

## The Underground Type

Noah looked at his watch. The hands read 10:10. All right; he could work with that. Five minutes to finish packing, five to get himself looking presentable, a two-minute walk to the car, followed by a roughly six-minute drive to the bakery, and then he would be inside and waiting for her with a minute to spare.

He crossed the room to the bedspread. There was his utility bag, empty, and the contents laid out nicely for inspection. One road map of Tennessee, one road map of Montana, one road map of the United States—all Rand McNally, of course. A first-aid kit from Walmart and a couple of Slim Jims from the gas station. Food rations weren't in abundance, but that was okay; he needed to start slimming down. Noah ran his hands over the assembly of knives. Five of them, sheathed and ready to help him with anything from peeling the rind off an orange to skinning a bear. One compass, hopefully working, a pack of water purifier pills, a flint and steel bag his grandfather had given him for his seventeenth, and one of those foldable ponchos. Everything looked good, nothing obvious missing; anything he had forgotten could be purchased on the road. Just looking at everything laid out so plainly made his fingers tingle. Why hadn't he gotten the fuck out of Dodge in August? At least he wouldn't have had to subject himself to another quarter rotting away in the ivory towers, battling to ignore a girl who had obviously stopped caring for him the week after . . . the week after it all happened.

It took three trips to transport his bags from room 317 to his car—an '89 Toyota pickup his dad had found for him on Craigslist. He glanced at his reflection in the front door window. His blonde curls needed a trim and his skin wasn't the best after three days in a motel, but he doubted Anna would care.

Noah referred to the dashboard clock as he swung into an angled parking space across from the bakery. 10:33. Shit. He should've muscled it and carried the bags down in two trips. Now Anna would be waiting for him, and he had to look calm and not rushed. He had to look absolutely certain. Certain and confident and in control. He slammed the door of the truck, straightened the collar of his Han Solo jacket, and rushed across two lanes of traffic. Should he apologize for his tardiness? No. Better to smile and comment on the traffic. Noah pushed open the bakery door and was assaulted by the smell of butter and sugar. French music played softly in the background. His eyes flicked over to the tables lined against the windows. He spotted her immediately. Anna Cappello, dressed in a Vanderbilt sweatshirt and jeans, hunched over her phone. An untouched tea and Danish rested on the table in front of her.

Noah bought a cinnamon roll and paid with cash. He approached the table, a smile already plastered across his face.

Anna looked up.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

Noah set his cinnamon roll on the table and began taking off his jacket. He caught Anna giving him a little smile, or was it a smirk? “What, I’m sorry I’m late . . .”

“Did you think this was a Halloween party?”

“My jacket?”

“It’s not even from the right movie. If my dad saw you in Alden Ehrenreich’s jacket, he’d go into cardiac arrest.”

Anna's mouth did a little dance, and then they both burst out laughing. She leaned forward across the table and he caught a whiff of her lavender perfume—one of his old Christmas gifts to her.

“I've been meaning to call you, believe that.”

“I know,” Noah said.

“And . . .”

Noah let her question hang.

“Well, was last night the first time you've ever thought about texting me? Radio silence for four months and then I get *Aveline Bakery. 10:30. Something big* from you at eleven at night? I mean, I had to call my mom just to make sure I wasn't, I don't know, walking in front of a train.”

“A train? Anna, listen. I haven't contacted you because I thought I could do what I wanted to do alone. But the more I thought about it the more I realized something was missing, and then I thought about it some more, and I realized what was missing was you.”

“Take a breath before you pass out.”

“I'm serious. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

Noah tore the end off his cinnamon roll and flicked it into his mouth.

Anna wrapped both hands around her tea cup. “I have an idea. Before you tell me *something big*, I think we should get reacquainted.”

“Reacquainted?”

“Yes. We've only had one conversation since the incident, and I want to think you've had time and reflect and move on. Let's talk about us for a while.”

“Okay, first question. Beard or clean-shaven?” He rubbed a hand along his smooth jawline.

“Honestly, I thought you looked better before.”

“Yeah, well, I wanted a clean start. Shaving the beard was supposed to be a symbolic act.”

“I see. Like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*.”

“Sorta. But yeah, speaking of, didn’t you say you were going through the top 250 movies? Isn’t *Cast Away* on there?”

“I don’t know, I’m only on number forty-five.” Anna raised her tea, then lowered it without taking a sip. “It’s hard sometimes, watching these movies and seeing people put in impossible, heart-breaking situations, and then you’re watching the credits roll and you’re left to pick up the pieces.”

“That’s what I’ve always liked about film. The vicarious aspect of it. Aristotle’s idea of catharsis and all that.”

“Is that so, Mr. Philosophy Major?”

“Let’s take a movie from your list. What’s number 44?”

“Grave of the Fireflies.”

“Oh shit.”

“Right? My roommate thought I lost a family member.”

“Look at it this way. Aristotle would say that the experience of watching post-war trauma and grief play out in *Grave of the Fireflies* would purge you of those negative emotions. You would come out of it feeling more capable of dealing with, uh, your own—”

“My siblings’ deaths?”

Noah went back to his cinnamon roll. “I was thinking more like death in general.”

“Don’t you think it strange, the things people base their confidences in? It could be watching a couple seasons of *The Wire* and believing yourself to be an expert in law enforcement, or . . . this is a silly example, but my brother wanted bouncy houses for his birthday and I was there watching him try the gladiator joust. I swear I never thought a person could look so slow and uncoordinated.”

“Hah, I’d like to see you try.”

“That’s what I *did*, and I fell off immediately, like he just tapped me and down I went. It was a true Icarus moment.”

“No, I know what you mean. It’s the same with those bucking horse machines at festivals. You totally overestimate your abilities.”

“Or like the Olympics. When they’re running the 1500m and you watch their smooth stride and it doesn’t look like they’re going very fast, and then you look at the time they’re running and it doesn’t make sense.”

“Exactly.”

“Right. So, ultimately, living vicariously only warps your perception of yourself. Makes you more confident or less confident, makes you think about one thing over another. Only true life experience is going to paint you an accurate picture.”

“Yeah, but how do you *get* that experience? Sitting behind a desk or actually getting out there and *living*.”

Anna regarded him with a thinly veiled look of disappointment. “You’re doing it again, Noah. You’re spinning your philosophical webs and I keep getting stuck in them.”

“Okay, I know, I’m sorry, but, but concede me this. I just want to make this clear. Sitting down and reading about how the body reacts to high-pressure situations does in no way, shape, or form prepare you for looking a criminal straight in the eye and screaming at him to put the knife down, okay, there’s absolutely no comparison to be made—”

“Noah, I get it; Noah, stop. We’re not talking about this. Reacquainted, remember? Here, let me ask you a question. Um, why . . . what made you want to ask me out on our first date?”

Should he allow her to derail the conversation like this? A sly peek at his watch told him it was 10:44. He really didn’t have all morning. But Anna was looking at him with such commitment that Noah felt compelled to follow her down another rabbit hole. “You want the truth?”

“Always, you know that.”

“I asked you out because you looked absolutely pathetic sitting behind the school on a Friday at 2:20 pm.”

“Oh, I see, it was a charity date.” Anna smiled coyly.

“You could call it that. But no, Anna, I liked you before then. I did. Freshman orientation, remember? We listened to Mr. Craven talk about locker combinations for twenty minutes?”

“I told you he looked like a beaver with those whiskers of his.”

“I remember. You were definitely a charmer. You still are.”

Anna looked off into the distance. “When you came up to me that Friday after school I thought you were a jock who split his time between the gym and the sofa, but then you started talking very articulately and companionably and I thought, well what do you know, here’s a guy who gets me.”

Noah nodded, licked cream cheese frosting off his fingers.

“I still remember what you told me. Don’t be afraid to climb over the walls we put around ourselves. Not every straight path is the right one.”

“Me trying to be a philosopher.”

“You were cute.”

“What was it though? Your history teacher thought your paper was good enough for publication in some college press and you, what, freaked out because that ‘didn’t align with your life goals’. That was an opportunity, Anna. Off the beaten path if you prefer my stupid metaphor. I asked you out that day because I saw something in you that . . .”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

“Anna, never mind. I wanted to meet up with you to tell you something, and I think it’s a little rude of you to lead me around the bush like this.”

Anna leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “Okay. Okay, Noah.” There was fear in her eyes.

Christ, Noah thought. She thought he was going to break this off for good. Miss Cappello still had feelings for him after all. “I’m going to Montana, Anna. I’m moving to Montana, and I want you to come with me.”

She literally could not have looked more surprised. “Oh, uh, okay, um, *school?* Are you still, is that still going to be a thing with you?”

“Nope, no, I’m done with school, done with Vanderbilt. I’m leaving it all behind and starting afresh.”

“Wow.”

“So, are you interested?”

“I’m sorry, Noah, I feel like I need a Navajo code-talker here to help me interpret because you’re not making a lot of sense. You want to leave one of the most prestigious schools in America midway through your junior year and live with the bison and the dandelions?”

“More like moose and columbines, but yeah.”

“This isn’t all because of—”

“Yeah, it is.”

She looked at him for a long time. Then, “You need help, Noah. If this is bothering you so badly, go see a therapist, okay, I mean, my mom’s best friend is a psychologist. She could help you deal with the PTSD or whatever it is you have going on.”

Noah had to make a conscious effort not to grit his teeth. “You don’t understand what happened, Anna, you don’t understand how it changed me. I’m not running away from something, I’m running toward it. You want to know why I didn’t contact you for four months? It’s because I’ve needed time to decide how I want to live my life.”

“But I could’ve talked you through it, helped you—”

“Unless you were there, feeling what I felt, seeing what I saw, there’s no way you’d be any help.”

“Then *make* me understand, Noah. For Chrissakes.”

His response was interrupted by an alarm coming from his phone. Noah drew it from his pocket and looked at the caller ID. Dad. He declined the call and slid the phone back into his pocket.

“Amber alert?” Anna asked, nursing her tea like a widow in a homeless shelter.

“My ringtone.”



“Your *ringtone*?”

“I uploaded a splice of the Purge dubstep.”

“First the phony jacket, and now this? God, Noah, do I even know you anymore?”

“No,” he said thoughtfully. “You don’t.”

Anna drew the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and pulled the drawstrings, leaving only the oval of her face exposed. “Have I been dating Patrick Bateman?”

“Dead people don’t look at all how they do in the movies.”

Anna’s eyebrows twitched.

“If you want to understand what’s happened to me, understand this. I was bored out of my mind until I shot my first guy. But don’t get distracted by the killing, it was more the, the mindset of the whole thing. Here—imagine yourself, parking your car at a motel at night, when you see a man in a black ski mask walking up the stairs to the walkway. He starts walking by each room, stopping and listening at every door. Suspicious behavior, right, so already you have a choice. Ignore or investigate.”

“Or call the police like a normal person.”

“The cops? Would take ten minutes for them to arrive. At that point, they might as well be a cleaning service. But no, listen, okay? So you assess the situation and, realizing there’s only the one guy, you hurry up the stairs and hang back while he goes from door to door. Adrenaline’s pumping through your body. At this point, your goal is crystal clear. Stop this guy from hurting anyone. You’re standing by room 238. Four doors down, the man in the ski mask has stopped. You see him reached into his jacket and you see he’s strapped. Okay, you’re at decision number two. Now that his intent is confirmed you can either run or intervene. Be the coward or the hero.”

“Noah—”

“You decide to be the hero. The man bangs on the door of room 234. A woman is shouting from inside, your mind’s racing. The guy does some trick with the lock and kicks the door open. What you do next is vital, and that’s what spurs you forward. Never before have you felt so alive. The man’s shouting, the woman’s screaming, and you act. You rush forward, grab the man’s arms from behind, wrench away the handgun. He’s weaker than you expected, and you shove him across the room. By this point, your body’s pumped so full of epinephrine it’s ridiculous. You can see every dust mote in HD. The woman is scrambling across the bed to the motel phone, but the guy jumps on her and suddenly there’s a knife at her throat. A third choice is presented to you. Leave or the woman dies. But you see a third option. Pull the trigger. The next several seconds are the most intense of your life. You’re screaming at the man to put down the knife, he’s screaming at you to GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE ROOM. You know what you’re going to do a split second before you do it. Your eyes flick down to his knee, your arm lowers, your fingers squeeze. Now the man in the black ski mask is on the floor missing a kneecap and a pound of flesh. You take the knife, already dialing 911 with the other hand. The woman runs past you out of the room and you’re left alone with him. Waiting for the sirens to come.”

Anna was looking at him with a mixture of pity and revulsion, and Noah saw her as she would look fifteen years from now—tired, wrinkles around the eyes, her glow gone.

“And this,” Anna said slowly. “This is what you hope to find in Montana? God-awful situations?”

“Not necessarily. Just the opportunity to be spontaneous.”

“As if you can’t do that here? Noah? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand? I just laid it all out for you in excruciating detail. I *never felt so alive* as I did when we were in that standoff. Sure, it was horrible, I know that. I have nightmares. But it was that voluntary choice of going into harm’s way for the right reason. It awakened a part of me that had been lulled to sleep by 8am classes and math tests and 5 to 11 shifts and hour gym sessions and all the crap that goes into growing up in the American school system.”

“It’s called discipline, Noah.”

“Oh, no, sure. It takes discipline to march to the beat of the same drum your entire life.”

“And am I part of that procession? Just a girl you were expected to date?”

Noah smiled. “No. I stepped out of formation for you, Miss Anna Cappello. The talent you had . . . the opportunities of *getting out*.”

“Getting anywhere . . .”

“Getting all the way to the F.B.I.”

They smiled, but Noah felt the spark between them begin to fade. She was fidgeting, glancing more and more often into the street. He waited for her to say something, and finally, she did.

“That night, talking to that TV reporter . . . you sounded scared out of your mind.”

“I wasn’t scared.”

“Noah, your hands are shaking.”

“No, they’re not.” Noah stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets. He had to calm down. *Look calm and not rushed. Had to look absolutely certain. Certain and confident and in control.*

“Noah,” Anna said gently. “I know you. I’ve known you for almost five years. You’re obsessive about the time. You apologize if you’re even a minute late. You need a schedule like a

hyperactive person needs medicine. You view the world like one giant checklist, and it's killing you. And apparently, you would rather move to Montana than admit that's the way you are."

Noah took a calming breath before answering. "I did something good that night, Anna. And, um, I guess I'm afraid that if I stay the course, you know—college, job, wife, kids, retirement . . . who's to say if I'll ever do anything remotely important again?"

Anna reached across the table and rested her open palm next to the remains of his cinnamon roll. Noah took her hand in his.

"I guess Dostoevsky was right," he said. "I thought up adventures for myself and tried to compose my life so as to at least somehow live a little."

"My Underground Man," Anna said, smiling.

"Just the Underground type."

"Noah?"

"Yeah?"

"You don't need to shoot a guy in the knee to be important."

"I know. It just feels like it sometimes."

Together, they rose from the table and stepped outside. It was October in Nashville, Tennessee, and the sky couldn't be clearer.

"You forgot your jacket," Anna said, squinting in the sun.

Noah looked over his shoulder, then shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Leave it for the next guy."

Anna stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll see you later, alright?"

"Sure, uh, hey, you want to catch a movie, Friday?"

She tilted her head to one side. "Yes. Yes, I'd like that."

Noah watched her walk down the leaf-strewn street. He watched her until she turned a corner and disappeared from view.

It was 11: 15.