

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST FOR *HONEY, BABY, SWEETHEART*

DEBCALETTI

the last forever



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*The Story of Us*

And don't miss

*He's Gone*

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DEB CALETTI

Simon Pulse

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*For John, always*





## chapter one

*Silene steophylla*: narrow-leaved campion. Seeds from this delicate, white-flowered plant were found in a prehistoric rodent burrow in the Siberian permafrost. Scientists were able to successfully grow them, making these twenty-three-thousand-year-old seeds the oldest living ones ever discovered.

In those early months, when the beautiful and mysterious Henry Lark and I began to do all that reading, I often skimmed over the name. *Svalbard*. I'd see all those consonants shoved together and my brain would shut off. I thought it sounded like a Tolkien bad guy, or a word that might cast a spell. Here's what I suggest—don't even try to pronounce it. Just imagine it. I love to imagine it: a hidden building, a narrow wedge of black steel jutting from the ice. When I close my eyes, I see its long, rectangular windows—one on the roof, one at the entrance—a beacon of prisms glowing green in the deep twilight of the polar night. Fenced in and guarded, with steel airlock doors and motion detectors, it is

the most protected place on earth. Outside, polar bears stomp and huff in the frigid air.

Or imagine this: that first monumental day of excavation, when the mayor of Longyearbyen, Kjell Mork, stood on the chosen spot with a fuse in his hand, ready to blast open the side of a frozen mountain. *Longyearbyen, Kjell Mork*—more Tolkien words, and Kjell Mork himself looks like a Tolkien king, with his snowy white hair and full blizzard of beard, the ceremonial chain of silver discs around his neck, representing his people and his place. Okay, he's also wearing a blue hard hat and an orange construction vest, which would never work in the film version. But that fuse burning down, it would. He looks grim but determined in the pictures.

It all sounds like a fantasy novel, but it's real. As I write this right now, as you read this, that place is there, tucked inside that mountain. As I pour my cereal or shove my books into my backpack, as you pay the cashier at the drive-through window or stare at the moon, it's there. And it's all—the guards, the buried chambers, the subzero temperatures—in service of the most simple, regular thing: a seed. Actually, a lot of seeds. Three million seeds. That's what it's for. To protect seeds in the event of a global catastrophe. To make sure that, even if there's a nuclear war or an epidemic or a natural disaster, even if the cooling systems within Svalbard itself are destroyed, the seeds will survive for thousands upon thousands of years.

What should never be forgotten is this: Even when times are dark, the darkest, even when you are sure that life as you

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know it is over, there are still things that last. I learned that. Henry Lark and I both did. You may not be able to see those things. They may be hidden deep under the ground, or they may be tucked even deeper into your heart, but they are there.

And how did I, a regular person, as regular as those seeds themselves, become connected to a frozen vault 3,585.1 miles from home? (5,769.7 kilometers and seven hours and twenty-seven minutes away by plane, to be exact.) You never know what life will bring; you never do. It's something my mother always said. In good times and in the worst times she said that, and she was right. We—that vault and me—we're an unlikely pair. There is that land of wintry wildness and midnight sun and the eerie blue of polar nights and then there's me, a person who chops her bangs and reads too much. But I am now forever connected to this most brave and defiant place.

*How* and *why* is what this story is about. *Here to there*. *Here to there* is where all the stories are. *Here to there* is the sometimes barren land you must cross to find the way to begin again.

## chapter two

*Mucuna pruriens*: velvet bean. One of the most irritating, confusing, multifaceted, and helpful seeds ever. The velvet bean can be deadly if eaten, but it's often used as a food source for animals and a coffee substitute for humans. It causes terrible itching upon contact, but it's also medicinal—supposedly curing sexual dysfunction, snakebites, Parkinson's disease, and depression. Sometimes it's smoked for its psychedelic effects. As a whole, if this seed were a person, it'd feed you, cure you, kill you, or drive you crazy.

Let's start here. The papers my father uses. They come in an orange envelope, and they're called Zig-Zag. There's a picture of a man on the package—he looks like Jesus if Jesus got a good haircut and trimmed his beard. Step one: Take out a paper and lay it on the table, sticky side up. Step two: Curl a tiny piece of cardboard into a cylinder. Step three: Lay the “weed” onto the paper in a line. (“Weed,” which is what he calls it, makes it sound unplanned. Like it just happened to appear in his yard,

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so what's a person to do?) Step four: Pinch, roll, and then lick the end down.

Dad pats his jeans, then the chest of his T-shirt, where the pockets would be if it had pockets. "Okay, where'd you go?" he says, as if his lighter is prone to practical jokes. Dad hunts around in the Folgers can by the telephone, which has a bunch of spare change in it, and then he fishes through the junk drawer—out comes masking tape and loose batteries. Now out comes a screwdriver, a key chain that says I SHOWER NAKED, a mini Magic 8 Ball, and farther back, the manual to an Osterizer blender we don't have anymore. You get the picture of Mom and Dad right there in that drawer. Mom, the fixer of things, the saver of instructions, part-time office manager for Dr. Ned Kelly, DDS, and Dad, the guy who'll take a glowy green triangle at its word. *It is certain.* Shake again. *My sources say no.*

Dad's black-gray hair is in a ponytail, and, hey, that's one of my elastic bands. He's been wearing that same shirt for days. My father would say he's been adrift since my mother died, but she and I would both argue that point. He's always been adrift. I think my mom blamed Dad's own mother, Grandma Jenny. Something about how Grandma Jenny used to do his homework for him, which saved him from "the consequences of his actions."

"O-kay," Dad says. He's found another lighter. It's a fast-food yellow, the shade of one of those plastic lemons with the juice inside. He holds it in the air in triumph, then

flick-flick-flicks the metal wheel with his thumb a few times before a flame appears. “Man make fire,” he says in a caveman voice. “Man make fire, hunt bear, smoke joint.”

I know what he’ll do next, and sure enough, he goes into the living room and the rocking chair begins to creak. Sometimes he just sits there, and sometimes he puts Bob Marley on the stereo (a cliché, dear Dad), and sometimes he just stares at the news or old reruns of *I Dream of Jeannie*, which he says he loved as a kid, with Major Healey and the jeweled bottle with the pink smoke, from the time when people knew the names of astronauts.

I think he’s depressed. Depressed and trying to hide it. He doesn’t hide it well. He watches entirely too much television, for one thing. I hear him flip through channels—*A fifty-dollar value for . . . After severe weather pounded these parts . . . The island is a stop along an ocean-wide migra . . . Difficult or painful swallowing, headaches, stomachaches . . .* I put everything he’s left on the counter back in the drawer; then I start dinner. Mac and cheese, hot dogs. Fill both pans with two-thirds of a cup of water, and when the noodles are done, it’s one-quarter cup of margarine and one-quarter cup of milk and the package of cheese dust.

I hate it when he’s hazy; I hate the unfocused eyes. It makes me get that middle-of-the-night feeling, when you wake up and lie there in bed, sure you hear a sound when you probably don’t hear a sound.

“Ah, excellent! Thanks, babe,” he says, when I bring him dinner.

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“Catch,” I say, and toss him his lost lighter, his favorite, the one with the picture of the two dolphins leaping from the sea, which I found in the silverware drawer.

“There it is!” He tucks it into the pocket of his jeans. “Hey, I just remembered. I heard something about dolphins today. Some scientist discovered that they give each other *names*.”

“Wow.” That is so cool. I love that idea. “How did they figure that out?”

He shrugs. “Didn’t hear the whole thing. What do you think they call each other?”

“Bart?” I suggest. I chuckle. Sometimes I crack myself up.

“Gino the Nose. Jimmy ‘Big Fin’ Balducci.”

We laugh. I should also say how much I love this guy, my father. I love him to bursting. My mom did too. “And Flipper is the common name, like John,” I say.

“You gonna eat with me?” He’s already shoveling it in.

“I’ve got homework. All the stuff they pile on at the end of the year.”

“You work too hard; you know that? Life is short.”

He realizes what he says. We catch eyes for a second, and there’s this awkwardness in the room. I wade through it to get to the doorway. I feel guilty leaving. My whole back, now turned to him, is crawling with guilt. You’d think that someone dying would draw people closer, but it doesn’t work like that. Or else, it didn’t work that way for us. What happened over the last six months is too intimate and important, and now neither of us knows what to do with it all. What

is unspoken between people—it has a life of its own, I'll tell you that much. It's like some wild animal cub you find orphaned in the woods. The mistake is bringing it home at all, because of course it's going to grow. Of course it's going to get bigger and fiercer than you first think, looking at its harmless little face.

My bowl of mac and cheese is on my desk, and so is my laptop, and of course, the last pixiebell, with its delicate, clover-shaped leaves and its sturdy stalk rising from its terra-cotta pot glazed blue. Right away, I think of doing what I would have always done in the past (something I was excellent at: procrastination), calling Meg, my oldest best friend, talking for twenty minutes about nothing, her new shoes, what she heard Jessie say in the bathroom. *Next year when we're seniors we're gonna . . .* Or I could call Caitlin, who recently went on one of those trips to Costa Rica, the tree-planting/shelter-building-type trip everyone goes on now, to some country with bad water and patchy Wi-Fi that makes all of them, including Caitlin, come home changed and with a new worldview. At least, they stop dyeing their hair and getting pedicures for a couple of months before everything goes back to being exactly as it was before. Sorry. I'm so negative sometimes. Planting trees is a good thing.

I also think of calling Dillon Moore, who I am sort of seeing. We kiss a lot, anyway, which is interesting, but truthfully, a kiss needs something more important than curiosity. A kiss

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needs desire. A kiss should rocket past the excitement level of eating lettuce. I'm terrible. I am. I care about Dillon.

I don't call anyone, though, because a loved person dying can make you feel distant from everyone, not just the person who's gone. There's grief and then there's the loneliness of grief. The way it's just yours and yours alone. After six months, the excitement of it is over for everyone else. They're ready to move on from being the supportive, understanding friends, which is fine—God, more-more-more than fine—but nothing about it is over for you. It's just getting started. You have gone on a long trip, the longest, and the water is very, very bad, but when you come back, the change is permanent.

I can hear Dad in the living room. It's not old *I Dream of Jeannie* reruns, but *Gilligan's Island*. There's the disgusted voice of Skipper: *Gilligan, you idiot!* and the capable tones of the professor, who after all these years is still trying to make a phone from a coconut. "Fuck, man," Dad says, and laughs. In this story—well, pardon my father's bad mouth. I sincerely apologize. I'm not responsible for him. He's not responsible for him either, but I believe we've covered this already.

In the end, I don't call anyone. Instead, I get right to work, finishing up the semester's final project in state history. Fort San Bernardino, 1851, where early settlers protected themselves against desert Indians, a to-scale model. Three feet equals one and a quarter inches. Honestly, it's a step above those dioramas we made for book reports in elementary school, but I like doing it anyway. Cardboard, X-Acto knife, glue. Tiny rooms

with thumbnail doorways. It's a fort, and I sort of even like to imagine I'm inside it. A tiny me in the tiny rooms. After a long while, Dad pops his head in the doorway.

"Tessa Jane?"

"Thomas Quincy?" Imagine having a middle name like Quincy.

"Want to make that road trip to the Grand Canyon? Want to just fucking *do* it?"

San Bernardino to Barstow, Route 66, 70.6 miles. Interstate 40 east to Williams, Arizona, 319.5 miles. From Williams, Arizona Route 64 north, fifty miles to the south rim of the Grand Canyon. Seven hours and we'd be there. We'd planned this trip the night our neighbor, Peggy Chadwick, Brianna Chadwick's mother, brought us over a casserole dish of baked ziti. You want to be bold when people feed you, or else pity makes you restless, or maybe Italian sausage is more energizing than you'd think.

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

I laugh. He's got to be kidding. "Um, your *job*? And school's not out until next week."

I'm sure that's the end of it. But here's the tricky part. Endings and beginnings sit so close to each other that it's sometimes impossible to tell which is which.

I bring the fort to school the next day. It's bigger than I realize, and for a minute I think I'm going to have to strap the thing to

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the top of my (Mom's) old Taurus. After much sweating and maneuvering and hoping no one's watching, I finally wrestle it into the backseat. Thank God state history is first period, but I'm also sort of sad to see the fort go. It's one of those projects you really want to get back, but once you do, it sits in your room taking up way too much space until you end up dumping it anyway. I'm not good at throwing stuff out. Well, Henry Lark would be the first to say so, but he'd make it sound like a compliment.

It's a dusty hot day, and you can feel the school year ending. It's all flip-flops and skipped classes and the slam of lockers and laughter. Jessa Winters and lots of other girls are wearing their skin-snug shirts that show a stripe of tanned stomach, and everyone's stressing about AP tests, especially the people who never need to stress. Walter Nguyen, valedictorian, for example, who hunches over a stack of three-by-five cards like he's trying to solve the global health crisis instead of memorizing orchestra vocab. It's the end of junior year, the year of acronyms: AP, SAT, ACT, GPA. Everyone wants to be done at this point, to just get out of here, except for maybe little Ben Dunne, who does every sport and after-school activity because his parents are both alcoholics.

I eat lunch with Meg and Caitlin and C.J. and Adam and Hannah. Someone throws a tortilla. Adam is bragging that he came in early to lift weights, but you can tell he didn't shower after. He starts every sentence with "Being as awesome as I am" until C.J. socks him.

“Being as awesome as I am, I won’t even seriously hurt you for that,” Adam says.

Jacob Newly comes by, bends down, says, “Feel my hair.” He’s just gotten a buzz cut, and everyone takes a turn.

“Ooh,” Caitlin says. “Nice.”

“Very grassy,” Adam says.

“I thought you said ‘very gassy.’” C.J. rubs Jacob’s head. Jacob is loving this way too much, in my opinion. “Dude, you look like ROTC.”

“Don’t you think that’s just *wrong*? You don’t hang up on someone. You just don’t,” Meg says to me. “You’re not even listening.”

“You don’t just hang up on someone, you said.” I eat a container of yogurt. Everything feels silly to me. Haircuts and arguments, lockers and flip-flops and yogurt, even. Forts in miniature and the amount of time it takes to memorize *larghetto* versus *allegretto*. Every *etto* in the world feels silly, and so does Mr. White’s striped necktie, as Mr. White paces the cafeteria trolling for bad behavior, and so do plastic, elastic cafeteria-lady hats and Caitlin’s tube of lip gloss, which she is now winding upward.

“You okay?” Meg asks. She knows me so well. She rubs my back. I love her like a sister even though I never had a sister, but right then her touch makes me cringe. Nothing seems right, not concern, not distance, not sandwich bags with zip-pers. Meg and me—we’ve been friends since the first grade. Our mothers took us trick-or-treating together when we were

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both tiny princesses. We know everything about each other. But she can't know *this*, this grief-land I'm in; she thinks she's here beside me, but that's not possible.

I get up. I need to get out of there. I smile. I rub her head. "Very ROTC," I say.

"Next time, listen when I talk to you," she says.

Between fourth and fifth period, I meet Dillon at his locker. We kiss, and Señora Oliver sees us. It makes me feel bad. It's just a kiss. I can feel so guilty for every little thing.

"We haven't hung out in so long," he says.

"You always have track," I say.

"Since before track."

"This weekend," I say.

"Tomorrow. Friday night."

I kiss him again before we go to class. I wonder—if I knew that was the last time, would I have tried to make it more meaningful? It's one of those things you think about later.

Dad's truck is in the driveway. It's the middle of the day, so this is strange. He's often at Plum Studio until seven or even later if there are a lot of orders for the handcrafted furniture he makes. But he's never home after school. Inside, there's a case of Manny's Pale Ale and a six-pack of Diet Coke on the kitchen counter. Then the door to the garage flings wide and bangs hard against the doorstop because Dad has kicked

it open with one foot. He stands there, hefting the large red cooler in both hands. The sight of him makes my heart leap, and I can't tell if it's a good leap or a bad one.

Dad's got a map held in his teeth. His hair has those side-tracked wisps around his face, but his grin is huge and he's wearing his lucky Grateful Dead shirt, the one he had on when he'd bought a lottery ticket that won him twelve hundred bucks. He sets the cooler on the kitchen table and takes the map from his mouth.

"Get a move on, girlie. Fifteen minutes, we're outta here."

The awareness of an ending beginning or of a beginning starting—it comes from the same place inside that senses when a thunderstorm is imminent, or a snowfall. I drop my backpack and stare at him.

"Dad, we can't."

"Sure we can."

"School's not even out."

He just looks at me like I'm crazy. I think about distance and loneliness and what my life feels like right now and then I think, why not? Why the hell not?

I throw on some shorts and a tank top. I stuff a bunch of clothes into my duffel; they're light summer clothes, so I can jam a lot in there. Books to read, mandatory. I have a film version moment and pack my photo album, too, but let's not linger over that. What am I going to do, leave her behind? I can't bear that, even for a few days. My mother had never even been to the Grand Canyon. Of course she's going now.

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And then, wait. The last pixiebell. I don't know how long we'll be gone. If I leave it, it might die. I can never, ever let that happen. Never. Grandpa Leopold Sullivan, Mom's dad, stole the seed of this extinct plant some sixty years ago, pinching it from the home of a professor he knew, an expert on the flora and fauna of the ancient Amazonian rainforest. The theft occurred during a Christmas party, after Grandpa Leopold excused himself to "use the facilities." Apparently, Sully was a bit of a klepto. What are you going to do? When he died, they found spoons from the Ambassador Hotel and saltshakers from the RMS *Queen Elizabeth*, and several herringbone overcoats that weren't even his size.

After he stole that last, one-of-a-kind seed, he put it in a pot and grew it. It was a kind of miracle. And after Grandpa Leopold was felled by a heart attack one cold New Year's morning, my mother took care of that plant. She kept it alive all these years, taking it with her every place she moved, from her college dorm room forward. My mother vowed that the last pixiebell would never die on her watch, and now that I have it, it isn't going to die on mine, either.

I find a shoe box under my bed, dump out the old boy-band CDs that I loved when I was twelve. But no—it'll slide around too much in there. I fling open the closet in Mom and Dad's room and grab one of my mother's running shoes. I set it in the box, and then wedge the pot of the last pixiebell into the shoe. I tie it up snugly.

In a few moments, I'm in the passenger side of Dad's truck,

and just like that, we're heading out of the driveway, away from our house and everything around it: our scratchy tan lawn, the row of mailboxes, the neighbor's dog, Bob, who always stands at the corner and watches traffic.

“Adios, Bob,” I say out the open window.

“For fuck's sake, Bob, get a life,” Dad says.