

Excerpt from ARTS & ENTERTAINMENTS by Christopher Beha

Chapter One

"You know who I saw on TV last night?" John Wilkins asked the small group of old friends surrounding him. "Dr. Drake."

They'd been drinking in the St. Albert's library for less than half an hour, but Eddie was surprised it had taken even that long for the name to come up.

"The show's in syndication," he said. "It's on every day."

"Not Dr. Drake," Wilkins clarified, as though the distinction should have been obvious. Martha. She was on Entertainment Daily talking about her new boyfriend, Rex Gilbert."

Wilkins still had his reddish blond hair and the pale, lightly freckled skin that made him look perpetually young. In the years since Eddie had seen him last, he seemed to have aged only by a slight thickening. He wasn't fat so much as dense.

"She's a big star now," Eddie allowed.

"Are you kidding?" Wilkins said. "She's all over the place. All the talk shows. *Reverberator's* sexiest list. Must drive your wife nuts."

He said this last part like a joke, though it was true and wasn't funny.

"Jesus, Wilky," Justin Price said. "Cut the guy a break."

Wilkins waved Justin off.

"You still keep up with her?"

"We haven't really talked since she moved out west."

"You know who I saw on TV the other day?" Justin broke in again. "Handsome Eddie Hartley."

He was trying to help, Eddie knew, but in some ways this was worse. The edge of good-natured mockery his old nickname had always carried felt more pointed now. The last thing he wanted was for his acting career to be set beside Martha's.

"Is that right? Which of my masterpieces was it?"

"One of those old Law & Order episodes."

"Was I the good guy or the bad guy?"

"You were some kind of pervert. Putting plastic bags over little girls' heads or something like that."

"One of my finest roles."

"Have you gotten any big parts recently?" Tim Reilly asked. Eddie hadn't seen Reilly since their last reunion, so he couldn't blame him for the question.

"I gave all that up a few years ago. I just teach now."

"Not a bad fucking gig," Wilkins said. "Out at four. Summers off. I'd take it. I've been getting killed these days."

Eddie wanted to say that an opening could be found, if it attracted him all that much.

"The job does have its perks."

"Plus you get scholarships for the kids, right?"

"I don't have any kids just yet. But in theory, yes."

"Lucky bastard." Wilkins laughed, and his cheeks turned red, his freckles seeming to bleed out into the rest of his face. "We've got two, and we're already sweating how to get the older one into preschool. Do you know how much that shit costs these days? Even if I make partner in a couple of years, I couldn't pay two St. Albert's tuitions and keep the place on the

North Shore. It didn't used to be so expensive to be rich in this town. Now it's just the hedge fund guys like Price here who can swing it. Mere professionals need not apply."

Eddie separated himself from the group and walked to the far wall of the library, where a makeshift bar stood beneath a large circular window that looked out on the park. A banner stretched across the window: "St. Albert's School Welcomes You Back." Beneath it, the young woman working the bar smiled at Eddie with uncertain recognition, a once-common reaction that had become less so in recent years.

"You look familiar," she said as she filled his glass with ice.

Perhaps she was just flirting. That was still common enough.

"I know what it is," she added before he could respond. "You buy your morning coffee at the Flying Duck Market around the corner. We're the caterers for this thing."

"That must be it," Eddie said. "I'm the drama teacher here."

"That's so funny," she told him. "I'm an actress."

Eddie wasn't surprised to hear it. She was pretty—though not, he reflected, quite pretty enough.

"I work at the Flying Duck to pay the bills," she continued.

Eddie tried to think of something encouraging to say.

"That's as good a reason as any to work somewhere."

He took his drink and turned from the bar just in time to see Max Blakeman arrive. Eddie's mood immediately lifted at the sight of Blakeman. He'd known what he was in for that night—his classmates with their growing families and easy success, the questions about Martha Martin and his own acting career. The one appeal the evening had held was the chance to see Blakeman. They'd been best friends for years, but it seemed like they hardly spoke these days. Eddie missed him, perhaps more than anything else about his old life. They caught each other's eyes as Luce made his first attempt to call the room to order.

"If I could have just a moment of everyone's time, and then I'll let you get back to catching up with old friends."

Eddie watched with satisfaction as his classmates continued their conversations, barely acknowledging the effort to silence them. George Luce had been a young history teacher when Eddie's class was in school. Eddie's own mother—a secretary at St. Albert's for more than twenty years—had handled Luce's application to teach at the school. Only Eddie knew him in his role as headmaster, and the others seemed not to understand why they ought to be listening to him.

"As some of you know," Luce pressed on, "I'm the kind of man to whom tradition is a very serious matter." Luce was the kind of man, Eddie thought, who liked to tell people what kind of man he was. "Tomorrow, another class will graduate from St. Albert's," Luce continued. "This is the sixtieth graduating class in the school's history, and its members will go on to the finest colleges and universities in the nation. I take pride in having guided the tradition of St. Albert's to this auspicious point." The room came slowly to puzzled attention, as though seeking the source of a faint but persistent buzz disturbing the ambience. Just as Luce secured command of his audience, he seemed to lose the thread of his speech. "I hope you all have as many fond memories of your time here as we who are still here have of you," he concluded. "Now I'd like to hand things over to your class president, Justin Price."

In the days leading up to the reunion, Eddie had entertained the idea of saying a few words himself, offering his insider's view of life at St. Albert's these days. That seemed foolish now. As the only member of his class still connected to the school's daily existence, he'd

considered himself a kind of host that night, but he'd played no role in planning the event. Such duties and privileges fell naturally to people—like Justin—in a position to write checks of some significance to the school's endowment and capital needs.

"I'm going to be brief," Justin began, "since I think it's my job to catch Wilky when he passes out."

Justin had come to St. Albert's in the seventh grade as part of the Bootstrappers Program, which matched gifted underprivileged students with private-school scholarships. He'd been one of three black students to graduate in their class, and he now worked at some kind of financial concern—a fund? a firm? a trust?—with an ostentatiously generic name like Redwood or Bedrock, whose primary business so far as Eddie could tell was printing money in sufficient quantities to buy Justin a house on the South Fork and an apartment on Park Avenue by the time he'd turned thirty.

"Most of you know how important St. Albert's is to me, how the opportunity to come here changed my life. And I want that opportunity extended to as many young boys as possible. That's why I'm marking our fifteenth reunion by establishing a class scholarship fund. I encourage you all to consider contributing, in addition to your usual support of the annual campaign. To get us started, I'm endowing the fund with a gift of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Luce briefly applauded this number, but he was met only with uncomfortable laughter from Justin.

"I'm also committed to matching every dollar given to the fund up to another two hundred and fifty. So that's a challenge to you cheap bastards. That's all I've got to say, really, except it's great to see old friends."

Two hundred and fifty grand in one shot, Eddie thought as he raised his glass in a toast. Half a million, depending on how things worked out. It was certainly impressive, given where Justin had started. Though neither gifted nor excessively underprivileged himself, Eddie had also been something of a scholarship case, since his middle-class Irish immigrant parents could never have sent him to St. Albert's without the steep discount offered to employees. If his own career had gone just a little differently, he might have had that kind of money to throw around now. After all, the gift was less than Martha made for each episode of Dr. Drake.

As the crowd fell back into conversation, Eddie crossed the room to find Blakeman.

"Just the man I've been waiting to see," Blakeman said.

"You, too," Eddie said. "I wasn't sure you would make it."

"I had to show up. Since you won't come down to see me anymore."

In his first years out of college, Blakeman had thrown parties at his place several nights a week, and Eddie had never missed them. At the time, Eddie's acting career had still seemed promising. Blakeman had been struggling to get started as a writer, copyediting on the side for the New York Interviewer. Now Eddie was a drama teacher, and Blakeman was on the Interviewer's staff. He still threw the same parties, but Eddie hadn't gone to one in years. He'd tried to keep up for a while, but he couldn't stand in a room of writers and actors and filmmakers—even if most of them were "aspiring" writers and actors and filmmakers—and tell them he wasn't going to aspire anymore. He'd watched himself become less interesting in other people's eyes. Worse, he'd become less interesting in his own.

"Married life," Eddie said. This was unfair to Susan, who would have been happy to spend an evening at Blakeman's from time to time.

"Talk to me when you've got kids at home," Blakeman said. Everyone knew that Blakeman would never have kids at home. "Unless there's something you're not telling me?"

"Nothing to tell," Eddie said.

They left the building an hour later. Outside, someone made the predictable suggestion that they head to the stretch of bars on Second Avenue they'd snuck into during their last years at school. They stumbled across town until they arrived at an Irish pub that hadn't existed back then but was indistinguishable in look and tone from the places that had. Above the bar a television set that in earlier days would have been showing whatever sporting event could be found now aired a reality show.

"Pure Bliss," Reilly said. "My wife is obsessed with that show."

"Mine, too," Wilkins said as he handed out plastic shot glasses filled with a green liquid that appeared to have toothpaste mixed into it. "I can't say I mind watching with her. Justine Bliss is pretty cute."

"Hey, Eddie," said Reilly. "If you were still with Dr. Drake, you could have one of those shows. We'd all be on TV right now."

Eddie swallowed his shot, which had an odd spiciness that made his nostrils itch.

"If he was still with Martha," Justin said, "he wouldn't be wasting his time with any of us."

"I'm sure a master of the universe like yourself could manage an audience," Reilly told Justin. "But the rest of us would be out of luck."

On the trip across town they had lost all but about a dozen classmates. Some of those remaining seemed ready to leave after an obligatory first drink. Eddie spotted Blakeman at the bar and thanked Wilkins for the shot before walking over. Blakeman bought a round, which they brought to a table in the corner.

"Catch me up," Blakeman said. "How have you been?"

"What you were saying before," Eddie answered. "About kids at home?"

Perhaps the alcoholic mouthwash had done it, but he felt like telling someone. For all the distance that had grown between him and Blakeman, Eddie didn't have anyone else to tell. He had coworkers and a few couples that Susan invited over for dinner, but he didn't have any real friends anymore.

"Sure," Blakeman said, though he didn't seem to know what Eddie was talking about.

"We've actually been trying for a while."

"I can show you how it works, but I don't think the men's room has a lock."

"It doesn't seem to be happening," Eddie pressed on.

"Aren't there doctors for that?"

"Lots of doctors. Assisted reproductive technology. They call it ART."

"I guess you know it when you see it."

Eddie couldn't even pretend to laugh.

"Sorry to hear it," Blakeman said, once it was clear he couldn't joke his way through the conversation.

"The thing is, for all that pain and trouble, Susan wants to keep at it."

"And you don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't know whether it's a good idea," Eddie said. "I just know we can't afford it. Insurance won't cover most of it. We're out of pocket more than ten grand in the past six months, and we're broke."

Eddie was nearly in tears. He didn't know why he needed to tell Blakeman. There was nothing Blakeman could do about it.

"Do you remember Morgan Bench?" Blakeman asked.

Morgan was an old friend of Blakeman's who used to hang around when Eddie and Blakeman were still close.

"Sure."

"We're having dinner tomorrow night. You should join us."

"I don't know." Eddie was happy to be invited, but he resented the effort to change the subject. "I've got graduation and a reception afterward. But I'll be free by dinner."

"Try to make it work," Blakeman told him. "I don't just mean for the distraction. I think I can help."

"I'm not looking for a loan or anything." This was true, but only because he had no means of paying one back.

"Of course not. I'm as broke as you are." This might also have been true in some technical sense, though money was not something Blakeman had to worry about. "I'm just saying I think I can help."

Eddie wanted to ask what kind of help he could offer, but Wilkins and Reilly descended on the table.

"We were just talking about those Melwood girls from our year," Wilkins said. Melwood was the girls' school around the corner from St. Albert's.

"Do they still hang around the building after class?" Reilly asked Eddie. "With their uniform skirts rolled up?"

Eddie nodded while sipping his drink.

"Not a bad way to end the workday," Wilkins said.

"They're sixteen years old."

"There's no harm in looking," Wilkins said. "That makes them as old as Justine Bliss, and look at the way she gets up on TV."

As he spoke, he settled in across the table. The conversation about Blakeman's help was over. But Eddie couldn't stop thinking about it. After the four of them had closed the bar a few hours later, he walked home with a single phrase in his head: Blakeman can help. He dared to say it out loud. Blakeman can help. A couple walking by in the opposite direction—they weren't much older than Eddie's students—turned to look at him and laughed.

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