

SHARDS



ONE

Now (November 17th)

Outside the dinner theater lobby, the glow of street lamps barely penetrates the thick mist that shrouds the parking lot. It's the kind of night that Jack the Ripper might have prowled the cobblestoned streets of London searching for victims.

In the lobby, fresh from the standing ovation he's received as Tony in our production of *West Side Story*, my best friend Ryan Morgan is surrounded by a crush of people. For two weeks running, his performance has been drawing crowds from all over Westchester County.

I glance around furtively, but no one notices the lighting guy. Truth is, my heart's not in theater. I'm only working weekends to pad my college applications, and my wallet. So, I take a minute to study the latest text from Susannah Durban, Ryan's girlfriend of three years. Heat creeps into my cheeks.

For the past year, Susannah's been inexplicably texting me with YouTube links to her haunting stop-action animations. I watch her body drift across the screen draped with filmy gauze, her dark bronze hair and golden skin amid floating leaves, graveyards, ballet dancers, Indian goddesses, and scattered words in Hebrew and English, most of which make no sense.

But other than telling me the link is private and to keep it our little secret, Susannah never mentions them when I see her. Neither do I.

Yet if I could dive into my iPhone and swim beside her, an exotic fish in her private world, I would do it and never look back.

And Ryan would kill me. Best friends don't want to do their best friend's girlfriend. I think that's

written somewhere. So is not cheating on your girlfriend. And so is not ratting him out.

I glance behind me. Ryan is intertwined with Claudia Herman, the community college girl who plays Maria. Claudia's hot. And she's slept with our whole track team. I think of Susannah, mercifully out of town on a college visit.

My phone vibrates. Susannah again. This time it's an actual text.

I clench my jaw and look away from Ryan and his latest fling, sworn to silence by the Guy Code of Honor.

Jeremy! guess what. i'm here! got n earlier flight

I peer out into night, then glance at Ryan again.

Shit.

Claudia has one leg coiled around Ryan's tall frame, like a boa constrictor. I fumble with my phone. Texting under pressure has never been my strong suit.

Heart pounding, I gulp in air and think of my water bottle, nestled in the glove compartment of my car. I can feel my lips pressed to its cool rim, imagining the warmth of its contents sliding down the back of my throat.

But no. I have to stay sharp. I'm sensible, I tell myself. Sensible Jeremy Glass.

Besides, there's no time. Susannah emerges from the parking lot mist carrying a single red rose. A circuit flips on inside me; a familiar volt of current sizzles through my core like heat lightning. I stuff the phone in my pocket and try to position myself to block Ryan from view. My palms are slick. At first, I identify the heaviness behind my eyeballs as guilt. Only as Susannah pushes through the glass doors, droplets beaded on her hair like diamond chips, do I recognize the cold hollow thing that claws up into my throat for what it really is.

Shame.

Panic cramps my insides. The water bottle beckons.

"Jeremy!" Susannah hugs me, smelling of rain and vanilla. She flashes a smile, her clear eyes bright, but at the temples her deep golden skin is almost transparent, stretched just a bit too tight. And her raincoat hangs loose. "I thought I should be here for the big night, so I booked an earlier flight," she says. "Surprised?"

"A little. I know Ryan certainly will be." I'm buzzing like I've just downed a fifth of Absolut, the damp ache inside me incinerated to ash. The idiotic smile still frozen on my face, I notice a scarlet string around her wrist. Buying time, I ask, "What's that?"

Susannah shrugs her bronze curls behind her shoulders. She takes a step closer and tilts her head toward me in a way that causes a shudder to run up my legs.

“It’s a souvenir from the Kabbalah fair I stumbled onto this weekend. Can you believe it?” She gazes at me as if this bit of information should hold some significance. We are both part Jewish, at least in lineage, though Susannah has always been more into the occult. I keep the Magic 8 Ball she gave me for my tenth birthday in a place of honor with the first track medal I won. For me, her fascination with the spiritual realm has always added to her mystique and made me want her all the more. “Oh, the trendy spiritual stuff,” I say, stalling for time. “Isn’t Madonna into that?”

Susannah narrows her eyes. My heart stutters. The way she looks at me sometimes, I wonder if she sees through the placid mask I’ve worn all these years. With my hands-on experience, I figure I’m probably a more accomplished actor than Ryan is by now, so I should be able to hide how I really feel.

But Susannah smiles, roots around in her giant handbag, and hands me a pen with a clear top and a little floating carousel horse inside. “Since you made such a stink about Rhode Island having the oldest carousel still in use in America.”

“The Flying Horse Carousel. Wow. Thanks, Suze.” I pocket the pen and wipe the dampness from my palms. “I love it.”

I don’t mention that I will probably rearrange my shelves to find a special place for it among the historic relics, personal and otherwise, I collect the way birds gather twigs. My shelves are crammed with artifacts people bring me from their travels: old baseballs, gravestone rubbings, arrowheads, even chunks of brick from buildings where significant events took place.

You don’t have to worry about what’s going to happen with history.

Because it already happened.

Then it dawns on me. I’d been so wrapped up in the details I’d missed the main point. “What happened with your portfolio review at Rhode Island School of Design, Suze? Isn’t that why you went in the first place?”

Susannah looks away. “I can’t afford that place.”

“Can you say scholarship? Your art is amazing,” I offer, avoiding mention of her strange but genius animations.

“With my grades?” She smiles and meets my gaze, emotions I can’t read flickering in her green eyes. Her smile falls away. “Besides. I’d never fit in there.”

I reach for her hand. “I thought you said your filthy rich half-brother was going to pay. Suze, you can’t just—” I start to say. Until I remember what’s happening right now, about twenty feet behind us. I’m afraid to look.

“I never went to the interview,” she mutters, sniffing the rose.

“Are you kidding?”

Susannah scans the crowd for Ryan. For the past two years, RISD was all Susannah talked about. She’d trudge every weekend to that portfolio class in the city, just to get ready for it.

“So was he awesome?” she asks brightly.

I swallow hard and try to answer, but my mouth is dry as pavement. Even though it’s ripping my insides apart, I’m still covering for Ryan.

“Bet you were great on the lights, Jeremy,” Susannah adds quickly. She cranes her neck, trying to spot Ryan in the crowd. “So where is he?”

Heart pounding, my mind hiccups through its storehouse of facts. I reposition myself to block her view. There’s no time to try texting Ryan a warning.

I could tell Susannah. Tell her how Ryan has been sneaking around behind her back for over a year, even hooking up with two college juniors in a motel room during one of our out-of-town meets. But defying the Morgan machine by pointing this out would take too much energy. Instead I blurt, “Did you know the Flying Horse Carousel in Watch Hill was once part of a traveling carnival?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “What? Jeremy, sometimes you can be such a—”

But her voice trails off as her gaze wanders past mine, her smile crumpling like a paper bag. I follow her line of sight and I know this is it. The crowd has thinned around Ryan, enough for her to see him with his mouth smashed against Claudia’s.

“Oh, man,” I gasp. I turn to comfort Susannah, but she is already gone.

I stand, dithering, wanting to run after her and apologize for letting her walk into this ambush.

But, no. This is something Ryan needs to take care of. I might have signed on to sweep his mess under the rug, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to clean up after him. I push through the crowd to get to him.

“What? She what? Did you know she was coming back early?”

I feel my face heat. “No.”

Ryan pushes a pouting Claudia off him, his stage makeup still glistening and thick, traces of Claudia’s lipstick smeared on his lips. “Good job, Jeremy. You could have at least texted me.”

My hand curls into a fist. I stuff it in my jacket pocket. “She ran out,” I say. “Maybe you can catch her.”

Ryan shrugs, and without a coat, stalks out of the theater into the night. I wait a few minutes, then follow. Susannah’s car is gone, and so is Ryan’s. I try to call Susannah, but she doesn’t pick up.

I get in my car and focus on resisting the water bottle’s siren call, panicked glimpses of my wak-

ing nightmare crashing through the floodgates, the terrifying memories swept through with it. The rain and the torrents of water sweeping past, draining into the Gorge, forcing me to remember. To relive it. No. Not now. I need to stay clear.

Since eighth grade, when I discovered that liquor dulls my terrors, I have been a master thief and spy.

Not even Ryan knows.

Just a sip to calm my shaky nerves. One tiny sip to beat back the rising waters that threaten to drown me. I can do it. I pride myself on my steely self-control and my ability to remain stone-cold sober, even when the track team holds a victory keg party. They call me Jeremy the Teetotaler, Jeremy the History Nerd, who never partakes.

I snap open the glove compartment. The innocuous silver bottle is shoved behind the owner's manual, gas receipts, and a collection of PowerBar wrappers. I raise it to my lips and gulp once, twice, three times, the cold liquid igniting as it hits my throat. It takes two, three more gulps to slow my heart to normal speed. The bottle is nearly empty. I cap it and return it to the compartment, warmth flowing to my cold fingers. I'd need to drink three times as much as that to lose focus.

Swerving through the deserted black roads, slick with rain over the ice, I follow my usual running circuit. This is familiar turf. Practically my backyard.

Yes. I can do this. Susannah knows my route, so I hope she's come this way and parked, knowing I'd find her. She wants me to find her. To comfort her. I'll tell her everything. How I'm sorry for lying to her. For letting Ryan hurt her. And maybe, at last, she'll accept that it's not Ryan she wants, but me.

But there's no sign of her.

After driving and searching fruitlessly, my mind churning with outcomes, the now-driving rain blurring my windshield, I can't stand it anymore. My heart is racing. Just one last sip to fortify myself is all I need.

When I round the next hairpin curve, my headlights flash on Ryan's car parked behind Susannah's, both engines running. I squint through the rain and mist and spot them behind the guardrail, illuminated in the headlamps' cone of light. There's no shoulder on this side of the road, so I pull over when I can, about twenty yards past them.

When I finally get out of the car, I can hear her shouts over the racket the rain makes. My head is buzzing, but my thoughts are clear.

In fact, they've never been clearer, as the roots that entangle me fall away.

The damp air smells like freedom.

Susannah screams, and pounds at Ryan's chest with her fists. He shoves her hard and she falls

backward. I don't see her get up again. Raucous arguments are nothing new between Susannah and Ryan, but I've never seen him hit her before.

There's a steep decline into the woods where they've chosen to have their argument, and I worry Susannah could have gotten hurt. Ryan disappears now, too. What the hell are they doing?

I begin to run at full tilt. I still have some distance to cover, but that's no problem for me, even with the Absolut pumping heat through my veins. But my boot heel catches on a wet leaf and slides out from under me.

I'm flying, but I land softly.

I should have worn my running shoes, I think crazily, then scramble to my feet.

There are blinding lights. The squeal of brakes. Breaking glass.

I don't make it to the other side.

TWO

Then

Art class was mandatory freshman year, and I'd spent most of my summer griping about it. I preferred to be out running, not cooped in a smelly room with Mr. Wallace, the creepily silent art teacher who looked like an iguana, but with even less personality.

None of my track buddies were in the class with me, so I fidgeted on my stool, trying to figure out a way to get an extra period of gym.

Five minutes after the late bell rang, a bronze-skinned girl with a cloud of hair a shade lighter flounced in. She wore a tight-fitting black T-shirt and baggy black cargo pants tucked into lace-up combat boots. Mr. Wallace's iguana-eyes followed her to the empty stool next to me. When she got closer, I could see the tiny white hand-written letters on her shirt that said "laugh."

I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

"Is that an order, or a noun?" I whispered once Mr. Wallace looked away, busying himself with the attendance roster.

A slim eyebrow arched over one bright green eye. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"If I'd met you before, I wouldn't have forgotten you."

I rubbed my sweating palms against my jeans. Scrawny as I was, I knew I had no chance with this girl. But at least I could charm her with my biting wit.

"I looked a little different back then," she said, leaning in so close I could almost taste the scent of vanilla on her skin. She pulled away just as Wallace began to read off the attendance.

After my name was called, she leaned in close again and said, “Jeremy Glass, say hello to your Pirate Queen.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I did learn her name was Susannah Durban. The syllables sat on my tongue like melting sugar.

Now

There’s some kind of fog in the room. Through the fog I see my father’s eyes.

“Jeremy,” he says. “Can you hear me?”

The fog is heavy. It bears down on me, forcing my eyes to close.

“Jeremy. Stay with me.” Air hisses in my ears. I’m losing the sound, too.

It seems like a long time later when my eyes flutter open again. My gaze lands on my father. I struggle to understand why I am lying on my back trying to focus my vision on my dad’s bloodshot blue eyes.

“Jeremy,” he says. “There was an accident last night.”

My mind scrambles to piece together the last thing I remember. Susannah and Ryan fighting. Oncoming lights. I struggle to sit, but everything, every inch of me screams with pain.

“Did something happen to Susannah?” I think I am shouting, but instead it comes out as a muffled croak. I sink back on the pillow and let my eyes slip closed.

“Nothing happened to Susannah, as far as I know,” Dad says.

I sigh, my eyes still closed, the harsh light stabbing through my eyelids. My heart is starting to race and I remember the flask. And how numb I was as I stepped onto the road. My memory stops there. Had I ever made it across? “Was her car still there?”

The chair scrapes the linoleum as he slides it closer to me. “I have no idea. Susannah Durban isn’t really my main concern right now, Jeremy.”

My eyes blink open and scan the fluorescent tableau. Machines purr, hum, and bleep. Wires and tubes sprout from me like I’m some kind of space-age hookah pipe.

It’s me. I’m the one in a hospital bed. Not Susannah. I’m numb, floating, but I can feel my weight sinking into the hard bed. One foot pushes up from under the blanket and I wiggle my toes to make sure it works. The other leg, mottled and swollen as a raw sausage, is suspended above the bed, enclosed in a configuration of rings and pins. It tingles vaguely, but doesn’t actually hurt.

“She was there. With Ryan,” I say.

Dad stares at me, his eyes weary and filled with something vague. It dawns on me that it is resignation. It’s the same expression he dons before a particularly tough trial, along with one of his

expensive but slightly worn suits. His calm demeanor makes me want to vault from the bed, run into the hall, and keep going.

No way that's happening.

Dad sighs. "Actually, Susannah's mother, Trudy, called this morning to tell me Susannah never did come home last night, as if I could do anything about it."

Was she on the run again? Susannah ran away seven times since Freshman year. Dad had had to intervene on Mrs. Durban's behalf to stop child services from placing her in foster care.

"I told her that, at the moment, I had more pressing things to attend to," he adds.

"Shit." I glance at my engineering feat of a leg and realize that I won't be running anywhere for a while.

Dad pushes away the salt and pepper flop of hair from his forehead. His face is creased and the skin under his eyes puffy beneath his lawyer's composure. "Don't worry about Susannah. Worry about yourself."

He looks away. I can tell by the way he swallows he has more to say, but I'm too tired to ask. I want to know if they found the water bottle full of vodka, then I realize a simple blood test will tell them the whole story. But mostly I want to know where, exactly, Susannah is. I reach for my phone. No texts from her.

I don't even think about Ryan, until he walks into the room.

Dad has ducked out for coffee. It's me, Ryan, and the beeping of the machines.

Ryan pulls up the chair Dad has just vacated. "I came as soon as I heard."

I furrow my brow and search my memories. "Dude. Weren't you there?"

Ryan twitches the sandy curls out of his eyes. He studies me, confusion and sorrow mingling on his face. "I was so busy having it out with Susannah we didn't even hear you. Then she started to run, so I chased her."

I stare back at his uber-sincere expression. This from a guy who was pissed I hadn't lied well enough for him. I grind my teeth. "She ran? I thought I saw her fall. It's all rocks, and then there's that steep slope to the reservoir."

Ryan shrugs. "She tripped, got up and started running like a mad cow."

"She tripped, or you pushed her?" I try to sit forward, but pain lances through my leg as if a team of chainsaw-brandishing dwarves have crash-landed on it. I fall back shakily onto the pillows.

"Take it easy, Jer."

I search my mind for details, but the night is hazy, a mix tape of rain, vodka, and bright lights. And then Susannah's face is in front of me -- glistening lips, autumn leaf eyes, tears sparkling on

their rims. The urge overtakes me, like it always does when there are things I can't face—the urge to run. But I'm pinned to the bed like a butterfly specimen. "Where is she now, Ryan? My dad says she never got home last night."

"Jeez, Jeremy, how should I know? I did follow her. It's pretty rough going on those rocks. It hasn't changed since we used to fish there. And the weather last night was hideous. The ground was slippery. I lost my footing and wrenched my ankle. I couldn't keep up. I just lost her."

"So, she vanished into thin air. And a high school track star like you couldn't keep up with her. You expect me to believe that?"

"C'mon, Jeremy, what's up with you? It wasn't like I didn't try to follow her. She was hysterical and I was worried because she cut her head when she fell. But I could barely walk with my ankle, you know, and I lost track of her. I figured she probably doubled back to where her car was and took off. I got back to the road just as they were loading you into the ambulance. You can check the police report. They asked me if I'd seen what happened, but I didn't find out it was you in there until later."

"You left a bleeding girl stumbling around in the woods and you didn't wonder why her car was still there," I say in a monotone. "And your ankle looks okay today," I add.

The nurse comes in, adjusts my drip bag, then leaves. Ryan leans forward, his voice soft. Reasonable. "She wasn't that hurt. Just a scratch. Shit, Jeremy. You know Susannah. She pulls these stunts all the time. She used to run away all the time."

"Right. I saw you hit her, Ryan."

Ryan turns a bit green. "C'mon, Jer. It was just a little shove. If you saw us, then you know she was slamming me with her fists first. I wasn't going to do anything with Claudia Herman. Suze is just—oversensitive. You know how she gets."

I'm getting fuzzy. It must be the drugs they keep pumping into me. The words kick out like a knee to the groin. I'm shouting now, my voice hoarse, my mouth flooded with a sour taste.

"You mean how she gets when you fuck around behind her back?"

I want to suck the words back in. In all our years as The Lone Ranger and Tonto, I've never violated the sidekick rules. Even when I had to bite my tongue so hard it bled.

Outside my room, I hear voices speak rapidly in urgent tones, too low to understand but loud enough to recognize. It's Patrick Morgan, Esquire, talking to Dad. I'd know his booming voice anywhere. Ryan's uber-influential father is probably here to make sure the Morgan interests are safeguarded—as in, Ryan's name is kept clean. He had to have heard my outburst and now Dad is most likely supplicating himself and pleading to the Almighty for forgiveness on my behalf.

Clouds of cotton breeze over me, my eyes closing. The drugs are claiming me again. I almost

forget Ryan is still here, beside me.

“That’s not what we fought about, Jer,” he says softly.

Behind my closed lids, I still see only Susannah’s face. “Then where the hell is she, Ryan?” Clouds of cotton breeze over me, my eyes closing. The drugs are claiming me again. I almost forget Ryan is still here, beside me.

“That’s not what we fought about, Jer,” he says softly.

Behind my closed lids, I still see only Susannah’s face. “Then where the hell is she, Ryan?”

