

“THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ELIOT WILEY”

Season 1 of *ATL Mysteries* – by Anne Corbitt

CONTEXT:

ATL Mysteries premiered in October 2017 as a public writing project in Atlanta, Georgia. It is an interactive mystery series that combines contemporary fiction, Atlanta landmarks, and audience engagement. Over the course of four weeks, I wrote and released twenty-two chapters, each between 1500-2100 words, every day (Monday – Friday). Readers followed the story in print and online, searching for clues within the daily chapters, across social media, and throughout the city, at times even influencing the plot as they worked through social media to be the first amateur detective to solve the case and win a prize package (including the chance to be written into the story’s final chapter).

In Season 1, readers meet Grant Maxwell, an up-and-coming star in Atlanta’s culinary world, who becomes suspicious when he can’t find his best friend, the free-spirited journalist Eliot Wiley. With the help of Eliot’s girlfriend Jules, a pair of reference librarians from the Central Library, and various other fictional and real Atlantans, he embarks on a search to find her.

Included here are the first three chapters, interspersed with the bonus assets available online and around the city to help readers solve the mystery.

CHAPTER 1: “WHERE ARE YOU??”

At first, Grant barely noticed. He had the menu to finish, another meeting with the lawyers, line cooks to interview. He sent a text and promptly forgot it, unaware when she didn't respond.

The next day, Thursday, he called her on his way home from the farmers' market. He got her voicemail but didn't leave a message. She'd call back, he figured, when she had the time.

He spent most of the weekend in the kitchen—fine-tuning his chimichurri, reorganizing the walk-in. Sometime Saturday afternoon, he forwarded her an article about the Falcons defensive line, and he did wonder, for just the second it took the email to send, why she hadn't called him back. But then he returned to the dry storage, the lagging P.O.S.

After a long Sunday reviewing receipts with the Group's accountant, though, Grant started to wonder. Sure, they'd gone days without talking—weeks, even—but since Eliot moved back to Atlanta three months before, they hadn't gone *this* long.

It had been ten days since the last time he saw her, at Noni's on a drizzly weekday afternoon. He'd had a lunch meeting with three of The Phoenix Group partners, and though they'd been complimentary—they loved his projected margins on appetizers, his use of color on the plate—they still kicked the soft open to the end of the month. Grant was starting to doubt Bravata would ever open its doors. Like anyone in the business, he'd worked in short-lived restaurants, for new owners who fired the whole staff in less than a week, but this time, it was his menu, his kitchen, his name on the door. He'd worked for years to get here, sacrificed a marriage and who knew how much sleep. Another delay in the schedule meant more waiting, more chance of developing an ulcer or not making rent. All he could think to do after that meeting was drink too much.

His third beer had arrived when El did. She slogged her messenger bag on one stool and plopped into another, crossing her legs beneath her. “Looks like I need to catch up,” she said, and she ordered a shot of whiskey and the darkest beer they had on tap. “All right,” she said. “Tell me everything.”

And Grant had—all the questions they kept asking, every subtle shake of their heads. El nodded along and scattered in enough profanity to show she was listening, but now that he thought about it, she had seemed distracted. Twisting her hair into tight knots around her finger. Glancing at the door whenever a shadow passed. He’d just chalked it up to the life of a freelance journalist, the dizzy energy it took to make a living. When El was on a deadline, she was liable to gnaw her lip bloody or stop mid-sentence to fill a page in her notebook. He never took it personally.

He tried to remember if she’d mentioned a trip she was taking, maybe some story for a travel website, but his head was aching from the hours with a calculator. He sent her one more text—*Where are you?? Im starting to worry*—before falling asleep in his recliner.

Grant woke Monday to his phone ringing. He jumped to grab it from the charger, groggy but expecting El on the other end.

Instead, it was a nurse from Sunset Villas Assisted Living. Frank had collapsed in the dining room during breakfast, just as he stood to bus his plate. A stroke, they thought. The ambulance was already in route to Grady, but they couldn’t get a hold of his daughter, who, the nurse added, hadn’t been to see him all week. Grant’s was the only other number in the file.

He called El at least a dozen times on his way to the hospital. He even drove by her place, a carriage apartment in Virginia-Highlands with an iron gate and ivy swooped across its door. He knocked and knocked, but no one answered. He couldn’t see a thing through the blinds. No one answered at the main house either, but the stack of A/Cs peeking from under the grill cover suggested the Braddocks were on one of their trips. By the time he got to Grady, where he found Frank in a coma and no sign of El, Grant officially started to panic.

Yes, he knew El could be flighty. She could forget to pay her power bill, or leave her keys in the front door, or even, when Grant visited her in Chicago three years before, fail to show up to a Cubs game after paying extra for seats behind home plate. But she never—*never*—went a day without talking to her father. She would answer his calls in the shower, hop a plane when doctors ordered a second round of tests. Frank was the only real family El had left, the reason she quit her job and moved home. She'd visited Sunset Villas nearly every day since. Whatever kept her from his bedside couldn't be good.

As he waited for Frank's doctor, Grant opened Twitter on his phone. He'd signed up for the app years before, when the cute sommelier at that French place nicknamed him Flintstone on account of his flip phone, but he rarely checked it. He followed a few dozen people, most of them Falcons players and stand-ups, but Eliot used it all the time. "Part of the business," she liked to say. He guessed it did help her get her name out there.

Her last tweet was dated a week before, the link to a review of some album with the hashtag #newthemesong. Below that, other links, other hashtags, a few responses to names he didn't recognize, a meme about *Game of Thrones*. A few people had tweeted at her, mostly in response to messages she must have sent but he couldn't see. In the days before her last tweet, somebody named YAWPmusic left four separate messages: two links to YouTube videos, a meme of a dog with a bucket on its head, and most recent, an image of a pencil sketch that looked an awful lot like Eliot, with the hashtag #myprettylady.

He was about to close the app when a new tweet appeared on her page from someone named J: *seems that she has gone and changed her locks on me.*

Grant didn't know what it meant, but it made him worry. He didn't want to waste any more time not knowing if El was okay, so he found the bag of Frank's clothes in the closet and checked the pockets. He snapped a picture of the phone extension and left a note on the whiteboard, in case Frank woke up. Traffic had probably died down by now. He figured it wouldn't take long.

In the car, he kept replaying those hours at Noni's. His soggy complaining. Her loyal scoffs. He remembered that one moment, after a few more rounds, over a plate of fried calamari. He'd been in the middle of criticizing one of the partner's logic when he looked up to see El staring past his shoulder. Her face tense and gray. He scanned the room behind him and saw people waiting for a table, a line forming for the bathroom.

"What?" he'd asked. "Who is it?"

But El didn't answer. When he waved a hand in front of her face, she snapped back to him.

"Sorry," she said, reaching for a kernel of fried batter. "Totally spaced out. I think I need to eat more. You were saying?"

Looking back, Grant wished he had asked what she was thinking. He remembered how she'd told him about the weeks before her mom died, how she would hover in the hallway or sit right up against El on the couch, as if she wanted to say something but never did. What might El have told him if he'd shut up long enough to ask?

He decided to call Nick. It rang a couple times, then he heard a rustle, the fumble of fingers on keys.

"Sorry," Nick said. "My man, Grantland. How goes it?"

There was a reason most of Grant's friends were old ones. Just hearing Nick's voice slowed his heartbeat, made him blush at his frantic pulse. They'd been friends since their early 20s, back when he picked up shifts at The Punchline and Nick took the stage at open mics. They'd been like their city back then, unshaven and hungry, engines gaining speed. Before the Beltline and back pain, the movie crews and full-time jobs. It steadied him, somehow, to hear their years of late-night drinking, those dreams as restless as their bodies, tucked behind Nick's words. He exhaled.

"Hey, man. Is this a bad time?"

"Headed to a meeting at Woodruff Park, so I got a minute. What's up?"

"Have you talked to Eliot recently? Like in the last week?"

"Nope. I left her a message on Thursday, I think. Thought we might have some work for her, but she never called back, so I gave it to someone else."

Grant cringed a little. Nick had been good enough to give El some freelance jobs for *Creative Loafing* while she got on her feet in Atlanta. Her portfolio was good, but Grant's connection hadn't hurt. He'd be pissed if she screwed this up.

"Ok, well, if you hear from her, will you tell her to call me?"

"Sure," Nick said, an ambulance passing in the background. "Everything okay?"

"Her dad had a stroke this morning, and nobody can get a hold of her. I'm headed to her house now."

"That sucks, man," he said. "But I'm sure she's fine. Probably just passed out after writing all night or something."

"Yeah, maybe." Grant turned off North Highland, onto El's street. "I just got a feeling something's wrong."

"That Eliot is a tough chick. She's smart. There's got to be a good reason—what was that group y'all were in? The Unsinkables?"

"The Unshakables."

"Right. That girl is *unshakable*. You'll see."

Grant told himself that Nick was right. El was tough, and not in some polished, deodorant-commercial kind of way. She was scrappy and blistered, dirt under her nails. All that she'd lived through—her mom's suicide, the attack—El had learned how to take life's punches standing up.

The night they met, that clammy July more than 20 years before, her balance had been the first thing he noticed. In the whirl of that emergency room hallway, all those cops on their radios, the nurses, the screams from down the hall. That guttural boom, the one he still hasn't forgotten, echoing from

every TV. She'd smiled at him, this wispy white girl with her head wrapped in splotted gauze. She reached over and handed him a cup of lime Jell-O. "Something tells me," she'd said, passing him a plastic spoon, "I get to skip my algebra test on Monday." All that chaos, his leg mottled and throbbing and never going to bend quite right again, and somehow Grant had laughed.

"Listen," Nick said. "I got to jump into this meeting, but I'll ask around and let you know if anyone's heard anything."

Grant thanked him as he pulled into El's driveway and grabbed Frank's keys.

A fat oak tree hid the path to her door, so it was quiet, only the soft munch of fallen leaves beneath his feet. He knocked a few times, but she didn't answer, so he stabbed the first key at the lock. It didn't fit, in either direction. His hands were shaking, he realized. He dropped the ring and bent to get it, a bloom of nausea up his chest.

What if she *was* in there, he thought. What if there were a reason she couldn't answer the door or the phone? That familiar rumble started in his ears, as if the ground were moving, his lungs hardening like cement. He could almost hear El's voice, as usual. *Say it*, she told him, so he did, out loud: "I am steady. I am real. I am unshaken."

He stood up, shook his head, and the rumble faded. The walls stayed in place. A short one this time, but still, it had been months since he last heard it, maybe a year.

Bracing, he inserted the second key. A soft click. Gears groaning as they turned. He wiggled the knob, as he'd seen El do dozens of times, and placed his shoulder to the door. With a push, it opened...

TWITTER ACCOUNTS

Twitter accounts were created for Eliot, Grant, and @YAWPMusic. Volunteers posted pre-written tweets at set times. The below screenshot shows the tweet referenced in the previous chapter.



CHAPTER 2: “WASN’T SHE BEAUTIFUL?”

Grant could smell it as soon as he opened the door. The waft of artificial lemon. A prickle of bleach. Gone were the familiar scents of blackening banana peels, dishes moldy in the sink, warring stubs of incense heavy with vanilla or jasmine or sandalwood. No coffee mugs, half empty, lined her bookcases. No stacks of paper as high as his calves. No brimming trash bags, or hand-washed clothes draped on chair backs, in various stages of drying. Except for a scuff of red clay by the welcome mat, the floor looked clean enough for surgery.

That was the first thing he noticed, the eerie hygiene. The second—after he threw open doors and peered under the bed—was that Eliot was not here, and by the looks of it, she hadn’t been for days. Dust had started to tint the blinds. The microwave and stove lights flashed zeros. A hint of pink inside the toilet bowl. Whoever cleaned the apartment had been thorough, but even unprompted, a place tended to resume its ways.

There had to be some clue to her whereabouts, a forgotten receipt or confirmation number, so Grant started looking. Sitting at her desk, he opened drawers and fingered the paper clips and tracks of staples. A stack of brochures for yoga centers in Serenbe and Blue Ridge. He found empty envelopes and Post-it notes, and, somehow, a box of floppy discs. He smiled at their labels. *Lit/Bio essays*, one said. *P.G. movies*. *Damn*, he thought, that girl never threw anything away.

The bottom drawer revealed a file cabinet, each of the suspended folders labeled by utility: “Power,” “Cable/Internet,” “Car Insurance.” Grant wondered how she had so many bill stubs from just three months here, so he pulled out the one labeled “Water” and leafed through the pages she’d thrown in. He found print-outs of the Water Department’s website, GoogleMaps directions to some place in East Lake. Halfway through the stack he found the most recent bill, due the day before. El had

scribbled a date across it: “paid 9/28.” Just in the last three months alone, she’d had to go downtown twice to turn her water back on, her checks having bounced. How could she afford to pay this one early?

He sorted through the other files with increasing speed. Car insurance: “paid 9/28.” Gas, the same. Cable and renter’s insurance. Even the rent for Frank’s apartment, which Grant had thought came straight from his Social Security check. But here was a letter from Sunset Villas confirming receipt of six month’s rent—paid *in advance*. The date on the letter? October 2, 2017. Grant had no idea how or where Eliot would get that kind of money...or why.

If the apartment hadn’t been so quiet, so muted without the hum and bustle of Eliot, he might not have heard it. A tinny sound. A melody, like muffled hand bells. Grant threw back the cushions, the basket of woven blankets. Dizzy, he closed his eyes to hear it better. The bedroom, he realized. Around the dresser. He pulled open the drawers, dumped the folded socks and concert t-shirts on the bed, but the dinging continued, as if it were coming from the walls. He nudged out the dresser as the sound disappeared. In its place, a white charger cord snaked from an outlet, leading to the gap underneath the dresser’s two-inch legs. He lowered to the carpet. With a tug, an iPhone slid out and, with it, two spirals of a notebook. Grant reached for it, already knowing what it must be.

A black spiral notebook, like the kind SCAD students used for sketching, only smaller, purse-sized. Eliot’s notebook, the one he’d seen her write in dozens, maybe hundreds, of times. She bought them in bulk, he knew, so he tried not to panic as he picked it up. It could be an old one, all its pages covered in Chicago. But as he opened the front cover, a gulp rose in his throat. *Atlanta*, it said on the first page, *September - _____ 2017*. A majority of empty pages confirmed it. This was the notebook he’d seen just 10 days before. The one she never left home without.

He thumbed through the pages, Eliot’s bulbous letters in all directions. Phone numbers and names he didn’t recognize. Untethered words and phrases, sentences without beginnings or ends. A

drawing of some sort, edges stained with coffee rings or smudged ink. He stared at the pages as if they were those old 3-D posters, as if willing a shape to spring into view.

Then he turned his thoughts to the phone. Eliot often forgot it. He'd seen her empty her messenger bag on restaurant tables and car hoods, only to later rediscover her phone in the refrigerator or on the lip of her bathtub. So it wasn't the presence of her phone that sent pulses of static up his neck and down his arms. It was the realization that, without it, Eliot could not call for help.

He pressed the phone's home button, and the screen lit up, announcing 42 missed calls. A good number of those were his own, Grant knew, and the nurse from Frank's apartment. But there had to be others. He tapped to get the password screen, where he tried her birthdate, the year she graduated from high school, but then he stopped. He had no idea how many wrong passwords he could try before the phone wiped itself clean, and he didn't want to find out.

He stood in her squat bedroom, trying to decide what to do next. He scanned the walls and furniture for anything out of place. There was her framed poster from a Picasso exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago. The chipped tile coasters. The floral tray that held her rings and necklaces. On the wide bedside table, a few paperback books—a biography of Olivia Newton-John, a guide to day trips from Atlanta, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. A framed picture of Eliot and Frank the day he moved her into college. Another of the two of them in Times Square. In each, El's edges blurred as if in motion. Frank's hand on her shoulder like an anchor to keep her from blowing away.

Behind these frames leaned the gauzy Polaroid she used to tuck under her pillow and prop on dashboards. A blonde woman in a white robe draping open at her thighs, her face flushed almost as red as the fist-sized splotch of a birthmark across her cheek. She's laughing at the toddler in her lap, the kind of laugh you could almost hear, even now, twenty five years after she left a note taped to her steering wheel and stepped off the edge of Brasstown Bald.

“Wasn’t she beautiful?” Eliot had asked him the first time she slipped the picture from the inside pocket of her pea coat. “Don’t I look just like her?”

Grant didn’t remember what he said that first time, or the countless times she’d asked since, but he didn’t see much resemblance, except maybe the broad shoulders, the throaty laugh. The filmy gray eyes of someone who knew how to guard her secrets. The woman made him angry, to be honest, protective of that little girl she’d left behind. He hoped abandoning your life without warning wasn’t an inheritable trait.

On a shelf by her closet, he noticed that old picture of them standing in front of Grady the day he was discharged. He still had the crutches, and that itchy brace, but enough patches of El’s hair had grown back that you couldn’t see her scar. They were smiling in the picture, but Grant remembered how nervous he’d been to leave that day, how much he dreaded the quiet of his own bedroom and the woozy clamor of his high school halls.

“Just breathe whenever it gets too much,” Eliot had told him on the elevator down, while his parents hurried to get the car. “Just breathe and say your words. Out loud, remember?”

“I remember.”

“Say them with me now, just for practice.”

His voice still warbled back then. Hers somehow already had the hint of a smoker’s rasp. Together, they repeated his mantra: “I am steady. I am real. I am unshaken.”

“That’s us,” Eliot added, as the elevator settled and wrenched open its doors. “The unshakables.”

In the worst moments of his life since, he’d thought of that elevator ride. When he got fired or screamed at. When cops pulled him over on unlit roads. The weeks and months after Kendra left him. Those nights he slept in his car. The loudest noises, the shakiest ground, he remembered it. Their voices, melding, became his theme song for keeping on. Standing there, he hummed it now.

Just then, her phone rang. He almost dropped it, he was so startled. The screen lit with its announcement: *J mobile*.

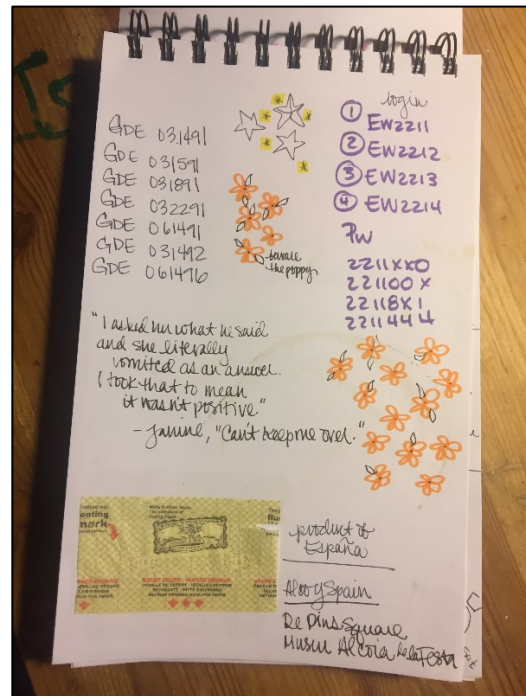
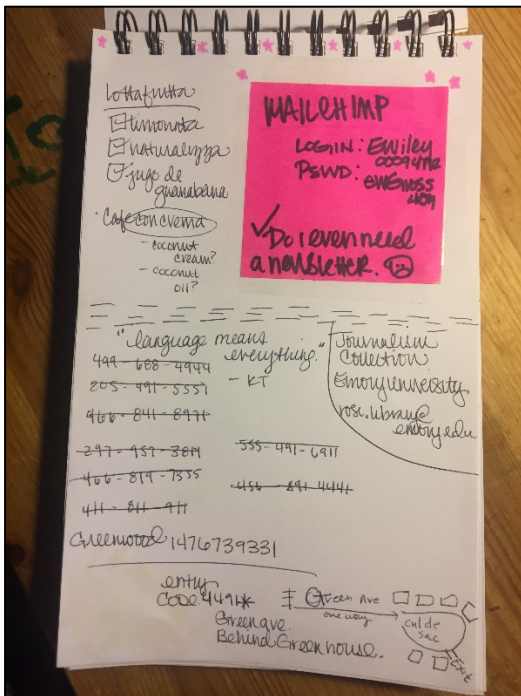
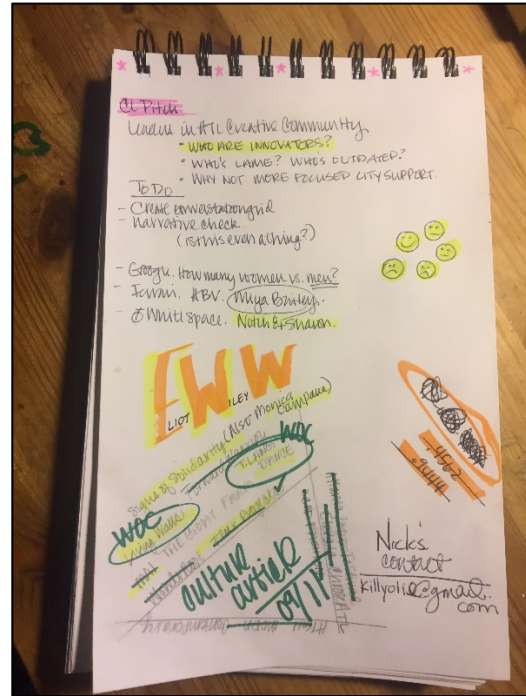
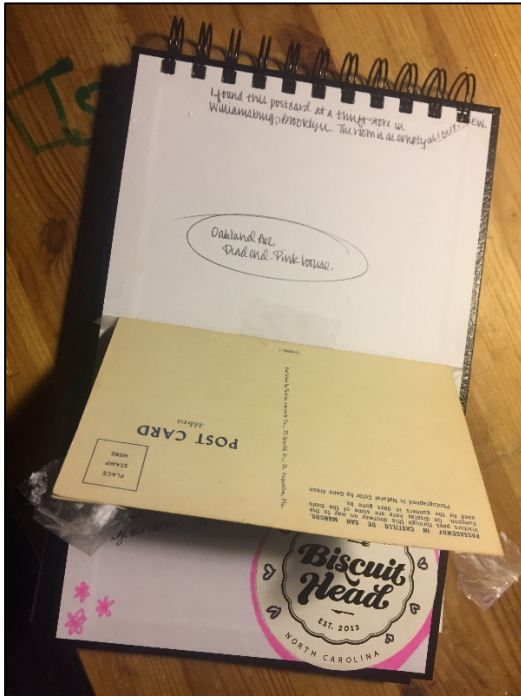
He thought about that cryptic message on Twitter. He couldn't let the call go by, so he swiped at the screen until the ringing stopped and, tentatively, brought the phone to his ear.

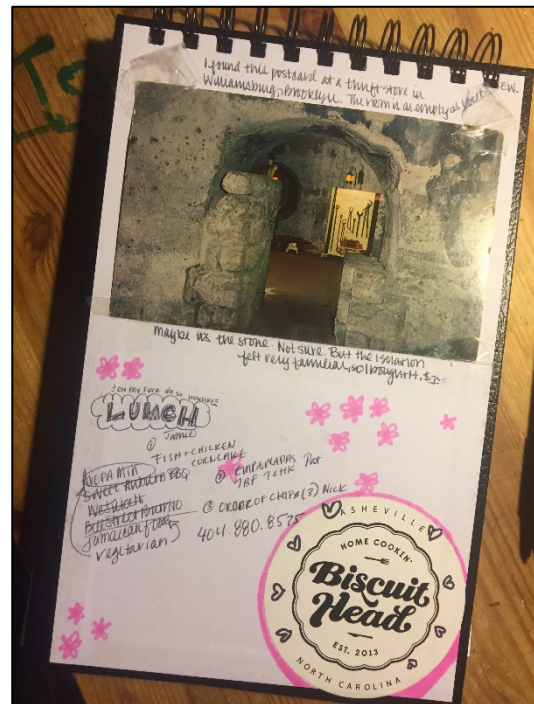
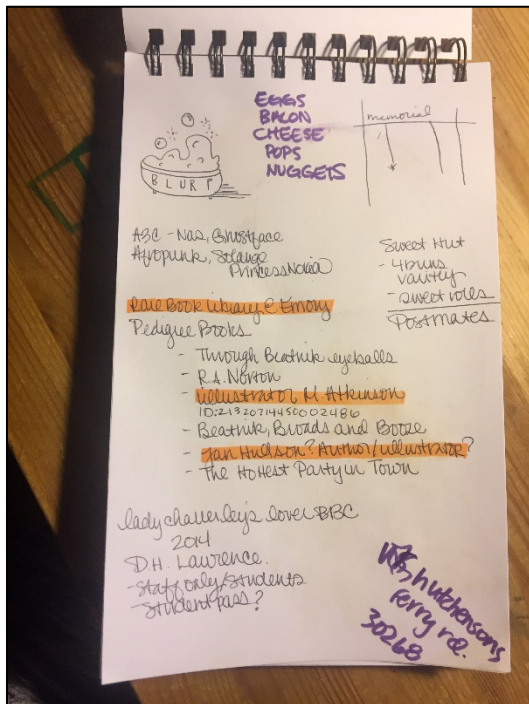
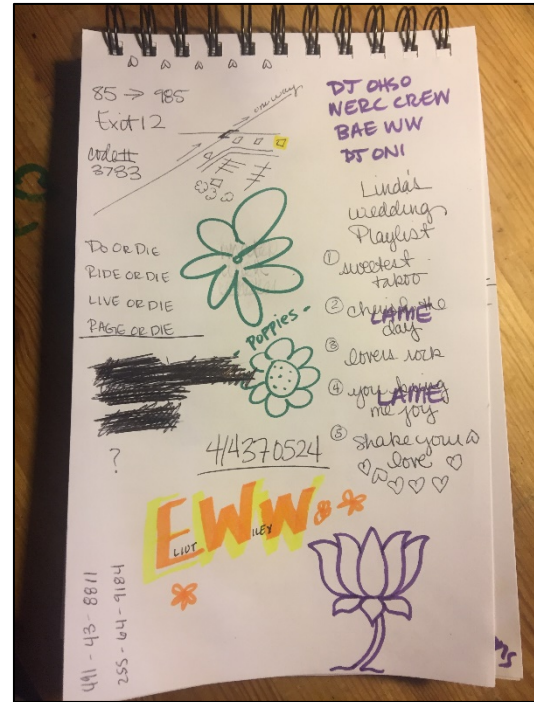
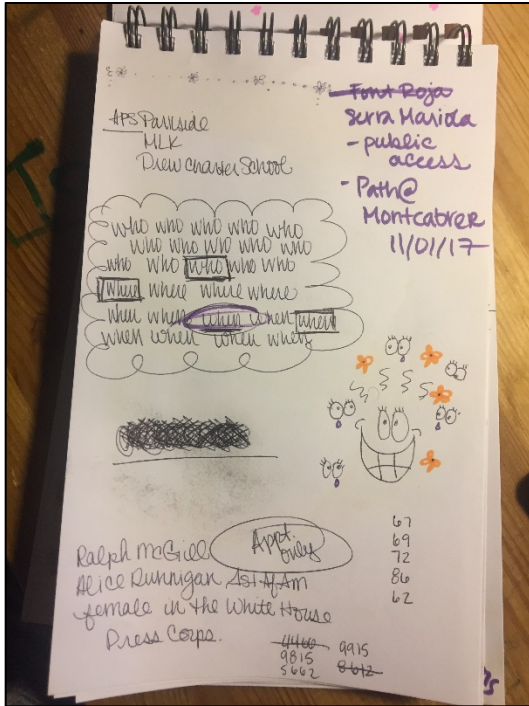
"Hello," he said.

He never expected what he heard next.

ELIOT'S NOTEBOOK

These images—meant to be photos Grant took of the notebook he found—accompanied Chapter 2. Clues to future challenges (such as passwords, library call numbers, and social security numbers) appear in these pages, along with many red herrings.





CHAPTER 3: “SEPARATE WORLDS”

Grant wasn't hungry, but he knew he should order something. His knee was throbbing, and he hadn't eaten all day. The calamari, his usual go-to, reminded him of the last time he was at Noni's, the last time he'd seen El, so he ordered a Caesar salad and picked at it. Beside him, Eliot's notebook and cell phone waited, still codes he couldn't crack.

They'd sat at the far end of the bar, the last time he saw her, by the windows. His back to the room, he remembered the sloshes of traffic on Edgewood, the smeary red of brake lights. Against the fogged glass, Eliot had been like the sun in how she warmed him. Her soft gray eyes, sleeves tugged to her fingers. A head shorter than him and half his weight, she was still one of the safest places he knew.

He thought again of that moment when Eliot's face had tightened, her gaze fixed on someone or something behind him. He scanned the room, searching for any clue in the black-and-white photos, the wood booths, the pulsing old TV. But every surface stared back at him, blank.

Grant's phone buzzed, and he grabbed for it, knowing he shouldn't hope for anything but hoping all the same.

We got estimates for new linens. Need your ok.

It was Allen Roberts, the restaurant's head investor. A nice enough guy, with his pocket squares and heavy silk ties. He started the Phoenix Group more than a decade before, and in that time, every restaurant they'd opened—the Thai fusion place on the Beltline, that Italian steak bar in Buckhead—had won Best of Atlanta more than once. They were careful investors, thorough too, so Grant knew he should jump whenever they said to, lucky as he was for their backing. But today he couldn't imagine talking about tablecloths, or tasting menus, or sous chefs. So he left the text unanswered and put his phone away.

The patio door opened behind him, and he turned hopefully. On the phone, he'd described himself: black, late 30s, bald with a beard. But he had no way to recognize her. He wasn't even certain she was coming, or what she might do to him if she did.

"Whoever you are" she had said, when he answered El's phone. "I am tracing this call and contacting the police." Her words had been spiky, as if spoken from gritted teeth.

"What?" Grant had answered. "Who are you? Is Eliot there?"

The woman went silent for a second, and he'd been afraid she'd hang up, but then her syllables came back harder, open-mouthed. "If you hurt a hair on her head, I will personally—"

"Wait," he said. In one breath, he explained who he was and how he got into her apartment, leaving out the bits about Frank's stroke or coma. He'd played enough poker to know that even with a bad hand, you didn't show all your cards.

"You're at her place? I'm coming over."

"No," he'd said, more alarmed than he would have expected. The apartment walls felt suddenly close, the scar down his knee starting to burn, so he suggested Noni's. She agreed and hung up before he could ask her name.

The woman in the doorway didn't match that voice, but she walked toward him. She was thin-wristed and wispy, gleaming from the light on her blue-black hair. She wore a man's tweed blazer and blue high-tops, but Grant could pick her up, giant messenger bag and all, with one arm. The tangle of nerves in his gut loosened a little.

"Are you?"

"Grant Maxwell." He reached out his hand.

She didn't take it.

"Have a seat." He nudged the stool out with his foot.

She perched on the edge but held her bag with both hands in her lap.

The bartender approached. The woman shook her head at the offer of a menu. "Water's fine."
She eyed Grant's beer.

"It's been a rough morning," he said, as he swigged the last of his Tropicalia and ordered another.
"Are you going to tell me your name?"

"Jules," she said.

"That's a start." He noticed a slight shake to her fingers as she lifted her glass. "How about another
easy one? How do you know Eliot?"

"She's my girlfriend. You?" Grant's surprise must have registered on his face because a wry smile
seeped onto hers. "You didn't know she's gay?"

"What? Of course I did" Grant said. "Who do you think took her to her first topless bar?" he
laughed, but Jules didn't. He coughed and continued. "I just didn't know she had a girlfriend."

Jules faced forward and started to weave a napkin between her fingers. "Yeah, well, it's still new.
We haven't really defined it or anything."

"Did you know about me?"

"A pudgy Luther wannabe who sometimes breaks into her place? I think I'd remember if she'd
mentioned you."

Grant couldn't help but smile. "That's EI for you. She likes her worlds separate."

Her eyes sliced to him. "And which 'world' are you, exactly?"

He took another sip before answering. "I've known Eliot 20 years—wait, no, 21. Did she ever tell
you about—" Grant pointed above his ear, roughly where the shrapnel had hit her. "We met in the
hospital."

Jules peered at his head, skeptical.

"I was hit here." He tugged up his pant leg to show the scar, from ankle to knee cap. "Couldn't
walk for weeks."

He didn't usually lead with this backstory. Even with El, it wasn't a topic he liked to discuss. He'd drive ten minutes out of his way just to avoid passing where it happened. Last year, he didn't watch TV for a month after accidentally catching an anniversary documentary on ESPN. He'd come closer to actually dying a few times in the last 21 years, and he'd surely been the target of far more personal hate, but there was something about the spray of metal that night, flakes of fire like confetti. It never felt far away.

"I'd be happy to cut it open and show you the screws—"

"No," Jules blushed. "I believe you."

"Sorry," Grant said, swallowing another sip. "It's just—I'm kinda freaking out here. Where is she?"

Jules shook her head. "I've tried calling, like, 100 times. I've gone by her place, tweeted her."

"That was you today. That message about her door key?"

This time, her smile was softer. "It's from a Little Tybee song. Our first date, we went to see them."

Grant knew the band, had even taken El to one of their shows when she first moved back, but there was something about Jules's tone that sounded like the rattle of a chain link fence, as if marking how far he could go. He changed the subject. "Do you know this person?" He scrolled through his phone to find the name. "YAWPmusic?"

She barely glanced at the screen. "Oh, him. Eliot's not-so-secret admirer."

"Who is he?"

"A DJ. She interviewed him for that music blog, maybe a month back? He's been trying to woo her over Twitter ever since."

"Doesn't he know she's gay?"

Jules looked up flatly. "Have you *been* on the internet? The world's full of creeps who think all lesbians need is one good roll in the hay with a 'real man.'"

"Is he crazy? Do you think—" Grant said.

"He's harmless. A delusional, egotistical puppy dog, but a puppy dog all the same."

Grant lowered the phone, unconvinced, but before he set it face down on the bar, he tapped a finger on the screen so quick, he was pretty sure Jules didn't notice. "So, when did you see her last?"

"Monday night." Jules patted the bar. "Here, actually. We were supposed to go to this DJ showcase at the Music Room, but she was all stressed. Said she had a deadline coming. So we rescheduled."

"And?"

Jules shrugged. "It's been crickets since. She could be ghosting on me or whatever, but, I don't know. She just didn't seem like herself on Monday."

"What do you mean?"

She tucked her hair behind both ears. "It's probably nothing. But she just seemed, I don't know, depressed or something. She kept talking about how as kids, we think we can grow up to be anyone we want, but then we make all these choices, go to school, move places, and suddenly we don't have that freedom anymore. We're stuck."

Grant felt a tightness spread across his body, seizing him in place. Eliot, for all her renewable energy, wasn't the Energizer bunny. She never used the "D" word, explaining her days in bed and that semester she took all Incompletes as times she wasn't "well," but Grant had seen the bottles in her medicine cabinet. He'd read the spines on her bookcase. She always bounced up after a few weeks, at most, and could go months or even years before another spat of existential questions sent her to the Tom Waits Spotify station. So he'd never *really* worried about her. But now, with the unanswered calls, the reminders of her mother in that Polaroid and even the scar beneath her hair, Grant felt the panic in his fingertips.

Jules was still talking. "It was probably nothing to worry about. She's probably on assignment somewhere and forgot to tell us. I just...I don't know. I don't like it."

Grant reached for the notebook.

Jules recoiled. "Where did you find that?"

"In her apartment."

"She wouldn't—"

"I know," Grant said. "And her place was spotless. You could eat off the floor."

"Are you sure you were at the right apartment? I've seen Eliot leave an apple core on her toilet seat for, like, days."

"Something isn't right. I just know it." He pressed the phone to light up its screen. "I've tried cracking her PIN, but no luck. You don't know it, do you?"

"Yeah, right."

"Ok, then, look through the notebook. There's about ten pages there, some notes, numbers. I can't make sense of it."

The bartender checked in, and Grant saw Jules eyeing the bottles.

"Go ahead," he suggested. "It might help."

"A Bullitt. Neat."

"That-a girl," Grant said. He went to the bathroom and then paced behind her for a few minutes.

"Anything?" he finally asked.

"That could be a phone number." Jules pointed to a string of digits on the third page.

"It's too short."

"That '1' could be a slash if you look closely. So the 4 before it—"

"Area code." He fumbled for his phone, but Jules was faster.

"I'm going outside. I need the air," she said, standing. She downed the rest of her drink in one shot and started to move toward the door but turned. "What about her compu—" Jules froze. Her eyes sharpened at the wall of frames by the window.

"What?" Grant asked. "What is it?"

“Monday night, when Eliot and I were here?”

“Yeah?”

“She ordered food, but the place was crazy busy. I still wanted to go to the show. She told me to go on, she could do work while she ate. At the door, I looked back to blow her a kiss. She was taking one of the frames down.” Jules looked at Grant. “She snapped a picture of it.”

Grant stood up and moved toward the wall. “Which one?”

Jules shook her head. “I don’t remember.” Her dark eyes flitted across the wall. “Wait,” she grabbed his arm. “It was that one.”

Together, they reached for the frame.

THE WALL AT NONI'S

This fictional magazine page hung on the wall at Noni's for the month of publication (and many months afterward). If readers visited the restaurant and followed the descriptions in the third and fourth chapters, they could identify the article and work to decipher its clues.

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TASTE

ENTRÉE 3000

Crowning a winner in Atlanta's entrée salad war

Atlanta's restaurant scene may be the last place you'd expect to be embroiled in a salad war but that's exactly what's been transpiring since Drunken Noodle threw down the gauntlet with their Papaya masterpiece.

Let's breakdown the contenders:

Papaya Shrimp Salad at Drunken Noodle - This irresistible dish is made from ripe Southeast Asian papayas and Georgia coast salt-pepper shrimp on a bed of local greens. The star of this dish is the secret sauce that's a perfect combination of sweet and savory. \$12

Kate's Big Salad at Noni's Bar & Deli - Noni's classic is the Edgewood champ. Kate's is a perfect blend of romaine, arugula, red cabbage, kalamatas, grape tomatoes, orzo, smoked turkey and salami, drizzled in their magical house vinaigrette. \$10

Chopped Vegetable Salad at BLT Steak - A mountain of uniformly chopped vegetables in every color of the rainbow erupts with flavor thanks to sharp bites of bitter lettuce and briny feta. An expertly emulsified dressing lends body and tang to this unforgettably crisp, cool pile of crunch. \$15

Winner - While Drunken Noodle comes close Noni's defends the crown ... for now. 

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The wall at Noni's (unpublished photo)