Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

# Untouchable

written by

## Kate Brian

published by

**Simon & Schuster**

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

# charade

My first funeral. My first funeral was for the first guy to ever see me naked. This could not be right.

It wasn't for a grandparent or for a friend's elderly aunt with wrinkles so deep you could stash stuff in them, but for Thomas. Thomas Pearson. The first classmate I had met at Easton Academy. The first person who had made me feel semi-welcome. Gorgeous, mysterious, intense Thomas Pearson. The person I had lost my virginity to.

So many moments kept replaying themselves in my mind, and no matter what I did, I couldn't seem to make them stop. The moment Josh Hollis had rushed back through the fog to tell me that Thomas was dead. The moment I had found the note from Thomas telling me he was going to be all right, and how stupid I felt now to have believed it. The last moment I had seen Thomas, leaving my dorm room at Bradwell. It seemed like so long ago. I didn't even live there anymore. Thomas had never seen my new room at Billings. Now he never would. Because now he was lying

cold and dead in a coffin. In the ground somewhere, in a coffin. The family had opted for a private burial, so I didn't even know where he was. I just knew he was down there somewhere. Rotting.

Every time I thought about it, I gasped for breath.

"What is it?" Noelle Lange asked me.

We were standing next to the huge marble fireplace in one of four massive living rooms in the Pearsons' co-op on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A few kids from school were staring at me, just as they had been ever since Thomas had first gone missing. It was like they were just salivating for the nervous breakdown they were sure I was going to have. But so far I hadn't even cried in their presence. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. I waited for the soul-gripping fear to pass before answering.

"Nothing," I told her. "That just keeps happening."

"You're still in shock," Ariana Osgood whispered, her voice soothing. "It's perfectly normal."

Noelle nodded and put her hand on my back. Noelle. Being comforting. That was a new one. Mostly she just opted for sarcastic and mocking. She also looked softer than usual today. Less threatening. Her light-gray cashmere crewneck and simple black skirt were perfect, of course, but her brown hair was product-free and fell around her face, framing it in a way that made her appear gentler. She had also forgone the mascara and subtle eyeliner she always wore. Without it, she almost looked her real age. Like she was my equal.

I looked around the spacious room, feeling numb now and

extremely hot. Hundreds of people had turned out for the wake. They mingled in the muted opulence in their designer suits and black dresses, sipping wine and talking in low tones. Peppered among the gray-haired gentlemen and Botoxed ladies were dozens of kids from school, all of whom looked shocked and shaken. Like Noelle, some of Easton's most renowned Shiseido worshippers hadn't even bothered with makeup. They perched on sofas and settees, dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs, consoling one another. The guys, meanwhile, stood around with their hands in their pockets, looking skittish. As if their confidence had been somehow shaken. Maybe if Thomas Pearson was capable of dying, they weren't quite as invincible as they had once thought. Reality had just set in for these guys who normally walked around in a dream world, a world where they were completely untouchable.

"Could this be any more morbid?" Kiran Hayes said, swinging her wineglass around a bit too brazenly. "This many people didn't turn up when the pope died. It's like everyone has some sicko fascination just because he was a kid."

Kiran tipped her wineglass toward her mouth and downed what was left in one gulp. An actual billboard model, she was the most beautiful person I had ever met in real life. And after knowing her for a month, I was starting to feel like she might also be the one most likely to end up in rehab. A few pieces of her dark hair had fallen out of her carefully twisted bun, and her green eyes were unfocused. Still, every guy in the room was checking her out when they thought no one was watching.

"I bet one of these blond chignons walking around here is covering it for the rags," Noelle said stoically. "A good prep school scandal is their wet dream."

There was the Noelle I knew and feared.

"Noelle!" Ariana scolded, her blue eyes piercing. Her own blond hair was also back in a loose chignon. In her dark clothing, with her diamond earrings securely fastened in her ears, Ariana looked less wispy and more in charge than she ever had before.

"What? No one heard me," Noelle said, smoothing her long, dark hair behind one shoulder. "And I'll bet you my entire trust fund I'm right. Just wait. 'The Thomas Pearson Tragedy' will have a four-page spread in *Hamptons Magazine* next month."

"I can't believe anyone would want to exploit his death," I said. "It's not like he's famous or something."

"He was around here," Noelle said with a sigh.

At that moment, Taylor Bell, who had been sniffling and quietly weeping all day, burst into another round of tears. Her dark-blond curls shook as she buried her cherubic face in a handkerchief. Ariana reached out and rubbed Taylor's arms.

Taylor's display of emotion made me so uncomfortable I had to look away. She and the rest of these girls hadn't even liked Thomas. They had, in fact, hated him. Warned me to stay away from him. And now, like everyone else, they were all completely shattered. As if Thomas had meant the world to them.

Still, it wasn't like I should have been that surprised. Love him

or hate him, Thomas had been a classmate. One of them. They had known him for years. So of course they would be shocked and freaked. I was just surprised at *how* freaked.

My strained eyes fell on Missy Thurber—big nostrils, bigger attitude—leaning back against the tastefully papered wall in her chic black suit, her nose all red from crying. At her side, as always, was Lorna Gross, whispering in her ear, looking very somber. I suddenly wanted to hurl something at them from across the room. Where the hell did they get off pretending to mourn? Neither of them had ever spoken to Thomas in their lives.

Between them and Taylor and Kiran's continued rantings, I was beginning to feel a bit claustrophobic. Then I saw Constance Talbot, my former roommate, making her way across the room toward me. The last time I had seen Constance she had told me off with tears in her eyes for dating the guy of her dreams, Walt Whittaker. Walt Whittaker, who was here somewhere, chatting up a few members of the older generation, as usual. Whit and I were definitely no longer an item (not that we'd ever really been one), but I had no idea whether or not Constance knew this or not.

I stood up straight as she stepped up to me, my whole body tense. Constance met my gaze, then threw her arms around me.

"Reed! I am so, so, so, *so* sorry!" she said over my shoulder.

I was so surprised, it took me a moment to respond. But then I hugged her back. Hard. In a million years I never would have been able to predict the relief that rushed through me at her gesture of

friendship. Apparently Constance was a lot more important to me than I'd realized.

"Thanks," I said as she pulled away.

Her green eyes were bright and red-rimmed, her wavy, dark-red hair held back in a simple ponytail. It was hard to tell if she was paler than usual or if it was the lighting, but somehow the freckles on her nose stood out more today, making her look almost precious.

"Are you okay?" she asked me, biting her lip.

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know," I said. A bubbly sob rose up into my throat and I swallowed it back. "It's all just a little surreal."

Surreal didn't even begin to describe it, but it was the only word I could come up with. Every other second I experienced a new and intense emotion. Just forty-eight hours ago I had been on a train back to Easton from the city, telling Josh—Thomas's roommate—that I was over Thomas. That I was moving on. And I had felt really good about that decision. Thomas, after all, had disappeared from school without warning. Without a goodbye. I had found that note from him days later, but it had raised more questions than it had answered. And for weeks he hadn't bothered to get in touch with me, even to let me know that he was all right. I had decided that a guy like that was not worth my time. That I deserved better.

But now I had found out that the reason Thomas had been incommunicado was that he was *dead*. And every time I thought about how indignant and angry and self-righteous I'd been over

the past few weeks, I felt this soul-sucking guilt unlike anything I had ever felt before.

"It must make it harder, not knowing how he died," Constance said. She turned around to stand next to me and survey the room.

"You bet your ass it is," Kiran said, a bit too loudly. She grabbed another wineglass from a passing waiter and drained half of it.

"Kiran, keep your voice down," Ariana said.

"What? I'm just saying I'd like to know, you know, exactly *how* they think it happened, that's all," Kiran ranted. "Wouldn't it make you feel better to just know, once and for all, what they're thinking? If they have any theories?"

"You're rambling," Ariana said, taking the glass right out of Kiran's hands and placing it on the mantel, out of reach. Kiran looked after it longingly.

"I wonder if his parents know," Noelle said, narrowing her eyes as the golden-haired Mrs. Pearson strode into the room to whisper in the ear of the caterer. "They'd have to tell the parents, right?"

No one spoke. It wasn't as if we knew the inner workings of the justice system.

"Look at them," Kiran said, lifting her chin toward Mrs. Pearson, who had now been joined by her silver-haired husband. She snapped at a waiter and procured a fresh glass of wine. Ariana rolled her eyes. "They're just chatting like this is some charity function. When I go, I hope my parents don't look that poised."

"Kiran! Oh my God!" Taylor said, her quivering jaw dropping.

"What? I'm just saying," Kiran replied, rolling her eyes.

"Talk about morbid," Noelle said.

I watched as Mrs. Pearson chuckled and laid her hand gently on the arm of one of their friends. Mr. Pearson checked his watch and glanced around as if looking to see if there was anyone more interesting to talk to. Suddenly, my heart started to flutter in this insane way. A way that made my breath catch and my skin sear.

They had lost their only son and they didn't even care.

I looked away and my eyes fell on a tall, broad guy, about my age, who was leaning against the wall alone, staring at me. I looked away quickly, thinking maybe we'd just happened to glance at each other at the exact same moment, but when I looked back, he was still staring. He had a thin face, chalk-white skin, and blue eyes rimmed in red. His black hair was slicked back and he wore a black suit. Add some dark lighting and eerie music and he could have been a vampire lying in wait. I waited for him to look away. And waited. Still he stared.

"Who is that?" I asked Noelle finally.

"That? That's Blake."

"Blake who? Why is he staring at me?" I asked, nervous.

"Blake *Pearson*," Noelle said. "Thomas's brother?"

The entire building might as well have collapsed beneath my feet. I leaned against the wall, feeling for a moment that I might black out. I wasn't sure my body could take another shock.

"Thomas's *what*?"

"He never told you he had an older brother?" Noelle asked. "God, that boy was really down with the secrets."

"Why would Thomas talk about Blake?" Ariana reached up and scratched the back of her neck. "They hated each other."

"They did?" I asked, half out of it. I wanted to know more, but my brain was too frazzled to formulate words. Had he talked to Thomas before he died? What did he know? But when I managed to look up again, Blake was gone. A chill raced down my back.

"'Member that huge brawl they had freshman year?" Kiran drawled. "I really thought they were going to kill each other."

Ariana shot her a silencing glare. Not at all an appropriate comment.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Blake was having an affair with the dean's secretary, and Thomas threatened to tell their parents. Classic 'I wanna be the favorite son' threat," Noelle said.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I said. "Thomas's brother had an affair with Ms. Lewis-Hanneman? But she's . . . old."

"Yeah, but look at the woman. She's totally hot. And it's not like she's *ancient*. She was still in her twenties a couple years ago," Kiran said. "Deteriorating, sure, but not quite ready for the junkyard."

"I think we should change the subject now, ladies," Ariana said, noticing that some of the older attendees were beginning to stare.

This was totally insane. Thomas had a brother. An older brother

who supposedly couldn't stand him. Why had Blake been staring at me? Did he know who I was? Had Thomas told him about me? I thought I had known Thomas so well and all along he'd had a brother I had never even heard about. Yet another mystery that would never be explained.

"I have to get out of here," I said, pushing myself away from the wall.

I walked right through the crowd and over to the far side of the room where Josh stood chatting with some other guys from school. His curly blond hair had been tamed with some kind of gel and he looked even taller and slightly broader than usual in his blue suit. While the rest of us had been whisked to the city in a limousine commissioned by Dash McCafferty's parents, Josh had driven his own Range Rover down—the one he kept in a garage off campus in case of emergency. He had been prescient enough to realize that either he or someone he cared about might want to bail from this charade early. Boy had a gift.

"Hey," I said, touching his arm.

He took one look at me and his blue eyes widened. "You okay?"

Just being near him made me feel slightly better. Solid, comforting, levelheaded Josh. He would take care of everything.

"Fine," I said flatly. "I just need to go. Can we go?"

"Yeah. Definitely. Let's go," he said.

He placed his water glass on a table nearby, said a few words to the guys, and placed his hand against the small of my back as we

turned. He walked me back to my friends near the fireplace, all of whom were already gathering their purses.

"You guys wanna bail?" he asked.

"My hero," Noelle said wryly.

"In *your* car?" Taylor asked, her eyes still wet.

"Yes, in *his* car. What do you think, he's gonna hijack a helicopter?" Noelle snapped.

Taylor looked at Kiran, who rolled her eyes and finished the wine she'd grabbed back from the mantel. "Just what I need," she muttered.

What the hell was wrong with these girls? Were they really that put out by the fact that they'd have to spend a couple of hours in a car that wasn't a limo? Five minutes living my life at home and they'd probably all break out in hives.

"Where are Dash and Gage?" Josh asked.

"Who cares?" Noelle said, abandoning Dash, who was her boyfriend, with two words. "They're big boys. They'll live without us. Let's just get the hell out of here."

"Constance?" I said, turning to her. "Wanna come?"

Constance looked warily at the four girls surrounding me—the four most powerful girls in all of Easton. Apparently the idea was too intimidating for her to handle.

"Actually, I'm supposed to have dinner with my parents and the Whittakers tonight," she said finally. "They're bringing me back."

"Really?"

Under any other circumstances, this news would have made me smile. Constance blushed. "It was our parents' idea."

Later, when I had the energy and the motivation, I would have to grill her about this. But for now, she was off the hook. The good news was that I could tell that all the Whittaker-related tension between us was gone for good.

"Okay. I'll see you back there," I told her.

Then I did something I hade never done before. I voluntarily hugged a person.

Suddenly, I couldn't wait to get out of this place. I could practically taste freedom. On our way out, Ariana veered off course; away from the door.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Reed, we have to pay our respects," she said over her shoulder. "We're not heathens."

Great. Exactly what I wanted to do. As we approached the family, Mrs. Pearson chatted with a horse-faced woman with capped teeth and a widow's peak.

"Well, yes, of course. This is the only time of year to be in Paris. Any other season it's just *overrun* with tourists," Mrs. Pearson was saying.

"Trina hasn't considered herself a tourist in any part of Europe since the day she bought her first couture," Thomas's father added, sharing a chuckle with his friend.

"We'd be there now, if it wasn't for this," Thomas's mother said, gesturing blithely at the room.

My heart was in a vise. There was no way. There was no way these people were standing there joking about their travel habits and dismissing Thomas's wake as an inconvenience. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe.

"Screw them. Just get it over with," Noelle said in my ear as Ariana politely shook the Hands of Evil.

When I stepped before the Pearsons, I must have been red with rage. Still, part of me expected them to recognize me as the person who had been with them when we had first realized that Thomas was missing. The person who had meant enough to their son that he had invited me to brunch with them. But when his mother's cold, hard eyes fell on me there was no spark of anything. Except, perhaps, mild displeasure. Apparently my simple black dress and unhighlighted brown hair didn't meet her exacting standards. These were the things that were on her mind today of all days. Well, these things and Paris.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I told her through my teeth.

Then I somehow refrained from grinding my heel into her toe on my way out the door.