

WEST OF WINSOR

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by
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Chapter 2 “Wake up”

Part 3

Joe Joe’s typical cat dislike for a closed door manifested itself into a paw pushing on Danny’s door. When Joe Joe did not receive the response he desired, he stretched his paw underneath the door, extended his claws and engaged in a battle of wooden door versus cat.

Danny heard the commotion but ignored it. She pecked away on her keyboard struggling with her third attempt at the essay that was now due tomorrow. It did not take long for the sound of scratched wood to become an unavoidable distraction.

“God! You are so annoying,” Danny called to the feline. “Are you sure you’re not Will’s cat?” The cat flexed his claws and once again, dug into the bottom of the door.

“All right. All right,” Danny said. “Don’t destroy the door.” When she opened the door Joe Joe sat up and looked at Danny. His slow blinks and casual attitude meant he was in no hurry.

“Well, are you coming in?”

Joe Joe looked around, meowed to Danny then strolled into her room.

Danny checked the time. It was almost six thirty which meant it was almost dinner time. Why did she say she would join them for dinner? Why? Why? Why?

Danny sat down in front of her laptop and scanned her essay. Her writing was all over the place with no definitive message. It was a mess of ideas. She knew if she handed it in it would not reflect well on her or her work.

The first pass was an essay about the time she had to wake her mother up from a drug infused stupor to get her to an awards show on time. The second pass was about a girl in high school who stood up to a bully one day by pouring a large cup of soda over the mean girl's head. The third pass revolved around her step brother and his need for their father to pay more attention to him. None of it clicked.

Danny shut the laptop yet again. She couldn't remember the last time an assignment gave her such a hard time.

"Come on, Joe Joe. Dinner awaits."

Joe Joe had already curled up on the end of her bed.

"Okay fine. You stay here and relax and I'll go downstairs and be tortured," Danny said while petting the cat.

Danny did not have ill feelings towards the Wynn family or Jacob. The feelings of dread she carried had to do with the concept of the dinner table and all the crappy memories of her own family's dinner table drama. She figured all families were the same and, eventually, even the Wynn family dinners would turn into a fight between the parents or an attack on someone's character or a slew of disrespect slung at someone through judgment and belittling.

Danny entered the dining room much to everyone's surprise.

"Well..." Will began.

"William," Tina said sternly, her eyebrow arched. Tina placed a large bowl of soup in the center of the table. Next to it sat a tossed salad in a large wooden bowl.

"Well," Will continued, "it looks like we are having pho for dinner tonight."

"All vegetable," Juliette said. "I helped make it."

“So, I should pass,” Will teased. “Salad looks good.”

“Very funny,” Juliette said.

“Let’s pray,” Charlie said.

“Dear God, please don’t let Juliette poison us,” Will said.

“Wow, you are in rare form tonight,” Charlie said. Will smiled.

“Heavenly Father,” Charlie began. “Thank you for the food laid out before us, for the hands that made it with love and for the gifts of our neighbors sitting next to us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.”

“Jacob, you want to start with the salad and I’ll scoop the soup?” Tina said.

“Sure,” Jacob said.

“Soup smells delicious,” Charlie said. “Juliette, can you make this now?”

“Probably not without mom,” Juliette said. “But I bet I’m close.”

“Will, I forgot the plate of fresh herbs. Can you go grab it please? It’s on the counter,” Tina said.

“Sure,” Will said.

“Tina spent over a year traveling around Asia and taking classes at different schools,” Charlie said. “Wait until she makes her tom kah kai soup. She makes a vegan version that is *the* best.”

“Smells delicious,” Jacob said. “It reminds me of a little Vietnamese place my friend used to deliver for back home. Sometimes I would meet him there at the end of the night and the owner would make us soup with ingredients he needed to use. It was so good.”

“That was nice of the owner,” Tina said.

“Yeah, he was a great guy.”

Will walked back into the dining room with the plate of herbs in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

“Jules, you got a text from Brooke. ‘Wanting me something DELISH!’ Will said. “What’s ‘Delish’?”

A lovely shade of pink swept over Juliette's face. Everyone at the table noticed. Charlie and Tina shot each other a look and a smile.

"It's nothing," Juliette said as she snatched her phone from Will.

"Nothing? You're face looks like an apple," Will said.

"Shut up," Juliette said.

"All right," Charlie reprimanded. "Let's not over do it."

Danny and Jacob witnessed the sibling exchange with amusement. Danny smirked. She knew exactly what, or who, a "Delish" was by Juliette's reaction. And Jacob smiled in recollection of his bantering, bickering and teasing moments with Shia.

"Let's move past 'Delish'," Tina said. "How was your day? Anything exciting happen?"

"Not for me," Juliette said even though she had P.E. and Delish did smile at *her* today.

Jacob and Will glanced at each other.

"Jacob had a good day," Will said smiling at Jacob.

"Please share," Tina said.

"I got a job today."

"Terrific! Where?" Tina asked.

"At CC's. I'm going to go in tomorrow to work out the schedule."

"That's fantastic," Charlie said. "Were you looking for a job?"

"Not really. This one sort of fell in my lap but it's cool. I'm excited."

"You have waiter experience?" Charlie asked.

"A little," Jacob said shooting Will a look.

"Did you know there are catering jobs on campus that are available to students as well?" Charlie said. "The school hire's students for events that we cater both on or off campus. Would you like me to

put you on the list? Will, I can put you on the list too. It's only for special occasions and it's usually on the weekends."

"I thought you said I could not get a job while I was in school?"

"We did but this is not consistent work and you can say no whenever you want – like if you have an exam coming up or something and you need to be studying and not working. The school keeps a large pool of students so we are sure to have servers when we need them but, at the same time, make sure students don't feel pressured to work when they can't. It's decent money and like I said, you can say no whenever you want."

"Sure. Sign me up. It's not like I'm doing anything else," Will said with an uneasy smile.

"Danny, I can put you on as well, if you'd like. Totally up to you," Charlie said.

"Oh, thank you. But I'm good – for now anyway."

"If you change your mind just let me know," Charlie said.

"The soup is *delish* by the way," Will said putting a big emphasis on 'delish' and smirking at Juliette. Juliette returned the jab with a seething stink eye.

"Our neighbor, Abigail Morris stopped by today," Tina said. "She caught me as I was leaving to run errands this morning. She said she needs some furniture moved around and was wondering if we could help her out."

"This is the woman who will only shoot short waves with her back turned to me when I say hi, as if I were the biggest annoyance on the planet?" Charlie said.

"Yes, that's her."

Charlie smiled and nodded. Here it comes Danny thought – the barrage of insults to the woman, maybe even some vulgarity to describe her.

"Sure," Charlie said. "We'll help her out, right Will?"

"Yeah, sure."

“Jacob?”

“Yup, no problem.”

“I’ll help too,” Juliette said.

“Great. I’ll let her know,” Tina said. “But don’t expect a thank you. I’m not sure if she’s asking as a favor, for real, or if she feels we owe her for her letting us live here... type thing.” Tina laughed. “I invited her over for dinner but she declined.”

“It’s all good. We are kind of a scraggly bunch,” Charlie said as he slurped a noodle into his mouth with an over the top sound effect.

“Really dad?” Juliette said as she rolled her eyes.

Danny was taken aback by the sudden slurping and flinched.

“Dad, you scared Danny,” Will said.

“You scared me too!” Jacob laughed.

“Yeah, just wait until soba noodle night,” Will said. “It will get crazy around here.”

“That’s how you get the flavor of the noodles,” Tina said.

Charlie locked eyes with Juliette then grabbed more noodles with his chop sticks. He raised his eyebrows then nodded slyly.

“Really dad?” Juliette said with pain in her voice.

Just as Charlie began to slurp more noodles, and seemingly from out of nowhere, Joe Joe jumped onto the table right in front of Danny, startling everybody. The slurping noise combined with everyone’s flinching spooked Joe Joe who responded by scrambling his feet in lightning fast motion to get off the table as quickly as possible. His back paws, with claws extended, found their way onto the herb plate, then launched bean sprouts into the air in a rapid-fire attack of bean sprouts and fresh greens. When the herb plate was empty he clawed his way onto the table cloth causing it to bunch

under his paws until Danny's water glass fell over. With water now on his paws, Joe Joe shot straight up in the air, landed on the floor and then took off.

It all happened in a matter of seconds but the damage was done. Bean sprouts were everywhere – in Danny and Charlie's hair, on Will and Juliette's shirts and in their soup. Some even made it as far as Tina's water glass.

The commotion ended with all six individuals sitting in a moment of frozen shock.

"Um, what just happened?" Juliette said.

In yet another dinner surprise, Danny burst out in uncontrollable laughter. She tried to suck air into her chest only to be foiled by a snort that put everyone else into wide eyed disbelief. A fit of laughter overtook everyone at the table.



Danny wound up staying at the table for coffee and dessert. The dread she faced when heading to dinner had transformed into a fun night. It was nice conversation with a nice surprise and more nice conversation. Joe Joe of course was the topper. Danny couldn't remember the last time she laughed that hard – so hard her stomach hurt.

When Danny came to the east coast she arrived with some clothes, shoes and her cell phone. The cell phone, with all her pictures and any other information on it from her past, was tossed and replaced with her current phone. She left everything behind except one thing – a printed picture of her and Evan. She took the picture out of the desk drawer and held it in her hand. She knew that was the last time she laughed as hard as she had tonight – when she was with Evan goofing off and having fun.

Danny placed the picture on her desk then went back to finishing her essay. She was not happy with her work but knew she was out of time. Once the essay was "complete" she prepared an email. All she had to do was hit send and the PDF would go to her professor. Instead, she tapped her fingers on the desk then closed her laptop. She decided, come morning, she would proof it one more time.

Despite the essay, Danny's mind wandered to the antics of the night. She fell asleep in a pleasant mood thinking about Joe Joe and his crazy idea to leap on to the dinner table.

The dream, at first, was fun and happy. She and Evan were at a party sitting by the pool at a frequented party house. The house was full of familiar faces. The night was a typical and comfortable Los Angeles night. The music was loud and guests were everywhere. She and Evan were laughing together just as they always had.

It was a pleasant memory until Danny's emotions in the dream began to change. In a blurred second, she went from being happy with Evan to a sudden feeling of dread. In the dream she was trying to say something to him but he would only laugh at Danny as if confused and amused by her. Danny grew frustrated trying to tell Evan something but he would only laugh and hug her. He turned to walk to the door, Danny started to yell for him and then she woke up.

She sat up in bed with a lump in her throat. Her empty room gave her pause and then a feeling of relief because she was where she wanted to be. Once she collected herself, she walked over to her laptop and sat down. The glowing screen lit up the room.

Danny took a deep breath then restarted her essay. She would tell the story of when her eyes opened, what caused her view of the world and more importantly, herself, to change, and how her actions changed her life forever.