



## Chapter One

I was struck by the sudden idea of how absurd it would be if my life were a story somewhere and this is where it began. You never see the really boring beginnings of most literary characters. *Wuthering Heights* begins with Lockwood having a crap time with his new landlord, which—okay, might not be the best example to start with. I think most of us can relate to fighting with a landlord. All right then, pretty much any superhero. You get the essential small parts of their day-to-day lives before they get hit by lightning or find an artifact or get bitten by an insect and then yay! Super powers! But presumably, they lived an entire life before any of that happened. You don't see anyone stuck in traffic or eating alone in a food court while wondering if they should take up Swing lessons. Maybe I'll get bit by a magic spider!

I looked around. No spiders. I took a sip of my whiskey. This is terrible whiskey. Maybe it was magic whiskey, and I'd get alcohol related super powers! I took another sip, and...

... no, no powers. Unless a sore throat is a power? I became a little more aware of my surroundings then and felt just a twinge of claustrophobia.

"This was a mistake," I said out loud to myself, sincerely and entirely by accident. It was true but that didn't change the fact that I was hoping desperately that no one had heard me. I was usually much better at internalizing that sort of thing, so I could only assume I had truly meant it. I looked around, and if anyone had noticed, they didn't care. Or they cared, but just didn't want to show it. The most likely scenario was they were all too self-absorbed with whatever they had been talking about to notice me. This was preferable.

I've often had the problem of liking people whose idea of fun is vastly different from my own. The entire house seemed too small, and the air unnaturally humid. Vibrations came from a speaker on the other side of the living room; the sound was the lyric-less mess of incidental noise you heard at every party. I was convinced no one actually liked it but seemed to think that everyone else did. Except for this one guy who stood nearby. I'd never seen him before, but was sure of two things: he really liked this noise, and he'd hit on nearly every woman there. I feared I was next. I would have left if not for the fact that three more people I didn't know had created an impenetrable triad between my spot in the kitchen and the salvation of the exit. To me, interrupting a conversation is worse than drinking orange juice immediately after brushing my teeth.

I wanted more than anything to be on the other side of them, but I couldn't blame them for talking to each other. It was a party, after all, and it was my fault for being there in the first place. It's not that I don't like parties, it's just that—I don't know.

Yeah, I just don't like parties. Not even housewarming parties for good friends. I don't want to be the type of person who doesn't like parties, but that doesn't change anything. People are capable of amazing things, change being one of them, but I've yet to meet someone capable of explaining how change works. I wouldn't even know who to ask, so I guess that's a bit of a non-starter. I never know what to say, for one thing. In Los Angeles, it seems like at least half of the time, everyone wants to talk about entertainment. Which would be fantastic, except it's never about the worlds or the people or the stories or any of the other outstanding things that make entertainment... well, entertaining. To most people here, it seems to be about video editing, being someone's assistant, or the post production. I'm going to level with you: I don't actually know what post production is, but I've heard people mention it enough times that I'm convinced it's a real thing.

Sometimes I just want to shout the truth about me and what I'm capable of at the world. It's not a good idea. I don't know why it's not a good idea, but I'm pretty sure it is. You know what? That's a lie. I know exactly why. It is because as much as everyone claims to love individuality, there's a limit and my life almost certainly dashes past that and wears it as a first place ribbon for weirdness, then takes a victory lap before car surfing a stolen food truck off a cliff and into—

“Elana Black! What up?”

What kind of obnoxious jerk announces someone's first and last—Wait. I forget this guy's name. Brett? Brad? Bard? Bard would be a pretty sweet name.

“Hey!” I replied immediately, with a smile. His name would come to me in a moment. I was spiraling anyway.

He hugged me, which I really wasn't happy about. I'm not against hugging in general, I just... have a thing about it sometimes. He also seemed to disregard the fact that I was holding a drink, and preventing it from spilling became the full focus of my attention for the next two very precarious seconds. Like a pro, I quickly slipped into the small talk that he confused for genuine friendship. I could hear the answers coming out of me before I was able to stop and consider what I was actually saying. It wasn't that I disliked Jeff—

Jeff! I was way off.

It's not that I disliked him. There was nothing inherently offensive about him; he was just so uninteresting. He also stood too close, never quite smelled right, and never talked about anything other than himself. He would talk and talk, and yet never actually say anything.

You'd think with how often I'd seen him that I would have remembered his name. I suddenly felt very guilty for that. Even so, I almost didn't notice when he finally left.

I don't know why I feel the way that I do when I get into large social situations like this. I sincerely care about people; I guess just not as an audience. I came here to hang out with my friend Olivia, this was her party. But as is usual with Olivia, she was nowhere to be found. Neither was Logan, her boyfriend. I liked him too, which is strange because I typically don't get too attached to the partners of close friends, but he'd passed the test (the test being whatever arbitrary and secretive test that I thought of at the time and only made sense to me, that test). My other friends Ann, Jason, and Teague had all failed to show as well, so that accounted for the five people I could relate to and felt safe talking to at a party. From my hopefully secure location in the kitchen, I could count maybe twenty people and knew none of them to varying degrees. The range was anywhere from a complete stranger to I kind of recognize them from maybe the last

time I saw them and didn't know them.

While gauging my level of intoxication, I identified trepidation at the notion of a stranger talking to me. So that meant the level was "Not Very." I further decided to get the hell out of here. I thought about hiding in Olivia's room, but it was locked. I made a mental note of that, what was that about? It's almost like she didn't want a house full of people to have access to her bedroom. Okay, mental note discarded, that actually makes perfect sense. But another room was open, and it had what I needed: Books. I walked right up to the flimsy wire frame shelving and was disappointed. I couldn't use any of these. Books on art history, an entire book about motorcycles, some apparently heavily used textbooks. There had to be something decent here.

I spun at the sound of the door opening up wider behind me. It only just now occurred to me that I was in someone else's room without their permission.

"See anything good?"

I didn't recognize this man, but his appearance struck me all the same, mainly how well he dressed. Put together. All of his clothes were immaculate like they'd been purchased earlier that day. He wore white slacks, white shoes designed for some sport which was irrelevant given they would never be used for their intended purpose, and a white vest over a white dress shirt. He completed the look with a white cap, like the kind you might see on a golfer. Not the kind with the fuzzy ball on top, the regular kind, I guess. You know what I mean.

It was in stark contrast to my disaster of an outfit. Canvas high tops that I'd painted nonsense on at some point, beige slacks I had slept in the night before, a bluish, purplish and somewhat wrinkled blouse, red suspenders, an oversized vintage brown coat I'd found at a yard sale off Miracle Mile and immediately had dry cleaned, a bright multi-colored scarf I found at a dollar store, and a white straw sun hat hanging off the back of my head, which barely hid my thick head of red hair. My hair was thick, not my head. Ok, maybe also my head. I was only just now becoming aware that I was still wearing the hat indoors and at night. My finishing ensemble piece was a too large, beige canvas book bag I had made myself on my first attempt, just to see if I could. I could have fit a small child or a medium sized dog in there, but I liked it. It was also devoid of books at the moment, a rarity for me.

My mind wanted to go to its default party speak mode, but it was too late for that. I'd been surprised, and was now present.

"Not really, honestly," I said. "I'm not sure I can exactly curl up with a glass of wine and *Honors Geometry*." I could already tell that was less charming than I'd intended.

He smiled and said, "You must be Ollie's friend."

She hated that name. Less charming than he'd intended.

"And what makes you say that?" I asked. That was dumb. I was in her home at her party.

"I'm her new roommate. I don't believe we've ever met, and you're standing in my room, so I'm hoping you're her friend and not a homeless woman who wandered in off the street." He was still smiling.

The homeless crack kind of stung, but I let it go. He was joking, but I already felt uneasy about my fashion sense compared to his. I like comfort over form, and I didn't want to apologize for it. Maybe he could swing past my home later and ask me if the neighborhood was safe, maybe come inside and point out things I should replace.

"You got me," I said, returning the smile, not letting him see anything else.

"They say you can tell a lot about a person by what they have on their bookshelf. So what can you tell about me?"

"Who says that?" I challenged him on instinct.

“English majors, probably,” he offered. “Or maybe just people who are too proud of their bookshelves.”

“Fair enough.” I decided to go along (and that he didn’t need to know about my English Lit degree). “You’re not a big reader. I don’t even think you can call this a bookshelf, I use something like it for cleaning supplies. Some of these seem like they might be for school, but I don’t think you’re a student anymore. The textbooks seem like things you never got around to throwing away. The rest is just a bizarre compilation of topics that don’t make any sense together. It’s almost like you just bought a box of random books from a thrift store and just sort of dumped them here. Why do you even have this?”

I held up a book that offered knowledge of how to develop psychic powers through a vegan diet.

“For research,” he replied curtly, his smile fading. Catching himself, he offered an explanation. “I’m an actor.”

*Of course you are*, I thought sarcastically. Maybe cynically? I felt awful for thinking like that. Or at least, for judging as quickly as I did.

“Oh! Here’s a good one!” I exclaimed, reaching for another book, both due to genuine excitement and to distract from feeling like a jerk. Or was he being a jerk too? I read the title out loud. “*Crome Yellow!* An Aldous Huxley title that’s not *Brave New World*. I’m impressed!”

“Well, thank you.” His smile was returning but I had barely noticed.

“Have you read this? It’s pretty awesome.” I couldn’t contain myself and kept going. It didn’t even occur to me to wait for an answer. “The story itself is very obviously fiction, there’s a man named Mr. Barbecue-Smith, and I mean, come on. But the house in it is actually based on this real place called Garsington Manor, and all these famous literary types of the day used to hang out there and just create. So Huxley writes this book about a party that was being thrown there, and it’s honestly just the worst party ever. Everyone is pretentious and trying too hard, no one is happy by the end, and nothing really happens. I love it.”

I was beaming. I could feel the tightness in my face coming from a smile growing that full.

“You, uh, you definitely know more about the book than me,” he said, forcing the kind of small laugh that comes from being intimidated. “I didn’t even know I had it. But that’s cool though.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t expected to be *this* disappointed.

“Tell you what though. You keep it. My gift to you. I need to get back to the party, but it was lovely meeting you, uh...” He did that thing where he wanted my name without asking for it.

“Elana,” I answered without wanting to. He offered me a quick handshake, and I accepted out of instinct.

“Yeah, cool. My name is Jason. You take care!”

I didn’t have the chance to tell him I knew another Jason who was supposed to be here. He left in a hurry. Weird that he just left me in his room like that. I guess his only qualifier for someone being alone in his room was if they were homeless or not. Maybe I just weirded him out and he wanted to get away. I could relate to that.

I considered the book in my hands. *Crome Yellow* would work. It wasn’t like I had a lot of other options and now, more than ever, I wanted to get out of there. I took the book into the bathroom—sadly, not a new experience for me. I’ve spent more time pretending to go to the bathroom at parties than actually using it for its intended purpose. But I wasn’t just hiding every time and definitely not this time; I was escaping. There was a huge difference; one made me anxious and shamed, the other was adrenaline inducing.

I opened the book and started to look for an entry point. I don't know how I know where they are, I just sort of find them.

"At least I won't have to attend the party over there," I muttered to myself. I locked the door and made myself as comfortable as I possibly could on a throne that was not a seat. I opened the book, careful of the glue of the paperback. This was not a book which had been handled with care. I started to read, and as always, my eyes cascaded over the words like water over a hill.

*Along this particular stretch of line no express had ever passed. All the trains—the few that there were—stopped at all the stations. Denis knew the names of those stations by heart.*

There it was. My way inside, much sooner than I'd expected. I wasn't complaining.

I sat on the toilet seat, reading furiously and long enough for my butt to start numbing. I didn't care. Not about the pins and needles in my leg, not about Jason or this party. It was happening. Words became colors. The colors danced and swirled, becoming more vivid than ever intended.

Oh, this is my favorite bit!

And that smell! Like daybreak, like clean water. The poorly lit bathroom was giving way to the luscious greens of an English Manor. Then the familiar sensation of falling, losing both the fight with, and fear of, physical gravity. The dull thuds of music against the thin door were replaced by birds and the background hum of the universe, in that order. The slight ceramic chill around me faded into the sharply refreshing feel of morning mist on my face. The very pages in my hands disintegrated into sunlight and wind.

*Goodbye, Highland Park. Hello, Oxford.*