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the only alien on the planet

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chapter 1

The first time I ever saw Smitty Tibbs, I was having one of the worst days of my life. Truth—up till then, I'd been a happy person—happy, cheerful, confident, easy going, reasonably popular even. Well-adjusted, in other words. Everything in my life had always been so balanced, so friendly, so *dependable*.

And then my brother Paul, probably my best friend in the world, up and left for college. It was the biggest shock I'd ever had. *This should not be a big surprise for you*, he'd said to me. And he was right. It's just, I wasn't ready for it, somehow, and the reality ended up hitting me in the face like a bucket of ice water. I couldn't figure out how Paul had all of a sudden gotten so old. When I said that very thing to my mother a couple of months ago, she pointed out that I just happened to be starting *my* last year of high school, talk about people growing up.

I wish she had said anything but that.

We've always had this tight little family: my three brothers, me, and our two parents. My mom'd had us kids in five and a half years' worth of marathon pregnancy. ("I always wanted you guys to be close," she says now. "Just don't ask me to do it again.") So living in our house had been a little like being raised in some kind of crazy boys' dorm.

We'd always lived in the same house, in a middle-sized town where everybody who counted knew our names, in the West where there are always great sunsets and never any winter. All of my friends I'd known since kindergarten. Everything well ordered, solid, and wholesome—constant as the earth under your feet. *Too darned comfy*, Paul would say.

It never even crossed my mind that things could ever change; I just figured we'd go on that way forever—always, always, always, as natural as breathing. Stupid kid that I was, I thought it was just Life.

But I've gotta go, Paul had said. *The only way to get things to stand still is for us all to die at the same time. And I don't think we're going to be into that.* So, he paid his tuition, packed up—it was like the ground fell out from under me, and I didn't know where I was anymore. Actually, I was right about that; I'd been living in a beautiful dream that was coming to an awful, sickening end.

A month and a half before Paul actually departed for the Mysterious Beyond, my dad comes out with this announcement: "The good old ancestral air is going a little stale. I think, dear family, we need a little stirring up."

Stirring up.

And what, exactly, did he mean by that? I'll tell you what he meant: he intended to sell our good old house and move us thousands of miles *east*.

"I promise you *Winter...*" he says, like he's performing some kind of great magic, "...*Autumn, White Christmases*. A House with a Fireplace. New *Faces*. New *Norms*. Fresh Blood. My children—this may very well be our *Great Adventure*."

"What about the stuff we've already got?" I pointed out. "What about *familiar* faces? What about *old* norms?" But the boys bought it. The boys would have bought snake oil too. My mother, on the other hand, is a stable, reasonable kind of person; she likes money in the bank and old friends and things of *familial* historical significance. I kept waiting for her to do something, to tell Dad this was the stupidest idea he'd ever had.

But no. She just sat there, smiling, while he stuck signs in our yard and signed papers and made us go through all the stuff in the attic.

And suddenly, there I was, Ginny Christianson, displaced person, sitting at a marked up desk a thousand miles from home, in the middle of a school filled with hundreds, maybe thousands, of people who didn't even know they didn't know me.

A new life, Paul had said to me. *Built on the beautiful model of the old one. Take hold, old Gin. Attack it the way you would a wild windmill.*

Nobody in this place was talking to me. Nobody needed me. Nobody even knew I was there.

I was totally alone for the first time in my life.

And I really hated the way it felt.

I decided then and there—no Great Adventure is worth this kind of pain. No new life is worth demoting the old one to Beautiful Model. No Great Adventure will ever be worth the price. I swore to myself, feeling a lot like Scarlett O'Hara, *I'll never go wandering again*. Give me a safe, warm hearthside and comfortable, old furniture; give me familiar, beloved faces—definitely, I am a fan of the Known and Constant Universe.

In a desperate bid for sanity, I told myself, *This is the first day of school for all these people; everybody's got to be a little off-balance.* I could hear Paul telling me, *Never, never make the mistake of thinking you're the only alien on the planet.*

But that's exactly the way I did feel—different desks, different schedule, halls and halls and halls that all looked the same to me. Everybody else knew their way around. I might as well have been a million light years from home.

And lost.

Then, all of a sudden, this girl across the aisle—one of those very cute, totally secure looking people; somebody like I might have been, myself, once, in another life—smiled at me. “I don’t know your face,” she said to me. “You a transfer? Or did you just move in?”

“Just moved in,” I said, hoping my mouth didn’t look as rubbery and stupid as it felt. It was like I was hearing my own voice from the outside, and I didn’t sound natural.

“I hate being new,” she said, commiserating. “You just feel so—off register, you know what I mean?”

The image was lost on me, but I was pretty sure I knew what she meant, so I smiled, and she smiled, and things began to seem not so utterly desolate.

“I’m Hally,” she told me.

“My name’s Ginny,” I answered, still sounding like a total nebbish.

But Hally didn’t seem to notice. She was too busy asking me stuff—where I was from and what I liked to do. She finally hauled out her schedule and made me show her mine. As it happened, they turned out to match almost exactly.

She glanced over my shoulder and started to grin. “Not a bad start,” she whispered to me. “Scott Holyoak’s over there giving you the eye.”

“Is that good?” I whispered back.

“Ain’t bad,” she laughed. “Yep. He’s interested, all right.”

So, of course, I glanced back over my shoulder, and that was the first time I saw Smitty Tibbs.

Just then the bell rang and the teacher came through the door. I never got the pleasure of embarrassing Scott Holyoak. I never even saw him. It was the boy in the far corner of the front row that caught me by the eyes and made me forget just about everything else in the world. This unearthly, beautiful boy.

“Okay, people,” the teacher was saying, and I remembered where I was. I glanced at Hally apologetically, suspecting I’d just made a total fool of myself. She was watching me, the smile gone. She narrowed her eyes slightly and gave her head this ghost of a shake. It was not an unfriendly look. More like a concerned warning. The whole thing was very disconcerting.

The noise in the room had now settled to a soft rustle. Hally smiled at me once more, and gave me this little shrug.

The teacher finished writing MS. STERN on the blackboard and turned to face us, all hard, bright business—obviously your very dedicated kind of woman. With something like a collective spiritual sigh, we all slid back in our seats and let her start the year.

I really tried to listen, but once you’ve heard the *This is English and You’re Going to Take it Seriously* spiel, it’s hard to get excited for the reruns. My mind began to wander, and so did my eyes—back to

that far corner of the front row. Back to the most beautiful human being I'd ever seen.

The interesting thing about it was, the more I looked at him, the less I understood what I was seeing. At second glance, he really wasn't physically all that remarkable—medium-sized body, medium length, light brown curls—squeaky clean but not especially groomed. (I always check out a person's hair right off; I think you can tell a lot about somebody, looking at the way they have their hair. All this hair said to me was "neat and clean and not particularly concerned.") His clothes were okay—on the conservative side, but with a little bit of style.

It was something in his face that got to you; he had a sort of angelic air, clear and distant and pure, like he'd never had a bad thought in his life. And strange—there was something really strange about him.

The room had gotten very quiet.

"I'll make sure she picks one up," Hally was saying.

I came to myself and realized that everybody was watching me. My cheeks started getting hot, and I caught this *You have only minutes to live* look from the teacher. Great way to start out. *This girl's an idiot*. Right then I was sure I was doomed—but then Hally gave me this little wink. It was kind of her. And that single, insignificant, kind act suddenly shone like a tiny sun in the dark void that had been looming in my future. All of a sudden, I knew Hally was going to be my friend. It was like finding my center of gravity.

"I'd forgotten how pretty he is till I saw your face this morning," Hally was saying as she dug for a book in the bottom of her locker.

"I guess I should have warned you, but I really didn't even think of it."

"Is there—" I asked, trying to read her attitude, "—something wrong with him?"

"Some people think he's autistic," she said, pulling the book out and shoving everything else back in. She stood up, trying to balance all the books she had stacked up on her notebook. "Myself, I wouldn't know." She slammed her locker shut. "Mr. Leviaton—I think you've got him—fifth period, World History. Yeah, you do, see? Smitty's kind of a pet of his. He says it's no way autism." She gave the lock an absent spin.

"Smitty."

"Smitty Tibbs. Sounds like a name you'd give a puppy or something, doesn't it? Come on." She started off down the hall. "Anyway," she went on, "*something's* seriously wrong with him."

I considered that, dodging a couple of freshmen who were chasing each other down the middle of the hall. "Like, what is it he does that's weird?"

"Smitty Tibbs has never said a word to anybody." Hally waved at a kid down the hall. There must have been about fifty people who said "Hi" to her on our way to second period. "And he never smiles, and he never frowns, and he never cries. He's always been that way. If you talk to him, he doesn't react—it's like he doesn't hear you. It's really like he's not aware there's anybody else in the universe."

She stopped and readjusted the books.

"So what's he doing here in this school?" I asked. "Is it some kind of social integration program or something?"

She laughed. “That’s a better question than you know. The really weird thing is, he’s totally brilliant. Top honor roll, every semester. There’s this story around that Mr. Leviaton secretly had Smitty sit down and make up an exam for him—questions, answer key, the whole thing—and then Mrs. Flicher, the principal, gave the test to the whole faculty in faculty meeting one day, without telling them what it was. They hated it.”

“And that really happened?” I asked, doubting it.

She shrugged and pointed. “Down those stairs. No, to the left. The thing is, it *could* be true. So I don’t know what he’s doing in this school. He should probably be at MIT or Johns Hopkins or something.”

“This is weird,” I said.

“Tell me about it. He’s definitely one of the Great Mysteries in our lives.”

I shook my head, thinking it over. “I’m amazed he’s made it this far alive. You guys must be very civilized. It’s sad, but he probably wouldn’t have lasted five minutes in my old school.”

“Yeah, well,” she said. “He really had it hard for a while here, early on.” She jumped. “Knock it off, Jesperson.” She slapped at somebody behind us. “One day in the first grade” —she shifted her notebook—“a whole bunch of kids had pushed him down on the playground. It was really awful—they were kicking him, and it was just—” She clenched her teeth. “I was really furious.” Then she grinned fiercely. “But along came Caulder Pretiger, like an avenging angel out of heaven, and within about thirty seconds, those kids were scattered like spit in the wind. It was wonderful.

Nobody messed with Smitty after that because they were all too scared of Caulder.” Her eyes were flashing.

Then she shrugged, shifting gears. “They probably wouldn’t want to try anything with him these days—he’s not exactly your defenseless little wimp anymore. The worst they do now is make stupid jokes. And they call him ‘The Alien’ sometimes, which is not totally inaccurate considering he definitely *is* from another planet. It’s just kind of ironic they’d call *him* that, like they’re all so normal themselves.”

She sighed. “Actually, I don’t think anybody really notices him that much anymore. I mean, he looks normal enough, doesn’t he? And you get used to people after a while. And I don’t know,” she grinned. “Maybe they’re all still scared of Caulder.”

She stopped in front of a classroom door. “Now you know everything I know.” She pulled the door open. “Pre-Calc Logic,” she announced, looking anything but excited. “Welcome to the math class from hell—”

That afternoon, the Christiansons had a little family council. We sat on scavenged stools under the one overhead light in the new living room, surrounded by piles of boxes and mounds of books and other stuff we hadn’t organized yet, feeling like intruders in that empty, echoing house. There, our folks told us about the beautiful old Victorian building they’d found downtown, the absolutely perfect new home for Christianson Graphic Design.

“The only thing is,” my mother said, “it’s going to take a lot of effort, getting that place in working order. A lot of work. And

it's not like we've got a lot of money lying around just now"—here, she sent my father a pointed look—"so your dad and I are going to have to be doing a lot of the work ourselves. Wiring and painting and stuff." Then she looked at Dad like she wasn't real convinced about the thing she meant to say next.

"And the point of all this?" James prompted.

"The point is," my father responded, "you guys are going to have to be pretty much on your own for the next few weeks."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Mom said to him.

Dad looked at us. "Understand, it means we're going to be down there all day every day—and probably into the night, trying to get this thing going before we all starve..."

"Are you suggesting that this is going to be a problem?" Charlie asked.

Mom looked at him like he'd just proven her point. "You're going to be cooking for yourselves," she said, ticking things off on her fingers, "doing the laundry, the unpacking, the house-keeping, fielding any problems that come up—and it means that you're going to have to get along, which may be harder than you think, considering the circumstances. And you're going to have to be responsible. Nobody's going to be here to pull you out of trouble, or yell at you for not doing your homework. Getting the picture?"

"I do all my own laundry anyway," James sniffed. Mom gave him one of her *yeah, sure* looks.

"You taught us all about nutrition, Mom, remember," Charlie said consolingly. "It's not like we're going to die of rickets or something."

"Yeah, well—one of the responsible adults in this house will get a lunch made for you people every morning before we leave for downtown. That'll be one halfway intelligent meal a day anyway. And you will be able to call us there once we have the phones in. But till then, you're going to be pretty much orphans."

Wonderful. Another great stride for my sense of inner peace and security.

"Just remember," my father said, "the sooner we get this building done, the sooner we'll be in business. The sooner we're in business, the sooner you can start asking us for money."

"We had a business back home," I said. A little flicker of anger had come up from someplace way down under, a place that should have been shut up tighter than it evidently was.

My mother looked at me. "That's true," she said. "But we're here now. And we want to make this work." She was still looking at me. "On every possible level. Things are a little different right now, I know. But you've got to keep in mind—nothing important has changed."

So Paul not living with us anymore wasn't important.

"So, you guys going to support us in this?" Dad asked. "Can we depend on you?"

My mom was studying us. Studying me. "Is this a realistic expectation?"

James rolled his eyes. Charlie grinned.

"Of course," I lied, not looking at anybody in particular.

"Fine," she said. "James, you're in charge of laundry, since you're such an expert. Charlie, the kitchen. Ginny, you're in charge of