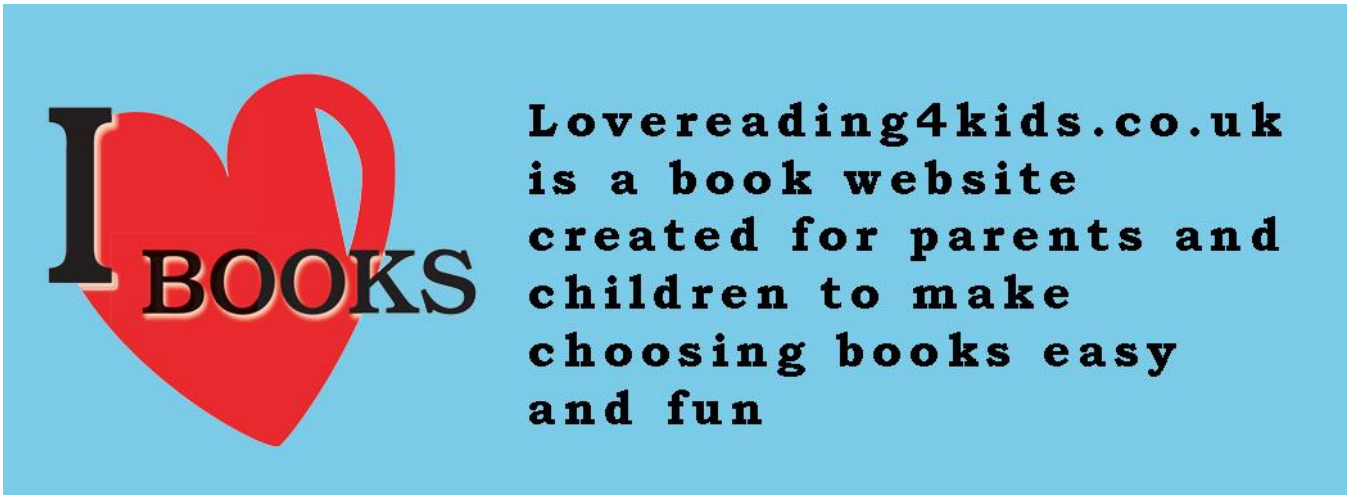


Opening extract from

Goodbye Days

Written by

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Chapter One

Depending on who—sorry, *whom*—you ask, I may have killed my three best friends.

If you ask Blake Lloyd's grandma, Nana Betsy, I think she'd say no. That's because when she first saw me earlier today, she grabbed me in a huge, tearful hug and whispered in my ear: "You are not responsible for this, Carver Briggs. God knows it and so do I." And Nana Betsy tends to say what she thinks. So there's that.

If you ask Eli Bauer's parents, Dr. Pierce Bauer and Dr. Melissa Rubin-Bauer, I expect they'd say maybe. When I saw them today, they each looked me in the eyes and shook my hand. In their faces, I saw more bereavement than anger. I sensed their desolation in the weakness of their handshakes. And I'm guessing part of their fatigue was over whether to hold me accountable in some way for their loss. So they go

down as a maybe. Their daughter, Adair? Eli's twin? We used to be friends. Not like Eli and I were, but friends. I'd say she's a "definitely" from the way she glowers at me as if she wishes I'd been in the car too. She was doing just that a few minutes ago, while talking with some of our classmates attending the funeral.

Then there's Judge Frederick Edwards and his ex-wife, Cynthia Edwards. If you ask them if I killed their son, Thurgood Marshall "Mars" Edwards, I expect you'd hear a firm "probably." When I saw Judge Edwards today, he towered over me, immaculately dressed as always. Neither of us spoke for a while. The air between us felt hard and rough as stone. "It's good to see you, sir," I said finally, and extended my sweating hand.

"None of this is good," he said in his kingly voice, jaw muscles clenching, looking above me. Beyond me. As though he thought if he could persuade himself of my insignificance, he could persuade himself that I had nothing to do with his son's death. He shook my hand like it was both his duty and his only way of hurting me.

Then there's me. I would tell you that I definitely killed my three best friends.

Not on purpose. I'm pretty sure no one thinks I did it on purpose; that I slipped under their car in the dead of night and severed the brake lines. No, here's the cruel irony for the writer I am: I wrote them out of existence. **Where are you guys? Text me back.** Not a particularly good or creative text message. But they found Mars's phone (Mars was driving) with a half-composed text responding to me, just

as I requested. It looks like that was what he was working on when he slammed into the rear of a stopped semi-trailer truck on the highway at almost seventy miles per hour. The car went under the trailer, shearing off the top.

Am I certain that it was my text message that set into motion the chain of events that culminated in my friends' deaths? No. But I'm sure enough.

I'm numb. Blank. Not yet in the throes of the blazing, ringing pain I'm certain waits for me in the unrolling days ahead. It's like once when I was chopping onions to help my mom in the kitchen. The knife slipped and I sliced open my hand. There was this pause in my brain as if my body needed to figure out it had been cut. I knew two things right then: (1) I felt only a quick strike and a dull throbbing. But the pain was coming. Oh, was it coming. And (2) I knew that in a second or two, I was about to start raining blood all over my mom's favorite bamboo cutting board (yes, people can form deep emotional attachments to cutting boards; no, I don't get it so don't ask).

So I sit at Blake Lloyd's funeral and wait for the pain. I wait to start bleeding all over everything.

Chapter Two

I'm a seventeen-year-old funeral expert.

The plan was we'd finish our senior year of high school at Nashville Arts Academy. Then Eli would be off to Berklee College of Music to study guitar. Blake to Los Angeles to pursue comedy and screenwriting. Mars hadn't figured out where he was going. But he knew *what* he would be doing: comic-book illustration. And I'd be heading to Sewanee or Emory for creative writing.

This was *not* the plan: for me to be waiting for the funeral of the third member of Sauce Crew to begin. Yesterday was Mars's funeral. Eli's the day before.

Blake's funeral is at his small, white Baptist church—one of about 37,567 small, white Baptist churches in the greater Nashville area. It reeks of graham crackers, glue, and old carpet. There are crayon-drawn pictures of Jesus, resembling

a bearded lollipop, handing out blue and green fishes to a multitude of stick figures. The air-conditioning doesn't work well in the early-August heat and I'm sweating in a navy-blue suit my sister, Georgia, helped me pick out. Or rather, Georgia picked it out herself while I stood there, dazed. I came out of my stupor briefly to express that I thought I was supposed to get a black suit. Georgia gently explained that navy was fine and I could wear it after the funeral. She always forgot to say *funerals*. Or maybe she didn't forget.

I sit in the back of the church, forehead resting on the pew in front of me. I watch the tip of my tie sway to and fro and wonder how humans got to a place where we said, "Whoa. Hold on. Before I can take you seriously, you need to hang a brightly colored strip of narrow pointy cloth around your neck." The carpet is blue and flecked with white. I wonder who designs carpet. Whose life's calling this is. Who says, "No! No! It's not right yet! It needs . . . specks of white! And then my masterpiece is complete!" I mull over this stuff because the world's reliable absurdity is one of the few things that can distract me, and I welcome distractions right now.

My forehead aches from resting on the hard, smooth wood. I hope I appear to be praying. That seems a church/funeral-appropriate thing to be doing. Plus it saves me from having to make small talk (which I despise under the best of circumstances) with the people making a hushed, sorrowful buzz around me, a swarm of mourning locusts. *Isn't it terrible . . . What a loss . . . He was so young . . . He was so funny . . . He was . . . He was . . . He was*. People take shelter

under clichés. Language is powerless enough in the face of death. I guess it's asking too much for people to veer from the tried-and-true under such circumstances.

There's a huge crowd. Blake's extended family from East Tennessee. People from Blake's church. Friends of Nana Betsy's from work. A bunch of our classmates from Nashville Arts. I'm friendly with most of them, if not friends. A few come by and quickly express sympathies before moving on, but they mostly leave me alone and I'm grateful. That is, I'm grateful if they're leaving me alone for compassion's sake and not because Adair has already persuaded them that I'm a killer.

There's a rustle beside me, the cushion of the pew depressing, a warmth, and then the sunlit perfume of honeysuckle. If any smell stands in defiance of death, it's honeysuckle.

"Hey, Carver."

I look up. It's Jesmyn Holder, Eli's girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend? They never broke up. They'd been dating for maybe two months. She has dark circles under her eyes. She wears her grief like dust on her face.

"Hey, Jesmyn."

"Can I sit here?"

"Sure." *Glad there's at least one future classmate Adair hasn't gotten to yet*.

"I guess I'm already sitting here."

"I heard someone say once that it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission."

"You here alone?" Jesmyn asks. "You were at the other two with a girl."

"That was my sister, Georgia. She had to work today. Sorry we didn't really talk at the other two funerals."

"I wasn't in a chatty mood."

"Me neither." I tug at my collar. "Is it super hot in here?" In general, I'd rather be bitten on the nuts by a Komodo dragon than make small talk. But sometimes you do what you have to do.

"Yeah, but my Filipino genes are fine with it," Jesmyn says.

We sit quietly for a moment while she surveys the crowd. "I recognize a lot of these people from the other two."

I lift my head slightly. "Some go to NAA. You still planning on going?"

"Of course. You didn't think I was going there because of Eli, did you?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. No."

"Two girls from NAA got into Juilliard's piano program last year. That's a huge percentage. That's why I decided to go even before I met Eli."

"I'm glad you're coming still. I didn't mean anything."

"It's cool. Anyway, this seems like a weird thing to talk about right now."

"Everything seems weird to talk about right now."

"Yeah."

At the front of the room, Nana Betsy shambles, weeping, toward Blake's cedar casket to run her hand along its smoothness once more before the funeral starts. I did that before sitting down. The smell of the cedar. Sharp and clean. It didn't smell like something that should be buried under the dirt. It was closed. You don't let people see how someone

looks after something like the Accident. So perched atop the casket lid on a wooden stand there's a photo of Blake. He purposely made it ridiculous. It's a department-store portrait; Olan Mills or Sears studio or something. He's wearing a thrift-store sweater from the 1980s and pleated khaki pants. He's holding a huge, grouchy-looking Persian cat. He didn't own a cat. He literally borrowed one for the photo. Pure Blake. A genuine and radiant grin covers his round face. His eyes are closed as if he blinked. He thought photos where people were blinking were hilarious.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw it. Even under the circumstances. All Blake had to do was walk into a room and I started preemptively laughing.

"How come you're not here with your parents?" Jesmyn asks, drawing me out of my memory.

"They're in Italy for their twenty-fifth anniversary. They tried to come home, but they had trouble getting tickets and my dad had to deal with a lost passport. They're coming home tomorrow."

"That sucks."

"Why aren't you sitting with Eli's parents?"

Jesmyn crosses her legs and picks a piece of lint off her black dress. "I was. But Adair was giving me a supercrusty vibe. And then I saw you sitting here looking really lonely."

"Maybe this is how I always look."

She brushes a lock of her reddish-black hair from her face. I smell her shampoo. "Imagine my embarrassment if I came over here to show you kindness and you didn't need it."

"Adair won't be happy with you showing me kindness."

"Yeah, well. I guess life is about risk."

I rub my eyes. My exhaustion is beginning to set in. I haven't slept more than a few hours in the last three days. I turn to Jesmyn. "Have you talked to Eli's parents or Adair much since the accident?" I realize, even as I ask, that I have no idea where Jesmyn herself stands on the whole blame thing. Lack of sleep has lowered my inhibitions such that I'm asking questions that might lead to answers I'm unready to hear.

She opens her mouth to answer when the service begins. We bow our heads as Blake's pastor prays and then offers words of comfort from the gospels. It reminds me more of Mars's huge funeral at New Bethel AME Church than Eli's small private service at Connelly Brothers' Funeral Home. Eli's parents are atheists, and it was the first funeral I'd ever been to that didn't once mention God. Seventeen years old and the breadth of my funerary experience probably rivals that of people twice my age.

Six members of Nashville Arts's a cappella choir perform a requiem. They did this at Mars's and Eli's funerals too. Tears streak Jesmyn's face like an atlas of rivers. She holds a wadded-up tissue and dabs her eyes and nose, staring straight ahead. I don't understand why I'm not crying. I should be. Maybe it's like how it's sometimes too cold to snow.

One of Blake's uncles reads First Thessalonians 4:14–17 in his thick East Tennessee accent. His large hands tremble. His voice wavers. *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's*

word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

A fly lands on the pew in front of me and rubs its back legs together. This fly is alive and Blake is dead. The world brims with pulsing, humming life. Except for in the wooden box at the front of the room. There everything lies still. And what caused this stillness was the most banal, routine activity on my part. Texting my friends. The human equivalent of a fly's rubbing its back legs together. It's just something we *do*. It's not supposed to kill your three best friends.

Nana Betsy limps to the pulpit to deliver the eulogy. She has bad knees. She takes a long while to gather herself before speaking. Her hands are empty, as though she planned to say whatever was in her heart. The look on her face says that there's too much to choose from.

I try not to breathe too much or too loudly in the silence. My mouth is dry and I have a headache forming at the base of my skull. My throat aches as if I have something caught in it. The precarious wall I've built—that we all build to protect others from enduring the spectacle of our grief—is beginning to crumble.

Nana Betsy clears her throat and speaks. "Blake's life

wasn't always easy. But he lived joyously. He loved his family. He loved his friends. And he was loved by them."

Down comes the wall and out pours the swirling, gray sea it contained. I put my head in my hands and rest my elbows on my knees. I press the heels of my hands over my eyes, and tears seep hot around the sides. I'm trembling. Jesmyn's hand is on my shoulder. At least the ache in my throat is gone, as though it were an abscess full of tears that I lanced.

"Blake was funny," Nana Betsy says. "If you knew him, he made you laugh at some time or another."

Tears stream down my wrists and dampen my shirt cuffs. They dribble onto the blue carpet with white flecks. I think for a second about all the places I've made a small part of me. Now a tiny piece of this church holds my tears. Maybe after I'm dead, they can cut up the carpet and extract my DNA from my tears that have soaked into the carpet and resurrect me. Maybe that's what the resurrection will be.

"Think of him every time someone makes you laugh. Think of him every time you make someone laugh. Think of him every time you hear someone laugh."

I draw a deep breath that hitches and shudders as the air enters my lungs. It's probably too loud, but I don't care. I sat in the back for a reason. I don't sense anyone turning to look at me, at least.

"I can't wait for the day that I see him again and throw my arms around him. Until then, I know he'll be sitting at our Savior's feet." She pauses to compose herself before

finishing. "And he's probably making Jesus laugh too. Thank you all for coming. This would have meant a lot to Blake."

The funeral ends. I stand to serve as pallbearer. They didn't ask me to be Mars's or Eli's pallbearer.

Jesmyn reaches up and touches my hand. "Hey. Do you want a ride to the cemetery?"

I nod, grateful, sagging into myself. Like I've awoken from one of those dreams where you cry and soak your pillow. Your grief is animal, formless, unhinged in the illogic of dreams. You wake up and don't remember what you were crying about. Or you do, and you were crying because you've been offered a chance at redeeming yourself. So when you realize it was a dream, you keep crying because your shot at redemption is another thing you've lost. And you're tired of losing things.

I help carry Blake's casket to the hearse. It weighs a thousand pounds. I had a science teacher ask us once: "What weighs more? A pound of feathers or a pound of lead?" Everyone said lead. But a few hundred pounds of best friend and casket don't weigh the same as a few hundred pounds of lead or feathers. It weighs much more.

▫ ▫ ▫

It's a short walk from the front of the church to the waiting hearse, but in the sultry afternoon heat, I'm soaked when I get to Jesmyn's battered Nissan pickup.

"Sorry, my AC doesn't work," she says, sweeping piano books off the passenger seat.

"Don't you die of heat every time you drive anywhere?"

"That's the best way you could phrase it?"

"Don't you suffer extreme discomfort but not literal death every time you drive anywhere?" I get in and roll down the window.

We drive without speaking for most of the ride, the muggy air washing over our faces. My cheeks are gritty with dried salt.

When we're a few blocks from the cemetery, Jesmyn asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I lie. A few seconds pass. "No."