw it. Mike and Pike.”

“Mike and Pike?”

“Yeah, you don’t know those guys? I used to play basketball with Mike, but then he took up with Pike and now all he does is hang with a bunch of stoners.”

“Well, it seems that they have some history with Jordy. Sucks for him. Hard way to start out freshman year.”

They both sat thoughtfully while they munched on their food.

“What kind of name is Pike?” asked Will. “That can’t be his real name. It sounds like something Blue would make up.” Will was referring to how Blue had nick-named Bronco “Gronk” and Jack “Greazal” last summer.

“It’s Peter Ketcham. His middle initial is “I” and we just started calling him ‘Pike’ back in middle school. You know, P-I-K, Pike”

“Hmm. I don’t remember that. I never saw him much in middle school, though. Maybe it should be ‘Prick’ instead of ‘Pike.’”

Wu laughed and said, “Yeah, he was kind of a jerk back then, too.” Wu took his last bite of sandwich. After he swallowed he changed the subject. “So how was gym? How does the arm feel? You think you’ll be able to try out by November?”

“Well, it wasn’t great. I’m still weak and I can’t stretch my arm all the way out yet. My shooting sucks. Coach Ryan says not to worry and just take my time and make sure it heals right. Easy for him to say. I guess I’ll just keep working at it. What about you? Have you talked to him yet?”

Wu looked down at the table. He seemed reluctant to say anything.

“He wants you to try out for varsity, doesn’t he! Right? Right?”

“Yeah,” said Wu, still looking down.

“Wu, that is so totally awesome! Of course he does! You're going to do it, right?”

“Well, what about you? What if you're on JV?”

“C'mon, I'll be lucky to make JV this year. You have to go for varsity. Say you'll do it, or I'm going to stuff this banana peel down your shorts!”

“All right, all right. Keep your banana peel. I just felt bad about the whole deal with you and your shoulder and all.”

“C'mon. It is what it is. It's a shame though . . .” he said, holding up the banana peel. “I don't know what to do with this now.”

A girl from the table next to theirs said, “Hey, Will, your banana looks a little limp there.” Her whole table exploded into high-pitched laughter.

“Heh. Heh. Very clever.” He looked over at Wu, whose hand was up to his mouth in a lame attempt to conceal his very obvious convulsions.

Will just rolled his eyes. High school was definitely in full swing again.

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**ANNA**

Only two weeks into high school and Blue was convinced more and more each day that the glasses were a game changer. In her head she said another silent thank-you to Will's dad.

She also said a silent thank-you to the fates that the legacy of "that" night hadn't followed her to school. At least not yet. Either everyone was giving her space, or the story had gone stale. Easy to see how it would go stale with all the fresh drama that accompanied the beginning of the school year. That suited her just fine. Flying under the radar was a nice comfortable place to be. She just hoped it would last.

She got to her locker and dialed in the combination. Pretty nifty upgrade, she thought, having locking storage at school. No such luxury in middle school. Then again, they didn't give you a whole lot of time to get to it between classes in high school, and with her locker way off in the boonies it was even tighter getting between classes.

Blue lifted her book bag to hook it inside, and as she did, she felt her gut clench. She set the book bag back down. Had she pulled a muscle or something? The book bag was pretty hefty with

all the textbooks. A lot more hefty than middle school. She picked up her bag again and managed to hook it inside her locker even though she felt a pulling in her abdomen. Maybe she had eaten something bad. She winced a little as she pulled out the books for her next class. As she did she realized someone was standing next to her. It was a girl with long straw-blonde hair and a wide and friendly face. She looked older. Definitely not a freshman.

“Hi there! I’m Anna. I’m a friend of Will’s. My locker is right there,” she said, pointing to a locker about ten feet away. “You’re Blue, right? Nice to meet you!”

Blue was a little surprised by the girl’s forwardness. She was instinctively wary of someone just walking right up to her like that. But there was something about this girl. Something that exuded trustworthiness. She found herself saying, “Hi . . . nice to meet you, too.”

Anna leaned toward Blue and whispered, “Do you need anything?”

Blue wasn’t quite sure what she meant. “Do I *need* anything?”

“You know . . . supplies?”

“Supplies?”

Anna stared at her intently for a moment, and then a knowing look came to her face. “Ah! I bet this is your first time.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

Anna got a motherly look on her face and said quietly, “Don’t worry, I have seen this a million times.” She opened her purse and rummaged around in it. “It happened to me when I was eleven and it totally freaked me out.” She glanced up and down the hall and then said, “Do you have a purse?”

“Umm . . . no. I don’t use a purse.” Why would she be asking if she had a purse, and why was this damn stomach cramp not going away?

“That’s what they all say. But trust me, you’ll want one pretty soon. Is this your book for next class?” She slipped something out of her purse and put it inside the cover of Blue’s book and then

whispered, "Go to the bathroom, and put this on right now, even if you have to be late for class. Trust me. It will feel weird, but you will thank me later!" She looked at Blue and laughed. It was a disarmingly cheerful laugh. "I love the look on your face right now. Don't worry, you'll figure it out. You better hurry! There isn't much time left before class. Meet me back here after class and I'll set you up with everything else you need. Bye!" She added one more loud whisper as she left, "Welcome to the sisterhood!"

Blue stood there briefly as it finally dawned on her. Another little cramp acknowledged it. Her body was once again telling her what she needed to know. And right now it was telling her to get moving.



She was late to Miss Kendrick's algebra class. All the kids were already head-down working on what looked like a quiz. A quiz so soon? Blue slipped down the row to her seat. Miss Kendrick came over and plopped the quiz in front of her. Blue looked up. Miss Kendrick gave her a disapproving, yet knowing look and Blue heard her *chiss* as it snuck around the corner of her glasses, "*YOU GET A BREAK THIS TIME, DEAR . . .*" and then Miss Kendrick went to the front of the class and sat down behind her desk. That was it. Miss Kendrick knew. Anna knew. It *was* a sisterhood. How had she not noticed this before?

She looked down at the quiz. Easy. But it took her longer than it should have. For some reason, gut cramps and the strange foreign sensation of sitting on a crinkly wad of panty liner was not conducive to concentration. She had been expecting this for a long time. Almost too long of a time. She was nearly fifteen for god's sake. She was beginning to think it would never come, but now that it was here, it was kind of a relief. She wasn't quite sure how she would get through the day, but all the other girls seemed to manage so she damn well would, too. Plus, she had Anna.



Blue tapped her pencil on her desktop, absent-mindedly making little dots on her completed quiz paper. She wasn't quite sure what it was about Anna that made her feel instantly comfortable with her, but there it was. Something about her expression, her way of holding herself, how she had cared enough to come over and help. It was that "care" thing again. Like Wu, like Will, like Ma Beth. And then she realized that was exactly it—Anna was like a walking, talking teenage version of Ma Beth. She smiled to herself at that thought.

"Something amusing about the quiz, Miss DuBois?" Blue looked up. Miss Kendrick was looking sternly at her and holding out her hand for the quiz paper.

"No, not at all." She handed her the quiz and realized she was looking forward to seeing Anna again after class.

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**ALEX**

Jack sniffed the zippered fabric pouch. He caught just the slightest lemony tang over a skunky, spicy aroma. He didn't know why he brought it with him to school—habit perhaps. He hadn't smoked in weeks. Part of the promise to his mother. Funny thing was, he didn't really want it anymore anyway. He thought it was going to be hard, like quitting cigarettes or alcohol, but when the first week went by with no craving, no side-effects, no interest at all, he was surprised. Maybe he was immune to addiction. Not likely, he thought, not with a dad like his, locked up for at least seven years and suffering through detox.

Suffer away, you bastard, he thought. Seven years hardly makes up for the seventeen years of shit he and his mother had put up with. And now they had to pick up the wreckage he left behind. It wasn't easy. They had normalized him for so long, they were both still in a daze trying to figure out how to do even the most mundane things—get up, eat breakfast, do chores, even talk. Every second they were waiting for the judgmental jackass to pick apart everything they did, but instead there was only silence. He had left a vacuum that they weren't quite sure how to fill.

There were two things, though, that his mom had jumped on

right away and made no bones about. Jack was to finish high school and stop dealing dope, period, end of sentence. And he was fine with that. He'd only been doing it for the money anyway, and now that his mother's paycheck wasn't going down the alcoholic toilet that was his dad, they suddenly had enough to actually pay bills on time and a little extra afterward. In fact, considering how things could have gone, life was pretty good right now. He suspected that it was due in part to Chief Hannah. He was pretty sure that she and his mom had cut a deal and that was the reason his part in the whole kidnapping saga was never revealed and why his mom was on his case about finishing high-school and getting clean. Those were the unspoken deal-breakers. He could deal with that.

He realized that he was still standing in front of his locker and holding the pouch. It felt like a relic. He tossed it deep into the locker. He'd take it home at the end of the day and leave it there. As he slammed his locker shut and turned to go he found himself facing a kid that was no taller than half of a locker door. He had short hair and horn-rimmed glasses which sat too low on his nose so that when he looked up at Jack, he had to tilt his head way back.

"You're Jack, aren't you?" he said.

"Who wants to know?" replied Jack.

"Name's Alex. I'm a freshman, obviously. I want to talk business with you."

"Don't know what you're talking about, kid." Jack turned and started to walk away.

"What was in that pouch?" said the kid, and then he took a long, deliberate sniff.

Jack stopped and gave the kid the kind of harsh gaze that should have made it crystal clear that he was treading in dangerous territory, but the kid just kept talking.

"Look, I've got some stuff I need to sell but I'm new here and I don't know who might be a customer." He opened the top of his backpack and held it up to Jack, revealing about a dozen prescription bottles.

Jack jumped. He quickly grabbed the top of the backpack squeezing it shut. “Jesus Christ, kid!” he hissed in a loud whisper. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Are you crazy? Get that out of here! I don’t ever want to see it again! Scram!” He let go of the backpack, turned his back on the kid and hurried down the hall, thankful that no one seemed to notice Alex’s indiscretion. Alex didn’t seem deterred, however. He kept pace with Jack and kept talking.

“C’mon, all I need is the names of a couple of kids. I’ll never bug you again. It’s not like I’m the only one trying to sell stuff, right?”

Jack stopped short and gave the kid his sternest look. “Don’t go down that road, kid. And don’t talk to me *ever* again!”

“Just a coupla names. Just two! That’s all I need,” said Alex.

“Jesus, kid, you must annoy the hell out of your parents.”

“Two names! Two names, two names . . .”

Jack turned away and walked into his next class, leaving Alex standing in the doorway. He found a desk as far away from the door as possible and sat. He looked back at the door. Alex was still standing there, holding up two fingers and mouthing “Two names,” and then he disappeared just as the bell went off.

Jack stared out the window feeling like he had just met a terrier that had bit into his pant leg and was determined to drag him back into a world he thought he had just escaped.

**THIS ENDS THE EXCERPT FROM "THE  
INNOCENCE OF WESTBURY."**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo Credit: Dorothy Schnure*

Frederic Martin lives and writes in and about Vermont. He was awarded the 2018 Vermont Writer's Prize for his short story *Maybe Lake Carmi*. His first novel, *Not Alone*, was published in February, 2020. *Not Alone* is the first book in the *Vox Oculis* YA science fiction thriller trilogy. *The Innocence of Westbury* is the second novel of the trilogy. The final book, *Forest*, will be published in the summer of 2021.

