Mixed Tape: A novel

Geoffrey Wilson



Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Copyright © 2026 by Geoffrey Wilson

Geoffrey Wilson asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Cover designed by Spectrum Books.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-915905-86-4

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means without the express written permission of the author or of Spectrum Books, except for brief quotations used for promotion or in reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental.

Permission for the use of training, scraping, or any other use of this work by any generative AI or machine learning models is explicitly prohibited.

First edition, October 2026.

Discover more books at www.spectrum-books.com

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Notes and Acknowledgements

To my dear husband, Jeff Stoneham-Wilson, who has encouraged and supported this dream of mine for over thirty years, and who patiently listened while I read every word of this story to him out loud.

I am also indebted to all those who eagerly read this book as I was writing it, and who have lovingly and generously given their time, attention, and most importantly, their feedback: Robin Hamilton, Deb Elliott, Jennifer Millman, Jane Allt, Susan Dunn, Cynthia Bastarache, Paul Routhier, John MacIntosh, Wallace MacDonald, Calum MacLean, Angela Poirier, Shona Whyte, Amie Brownbridge, Jaime Fricker and Kristen Kutner.

I am grateful for the love and encouragement of all my friends and family who have listened to me talk about wanting to write a novel for years. Thank you for humouring me all this time until I finally got around to doing it.

This novel is not an autobiography; it is fiction. Some places and events in this novel are real, taken from my own life and borrowed with permission from others. Real stories inspired some situations in the novel, but I have fictionalized many details to serve this story. The characters depicted in this book are entirely fictional, and any similarities between persons, either living or dead, are purely coincidental.

I also want to gratefully acknowledge the music and musicians I reference throughout the novel, as well as all the fantastic 1980s songs that inspired me and helped me remember this influential decade with such joy and clarity. I hope that those who read this book and who may not be familiar with the music from this era will seek it out and enjoy it as much as I do.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

"Music is the art which is most nigh to tears and memory."

– Oscar Wilde.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Prologue: "Waiting for a Girl Like You"

Halifax, January 1, 1982

I woke with a jolt.

It was hot inside the car—sauna-hot—and dark, except for the soft glow of the dashboard, washing over the windshield in sickly green. The air was wool-thick with smoke, the stale tang of cigarettes clinging to my throat, turning my stomach again.

"Someone crack a window, *Jesus*," I groaned, patting myself down for my own pack, as I was clawing at my winter layers for relief from the heat.

"It lives," Sarah said, twisting around in the front seat. I couldn't see her face, just the silhouette of her hair haloed by the streetlights.

"He's not going to spew again, is he?" Jeannie called over her shoulder, a mass of red perm in the driver's seat. "My dad will kill me if you puke in here, Will."

The car—her father's pride and joy, a white '78 Ford LTD with a vinyl roof and plush red velour seats—seemed to sigh, resigned to the indignity of shuttling teens. I wondered whether vomit came out of velour or if it just became part of its soul forever.

"Where are we?" I asked, lighting up.

"Twenty minutes from your place," Sarah said. "Is Darren alive back there?"

I glanced to my right. Darren lay in a heap in the opposite corner of the backseat; an impossible jumble of arms and legs, and bulky winter clothes. "Hard to say in this light," I mumbled, "but I think he's still breathing."

I slumped back, holding the cigarette loosely between my fingers, and retreated further into my winter coat. I was still

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

drunk—head pounding, mouth sour, stomach threatening revolt. The whole thing was my own fault.

New Year's Eve—well, New Year's Day now. 1982. I'd had no plans, happy enough to have the house to myself after my father and his latest girlfriend left for some party. Then Sarah called, and one thing led to another: a house party thrown by some guy from school—one of Jeannie's many admirers—and a water cooler filled with the cheapest white wine imaginable. Someone handed me a beer mug full of the stuff, and that was the beginning of my descent.

The dark glass of the car's window flared orange as I took a drag from my cigarette, revealing a distorted reflection of my face. Outside, the sky was a hard black mantle pricked with cold stars; a sliver of moon provided backlighting for a swath of silver clouds. The heater hummed along to Blondie on the radio. In the front seat, the girls chatted in hushed voices, signaling that a full-blown debrief on the party was underway, including judgment of our classmates.

"*The news is next*," the radio DJ announced.

I leaned into the front seat, reaching for the radio, interrupting some salacious gossip. "Can you turn that up?"

Ash broke off my cigarette and scattered across Sarah's arm and the front seat.

"Hey!" Jeannie barked. "My dad will take your balls if you burn a hole in that upholstery!"

"Relax…" I reached for the volume knob again. Sarah slapped my hand away and brushed the ash onto the floor. "I want to hear the news," I said, wounded.

"It's all depressing shit," Sarah said, but she turned it up anyway.

"*…as the year comes to a close, dissent in the governing Parti Québécois may lead to a change in leadership.*"

A pause. Static. Then:

"*Doctors in the U.S. are continuing to diagnose cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer among homosexual men. The cause is under investigation, but researchers say there is no evidence of contagion.*"

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

My heartbeat stalled.

"*In San Francisco and New York City, physicians treating large numbers of homosexual men are sharing information to identify more cases and reduce delays in treatment. The mysterious illness, currently being referred to as GRID—Gay Related Immune Deficiency—was first reported in June by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.*"

Another breath.

"*To date, approximately one hundred and twenty cases have been reported in the United States, ninety-two percent of which are gay men. Seventy-four have died, all of whom were homosexual or bisexual.*"

Jeannie swore quietly and switched the radio dial to a countdown of the top songs of 1981.

"Jesus, that's grim. No more."

I wanted to tell her to turn it back, but I couldn't, as if truth stuck in my throat, making me mute. Something cold and hollow was spreading through my chest, a creeping terror with no name yet.

Seventy-four have died. All of whom were homosexual or bisexual.

Those words struck me like a blow, and I felt myself folding inward, shrinking deeper into the corner of the backseat.

You see, I was gay—or I thought I might be—or maybe bisexual. I didn't really know for sure. I'd been fantasizing about guys for years, but only in the privacy of my own mind, where it was easy to pretend that it meant nothing. I'd had girlfriends, sure, but they were really just…friends. I told myself I was inexperienced, shy, waiting for the right moment, waiting to snap out of it and waiting for nature to kick in and make me straight, like it was supposed to.

I stared at the silver clouds scudding across the slice of moon beyond the window and swallowed hard.

'If I am gay but no one knows… can I still get the gay cancer? And if I get it… then everyone will know.' I stared at my dim reflection in the window, like I was expecting answers. None came.

In the periphery of my fear and awareness, Foreigner's

unmistakable synthesizer and bass line swelled from the radio, and Lou Gramm singing about waiting for a girl.

But I didn't want to just wait like Lou; I desperately prayed, hoping for salvation, hoping I was normal…

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Chapter One – "High School Confidential"

Halifax, January 1982-June 1984

High school sucked.

In the book about my life, that could have been the whole chapter. Those three words stamped on a lone page, and a doodle of a noose hanging off the "d" to emphasize how I truly felt. It would have been entirely honest.

But my teachers were always going on about specificity and developing my ideas, and if I'd learned anything in the last few years, the devil really was in the details. And even at such a young age, I had so many devils to exorcise.

My high school sat on a hill that didn't pose much of a challenge to the non-disabled until February, when the snow turned to pack ice, and you could watch people risk death as they tried to climb it in cheap boots. Someone said once that the teachers watched us from the windows in the second-floor teacher's lounge and wagered on who would wipe out first. I believed that.

On clear days, you could almost see the harbour from the student smoking area at the back of the school—just a strip of steel-grey water between the blocks of houses and the boxy apartment buildings, and container cranes jutting up like mechanical giants from a bad science fiction movie.

The school building itself was a low, flat thing of yellow-brown brick and narrow, ugly windows. It had the aesthetic of a structure that someone had begun designing with good intentions, but had given up halfway through. Inside, it smelled like industrial floor cleaner, orange peels, and teenagers. The hallways of cream-coloured cinder blocks were punctuated at intervals with brightly painted doors of orange and yellow and blue, depending on which of the three floors

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

you were on. Tiled ceilings. Fluorescent lights. Safety glass in all the doors. Row upon row of dull grey lockers lined the longest corridors. Darren once described our school as a place where architecture had gone to commit suicide. Jeannie corrected him: Hope, not architecture.

The rules of the place were simple. You didn't have to like them, but you had better learn them quickly if you wanted to survive.

Rule number one: Don't give anyone a reason to look at you too closely.

Rule number two: If they look anyway, make sure they see what they expect to see.

Rule number three: Whatever you do, don't be a fag.

We didn't use nicer words back then. There weren't any.

I wasn't a complete outcast. That would have at least put me into a category. I orbited the edges of a few different groups without ever fully belonging to any of them, close enough to recognize the constellations, never close enough to be mistaken for one of the stars.

There were the jocks and their groupies. You didn't need much imagination to understand them fully. Their world was one of team jackets, rugby pants, and upturned collars on Lacoste golf shirts. They swarmed in self-assured, self-congratulatory packs. Their casual, confident touching—slaps on the back, arms thrown around shoulders, juvenile rough-housing, and boys and girls colliding in ways that made me both envious and uncomfortable. Watching them was like looking into the window of a warm, well-lit house on a winter night, seeing shadows move behind the curtains. You knew you'd never be invited in, and you were never certain if you even wanted to be.

Then there were the smart kids, the overachievers, the keeners, the Math Club geeks. They inhabited the front rows in class. They knew the difference between a metaphor and a simile without having to think about it and could recite pi to seven or eight decimal places. I could have been one of them

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

if I'd worked harder and hadn't spent so much time trying not to think about what was going on inside me. As it was, I hovered in the middle rows, close enough to answer questions when called on, far enough back not to draw too much attention. Safe from predators in the middle of the pack.

Then there were people like me and my friends: the floaters. We weren't cool, but we projected the possibility of cool—the potential for complete peer acceptance and social assimilation within a station higher than we deserved. We were competent. Invisible enough to be safe, visible enough not to be pitiable. We liked music, movies we were technically too young to see, and complaining about things we had no intention of changing. Occasionally, usually by accident, a few of us even managed the right fashion choices.

Sarah, my best friend, had a sharp tongue and a soft heart. She complained perpetually that her hair never did what she wanted it to. She had perfected a detached, amused expression she wore daily, making her seem to be watching the world through a one-way mirror and silently judging everything. We had been friends for as long as I could remember, as far back as my earliest recollections of elementary school. Sarah had always been there, at my side, loyal but with a habit of getting me into the worst trouble possible, and a penchant for inserting herself into my life in ways that were infuriating and endearing.

Jeannie was loud and dramatic, a walking fog of hairspray and perfume whose moods could be tracked more accurately than the weather. Being Jeannie's friend legitimized invitations into the higher social strata in the school. We were tolerated at parties and events because of our association with her. She was cool and beautiful, and being in her orbit made the rest of us acceptable, or at least tolerable, to those above us in the school's social pecking order.

Darren was tall, mild-mannered, and stoned most of the time. He was handsome in a gangly teenage rocker sort of way. We bonded over leather jackets, heavy metal, and the per-

petual drama of our "broken homes," with parents constantly at war with one another, usually over something entirely ridiculous and petty. His sense of humour was witty, observational and frequently droll. He was smarter than he let on, preferring to coast through school. If he had bothered to apply himself, Darren could have dominated in academic competition. Music was both a refuge and his gladiatorial arena; drums were his weapon of choice.

Together, the four of us were a loose, misshapen unit: not quite cool, not quite losers, united by sarcasm and boredom and a low-level contempt for everything around us. They were my people, to the extent that I had people. They knew things about me—how I liked my coffee, which songs I replayed on my tape deck, which teachers I loathed—but they did not know *that* thing about me. The important thing. The secret thing. The thing that terrified me about the late-night news report overheard on the radio in Jeannie's father's car.

And I had no intention of telling them.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

It was cold that first day back to school after Christmas break. The air felt razor-sharp on my face, and it managed to dig its claws beneath all the layers of scarves, sweaters and coats. The wind whipped away the plumes of visible breath as fast as I exhaled as I trudged up the hill, backpack weighing me down from the weight of Christmas holiday reading and assignments. The snow on the sidewalk had been pulverized by many passing feet. Where the sun hit the concrete, it had been churned into grey slush, littered with cigarette butts and the occasional flattened Styrofoam coffee cup, like some low-budget installation art piece entitled "*Mutually Assured Self-Destruction.*"

Inside, the halls were a riot of colour and sound: puffy jackets, denim, plaid, the squeak of rubber soles on wet tile, the clash of lockers and voices. Someone's boombox bled

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

muffled music from inside a half-open locker further down the hall. It sounded like REO Speedwagon, which felt about right.

"Will!" Sarah's voice cut through the hallway noise. I turned to see her weaving through the crowd toward me, a small figure in an ample navy parka, white furry earmuffs clamped to her head, scarf trailing, and a binder clutched tightly to her chest. Her face was still glowing red from the cold. I received a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

"Happy New Year," she said, rolling her eyes as if the concept of a seasonal greeting personally offended her. "How's your head?"

"Better than Darren's," I said. "He looked like a corpse when we dropped him off."

"He looked like a corpse when we picked him up," she replied.

I made a face. "Whatever you do, please don't mention that water cooler. I could barf just thinking about it."

"Can't promise that. Traumatized?" She grinned and bumped my arm with her elbow. "You were funny, though."

"Drunk people always think they're funny," I said. "That's how drunk works."

We fell into step, adjusting automatically to the flow of student traffic. The hallway narrowed as we approached a bank of lockers, the smell of coffee and cafeteria fries heavy in the humid air. A boy in a hockey jacket shouldered past us, leaving a wake of drugstore cologne and entitlement.

"You hear the news that night?" I asked casually, as if it had just occurred to me.

She made a face. "The depressing stuff? About those guys in New York? Yeah, thank God Jeannie shut it off."

"Yeah," I said. My heart thudded once, hard. It felt like it was trying to punch through my ribs like the monster in Alien. "Grim."

Sarah shrugged. "I mean, it's awful, obviously. But it's, like… that's New York. San Francisco. Big cities. People there

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

are always doing things," and she waved her hand vaguely, as if "things" meant every activity more adventurous than hanging out in a McDonald's parking lot on a Friday night. "They'll figure it out."

"Yeah," I said again, nodding, but feeling skeptical. "They will."

And maybe they would. The radio voice had sounded confident, almost soothing. Research was happening—no evidence of contagion. Doctors were sharing information. It should have been reassuring, but it wasn't.

We reached my locker, and I spun the dial with numb fingers, letting muscle memory take over. *14-7-32*. The inside of my small metal cave smelled faintly of mouldy lunches and pencil shavings. A folded clipping from the Chronicle-Herald slid sideways as I shoved my books in. I'd torn it out for the record store coupon before Christmas and meant to throw it away because it had expired. On the flip side of the coupon was a tiny headline about a mysterious disease appearing in the U.S. Now, suddenly, it seemed important, like a clue I wanted to conceal from a crime scene.

"Earth to Will." Sarah waved her still-mittened hand in front of my face. "You in there?"

"Yeah." I slammed the locker door a little too hard. "Just… thinking."

"Bad habit," she said. "Next thing you know, you'll be applying to philosophy programs and quoting Kafka."

"I already quote Kafka," I protested, then struck a pose: "'*A man doesn't need to fly to the sun, he need only find a patch of clean earth, and crawl there, and let the sun shine on him.*'"

"Yeah, that's your only quote, and you only bring it out when your dad gets on you about university." She lifted her voice into a nasal imitation of my father: "'Why do you have to be so disinterested in everything, Will? It's like you think bettering yourself is beneath you.'"

"That's eerily accurate," I remarked with surprise, impressed by her imitation of my dad's tone and facial expressions.

She gave a little mock bow. "Thank you, thank you very much. I'll be here all week."

The bell shrieked overhead. Conversations were chopped off mid-sentence, and then the noise of chatty teens surged louder. The herd began to move with new urgency.

"English?" she asked.

"English," I confirmed with a nod.

"Let's go, then. I want a good seat near the back so I can watch Mr. Robichaud pretend not to look down Cynthia's shirt every time she raises her hand."

"High culture," I said. "That's what we're here for."

We laughed aloud, oblivious to those around us who weren't in on the joke and let ourselves be carried along with the swell of students, blending into the flood. That was the trick I'd learned. You didn't have to be invisible; you just had to be indistinguishable.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

Of all the embarrassment and humiliation that was high school for me, gym class was the worst. I'd tried to get out of it so many times, claiming asthma, bad knees, a mysterious rash. The school nurse, a woman with pale eyebrows and a permanently nonplussed expression, had seen through it all and marked my file with something that boiled down to: Nice try, kid.

So, on Thursdays after lunch, I gathered my gym gear reluctantly from my locker and stepped into the changeroom. The air was as thick and humid as a sauna—steam from the showers mingling with deodorant and sweat and the sour undertone of wet socks forgotten in the bottom of gym bags.

The naked boys were harder to ignore.

"Jesus, Will, you look like someone died," Darren said one afternoon, peeling off his T-shirt with the easy, absent confidence of someone who'd been tall and comfortable in his own skin since birth. He wasn't on a team—too lazy, too

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

stoned—but he had the long, ropey muscles of someone who'd never had to think about exercise.

"Someone did," I muttered, unfolding my gym shorts with unnecessary precision, hoping to buy time while the changeroom emptied. "My dignity."

He snorted. "You don't have any dignity. That was taken at the door when you enrolled here."

He wasn't wrong.

I changed quickly, desperately intent on keeping my eyes carefully unfocused. Around me, boys shouted and laughed. They snapped towels at each other, a flurry of arms, legs, and bare skin. My mind and body vibrated with an unamenable combination of fear and secret desire. My eyes were locked on the floor tiles. I counted the flecks of blue in the white until the world narrowed down to that simple geometry, and only shadows moved in the periphery.

If you look, they'll see. If they see, they'll know. And if they know…

And if they know, they'll do what high school boys do to fags in changerooms and back alleys. There were stories that filtered through the school like whispered urban legends: someone beaten behind the portables, someone else stripped bare and locked outside in the winter. No one ever had names. They were always someone a year or two ahead who had conveniently moved away. Maybe those stories were made up; I didn't really know. It didn't matter, though. They were true enough, in the way that counted.

As I left the change room for the gymnasium, I wasn't thinking about Phys Ed class or even listening to Darren's ramblings about how Carol Pope and Rough Trade had been robbed in 1981 when High School Confidential wasn't even nominated for Single of the Year at the Juno Awards. I certainly wasn't thinking about the first top 40 hit about lesbianism.

GRID. Gay-related immune deficiency… gay-related.

Those words I first heard scarcely a day ago nested in the

back of my mind like a malignant echo. It didn't even sound like a real disease, like malaria or syphilis. It sounded like a technical problem, an industrial challenge that the right engineer could fix.

I'd never heard the phrase "internalized homophobia"—no one had. We didn't have that vocabulary yet. What we had were assumptions and prejudices, handed down like family recipes: that certain kinds of desire were dirty, that certain kinds of people deserved what they got, that some invisible line separated "us" from "them."

I had an idea which side of the line I probably stood on, and I knew for certain which side I was supposed to be on.

"Will!" The Phys Ed teacher's voice boomed from across the gym. "You going to move today or just stand there taking up space?"

"Move," I shouted, forced my legs into motion, and repeated under my breath. "I'm moving."

I ran with the rest of the pack. I sweated appropriately and pretended it was all physical.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

There were girls who liked me, in that vague, nonthreatening way. They laughed at my jokes and lent me pens, and occasionally one of them would touch my arm and then look at me a beat too long. I would panic and look away, heart pounding in my chest like a car that had thrown a tie rod. I had never managed a teenage romance with a girl beyond a handful of weeks and a bout or two of heavy petting.

Heavy petting. Such a strange phrase. Like we're dogs, or something.

"Why don't you ask someone to the dance?" Sarah challenged one afternoon as we lounged in the library, allegedly working on an English project. She was tracing shapes on the plastic cover of *To Kill a Mockingbird* with the tip of her pen, not looking at me.

"Define 'someone,'" I said, staring at a paragraph I'd already read three times without absorbing a word.

"A girl, genius."

"I know what you meant."

"So?" She flicked her eyes up. "You're not ugly. You don't smell. You're moderately funny. This is your chance."

"My chance for what?" I asked with just a hint of disdain. "Slow dancing to Air Supply in the gym while the teachers patrol the perimeter like prison guards?"

"Yes," she said. "Exactly that."

I hesitated. I could almost picture it—the dim lights, the glittering paper stars taped to the walls, the heavy sweetness of punch mingled with perfume bought from Zellers, the sound of some ballad bleeding out of the speakers. A girl's arms draped on my shoulders, mine clamped awkwardly on her waist. My eyes would inevitably drift over her shoulder to the boys on the edges of the dance floor, to the way their shirts clung to their backs and how their jeans hugged their bums.

I swallowed. "I'm busy that night."

"You don't even know what night it is."

"I'm pre-emptively busy," I said.

She snorted. "You're hopeless."

"I prefer 'selective.'"

"Uh-huh." She turned back to the book, but there was something like curiosity in the angle of her head, some half-formed question she chose not to ask.

I was grateful she didn't ask. Furious, and grateful.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

The GRID story haunted me. I scoured the newspaper every day for more, occasionally finding a column inch or two buried in the unimportant section, sandwiched between the furniture ads and the grocery coupons. I saved every clipping, stuffed into my journal, a macabre scrapbook I kept in hopes of a clue to my possible fate.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

In time, it was becoming clear that 'gay cancer' or the 'gay plague' was sexually transmitted. When I read those words for the first time, the relief was palpable, physical, like a slap or the shock of a cold-water plunge. The secret to prevention was abstinence. Easy. I had become adept at avoiding sex—or any situations that might lead there.

Avoiding even the casual conversations about sex grew harder and harder, no matter where I was. Teenagers are horny, and my band of misfits were not immune. Jeannie was the worst among us. Her curiosity transcended all bounds of either discretion or appropriateness, and Sarah and Darren egged her on for amusement. In these moments, I assumed cynical disinterest as a shield against her inquisitions. Darren told her outright lies about male anatomy, which I imagined would become the root of her dysfunctions for years to come.

After one such session that ended with Jeannie creating a detailed illustration of female genitalia on the back of a grease-stained paper plate, the conversation took a sudden turn when one of my clippings fell from my notebook. Jeannie snatched it up. There was no time to react, even less to form a convincing cover story. Panic.

"What's this, Will?" she slapped it down on the table with a flourish. Both Sarah and Darren leaned in, then looked up at me expectantly.

The laws of gravity gave way in that instant. If I'd been floating five feet off my chair, I couldn't have felt more conspicuous, more exposed. And for a flashbulb moment, I could have come clean until my limbic brain took charge of my self-preservation. Confronted, there was only one choice: Lie.

"Uh… It's an A&A Records coupon I snagged from a newspaper in the library." An obvious lie.

Jeannie grimaced as if I'd farted at her willfully. "Uh, no, it's not genius. There's no coupon, just a story about…"

I snatched the scrap from her, flipped it over, and studied the other side, knowing there was no coupon. "Fuck! My coupon! I took the wrong scrap. The librarian was circling like

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

a shark. I know she could hear me tearing the paper. I guess I panicked." Plausible. Creative. And the ruse maintained my carefully crafted fuck-up façade.

My tablemates stared blankly before dissolving into laughter. Jeannie snatched the scrap of newsprint back and searched both sides. "Nope, no coupon. You won't be able to get that Hall and Oates cassette for $3.99 you've been secretly coveting."

My eyes narrowed. "You know I hate Hall and Oates." (I didn't, of course.)

"There's a news story here about that GRIT thing, you know, the gay plague," her eyes scanned the story. Surprise first, then pity. "Oh, this is just grim. The poor gays are dropping like flies in San Francisco and New York. Sad."

I corrected: "It's GRID, not *grit*."

Jeannie stared blankly at me for a moment, then tossed her head, "Whatever, it's still sad."

Murmurs of empathy from the other two, then Darren piped in: "My uncle in Toronto is gay. Mom said he and his friends are scared shitless about this thing."

"Your uncle is gay?" Sarah was fascinated. Darren nodded. "Why haven't you ever told us?"

"Not your business, I suppose," Darren frowned. "Seriously, I don't really know him. Mom told me he got arrested last year, or maybe two years ago… some police raid on a secret sex club or something."

"No!" the girls chorused, clearly enthralled by the scandal.

The conversation was careening out of control, swerving dangerously close to the precipice of my secret self. I swept up the paper scrap and crumpled it into a ball with a theatrical flourish, "Well, that's a fucking drag. No goddamn coupon." A diversion. Laughter again at my expense. But I could live with that. A different outcome was just too horrifying to imagine.

Surreptitiously, I caught Sarah's eye as we gathered up our lunch trays, and, again with the curious tilt of her head, an

unvoiced question poised on her lips. I hurried away to the men's room, in full tactical retreat, before any questions could be levelled at me.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

The thing about high school is that it's both endless and over in a heartbeat. Days dragged, but weeks vanished. A year. And another. One minute you were memorizing the periodic table; the next someone was handing you a brochure about universities and asking what you planned to do with the rest of your life, as if that was a reasonable question for any seventeen-(almost eighteen) -year-old.

Grade eleven passed in a flash. Winter carnival. The spring musical production—*Bye Bye Birdie*. I secured a part in the chorus and helped with sets. Soon after, exams, and a summer job in the auto parts warehouse at the car dealership my father managed. My life, it seemed, was no end of glamour.

The warehouse job meant spending every day with my dad and travelling to and from work together for the entire summer, except on weekends when I fled to Darren's for two days of unsupervised pot-smoking and records. During the week, though, I endured my father's endless lobbying to have me commit to my future. I was bombarded with questions about my academic intentions. Out of spite, I would shrug a lot and offer only monosyllables, the language of my people.

My father had my answer ready, of course. He always did.

"You'll go to Dal," he announced over supper one night, as if he were sharing the weather forecast. "Get a proper education. Something you can use. Business, maybe. Or law, if you've got the marks. None of this arts nonsense."

"Right," I said, pushing peas around my plate absently.

He eyed me over his fork. "You're smart enough. You need to apply yourself next school year. Stop wasting time with your friends and the damn stereo."

"I'll apply myself," I said.

"You'd better." He turned back to his meal. "You don't want to end up stuck here like some people."

By "some people," he meant half our relatives and most of the men who worked at the car dealership he managed. By "here" he meant the city, the province, the life he'd built and now seemed to resent. I wasn't sure if he wanted me to escape for my sake or to prove that he could produce something better, lay claim to my future, some vicarious genetic success.

Maybe it was both; maybe neither. It didn't matter. Dalhousie University, with its campus full of strangers, loomed on the horizon, glowing with the promise of reinvention. It offered me distance from my current life and a chance to rewrite myself. Academics were entirely secondary.

And underneath that glow, faint but steady, another light pulsed: the one that had flickered into being in the back seat of Jeannie's father's car that early New Year's morning. The knowledge that whatever I was running toward, I was also running from something that lived within me.

High school sucked. But it was almost over—one more year to get through.

The problem was that I had no idea what would come next.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Grade twelve was a blur I barely remembered. The first half of the year was dominated by the stress and anxiety of completing university entrance applications, and the second half was dominated by the stress and anxiety of awaiting acceptance letters. I applied to three schools: two close to home—Dalhousie and Acadia—and the University of Toronto. To my delight and astonishment, acceptance letters for all three arrived within a few days of each other in early May.

My choice was easy. Toronto was out because of the cost.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Acadia University—a well-respected, picturesque school for undergrads—was tempting, but I wasn't sure if four years of small-town rural life would be right for me. Darren was headed to Acadia to study music, but even that wasn't enough of an incentive. Dalhousie was my best choice, big enough so I could lose myself, and familiar enough to still feel safe. Dad had nodded his approval, as if his three-year campaign for me to choose Dalhousie had paid off. I didn't have the heart to tell him it had been my desire all along, so I let him have that for himself.

With the future now at least somewhat settled, I could focus on finals and maybe relax a little.

Then, prom season arrived with all the subtlety of a meteor strike. Posters appeared in the hallways overnight—glittery letters proclaiming 'A Night to Remember'—which felt like wishful thinking for a school that could barely remember to fill empty soap dispensers.

Sarah decided immediately that I would be attending.

"You're going," she said the moment announcements ended that Monday morning.

"I'm really not," I replied.

She folded her arms. "You can't ditch your own prom."

"I can. Watch me."

"Nope," she said. "My mother already bought me a new dress. You're not leaving me alone with the Hyenas." (Her affectionate term for the popular girls who had once called her Mini-Medusa.)

"What makes you think I'll be any help?" I asked. "My social skills are like firearms… or… raw poultry… dangerous when misused."

"You'll be fine," she said, waving away the concern with all the confidence of a woman who'd never once doubted her place in the world. "Besides, Jeannie and Darren are going. Don't you want to be in the group picture?"

"I look terrible in tuxes."

"You've never worn one."

"Then I probably look terrible in them."

Sarah sighed deeply. "Okay. New strategy. We'll get you a date."

"No."

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

"That was not an optional step."

"I don't need a date."

She raised an eyebrow. "Everyone needs a date."

"That's propaganda," I said. "Capitalist, heteronormative propaganda."

"Big words," she said. "Still going to get you a date."

The next four days were an exercise in misery as Sarah conducted a covert matchmaking operation with all the delicacy of a military coup. I watched her approach girls in the hallway with the kind of confidence I associated with petty criminals and cult leaders.

The rejections came quickly:

"Will? Really? He's nice, but he's kind of intense."

"He's cute in a… quiet way. I think he hates me, though."

"Is he even allowed to date? I heard his dad was strict."

"I heard he cried at E.T. That's not… a dealbreaker, but—maybe ask someone else."

Sarah regrouped after each failed attempt, her expression tightening as if she were adjusting her strategy in a chess game or for the invasion of Normandy. I could see the pressure on her growing daily with each rejection. I wasn't an easy sell, even I knew that. But Sarah was determined, intent on victory.

Finally, on Friday, she appeared beside my locker with Melissa in tow.

"You know Melissa," she said, presenting her like an exhibit or prize-winning livestock.

I did know Melissa. We'd sat next to each other in grade nine English. She had a quiet voice, nice handwriting, and seemed, above all, gentle, which I appreciated. Oh, and she was pretty, too… I guess.

Melissa smiled shyly. "Hi, Will."

My stomach lurched. "Hi."

"Melissa needs a date," Sarah said breezily, "and you need a date. I've solved all your problems in one stroke."

"Oh," I said, as if the concept of dating was new to me, "right."

Melissa looked slightly terrified and shifted nervously. "Only if you want to, Will."

I could have said no. I should have said no, but the hope flickering behind her eyes struck at me, unfairly. I hated the idea of extinguishing it.

"Sure, prom sounds… good," I reluctantly agreed.

Sarah beamed triumphantly, as if she'd just arranged a royal wedding.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

Prom night itself was nothing like it was in the movies. There were no sweeping staircases, no elegant décor. Our venue was the school gymnasium, transformed with cardboard stars wrapped in shiny paper and hung near strings of white lights. There was a hand-painted banner on heavy brown paper, slightly crooked and draped above the stage, that read, incredulously: "A Night to Remember." A punch bowl of some pinkish-orange concoction sweated nervously on a table full of bowls of potato chips.

Melissa wore a pale blue dress and smelled like vanilla. I wore a rented tux that made me feel like a headwaiter or an undertaker.

"You look nice," she said as we entered.

"You look nice too," I replied, because that was what one said. Melissa was thrilled when I presented her with a pale blue periwinkle and white baby's breath corsage to go with her gown. Pinning it on her dress proved to be a humiliating, awkward, and clumsy moment for me, and both Sarah and Jeannie had to intervene. If I could have spontaneously disintegrated into nothingness in that moment, I would have.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

We sat with our group at a round table draped in white plastic masquerading as linen. Sarah looked radiant. Jeannie sparkled. Darren looked vaguely confused by how formal everything was, but he carried his slightly disheveled tuxedo look with the same casual cool for which he was known.

When the music shifted to a ballad, Melissa asked hopefully, "Do you want to dance?"

I froze, then said, "Okay," with feigned enthusiasm.

Her hands were soft on my shoulders. Mine were stiff on her waist. She leaned in. I panicked slightly and immediately diverted my eyes that had been locked—traitorously—onto the cluster of guys standing near the bleachers in their tuxedos and fresh haircuts, laughing, jostling, adjusting collars, looking handsome, and out of reach. I tried harder to be present with Melissa.

"You're very quiet," Melissa whispered.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's okay." She smiled kindly. "I'm nervous too."

I exhaled. "Really?"

"Yeah. Proms are… kind of weird."

Relief washed over me—not attraction, not connection, just relief that she didn't expect anything from me that I couldn't give. I nodded in agreement.

We danced to two songs. Maybe three. Then she excused herself to the bathroom. When she came back, she sat beside Jeannie for a long time, the two of them whispering.

Eventually, Melissa returned to me.

"Hey," she said softly. "I'm going to head home early. You don't have to come with me. You should stay with your friends."

"Oh," I said. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I just… I think you and I are better as… friends."

"Right," I said, grateful and mortified in equal measure. "Absolutely… um… do you want me to drive you…?" I started to get up.

Melissa placed a hand on my arm, "No, that's okay. I called my dad. He's coming to get me." We smiled at each other silently, uncomfortably for a moment. "Thanks for inviting me, though. I wasn't going to go."

"Me neither," I said, relieved, "but I'm glad I did. Thanks for agreeing to come with me. I know Sarah probably pressured you."

She giggled, "Maybe a little," a pause, "but you're sweet, Will… and thanks for such a pretty corsage."

She gave me a quick peck on the cheek, patted my arm with genuine affection, and left.

Sarah slid into her chair beside me. "She's too good for you," she said.

"I know."

"Want to dance?"

"No."

"Want to make fun of everyone here?"

"Yes," I said immediately.

We sat there, watching our classmates spin under the disco ball like awkward satellites, and for the first time that night, I felt like myself again—strange, unsure, out of place, but oddly okay.

It struck me that the myth of prom was more powerful than the actual event itself. Kind of like New Year's Eve or losing your virginity—moments that were supposed to be special, monumental, maybe even character-building. Instead, it felt like a lot of unrealized expectations, not magical like prom was supposed to be. It wasn't even all that memorable, like teachers, parents, and the volunteer organizers hoped it would.

But it was survivable, and for someone with secrets, like me, that was good enough.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

Graduation day was bright, the sunlight bouncing off as-

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

phalt and car hoods as if nature was intent on putting on a good show for our special day. The ceremony itself was a blur of names and applause and platitudes about success and the future, and the rustle of polyester gowns that smelled faintly of a thousand previous wearers.

Afterward, we gathered on the school lawn, sweating under our gowns.

Darren lit a cigarette immediately. "Free at last, free at last," he declared, exhaling like a man released from captivity.

"I'm pretty sure Martin Luther King Junior wasn't referencing high school graduation when he said those words, Darren," I said. He just rolled his eyes and blew a smoke ring at me.

Jeannie twirled in her gown. "Does polyester melt? I feel like it's melting."

Sarah adjusted her cap. "Between the amount of hairspray in your hair and that robe, you probably shouldn't be spinning too close to Darren's cigarette… one stray spark and you're an incendiary device."

Jeannie just laughed, plucked Darren's smoke from his hand and twirled away.

I stood with them, feeling both inside and outside the moment. Everyone around us laughed, hugged, and posed for photos with their parents. It was happiness, or something proximate to it, but with undercurrents of excitement and anxiety in equal measures.

"So," Darren said, flicking ash onto the grass, "summer plans?"

"Europe," Jeannie said smugly. "Six weeks. Paris, Florence, and maybe Greece if my aunt keeps her promise and sends me the ticket."

"I'm working at the record shop," Darren said. "Free music, minimal responsibility."

Sarah sighed dramatically, "I'm working at the library again. Dewey Decimal and I are in an abusive relationship."

They looked at me.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

"I'm at the warehouse," I said glumly. "With my dad. Again."

"Oh," Jeannie said, nose wrinkling sympathetically. "That sounds…"

"It's something," I said, which was both true and evasive.

Sarah nudged me with her shoulder, grinning. "But then—Dal."

"Yup, then Dal," I repeated, and smiled.

Sarah eyed me carefully. "Are you nervous?"

"A little," I said with a non-committal shrug.

"Only a little?" She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I'm scared shitless,"

"Okay, maybe more than a little," I admitted grudgingly.

"What scares you the most?"

"Everything," I said honestly, feeling a familiar twinge of premeditated anxiety in my stomach. "Classes. People. Trying not to be… whatever I was in high school."

Sarah cocked her head and offered me a look that was at once knowing and puzzled. "And what do you think you were in high school?"

"A shapeshifter," I replied without hesitation or doubt, "or whatever I needed to be to survive this place." I gave a generalized gesture towards the mob of classmates, teachers, and parents surrounding us.

She didn't disagree. Sarah took my arm, and we drifted from the group for a moment, stepping out of earshot. The air felt quieter there, less chaotic, the noise of celebration dimming behind us.

"I saw your mom," Sarah said after we walked for a few minutes. "How are your parents getting along?"

"Same as always," I nodded. "Couldn't you feel the animosity beaming from my father like radioactivity?"

Sarah chuckled, "Kinda. He gave me a smile when I went up to get my diploma—but it looked more like he was having gas pains."

I laughed, "Yup, about sums it up. I know they're both trying to figure out how to get family photos without standing

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

within fifty feet of each other. I'm not getting involved."

"I always liked your mom," Sarah said wistfully. "Where is she now?"

"Vancouver, at one of the hospitals," I said. "But I guess even that's not far enough away from Dad…"

"What does that mean?"

I sighed, "She's taken some nursing job with a foreign aid group… Doctors Without… something or other. She's going to Africa."

"Africa?"

I nodded, "Leaves in a few weeks. Not sure when she'll be back," I said, doing my best to bury my disappointment.

I knew my selfish desire to have her near, close to me, was unfair, but the last few years had been hard for me, seeing her only a handful of times and only on long-distance calls on birthdays and holidays. The mature part of me admitted that she deserved to have a life as much as anyone else. Dad had made that impossible for her immediately after their split when she still lived here. She needed that distance for herself, and it was selfishly difficult for me.

"That sucks," Sarah said, giving me a sympathetic look. We wandered a bit more, making a wide circle back towards Darren and Jeannie.

"Sarah," I said, hesitating. "When we go to Dal…"

"Yeah?"

"I think we should try to make… new friends."

Her eyebrows elevated. "New friends?"

"Not instead of each other," I added quickly. "Just… alongside. I don't want to hide behind you the way I did here. I want to… try… to be my own person."

She softened instantly. "Will, I don't think you hid behind me."

"I did," I said. "A lot. And you carried me. And I'm grateful. But I want to stand on my own a little. Maybe."

She looked at me with something that wasn't quite sadness and wasn't quite pride—something gentler. "Okay," she said

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

softly. "If that's what you want."

"It is."

"But you're stuck with me anyway," she added, punching me playfully in the shoulder. "Even if you become cool and popular and end up having a steamy affair with a French professor."

I choked on a laugh. "What?"

"I'm planning ahead," she said. "My future is important too."

We walked back to rejoin Darren and Jeannie. Someone was taking photos; we squeezed together, arms around each other's shoulders, the photographer commanding us to "look excited!"

It was the last picture of us as high school students. After that, I sensed that everything would change. And for the first time, that didn't terrify me. Not completely.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Chapter Two – "What's Love Got to Do With It?"

Halifax, September-November 1984

By the time we pulled onto the street adjacent to Howe Hall, one of the student residence buildings on the Dalhousie University campus, the cicadas were screaming like a thousand tiny machines sawing away at the humid September air. Dad had insisted on driving me—"a father-son thing," he'd said, as if we regularly did father-son things. We didn't. We had silent drives, awkward dinners, and all too-frequent lectures about personal responsibility. But apparently moving into university residence demanded this ceremony.

I'd protested, insisting it would be better if Darren had just dropped me off. We lived less than a 15-minute drive from the university. It wasn't as if I was really going away. Still, Dad needed something out of this moment too. I guess could let him have that.

"Big day," he said for the fourth time as he pulled the car to a stop. "Dalhousie. Not everyone gets this chance. I didn't." *Was that a hint of envy? Hard to read.*

I nodded, because that was the expected response. *Yes, Dad. Big day. Big chance. Big expectations I have no idea how to meet.*

We unloaded my boxes in a blistering silence broken only by birds and the grunts he made lifting things he refused to let me carry. The residence building loomed above us, all grey stone, reminiscent of turn-of-the-century prisons. In truth, the building was forty or fifty years old, but was designed to fit in with the other older buildings on campus.

Dad surveyed the lobby with disapproving eyes. Students moved past us, sweating in their shorts and T-shirts. Van Halen was blasting from an open door somewhere nearby. A girl with purple hair and in ripped jeans breezed past us,

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

juggling a stack of textbooks and a plant in a cracked terracotta pot, smiling as she went.

Dad frowned. "Interesting crowd."

"It's Frosh Week," I reminded. "Lots of… uh… high spirits."

He grunted an acknowledgement, which could've meant anything from approval to disapproval—or indigestion.

We lugged my things up two flights of stairs to my tiny room, where the humid air smelled of old carpet and whatever industrial-strength cleaners they used to disguise the scent of all past and present occupants. Dad set my final box on the bed, wiped his hands on his pants, and looked around as if evaluating the place for structural weaknesses.

"Well," he said, clapping his hands together. "Here you are."

"Here I am."

He nodded once, briskly, like we'd concluded a business deal. "Make the most of it. Don't get distracted. You've got potential, Will. Don't waste it."

A beat. Then, softer: "We're proud of you. I mean, I'm sure your mother is too."

This would've been touching if the delivery didn't make it sound as though it'd been forced from him, Heimlich-style, like some rogue chicken bone.

"Thanks," I said, with sudden conflicted feelings of misappropriated affection and relief for the distance this would bring.

He hesitated—he actually hesitated, like he might have hugged me—then his arm twitched, aborted the mission, and instead he offered a handshake. *A handshake*. With his own son. I took it anyway.

And then he was gone without another word.

Residence was chaos disguised as community. Every door along every hallway seemed to be open, music pouring out in competing genres—Hall and Oates from down the hall, Prince from somewhere overhead, and something punkish

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

three doors down that sounded like a cross between ripping sheet metal and anger being uncorked. Darren would have loved it.

I unpacked slowly, trying to make my half of the shoebox room look intentional rather than accidental. Posters felt too revealing yet, so I settled on a Canadian flag thumb-tacked slightly crooked on the wall.

My bedding looked like it had been designed for a much younger boy. Maybe that was fitting, but I made a mental note to buy something new at the first opportunity. There are so many small details that get overlooked in families going through a break-up, such as the transition of children into young adults, as was my case. In the heat of battle, it was too much to expect parents to think about age-appropriate linens, after all.

My roommate hadn't arrived yet. According to the orientation sheet taped to the door, his name was Kevin. Kevin sounded harmless. Neutral. Not threateningly masculine, but not flamboyant either. Kevin could be anything, anyone. I just hoped he wouldn't be a dick.

I was in the middle of arranging my books by height when someone pounded on the doorframe.

"You're Will?" the guy said, leaning in. Tall. Ginger hair. Freckles for days. A grin that was either friendly or predatory—I couldn't tell.

"Yeah. You Kevin?"

"I'm Mike. I'm your RA… uh, Residence Advisor. Welcome to Bronson House… you settling in okay?"

"Sure," I said. Settling implied a kind of confidence I did not feel, but subtle, harmless lying had become my superpower at this point in life.

"Good, good. You're now officially a Bronson House Buccaneer… arrrrrr!" Mike pulled a pirate's eyepatch over his left eye, and we laughed uncomfortably in unison. Removing the eyepatch for his next performance, Mike glanced around. "Where's your roommate?"

"No idea. Maybe he bailed."

Mike laughed. "Well, don't get used to the extra space. Anyway, Frosh Week's just getting started. Orientation meeting's at six in the common room. There'll be games."

The way he said "games" made me deeply suspicious, fearful even.

"I'll try to be there," I lied again.

Mike nodded and, giving my flag a thoughtful but sympathetic look, moved on to the next room.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

My first meal in the dining hall was a blur of excited chatter under unforgiving fluorescent lights. I sat alone with my plastic tray and plate of spaghetti that tasted like ketchup and disdain, and looked even worse. All around me, new friendships were forming with alarming speed. There was laughter, bonding over hometowns and majors, and terrible jokes about the terrible cafeteria food.

I envied the ease with which some people just seemed to fit in, the way they glided into belonging and friend groups without fear or hesitation. I always made friends easily and confidently, up until the last few years, that is. It seemed harder now for some reason—and to be honest, I was already feeling more than a little overwhelmed by university life.

Was this a mistake?

"Mind if I sit?" a voice asked, dislodging me from my thoughts.

I looked up to see a girl awkwardly balancing her tray. She had glasses, short spikey hair with a wide swath of deep blue on one side, and a T-shirt that said: 'Don't Panic.'

"Sure," I said, and gestured at her t-shirt with my fork. "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, right?"

"That's right!" She beamed, validated, and slid into the chair across from me. "I'm Gina, by the way. Computer science. Or pre-computer science, technically. You?"

"Will, and, uh… arts. I think."

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

"You think?"

"I haven't declared yet."

"Ah," she said knowingly. "One of the lost boys," and giggled.

I almost laughed. She really had me pegged. "Pretty much," I said with a smirk.

She was easy to talk to—maybe because she didn't know me yet. No expectations. No history. Maybe because she wasn't Sarah or Jeannie or anyone who'd known me long enough to sense the complications.

Gina was an Ontarian from some suburb near Toronto. Her parents were from Halifax and Dal alumni. She confessed that Dal had been her second choice but was happy to please her parents with her decision. We bonded over sci-fi novels and music. Gina had encyclopedic knowledge about UK pop music and promised to make me a mixed tape of her favourites.

Halfway through dinner, someone breezed past our table holding a stack of student society brochures. One slipped loose and fluttered to the floor beside us. Gina bent, grabbed it, and handed it to me.

A pale blue flyer. Blocky text. A discreet pink triangle in the corner: **Gays & Lesbians At DalL - Weekly Meetings - All Welcome**

My hand jerked reflexively as if it were hot. I flipped it over immediately, pretending to read the blank back.

"Are you thinking of joining?" Gina asked, casually gesturing at the flyer with her fork.

"What? No. I mean—no. It just… fell here." I spat out a nervous laugh.

She nodded, reading nothing into my reaction. "I might check it out. I think one of the teaching assistants from the computer lab is a member. She seems nice. Talks too fast, though."

"Oh," I nodded, desperate to sound interested in a casually detached way. "Cool."

I tucked the flyer beneath my tray, as if it were contraband.

Sample Chapters

Later that night, the campus was alive with energy—voices spilling out of open windows, music blasting from courtyard speakers, laughter echoing through the shadows. I stopped by the Bronson Common Room against my better judgment. I hung out at the back, close to the exit, so I could slip away, which I did before the games started. There was no way in hell I was being dragged into games. Once outside, I wandered aimlessly, trying to look casual, as if I belonged.

Eventually, I found myself outside at the Student Union Building—the SUB—down the hill from residence. I loitered about the bustling lobby, feigning purpose. The massive, cluttered bulletin boards drew me in, a focus that would keep me from being conspicuously solo.

My eyes were instantly drawn to a bright pink flyer for Rumours.

The universe clearly wanted my attention.

Of course I'd heard the name whispered around Halifax many times, usually with a knowing smirk, raised eyebrows, and always in lowered voices. The gay bar. The only one.

I had a vague idea of its location; I could see it in my mind's eye. My imagination had me standing outside of it. A small crowd in front, smoking, laughing, at ease. I stood to the side, half in shadow, hands shoved into my jacket pockets, pulse ringing in my ears. I wanted to go in. I wanted to run away.

I did neither.

When the daydream melted away, I was still in the lobby of the SUB, staring pointlessly at the bulletin board and the bright pink flyer. I retreated back toward the residence, telling myself I was just exploring, that I wasn't scared, that it didn't matter, that I was normal. Completely normal.

But the truth followed me up the hill, as quiet and persistent as my own footsteps.

Back in my dorm room, Kevin had finally arrived.

"Hey, man," he said, flopping back on his bed with the boneless ease of someone utterly at home in his body. "You must be Will. I'm Kevin."

He had a wide, open smile. Nice hair. Nice eyes. Friendly shoulders.

Too friendly.

"Hey," I said. "Good to meet you." We shook hands, which seemed pointlessly formal.

"So," he said, hands behind his head, studying the ceiling. "Ready for university life?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

"Good," he said. "Because it's going to be bitchin'. Like—weird, stressful, confusing fun. But fun."

Fun. I nodded my agreement. I hoped so. I really did.

But lying in the dark that first night, listening to Kevin's breathing deepening as he fell asleep, all I felt was the weight of the flyer hidden in my desk drawer. The one I hadn't thrown away. The one I wasn't sure if I could throw away.

And somewhere in the distance, faint and impossible to block out, Tina Turner's unmistakable voice drifted from someone's stereo singing, "*What's Love Got To Do With It?*"

I didn't know yet. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

But maybe I was beginning to understand the question.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

***

I remember some years ago, my mom saying to me after you turn eighteen, time just seemed to pick up speed, and that I shouldn't be so impatient about racing into adulthood. I really had no idea what she was telling me at the time, but soon came to understand: You make grand plans, and somewhere along the way, your life happens. Classes, assignments, new friends, responsibility for myself… all these things made time collapse, crushed by pressure and drawn ever closer, ever faster, towards something unknowable, like crossing an event horizon.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

Okay, saying that my life was becoming a black hole was too melodramatic, even for me, but some days it felt like this. It was more like I had crested some invisible peak in September and was careening down the other side, headlong, picking up speed, still with no clue of the final destination.

Now it was October already, almost Hallowe'en in fact. Seems I woke up after that first night in residence, blinked, and weeks had passed in an academic blur. Midterms were over, term papers had been written and submitted for evaluation, and ahead, more… just more, of everything. Studying, reading, classes, and drinking, of course. Then Sarah reappeared. She was the only one from our high school quartet who'd joined me at Dal. Darren was off in Wolfville at Acadia studying music. Jeannie was travelling for a year and was out of our lives, which was a bit sad but strangely peaceful.

At the start of the semester, Sarah and I agreed that it would be best for us not to hang out for a while, so we could both make new friends. My idea. I think it stung a bit for her. In the end, it was good for us both—better for her, I think—but we'd both navigated successfully through the first two months, and it was time to compare notes. I was glad to see her when she appeared in my doorway.

"You cut your hair!" and gave her a hug that I let linger.

"Your powers of observation have always been your greatest gift," she joked and kissed me on the cheek. "I needed a change, I think. Break away from the old Sarah, you know?"

I did know; seems I was having a harder time achieving a new orbit, though, and a haircut wasn't going to do it for me. I wasn't prepared for the amount of work. My social life was suffering. Sarah just seemed to know that and instinctively came to my rescue. I was always better in a group than solo, and she also knew that about me too.

Sarah casually surveyed our room, but her face held that familiar mischievous grin—the one that had always landed me in trouble in high school.

"What?" I asked, immediately afraid.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

"I'm here to whisk you away," she said, leaping onto my bed. "I can show you a whole undiscovered world, Will, where people mingle, and talk to each other, and laugh… you remember laughter, right? You've hidden away in this cave long enough! Get your coat, we're going drinking!"

"But it's Tuesday!" I protested.

"Ah ha! It's Wednesday, and I know you have no classes tomorrow." She bounced off the bed, grabbing a handful of my hair on her way toward the door. "Come on, William, you're buying the first round."

"Ow!" It didn't really hurt. We both laughed. I grabbed Sarah by the shoulders and leaned in. "On one condition…"

She studied me, looking serious, but with her unmistakable twinkle. "What?"

"Promise this isn't a scheme to hook me up with one of your residence friends. Pinky swear," I demanded.

A pause, then whining: "But Lisa's really nice and pretty, and you two would make such a cute pair!" I frowned.

"Your track record as a matchmaker for me isn't stellar."

She relented, "Oh, alright, then! Stay a virgin forever, Will." We locked pinkies, cementing the contract.

"Who says I'm a virgin?" I protested, pretending to search for my coat.

This time it was Sarah who leaned in almost too close. "I'm your best friend, William Rafferty. I know you better than you know yourself. Now shut up and come on. I'm dying of thirst."

Sarah launched herself into the hallway to speak to a passing classmate. I paused for a moment, searching for keys that were already in my pocket. '*Hurricane Sarah*,' I thought and shook my head, remembering the devastation she wrought as she blew a path through my personal life in high school. I smiled, watching her flirt shamelessly, effortlessly with the guy outside my door. She meant well, and I was her lifelong project—her chunk of wood she was determined to whittle into a real boy, she'd said to me on one occasion.

That vague reference to Pinocchio was more apt than she knew. I had become adept at lying after all.

Later, in the campus pub—a dingy L-shaped room on an upper floor of the SUB—we crowded around a glass-strewn table with a half-dozen of her Sherrif Hall residence friends. Me. Seven horny college women. And alcohol.

'*Oh, God. What am I doing???*'

The conversation had naturally turned to sex. Longshoremen and construction workers would have blanched hearing them talk. I fidgeted, hanging at the edge of the repartee, engaging for show, ignoring the overt flirtation directed at me from more than one of Sarah's friends. The pub began to fill up, which was a blessing. I pretended I couldn't hear the conversation over the noise of the crowd and the music. I pretended not to notice all the attractive women sitting across from me, giving me looks. I pretended a lot.

Sample Chapters
1/24/2026

***

Friday morning, and the lecture theatre lights hummed faintly overhead, their light casting everything in washed-out tones that made even the pluckiest of first-years look like faces in an ad for academic despair. I slipped into my usual seat halfway towards the lectern at the front, that safe middle ground, trying to project a sense of casual belonging while discreetly surveying the room and wondering if anyone could tell I was a little hung over.

A late arrival caught my eye. He moved with easy, confident purpose, not someone rushing because of lateness, though his hair looked like it had been hurriedly plastered into submission. He carried a notebook tucked under one arm, and his mouth sported a pen, cigar-like. He gave me a small, sleepy nod before dropping into the seat two rows ahead. The nod shouldn't have meant anything. But it did.

Dr. Hawthorne swept hurriedly into the hall, coat flapping behind him like a weary academic cape. He always looked

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

vaguely disappointed—either with us or with the entire trajectory of political thought since Plato. Hard to tell.

"Today," he announced, adjusting his glasses, "we're discussing the relationship between ideology, governance, and responses to public health crises."

Pens clicked. Books opened. Several people around me immediately checked out mentally.

I uncapped my pen, feigning competence.

"While Canada has yet to encounter the full force of what is being called the AIDS epidemic," Hawthorne continued, pacing slowly, "we must understand it as a political issue, not purely as a social or health issue."

My heart plummeted so fast I felt it physically.

Around me, students shifted in their seats, unbothered, flipping to the relevant pages in their course packs. Someone whispered a joke. Someone else crinkled a granola bar wrapper with no regard for the gravity of the moment.

The guy two rows ahead leaned back slightly, scribbling something in the margins of his notes. Totally calm. Normal. Unaffected.

Meanwhile, I felt like a hunted animal, exposed, threatened.

AIDS. The word clunked against the inside of my skull, heavy and wet, as a stone dropped into water.

Hawthorne kept talking, unaware that his voice had become a distant echo in my head: "…American cities… diagnostic uncertainty… social stigma… policy failures…"

I stared straight ahead, jaw locked, and my pulse tap dancing fervently.

Don't react. You can't react. No one else is reacting.

My palms were so slippery with nervous sweat that the pen nearly slid from my fingers.

Then the guy two rows ahead glanced back at me suddenly—maybe to stretch, maybe to look at the clock on the wall behind me—and for one horrifying second, I thought he'd noticed. That he could see it written on my face: fear,

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

guilt, or the secret I wasn't even admitting to myself.

But he just gave me a tiny, absent half-smile before turning around again.

My entire nervous system short-circuited.

Beside me, someone sighed dramatically about being hungry. Behind me, a couple made whispered weekend plans. Across the aisle, a girl was doodling hearts in the margins of her notes, absently, disinterested and seemingly unaffected while Hawthorne droned on:

"…public perception shaped by media narratives… homophobia embedded in policy responses…"

I heard every word and none of them. It wasn't just fear distracting me; I also had the sensation I was slipping out of phase with everyone else, as though I was in one version of reality and they were in another. A double consciousness, split cleanly down the middle: Them—safe, academic, bored; and me—terrified, exposed, and pretending so hard it almost hurt.

When the lecture finally ended, chairs scraped, and conversations resumed as if nothing world-shifting had occurred. Students filed out, complaining about assignments and making lunch plans.

The guy two rows away stood, stretching. It was hard for me to look away when his T-shirt rode up, revealingly. He had dark hair and was a bit taller than me, I guessed. Casual, comfortable clothes on a lithe frame. Then he looked back at me again—eye contact—brief, warm, nothing remarkable, but something in his smile nearly undid me.

"See ya later," he said shyly, almost whispering, and offering me a charming, crooked grin.

I swallowed hard and forced a smile back, "Yeah, later…"

Then, just like that, I stepped back into the other version of myself, the smiling one. The quiet, slightly anxious, careful one who pretended he hadn't just been struck by lightning in the form of a casual smile in the middle of a lecture hall.

***

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026

The dormitory bathroom was always too bright with the kind of fluorescent light that made even the healthiest students look sickly or otherworldly, as if we were all devolving into two-dimensional sepia images of ourselves. I leaned over the sink. The porcelain was cold beneath my hands. The faucet on the sink to my left dripped, a slow, irregular rhythm. Reflected in the mirror, someone's discarded towel lay in a heap on the floor by the shower stalls, damp and orphaned.

This morning's lecture replayed in my head, again, probably for the fifth or sixth time today. Hawthorne paced back and forth in front of the lectern, discussing "the emerging AIDS epidemic" with that gravelly enthusiasm of his, weaving it into a point about social contract theory and public health policy. Most of the students were barely attentive; most were thoroughly unmoved. One girl flipped her hair obsessively. Someone coughed. From the dim recesses near the back of the hall came a whisper followed by a snicker—the joke inspired, no doubt, by the topic of the lecture.

Meanwhile, I hadn't been able to breathe. I'd kept my eyes glued to my notebook, pretending to write something meaningful, pretending I wasn't hearing every syllable like it had been aimed directly at me. Pretending the eye contact I'd made with the guy two rows ahead had meant nothing.

Now, alone in the bathroom, my panic had settled into a dull, throbbing pressure behind my eyes. Not entirely gone but waiting for the right moment to resurface. I lifted my head and stared at myself in the mirror.

The lighting in our communal bathroom was truly cruel, but it was not entirely to blame for what I saw reflected in it. I was a mess. My shirt was rumpled. I looked nineteen, going on ninety. I had puffy dark circles under my eyes, and I thought I even saw a single grey hair near my right temple. I didn't look gay. I didn't look straight. Truth was, I didn't even know what either was supposed to look like. I just looked like a person trying very, very hard to pass as someone who had things under control but was slowly losing the struggle.

"You're fine," I whispered to my reflection. It sounded unconvincing even to me.

The bathroom door swung open suddenly with a loud squeak, and a guy from down the hall wandered in, humming. He nodded at me, yawned, brushed his teeth loudly, and left without giving me a second glance. The casual normalcy of it made something twist inside me.

It was so easy for him just to exist.

I splashed water on my face. It was colder than I expected, so sharp it made my eyes water.

I am starting over, I told myself. I could navigate a new school with new people. It was the new life I had so desperately wanted, even yearned for when I was in high school. I could avoid making mistakes. I could avoid projecting all the telltale signs of emotional collapse if I tried hard enough. I could do that. I could really start over.

I held onto the sink until the butterflies in my gut fluttered away. The mirror fogged slightly from my breath, blurring my reflection into something with softer edges.

"Fresh start," I whispered to the quiet of the bathroom.

A promise, or a plea, maybe.

I splashed my face with water again, unstopped the sink, and dried off. Forcing my shoulders back and forcing my expression into something that looked like resolve, I walked out into the dim hallway. Strangely, the air felt a little lighter, the sounds of residence life swelling around me in a familiar, frenetic rush.

I wasn't sure what "fresh" meant yet, but I knew I wasn't done trying to figure it out.

Sample Chapters
11/24/2026