

Izzy + Tristan

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*To those who understand that
love can collapse time*

*Then while we live, in love let's so persever,
That when we live no more, we may live ever.*

—Anne Bradstreet, 1612–1672

Prologue

This is not a novel. It's a romance.

A *romance*—Mrs. Dwyer taught us this in sophomore year English class, when I was still going to my old school—a romance is more like a fable. It traffics in ideals, mysteries, and obsessions. Grasp too hard at the characters in a romance, and they'll float away from you, become abstract, drift in the direction of myth.

Believe me, I don't feel mythic at the moment. Sisyphus aside, my unchanging daily routine, here at this desk, is the opposite of mythic. My *narrative perch*, Mrs. Dwyer might have called it, and I do feel perched here in time, a bird at rest without an impulse to migrate farther.

Back then, though, everything was different, I was different, and I suppose I did feel *romantic*: in the common, everyday use of the word, red roses and poetry, but also in the academic sense, wrapped as I was in the myth of my own story. Tristan always felt that way to me, too. Tristan, so

beautiful his edges were blurred, like he didn't quite exist in reality. Tristan the Ideal, Tristan the Mystery, Tristan the Obsession. I saw it all in that very first moment I set eyes on him, when I wanted to swallow his pain, hold it in my mouth like a hard candy, let it melt until it was part of me.

Maybe that is what happened. Maybe that was the cause of all the trouble that followed.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

Mrs. Dwyer also taught us that the word *novel* comes from the Italian for "new little story," something fresh, something that, at the time the word was coined, no one had ever tried before. So you see, this can't be a novel, because it's not about anything new. It's about the oldest thing in the world. It's about love.

part 1

The Knight

Marcus is sitting a few yards behind me on a park bench, and even though my eyes are focused on the board, I know exactly what I'll see if I turn around. He's stretching out those long arms, taking up the space because he can, letting his lackeys cling to the edge of the bench or skulk around behind it. Tyrone, K-Dawg, Frodo—less charismatic than the pieces on the board and with about as many brains. I hear Marcus yawn and know that he's making a big show of adjusting his lid, closing his eyes like he couldn't care less about what is going on in the match.

"Yo, T, this going to take much longer?" he asks. When I first moved up to Brooklyn and in with Auntie Patrice two years ago, Marcus took to calling me Lil' T, because Tyrone was already called T. But that was before I started making money for Marcus at the chess tables.

"Not over 'til it's over," mutters Antoine. I can see him out of the corner of my eye. He has his arms crossed over his

chest. He's nervous. He should be, too, because his man, the fat Puerto Rican kid sitting across the table from me, is running out of options and trying to sidle his rook into a better position. Bad move.

"Not over 'til it's over," I say without lifting my eyes from the board. "That is what they say. But it's almost over. Check."

I can feel the slow spread of Marcus's grin behind me.

From that point on, it's standard procedure, all over but the shouting, if you will, which the three stooges provide a few moves later when I announce checkmate. (And I always have to announce it, because it's not like they could see a killer move if it was mooning them in the face.)

"Way to go, Lil' T," Tyrone says, punching me on the shoulder.

"Ain't so little these days, is he, Tyrone?" Frodo says. Frodo is so short and ugly that his only real joy in life is trying to feel more important than Tyrone.

I ignore them all, ignore Antoine walking over to pay Marcus, too, and focus on shaking the fat kid's hand. I don't like to know the dollar amount that Marcus has riding on these matches. It messes with my game.

"Good game," I say, looking fully into the fat kid's sweet face for the first time that day. He's young, maybe only fourteen, and his emotions are wallpapered all over him, tip to toes. He tried tripping me up with a strange opening

called the Orangutan. Kid's got guts, if not the experience to back them up.

"Yeah," he says, "maybe for you."

"Hey," I say, lowering my voice, "you shouldn't hang with Antoine. He's bad news, man."

The fat kid smirks. "Yeah. And Marcus isn't?"

And then it's time to go, time to leave the park, ditch the lackeys, walk home with Marcus, maybe smoke a joint with him to come down from the adrenaline of the match, and leave that poor fat kid to get knocked around a little by Antoine.



There's a chill in the air tonight, the first little dip into fall that we've had this year, but as we amble down Eastern Parkway, Marcus is still wearing short sleeves, and I know he probably will for weeks yet. He doesn't like to cover up his tats, which cost a fortune, that's the real reason, but when the girls, the girls with the lip gloss and tight jeans and low-cut tops, when they squeal and ask, "Aren't you coooold?" he flashes them his thousand-watt smile and says, "Hot-blooded."

Sometimes, looking at the raw strength knotted up in Marcus's biceps, I marvel that we could be related or even of the same species. We are, though, and by blood, no less; his father is my mother's brother ("God rest her beautiful soul," Uncle Sherwin always says to me through tears when he's had one cupful of rum punch too many), and Auntie Patrice

is aunt to both of us, even though I'm the one who lives with her. Marcus lives with his mother and his baby sister, Chantal, on the same block. Officially, that is. In reality, Marcus lives everywhere and nowhere: on the basketball courts down on the piers, on the benches outside the TipTop Social Club where the old men roll dice, at Patrice's table, where he often slides into a chair at dinnertime, unannounced, and at the corner of Fulton and Nostrand, where he has various business ventures that he insists I don't need to know too much about. I never argue that point.

There are people out there who are scared of Marcus, and they're not all as helpless as the fat chess player, either. I've seen a few things, hanging out with Marcus, things that make me wish that my brain had a delete function. But on whatever scale I want to weigh it, my loyalty to Marcus is always the single heaviest stone, and not only because he's the best insurance policy against getting beaten up that someone like me could ever have. He's blood, pure and simple, and we start from the same side of the board, always. Marcus can be impulsive, and I don't want it to get him tangled in serious trouble. Most of the time, though, he seems too perfect for anything to go wrong.

When we get back to the block, he starts jogging up the steps to his door, and I say good night, but then Marcus says, "Wait," and sits down on the top step, nodding to the empty space beside him. My mouth is dry, that weird postmatch headache starting to creep in around the edges of the faint

buzz from the weed, and I want to go home and try to catch a nap before dinner, but instead, I sit, one step below him, telling myself it's to give us both more room.

"That was some solid shit you were working today," Marcus says.

"It was nothing," I say. "Kid was scared from the beginning. Of Antoine, not me."

Marcus smiles and stretches back, leaning his bare elbows against the concrete of the stoop. "You gotta learn to take a compliment, little cuz."

I shrug. Marcus doesn't know a thing about chess, and I'm not in the habit of accepting empty praise.

"School next week," he says.

"Yup."

"You wanna know something crazy?"

I turn toward him slightly, raising one questioning eyebrow. "Frodo might actually graduate this year?"

Marcus smiles, a small reward for my lame joke, so many gleaming white teeth. "Naw. It's like this: I feel like this is my year. My year to be on top. My moment. That sound crazy?"

It does, but only because, from my vantage point, Marcus has always been on top. This will be his senior year; he made it this far largely because of his mother's pleading (with both him and the school administration) and because he likes the reinforcement that school gives to his place in the social hierarchy. I'm only a grade behind him, but a full two and a half years younger, and I look it, too. Some advice: Skipping

a grade is not a route to respect and admiration from one's peers.

"Nope," I say.

"Things are changing, T," he says, with that distant, pitcher-winding-up-on-the-mound look that he gets sometimes. "I can feel it."

"Mmmm." I'm having trouble focusing on anything but the dry patch at the back of my throat. That and the image of the fat kid with a black eye and a swollen lip. Dragging himself home to practice chess problems. Maybe masturbating out of loneliness if he can get the bathroom in his tiny apartment to himself for a few minutes. And the thought that the only difference between him and me is a handful of losses, lighter than the fluff of a dandelion.

"You're a million miles away," Marcus says coolly, and I snap back to attention, afraid that I've pissed him off. "But that's okay, T. All that stuff going on up here." He taps his temple. "It's what makes you a winner." Then he smiles that smile, which makes me as weak in the knees as one of the girls who are always following him around, and he cuffs me on the back of the head, a little too hard.

That's the thing about Marcus: He's so beguiling that sometimes even I forget how powerful he is.



The lock in the front door is tricky and it always requires a few moments of fooling with the key to make it work. This

gives me enough time to sniff at my jacket for any trace of smoke and become adequately paranoid. If Marcus is a force to be reckoned with, then Auntie Patrice is a straight-up force of nature. She's stirring a saucepan of something on the stove when I reach her fourth-floor apartment, but she's typing, too, with one hand, an email on a laptop that is propped on the counter and also talking to someone on her phone headset, most likely a distant relative in Trinidad.

"Hold on," she says to the distant Trinidadian when she sees me come in. "Tristan just walked in."

"Tristan," she says, clucking the word like an agitated hen. She is one of the only people to use my full name, this crazy German name, and I know it's out of loyalty to the person who gave it to me. She sniffs the air delicately, like a bloodhound, and says, "You been hanging out with Marcus?"

There is never a point in lying to Patrice. "Yeah. But it's okay. Nothing bad." And that's true enough, I guess, that she buys it.

"Marcus," she says, shaking her head. "That boy is nothing but trouble." And that's true enough, too, but I know she loves Marcus fiercely, probably more than she does me. "Is he coming for dinner?"

"Not sure. I don't think so."

"Okay." She hasn't stopped stirring the entire time we've been talking, but she still looks restless, as if her other hand is annoyed that it isn't doing anything. "Dinner in forty-five minutes. You can't water the coriander in the evening, baby,

it will bring in the bugs. You gotta do it early in the morning.” It takes me a beat to realize that this last directive is meant for the faraway relative, not me, and by then, Patrice has already turned away and is reaching for her laptop again. “No, that’s not early enough.”

I trail down the hall to my room, or the room where I sleep, at least. It still looks mostly like a guest room, even though I have been living here for two years. It’s easy to have gratitude and respect for Aunt Patrice, since she is easily the most sensible person in my family, and I have plenty of affection for her, too, but she isn’t the warmest person, and the truth is, there are days when I feel like an intruder here.

I flop down on the bed and shut my eyes, but now that I’m here, I can’t shake the feeling that something is closing in on me, a suffocation so subtle I’ll be dead before I put my finger on it. Eyes open. Eyes closed. Monster easing itself down onto my chest. Eyes open. On the bedside table, there’s a framed wedding photo of my parents, and I’ve never known if Patrice put it there because she thought it would be comforting for me or because she wanted it in here, out of her sight.

In the photo, they’re cutting a cake. She’s wearing a white suit and laughing and saying something to someone out of the frame. I have my father’s light Creole skin, but the rest of me is so completely my mother that it looks like we were cast from the same mold. My father’s head is tilted down, but you can tell from his dimples that he’s smiling, too.

(Dimples! I can't think of the last time I saw his dimples in real life. Do they still exist? Can you age or grieve your way out of dimples?) The photo is black-and-white, which I've always found confusing, since it's not like it was all that long ago. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm in the photo, too, under the buttoned coat of my mother's white suit. No one has ever mentioned it to me outright, but it doesn't take a genius to count the seven months between the day this photo was taken and the day my mother died.

"Bianca was a wild child," some of the relatives will say, shaking their heads, smiling at the memory of her. When I was small, I would snatch at the words people used to describe her: beautiful, crazy, fun, charming, impulsive. I would take them and try to roll them together into my own memory of her. But it's not an easy thing to do, building a person from scratch.

I reach out and turn the frame facedown on the table, and then I search for my phone in my backpack. I want to hear my dad's voice, even though I know he won't pick up the phone. He's a concert promoter, and he works strange hours. I listen to the recorded message on his voice mail, and then I redial and listen to it again. He'll see that I tried to call, obviously, but a lot of people call him. He'll make a mental note to call me later and then he'll forget.

If that makes me sound like a big puddle of self-pity, I don't mean for it to. I'm not tearfully waiting for my dad to come reclaim me, nothing remotely like that. Before I moved

to Brooklyn, my dad and I were living in McAdams, a suburb of Atlanta, in one side of a little ranch double house that was always dark and usually smelled bad, like dirty feet and a half-hearted punch of cheap cleaning products. It took me a long while to figure out that it wasn't normal, having a father who could barely make himself get out of bed to pay the guy who delivered our groceries. At seven, I went over to my friend Benji's house for the first time and marveled at the fact that his mother seemed to have a vested interest in knowing where we were, what we were doing, whether we were hungry, whether we were safe. When she brought his laundry into his room, all fresh and folded, I think I stared at her as if she were a unicorn. I had figured out how to use the washing machine when I was five, and folding the laundry seemed entirely unnecessary. I was pretty afraid of lighting the finicky gas stove in our kitchen, but sometimes I did it anyway to make us macaroni and cheese. Most of the time, though, we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and salad out of a bag and pretzels.

I got really good at school. For one thing, I liked being there, because no matter how dumb the classes were or how mean some of the kids could be, it felt so much less lonely than my house. But also, I knew that the better I did, the less likely anyone was to interfere with my life. I wasn't stupid; I knew what sort of shit happened when teachers started to notice that someone was having "trouble at home." Ace every test and you're suddenly way down on any potential

do-gooder's list of meddling priorities. So I got good grades, joined a couple of clubs in middle school, like chess club, because it seemed so laughable that you could play a board game for a few hours and get praised for it.

Maybe this all sounds sad, sad, sad to you, but it wasn't. Life is made of comparisons, after all. In school, from the time you're small, they teach you about wars and more wars, diseases and famines and still more wars, and I would sit there in the back of my social studies classes, marveling at the boring era I'd been born into and feeling relieved. I think a lot of people have the opposite reaction, and those are the people who start new wars. Not me. I was too busy flying under the radar.

That's how it was, with me knowingly and expertly avoiding attention for over a decade, while the twin gargoyles of grief and depression sat on my father's chest, suffocating him.

And then, everything changed. I'm still not sure how, exactly. My father always had gone through periods of feeling better, when his mood would lift and he would hire a cleaning service and ask me what I was doing at school and even call his colleagues at the PR firm that he still technically co-owned. My best guess is that during one of these periods of relative okay-ness he went to a doctor and got some pills, because almost overnight, he became frantically, manically busy. He went back to work and pounded the pavement the way he did when he was a twenty-year-old kid just starting

out. He said that all the time, that he felt like a kid again, cigarette in his fingers, leg jiggling, a glazed expression that said that he did not, necessarily, remember that he was speaking to an actual kid, his kid. He started working late, and I was home alone a lot, and even though it shouldn't have made that much difference, since it was similar to him being asleep in the next room, I admit that this is the part of the story where I started to feel kind of abandoned. And offended, maybe, that after all those years, I hadn't been the thing to get my father out of bed.

Then he sat me down one day and told me that I was going to go live with my aunt Patrice.

"But I barely know her," I said. That was true. Auntie Patrice was a name that I mostly recognized from birthday cards, and I wasn't certain that I could pick her out of the crowd of Mom's siblings in the old photo albums piled in the hall closet.

"What do you mean?" he asked, fidgeting in his chair. "You lived with Patrice until you were almost two."

"In Brooklyn?" This was all news to me. "Where were you?"

My father sighed. "This isn't a life, T. It's my fault, but still."

"It's my life," I said.

"Patrice will know what to do. She always knows what to do. And things will be fine." I think I started to protest, to list some pretty valid reasons for not wanting to go live with

a virtual stranger, but he got distracted by something and walked out of the room, and left me there, trying to remember something, anything, about Patrice.

So my dad fumbled the opening move a little, but the thing is, he was right: Moving in with Patrice was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. Suddenly, there was Patrice and Marcus and the wonderland of Brooklyn. There were chess tables in the parks and beautiful, worldly girls on every block and big, extended-family parties on holidays. School is even more laughably easy when someone else is making the macaroni and cheese. It was an entirely new point of comparison.

My father works all the time, and sometimes I see the uncles shaking their heads and *tsking* about that, saying that he's just a different kind of crazy now, but he sounds okay when I talk to him on the phone or when he comes up to visit every few months, happier than I've ever known him to be. It's like he finally decided to come back from the dead and live a second life, and I'm not mad at him about that. Those words that he said to me haunt me sometimes, though. *Is this a life?* If it is, can I legitimately call it my own or have I merely been letting the circumstances wash over me? My dad, he's had two lives already, but have I even started my first?

"Dinner!" Patrice shouts from the kitchen.



Marcus doesn't show up for dinner, and there's a little pop of relief in my chest, along with some nervous anticipation. Sometimes it can be awkward when Patrice and I are left alone, like we don't quite know how to talk to each other. I ask her polite questions about her job at a bank in Manhattan when, really, I'd like to ask her about my mother or what it used to be like when she took care of me as a baby or why she never goes out on dates, even though she's still pretty, in her no-nonsense, often-frowning way. But it feels like all of these topics are off-limits.

"It's good spaghetti," I say, but it comes out almost apologetically.

"Labor Day this weekend," Patrice says. "That means the block party on Saturday." Patrice helps to plan the neighborhood block party every year, and I know she puts a lot of time into polishing every detail. But I've learned from the past two block parties that it's one of those things where the whole neighborhood seems to be having more fun than I am and I don't know what to do with myself.

"Oh, yeah," I say. "I have to work in the morning, but I'll come straight home afterward. I should be able to catch a lot of it." I have a job as a summer math tutor at one of the branches of the library. I took it so that I could hang out in Brooklyn for the summer instead of going back to Atlanta like I did last year. I barely know anyone there anymore, and besides, tutoring is not terrible money compared to flipping burgers. Marcus, though, didn't agree. "You're worth more

than that, fam,” he said. But I couldn’t give up the job and play chess for Marcus all day long; I knew enough about Patrice to know that wouldn’t go over well. “One of my last shifts,” I finish, as a sort of explanation.

“Maybe you can help with the activities for the children when you get home,” Patrice says. “There’s a new family up the block, and the lady wants to do some kind of arts and crafts thing.” Patrice shrugs and rolls her eyes, so I know she’s talking about the white family who moved in a few weeks ago. They renovated one of the oldest houses on the block, and now that corner, without the overgrown yard and rotting porch, looks completely different. “Buddhist sand sculpture or something. I don’t know.”

“That sounds . . . interesting,” I say cautiously. It’s way different up here, the whole race thing, than it was in Atlanta. Personally, I like the way everybody’s so blasé about it here, the way people try their best to get along because there’s not enough room not to.

Patrice makes a noncommittal *hmming* noise. She’s been living in this neighborhood since she was younger than I am now, and she can definitely be a little territorial when it comes to our block. She’s seen a lot of changes, and any newcomers get put through a long probationary period while she decides if she likes them or not. This is especially true if they look like they might not fit in. If they make Buddhist sand sculptures, for instance, and wear flamboyantly tie-dyed scarves, like I’ve seen this woman wear.

“Well, I’m glad you think it sounds interesting,” Patrice says. “You can help her, then.”

If Marcus were here, he’d make some joke about crazy white people and their crazy schemes and make her laugh. He can be a harsh judge of people when he wants to be, but maybe that’s just another form of being territorial.

I get uncomfortable making jokes like that, though, so I act terrifically interested in my spaghetti and nod. I compose my face into a blank that says: You know me, I love Buddhist sand sculptures.

“Good,” she says. “It’s settled, then.”