

#NotReadyToDie



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Cate Carlyle



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*Where you tend a rose my lad,
a thistle cannot grow.*

—Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

Chapter 1

shifted my position, trying to stretch my stiff legs out a little bit while slowly and silently turning onto my back. I lifted both feet off the ground as I moved so my boots wouldn't drag on the floor and make a sound. No one could know we were inside. That's when I noticed the writing in green ink on the bottom of the desk. *Jarrold H. is a wiener 1981*. A wiener, really? Who would write that? Obviously someone less than stellar in the spelling department. And how would a student have had the opportunity to get under the desk to diss Jarrod in such a permanent way? Someone clearly felt strongly enough about him to take the time to vandalize school property in his honor. A jilted girlfriend? No, girls don't often use the term wiener. We're too mature. Wiener is a guy's word. And most girls wouldn't chance getting caught crawling under a desk to ink their feelings anyway. Too risky. Bathroom stalls all the way. In my experience, we tend to spread gossip and rumors when jilted, or cry into our pillows. Or maybe back in 1981 girls would've written nasty notes in the margins of their notebooks? We are typically much more passive aggressive with our disses, and sly, and smart. We are all about not getting caught and seeming like we couldn't care less anyways.

I wondered what had happened to Jarrod. Did he grow up to become an even bigger wiener and sire annoying little Jarrolds? Or did he outgrow his wienerness, survive the bullying, and

mature into a normal guy with a day job, a minivan, a wife and three kids, two cats, and a house with a huge mortgage?

Nowadays Jarrods are attacked online. A compromising Instagram pic or humiliating Snap—so many options. Phones across the school would ping as Jarrod’s fate was sealed, all in seconds and all anonymous.

Whoever Jarrod was or is, and whoever had had a hate-on for him, they would never know how grateful I was for the few minutes of normalcy it gave me as I lay there pondering the vintage graffiti, Jarrod’s fate, and why he was a wiener.

For those few peaceful moments, I wasn’t thinking about the blood slowly seeping towards me from the desk in front of me. I had also succeeded in tuning out the incessant muffled whimpering coming from Mary Jane Schmidt. “MJ” was huddled under the desk beside me. She was one of those invisible kids, neither popular nor hated, neither weird nor cool, neither beautiful nor ugly. She wasn’t in any cliques or sports clubs, and she got average grades. If she had gone off the deep end and committed a crime and I had been asked to describe her, I wouldn’t have been able to offer anything. She was just *there*.

I tore my eyes away from the bottom of my desk and stretched my left leg out as far as I could to nudge MJ with the toe of my Blundstone. She jolted and looked over at me, her eyes glistening saucers and her hand clamped over her mouth and nose.

“Sshhh!” I mouthed, librarian style, with my index finger held up in front of my face.

MJ let out one last whimper then rested her head back on the dirty gray vinyl floor. She was probably in shock, as I’m sure many of my other classmates in Grade 11 Homeroom A were. Even during the practice lockdown we had all endured back in September it had been impossible to keep everyone quiet. And some classmates had reacted to the drill with instant panic, either babbling nonsense or blurting “We are all going to die!”

over and over like a mantra of doom. I knew that day that if we ever had a real emergency at school, an emergency that required silence, we would fail miserably. Some people rise to challenges in extraordinary circumstances, some crumble and collapse. MJ was clearly a crumbler, and the jury was still out on which category I fell into.

My mom always said I was strong like her grandma, my great grandma Gwyneth, a Holocaust survivor. I didn't think I was strong. Although maybe if I survived this day, I would be slightly worthier of comparison to Mom's "Gwynnie."

I glanced down at my phone, my lifeline to the outside world. It had been a gift from my dad, a unique model from Japan that a client had given him. Mom still hadn't answered any of my texts. She must have been busy at her library branch; she loved to brag that it was "the busiest and coolest hangout this side of Toronto." Mondays were usually quite hectic for her with returns from the weekend and toddler story times. Any other day of the week I knew she would have answered quickly, but still no reply to the text I had sent at 9:05 a.m.:

Gunshots in hall

I texted her again at 9:06:

Locked in homeroom

Then again at 9:08 as I remembered our fight that morning before school and felt bad for my earlier bitchiness and the bluntness of my first two texts:

ILY to infinity, Mom. SRY for this morning ♥

Don't worry!!!!!! TTYS

Telling Mom not to worry was like telling the Kardashians to stop with the selfies. Not gonna happen. Since Dad's heart attack, Mom had glommed onto me and started an awkward ritual she insisted we do before we went to bed each night. Mom would say, "Love you to infinity, Gin," we'd fist bump, and then we'd both strike a superhero pose, chests puffed out, and hands on hips. Yes, I was named after Ginerva "Ginny" Weasley, the burden of being born to a librarian and an editor. It was a cross I had to bear. But, glass half full kinda gal that I am, I was pretty grateful to have not ended up a Matilda, or a Ramona, or a Scout. Mom and I had been fist bumping and posing for 945 days now. It was super dorky, and I'd die a thousand deaths if my friends ever saw me doing it, but if it helped Mom deal with her loss, then I'd suck it up. Always made me laugh at least.

I noticed a change in the noise in the room. MJ had gone silent. Had she passed out from the shock or finally calmed down? Either way, a good thing. I eased my leg back and away from her and made another attempt to get comfortable under my desk. If we were in this for the long haul, I'd need to figure out a better position. As I checked for the third time that my phone was on silent and went to tuck it back into the front pocket of my jeans, I noticed the battery icon had grown smaller. No one else had a charger for my model and my cord was sitting on my nightstand at home. My breath caught in my throat as I was reminded that my life-line to normalcy was finite and the minutes were ticking down.

News Talk Radio 956

@NEWSTALK956

#BREAKINGNEWS: Reports of shots fired at local high school. Stay tuned. #education

9:12 AM - April 28, 2019. News Talk Radio 956

🗨 250 ↻ 308 ❤ 201

Chapter 2

Weekday mornings at the Bartholomew house were always the same. So much the same that I once suspected that maybe I was an unwitting participant in a *Truman Show*-style experiment wherein nothing changed and I was living under a dome and being watched for others' entertainment. Mom, the person responsible for my obsession with 80s and 90s pop culture, assured me we weren't being watched and that I wasn't that entertaining. Susan Bartholomew, Mom, was a morning person, always awake by 6am without an alarm and happier than anyone should be at that God-awful time of day. I, on the other hand, was a night owl. While Mom was tucked in bed with a book by 9:00 every weeknight (10:30 on weekends when she was really letting her freak flag fly), I was usually up until 1 or 2 a.m.. I wrote my best papers after 11 p.m., sent witty texts to my besties, and I finally made it to the bottom level of the mine in *Stardew Valley* after midnight. My brain never truly woke up until the sun went down. Most of my friends were also up super late and we chatted and Snapped online until the wee hours.

Unfortunately, my vampire-like existence turned Mom's 6:00 a.m. wake-up call into my own private hell. I always set the alarm on my dad's old-school clock radio, and I set my phone alarm with the volume on max, and Mom would also try her best to wake me when I hit the snooze button a few too many times.

She'd nudge me at 6:00 a.m., then again at 6:15, then again at 6:30. By 7:00 a.m. she'd usually push me until I fell off the side of my bed. I would then wander trance-like into my bathroom to submit myself to the jarring effects of a cold shower. By the time I was dry and dressed, hair braided, blush and eyeliner applied, and sitting at the kitchen island with a cup of Mom's masala chai tea in hand, I was a bit more capable of carrying on a conversation and at least appearing to be fully awake.

This particular Monday morning was different. Mom and I had done the wake-up dance, I had showered, and I was seated at our long butcher block island by 7:30 a.m., but not with tea in hand. Mom had run out of chai and she was running late. That *never* happened. Mom was as punctual as a drill sergeant and our chai tea stash could keep all of India quenched for at least a year. This Monday morning, Mom was running around the L-shaped kitchen, gathering a makeshift lunch of Mr. Noodles, a banana, and packaged applesauce and frantically trying to find her favorite silver charm bracelet, the one Dad had gifted her for their 20th anniversary. The bracelet featured a charm for every year they were married, including a little book, a letter G, a heart, and a lighthouse. All held special meaning for Mom and Dad.

"I can't find it anywhere, Gin Gin. I'll never forgive myself if I've lost it. Where could it be?!"

"I am sure you haven't lost it, Mom. You know how you're starting to forget things in your twilight years; maybe you left it at work?"

Mom looked me in the eyes and then, with a half-smile, she reached over and pushed the sleeve of my hoodie up on my right arm.

"You've borrowed it to impress that cutie pie Owen haven't—"

The words caught in her throat as she took in the red gashes crisscrossing my forearm just below the elbow. She gasped and

her hand flew to her mouth just as my hand flew to my sleeve, yanking it back down to conceal the angry maze of scars.

“You’re cutting again, Gin Gin!” she screeched before launching into a string of comments I’d heard several times before. “Why didn’t you tell me, or ask for help? You know you can talk to me. We can find you a counselor again. Oh Ginny. What would your father think, you hurting yourself like this? Are you trying to kill yourself? I wouldn’t survive if I lost you too!”

I tuned Mom out and let her babbling fade to white noise. How could I explain so that she would understand? How could I describe the euphoric feeling when the scissor blade touched my flesh and I could finally feel something, really *feel* something? She would never understand. Since Dad’s death, there were weeks at a time when I felt nothing other than a dull numbness; the world swirled around me like a hurricane and I was stuck in the eye, merely existing. On the nights when I could hear her crying softly in her room the cuts brought me instant calm. The blood would bubble up and I could exhale. The hurt that rose up unexpectedly and unchecked when I would remember my dad and feel his absence, his aftershave wafting by on the bus or his favorite AC/DC song on the radio, it all seemed to go away after I cut. No, she wouldn’t get it. We’d been through this before—the talks, counselors, and arm checks—in the months after Dad’s death. She clearly knew nothing had changed and she still didn’t understand it.

“God Mom, chill!”

She reddened, chastised, and let out a long breath.

“I know you worry Mom, and I know you care. Can we not do this right now?” I begged. “We’re both late. How about you read me the riot act tonight instead, and you can remind me then how ungrateful and irresponsible I am?”

I regretted it the moment I said it. Mom looked at me with the saddest face, like a puppy kicked to the curb. She didn’t

deserve it. I was tired and missing Dad, and it was Monday. Sometimes I couldn't control what came out of my mouth.

"Fine, I will see you tonight and we will talk about this."

"Sure, whatever," I called back, grabbing my black pleather backpack and heading out the side door.

"I love you, sweetie. You know that, right?" she called after me. "Have a good day!"

I didn't turn or look back, I didn't tell her I loved her too, or give her a hug, or make a comment about how her hair looked particularly good today, curled away from her face. I didn't say or do anything.

My last words to my father had been, "See you tonight" as he'd headed off to the gym. He'd replied with an, "I love you, sweetheart," but I hadn't said anything else because I was too absorbed in a game on my phone.

It wasn't until a few hours later, huddled and shivering under my desk, that I realized my last words to my mother might forever be "Sure. Whatever."

John Thomas

@johnnybegood

Our school is under siege. In lockdown. Help us, we are terrified #surreal

9:22 AM—April 28, 2019. Southwestern High School

🗨️ 32 ↻ 108 ❤️ 198

Chapter 3

Owen Sanders always took the desk in front of me in homeroom. He invariably arrived late to school and would race in after the bell, skidding into his chair like he was taking home plate. He'd turn back around to me with his huge Cheshire Cat grin.

"Made it just in time, Ginny! Miss me, sweet thing?"

"Nope, Owen. Didn't even notice you weren't here."

Same banter every morning. But not today.

I lifted my neck up off the floor so I could see Owen better. He was curled in the fetal position, lying in a small pool of his own blood. He was covering his nose with one hand and a crimson tide was seeping out between his fingers. I assumed he had a bloody nose, maybe even broken, from banging his face on the corner of his desk as he scrambled to get under it. I waved my hand in the air in his direction to get his attention. Owen lifted his head slightly and looked at me with an expression I will never forget. I can only describe it as deflated. He looked as though all of the life had been sucked out of him, his face ghostly pale, dark rings around his eyes and tears streaming down. Not the usual happy-go-lucky, cheeky Owen, the guy who sang his way through the day deliberately off key and with the wrong lyrics, the guy who had never made an enemy, the Archie in our Riverdale (the old-school comic Archie, when Archie was a simple, innocent, freckled, standup guy, not the TV series.).

Today Owen looked terrified and in pain. I pointed to his nose and made a breaking-in-two gesture with my hands. Owen shook his head no and slowly stretched his right leg out straight. Blood was seeping from his jeans and I recognized it as the source of the rusty smell I had been breathing in. Owen had his other hand clamped high up on his thigh and he let go for a few quick seconds, revealing a hole in his jeans. It took me a moment to realize that the gleaming white object visible through the hole was probably Owen's bone. I gasped involuntarily, and searched Owen's eyes for any kind of explanation. He once again clamped his hand down over the hole in his leg, temporarily slowing the blood, and released his other hand from his nose. He made a gesture towards me as though he was holding an invisible gun and pulling the trigger. Owen had been shot.

News Talk Radio 956

@NEWSTALK956

#BREAKINGNEWS: Police and SWAT on scene.

Parents alerted to shooter @SouthwesternHS. Stay tuned. #education

9:30 AM – April 28, 2019. News Talk Radio 956

🗨️ 202 ↻ 489 ❤️ 323

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And finally to Lucy, for keeping my feet warm while I type and only asking for a carrot and a butt scratch in return.