

THE FRUMIOUS BANDERSNATCH

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SHE CAME CRUISING downriver like the city personified, all bright lights and big bad music, banners and flags flying from bowsprits and railings, a hundred and sixty-three feet of sleek power and elegant design. It was costing Barney Loomis \$6,000 to charter the yacht and its staff of twenty. The additional cost of catering food and drink for a hundred and twelve music industry movers and shakers was close to \$12,000. Add the cost of the ten-piece orchestra, and a 15% service charge, and the 8.25% city tax, and Loomis figured the launch of *Bandersnatch* would cost Bison Records something like twenty-five grand overall. But it would be worth ten times that amount if the CD jumped to the top of the charts.

The boat, or the ship, or the vessel, or whatever the people at Celebrity Yacht Cruises had called it when Loomis was negotiating for the bash, had picked up the assorted glittery guests at Pier 27 West, just off the new marina complex in the renovated Overlook Zone of the city. The boat, or the ship—

Loomis liked to think of it as a launch.

“We’ll charter a *launch* for the launch!” he’d told Tamar, and she’d clapped her hands in excitement—well, hell, she was still only twenty, she reacted like a teenager more often than not.

The official *launch*, then, of the new album had started at six

P.M. with cocktails on the bridge deck of the *launch*—he *loved* that pun—where bistro tables were festooned with roses that picked up the red of the mask the beast was wearing on the album cover, and where the mahogany-topped bar seemed haphazardly strewn with giveaway CDs and tapes. The covers on each version of the album showed Tamar as skimpily dressed as she was in the video that had aired simultaneously last night on MTV, VH1, BET, and WU2. Wearing a shredded white tunic that seemed to have been torn forcefully from her legs, she struggled in the clutches of a muscular black dancer wearing an oversized red mask that made him look like some sort of fire-breathing mythical beast—the Bandersnatch of the title song—who brought her close to his gaping jaws, while she tried to fend him off, creamy white breasts tumbling virtually free of her equally tattered top.

“Like in *King Kong*,” Loomis had told her.

“Like in *King who?*” she’d asked, never having seen either of the movies—well, she *was* only twenty.

A mahogany stairway swept the assembled guests down to the main deck salon where the passed hors d’oeuvres included raw oysters (even though this was already the fourth day of May, which was not an “R” month when oysters were supposed to be safe, according to the “Oysters ‘R’ in Season” legend), and chanterelle-and-lobster risotto cakes with white truffle crème fraîche and chives, and salmon tartare on scallion potato chips. For dinner, there was first a mesclun salad with walnuts, Stilton, and cranberries, and then a choice of either grilled tarragon chicken or seared mustard salmon, both served with steamed asparagus. For dessert, the chef had prepared chocolate pâté with vanilla bean sauce and raspberries. Merlot and Chardonnay were served with the meal. A champagne toast was planned for later this evening, after Tamar sang the title song of the new album.

Barney Loomis was a big man, and he didn’t get that way by accident. His plate was heaping full, and he demolished his dinner with obvious gusto now, listening to the chatter all around him,

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alert to every signal beamed from this influential crowd. For a record company mogul—he tended to think of himself as a mogul—he was dressed somewhat conservatively, wearing a mocha colored cashmere sports coat over slacks a shade darker, a beige sports shirt open at the throat, a gold necklace showing. His hair was black and worn in a sort of shaggy-dog style, his eyes brown. He fancied a spade beard the same color as his hair but strewn with a few white whiskers that gave it a distinguished professorial look, he thought.

As the launch cruised up the River Dix, passing under the bridges that connected Isola with Calm's Point and Majesta, gliding past Cavanaugh Island and the exclusive Cavanaugh Club, and coming back inbound on the deep water range to head downtown again on the River Harb, a disc jockey began spinning songs from Tamar Valparaiso's debut album, and the talk was of nothing but *Bandersnatch* and the spectacular television video that would cause the single to leap onto the charts—Loomis hoped, he hoped. The stars and the moon were bright overhead.

The music swelled.

Several brave souls ventured out onto the dance floor.

TONIGHT WAS OLLIE'S first date with Patricia Gomez.

Man, she looked like a million bucks.

He had first admired her feminine pulchritude in uniform, the blue tailor-mades showing off her perky figure to great advantage, ah yes. But in uniform, she wore highly polished flat black rubber-soled shoes. And in uniform, her long black hair was pulled up and tucked under her cap, and she wore no lipstick or eye shadow, and she carried a nine-millimeter Glock on her right hip.

But tonight . . .

On this balmy, breezy, first Saturday night in May . . .

Patricia Gomez was wearing a tight-fitting red dress cut high on the thigh and low on the neck. And tonight, Patricia Gomez was wearing her raven hair falling to the shoulders, punctuated by dime-

sized circles of red earrings on either side of her beautiful face. And tonight, Patricia Gomez was wearing glossy red lipstick as bright as the dress, and midnight-blue eye shadow that made her look slinky and sexy and Spanish, like some señorita coming down a long wrought-iron staircase in a movie with banditos and good guys. And tonight, Patricia Gomez was barelegged in strappy red satin sandals that made her seem even taller than her five-feet-seven, which Ollie had already informed her was a perfect height for a woman.

Best of all, Patricia Gomez was in his arms, and they were dancing.

Detective/First Grade Oliver Wendell Weeks was a damn fine dancer, if he said so himself.

The place he had chosen for their inaugural outing was a spot called Billy Barnacles, which was perched on the edge of the River Harb, on the city's Upper North Side. The place served great sea food—he had asked her two nights ago if she liked sea food—and it had the advantage of a live band and a parquet dance floor under the stars and directly on the river's edge. The band called itself The River Rats . . .

Ollie wondered what their name was when they were playing someplace less proximate, ah yes, to the river, but they'd been playing here forever, and in fact Arnie Cooper, the leader, was Billy Cooper's brother, who *owned* Billy Barnacles, but that was another story.

The band played all kinds of music, all of it danceable. Dixieland from the twenties, swing from the thirties and forties, doo-wop from the fifties, rock from the sixties all the way to the present, even a rap song or two to satisfy the handful of Negro customers who wandered in from Diamondback further uptown. Ollie did not mind dancing on the same floor as "people of color," as they sometimes preferred calling themselves, so long as they behaved themselves. The trouble with most Negroes—and Ollie preferred calling them this because he knew the outmoded label pissed them off—

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was that they seldom knew how to behave themselves. He considered this a crying shame, which was why he tried to take as many of them off the street as he possibly could.

But this was a Saturday night, and not a time to be ruminating about the difficulties of the job in a city as large and as diversified, ah yes, as this one. He considered it a comment upon his social aptitude that he had never once discussed police work all through dinner, and was not now discussing it as he and Patricia glided nimbly across the floor to a spirited version of "When the Saints Go Marching In," another of the tunes in The River Rats' repertoire.

To watch Ollie prance around the dance floor was tantamount to watching the hippos in *Fantasia* performing to "Dance of the Hours," except that Ollie wasn't wearing a tutu. He was wearing instead a dark blue tropical-weight suit he had purchased at L&G, which was short for Lewis and Gregory, two brothers—literally and figuratively—whose shop Ollie frequented on Chase Street in the Eight-Eight Precinct, where both he and Patricia worked. Ollie suspected that half the clothing at L&G had fallen off the back of a truck, which meant it had been stolen. But "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was a very good policy to follow when you were looking for designer-label garments at discount prices. The suit made Ollie look a lot thinner than he actually was, which meant he looked like an armored weapons carrier instead of a tank, not to mix metaphors with hippos, oh no, m'little chickadees. Ollie was also wearing a white shirt and a red tie, which made him look patriotic in the blue suit, and which also picked up Patricia's dominant color scheme, the tie, that is.

For a fat man . . .

Ollie knew that there were some people in this city who called him "Fat Ollie," but never to his face, which he considered a measure of respect. Besides, he would break their heads. He himself never thought of himself as being "fat," per se. Large, yes. Big, yes.

For a big large man, then, especially one who was gamboling about the dance floor the way he was, Ollie sweated very little. He

figured this had something to do with glands. Everything in life had something to do with glands.

He twirled and whirled Patricia.

The number was reaching a climax.

Ollie pulled Patricia in as close as his belly would allow.

"A HIT VIDEO is all about screwing," Todd Jefferson was telling Loomis. "The guys out there want to whack they castles on Britney's bellybutton, the teenybopper girls want to wrap they little boobs around Usher's dick. It's as simple as that."

Loomis tended to agree with him, but he wished he was talking about Tamar Valparaíso instead of Britney Spears. As for Usher, he didn't give a rat's ass about him or his dick.

"Hit videos are all about guys and girls in they underwears," Jefferson said. "White guys like to see leggy black girls in they sheer panties. Black dudes like to see titty white girls in they skimpy bras. All this black-white shit really grabs 'em."

Todd Jefferson was a black man himself, with a black wife, but he was purported to have a white mistress. Loomis figured he knew whereof he spoke.

"Take J. Lo," Jefferson said. "She worked both sides of the street. In the movies, she was screwing white guys, in real life she was screwing ole P. Diddy. Your little girl could take a few lessons from her."

Loomis knew he was talking about Tamar.

Little girl.

34-C cup.

Some little girl.

"Her being Hispanic and all."

Loomis knew this was only half-correct. Tamar's father was Mexican, hence the soulful brown eyes, but her mother was of Russian descent, hence the blond hair with a little help from Miss Clairol. Her South-of-the-Border heritage pretty much guaranteed

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the loyalty of the Hispanic market. It was the crossover crowd they were going for with *Bandersnatch*. Bring in all those little Anglos who belonged heart and soul to Britney. If they failed to do that . . .

"Not too many singers can do what J. Lo did, you know," Jefferson said. "Only other artists done it before her was Boyz II Men."

Loomis didn't know what the hell he was talking about. Did he mean screwing white men in movies? Screwing a black man in real life?

"Three number-one hits in the Billboard Hot 100 for five weeks or more," Jefferson said, nodding. "J. Lo did it with 'Ain't It Funny.' She's the lady your little girl has to beat, man."

"We're hoping for a number-one single with the title song on *Snatch*," Loomis said.

"By the way," Jefferson asked, "is that related to her pussy in some way? The title of the album?"

"No," Loomis said. "What makes you think . . . ?"

"Cause it sounds somewhat pornographic, you know? Bander-snatch? Sounds like the girl has a whole rock group going down on her pussy. *Band*, you know? *Snatch*, you know? Bandersnatch. You know what I'm saying?"

"No, it's not intended that way."

"That's not necessarily *bad*, mind you," Jefferson said. "That kind of association. It relates back to what I was saying before. About videos being all about screwing. Does your little girl screw somebody on this video?"

It dismayed Loomis to learn that Jefferson hadn't even *looked* at the fucking thing yet. CEO of WU2, the fourth-largest video TV station in the country, he hadn't even *glanced* at the new video.

"Yes," Loomis said, "she screws the frumious Bandersnatch."

"Uh-huh," Jefferson said.

"This big black dude wearing a monster mask," Loomis said.

"Is that what Bandersnatch means? Big black dude? Cause I'm a big black dude, man, and nobody ever called me no Bandersnatch before. Nor any *other* kind of snatch."

"No, it has nothing to do with being black."

"Then what *does* it have to do with?" Jefferson asked. "Cause I have to tell you, man, the word 'Bandersnatch' is bewildering to me."

"Actually, it's a word Lewis Carroll invented."

"Who's that? Bison's Artistic Director?"

Bison was the name of Loomis' label. His Artistic Director was a man named Carl Galloway, whom Loomis had hired away from Universal/Motown, where he'd been Manager of Artist-Development. Jefferson should have known that. CEO of WU2, Loomis thought again, doesn't know Lewis Carroll was an English writer and not Bison's fuckin' *Artistic* Director. Shit, man!

"Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland*," Loomis said.

"Ah. Nice. I liked that movie," Jefferson said. "Disney, right?"

"Not the movie," Loomis said. "The book. The one that had 'The Jabberwock' in it."

Jefferson looked at him blankly.

Loomis began quoting.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

"The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

"Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

"The frumious Bandersnatch!"

"Frumious, huh?" Jefferson said. "*Still* sounds pornographic to me."