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Maybe a Miracle

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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Chapter 1

THERE'S A BOW TIED around my neck and I'm dying for a smoke.

Tonight's the senior prom and there's no way I'm going to get through this ordeal sober. I wouldn't be going at all, but I promised my girlfriend, Emily. She said the prom happens only once in your life and I'd regret it if I blew the whole thing off. "Humor me," she said. On the off chance she's right, I agreed to take her—a decision I now regret.

I figure if I catch a buzz before I pick her up, maybe the night won't be a total disaster. Emily always says she can't stand being around stoners, but then again she can never tell when I'm stoned.

Besides, there's no use complaining now. I have the whole thing lined up—the black tux, the white limo, the red corsage. I even rented a room at the Hyatt. It's something you're supposed to do, I guess. It's not like I think some cheesy hotel room will make Emily want to sleep with me. I know she won't. It's not even worth trying. I probably won't even tell her I got it. If she ever wants to go all the way, she'll let me know. Her parents left her home alone for an entire weekend last month and she still wouldn't put out. A hotel room isn't going to make any difference.

The most we ever do is kiss, sometimes until our lips are chapped. Every time I try to push it a little further, she pulls away and I stop. Supposedly, most guys don't. Like the guys she used to go out with. From what I can figure, they didn't take no for an answer and I don't want to be like them, so I always apologize and say, "Whenever

you're ready." You might think that makes me a good guy, but most people around here would say it just makes me a pussy.

I've heard people say that Emily was a slut at her old school, Fairview High. It's only a couple miles away from Chelsea. News gets around and sometimes I listen. Not that it really matters. People say a lot worse about their so-called best friends.

From the very beginning she told me she wanted to take things slow and that was fine with me. After three years of high school I'd never even been on a date, so going slow sounded a lot better than going nowhere at all.

I'm pretty sure Emily doesn't care about the prom anyway. She wants to shed her old skin. Going to the prom is really about making a new memory to replace the old ones she wants to forget. Deep down I'll bet she knows it's a big joke, but you'd have to ask her. That's the only way you ever know what's going on in someone else's head and even then you can't be too sure.

Emily doesn't talk about her past much, just in bits and pieces. She once told me how her dad found her drunk at Larry's down on High Street, sitting in some guy's lap. Another time she got so wasted at a Beastie Boys concert she had to have her stomach pumped. She's been arrested for shoplifting, but she won't tell me what she stole. Like she says, it doesn't matter. But if you put all the pieces together it looks like a blur, a girl out of control. She's not like that anymore; so maybe going to the prom is a small price for me to pay.

My sister, Annika, on the other hand, cares *a lot* about the prom. Even though she's only in the fifth grade and I'm about to go to college, in a lot of ways I think of her as my best friend. I can tell her anything and know she'd never rat me out. That's a lot rarer than it ought to be. In a few years she'll drift away. When she gets into sixth grade, it'll all change. That's when girls start thinking about boys. That's when they turn mean.

Last week Annika was begging me to help pick out my tux. Not that she had to, I would have taken her anyway. Without her or someone else from the family in the car, I'm not allowed to drive. Dad says *driving is not a right but a privilege.* He says he's doing it *for my own*

good. If I had a gallon of gas for every time I heard that, I could have escaped to California by now. Dad figures with Annika in the car I won't try anything stupid and if I do, he's under the false impression she'll report back to him. The truth is, I'm really not such a bad driver; I've just had some bad luck.

First of all, I should point out in my defense—and despite objections from the insurance company—that it was completely not my fault when I totaled the driver's ed car. That distinction belonged to Mr. Bailey, the so-called *instructor.* The one who was there *to teach* me how to drive. He was hard to take seriously. After all, no one grows up wanting to be a driver's ed instructor. In order to get that job, some serious vocational errors must be made along the way. Throw in the facts that he smelled like broccoli, never cleaned his glasses, and spoke often of Freemasonry and it's not so hard to see how it came to *this.*

Mr. Bailey didn't have too many driving tips to share, but he frequently ranted about how all the kids around here have been bred to be cogs in the machine and they don't even know it.

Maybe I was going a little too fast, but I only wanted to get out of the car. Bailey was babbling on and on about how fluoride is the main ingredient in rat poison. "It lowers your IQ, crumbles your bones, and causes cancer. People think it's the TV that makes everyone slaves to the system, but it's the *fluoride.*"

After a while, he wasn't so hard to tune out.

Later, Mr. Bailey would tell the cops, "I told him to slow down." More than once, he said that. That's the thing about conspiracy theorists—they never take personal responsibility for anything. Whatever happens is the result of some sinister plot.

Even though he wasn't at the wheel, Mr. Bailey was in control. He had his own set of brakes. He could do what he wanted. Any objective observer could see, it was Mr. Bailey who panicked, not me. Had he not freaked out and slammed on the brakes, we never would have fishtailed into the plaza in front of City Hall, headed straight for a statue of our city's namesake.

When Christopher Columbus hit the ground, his head fell off

and rolled down Front Street. You might have seen a picture of it in the paper. No one got hurt, but everyone acted like it was a sign of the coming apocalypse.

At the time, though, I couldn't stop laughing, which is probably why the cops thought I was drunk. But what was even funnier was Mr. Bailey. He was having a fit, wheezing about how he wasn't going to be framed.

I don't know why he was so upset. He'd only told me a dozen times how Columbus was a slave trader and a rapist and how if the natives didn't bring him all the gold he wanted, he'd chop off their arms. Mr. Bailey often said, "Everything they teach you in that stuck-up school is a lie, *a goddamn lie.*"

The destruction of such an esteemed civic icon really would have been a wonderful opportunity for Mr. Bailey to initiate a city-wide dialogue over why our landlocked town is named after the seafaring Christopher Columbus in the first place. But all he could talk about was how I was trying to ruin his life. Like he hadn't already done that all on his own.

I WAS WEARING jeans and a T-shirt. It wasn't really a big deal to me, going to a department store to get fitted for a tux, but Annika has always loved getting dressed up. Any occasion will do. She's old-fashioned that way.

"Monroe, we're going to the Lazarus *downtown,* right?"

"That's right."

"Not the one at the *mall.*"

"Yes, we're going downtown."

"And you're going to wear *that*?"

The Lazarus store downtown used to be a pretty elegant place, unlike the one at the Chelsea mall, which is a fortress made of glazed turquoise brick. Mom calls it architectural vomit. But the downtown Lazarus is different. It's like 1948, not that I know what 1948 was like; but when you walk through the cast-iron doors you could be walking into a black-and-white movie.

Lazarus keeps the tuxedoes on the fourth floor in the back. I wanted to get one in baby blue, just to make it clear I wasn't taking the prom seriously, but Annika would have none of that. "Monroe," she said, "you'll look back at pictures of yourself and wonder what you were thinking. Is that what you want?"

I look at myself in the mirror and cringe as it is. I can't imagine how looking back on photos will be any different.

She insisted on a classic cut. "You'll look like William Powell and Emily will be Myrna Loy . . . or better yet Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire." Annika wants to be a dancer. She watches those old movies all the time.

When I came out of the dressing room, she came right up to me all serious, brushed off my lapels, and asked, "May I have this dance?" I'm telling you, she's going to break some hearts someday, she really will. You'll see.

"Of course, my lady." I know it sounds kind of gay, dancing with your sister like that, especially in public. But we've always danced together. It's the one thing my mother insisted on, dance lessons. "There are a lot of things you can fake in this life and dancing is not one of them," she said. It's right up there with, "People always say dance like no one's watching, but the thing to remember is this: they *are* watching and you can bet they wish they were dancing too."

Annika and I used to dance all the time. It didn't matter that I have about a foot and a half on her; she could always keep up. It wasn't cheesy, you know, like at weddings when you see old people dancing with little girls. She really knew what she was doing.

People at school used to call me a faggot because I took dance class, like it was something to be ashamed of. And it worked. I was ashamed. Being called a faggot will do that to you. I wanted to quit and Mom would have let me too. But first she asked me one question: "So what do the boys who call you names do at the school dances?" I told her they all hang around on the edges. They don't dance at all. "That's interesting. You're dancing with girls and they're not, yet you're the faggot." Sometimes the most obvious things go right over your head when you're a kid.

We finished with a big dip and the clerks all clapped. It figures, they sell clothes.

Annika never worried if people laughed at her. She always assumed everyone else was in on the joke and I've always assumed the joke was on me. When I was eleven I was mortified if I wasn't wearing the right shoes to school. But Annika just never cared what other people thought. Maybe if you don't care, other people don't care much either. Maybe it's like how dogs only bite people who are afraid of them.

After they made some alterations, we got milk shakes at the old-fashioned fountain on the fourth floor. There was no one else there. It was just us and Sam, the old black man who works the counter. He's been working at Lazarus forever. Sam's a nice man, but kind of slow. Mom says he's thick—just like his shakes.

"It doesn't look like anyone comes here much anymore," I said.

"They don't, son, they sure don't," Sam said as he continued polishing the counter, not missing a beat. He concentrated his efforts on one spot, gliding his hands over and over it again.

I inhaled my shake, but Annika took her time. She said, "Mr. Sam, you make the best milk shakes in the world."

He just smiled and kept rubbing that one spot, considering the praise. Then he looked up at us and said, "I wish I could make more."

When I was a kid, before they built a new mall next door, Lazurus was packed on Saturdays. But sitting there looking at Sam, it felt like we were at a museum visiting a relic from the past, like the way they have blacksmiths banging out horseshoes and women spinning lamb's wool at the Ohio Historical Society. If they ever close the store, maybe that's where Sam will end up. In a museum. The mall next door—which was so new and popular just a few years ago—quickly filled with ghosts. New, better malls with more things to do popped up on the outskirts, effectively killing the downtown renaissance before they even had a chance to build an IMAX.

If you've already done the math, then you'd know I was seven years old when Annika was born. It was kind of an unexpected bonus—no longer being the youngest. I could hardly wait for her to

arrive. I learned so much about the infliction of pain from my older brother, I was eager to impart my wisdom to the younger generation.

I SPENT MY first seven years as an unwitting scientific experiment. *Scientific,* however, suggests it was all documented for a greater good. But nothing was written down. There were no lab notes. No charts. No graphs. Only a constant stream of misery. Dad always said our family was part Austrian, but all you had to do was see my brother, Ben, in action to realize our German roots ran deep. I could have written a book like Anne Frank, detailing the occupation, but Ben would have found it and rubbed every word in my face like broken glass.

I'm ashamed to admit that I, the persecuted, became the persecutor. When Annika was five years old she won a goldfish at the Ohio State Fair by tossing a Ping-Pong ball in his bowl. She named him Ping. For three weeks she took that goldfish with her wherever she went. She put his bowl in her wagon and walked him around the neighborhood like he was a dog. Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Maybe I was jealous to see her make a connection with a fish. Maybe I couldn't handle seeing her so happy. Maybe it annoyed me to hear the neighbors say how cute she looked, like they used to say about me. Maybe I was just being a boy. All I know is that it didn't go down the way I planned.

The thing is, I just wanted to put a scare in her. I thought it'd be funny. So I dumped the fish in the blender and made like I was going to whip Ping up into a frothy Orange Julius, just like at the mall. Annika was hysterical, begging me not to.

I'd never seen her so desperate, I'd never seen *anyone* want something so much as she did in that moment. And all she wanted was for me to stop what I was doing. But the more she pleaded, the more I was determined to deny her. Something clicked in my head when she started to cry. You'd think I'd have shown some compassion, but instead, I lost it.

"You want something to cry about? Watch this."

I remember being disappointed in myself, but it didn't matter. I did it anyway. I flicked the switch of the blender, and in an instant, Ping was no more.

Annika crawled under the coffee table and cried for the rest of the day. When Mom asked her what was wrong, she didn't even tell on me. I probably felt worse than she did. I promised myself I'd never do anything to hurt her ever again. I don't know if she even remembers that day. We've never talked about it and I hope we never do. I'm hoping it's one of those memories that's so bad, your mind forces you to forget, because if she ever remembers what I did, she'll probably hate my guts.

MOM INSPECTS ME in my tuxedo. She's impressed with my bow tie–tying abilities until she realizes it's a clip-on. She says, "Oh, Monroe, you'll never score with one of these." That makes me blush, which is always happening to me. It's a curse, blushing. I'll never be able to play poker. I'll never be one of the guys.

Despite her prim and proper exterior, Mom's always been pretty open about sex. I must have been eight years old when I called her a dildo and she asked me if I knew what a dildo was. "Sure," I said. "A dildo is a bird. They're *extinct*." I probably said it like she was stupid to even ask, but I was the stupid one. "That's a *dodo* bird," she said. "A *dildo* is something a woman uses for sexual gratification. It's a substitute for a penis—it could be a cucumber or a carrot."

I never thought of salad the same way again. Whenever I get the chance in the kitchen, I like to ask her if she washed that cucumber, but I don't think she gets the reference. It's kind of an in-joke with myself.

Mom's talking about how handsome Dad was last time he wore this tie at some fund-raiser. She shows me how to tie the bow without making me feel like an idiot. That's what Dad would do. Not that he'd mean to make me feel like an idiot, he just would. He doesn't have a lot of patience and that makes me nervous and when I'm

nervous I screw things up and, well, you can imagine the vicious cycle. Truth is, it's really not hard, tying a bow tie. Even though Mom is good at it, it kind of makes me sad it's not Dad teaching me, but he's not here. He practically never is.

Mom says seeing Dad in his tuxedo at that fund-raiser made her think of her wedding all over again. It was like taking a step back in time.

I tell Mom I probably should get going. "I think I left my wallet in the pool house." But what I really want to do is get high.