

"A stunning fever dream." —LEE CHILD

THIS BOOK IS
WORTH KILLING FOR

THE
BOOK
OF
DOORS



GARETH BROWN



THE BOOK OF DOORS

A NOVEL

GARETH BROWN

wm
WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*Dedicated to my wife, May, for all the memories made and the
adventures still to come
(NMINOO! VWDDR!)*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Part 1: Doorways

The Quiet Death of Mr. Webber

The Favorite Game

Venice

Magical Midnight Tour of Manhattan

Drummond Fox in the Snow

The Illusion in the Desert

Mr. Webber's Apartment and Izzy's Investigations

Book People

A Night of Travel

Possibilities and Reservations

A Stranger at Ben's Deli

The Woman

Part 2: Memories

The Shadow House

Coffee in Lyon

The Book of Memories

The Fox Library, in the Shadows

The Book in Cupboard Six, and Discussions in the Fox Library

Matt's All-American Burgers (2012)

Izzy Out of Sorts

Cassie and Joe (2012)
What Izzy Forgot
Old Friends in Bryant Park (2012)
Izzy and Lund
The Memories of Drummond Fox (2012)
The Bookseller (1)
Stranded

Part 3: Echoes in the Past

Alone in the Past
The Fabulous Tale of Cassie Andrews
The Passing of Days
The Other Cassie
The Book of Doors Discovered
The Final Goodbye to Mr. Webber
The Bookseller (2)
The Quiet Death of Mr. Webber (2)

Part 4: A Dance in a Forgotten Place

A Meeting in the Fox Library: On the Nature and Origin
of Magic (2011)
Barbary's New Books
The Book of Safety
The Forgotten Place
The Ballroom at the Macintosh Hotel
Pain in the Forgotten Ballroom
Too Late Arrives
Death in the Ballroom

Part 5: The Nothing and Nowhere [no title]

Part 6: A Plan in Five Parts

The Woman, After the Auction
Reality, Again
Beach Fires at Night

The Shadow in the Sand
Home (2013)
A Plan in Five Parts
The Plan, Part One—Azaki's Story
The Plan, Part Two—The Bookseller
The Plan, Part Five (1)
The Plan, Part Three—Drummond and Cassie in the
Shadows
The Plan, Part Four—Azaki and the Books
The Plan, Part Five (2)
Despair
Fire
The Last Act of Hugo Barbary (2002)

Part 7: Beginnings and Endings

The Fox Library
The Joy at the End
The Quiet Death of Mr. Webber (3)

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Copyright

About the Publisher

Part 1

Doorways

The Quiet Death of Mr. Webber

In Kellner Books on the Upper East Side of New York City, a few minutes before his death, John Webber was reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He was sitting at his usual table in the middle of the store with his overcoat folded neatly over the back of his chair and the novel on the table in front of him. He stopped for a moment to take a sip of his coffee, closing the book, and marking his place with a soft leather bookmark.

"How are you doing, Mr. Webber?" Cassie asked, as she made her way through the store with a stack of books under her arm. It was late in the day and Mr. Webber was the only customer.

"Oh, old and tired and falling apart," he replied, as he always did when Cassie asked how he was. "But otherwise I can't complain."

Mr. Webber was a regular face in the bookstore and one of the customers Cassie always made an effort to speak to. He was a gentleman, softly spoken and always neatly dressed in what appeared to be expensive clothes. His age showed in the wrinkled skin of his hands and neck, but not in the smooth skin of his face or his full head of white hair. He was lonely, Cassie knew, but he carried it lightly, never imposing his loneliness on others.

"Reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*," he confided, nodding at the book. The bookmark stuck out at Cassie like the tongue of a snake. "I've read it before, but as I get older, I find comfort in rereading favorites. It's like spending time with old friends." He coughed a self-

deprecating laugh, signaling to Cassie that he knew he was being silly. "Have you read it?"

"I have," Cassie said, hitching the pile of books up under her arm. "I read it when I was ten, I think." She recalled long rainy days one autumn weekend when *The Count of Monte Cristo*, like so many other books, had taken her away.

"I don't remember being ten," Mr. Webber murmured with a smile. "I think I was born middle-aged and wearing a suit. What did you think of it when you read it?"

"It's a classic, of course," Cassie said. "But the bit in the middle, that whole section in Rome, that was too long. I always wanted to get to the revenge stuff at the end."

Mr. Webber nodded. "He certainly makes you wait for the payoff."

"Mmm," Cassie agreed.

The moment expanded, the silence filled by the soft jazz music playing through the speakers on the wall.

"Have you ever been to Rome?" Mr. Webber asked, rubbing his hands together as if they were cold. Cassie knew that he had been a pianist and a composer before he had retired, and he had the sort of long, delicate fingers that would dance easily across a keyboard.

"Yeah, I've been to Rome," Cassie said. "I don't remember much about it." She had spent a week in Rome years earlier when she had traveled around Europe and she remembered it well, but she wanted to let Mr. Webber speak. He was a man full of stories of a life well lived, a man with more tales than people to tell them to.

"I loved Rome," he said, relaxing back into his chair. "Of all the places I traveled, and I traveled a lot, Rome was one of my favorites. You could walk around and just imagine what it was like five hundred years ago."

"Mmm," Cassie murmured again, watching as Mr. Webber's attention drifted off into his memories. He seemed happy there.

"You know, I stayed in a small hotel near the Trevi Fountain," he said, suddenly seized by a memory. "And they would bring me coffee in bed every morning, whether I wanted it or not. Seven A.M. sharp. A quick knock and then the old woman who ran the place would march in, bang it down on the nightstand, and march out again. On

my first morning I was standing naked in the middle of the room just contemplating getting dressed, and then she burst in, coffee in hand. She gave me one look, up and down, thoroughly unimpressed by what she saw, and walked back out again." He laughed at his memory. "She saw me in my . . . entirety."

"Oh my god," Cassie said, laughing with him.

He studied her as she laughed, drawing a conclusion. "I've told you that before, haven't I?"

"No," she lied. "I don't think so."

"You indulge me too much, Cassie. I've turned into one of those old people who bore youngsters with their stories."

"A good story is just as good the second time around," she said.

He shook his head, as if annoyed at himself.

"Do you still travel, Mr. Webber?" Cassie asked, pulling him away from his annoyance.

"Oh, I never go anywhere now," he said. "Too old and too weak. I doubt I'd survive a long flight." He clasped his hands over his stomach and stared at the table, lost in that thought.

"That's a bit morbid," Cassie said.

"Realistic," he said, smiling. He looked at her seriously then. "It's important to be realistic. Life is like a train that just keeps getting faster and faster and the sooner you realize that the better. I am hurtling toward the final stop, I know that. But I've lived my life and I've got no complaints. But young people like you, Cassie, you must get out and see the world while you can. There is so much to see beyond these four walls. Don't let the world pass you by."

"I've seen plenty, Mr. Webber, don't worry about that," Cassie said, uncomfortable with the conversation turning toward her. She nodded at the books under her arm. "Let me take these through the back before my arm falls off."

She headed past the coffee counter—now closed for the day—and through to the windowless cave of boxes and staff lockers in the back room. She dropped the books on the cluttered desk for Mrs. K to deal with the following day when she opened up.

"Cassie, I wasn't trying to tell you how to live your life," Mr. Webber said, when she reappeared, his expression serious. "I hope I

didn't insult you."

"Insult me?" Cassie asked, genuinely puzzled. "Don't be silly. I didn't give it a second thought."

"Well, what I mean to say, really, is please don't let Mrs. Kellner know that I was suggesting you might abandon her and her bookstore."

"She would ban you for life," Cassie said, grinning. "But don't worry. I won't say anything. And I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

As she tidied mugs and plates from the tables, Cassie looked around the store. It was everything a bookstore should be, with shelves and tables laden with books, soft music always playing in the background, and lights dangling on cables from the high ceiling, creating spots of brightness and cozy gloom. There were comfy chairs in corners and in between the shelves, and mismatched artwork on the walls. The paint hadn't been redone in ten years, and the shelves had probably been first bought in the 1960s, but it felt appropriately shabby rather than rundown. It was a comfortable place, the sort of store that felt familiar the first time you stepped through the door.

She nodded down at Mr. Webber's coffee cup. "Do you want a last refill before I close up?"

"I've had more than enough," he said, shaking his head. "I'll be up and down like an elevator all night to pee."

Cassie pulled a face, half amused, half disgusted.

"I offer you a window into the life of an old person," Mr. Webber said, unapologetic. "It's a constant pleasure. Now, give me a few minutes to gather my strength and then I'll be out of your way."

"Take as long as you want," she said. "It's nice to have the company at the end of the day."

"Yes," Mr. Webber agreed, gazing down at the table, his hand resting on the cover of his book. "Yes, it is." He looked up and smiled at her a little shyly. She patted him once on the shoulder as she passed. At the front of the store the large window spilled soft light out into the night, a fireplace in the dark room of the city, and as

Cassie perched on her stool, she saw that it was starting to snow, flakes spiraling like dust motes through the haze of light.

"Lovely," she murmured in delight.

She watched the snow for a while as it grew heavier, the buildings across the street a crossword puzzle of lit and unlit windows. Passersby pulled their hoods up and ducked their heads against the onslaught, and diners in the small sushi bar directly opposite Kellner Books peered out at the weather with chopsticks in hand and concern on their faces.

"The best place to enjoy a stormy night is in a warm room with a book in your lap," Cassie said to herself. She smiled sadly because someone she missed had once said those words to her.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was time to lock up. At his table Mr. Webber was sitting with his head tilted awkwardly to the side, like a man who thought he'd heard someone calling his name. Cassie frowned and a finger of unease tickled something deep in her gut.

"Mr. Webber?" she asked, rising from her stool.

She hurried across the store, the easy-listening background jazz jangling against her sudden unease. When she put a hand on Mr. Webber's shoulder he didn't respond. His expression was fixed, his eyes open and lifeless, his lips slightly apart.

"Mr. Webber?" she tried again, even though she knew it was pointless.

Cassie knew what death looked like. The first time that she had seen death, many years previously, it had stolen from her the man who had raised her and the only family she had ever known. Now death had come again, and this time it had taken a nice man whom she hardly knew while she had been distracted by the snow.

"Oh, Mr. Webber," she said, as sadness swelled within her.

The EMTs came first, bustling noisily into the store and shaking snow from their clothes and hair. They were energetic, like there was a chance of saving Mr. Webber, but as soon as they saw him all of their urgency drained away.

"He's gone," one of them told her, and the three of them stood around in an awkward silence like strangers at a party. Mr. Webber watched nothing in the middle distance with glassy eyes.

Then the police came, a young man and an older man, both of them asking her questions as the EMTs lifted Mr. Webber from his chair and strapped him onto a stretcher.

"He comes in the evening, two or three times a week," she explained to them. "Just before the coffee counter closes for the day. He gets a drink and then sits there and reads his book until I close up the store."

The young police officer looked bored, standing with his hands on his hips and watching the EMTs as they worked. "Probably lonely," he said.

"He likes books," Cassie said, and the cop looked at her. "Sometimes we talk about books we've read, books he's reading. He likes the classics." She realized that she was prattling even as the words continued to tumble from her lips. She folded her arms to stop herself. Something about the police made her self-conscious, excruciatingly aware of everything she was saying and doing.

"Right," the cop said, watching her with professional indifference.

"I guess he liked talking to you, ma'am," the older cop said, and Cassie thought he was trying to be nice. He was thumbing through the contents of Mr. Webber's wallet, seeking an address or next of kin. It seemed oddly obscene to Cassie, like rummaging through someone's underwear drawer.

"Nothing like a pretty lady to give an old man something to look forward to," the younger cop said, a mischievous smile tugging the corner of his mouth. The older cop shook his head in disapproval without looking up from Mr. Webber's wallet.

"It wasn't that," Cassie snapped, her words sharp with irritation. "He was just a nice man. Don't make it something it wasn't."

The young cop nodded an approximation of an apology but made no attempt to hide the loaded glance he then threw at his colleague. He walked to the door to hold it open for the EMTs.

"Here we go," the older cop said, pulling out Mr. Webber's driver's license. "Apartment four, 300 East Ninety-Fourth Street. Nice

neighborhood." He returned the driver's license to the wallet and folded the wallet shut. "We'll let you know if we need any more information," he said to Cassie. "But call us if you think of anything." He handed her an NYPD business card with a phone number on it.

"Like what?" Cassie asked.

The cop shrugged loosely. "Just anything we need to know."

Cassie nodded as if this were a good answer even though it wasn't. "What about his family?"

"We'll deal with that," the older cop said.

"If he has any," the younger cop added, waiting by the door. He wanted to go, Cassie saw; this was boring for him, and she hated him for it. Mr. Webber deserved better. Everyone deserved better.

"You gonna be all right, miss?" the older cop asked her. Everything about the man seemed tired, but he was still doing his job, and doing it better than his younger partner.

"Yeah," Cassie said, frowning in annoyance. "Of course."

He watched her for a moment.

"Hey, sometimes people just die," he said, trying his best to say something consoling. "That's just the way of it."

Cassie nodded. She knew. Sometimes people just died.

Cassie stood at the front of the shop and watched them go, the ambulance first and then the cop car. Her own reflection was a ghost in the window—the tall, awkward girl dressed in thrift shop clothes: an old woolen crewneck sweater, and blue jeans that were almost worn through at the knees.

"Goodbye, Mr. Webber," she said, absently pulling the sleeves of her sweater up to her elbows.

She told herself not to be sad—Mr. Webber had been old, and he had died peacefully and swiftly, it seemed, in a place that gave him joy—but her sadness was stubborn, a constant bass note rumbling in the background of her thoughts.

She picked up the phone and called Mrs. Kellner at home.

"Dead?" Mrs. Kellner said, when Cassie told her what had happened. The word was a bullet from a gun, a short, sharp bang.

Cassie waited, and she heard a long, tired sigh.

"Poor Mr. Webber," Mrs. Kellner said, and Cassie could hear her shaking her head. "But there are worse ways to go. Certainly Mr. Webber would think so. How are you, Cassie?"

The question surprised Cassie, as it always did when someone inquired about how she was doing.

"Oh, I'm fine," she lied, brushing it off. "Just shocked, I guess."

"Mmm, well. It comes to us all, and Mr. Webber was a good age. It's sad, but no reason to be depressed, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Cassie said, enjoying Mrs. Kellner's robustly given kind advice.

"You lock up now and get on home. It's a blizzard out there and I don't want you getting hypothermia. That's an instruction not a request."

Cassie said good night to Mrs. Kellner and got to work tidying up, wondering how well the Kellners had known Mr. Webber. They seemed to know most people who came into the store regularly. Not that Mr. Kellner knew much of anything anymore, dementia having stolen his memories from him a few years ago. Cassie's mind wandered, trying to remember when Mr. Kellner had last been in the store. It had been years, she was sure. Now Mrs. Kellner barely spoke about her husband at all.

When Cassie swept the floor around the coffee tables, around Mr. Webber's seat, she saw his copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* still lying on the table by the half-empty coffee cup. The sight of the book hit her like a punch in the gut, as if Mr. Webber had been taken away without his most prized possession. Then she saw another book next to it, a smaller book with a brown leather cover, faded and cracked like weathered paint on a door. Cassie hadn't noticed the book earlier, not when Mr. Webber had arrived, not during all the activity with the EMTs and the cops. Had she just overlooked it?

She cradled the broom against her shoulder and picked up the book. It felt oddly light, as if it was more insubstantial than it should have been. The leather spine creaked pleasantly as she opened it. The pages were thick and coarse, and covered in what looked like scribbled text in dark ink, but in a language and script that Cassie

didn't recognize. As Cassie flicked through the book, she saw that there were sketched images and doodles as well, some dotted around the text, others taking up whole pages. It looked like a journal of some kind, a place where someone had collected their thoughts over many years, but chaotically so. The text didn't run in a single direction; it was up and down and cutting through and curling around images.

On the very first page of the book Cassie saw a few lines, written in the same handwriting as the text on every other page, but in English:

This is the Book of Doors.

Hold it in your hand, and any door is every door.

Below those lines there was another message, written in a different script. Cassie gasped when she saw that it was a message to her:

Cassie,

This book is for you, a gift in thanks for your kindness.

May you enjoy the places it takes you to and the friends you find there.

John Webber

Cassie frowned, surprised and touched by the gift. She flicked through the pages again, stopping about a third of the way into the book where a single page had been given over to a sketch of a doorway. The doorway was penned in simple black ink, the door wide open, but through the opening Cassie saw what appeared to be a room in darkness, with a window on the far wall. Beyond that window was bright sunlight and a rich blue sky, the many colors of spring flowers in bloom among vibrantly green grass. Everything was sketched in black except the view from the window; that was drawn in full, glorious color.

Cassie closed the book, stroking the cracked leather.

Had she been so kind to Mr. Webber? Had he meant to give her the book that evening? Maybe he had taken it out of his pocket while she had been distracted by the snow, just before he had died?

She debated what to do for a moment, wondering whether she should call the cops and tell them about the book, both books. She could just see the younger cop rolling his eyes . . . "*Some crazy person's notebook he wanted to give to you . . . ?*"

"Stupid," she muttered to herself.

Mr. Webber had wanted her to have it. She would take it as a memento of the nice man who had often kept her company at the end of the day. And she would take his copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* as well; she would see that it got to a good home.

When she left the store a short while later, wrapped up in her old gray greatcoat and burgundy scarf and bobble hat, the sharp edges of the wind cut into her, but she didn't notice, so distracted was she by the contents of the odd notebook. After only a few steps she stopped under a streetlight and pulled the notebook from her pocket, entirely unaware of the figure watching her in the shadows of a doorway across the street.

She flicked through the pages again: more text, lines seemingly drawn at random as if the pages could be taken out of the book and placed together in a different order to reveal some grand, secret design. In the very center of the notebook she saw that a hundred or more doorways had been drawn in neat rows right across the two pages, each of them slightly different in shape or size or feature, as varied as the doorways on any street. It was odd but beautiful, enigmatic and inviting, and Cassie wanted to pore over the pages and dream about whoever it was that had spent so many hours scribbling in the book. It felt like a treasure to her, this book, a mystery to occupy her mind.

She wiped snowflakes from the pages and slipped the book back into her pocket, then started on her way through the snow-silenced streets, heading for the subway three blocks away, her mind alive with images and strange words scribbled in black ink.

The figure in the doorway did not follow.

The Favorite Game

When Cassie reached home, she took Mr. Webber's copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and found a space for it among the paperbacks on the bookcase at the end of her bed.

The bookcase was a map of her life: the books she had devoured as a child; books she had bought or picked up on her travels through Europe; the books she had read and treasured since living in New York. Her own battered copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* was there, an old paperback that had originally belonged to her grandfather. Cassie remembered reading it in her grandpa's studio back in Myrtle Creek, wedged into a beanbag in the corner as he had worked, the smell of wood and oil in the air as heavy rain beat the ground outside. She pulled the book off the shelf and flicked the pages, catching the ghost of a scent that made her heart crumple at the memories and emotions it conjured, the contentment and comfort of those days in her childhood.

She slid the book back into its place and pulled off her old sweater to dump it in the laundry pile. She caught her reflection in the mirror on the back of the door and regarded herself dispassionately. She was always slightly disappointed whenever she saw herself in reflections or photographs. To her own eyes she was too tall and too thin. She thought her hips were too narrow and her chest too flat, and her eyes were big and wide like a startled deer's. She never wore makeup, because she had never really learned how to do it,

and her blond hair was always flying off in different directions no matter how much she brushed it.

"You home, then?" Izzy called from the living area.

"Yeah," Cassie said. She opened the bedroom door, pushing her reflection out of sight, and wandered through to find Izzy cross-legged on the couch, dressed for bed in an oversized T-shirt and pajama bottoms.

"How was the work thing?" Cassie asked. "Must have been good since you're at home and in your pajamas."

Izzy rolled her eyes wearily. "We went to a few places. Couple of guys tried to pick us up in the last bar we were in. This big guy tried to use his charm on me. He was horrible. All muscles and monobrow. He suggested that we go down to Times Square together and watch the lights."

"Wow," Cassie said.

"Right?" Izzy agreed. "Who the hell wants to go to Times Square? The only people interested in Times Square are tourists and terrorists."

Cassie smiled, enjoying the sound of her friend's voice and the distraction from her lingering sadness. The journey home on an empty subway train and through snow-smothered streets had felt long and lonely.

"I said that to him," Izzy continued, as Cassie joined her on the couch. "'Nobody cares about Times Square except tourists and terrorists.' He acted all offended, like I'd said something awful." She pulled a face, affecting a lower voice. "*That's so distasteful, you know terrorists kill people.*"

"That's pretty special," Cassie said, grinning.

"It kinda spoiled the mood, so we called it a night. Lucky too." She nodded at the window, the snow still falling.

Izzy worked in the jewelry department in Bloomingdale's and every couple of weeks she would go out drinking with her colleagues after work. Her world was full of expensive products and rich people and wide-eyed tourists. It was a world Cassie neither understood nor cared about, but Izzy loved her job. At one time she had wanted to be an actress. She had moved to New York from Florida as a

teenager with dreams of singing and acting on Broadway. When they had first met Izzy had been working at Kellner Books while auditioning and performing in tiny theaters. After a few years of getting steadily nowhere she had given up on her dream.

"Can you think of anything worse?" she had said to Cassie, one evening when they had gone for drinks at the rooftop bar of the Library Hotel. "Being thirty-something and watching all these beautiful young women come into the same auditions as you, looking at you exactly how I look at all the older women now? The world has an endless supply of beautiful women, Cassie. There's always a newer, younger one coming along. I am not a good enough actress that my looks don't matter."

Cassie and Izzy had worked together at Kellner Books for over a year, and they had fallen into being friends almost immediately. They were very different people, with different interests, but somehow they had always gotten on well. It was a natural, easy friendship, the type that comes out of nowhere and changes your life. When Cassie had started looking for an apartment to rent, Izzy had suggested that they try to find a place together to save on costs. They had shared a third-floor two-bedroom walk-up in Lower Manhattan ever since. Their building was on the edge of Little Italy, above a cheesecake shop and a dry cleaner's. It was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, and because of the landlord's subdivides none of the rooms were the right shape or size, and none of the furniture really fit where it should. But it worked for them, and they had continued living together even after Izzy had left the bookstore to work at Bloomingdale's. Izzy tended to work during the day while Cassie preferred to work the late shift and weekends. As a result they often didn't see each other for days at a time, but that stopped them from getting in each other's way and prevented the living arrangement from spoiling the friendship. Every three or four days their paths would cross, and Izzy would give a rapid rundown on all the events in her life while Cassie listened. And then, when Izzy's stream of consciousness ran dry, she would look at Cassie with a maternal expression and ask, "And how are you, Cassie? What's going on in your world?"

Izzy looked at her now with that expression on her face, her hair tied up in a mess of curls behind her head. She was a beautiful woman, with high cheekbones and large brown eyes. She was the sort of woman department stores loved to have behind their counters, the sort of woman who might have been a film star if she had been able to act. Cassie felt plain in comparison, but Izzy had never done anything to make her feel that way. That fact said everything about the sort of person Izzy was.

"What's going on in my world?" Cassie preempted.

"What's going on in your world?"

"Nothing," Cassie said. "Not much."

"Come on," Izzy said, unfolding her legs and jumping up to wander over to the kitchen counter. "Let me get you a classy mug of wine and you can tell me your nothing and not much."

Izzy switched on the lamp by the door, splashing soft light across the walls.

"Mr. Webber died today," Cassie said. She looked down, realizing she was still holding the book he had given her. She had meant to leave it on the bookshelf in her bedroom.

"Oh my god, that's horrible," Izzy said. "Who's Mr. Webber?"

"Just this old guy," Cassie said. "He comes into the store every now and then. Gets a coffee and reads."

"God, it is so cold, what is with this weather?" Izzy muttered, closing the door to the hall as she padded back to the sofa and passed Cassie a mug. They didn't drink wine from glasses, not in the apartment.

"I think he was just lonely. And he liked the bookstore."

"So what happened?" Izzy asked, pouring the wine. "Did he trip and fall or something? My uncle Michael died like that. He fell, broke his hip, and couldn't get up. Died on his living room floor." She shuddered.

"No, nothing like that," Cassie said. She took the mug of wine even though she wasn't interested in drinking it. "He just died. Just sitting there. Like it was his time."

Izzy nodded but seemed disappointed.

"That's what the cops said anyway," Cassie reflected. "'Sometimes people just die.'"

Izzy settled more comfortably into the sofa, crossing her legs beneath her. Cassie took a sip of wine, and they were companionably quiet together for a few moments.

"Look at the snow," Izzy murmured, gazing out the window. The buildings on the opposite side of the street were almost hidden by the storm. The wind seemed to have died but the flakes were bigger and softer now, tumbling slowly but steadily from the sky.

"It's so pretty," Cassie said.

"What's that?" Izzy pointed at the notebook in Cassie's lap, and Cassie passed it to her, explaining about the gift.

"Leather," Izzy observed. She opened the book and flicked through the pages idly. "Wow. This looks like a crazy person vomited some word soup. Wonder if it's worth anything?"

"Probably not," Cassie said. It annoyed her that Izzy's first thought was about monetary value. That wasn't the point. "Anyway, it was a gift."

"I think Mr. Webber was sweet on you, Cassie," Izzy said, smiling mischievously, as she handed the book back.

"Stop it," Cassie protested. "It wasn't like that. He was a nice man. And he did a nice thing."

Izzy sipped her wine, her eyes slightly glazed. "Okay. Let's not wallow. Come on. Let's think of happier things."

"Like what?" Cassie asked, placing her mug on the table. "I can't drink this. I'll fall asleep."

"Lightweight," Izzy murmured. "Tell me about . . . tell me about your favorite day."

"What?" Cassie smiled, although she remembered the Favorite Game. They had played it often in the store when things were quiet and there was nothing to do. One of them would ask the other to talk about their favorite something . . . favorite meal, favorite holiday, favorite bad date. It passed the time.

"Tell me about your favorite day," Izzy repeated. "What was your best day ever?"

Cassie thought about the question, gazing out the window to the snowy world, cradling Mr. Webber's book in her lap.

"I tell you what *wasn't* my favorite day," Izzy said, interrupting Cassie's thoughts. "That day on the Greyhound."

"Oh god." Cassie groaned and smiled, remembering the trip she and Izzy had taken to Florida several years earlier to visit Izzy's cousin. The two of them had spent almost twenty-four hours together on a Greyhound bus to Miami, alternating between terror and hilarity at the events they endured. "Remember that man who smelled like he went to the toilet on the bus without leaving his seat?"

"Oh, don't remind me," Izzy said, covering her mouth as if she wanted to be sick.

Cassie turned her mind to better days. She remembered when she was much younger, days in the house she grew up in, just her and her grandfather, or just her and a book, but she wouldn't talk about those. Those memories were too precious. She thought instead about the traveling she had done before she had moved to New York, after her grandfather had died. She had taken a trip to Europe by herself, partly to grieve and partly to work out what she wanted to do with her life. She had backpacked from city to city, mostly by herself but occasionally making friends: a handsome German boy in Paris, a young Japanese couple in London. There had been a couple of middle-aged Dutch lesbians she had met in Rome whom she traveled with for a few weeks because they seemed to think she was innocent and in need of protection. Cassie had promised to keep in touch with these people but never had. They were walk-on parts in her life. Although they were lost to her now, those people and those warm, sunny days across Europe were among her happiest memories.

"I remember when I was in Venice," Cassie said.

"Ooh, Venice," Izzy said. "Nice." Izzy had never been out of the country, but she had often spoken about going back to Italy, to where her family originally had come from, talking about it in the way people speak of dreams that they know will never really happen.

"I was staying in this hostel," Cassie said. "And I had the room to myself. Just nobody else there, not at first. It was run by this middle-aged couple with young kids. They were so nice. I can't remember their names now . . ." She thought for a moment, searching her memories but coming up empty. "But they treated me like a daughter."

Izzy rolled her head to the side, resting it on the back of the sofa as she listened.

"The street I was on," Cassie continued. "It was a narrow, cobbled street with all these yellow and orange buildings with big wooden doors and small windows with shutters. I'd probably never find it again if I ever went back there. Well, there was a bakery across the street, and I'd sleep with the windows open because it was so warm."

"Mmm, warm is nice," Izzy said, sounding sleepy.

"And in the morning, I'd wake up to the smell of baking bread and pastries." Cassie sighed at the memory. "Just the best smell in the world. And you'd hear the locals talking and laughing as they met each other. The coffee shop at the end of the street would put out tables and chairs, the waitstaff clattering and banging even though it was early, and all the locals would stop by for a cappuccino on their way to work or whatever."

"I want to go to Italy," Izzy said.

"Every day I'd jump out of bed and run down the stairs," Cassie continued. "The property had this big old wooden door. You'd open it and the bakery was right across from you, usually with a queue of people waiting to buy whatever they needed."

"I love bread," Izzy murmured. "Can't eat it. Goes straight to my hips. But I love it."

Cassie ignored her, caught in the net of her own memory for a few moments.

"I'm going to put this away," she said, nodding at the book in her hand. "And I'm going to make a coffee or something, otherwise I'll be asleep before you."

"I'm not sleepy," Izzy said, with her obviously sleepy voice. "It's a lie."

Cassie smiled and pushed herself off the couch.

She was remembering Venice again, thinking about the coffees she'd had at the café on the corner, the crusty bread she'd eaten for breakfast, and as she reached for the door to the hallway she felt a shudder, a moment of oddness where the world seemed to tense and release within her.

And then she opened the door and found herself gazing out onto that small, cobbled street in Venice she remembered from her holiday, quiet and dark and glistening with rain.