



THE YEAR OF JOHN

New York (summer)

The summer between middle school and high school is an irreversibly, undeniably crucial time for an image makeover—in fact, if you’re looking to reinvent yourself, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Particularly if you happen to be a thirteen-year-old, skinny *ex-nerd*ling who is starting high school a year early. It won’t help if you’re a teacher’s kid, that’s for sure. And it won’t help if you have an older sister already going to your super-exclusive, socially impossible high school (in this case Marlowe)—unless, of course, you’ve spent a whole summer with a killer game plan.

John Darling happened to be a grand master of game plans. And in his entire thirteen years of life, he had never wanted a plan to work as much as this. Sure, John was shorter than the other kids at school. He was thinner, weaker, and less . . . well, just less, as far as he could tell. Less of everything. But in high school, he would eradicate all vestiges of his previous self. No more John the Loser. No more John the Gaming Nerd. No more John the Joke.

“This is the *Year of John*,” he said to himself, and sometimes to his sister, Wendy, who told him to just relax, because everybody liked him the way he was. But John didn’t want to hear that. What did Wendy know about not being cool? And about starting at a new school a year too young? She was hot (strawberry blond hair, cute little freckles, and a tennis-team build) and popular (but definitely still in the three digits if you’re counting Facebook friends, which John did). And now Connor Wirth, aka Captain Marlowe, was hitting on her. Wendy couldn’t possibly know anything about John’s problems—about being alone at lunch, worrying if anyone will come to your birthday, wondering if you’ll have to spend your free period in the science lab instead of out on the front lawn with the popular kids. But John wasn’t one to give up. He was a man of action. “This is the year I’m gonna be a badass . . . get some respect.”

Last spring, John had gotten in to Finnegan High, the city’s toughest school in terms of pure academics and a place where he would have fit in perfectly. It was just as selective as Marlowe, but it was no rich-kid haven. Its admissions were based only on test results. If you got in, they’d pay your way, whatever your family’s needs. But John had turned it down in favor of Marlowe (which was also free of charge for him and Wendy, since their father taught ancient civilizations there). He knew that he *could* make it there. Even though his father had resisted, urged him to take the Finnegan offer, John knew that if he tried hard enough, he could be one of them—not just part of the intellectual elite, but the social elite too. He could graduate from Marlowe a part of something so much better, so much bigger, than just the clique of supersmart New Yorkers headed to MIT. He could come out of it with an acceptance to a

top college *and* the friendship of the people who would *really* run the world. Those Finnegan guys, sure, they'd be successful, but they would probably all be crunching numbers for the overprivileged party boys from Marlowe. That's the way the world worked, and John knew that.

He had spent the last three months lifting weights, cultivating the slightest Hamptons tan in his backyard, scoping online discount stores for all the designer duds he could afford on his meager allowance, and trying to hang out with Connor Wirth, who had invited Wendy (and therefore John) to his family's Fourth of July party. Usually, John hated having Wendy involved in his life, but this Connor thing, whatever it was, could be his ticket. After the party, John started methodically changing his Facebook image.

The thing about Facebook is that you can't just change yourself all at once. People will know and then they'll fire back, calling you out on your wall, tagging you in all sorts of embarrassing old pictures (and John had been to enough Cosplay conventions to be worried). So, since leaving middle school in June, and especially after the party, John had uploaded cool new pictures of himself with all the right people, joined less embarrassing groups and fan pages, and started tailoring his status updates. He kept ignoring or deleting any mocking comments from his old gaming buddies until they finally shut up about it.

John Darling is psyched to have his bud Massimo visiting from Torino. . . . We couldn't go out, though, 'cause I'm trying not to get back into that lifestyle . . . spent too much of last year toasted. . . .

John Darling had a great time last night . . . but don't ask for details, 'cause she knows who she is and that's all I'm gonna say about that.

John Darling → Connor Wirth: Hey, bro! Are you lifting weights tomorrow? I'm gonna lift anyway, so you can come if you want. Whatever . . .

Connor Wirth → John Darling: Hi, little buddy. Sure, you can lift with us again. Say hi to your sister.



Poor John, Wendy thought as another one of her brother's transparent Facebook updates dropped onto her mini-feed. *What? He's telling people he used to have a drug problem?* Wendy had tried to be understanding the previous week when he started talking about his supposed sex life and his summer fling with a Bulgarian girl who was too Bohemian to have a Facebook profile, but this was too much. He could actually get himself into trouble for this. She couldn't say anything to John, of course, because he was so sensitive about his summer reinvention campaign that he would have a fit if Wendy even suggested that people weren't buying his act. But to Wendy, it was obvious what was really going on. John was lonely. Maybe he needed an older brother. He wanted to be someone else—to prove to everyone that he was big and important and deserved respect. And if this was the way he chose to get it, then . . . fine . . . She couldn't be his older brother, but maybe she could look the other way.

Tomorrow, on her date with Connor, she would ask him to invite John to something low-key. Maybe they could play soccer together. That would help. Wendy had been quietly dating Connor Wirth since

early July, but she hadn't said anything to her family—even though Connor had introduced her as his girlfriend to his three best friends, even though he had called every day for a month. *Why take the risk?* she thought. *Who knows what will happen once school starts?* Wendy was a pragmatic girl. She knew that boys her age were fickle and couldn't be trusted. And who knew if Connor would suddenly forget all his fawning speeches when he was faced with his shallow, social-climbing friends and their judgmental attitudes? Maybe he would pretend she didn't even exist.

Just then, her cell rang with Connor's ringtone. OK, so she had given him his own ringtone. It wasn't even that good a song . . . hardly a commitment. OK, fine, it was her favorite song, but only from this summer.

"Hey, Connor," she said, and immediately began forgetting about John. "What's up?"

"Wanna come over?" Connor said, then added, "My mom's back from Biarritz."

"You want me to meet your mom?" said Wendy, elated and wondering why she ever doubted Connor.

"Oh . . ." Connor said, and starting to mumble, "um . . . she's not here *now*."

"Right." Wendy could feel herself turning red. "I mean—"

"I just meant that she brought the cheese I told you about . . . made it through customs and everything," said Connor. "We can watch movies and eat it all before she gets home."

Normally, Wendy would be mortified by such a humiliating mistake. But Connor seemed to rebound quickly enough, going on and on about the cheese (a bit too long, actually, so he was obviously

nervous), probably trying to make her feel better with his own awkwardness. “OK,” she said, and reached for her purse. “I’ll be there in thirty.”



A week before the start of the new school year, on yet another “family breakfast” morning, which Professor Darling insisted they do all through the summer, Wendy stood two feet behind her father and watched him cook eggs. He was burning the undersides, and the whites were still runny on top. When he turned to make toast, she lowered the heat, stirred the eggs, and added more butter.

“Honey, can you set the table?” George Darling asked his daughter, his scholarly puff of hair disheveled, his sensible beige slacks pulled up just a bit too high by his twenty-year-old suspenders.

Wendy picked out a piece of blue lint from her father’s snow-white head and said, “Sure, Daddy.” At sixteen, Wendy was already running the house.

Their mother had disappeared only a year before, when John and Wendy were twelve and fifteen. She left in the middle of the night, probably thinking the kids would handle it better that way. Like a bad TV mom, she must have thought she did it for *them*, telling herself it would be easier for them to wake up to a whole new life without the bother of saying good-bye or having to listen to made-up reasons. She slipped away with her suitcase as Wendy watched from her bedroom window and thought about her father, who had once been handsome and adventurous. Watching her mother leave was the one event she had felt most acutely in her entire life.

Now, a year later, Wendy was in charge of almost everything around the house. Not because had anyone told her to but just because someone had to fill the void. Her father was way too preoccupied with his work. Besides, he could barely keep himself together. He had spent the better part of the last hour searching for his glasses. He finally located them near the coffeepot. He turned back to the eggs, replacing his glasses on his nose. They were all fogged up. “Ah,” he said, giving a satisfied nod to the eggs. “See, honey? Your mom couldn’t have done any better than this.”

“Nope.” Wendy shook her strawberry-blond head. She adjusted the setting of the toaster behind her back, smiling at Professor Darling, who was now rocking on his feet, suspenders in hand, crowing to himself for having made edible eggs. It would be a shame to ruin this proud moment for her aging father. “Mom would’ve burnt those eggs.”

“Daddy, I have news,” Wendy said as she arranged the toast on four plates.

Professor Darling glanced at the extra plate and said, “Not again, Wendy. Doesn’t that boy get fed back at his house? Last I checked, he had a whole slew of servants.”

For the past week, ever since Wendy had revealed her relationship with Connor Wirth to her family, Connor had eaten at least one meal a day at their house.

“Yes, but he likes eating with *us*,” said Wendy, putting on her most patient tone. “You never like any of my boyfriends.”

“You don’t *need* a boyfriend at your age,” said Professor Darling. “You need to focus on your grades and on college.”

“OK, Daddy, but I have news.”

“What?” Professor Darling asked, his lined face breaking into a multitiered fleshy smile, oblivious to the wily ways of teenage girls.

“I got an after-school job,” she said, not looking up from the plates. Wendy was a lot shorter than her father. It was easy to hide her motives under wispy bangs and downcast eyes. “At a café near Marlowe . . . I start on the first day of school.”

Professor Darling, who had already begun buttering a piece of toast, dropped the bread onto his plate and said, “No, Wendy. We already discussed this. School comes first. Straight As are not optional.”

Wendy looked pleadingly at her father. “Daddy, I’m sixteen now, which means it’s totally legal, and it pays really well. I spoke to one of the waitresses, and the tips—”

“No. We are not so destitute that my daughter has to waste her exceptional brain on measuring out coffee.” Professor Darling’s lips had almost disappeared now, and he was obviously trying very hard to keep his voice down.

“I promise my grades won’t suffer,” said Wendy, “and I can use the cash for John, too.”

Professor Darling’s perfect volume control now flew away, along with his temper. “*I will take care of John’s needs.*”

Wendy flinched. She glanced at the door. Connor would be arriving any minute now, and here she was in the middle of a family fight over money. She didn’t understand why her father was so rigid on this point. Wendy and John never had enough spending money. Poor John was always making excuses to the few kids who were willing to be his friend (*You go ahead—I went to that concert on opening*

night . . . Nah, bro, I tore my ACL, so I can't ski ever again . . . Please, MoFo, Cape Cod is so played). Wendy felt bad for her brother, who had no clue how transparent he was. She had even asked Connor to include John in a few things, and Connor had reported back (shocked) that John had turned down his offer to play paintball.

Quickly, Wendy texted Connor not to come over. **Have2Cancel.**

XX. Sorry.

Professor Darling lowered his voice again, and with an apologetic look in his eyes said, “You should be volunteering on the new Egyptian exhibit with me. Last spring I received a whole shipment of things from the British Museum. They gave me almost everything I asked for. It’s all been in the basement for the summer, of course, but someone needs to go through it all—” Wendy sighed loudly, but her father ignored her and went on. “Come here. Let me show you what I dug up on the *Book of Gates*. . . .”

“Maybe,” Wendy offered listlessly, trying hard not to hurt her father’s feelings.

“It would be very educational,” said the professor, straightening his glasses. “I think I’ve got a very early copy. And did I tell you about the Neferat statue? It is exquisite. A dark female deity, previously unknown, that could not only prove the validity of all five legends but could also cast serious doubt on Anubis as the identity of the death god—”

“Hey, John,” Wendy interrupted as John came pounding down the stairs.

John filled his plate to overflowing and said through a mouthful of eggs, “What are we talking about?”

“About how great it would be if I got a job.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” said John. “You can’t, Wendy!”

Wendy stared at her brother, confused. “Why not? We could both use the cash.”

“‘Cause I can’t have a sister working at the Shake Shack! Everyone’d know!”

“Oh, John.” Professor Darling looked disappointed. “No one at school is concerned with your financial situation.”

“You’d be surprised.” John looked like a startled animal, his eyes flashing with anxiety.

“We live in a nice house,” Professor Darling pointed out, his voice dropping.

Wendy looked around: at the African bust in the corner, the antique wood cupboard, the watercolors in the hallway, all the pretty things that didn’t belong to her family. She knew better than to mention it, but John, who was far less tactful, said what they were both thinking: “Everyone knows the house belongs to Marlowe.” But it was hardly necessary. Professor Darling already knew. None of his fancy degrees could get his family much respect in this town. Why? Because he didn’t own his own coffee table.

After a few minutes of silence, John added, “And everyone’s still talking about us.”

Professor Darling didn’t respond. That part was true. For a year, he had been the teacher with the wife scandal. The faculty lounge was abuzz with it. To everyone even remotely connected to Marlowe, he was the crazy old Egyptologist with a notebook full of unproven theories—no one of them was all that surprised when Mrs. Darling left.

“Give it a rest, John,” warned Wendy. The comment about their mother stung more than anything. But she knew that to John the money stuff was far worse. Divorces and scandals were hardly new at Marlowe. And all John wanted was to fit in.



John was perfectly aware (from his many Facebook stalkings) that a nerd at Marlowe could lead a fairly peaceful life provided he had one of three things: money (like Akhbar Hussein, who wore thick Armani glasses and used an inhaler blinged out by Jacob the Jeweler), a famous name (like Emily Vanderbilt-Hearst-Mountbatten, who had criminal acne, bad teeth, and a stable of Photoshop artists for her Page Six close-ups); or a media-worthy talent (like James O’Kelly, who looked like a unwashed rag but spent his lunch hours fending off novice journalists who’d caught the scent of “child genius” all the way from the far reaches of New Jersey). Those kids never got picked on. They may have to throw around some cash to get a prom date or promise face time with their dad for good lunch seats, but they didn’t get gang-wedgied in the hall the way John had all through middle school. And as far as Marlowe was concerned, John was coming in with no support system, no trick in his back pocket. If he didn’t fix his image fast, he would become Marlowe’s official human stress ball.

“Can you at least consider the job?” Wendy begged.

“OK,” said Professor Darling. “If you consider working at the exhibit.”

“Fine,” said Wendy.

“So where’s Connor, then?” John asked.

“I texted him not to come,” said Wendy, getting up from the table. “I have to run.”

John shrugged. He didn’t care, anyway. He was perfectly secure that he and Connor were best buds—he didn’t need Connor to come here every day to prove it. He shrugged again.

“Everything all right?” Professor Darling asked his son, who was now on his third shrug.

“Whatever, that’s all,” said John. “Whatever.”



Professor Darling sipped his coffee and stared at his son. Thirteen had definitely not been like this for Wendy, and frankly, George Darling thought that maybe he was better at raising girls. *What’s wrong with the boy?* For the last three months, he had forsaken everything Professor Darling had taught him—about being an independent thinker, a free mind, a leader of men. Instead, Darling had to watch his teenage son following other boys like a trained pet. If John was craving a role model, if he needed someone to idolize and learn from, then why not choose someone the least bit respectable? “What if you and I do something today?” he said. “You know”—he cleared his throat—“men things.”

“Nah,” said John. “I’m busy.”

“Oh . . .” said Professor Darling. “All right, well . . . later, then.”

John started getting up, probably to go back to his summer program of nonstop computer social networking. “John?” Professor Darling called after him. “You know, we’re getting a new teaching assistant for the exhibit . . . um . . . Simon Grin.”

“So?” John said from the staircase.

“I think you would get along. He’s very well read . . . mostly Old Kingdom, I believe. . . .”

“Please,” said John. “Sounds like a total noob. Besides, I don’t want to make a huge show about that stuff at Marlowe, OK, Dad?”

“OK, son.” The professor wiped the coffee from his gray mustache and began picking up the dishes. Then to no one in particular, he said, “Too bad . . . wasting all that knowledge.”



OK, so John had done his fair share of nerdery (in his chosen fields of gaming, comics, and ancient Egypt). But those days were over. This was the Year of John. This was the Year of Getting Respect. John knew why his dad was worried. He was probably thinking that John’s change of image would mean that he’d let his grades slip or wouldn’t work hard anymore. But John wasn’t that stupid. He wasn’t about to give up on his favorite activities or on the bright academic future he deserved. He’d just play it cool from now on—watch out how he came across. And if this Simon Grin guy knew his stuff, OK, fine, they could hang (because John wasn’t the kind of jerk who’d hassle the new teaching assistant)—but it’d have to be somewhere away from campus.

No problem, thought John. He could lead a double life. He had a game plan.

As he settled in front of his computer and typed his Facebook password, John promised himself that this year he would have it all.

John Darling is heading out to swim a mile. Screw swim team and their mandatory follicle testing, man, 'cause they need John Darling, bad . . .

Comment from Rory Latchly: WTF?

Comment from Isaac Chang: Just ignore him. He'll get over it.

Comment from Connor Wirth: Way to go, bud!



JOHN DARLING

A HAPPY THOUGHT

I was at a sleepover for Sanford Marshall's birthday and we crammed Coke and Oreos all night (I ate the most) and had a Smash Bros. tournament, which I won using not even my best characters. Then we played blackjack and I won that easy. And then we played with his Airsoft guns. You can't really win that, but I definitely got shot the least. I hit a plastic figure off his bed and Sanford said, "Good one, bro." So we were totally cool.

WENDY DARLING

A HAPPY THOUGHT

Mom and I went to a lecture Dad was giving to the entire British Museum about his research on an Egyptian book. I couldn't have been older than three, but I remember

everything. Dad was nervous, and Mom had stuffed his jacket pockets with handkerchiefs. We knew he hadn't found them, because he kept wiping his sweat on his jacket sleeve while he spoke. There weren't enough seats, so Mom had pulled me onto her lap. She had her arms wrapped around me, and when I'd lean back to look up at her, she'd kiss my forehead. I wasn't worried about anything, not even what the adults thought, when I yelled, "Daddy, look in your pockets!"



PETER'S FLIGHT

London (early autumn)

Everywhere Assistant Professor Simon Grin went that day, he had the feeling he was being followed. As he struggled to carry his duffel bag down the narrow stairs of his flat, he imagined there were upside-down faces watching him through the windows, as though kids were leaning over the roof. But every time he glanced over, he managed only to catch a glimpse of something that might have been the last wisp of hair pulling out of view. When he fell down the last few stairs and landed on his bag, which burst like a ketchup packet and sent his toiletries flying, he thought he heard giggling.

He knew it couldn't be hoodlums. After all, he was the assistant professor of Egyptology and second correspondent curator to the British Museum now. He had badgered the dean of faculty housing until he was given a flat in a very up-and-coming part of town. That's how Simon saw himself, up-and-coming. So it made sense to live there with *no* flatmate. This was all very important. Up-and-

coming professors (soon to be tenured professor, and then dean of history by thirty-seven) did not share rent.

Simon scowled at himself in the mirror with his sharp, fidgety eyes before heading out. His face was too white, almost pink, and his hair was too red, too carefully brushed, gelled, and parted down the side.

As he was locking up the front door, Simon thought he heard shuffling behind the neighbor's shrubs. Then he thought he heard a "Shhh, you eejit, he'll hear." Simon knew that in lesser neighborhoods it was dangerous to let people know you'd be out of town for a long time. Uneducated thugs would break in and take all your things. Of course, Simon Grin didn't have anything but history books and a fridge full of Vienna sausages. He prided himself on not owning a television, gaming console, or stereo. The only DVDs he had were footage of archeology digs in the lower Nile.

Simon checked his military-grade multifunction watch—with built-in compass, barometer, and gas-filled luminous tracer lamps, capable of withstanding a whole array of activities that Simon would never undertake—and saw that he was running late. When he lugged his bag to the corner, a cab was already waiting for him. *Strange*, he thought. *Cabs don't usually loiter in the up-and-coming parts of London.* Simon jumped in anyway. He couldn't keep the director of the museum waiting.

The cabbie looked like a teenager, olive-skinned and wearing a fisherman's cap. "Where to, sahib?" he said in a mixed-up Bengali accent. Simon squinted behind his spectacles. The driver's tangle of brown wavy hair reminded him of the ancient Greek frescoes depicting playful satyrs and dashing hunters. Simon couldn't quite decide

whether this guy was a hunter or a satyr. But he definitely wasn't Bengali. "Tick-tock, sahib," said the cabbie. "Where will it be?"

Simon could have sworn this kid was no more than seventeen. He looked at the ID card behind the driver's seat. *Naamkaran Jarmoosh*. The picture was of a graying Indian man with pocks all over his face, scowling at the camera.

"This isn't you," Simon said in his most accusing tone.

"My old man," said the cabbie.

Simon shrugged. He was in too much of a hurry to get involved in the details of father-son cab-sharing customs—in Bengal or any other place. "The British Museum, *Junior Jarmoosh*, and hurry!"

"You're the boss," said the cabbie in a clearly insubordinate tone that intensified Simon's suspicions.

The cab tore through the narrow London streets with Simon in the backseat, clutching his bag to his chest. A few times, when the car flew over a small hill, the cabbie would shout, "That was some wicked air." And then he'd catch himself and add, "Eh, sahib?"

By the time they reached the museum, Simon was green with nausea. The cabbie swerved in front of the building and parked with two wheels on the curb. Simon paid him and nodded good-bye. He rushed past the guard and through the front door, even though the museum wouldn't open for another hour. When he looked back, he caught a glimpse of the cab, still lingering in front of the museum.

Simon teetered onward toward the director's office. Through the frosted glass, Simon saw the old man bent over his desk, as usual. "Grin, is that you? Get in here."

Simon patted himself down, made sure his tie was straight, and

checked his multi-watch. *Six hundred and twelve seconds early, facing due west.* He rushed into his boss's office.

"Sit down, Grin."

"Sir, I'd just like to say thank you for the opportunity to oversee this exhibit to New York. I couldn't be more—"

"You aren't overseeing anything. You're babysitting the bloody things and making sure that nutter, Professor Darling, doesn't shame us with his mummy stories."

Simon paused. "*Professor Darling?* I thought George Darling was the *curator.*"

"They don't have curators at boarding schools, Grin," said the director, without looking up from his papers.

"They don't have professors, either," said Simon under his breath.

The director looked up for only a second, then went back to his papers and said with a snicker, "They do at Marlowe. It's one of those ostentatious American upper-class misnomers—like calling an afternoon party a *soirée*. Really, Grin, did you think that I'd send *you* to the Metropolitan Museum?"

"Well, um, yes," Simon stuttered. "I was told that it was an Upper East Side Egyptian exhibit."

"That's right: you will be *assisting* Professor Darling at the Marlowe High School exhibit."

Simon turned the words *high school* several times in his head. Up-and-coming Egyptologists do *not* waste their careers working with children. He began shaking his leg nervously. "I—are you sure you have the right assignment?" he asked desperately.

"Yes, Grin. I'm quite sure. The items were shipped several months

ago, and do you know what kind of strings I had to pull to get just a few worthless pieces to Darling?” Then the director began to mutter, “The man may be a fool, but he has friends in high places.” He raised his voice again and looked Simon directly in the eyes. “They’re just a few items that were going to storage anyway: a statue of a woman who was a historical and mythical nobody, a few jars and knickknacks, and a badly replicated copy of the *Book of Gates*. Rubbish. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Maybe not,” said Simon, his voice going weak. “I mean, if he’s such a loony, then why bother . . . I mean, how is a *high school* getting a loan from the Brit—?”

“Look, Grin. Some of our big donors like his insane stories. They wanted to make a gesture on behalf of the museum. And however mad I think he is, the man’s said to be an authority on all this. He’s read more about the dozen items in this shipment than you’ve read about any subject in your entire life. Besides, as I said, the items are *worthless*. Nobody else wants them. Free storage as far as I’m concerned. Understood?”

“I think I’m coming down with something,” said Simon.

“Your flight is in three hours.”

Simon made sure to grab an expense form before skulking out of the director’s office. He had already changed his Internet profiles to say he was an exhibit manager at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Now when he took it down, all of his strategically chosen network would know. As Simon mourned for his résumé, he heard the clatter of several sets of footsteps down the main marble hall of the museum. Strange, since the museum wasn’t open yet. Simon thought the rushing sound was coming up behind him. He

whipped around just in time to see a young man with brown wavy tangles of hair running toward him with two night guards chasing behind. Simon didn't get more than a glance at the fugitive before he flew by. But he saw that the burglar was carrying a wad of crumpled pink papers. Outside, he heard cursing and the sound of a car screeching away.

Simon brushed it off and picked up his travel bag. This was an up-and-coming disaster. Simon was no fool. Everyone he'd ever met knew that he was number one in his high-school class, was chess champion of his college dorm, and had taken an online test that said he had a genius IQ. So Simon knew when someone was pulling a fast one. And he recognized that wavy brown hair. *Amateur*, thought Simon, remembering that his research assistant had been sacked for stealing office supplies. *What kind of dumb ass would come back for seconds?* Simon thought, absolutely certain that it was the research assistant who had just gotten away. Once again feeling utterly superior, Simon straightened his collar and headed to the airport.



An alleyway a few blocks down from the British Museum, full of industrial-size trash cans, was the perfect hiding place for a secret meeting. On this particular morning, seven dirty faces huddled together: seven teenage runaways, all baring that one missing tooth, the one that showed that regardless of color or height or weight, they were friends of *Peter*.

"Everybody, shut up!" shouted Tina. She was Peter's number two, assembling his LBs (for Lost Boys, but shortened for texting) wherever Peter went in the world. She was a little shorter than the

rest of them, a little tougher, and always by Peter's side. She had long brown hair and tan skin, and her eyes were always half shut, as if she were appraising something or about to fall asleep. She was probably Hispanic, but nobody knew for sure. She had a dark beauty toughened by the streets. She was sexy, for sure, but not beautiful. She was just so . . . so . . .

"And if anyone else touches my can, I'll stuff your head in a toilet. Got it?"

Yeah, that was it . . .

"Peter's flying to New York in a couple of hours to start his new job. We need you guys to keep an eye out on the museum while we're gone," said Tina.

"Yeah, yeah. We know the drill," said a redheaded kid in the back. "Old Egyptian books. Got it." His name was Red. All the boys had nicknames like this so that Peter wouldn't have to bother with tedious chores like remembering their real names. *Red. Steroid. Hoodie. Newbie. Fattie. Spock.* And so on. Only Tina got to be herself, because Tina was Peter's undisputed favorite.

"What's the new gig?" asked Hoodie.

"Peter and me, we're gonna be RAs at some fancy school in New York," said Tina almost proudly.

"I heard he knicked the book from the British Museum," said Newbie.

"Nah, man, if he had the book, it'd all be over," said Spock.

"I heard he killed someone."

Tina rolled her eyes. Peter's legend just wouldn't stop growing. His fanboys knew him as a god of street kids and orphans. A phantom

criminal. An underworld adventurer with a worldwide network of lost boys bent on finding one lost treasure.

“What’s an RA?” asked Red from the back. “Hey, can we come?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Tina shrugged. As she walked away, she added, “The LBs in New York would cut y’all open and sell you for parts.”



Simon sat in the airport lounge, waiting for his flight and texting his mother. He was looking down when he heard, “Anybody sitting here, pardner?”

Simon looked up to see a young man dressed like a cowboy. He had on Levi’s jeans, a white shirt, and a straw hat. His eyebrows and sideburns looked too thick to be real, and they were a darker shade of brown than the hair on his head. The cowboy gave him a wink and a smile.

He had a not-too-tall, not-too-lanky body. He was a handsome boy, tan-faced, cocoa-haired, with eyes just a shade too hazel. He wasn’t thin, or fat, or tall, or short. He was just an American cowboy, tightly packed and nimble, able to blend in or stand out on a whim, and completely unrecognizable as the young man who had driven Simon to his meeting that very morning.

Simon shook his head.

“Great,” said the cowboy. “My name’s Petey Peterschmidt. Put ’er there.”

The cowboy shook Simon’s hand up and down. He sat next to Simon and propped his muddy boots on the facing row of chairs. He let

out a loud sigh. “Well, friend,” said Petey the cowboy, slapping Simon on the back, “you headed out of town on business or pleasure?”

Simon was already uncomfortable, huddling down and putting away the message to his mom. “Business,” said Simon.

“That’s a shame,” said Petey. “You coulda hit the town with your buddy Pete, here.”

“Important business,” Simon added.

“Ooh, well, don’t let me stop you. You seem like one of those genius types. Am I right? Somebody payin’ you the big bucks for that brain of yours?”

Simon smiled. It was nice to have his genius noticed. Maybe this cowboy wasn’t as stupid as he looked. Simon didn’t want to brag. “I’m a very important man, actually.”

“Seems that way,” said Petey.

“I’m overseeing a major Egyptian exhibit in New York.”

“Like, *Egypt* Egypt? Must be at the United Nations or some such. You’re like an ambassador?”

“Well, kind of. Yes, yes, I guess I am,” said Simon. Simon went on telling Petey about every detail of his important exhibit, with just a few things left out or exaggerated here or there. After Simon had exhausted every subject revolving around himself, he finally turned to Petey and said, “So what do *you* do?”

“Well,” said Petey, “I’m no ambassador to Middle Eastern peace-keeping, but, you know, I do well for myself.” Then Petey gave a conspicuous look-see this way and that (presumably to make sure the coast was clear). He leaned in to Simon and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “The truth is, Mr. Grin, I’m in the self-help business.”

“You write about how to stop being a child and get your life

together?” said Simon, not stopping to ponder how the cowboy knew his name.

“Oh no, nothing like that.” Petey laughed. “I help people help themselves. I give them the identity they’ve always wanted. Plus maybe a few added years if they’re underage.”

“You’re saying you make fake IDs?”

“I guess so, yes. That’s exactly the phrase for it. Leave it to the professor. But what I mean is age is just what you make of it, right? Look at me, for instance. Heck, most clubs *still* card me. I can’t convince a daggum soul of my age. They all think I’m a teenager!”

At this, Petey put his head back and guffawed at the fluorescent ceiling lights. Simon chuckled nervously. Petey did have a baby face.

“But that’s all between you and me, right, Professor?” said Petey. “I wish it was fate for me to come out a director of Egyptological studies for two major museums, but we can’t all be Einstein. You know what I mean?”

An up-and-coming scholar like Simon didn’t want to have anything to do with the kind of riffraff that made a living off petty fraud. But Petey was such a likable guy. And great men were always nice to the plebeians. Simon nodded and smiled. Petey slapped him on the back. “Good!” said Petey. “Now, let’s get on that plane and see what kind of stewardesses they got. But first I gotta see a man about a dog, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t, actually,” said Simon. It stung him to admit that he didn’t understand something.

“It means I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Oh, right, I should do that, too.”

“Well, how about I stay here and watch your bag? You don’t

wanna be putting that thing down in these airport bathrooms—get all kinds of hepatidal cholerooids. I’ll go after you.”

“All right,” said Simon. Simon headed to the men’s room feeling like a smooth operator.

Sure, the cowboy was an uneducated dimwit with the slight tangy odor of a cheese wheel, but Simon had regaled him with his academic exploits, and now he was like a personal porter. Some people struck up conversations to make friends; Simon tolerated them to get something useful out of it.



The second Simon was gone, Peter grabbed the travel bag and started walking to the boarding gate. He dumped Simon’s passport and boarding pass into the trash and then flashed his own papers to an attendant who looked more like a teenager than an airline employee. The attendant gave him a wink and said, “Have a good trip, Pete.”

As Peter disappeared into the tunnel, he pulled out a wad of crumpled pink papers, shipping orders from the Egyptology Department dated several months ago, and examined them one more time. *New York City. The Marlowe School.* He may not have intercepted the shipment in time, but at least Simon wasn’t going near Peter’s prize anytime soon.



Meanwhile, back at the security gate, Simon Grin was panicking about his lost bag and trying to get on his flight regardless. He tried to explain why he didn’t have a passport or a ticket or any other

essential document. He called the attendant a few names and tried to run past him. But the uneducated types had a way of outrunning Simon, so he was tackled, Tased, and escorted out by security.



SIMON GRIN

A HAPPY THOUGHT

Simon's Log, Stardate 3109.44

All is well in the Omega Quadrant. The triplet suns of the galaxy shine on my ship, the SS Brilliance, with equal—no, increasing—admiration. I sense that the vast alien races in this space hub will be as much in awe of my reputation as they would of a god. I will become something of a legend in their world. After escaping the clutches of these Taser-wielding monkey-men and HALO jumping from outside the stratosphere of the planet London Prime, I will save the training facility of the famous “French Maid School,” and they will see me as an avenging angel. The hottest students will beg to join my starship, but I will, of course, have to tell them that my adventures are just too dangerous for such fair maids. My weakling second-in-command, Officer Darling, will appeal as well, but my resolve will be unshaken. I’m a captain, and with that great mantle of power comes a great amount of attractiveness.