

WEIGHT OF AN OVERFLOWING SOUL

Part One

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Chapter 1

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Long has it been said that two is company and three is a crowd. For two friends at Wellington high school, this was their eternal truth. For almost five years, they were each other's best company in their impenetrable little world.

Joe and Gigi. Gigi and Joe.

These names were seldom uttered without the other, with each begging for its missing half. To all who knew the duo from their middle school days, their friendship was a fated event in the grand history of the universe. Energetic and outgoing Angela, called Gigi by all her adoring friends and classmates, was once a shy girl who kept to her studies. Meanwhile, mysterious and thoughtful Joseph, known simply as Joe, was once a violent boy who acted out for attention. But upon their meeting, the girl gained the confidence to befriend their peers while the boy was finally satisfied by the appreciation of one person. The rest, to their classmates in senior year, was history.

But of course, history is only a preface to all the stories to come.

— *Duo*

I

Joe yawned yet again, to the amusement of Gigi. This marked the third time in six minutes, and last period English class has not even started yet.

"Hey, sleepyhead. What were you staying up to read *this* time?"

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"Scandalous. Never knew you were into hardcore erotica."

"Nah, the dictionary."

"Who are you?" Gigi shook her head in faux dismay. Joe stretched his arms and took another deep breath, then exhaled slowly. *Fourth time now*, counted Gigi.

"Will you even be awake if we go to a movie?"

"Seems like the onus should be on the director."

"My my, we've got a critic in the house."

"If you think about it," he said while tipping his chair back, "I basically get to sleep in the theatre for free on Tuesdays."

She sniffed. "Not how this works, yo."

"Is too." He rolled foam earplugs between his fingers and stuck them in his ear before allowing his chair to fall forward and putting his head on his desk.

"How about we skip just this week?"

"Oh, come on. Half-Price Day with my better half is a sacred tradition."

"What's the use of buying something at a discount when you don't even use it?"

"It's about the principle of the whole thing."

"You're hopeless."

And yet, as she said that, she pulled out her phone and covertly searched up movie times. Behind her, Joe put his head down on his desk and dozed off. Their English teacher, Ms. Lepore, rose from her desk and addressed the class.

"Good afternoon, students. And of course, good night and sweet dreams to Joseph."

The class erupted in laughter. Sleeping Beauty's sheepish guardian put her phone aside and grabbed her pen and notebook, ready to take notes.

— *Fripberries*

Almost an hour later, Ms. Lepore's last period English class was more excited about the freedom awaiting them past the ending bell than about her talk of Greek literary terms. On the blackboard she wrote a particularly long one:

ANAGNORISIS

"*A-nag-NOR-uh-seez*," said Ms. Lepore. "The moment of discovery."

Gigi diligently scribbled in her notebook, annotating heavily as she went. She would not be the only one relying on these notes; Joe might glance over them later to catch up on the material. Meanwhile, he was fast asleep and the target of his classmates' silent glances and stifled chuckles. Gigi shook off the second-hand embarrassment and let her mind wander.

That loser better buy me popcorn. And a pack of gummies.

"According to Aristotle, anagnorisis is the mark of a superior tragedy," continued Ms. Lepore. "While Medea makes her intent to murder her children clear from the very beginning and this is exactly what happens, Oedipus has to first uncover an ugly truth before the plot reaches *peripeteia* — a reversal of fortune and circumstances."

"Pear-uh-puh-TEE-a? How do we spell that?" A student in the front row thinks aloud. Ms. Lepore smiled and wrote on the blackboard: PERIPETEIA.

"The word comes from the Greek words for 'turning' and 'falling'; think of it as all the plot elements finally falling into place. An English word with a similar meaning would be 'turnabout', though 'peripety' is an accepted Anglicization of the original Greek word."

"So that means we won't need to know the Greek version of the word for a quiz or test?"

"You won't," Ms. Lepore sighed.

"Then why are you even teaching this?" From the back of the room came a greasy voice. Gigi rolled her eyes. *Shut up, Fraser.*

Ms. Lepore cleared her throat. "There's more to education than quizzes and tests."

"But, like, isn't there more to stories than fancy words? Why bother even learning all these new term when we're completely fine without 'em? Seems like 'moment of discovery' and 'turnabout' work perfectly fine."

Though much of the class was annoyed by another one of Fraser's famous interjections, many silently sympathized with this sentiment. Gigi, too, was at a loss.

A wry smile forced its way onto Ms. Lepore's visage. "I think we ought to appreciate the classics and the great ancient thinkers. Though the masters have long left this world, their teachings have survived for so long because of their incredible cultural value."

"Well, it all sounds like Greek to me."

Fraser leaned back in his chair and celebrated the chuckles and giggles he received. Ms. Lepore shot him a contemptuous glare, but stayed silent.

"Ms. Lepore," Gigi said while raising her left hand as her right hand scribbled away. "Which terms do you prefer we use?"

Ms. Lepore's eyes lit up at the sound of her star pupil's voice.

"It may be pretentious and old-fashioned to some, but I think when speaking about the Greek tragedies we are enriched through learning the same vocabulary as the Greeks. But for the sake of casual discovery, 'moment of discovery' and 'reversal of fate' do work perfectly fine. Meaning," Ms. Lepore turned to Fraser once again, "you're not exactly wrong in your observation that these words may be extraneous in many contexts. However, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater."

Fraser shuffled uncomfortably in his seat from the candid response and lowered his head, muttering something under his breath. Class continued.

— *Apologia I*

III

Ms. Lepore found herself back on schedule and finished the lesson a few minutes before the end of class.

"Before we go," said Ms. Lepore as all her students began sneaking their notebooks and writing utensils back into their bags, "I want to tell you all about the informal presentation you will all be doing next week." Groans filled the room.

"In groups of two, all of you will be expressing your thoughts on the nature of tragedy." Ms. Lepore looked around the room at her captive audience. "Your presentation can be in any format. It can use any props or visuals. It can be whatever you want it to be."

"But Ms. Lepore," said a girl in the front row, "there's an odd number of students."

Ms. Lepore adjusted her glasses. "Then we will need one group of three."

Everyone in the class all looked around in search of their partners. Several students exchanged knowing glances and beckoning gestures, while others observed who else did not pair off. Gigi simply turned around and poked at a certain napping boy with her pen.

"I hope you finally do your fair share this time around."

"When have I ever not?"

"Running my errands and doing my chores doesn't count as doing your fair share."

"I like to think of our partnership as all-encompassing."

Gigi sighed and began brainstorming ideas for both the presentation and also the favors she would have him do.

"Joe, my man." A certain voice came from the back of the room. "Will your girlfriend let you make a group of three with us?" Gigi looked over and glared at Fraser and his right-hand man Hudson, who was leaning against Fraser's desk. *An asshole and his dunce of a goon*, thought Gig.

Joe kept his head on his desk and only lifted his hand. "Thanks but no thanks. I have but one master. Count me out, gentlemen."

Gigi giggled in spite of herself. Joe's complete apathy toward his own popularity among the delinquents never failed to entertain her. Stories from middle school followed him to high school and his reputation as a dangerous bad boy had

endured despite his new serene albeit torpid self. As his closest friend, Gigi was the main witness to Joe's calm indifference regarding his notoriety.

"Joe's nothing without his woman, huh." Hudson sneered. "Legend reduced to doormat. What a shame."

Fraser elbowed his companion and gave him a reprimanding glare before turning back to Joe. "Don't worry, bro. Perry doesn't have a partner, so she can pair up with Gigi. Us guys can have fun and Perry can finally have another straight-A student to make friends with. Hey Perry, you don't mind, right?"

Gigi glanced over at the classmate named Perry who tried her best to look unaffected by her unwanted inclusion in the conversation. Though they had not spoken before, Gigi remembered seeing her receive awards at a ceremony near the start of the year for receiving the highest mark for junior year English. She recalled Perry scurrying on and off stage so quickly that she even forgot to shake hands with the principal.

And now the poor girl was getting pulled into Fraser's antics.

Just as Gigi was about to speak up, Ms. Lepore made her way over to Fraser's desk and crossed her arms.

"Maybe if you two made friends with someone like Perry, you might manage to accomplish something notable in my class."

Fraser scoffed. Hudson ignored Ms. Lepore and popped another piece of gum into his wide mouth.

Ms. Lepore tapped her foot, then snapped her fingers. "Instead of Joe, you two should invite Perry into your group. It would do you both some good."

Perry and Fraser made eye contact before breaking away — Perry in humiliation, Fraser in scorn. Fraser looked right into Ms. Lepore's eyes.

"No thanks, Doing a presentation with someone like her would totally crimp my style."

"Are you saying you have any *style* to begin with?" Gigi snapped and rose to her feet. Just as she stepped forward, Joe reached out and grabbed her wrist. He sat up and popped out his earplugs.

"She's in my group. Gigi, me, Perry."

Ms. Lepore looked at him in surprise. "Did you three discuss this together?"

He shrugged. "Nah, I decided it just now. I'd love for two top students to do all the work for me. I'll just do my best to not hold them back on the day of the presentation."

Ms. Lepore gave him a look, then turned to Perry. "Are you okay with this?"

The quiet girl nodded her head without looking up. Gigi could see that, behind Perry's long bangs and glasses, her face was bright red.

"Then, it's settled. Angela, Joseph, and Perry are the one and only group of three."

Just then, the bell rang. Students poured out of the classroom and into the quickly-filling halls. Fraser and Hudson stormed out of the classroom, shooting daggers at Ms. Lepore and Gigi on their way out. Ms. Lepore sighed and faced the three students left behind.

"Those two guys are assholes."

Joe scratched his head. "Is that really fit for a teacher to say?"

Ms. Lepore grinned conspiratorially. "I speak only the truth, and the truth must be said."

Perry got up quietly and made her way out of the classroom. "Wait up!" said Gigi as she followed her new group member out the door.

As Joe stood up to leave, Ms. Lepore stopped him.

"Thank you, Joseph."

He looked at her blankly. "For what?"

"Don't play dumb. I know you did that for Perry."

He shrugged and looked away. "She was obviously the victim here."

"Yep. Like I just said, Fraser and Hudson are jerks."

"What about the teacher ready to force her to work with them?"

When he looked at Ms. Lepore this time, his face was one with thinly-concealed anger. The blood rushed to her cheeks.

"I thought it would be a good teaching moment if they formed a group."

"Oh, yeah? Teaching her *what*, exactly? That the adult in the room is ready to throw her under the bus?"

"And what do *you* know about teaching?" Ms. Lepore snapped.

He shrugged again. "At the very least, I know how it feels to be a student. Might do you some good if you tried remembering that for yourself." With that, he turned on a dime and marched out of the room. In that empty classroom, Ms. Lepore sighed and went over to Joe's seat. She sat down, propped her head up on the desk with her elbows, and closed her eyes.

— *Diffusion*

IV

Outside the classroom, Gigi and Perry stood by the lockers lining the sides of the packed halls. Gigi's exasperated tone caught Joe's attention as he drew closer, as did Perry's shrinking frame.

"—I can't allow that!"

"Angela, please..."

"Joe! Talk some sense into her!"

The poor boy scratched his head quizzically. "What's up?"

"Perry said she wants to do all the work herself!"

He blinked. "And what's wrong with that?"

"Joe! Take this seriously!"

Perry cast her eyes at the ground and pressed even closer against the lockers.
"Angela, please let it be..."

Gigi grabbed Joe's arm and squeezed hard. "We *insist* on doing our part. Isn't that right?"

Ouch—

"—Sure, sure, sure. We insist." Gigi released her grip while Perry scowled at Joe.

"I thought you said you wanted me in your group to spare you the work?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Don't worry, I'll send you both the materials by this weekend. You can just read it over a few times before the day of the presentation. I'm not so good at public speaking, so I'll be relying on you two for that. Talk to you tomorrow."

Perry abruptly excused herself and joined the crowd moving out through the closest exit. Joe gave Gigi a shrug.

"All's well that ends well?"

Gigi rolled her eyes. "You know full well that I am not done with this."

But a man can hope, can't he?

Joe checked his watch. "Let's catch the bus. Should still have time to make the usual route."

— *Chasm*

V

At the movie theatre, Joe dozed off just as Gigi predicted. Gigi did not mind so much, though; she had all the snacks to herself, and she got a kick out of putting gummy bears and popcorn kernels into Sleeping Beauty's hair. The movie was passable, too.

That night, the two of them said goodbye and went their separate ways. Gigi went to bed at her usual early hour, while Joe passed out reading the WXYZ volume of an old encyclopedia.

The next morning, Joe learned from his mother that Gigi was taken to the hospital during the night.

— *Suddenly*

Chapter 2

I

"I'm so glad you brought me something with an actual plot," said the upbeat patient sitting in the hospital bed. "I'd die of boredom if you brought me a thesaurus or something."

Her companion sighed as he watched her flip through the small stack of books he brought her.

"You almost had me worried before I arrived."

Gigi laughed heartily and fell back onto her pillow as if right at home in her own room. "Glad you considered being worried for me."

As soon as Joe heard that Gigi was in the hospital, he was ready to run over there on his own two legs despite not even knowing which direction to go. It was only after his mother calmed him down that he learned that it was just a case of appendicitis, that the surgery was scheduled for the afternoon, and that she was in no danger. Still, his heart only stopped racing when he finally opened the door to her hospital room and saw her alive and kicking.

"Doesn't it hurt? How can you be so relaxed?"

Gigi giggled. "After taking a few pills I felt nearly good enough to go right back home."

Ah. So the pain is being dulled by painkillers? But how could a painkiller remove the pain of an infected appendix without knocking her out cold? Joe wondered if appendicitis was not as bad as it sounds or if Gigi just had incredible pain tolerance.

Joe ran his fingers through his unwashed hair and spoke. "Say, Gigi."

"Hmm?" Gigi turned her head and curled up on her side, shuffling the IV tube going into her arm. Joe winced from the sight and remembered just how squeamish he was.

"Aren't you worried about the operation?"

Gigi thought for a moment, then shook her head. "The surgeon seems like he has a good heart. I trust him with my life."

"What does having a good heart have to do with anything?"

"I'm sure that it makes all the difference." Gigi reached for a novella and aimlessly thumbed through the pages with her head propped up by her elbow. "Love for his patients and his work is what lets that surgeon do a good job every day, and today should be no different."

"Personally, I'd be a surgeon just for the cash."

"Shush now, you."

Gigi's conviction in her truth shone through her smile. Joe looked away, humbled by the strength of will exemplified by his best friend.

My best friend. Somehow, that label did not fit right.

"What are we, really?"

Gigi's face reddened slightly, but she quickly put on a smirk and leaned in conspiratorially. "Partners in crime."

"Ah! That's what this is. A partnership."

Joe's *partner* scoffed. "Pretty sure this would qualify as an unequal one."

"Hey, nothing unequal about you helping me with school work in exchange for favors and free stuff. Your talents and time for my labor and money. Contractor and contractee."

"Oh! That reminds me to tell you something." Gigi pointed her finger at Joe, who leaned back disapprovingly. With an air of equal parts nobility and violence, she made a demand:

"Don't let Perry do all the work herself. Do enough to make up for the two of us."

Blink, blink. "That came out of nowhere."

"I'm serious, Joe! This is really important."

More important than the fact that you're getting your appendix removed in a few hours?

"Come on, Gigi. If she *wants* to do all of it, who am I to say no?"

"But she *doesn't* want to do all of it. I'm sure she wants to be part of a group where everyone does their part and puts their best foot forward."

"Well, aren't you quite the mind-reader."

"Joe, Joe, Joe! *Please* don't let her be a tool!"

Joe grumbled. "I'd be a *fool* if I turned down a maiden's good graces."

Gigi glared at Joe for a moment, but quickly her wrath subsided to sadness. "Can't you do it for *me*? Think of it as doing my homework for once."

"But what about you? Can't you just do your part after the surgery?"

"I have to recover after the surgery, duh! Who knows if I'll be in the right state of mind to do anything before the weekend comes around."

Joe thought for a moment, then chuckled. "You owe me then."

"Owe you what?"

"How about a fun little date together?"

Gigi's eyes widened. "A date?"

"Yeah. A day at the new amusement park that opened outside of town."

"You know how much tickets for that place cost? And I'm scared of heights."

Joe thumped his chest. "I'll spot the tickets. You just need to sit there next to me on the rides."

"Can I even go on roller coasters after surgery?"

"It can wait until you're all better and we're both free."

A short moment of awkward silence followed, but to both Gigi and Joe it was a minute of eternity. Gigi opened her mouth, closed it, then forced herself to speak.

"Would this be just like Tuesday movies? Or is this..."

Blood rushed to Joe's cheeks but he looked away and out the window in time. He brought his hand to his face as if to shield his eyes from the sunlight.

"Let's decide what it is after the fact."

Another eternal minute, and finally a nod from Gigi. "Deal."

— *Contract*

II

When Gigi quietly dozed off from what Joe assumed were the painkillers, Joe left her hospital room and wandered around for a while. Joe hugged close to the walls as he walked through the white halls of the hospital. Staff strutted to and fro, carrying papers and speaking in important tones. Those grotesque interactions, displayed in a sterile, artificial spotlight, unsettled Joe. He stiffly kept his eyes on the many posters and announcements.

The elevator slowly descended to the ground floor. Joe fished his old flip phone out of his pocket and read the directions Gigi had punched in. With fifteen or so minutes before he had to leave for the bus, he might as well hang around inside the hospital for a while.

When the doors opened, he brushed past a small group waiting to enter the elevator and made his way to the entrance.

"Excuse me, sir!"

A nurse near the front desk waved at Joe and made her way over with a folder in her hand. Joe was immediately taken by her confident stance. Although she must have once been quite a beauty in her younger years, the passage of time and the weariness of work must have taken its toll. But on that aged visage, her

brilliant eyes were even more striking with the subtle crow's feet at their corners.

"I was just about to go up to your sister's room to speak with you. What a good brother, skipping school to give her support."

Joe gulped in spite of himself, feeling guilty over the lie he told the hospital staff to be let into her room. Of course, Gigi played along as a perfect accomplice would.

"Gigi fell asleep so I was just gonna head back to school. Should we go back to her room?"

"Oh, no need! This can be quick." The nurse gestured for them to sit down in a waiting area overlooking the entrance. Sitting across from him, she clasped her hands and smiled.

"Are there any questions you have for me about Angela—no, *Gigi*'s surgery?"

Joe had half a mind to politely refuse and go on his way, but his latent worries regarding the procedure compelled him to ask away.

"Is there a reason why her surgery was scheduled so late despite her arriving during the night?"

The nurse sighed and shook her head. "There are only so many operating theatres in this hospital, and only so many surgeons. Today just happened to be a busy day."

"But can the surgery really wait? What if she gets worse?" Joe's anxiety heightened from articulating that fear.

"In general, removal of the appendix within twelve hours is enough time to prevent it from bursting. The only worry is that the poor girl has to endure the pain until the surgery."

Only after breathing deeply in and out did Joe realize that his whole body had been tense for quite some time. He leaned back and relaxed his shoulders.

"How long after the surgery will it take for Gigi to recover?"

"If everything goes well, she can be back at school in about a week or so."

Looks like she probably will not be presenting with me and Perry, then. Bummer.

Joe thought for a moment then asked another question. "Does this hospital give a question and answer period to every patient's family?"

The nurse smiled and shook her head. "My shift actually ended ten minutes ago, so I decided to talk to you and answer any questions you may have before I go. For some reason or another, your sister Angela—*Gigi*—reminded me of my own daughter, and I knew that if it were my daughter in that hospital room I would have a million questions on my mind."

So she's doing this not as part of her job, but rather out of the goodness of her heart?

"Thank you so much, ma'am. It means a lot."

"Call me Jane. And your name is?"

"Joseph. Joe for short."

Jane stood up and extended her hand. Joe also rose to his feet and accepted a firm handshake. The power and warmth of her grasp surprised him.

"One final question for you, Jane."

"Ask away, Joe."

"What's that bulge in the folder you've got there?"

Jane's eyes widened for a second before glancing down at her hands. "I'm surprised you noticed. Here, take a look." She opened the folder, took out a container with yellow fluid inside, and gave it a playful shake in front of Joe's face.

"Just a little urine sample."

"Gross." Joe stepped back and the two shared a laugh. After exchanging a few parting words, Jane walked off with the folder and sample while Joe sat back down. He saw the hospital around him in a different light.

Maybe a good heart does make all the difference.

— *Gladsome*

III

Though the distance from the bus stop where Joe got off to the school was no more than a few blocks, he had gotten so used to relying on Gigi's phone for directions that he got lost for a while. Joe quickly decided that if he was going to be late anyway, he might as well take his sweet time. By the time he arrived at school, it was already halfway through the lunch period.

Joe went straight from the front foyer to the cafeteria. But unlike the hundreds of other students eating there, he had other business to do. Walking up and down the rows of lunch tables, he looked around for a certain group member of his. After his third lap around the lunchroom and a few words of warning from a lunchroom supervisor to sit down or leave, he accepted that his self-proclaimed knack for picking faces out of a crowd was failing him. Slinking out of the lunchroom before attracting any more attention from the supervising staff, he made his way across the school through the empty halls to a particular secluded stairwell. He quietly took the stairs all the way down and reached a fire exit.

Peeking into the barely-illuminated landing of the stairwell, Joe found his bespectacled target.

"Hey, Perry."

Perry, who was reading a book and eating a sandwich while listening to something with earphones, seized up at the sound of her classmate's voice. Her fair-skinned face became as white as a ghost before becoming as red as a beet.

"How did you find this place?"

"To be honest, just guesswork. I figured the landing of a stairwell would be a great place to eat lunch alone. This is really quite a nice hideout you have here."

Aside from Perry's chair and the desk next to her with a small reading lamp, there were two more desks against the wall along with a few stacked chairs. An electric fan sat on top of a small humidifier stashed in the corner.

"Well, if you want this place, it's all yours." Perry hurriedly put her half-eaten sandwich back in her lunch container and slammed her book shut. Before Joe even said another word, she started packing her bag.

"You have the wrong idea. I'm not here to find a place to eat or hang out. I'm here to find *you*."

Perry raised her eyebrows for a moment but had a look of realization in the next.
"Is it about the group presentation? Don't worry, I already started on it last night. I can give you and Angela a script by Friday at the latest."

Joe's resolve faltered briefly at the prospect of avoiding any extra work, but the thought of Gigi's face when she accepted their deal kept him true.

"Actually, about that. I'll be doing my share of the work. Actually, both mine and Gigi's."

"Wait, yours *and* Angela's?"

Perry's voice betrayed enough surprise that Joe himself began to question why he was straying so far from his nature. He shook away the thought and grabbed a chair from the stack against the wall. Swivelling it around so that the backrest faced Perry, he sat down backwards straddling his legs.

"Gigi's at the hospital getting her appendix removed so she will not be at school for the rest of the week. I don't even know if she'll be doing the presentation with us next week."

Perry's mouth opened as if to say something but stayed silent. With the momentum on his side, Joe kept talking.

"Anyway, she and I won't let you write the entire presentation by yourself. This is a group project which requires a group effort. But since Gigi helps me with schoolwork all the time and is sick this time around, I'm doing both our parts. So, two-thirds me and one-third you."

Joe extended his hand for dramatic effect.

"Let's make something great together, Perry! Let's do our best together!"

Perry slung her backpack over her shoulder and slipped past Joe. She took the stairs two at a time while speaking quickly over her shoulder.

"Class-is-starting-soon-so-I'll-be-going-now-don't-worry-about-the-project-I'll-just-do-it-myself-tell-Angela-to-get-well-soon—"

With that, Perry disappeared. Right as her voice disappeared, the bell signalling the end of lunchtime reverberated through the empty stairwell. Joe sighed, turned off the reading lamp, and picked up a thick spiral notebook that Perry left on her desk in her haste. He read the title carefully printed on the cover in permanent marker: PERRYTALES.

Guessing you might need this, thought Joe as he made his way up the stairs.

— *At First You Don't Succeed*

IV

As usual, Joe slept through math class right after lunchtime. Though his empty stomach rumbled, it could not fend off the exhaustion of that long day.

After that class came last period English. Joe already knew what he had to do if it came to this, but that did not make it any easier. His mind, preoccupied with rehearsing what he was going to say, paid no attention to the lecture. Luckily, Ms. Lepore did not bother Joe at all during class and simply dove into the lesson after a short announcement regarding Gigi's medical absence. In his blissful ignorance he did not notice that Ms. Lepore, still remembering their exchange from the previous day, was making a point of leaving him be. Meanwhile, Fraser also lay low and held back any comments that came to mind.

When the bell rang, Joe immediately stood up with his backpack in his hand. He waited for Perry to put her pencil case and notes into her backpack, then followed her out of the classroom. Unlike the other students who stayed around to chat with friends or to make a final trip to their locker, Perry made a beeline to the closest exit. When they got outside, she quickened her step and took off to a side street. By the time Joe caught up to her, they were already approaching a bus stop on a main street.

"Hey Perry! Wait up!"

When Perry turned around, her look of surprise and terror blanked Joe's mind of any and all planning he had done for this encounter.

"A-are you a stalker?"

"Oh, no no no!" Joe waved his hands wildly in spite of himself. "I just needed to talk to you about something."

Perry exhaled deeply. "Is it what we were talking about before? I don't think there's anything more to say. Also, I have to get going—"

"Don't worry, I'll be quick. Basically, either you let me help you with the presentation or I will flub all my lines."

"What are you—"

"I will screw up. Hard. I will make a fool out of both of us. Word will spread beyond the class. Sounds pretty inconvenient, don't you think?"

Perry's bright-red face was all Joe needed to see.

"So, yeah. You're going to let me do my share of the work. Then everything will go smoothly and we'll all be happy."

Perry's voice shook as she forced out her reply.

"I'm telling Ms. Lepore."

Joe knew that if Perry went to Ms. Lepore and told her everything he said, his ultimatum would hold no water. What would come next would go beyond mere gambit.

"Go ahead. We both know she would love to see me embarrass myself."

Joe watched the color drain from Perry's face. He pressed on.

"She'll fail me and give you a great mark. To her, me sabotaging the presentation would be no big deal. Punishment for me, pity marks for you. She'd be my unwitting accomplice."

Perry opened and closed her mouth. *Victory.*

"And the other thing I wanted to talk to you about," Joe continued, distracting her from his bluff. "I also brought a little something for you."

Joe opened his backpack and pulled out the notebook from earlier. As soon as she saw the cover, Perry lunged at Joe and ripped it out of his hands.

"How did you get this?!"

Perry's angry exclamation shook Joe, but he kept up the facade.

"You left it behind earlier. Just doing my new groupmate a little favor."

Perry's face darkened. "Did you read it?"

Oh no, did I go too far? Joe drew a blank in response to Perry's biting glacial tone. He did not expect this reaction from his quiet, timid classmate. After all that masterful trickery, would this misstep be his downfall? All at once, Joe felt his control over the situation slip away from his grasp.

"Well? Answer me!" Perry barked at Joe, giving him a jump.

"No, I didn't! All I saw was the cover..." Joe pointed at the notebook which Perry held against her chest. "I'm sure it's very personal to you."

"You know what? Fine! I give up. You win."

A stunning comeback! "So, does that mean...?"

"You can do the damned project. I'll be at the library at seven o'clock tonight. Come if you insist on working together." The bus arrived and Perry stood up to board. "I have to get going. See you later."

Joe lingered for a moment after the bus left and scratched his head. *Well, that worked out.*

— *Try, Try Again*

V

Joe looked around.

"Now, how do I get home from here?"

— *Roman Triumph*

Chapter 3

I

"Did you go to your afternoon classes today?"

"Yes, Mom."

Joe shoveled the vegetables on his plate into his mouth and reached for another serving of roast beef. He thanked his Maker for giving him parents who ate dinner early. If he had to wait a minute past five o'clock for dinner, he would have started on the breakfast cereal. His mother, accustomed to lukewarm responses to her cooking, was secretly pleased.

"Christ, Joe. You're eating like a pig. Are you sure this is your third meal of the day?"

Joe swallowed a bit too fast and gulped down water before looking up at the incredulous man sitting across from him.

"You know how it is, Dad. Can't expect too much from cafeteria food with all the cuts to school funding."

Joe's father's chest puffed up. "Perfect example of where austerity takes us. Tax cuts, bah! Look at the mess we taxpayers have to clean up now. The voters better speak loud and clear come the next election."

"Speak they will, dear. No politics at the dinner table, please."

"Yes, honey."

Joe's father sheepishly returned to picking at the cold, dry meat on his plate. Joe rewarded himself on the perfect bait by filling his empty stomach with beef and asparagus.

"They should be almost done with the operation," noted Joe's mother as her son continued to devour his meal. "A small text tonight might do some wonders for her."

"Ugh, Mom. My wallet will need healing after my phone bill comes in."

Joe's father sighed and shook his head. "Makes no sense to me that a teenager in the twenty-first century would still be on pay-as-you-go. And with no data plan."

"Dad. Why would I pay for something I won't even use?"

"But that's the thing! Don't boys your age love using those newfangled MacPhones to talk with friends on FaceChat or whatever?"

Joe's eyes twitched, itching to roll.

"Please, dear. Our son is an old-fashioned romantic. Just look at how he dotes on his charming young lady! Taking her on dates instead of texting. Any parent would be proud of raising such a perfect gentleman."

"It's really not like that, Mom—"

"How about buying her some flowers, my son? I'll give you some money and the name of that boutique I used last Mother's Day."

"Dad, she and I aren't like that."

Joe cleaned off his plate with two pairs of eyes boring through him.

"But Joe, you practically ran out of the house in your underwear when I told you the news."

Joe's father grunted in agreement to his wife's comment. "Any girl who can make my son into such a man is welcome into our family. Looks like you got your old man's eye for women."

"And what a woman she is! A perfect angel."

"We're just friends! Friends!" Joe picked up the dishes and utensils and left the table. "I'll do the dishes."

"Joe's already all grown up, dear! Next thing you know we'll be holding our little grandchildren!"

"Time marches on, love. Time marches on."

As Joe scrubbed the plates with a soapy sponge, one word echoed through his head:

Friends. Friends. Friends.

— *That Inconvenient Word
or, No One Expects the Dinner Inquisition*

II

"God damn it, Perry. Which library did you mean?"

How could he have made such a blunder? Though his confrontation worked out, his efforts seemed to be all for naught because of one small problem: he had no idea which library she was talking about.

Luckily, the school library could be eliminated as it closed an hour after the end of class every day. That meant it had to be the local library; unfortunately, it had three branches in addition to its main location.

Joe fumbled across the keyboard of his nearly unused laptop in search of clues online. With no way of contacting Perry to either ask about the location or cancel, he had no choice but to play detective.

"Open at seven, close to the school..."

Thankfully, one of the branches closed earlier than the others and another was nearly an hour away from the school by bus. That should leave either the main library or the remaining branch.

But which one is it?

Both were around the same distance from the school, but the main library took nearly twice as long to get to by bus. The branch, on the other hand, was a newer building in a popular new part of town. However, if someone just says "the library", don't they usually mean the main location?

"Ugh, I'm stuck."

Joe glanced at the corner of his laptop display: *6:20pm*. Any later and there might not be a bus that takes him to either library by seven o'clock. Time was of the essence.

Think. Think. Think.

A lightbulb went off in Joe's head. Wouldn't *most* people know to clarify which library to go to? Maybe there is a reason why she thinks of one specific library as *the* library?

"Only hunch I've got."

Joe did a desperate web search: *library volunteer opportunities*. He clicked on the second result and scrolled through. Standing right in the middle of a group picture of library volunteers was Perry with a reserved smile that Joe had never seen at school.

"Jackpot."

— *Elementary*

III

As Joe skipped down the stairs, he heard his parents speaking in hushed tones.

"Shouldn't we tell him what happened?"

"Appendixes rupture all the time. What's the use in worrying him for no reason?"

"But what about her fever? Isn't that a bad sign?"

"It's too early to be sure, love. Everything could work out."

"But what if it doesn't? If anything happens to that girl—"

"Honey. The doctors are all doing their best. All we can do now is hope."

"I hope you're right, dear..."

Joe slipped out the front door and sprinted to the bus stop. As best as he could, he tried to clear his mind and forget how powerless he was.

IV

"Where is she?"

Joe wondered out loud and looked back over his shoulder for the fifth time at the clock on the wall: *7:20*. No, a bit past that now. After nearly killing himself trying to get there by the set meeting time, he sat in a study area for over fifteen minutes. Still no sign of Perry.

Could she have forgotten? Impossible. There was no way she would have forgotten about their conversation. So maybe she is flaking on purpose? Or maybe Joe got the place wrong after all?

After the sixth time he looked at the clock, he decided that he would wait for ten more minutes before heading home. He half-heartedly flipped through an old *Bescherelle* he grabbed from a shelf, but could not stop his mind from wandering to the conversation his parents were having.

When he looked for the seventh time, it was already past 8 o'clock. He put the *Bescherelle* back in its place, picked up his bag, and walked toward the entrance of the library.

Just as he moved to push the door open, someone opened it from the outside. It was a panting Perry with her glasses almost falling off her face.

"So—sorry! Appointment—went late—"

Joe pushed through the other door and walked past Perry. But before he even made it to the sidewalk, a hand grabbed his arm from behind.

"Please don't go! We can still get a lot of work done!"

Joe was stayed by the forcefulness of Perry's tone. But he hardened his heart.

"I thought you didn't want me to help anyway."

Perry's grip loosened. Joe shook his arm free, but stood still. *Sorry, Gigi.* His heart panged from his own silent apology. *I guess the deal's off.*

He continued.

"It was my fault for resorting to blackmail. I didn't care one bit about how you felt. I didn't care about fairness or any of that. I just wanted to fulfill a promise I made to Gigi."

Joe took a deep breath. His tears welled behind his heavy eyelids.

"Maybe I was just being dumb. Maybe all of this is for nothing. I'm sorry for pulling you into all this. Consider us even for making me wait an hour."

"An hour? You waited that long—"

"Anyway, good night. I'm going home."

Joe took a step forward. Then another. But before he could take yet another, he felt a strong tug on his backpack.

"Don't say you're sorry! Don't say that you're dumb or that any of this was for nothing. Because it's not!"

A jolt ran through his body. He turned around to face Perry. As soon as he saw the wetness under her glasses and on her cheek, his own tears also overflowed. He silently listened to Perry's unrestrained voice.

"I know you didn't really want me in your group to do your work. I know you wanted to help me out. I know that's just how you are. And most of all, I know that Joseph would never forgive himself for letting others down!"

Joe's heart ached with every crack in Perry's voice.

"Please fulfill your promise to Angela! Please let me help you keep your word! Please let me restore your lost hope! And please be my partner for this English project."

Perry extended her right hand while wiping away her tears with her left. Joe looked at it for a moment, then walked past her toward the entrance to the library.

"Let's just go back in."

Joe and Perry turned quite a few heads as they walked through the foyer and past the front desk. Joe ignored the amused and annoyed gazes of patrons and

staff and made a beeline toward the study tables furthest to the back. Perry followed behind with her head bowed.

Once they were both seated and composed, Joe broke the ice.

"So, what do we have so far? Did you already write anything?"

Perry nodded. "I had an idea for the presentation that I really liked, so I got started last night."

"Great, is it a skit or something?"

"It's a Greek dialogue. Like in Plato's *Republic*."

He scratched his head. "You lost me."

She smiled. "Follow me."

Joe followed Perry through the long aisles of the library to the nonfiction section. Glancing over the rows upon rows of book spines, she plucked out the one she wanted.

"Skim through this and you'll get an idea."

He looked at the title on the cover: *The Republic*, by Plato.

"As expected of a library volunteer, I guess."

Perry's face reddened. "How do you know?!"

Joe chuckled. "Had to do some sleuthing since I had no idea which library you were talking about."

Perry looked confused for a moment, then shocked as realization reached her eyes.

"I completely forgot! But you—"

Joe took a bow. "Elementary, my dear Watson."

"Sherlock never says that, by the way."

"Wait, what?"

For an hour and a half, Perry and Joe talked about the project with more than a few tangents. But despite the frequent diversions, the format of the presentation was established: they will be writing and presenting a three-character dialogue discussing the nature of tragedy. "You'd have to be Socrates," Joe proposed.

"Gigi and I can play the role of the fools down to a tee." Perry's face reddened, but she smiled while looking down and nodding. *She really wears her emotions on her sleeve*, Joe thought.

By the time a librarian came to escort them out of the empty library, Joe and Perry had created a list of all the ideas they wanted to have in the dialogue. Outside the doors, the two decided who would write which part.

"If we work together on this, I have a proposition to make," said Perry.

"Shoot."

"Let me do half of Angela's part."

"So then we would each be doing exactly half of the writing?"

Perry smiled. "Exactly. Like true partners."

"And then we hope that Gigi gets well enough to do the presentation with us."

Perry paused. "Worst case, you might have to read her part too."

"Only way it'll work," Joe agreed.

After the two exchanged numbers and Perry helped Joe search up a bus route back home ("No data in the current year? Are we the same age?"), the two walked together in the same direction for a while.

"How long have you and Angela known each other?" Perry asked.

Joe's heart skipped a beat at the thought of Gigi. "Since back in middle school. Back then I was quite the troublemaker and she was a quiet geek."

"I can't even imagine," Perry marvelled. "You two must have changed a lot then."

"I guess."

"By the way, how's she doing? Did the operation go well?"

Joe felt a twist in his gut.

"I actually overheard my parents saying she might be having complications."

"...Oh."

Joe quickly changed the subject.

"So, how long have you had that hideout in the stairwell?"

"A bit over half a year now. To be honest, Ms. Lepore hinted me in on it when I told her I wanted more alone time during school hours."

"Huh? But it's only a month into the school year."

Perry nodded. "She was my English teacher last year too. My class was right before lunch so we would sometimes chat after class."

"Wow. So that's how you got the highest English mark last year?"

"That probably came more from me studying alone during lunch and after school instead of talking with friends or joining clubs," Perry sighed.

"You know, I don't really understand why that is." Joe stopped and turned to face Perry. "You and I are getting along just fine right now."

Perry looked away. "I think you're a lot nicer than most people."

"I'll take that as a compliment. But I'm sure you could have plenty of friends if you showed people this side of you."

"...It's a bit complicated."

The conversation lulled and the two continued walking. After a while, Perry stopped.

"I have to cross the street here. Good night, Joseph."

"Later."

Perry crossed the street and Joe continued down the block. As he reached an intersection with a red light, he aimlessly pulled out his phone. The LED notification light was on. He flipped it open.

Three missed calls at 8:28pm, 8:57pm, and 9:31pm, all from a number saved as "Gigi's Mom". All sent to voicemail because the phone was on silent.

Without any hesitation, Joe called back. As the traffic lights turned green and he stepped out onto the road, someone picked up.

"Hello, Joe? I'm sorry if you were in the middle of something."

"It's no problem, ma'am. Anything the matter?"

"The doctors just let us into Angela's room, and... well..."

Her voice trailed off. Joe's entire being became hostage to the silence. After a few moments, the silence broke.

— *Crux*

V

"Hey, loser. Mom didn't bring me my phone so I'm using hers. Wanna hear about a weird dream I had while put under?"

Out the receiver came Gigi's voice. Joe finally relaxed his tense body.

"I'm all ears."

They talked on the phone until Joe got home, then for another hour after that. Maximum minutes and additional charges did not exist in the small but vast world of Gigi and Joe.

— *All's Well That Ends Well*

Chapter 4

I

Joe's mother made him swear to not skip class to see Gigi. Unknownst to her, Joe had already made the same promise to Gigi. *Damn are women good mind readers*, thought Joe as he walked out the house that morning. It took all the restraint in the world to not go straight to the school library and search up bus routes going to the hospital. Though Gigi requested that he pay attention to class so he could catch her up later, Joe spent his two morning classes staring at the empty seat beside him and counting the hours, minutes, seconds between now and the next time he can see her.

Only when the lunch bell rang did Joe have something else to worry about. Joe headed to the other side of the school and down the same dim staircase. Once again he arrived at Perry's secret hideout, where a familiar girl with glasses was writing in her notebook.

"Hey."

Perry looked up at the sound of Joe's voice and smiled as if she were expecting him. She took out her earphones.

"Welcome again."

"Not sure yesterday was much of a welcome, to be honest." Joe sat down in a chair set for him across from Perry. Another desk was put beside the one she was using yesterday, making a bigger table for the two of them. The reading lamp sat right on the border, slightly lopsided from the difference in elevation between the two desks.

Perry closed her notebook and began hesitantly.

"So... any updates on Angela?"

Joe smiled. "Surgery was a success. There was a leak in her appendix, but nothing that couldn't be cleaned up. No infections, and she should be discharged by tomorrow."

Perry applauded the good news. "I'm so glad."

She grabbed a thermos and two plastic cups, then poured out some iced tea. She raised a cup. "To Angela's good health."

"To Gigi." Joe drank everything in one gulp. He immediately noticed that there was no sweetness whatsoever to it. Perry put down her cup after a few sips.

"So, did you get any work done on the presentation last night?" Perry inquired while they ate lunch.

"Sorry," Joe admitted as he picked at the leftovers from last night's roast beef dinner. "I was calling Gigi."

"Nothing to be sorry about! I'm sure this has all been hard on the two of you."

"She's the one doing all the fighting." Joe gave up on the beef and packed his lunch box away. He pulled out some lined paper and began writing some notes.

"You know," remarked Perry as she took a bite of her sandwich, "I'm starting to see what Angela likes about you."

"Huh?"

Perry covered her mouth as she giggled with her mouth full. "What I'm saying is that despite all appearances, you're quite the caring boyfriend."

"Oh, we're not like that. Just friends."

"What?! But you guys act like an old couple!"

"Is that so."

Perry gawked at Joe. "How long have you two known each other, again?"

"Over five years, now. We started hanging out in seventh grade."

"And you *still* haven't gotten together?"

Joe laughed at Perry's disbelief. "I've been getting that reaction a lot lately."

Perry gulped some iced tea and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. "I'm sure you understand why."

To be honest, I wish I did. Joe shrugged and got back to work.

"Honestly, I barely even thought of dating Gigi for most of this time. We just took one day at a time, and suddenly the years flew by."

Perry looked away with a wistful expression.

"Honestly, I'm jealous."

The loneliness in her voice was palpable. Joe put down his pencil.

"Say, Perry. You're pretty smart right?"

"I-I wouldn't say so—"

"Is it really that weird for me and Gigi to not be dating?"

Perry finished the last bite of her sandwich, then poured herself some more iced tea. "I guess it's just really unexpected."

"Then, do you think she and I *should* be dating?"

"Huh?! How could *I* answer that? Isn't that a matter of if you and Angela like each other?"

Do I like Gigi? Joe did not know where to even begin with considering this question.

"What does it even mean to *like* someone?"

"Well, do you like her personality?"

"Why else would I be around her?"

"Do you find her cute or pretty?"

"I guess."

"So, do you want that all to yourself?"

"Never thought about it."

Perry sighed, then thought for a moment. "It's senior year, right? Do you both know where you're going after graduation?"

"I think Gigi's mother wants her to study medicine or engineering. Me, no clue."

"But what if Gigi moves far away? What if you two can't be together every day anymore?"

Joe opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated. He did not have an answer, but mustered an impromptu reply.

"She'll definitely come back to visit her parents. And I'll visit her when I save enough money."

"What if she finds a boyfriend? What if she brings him back and introduces him to you?"

Joe imagined a beaming Gigi with a faceless man's arm around her. Though Joe felt happy that Gigi was happy, he couldn't help but also feel lonely.

"...I think it would make me sad."

The two sat in silence for a while, appreciating his answer. Joe lifted his cup and sipped, but no fluid touched his lips. Perry picked up her thermos and poured him some more iced tea.

"There's probably no *should* or *shouldn't* about it," she mused. "Friendship might be more important than romance anyway."

Friendship.

"What if none of the words we have in the English language can really express what Gigi and I are?"

"Didn't Ms. Lepore allude to this on Monday? When Fraser spouted off in class."

"Now that you mention it, I do remember hearing something about Greek terms. But to be honest, I think Fraser had a point."

"That might be the problem. He's wrong, through and through."

Perry's eyes burned with conviction. The last thing Joe expected from her was such a strongly stated opinion; he said nothing and waited for more explanation.

"Ms. Lepore said that there's enrichment to be found in learning Greek terms. But it's about so much more than just the words. It's about our attitude toward the past."

Perry's white-knuckled hand crushed her plastic cup.

"It's so easy for us to say that we know so much more than those who came before us. But we never stop to wonder: what if we lost something along the way? And how would we ever know unless we look back to try learning and understanding what was once said?"

Joe did not understand what all the fuss was about, but nonetheless he felt a tightness in his gut, as if this conversation had some crucial meaning behind it.

"Maybe using Greek terms is outdated and pretentious. Maybe it doesn't matter in the end. But maybe we'll lose something important unless we pretend that it all matters and needs to be protected at all costs."

Perry stopped and closed her eyes. Joe waited with bated breath.

"Anyway, to answer your question. It's said that the Greeks had multiple words for love. To be honest, I don't know all the names off the top of my head. But maybe you can try looking into it and seeing if it helps you understand who Angela is to you."

Joe took a deep breath. "You know, you're really scary when you're serious."

"W-what? Is that something you say to someone who—"

"But," Joe cut Perry off, "that was really insightful." He bowed his head. "Thank you so much for the advice."

Perry's face turned red, but unlike all the other times she did not look away. Instead, she beamed a smile so bright that it all but blinded Joe in that dark landing.

"I'm happy to help."

— *Apologia II*

For the third English class in a row, Joe occupied himself with something other than listen to Ms. Lepore. But rather than sleeping or daydreaming, he was working on his part of the presentation. Ms. Lepore, seeing this problem student so intently scribbling, wondered if her lecture was particularly interesting that day.

When class ended, Joe packed his backpack and turned around to find Perry and go to the library together as planned. But. to his surprise, her seat was empty.

"Hey Joe, buddy! Looking for your little mistress?"

Joe sighed at the sound of Fraser's voice beside him. An arm draped around his shoulders.

"You know, man, I think Gigi would be heartbroken if she knew there was another woman in the picture."

"Knock it off, Fraser. Can you just tell me when she left?"

"Left? She didn't come to class in the first place." Hudson got up from his desk and swaggered over in a way that Joe assumed was supposed to be cool. "I guess even the famous Joe has his share of girl problems."

Fraser clicked his tongue and slapped Hudson's arm with his free hand. "Come on, now. Shouldn't we be helping a brother in need? Yo, Joe. I know some people. Gimme a moment and I can ask around for you."

"No need," Joe said flatly as he broke away from Fraser and Hudson. "Got other things to do."

As soon as Joe left the classroom, Fraser turned to Hudson and rolled his eyes. "Come on, Hud. You're literally killing me."

Ms. Lepore, who watched the entire exchange, snickered to herself.

— *Skit*

III

When Joe entered the library, he went straight to the front counter and cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, do you know where I can find a book called *Perrytales*?"

Perry turned around and scowled.

"Can you please not cause a scene? I'll be done in a sec."

— *Truant*

IV

"So, on which days do you volunteer?"

"Tuesdays and Fridays, usually. Saturday sometimes, if they're short on people."

"Today's Thursday."

"How does Angela put up with you?"

Perry rolled her eyes while writing in her notebook. Meanwhile, Joe twirled his pen around his thumb while staring at a blank sheet of lined paper. Perry shook her head.

"In any case, you would have had nothing to worry about if you charged your phone."

"Shouldn't I be worried if a dear classmate is skipping class?"

"Let me ask you, what did Ms. Lepore talk about today?"

Joe thought about it for a moment. "No clue."

Perry stuck out her tongue. "Get to work."

The two fell silent. Joe stood up and went to search the library database for books on Greek words for love; unfortunately, none of the results were what he needed. *Guess I'll ask Perry about this.* When he returned to the desk where he and Perry were working, he plopped back down and sighed.

"Couldn't find any books on Greek love. Can you help me out?"

"O-oh yeah, sure..."

Perry's skin was always quite pale, but now it was a sickly white.

"Hey, Perry. Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah. Just a bit tired." Perry stood up, but lost her footing. Her leg knocked loudly against the desk, turning many heads.

"Woah there," muttered Joe as he strode over to the other side. He put his hand on her shoulder, but she forcefully pushed it away.

"I'm fine. Let's go check the database together then get some more work done."

Joe looked Perry over. Was she really in a state to be working?

"Actually, I think I'll go visit Gigi. Must be lonely in the hospital."

Perry's eyes flitted for a second. "Yeah. Must be."

"Let's end it here and meet again tomorrow." Joe went to pack his bag while glancing up at Perry. "Please go home and get some rest, alright? You look terrible right now."

Perry scoffed, but all but collapsed back into her seat. The heaviness of her motions was apparent. As Joe headed over to a computer to search up bus routes, he looked back and saw that Perry's head was resting on the desk and her breathing was fast and shallow. The sight of her weak form bothered him all the way to the hospital.

— *Omen*

V

As soon as the fourth card was dealt, Joe made his move. "Check."

"I'll bet five." Gigi's poker face was unreadable by even Joe.

"Raisin' to ten raisins." Joe plucked five dried grapes from his stash and put them on the pile in the middle. Twenty-five raisins in the pot.

"Check-raisin'? Scary." Gigi's taunting did not phase Joe. He kept his eye on the cards between them: 8♠ A♥ 10♣ Q♦

"Hurry up and get re-raisin'. We don't have all day."

Gigi smirked. "You asked for it." Joe's palms sweat as Gigi picked up ten—no, fifteen—raisins and threw them into the pot. Things were getting heated. But our hero kept his cool and stared down the icy villain. It was do or die.

"Call." Joe picked up ten raisins and threw them into the pot. Then, he picked up the last two raisins in his stack and popped them into his mouth. "All in."

Without batting an eye, Gigi picked up her last four raisins and swallowed them whole. The next card would decide everything.

"Reveal?" Gigi moved to flip over her pocket cards.

"Nah. Wait 'til the end."

Dramatically, Gigi picked up the deck. She began dealing.

"Burn... turn."

The last card: J♥. Triumphantly, Gigi flipped over her hand: A♣ Q♣.

"Two pair. Lemme guess, you're on a flush draw?"

Joe was silent for a moment. Then, he emotionlessly flipped over his hand.

"Nope. Straight." A♣ 9♦ — gutshot!

Gigi threw her hands up with a mixture of disbelief and disgust. "Ace-9 offsuit? You're an actual river snake."

Joe held back from smiling as he collected his winnings in a makeshift paper cup. "Eating the rest of my stack was a pretty good bait, if I say so myself."

"Yeah yeah, you got me. Damned water boa."

"Got any more names for aquatic reptiles?"

"Swamp moccasin. Sea serpent."

"A mythical creature? Disappointing." Joe shook his head and offered his raisins. "Want some?"

As Gigi grabbed a handful of raisins, a certain nurse popped her head in the room.

"Hi Joe! Nice to see you here."

"Likewise, Jane."

Gigi looked back and forth between the two, utterly confused. "You know know each other?"

"Oh yeah, we go way back," declared Joe with a wink. Jane suppressed a chuckle, then cleared her throat.

"Visiting hours are over. The next time I come by, I'll have to kick you out."

"Please take your sweet time." After Jane left, Gigi looked at Joe quizzically.

"So, what's the story?"

Joe looked away, embarrassed. "She answered some questions for me before your surgery. To be honest, it helped me a lot."

Gigi raised her eyebrows. "I guess the world is full of good people."

"Speaking of which," Joe related, "I had lunch with Perry today."

"O-oh?"

"She said something about the Fraser incident two days ago that blew my mind. I didn't realize she was so damn smart."

"Some people just don't feel a need to broadcast it." Gigi sat up straighter, nearly upright on the bed. Her face was serious. "So how's the presentation coming along? Or have you guys been too busy chumming it up?"

"I think it'll be great. I can show you a copy as soon as we finish everything."

"No need. I'll work on it too."

Joe held his hand up at his bedridden companion. "No can do. You're not leaving the house until you're all better."

"I'll be fine by this weekend! Besides, can't you just send me an electronic copy to look over?"

"Wait, electronic copy?"

Gigi gawked. "Don't tell me..."

"Yep. We were just writing everything out."

"Nice, so you're not the only weirdo in my group." Gigi tilted her head and made a funny face. Joe looked back at her with a serious expression.

"Hey, now. I think you and Perry will make great friends."

Gigi opened her mouth to speak, but closed it then turned away. "It was just a joke," she muttered.

"I think you two would hit it right off," Joe continued. "I didn't tell you on the phone yesterday, but she's actually a volunteer at the main public library and has read a crazy number of books. You and her will have a lot to talk about."

"Well, isn't that amazing."

"And that's not all! Remember when Fraser spoke up in class on Monday? Well, Perry said something interesting—"

"Sorry to cut you off," interjected Gigi, "but I'm feeling pretty tired. Probably should get some rest. Can you tell me about it another time?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll leave you be for now. Gotta work on my share of the presentation anyway." Joe smiled and stood up. He packed up the cards and grabbed the snack wrappers lying around the bed and nightstand. Gigi looked up at him expectantly.

"Can you come tomorrow morning after I'm discharged? My parents will be at work, so I want you to bring me back to my place."

"Wait, weren't you the one who made me promise to not skip class to see you?"

"Shut up!" Gigi threw a raisin at Joe. It landed in his hair. He plucked it out and ate it while grinning.

"No problem. Anything for my dear sister." Joe playfully ruffled Gigi's unwashed hair and put his arm through the strap of his backpack. "I'll be sure to charge my phone tonight. Keep in touch."

"Good night." As Joe left the room, Gigi fell back against the bed and covered her eyes with her hands. Gigi rolled back and forth for a while before curling up and putting her face into her pillow and blankets. Alone with her thoughts, she could do nothing but think about why she felt nervous every time Joe brought up Perry's name.

"...What's gotten into me?"

Only a few minutes after Joe left, a nurse entered the room with an empty wheelchair.

"We're taking a quick trip to the lab. Let's get you loaded on."

It took the entire trip from her room to the hospital laboratory for Gigi to get used to being carted around. Ever since Gigi learned to walk, she always strove to walk on her own two feet. Though, she realized as they made their way across the hospital, one can take in a lot more information from the environment when they can look freely in any direction.

At last they arrived. She and the nurse waited outside the room for a short while before the door opened. Out came Jane, talking to someone behind her.

But before Gigi could greet her, another familiar face came out and caught her gaze. Gigi and Perry stared at each other, speechless.

— Hera | *Chance*

Chapter 5

I

Perry's eyes flitted back and forth from Gigi to Jane. Her face reddened.

"H-hello, Angela. How are you doing?"

"...Fine. And yourself?"

"Never better! Never better."

She repeated herself, thought Gigi. Something's up.

"Do you two know each other?" Jane questioned.

Gigi forced a practiced polite smile. "Same English class. We're in the same group for a presentation next week."

"Oh! Perry, is this the same presentation you were working on with the boy you were telling me about?"

Gigi tensed up. But Perry exploded.

"This is why I never tell you anything!" She stormed off. Jane offered quick apologies to Gigi and the other nurse before hurrying to catch Perry.

Many questions were on Gigi's mind, but the one that kept her up that night was one that irritated her to no end:

"What would Perry say to a nurse about Joe?"

Gigi fell asleep that night, painfully aware that she was a woman.

— *Enigma*

II

"Huh? Then did Jane figure out I'm not your brother?"

"Is that what you chose to pick out of everything I told you?"

"A spy with their cover blown is as good as dead."

"You're already dead to me."

Gigi let Joe help her into the taxi. The moment she sat down, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"Woah there, sleepyhead. Didn't you kick me out to sleep early last night?"

"Shut up," Gigi groaned. "I'll never get used to lying on a hospital bed. I can't wait to sleep in my own room again."

Joe gave the driver Gigi's address and they were off. He looked back at the shrinking big white buildings and sighed.

"I hope I won't have to see the inside of a hospital for a while."

Gigi grunted. "You can say that again."

Joe pulled out a copy of *The Republic* he borrowed from the library and flipped to a dog-eared page.

I wonder if Perry is sick or something, thought Joe as he read. *She was pretty out of sorts yesterday.*

Gigi's own mind was focused on working out the strangeness of the encounter last night.

"This is why I never tell you anything!" — So that is to say they know each other well enough that there is an established precedent to draw from?

Focusing on the strangeness of the situation distracted her from the uneasiness in her heart.

Tipping the driver generously at the end of the ride, Joe supported Gigi as they walked up the driveway and up the front steps. Before Gigi even pulled out her keys, a large barking figure approached the door.

"Calm down, Max!" Gigi laughed as she opened the door. She and Joe barely made it in before a large golden retriever jumped on her and licked her face and neck with its floppy tongue. "I missed you too, boy."

"Hey, buddy." Joe smiled at the happy dog, who did not so much as glance at him while continuing to give Gigi a hero's welcome. *I'm doing well, Max! Thank you for asking.*

Gigi and Joe headed upstairs, joined by Max. Gigi fell face first onto her bed as soon as they entered her room and Max hopped on to snuggle next to her. Joe tossed his backpack aside, then sat at Gigi's desk and leaned back in the chair.

"Been a while since I've seen your room."

"Only your second time, I think."

They both thought back to the first time Joe came over to Gigi's house. Back then, she had given him a quick tour of the second floor. Ever since then, the two of them never hung around in her room and instead stayed downstairs. Gigi's parents always invited Joe into their home with open arms, but in the end he was still a boy.

Joe looked around. "You really do keep your room clean."

Nah, your room is just a mess. Gigi nuzzled her face into her pillow and heaved a sigh. It was nice to be back home.

Joe glanced at Gigi. "Any plans for today?"

Gigi shook her head back and forth without looking up. "I just want to sleep."

"In that case, I'll leave you be. Take it easy." Joe smiled and stood up, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "I'll order you pizza or something for when you wake up?"

"No thanks. I'll make myself some chicken soup or something." Gigi sat up and stroked Max's head. "Hey, Joe."

"Yes?" Joe stopped in the doorway and looked back.

"Thanks for always looking out for me."

"The taxi was no big deal. Probably not good to walk around too much."

"No, not just that. Everything."

Joe was silent for a moment, then chuckled. "Partners in crime, right?"

The blood rushed to Gigi's cheeks. "...Yeah."

Joe's heart skipped a beat when Gigi stood up and stumbled over with arms outstretched. He let her wrap her arms around his neck and rest her head against his shoulder.

"I want to get well soon."

"Y-yeah. I want that for you, too."

"I think I'm getting impatient."

Hesitantly, Joe put his hands around Gigi's waist. "Is this about the presentation?"

Gigi tightened her embrace. "My end of the deal."

Joe reached up to stroke Gigi's hair. After two days in the hospital, her hair no longer had any of the fragrance from her shampoo. Instead, it smelled like *her*.

And who is she to me?

Joe dropped his arms and pulled away. Gigi released her hold and looked away bashfully.

"Have fun at school. Keep me updated on the presentation."

The door clicked shut. The two of them each lingered for a moment.

— ***Yearning***

III

Perry's hideout in the stairwell was empty when Joe arrived. He turned on the reading lamp and sat down to work on the presentation, but the end of the lunch break came with him barely having added onto what he had written the night before. He could not stop thinking about Gigi's touch and scent.

Halfway through math class, his mind became focused on the unsolved mystery before him:

Why was Perry at the hospital yesterday? How does she know Jane? And why was she acting so weird in front of Gigi?

Of course, why should he care? Though he and Perry were getting along while working on the presentation, since when was Joe of all people the type to involve himself in an acquaintance's business? Though, when Joe thinks back to the sickly color he saw in Perry's face, he could not help but be curious. Moreover, he was better off worrying about Perry than thinking about Gigi.

Joe sighed loudly, turning the heads of his classmates. But the bell rang, and off they were to next period.

When he walked into Ms. Lepore's class, Joe immediately noticed that Perry's seat was still empty. He looked back again when the tardy bell rang, and that fact remained unchanged. Joe checked his phone, just in case it was like yesterday:

No new messages.

Well, after class I'll go to the library to find her, thought Joe. She did say that she volunteers on Fridays.

As he struggled to remember the times for the bus he took yesterday, there was a knock on the closed classroom door. Ms. Lepore stopped her lecture and strode over to open it.

"Why hello, Perry. Nice of you to join us."

Classmates whispered and snickered as Perry made her way to her seat. Joe turned and caught her gaze as she sat down; she smiled, but it quickly faded and she went right into taking notes. He pulled out the same sheet of lined paper from before and added to what he wrote before.

When class was over, Joe threw everything into his backpack to make sure he could catch up to Perry. But when he turned to wave down Perry, he saw two boys standing by her desk with sneers on their faces. Perry's downcast eyes flitted up at him, calling for help.

"You're really more vicious than you seem," Joe heard Hudson say as he approached. "Swooping in as soon as Gigi falls ill? Guess being a top student

doesn't give you morals." Fraser nodded along. "What does he even see in you?" he added to Hudson's tirade. "Don't tell me you're doing him some... *favors*?"

"What *kind* of favors, Fraser?" Joe put his hand on Fraser's shoulder. Fraser and Hudson both turned to him.

"I was really thinking hard about this, man." Fraser put his own arm around Joe. "What else could you *possibly* get from Perry that Gigi doesn't already give you?"

"Bravo for you, Joe, but I really thought you had better standards." Hudson shook his head. "Abandoning a girl who's got it all for someone like *her*?" He pointed at Perry. But instead of silently listening like she was before, she stood up and smacked Hudson's hand away.

"How dare you insult Joseph like that," Perry snapped. "What do *you* know about him and Angela? How could *you* possibly understand?"

Hudson was dumbfounded by Perry's outburst. But Fraser scoffed.

"You think you can start running your mouth just because it was wrapped around the end of Joe's—" "

"That's enough." Joe yanked on Fraser's shoulders and flung him back. He nearly fell back, but caught his balance. Hudson began walking toward Joe with clenched fists, but Fraser stopped his loyal goon with his hand. He looked at Joe with a disbelieving smile.

"Come on, buddy. Don't tell me you're actually defending her?"

"I'm not your buddy." Joe's glacial stare erased the smile on Fraser's face.

"...We were just messing around, bro."

Joe turned to Perry and grabbed her wrist. "Let's go."

The two of them left the classroom. Fraser and Hudson grumbled and were about to leave when Ms. Lepore stopped them:

"Come on, boys. Let's take a walk to the principal's office."

IV

On the bus, Joe noticed Perry was massaging her hands. Her pale skin made the redness on her wrists stand out like bruises.

"Did I hurt you."

Perry shook her head. "Thank you for getting me out of there."

When they arrived at the library, Perry pulled a name tag out of her bag and put it on. She looked apologetically at Joe.

"I volunteer until seven on Fridays. Can you work by yourself until then?"

"Sure." Joe looked at the time. "I'll probably go out to buy something for dinner. You want anything?"

"No, it's fine!" Perry waved her hands. "I'll just have something when I go home later."

But what if we work until closing time like on Wednesday? Joe could not help but notice how thin and frail Perry looked.

While Perry sorted returned books and helped patrons with database searches, Joe used a computer to continue work on the presentation. Writing in the style of a Greek dialogue was a lot harder and more time-consuming than he had anticipated; when six-thirty came about, he groaned when he realized that he had only typed a page in total. If he typed everything he had hand-written before, it still would make two and a half pages.

Are English assignments really this much work? Joe did not remember the last time he put this much time and effort into anything else in school; between copying Gigi's homework and winging tests and quizzes using whatever he remembered from class, he barely ever broke a sweat. But now, he had a massive headache from thinking so much about Greek tragedy. "Does a weekly movie really make up for all this work?" Joe wondered out loud as he packed his bag and left the library.

Right down the street from the main library was a popular sandwich shop. While Joe waited for his order, he checked his phone:

remember to send me the script! i'm so bored at home lol

So persistent, Joe thought with a smile.

No problem. To be honest, I had no idea it would be this much work. I'll type out what we have and get it to you as soon as possible.

Sorry for the delay.

He received a reply within seconds:

lol u type like an old man 🤪 msg when ur done!

A worker called Joe's order number and handed over a bag. Joe said a quick thank-you then headed back to the library. He stopped by the front counter and called out to a certain girl:

"Hey, Perry! How much longer?"

Perry looked up from her pile of unsorted books. "Just a few minutes, probably. Is there anything you need?"

"Just you, whenever you're done." Joe smiled and held up the bag. "Best to eat while they're still hot."

Perry's face went from confusion to shock to elation in the span of seconds. Then, her eyes welled up.

What did I do?! Joe opened his mouth to speak, but he formed no words. An older staff member standing behind Perry called out to Joe:

"You can have her now! We'll finish the rest by ourselves."

Joe and Perry went to the study area at the back and sat across from each other at a table. Joe pulled two sandwiches out of the bag and handed it to Perry, who took it with a radiant smile. When they each had their first bite, Perry's tears finally fell.

"You know, Joseph." Perry covered her mouth and chewed for a bit before continuing. "This is the first time I've had a classmate buy food for me."

Joe barely held himself back from laughing. "Perry. It's just a sandwich, right? Didn't you pour me iced tea yesterday?"

Perry shook her head violently. "It's not just a sandwich! It's something I've always wanted!" She took another bite of her sandwich while Joe looked on, absolutely stunned. She wiped the tears from her cheek with a paper towel while laughing heartily.

"I'm just so glad we became friends."

Friends? Joe was at a loss for words. To him, Perry was just a classmate and someone in her group for a project. But to her, he was a friend? Everything that had happened in the past few days rushed back to him. From forcing her into his group to blackmailing her, from crying with her to eating lunch with her, from virtual strangers to receiving love and life advice from her, these experiences certainly made them more than mere acquaintances.

"...Me too, Perry. I'm also glad we're friends."

Perry smiled again, but this time it looked a bit sadder. She put down her half-eaten sandwich.

"Did Angela tell you about our chance meeting at the hospital?"

Joe paused for a moment, then nodded. "She did. Apparently you know Jane?"

Perry's eyes looked away at the sound of that name. "I do."

Joe tried to read her face. "Are you hiding something?"

"How did you—I mean—"

Perry struggled to keep it together while thinking of what to say. Finally, she picked up her sandwich.

"Yeah. I have a little secret. A *big* little secret."

Joe immediately suppressed his curious urge to pry.

"Well, no need to tell me unless you think I can help." Joe took big bites of his sandwich and soon had only a wrapper in his hands. He put his garbage back into the paper bag and watched Perry finish her food. "Maybe not everything needs to be said outright."

Perry thought while chewing her last bite. She swallowed. "I'm just afraid of losing the chance to say anything."

Joe reached out his hand and put Perry's garbage into the paper bag. Then, he took a shot at a nearby garbage can. *Swish.* He looked Perry in the eyes and smiled.

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to say everything. I'll always be listening. And hopefully, so will Gigi."

"Angela? You mean—"

"I'm sure you two will become great friends." Joe recalled Gigi's text for earlier.
"Oh, by the way. Gigi wants to read the script, so can we type it all up? We can make corrections along the way like that, too."

Before Perry could answer, two volunteers approached Perry. One of them spoke:

"We forgot to prepare the holds for tomorrow and there's still a lot of other books to sort. Could you help us out for just a few more minutes?"

Perry glanced over at Joe, who shrugged his shoulders. "Duty calls. Give me your notes and I'll type up your part."

Perry pulled a notebook out of her bag and handed it to Joe. Then, she excused herself and walked off with the other volunteers.

With their two bags on his back, Joe moved to the computer lab and signed in. First, he typed up the rest of what he had written on paper, rounding the document out to just under three pages. Then, he opened Perry's notebook and flipped through.

"Where are her notes..."

Joe skimmed through the pages, impressed by the beautiful penmanship and density of writing. But quickly, he realized that none of this was school notes.

"Did she give me the wrong one?" Joe wondered as he flipped one more page. On this page, the sentence at the top immediately caught his eye:

I'm so sorry, Mom. It's just too hard for me to live on.

Joe's blood ran cold. He glanced over the rest and picked out other bits and pieces:

... so hopeless and tired ...

... no point in struggling any more ...

... hate myself ...

His vision blurred from the cramped lines of scribbles. *Could she really have written all this?* Right after a line break near the bottom of the page, another sentence stuck out:

What's the point of a life used only to fear death?

"What are you reading?"

Joe jumped at Perry's voice coming from behind him. She leaned in to read what he was looking at and her face immediately became ghostly pale. She snatched the book away and held it close to her chest. Joe saw a familiar cover.

Perrytales. As Perry's face went from anger to shame to guilt and finally to resignation, Joe appreciated the degree to which her eyes and lips betrayed all her emotions. Right there and then, as Perry uttered a monumental truth, Joe became captive to the ethereal beauty of that simple, honest face.

— *Medusa*

V

"I'm dying, Joseph. I'm dying."

— *Apocalypsis | Aisa*

~ I N T R O I T ~