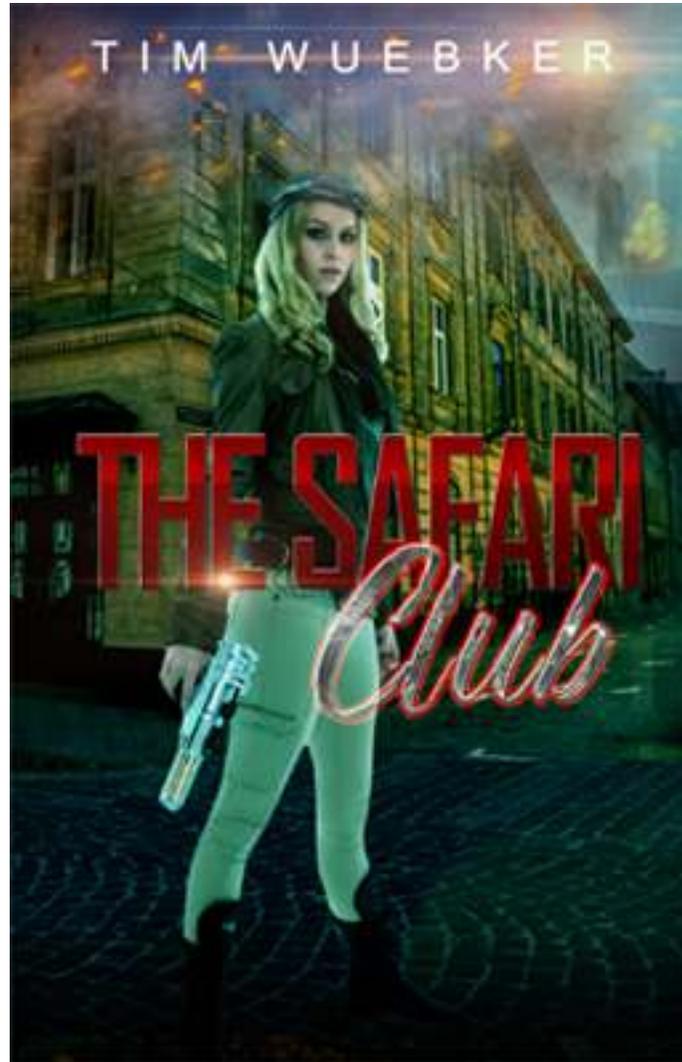


TIM WUEBKER

THE SAFARI  
*Club*





I.

Her mom had been unreachable for three days.

As Jeanne Darcy drove with both hands on the wheel and told Siri, “Call Mom,” Brock Walker zipped past her in his uncle’s blue Mustang. As Mom’s phone rang, Brock’s ocean blue eyes recognized her brown ones in his rearview mirror—and he braked. His thick, blond, wavy hair, glorious with just a hint of wildness, rippled in the breeze. Now they were alongside each other, smiling easily, permanent friends.

Only then did his friends—he had three friends in the car with him—all laughing and poking at each other—rowdy guys—notice her. One waved, one acted bored, and one furtively turned away—Les. Les was scared to death of people—especially girls. Especially tall girls with long blonde hair who played volleyball.

A final wave and Brock cruised ahead. She smiled easily, peacefully. They’d known each other since pre-school.

On the fourth ring, her mom’s answering machine activated. Jeanne sang along with Mom’s song—an anthem from Grandma’s hippie generation about powerful women. After the beep, she kept singing—then laughed. “Oops! Sorry, Mom,” she said. She slowed, and cruised right behind Brock’s blue Mustang, which was idling at a red light. She crept forward until she was 12 inches...eight...four...two behind his bumper—then her ten-year-old Honda kissed him and everyone in his car startled and frenzied and whipped around, and Brock started laughing, looking so gymnastic-y... everyone except shy Les, who took one tired glance at the girl and immediately turned away and on this sunny day with the top down, buried his head in his phone—*can’t look at a girl!*—and Jeanne continued:

“Mom, I am on my way to school to pay my tuition and register for classes. I just thought you should know. I hope you’re okay. If you get this, please call me now.”

The light blinked green and the blue Mustang suddenly revved, peeled, and shot out, a race car. Jeanne startled, then laughed. *Wild man*. He never did that. He was such a goofball. Already he was a block ahead, whipping around the garden she’d helped plant in the roundabout by the school’s entrance. Her sophomore year, she’d joined the Gardening Club, which proposed that the school raise its own food. Now they had four roundabouts, two meadows, and a greenhouse, and two animal pens. *Brock Walker, if you hop a curb and run over my tomatoes*, she threatened—

—and he was gone. She’d see him later.

Still two hands on the wheel, Jeanne's gaze flitted between the road and the screen. Why didn't Mom call her back? The longest she'd ever vanished was a day. This was three.

Desperately, Jeanne wanted to ask her older sister, but—

Instead, she prayed. She spoke to the dead. Dad, yes—but mostly Grandpa. Her father died as a soldier when she was in kindergarten and she loved him. Instantly, she remembered dozens of photographs. She'd spent hours searching his young, handsome face; wanting clues to her own life. Everyone said she was just like him. The early photos featured the towheaded, sun-kissed boy dangling by an arm or a leg from trees—eight years old and dangerously thirty feet up, over concrete, utterly free.

Later, the high school scholar-athlete in his basketball uniform. And at 17, in camouflage for the school play. Then camo for real at age 19, in the desert 12,000 miles away, at war. A friendly honk behind her. She startled. She was idling at a green light. Behind her was lovely Maria Siena, who waved joyfully at her. Jeanne smiled and waved back, embarrassed, and stepped on it.

Three right turns and she parked. Mom—what to do about Mom? No call. Mentally, she asked Grandpa, but from the beyond, Grandpa didn't answer. She asked Dad why he married Mom but Jeanne already knew. She wanted to call her older sister Beatrice, but was that really worth it? She wasn't even sure where Beatrice was. But if she didn't, how mad and frantic would Beatrice get when she found out?

She parked, pressed stop, and stepped onto the pavement.

The school was a gleaming architectural gem, half-shopping mall and half-castle. Asymmetrical on purpose, it had several wings, a state-of-the-art weight room, an extensive old-fashioned library her grandpa had loved (and had made her check books out for him, usually to slyly get her to read more), a multi-purpose atrium, and a chapel so heartbreakingly beautiful—all glass and sunlight—that dozens of alums had gotten married there.

And yet, if a tornado destroyed it, she had no doubt the community would re-emerge stronger. They'd hold classes in tents and mobile trailers. Her grandpa had loved this place. Last year's senior class contained Rhodes Scholars...fifty people with ACTs above 30, eight who'd started profitable businesses, three who started actual charities, two basketball players who'd made it to Stanford, an actress who worked her way into a Broadway supporting role, and her friend, Peyton, who'd written actual screenplays. They'd filmed them, put them on YouTube, and Peyton had 40,000 subscribers. "People use their God-given gifts here," Grandpa had said.

"They're just kids," her mom replied. Mom didn't like St. Joan of Arc.

“Yes, they are,” he’d said softly. Jeanne had stepped inside her home and was listening to them argue—again. “Kids without the nonsense holding them back.”

“I went to DV East,” Mom protested. *And I turned out fine.*

“I know,” Grandpa said. Jeanne removed her shoes and slid the door shut silently. She remained in the entryway. “And you loved it.”

“I didn’t *love* it.”

“Isabelle, we can afford this. And Jeanne loves it.”

“It’s too much,” Mom protested.

“It really isn’t,” Grandpa said. 64, an ex-navy pilot, still lean and muscular, a lover of books and what he liked to refer to as “clean fun with mud”—obstacle races, balloon rides, scuba, hang-gliding, and dirt bikes—he promised to tell Jeanne how much money he actually had—*provided she never told Mom.*

They lived in a three-bedroom, 1,800 square foot house next to plumbers and cops when he could pay cash for something twice that size. He drove a ten-year-old dented truck with 150,000 miles and tuned all their cars himself. He’d paid for Beatrice’s and Jeanne’s private high school and college all the way until Beatrice dropped out.

And that was it. Because Mom still had to work. Beautician, cook, hair-stylist, receptionist, hotel front desk, librarian.... Every few months, she had a meltdown and said she was wasting her life and she should go back and take more science and get into health care. Except she didn’t like blood and people’s injuries made her cringe. When Jeanne was 14, Mom would drive her to volleyball and start crying at a stoplight. Jeanne didn’t know what to do. “Why don’t you start at the bottom and work your way up?” she channeled Grandpa when she was fifteen and the crying happened again.

“Because I’ve spent all my time taking care of other people!” Mom exploded. But then Mom was shocked at her own rudeness and said, “Oh, baby Jeanne, I don’t mean that in a bad way. Daddy and Beatrice and you and Grandpa are the best parts of my life. I love you. I cherish you.” And her mom gave her a sun-kissed peck on the cheek and rubbed her shoulder. So soothing.

Three weeks later, after two glasses of wine, Mom had done it again—telling Grandpa she felt directionless, like everything she did was for anyone but her. Taxiing girls to volleyball, basketball, and tennis; conditioning; music lessons; study groups; student council for Jeanne; service projects....

“Joan of Arc isn’t a school,” Mom protested while Grandpa sneakily poured what was left of the wine down the sink. “They don’t just take seven classes and play a sport.”

“It’s a community,” said Grandpa. “Like when I grew up in the neighborhood. Always lots going on around the neighborhood.”

“It’s too much,” Mom muttered. “They’re always at games and plays and charities and seventy-seven other things.”

“It’s a small town,” Grandpa said.

“I don’t want them to be spoiled rich brats.”

“They work their asses off,” Grandpa said. “Jeanne’s up at five for homework, practice, and mass. Beatrice is up at six.”

“They push them too hard,” Mom had said. “They’re just kids. When do they get time to be teenagers?”

“What do you think they’re missing?” Grandpa asked. Jeanne could picture the two of them maneuvering around each other in the kitchen. She was mixing salad; he was broiling roast beef with onions.

“I don’t know,” Mom said. “Time to do nothing. Binge on movies. Throw parties.”

“Jeanne just had fifteen people over last Saturday,” Grandpa said.

When her mom started to protest that study groups weren’t the same, Jeanne reopened the front door and swung it shut. *Thud!* “Hi! Mom? Grandpa?” she called.

That killed the conversation.

By now, Jeanne was waiting in line in Joan of Arc’s library for her counselor. The line moved slowly but Jeanne was next. Mrs. Padder was sweet, distracted, and disorganized.

The problem with Mom was she had a lot of wild emotions and she never knew what she wanted—

“Jeanne Darcy!” Mrs. Padder called. Everyone called her Mrs. Scatter. If you wrote your own schedule and double-checked it against your transcripts, however, she approved it immediately.

Jeanne smiled patiently sat down in Padder’s tiny office, and tucked a long blonde strand behind her ear.

“How are you, sweetie?” Mrs. Padder said. She was peeking under books and files on her desk, hunting.

“Under your coffee cup,” Jeanne said helpfully. She had stuck a flower sticker on her file last year so it would stand out. Mrs. P. hadn’t noticed.

Jittery, Mrs. Padder looked under one cup. “Other one,” Jeanne said.

Mrs. Padder pulled the file from her desk blizzard. She ignored two yellow slips that fell out and floated to the floor as she opened it.

“AP Chem,” she read. “Pre-calculus. AP English. AP Journalism. Entrepreneurship. Sewing. Jujutsu.” Mrs. Padder looked up. “Who put you in Jujutsu?”

“I did.”

“Are you sure?” her glasses hung precariously low on her nose like a one-armed cartoon character dangling from a cliff. “Oh, honey.”

“My grandpa wanted me to take self-defense.”

Mrs. Padder nodded sympathetically. She had soft brown eyes. In peak health, Grandpa had died a year ago. He had left Jeanne his private journals, kept since he was nine years old, and she read from them every night before sleep.

“Well, that was fast. Most people aren’t quite so organized. All you have to do now is pay Mrs. Mackenzie.” She slid Jeanne a bill.

Mrs. Mackenzie was the registrar. Jeanne owed \$6,095.

Jeanne felt her eyes widen, and she froze. “That’s not what the tuition letter said.” Try as she might, her whole body was rigid. She wanted to run from the room. *Brock*, she thought. But she froze.

“There were mistakes,” Mrs. Padder said.

“Do I just pay you?” Jeanne was trembling. She didn’t have \$6,095, and the man who managed her trust, Uncle Mark, lived in Kuala Lumpur.

“Karen,” Mrs. Padder said. “I mean, ‘Mrs. Mackenzie.’ In the Registrar’s Office.”

“Okay,” Jeanne said.

“Unless you just want to hand me a check. I can give you a receipt.”

Jeanne stole a doubtful glance at the city dump of Mrs. Scatter’s desk. Like a paper factory after a cyclone. “Is she in?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Padder said too quickly.

“Could you call her?” Asking someone to double-check reminded her of her grandpa.

Mrs. Padder narrowed her eyebrows but picked up the phone. She gave up after the fifth ring. She’s supposed to be in,” Mrs. Padder said. “Probably just stepped away for a minute. Or she’s helping someone else.”

*The army brass screws up everything*, she remembered from Grandpa’s journal, age 29, El Salvador.

“Should I just wait in her office?”

Mrs. Patter’s pupils darted as she searched the room for a solution. “Yes,” she said, too confidently.

“Do I need anything from my file?” Jeanne asked.

Hastily, Mrs. Padder handed her two sheets, including an itemized bill. Jeanne read it as she walked down the hall.

Lost in thought, she didn’t sense anyone behind her until *whump!* Arms flung around her, she fumbled her papers, and her best friend had her in a bear hug.

“Jeanne!” Maria Siena hung on her, hugging and swaying. Maria was dressed in neon pink shorts and yellow tank top and cross-country shoes. “Want to play tennis Saturday?”

“Of course!” Jeanne said. Maria’s frizzy, brown-blond hair bumped her nose. “Five o’clock.”

“You got it!” Maria said.

“Siena!” Another runner yelled at Maria from down the hall.

“Bye!” Maria said and shot down the tiles.

Tentatively, Jeanne waited by Mrs. Mackenzie’s office until the Director of Admissions returned. A little heavysset in her forties, she had the unusually wide, concerned eyes of a mom who had raised five children and spent her days solving other people’s problems.

“What can I do for you, Jeanne?”

“I’m here to ask about my tuition.”

Those worried Mom eyes grew larger. “Where’s your mom?”

Jeanne hoped her anxiety didn’t show. She didn’t want to get into it. She smiled serenely and forced her shoulders to relax—the exact opposite of how she was feeling. “I just thought I’d pay it.” From her purse, she retrieved a check from Grandpa’s trust, from Uncle Mark, and a thick envelope of tips.

Mrs. Mackenzie read the paper and the check. As Jeanne thumbed through fifties and twenties, she said, “I’m a hundred short.”

Mrs. Mackenzie looked at her.

Jeanne forced herself to make eye contact. “Can I get it to you by the end of the week?”

Mrs. Mackenzie looked deeply thoughtful. “Can you just call your mom now?”

“I think she’s taking care of something else,” Jeanne said, and caught herself defensively crossing her arms. She forced them apart. *Be cool.* “I’ll bring it to you.”

“Jeanne, of course, we’ll work with you,” Mrs. Mackenzie said. “If you can get it to us by Thursday, there won’t be any late fees. And you won’t get unregistered for classes and lose your place in popular offerings because you’re unofficially a student.”

“All because I’m \$100 short?” Jeanne blinked.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Mackenzie looked away. “We’re basically a private business but we do work with people. Tuition’s actually due tomorrow. I’m giving you—your mom—two extra days.”

Jeanne caught herself not breathing. She’d spent the last three days making her own meals, doing all the laundry, talking with her older sister and brother-in-law, and paying the utility bill so they wouldn’t get shut off again. *Where was Mom?!*

“I understand. Thanks, Mrs. Mackenzie.”

“Jeanne, are you all right?”

One more question like that from this loving mom who always had a hand on a lonely freshman girl’s shoulder or who was texting her twelve-year-old to help the girl find her missing sock and Jeanne would explode with tears.

“Thanks, Mrs. Mackenzie.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m late for basketball,” Jeanne blurted. “Coach Lewis. Ten o’clock. I have to run. I’ll see you by Thursday.” She nodded at the clock and shot out the door.

In the hall, instinctively she reached for her phone to call her mom just as it buzzed with a new text message from an unknown number. The screen displayed a picture of a man in tight blue jeans, a leather jacket, and mirror-shades leaning against a motorcycle in front of a seedy bar. “Drinks on me,” read the caption.

Jeanne sighed and didn’t open it. Rand. She hadn’t given the man her number; he’d taken it from one of the servers where she waitressed, a place called Howl at the Moon. It tried to be a nice family tavern but after eight p.m., Grandpa said it attracted riffraff—the unemployed, the unemployable, pot-smokers, fake tough guys, and people with criminal records.

One Friday night close to closing, a pack of already-tipsy laughing boys burst in and tried to quiet themselves like drunks showing up late in a cathedral for a friend’s wedding. Patchy jeans jackets, wobbly, wearing low hats, torn V-necks displaying male heavage. One wore sunglasses after midnight to hide two black eyes.

Jeanne’s gaze darted toward the bar, the west floor, the east floor, and she realized Trish, the hostess, had vanished. A former hostess, Jeanne approached the rowdy five guys.

“Welcome,” she said. “Would you like a table?”

“The bar’s fine,” said one.

“Table,” the boy she later knew as Rand overruled the leader. He did so because he picked up on the fact she was a waitress, he was attracted, and he wanted to be in her section. In his silvery sunglasses, she caught her own worried green eyes and long, curly blonde hair. She was the only blonde athletic 17-year-old in the restaurant.

From there, she cooled her natural friendliness to distant politeness. She smiled instead of laughing at jokes. She responded with “Yes,” “No,” and “I’ll ask the cook,” to every question. And in the kitchen, she asked her manager to serve the table instead.

“We’re shorthanded back here,” he said, helping the cook. She frowned at Trish, the hostess who had evaded the five frat boys and stuck her with it.

Sighing, she marched back to the table. “Ready to order?” she asked.

“Where do you go to school?” Rand asked her.

“I’m younger than I look,” she said. “I’m still in high school.”

“You a cheerleader?”

“No.”

“You probably play volleyball. You’re tall.”

“Anything to drink?”

“Where do you go to school?”

She smiled politely. To certain customers, she absolutely did not want to give any information.

Rand hesitated. “I go to ESU,” he said. His four friends hunched, burying their faces in their menus, clearly trying not to laugh. One’s eyes did a split-second glance at a friend for reassurance, which meant, Jeanne knew, that Rand was lying. About what she didn’t care. Suddenly, she just wanted to walk out of Howl at the Moon and to go home.

“I’m actually taking a semester off,” he said. “Making some bank with my uncle, instead. Manufacturing solar panels. Paying for college.”

His friends pretended to scrutinize their menus.

“Do you need a few minutes to decide?” she asked, stepping one foot away.

“Pitcher of Lite,” said a freckled red-head.

“I’ll send someone over who’s old enough to serve alcohol,” Jeanne said, and disappeared.

They drank two pitchers, getting progressively louder. The manager sent Trish, 17, home. Usually, two burly cops showed up right before closing, but not that night.

“Go home,” her manager said.

“Are you sure?” Jeanne asked.

“Out the kitchen door,” he said.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked.

He smiled at her. “Jeanne, I’ve done this for twenty years. Of course. There’s three of us here. They’re just a little happy.”

“With fake I.D.s. And I don’t think they’re in college.”

“They looked real to me.”

“I disagree,” Jeanne said. “I think they bought them online.”

“C’mon,” her manager said. “With holograms and encryptions?”

“Yes,” Jeanne insisted. “I’ll show you tomorrow.”

“Fine. Go straight to your car and go home.”

She bee-lined past the stainless steel, said goodnight to the cook, and zipped out the heavy white kitchen door straight to her ten-year-old Honda.

Rand was outside, swinging one leg over his motorcycle.

“Thanks for serving us,” he said.

“Goodnight.” She unlocked her car.

“You’re really nice, Jeanne,” he said. “I’ll call you.”

*I didn’t give you my number.* “I have a boyfriend,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “G’night,” he said. He revved his hog and tore out of the dark lot.

She hadn’t meant to embarrass him. She just told the truth. And now, weeks later, he’d sent thirteen pics and chats. She didn’t open them; she just read them as they appeared on her screen.

“Hey, hot stuff, u don’t know what u missing.”

“You haven’t lived till I take you on a wild ride.”

“C’mon just once.”

Plus: pics of cigarettes slid out of the package; invitations to smoke weed, drink, skinny dip, and run away to Colorado and become a couch surfer.

Creepy! Now, as she shuffled to see Coach Lewis, she wished she’d done something about Rand sooner. She was hoping if she ignored him, he’d just go away. Her memory flashed to a story in her grandpa’s journal about a stalker who’d latched onto Aunt Heather when Aunt

Heather was in college. The man only went away when Grandpa and one of his cop friends visited the man and gently told him in his workplace within sight of a dozen customers, “If you *ever*. Step with five hundred yards. Or contact Heather Darcy again.” The man’s face turned green before draining down to albino fear as he nodded *yes, yes, yes* and babbled *sure thing, I didn’t mean anything, of course, sir*.

Then Grandpa invited him to church because “the little guy looked lonely. Maybe he’s hopeless but I had to try before giving up on him. Besides—what if he just started in on some other woman?”

Grandpa was kinder than Jeanne felt. She wanted to take one of Grandpa’s guns and visit Rand—

“Hey,” Brock said. Jeanne turned. He’d caught up with her.

“Hey,” she said as their hands slipped together and squeezed before their fingers slid across in a tender separation because she didn’t like PDAs.

A thrill rippled through her. She could feel his gentleness and yet his strength. She felt her heart thump, thump, thump.

“How’s your day?”

“Could be better. I’m a hundred dollars short on tuition.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I don’t know. I might need to cram in some extra hours. Mrs. Mackenzie gave me an extension till Thursday.”

“Can I give you a hundred?”

“I don’t want a loan.”

“It’s a gift.”

“You can help me sell something on craigslist.”

“Deal,” he said. “Like something in your garage?” he asked.

“That’s all Mom’s stuff.” The garage had so much storage they couldn’t park in it.

“She won’t care. She never goes in there.”

“Maybe,” Jeanne said. “I’ve got things to sell.”

“Okay,” he said, and gave her a quick kiss because the dozens of cross-country runners were all clustered and laughing and absorbed amongst themselves. She kissed back. She loved this man. “I’m meeting customers.” After gymnastics, Brock had gotten into weight lifting and martial arts his freshmen year, taken the Entrepreneurship class, and started his own martial arts business.

“When?”

“Two minutes. Call you later?”

“Cook me dinner?” she asked.

“You got it,” he said. And waded through the runners as she opened the gym.

Brock talked with the Marine recruiters. Right now, after high school, that was a possibility. Jeanne wondered if she should join, too. Grandpa and Dad were both Marines. Beatrice had wavered but got married and pregnant instead. The recruiters gave Brock and Jeanne the requirements. Both had the GPA. They could run ten 400s in 70 seconds each, back to back. They were strong enough. Plus, Brock had taught her plenty of gymnastics, boxing, and Krav Maga. When she was little, Grandpa signed her up for anything she’d shown interest in: dance, tumbling, volleyball, oceanography, poetry, interior design, marksmanship, theatre, scuba, sports medicine. Jeanne’s problem was she loved everything.

Coach Lewis was ringed by a dozen tall boys. Jeanne was 5’10”; the shortest one was a 6’1” sophomore. He nodded at her. “We’ve got agility drills,” Lewis said. One frowned, and several shifted like grade-schoolers from left to right foot, long limbs dangling. From an aluminum carousel, Jeanne started tossing each boy a basketball. “Let’s go,” he said, and the go-getters led the way.

“Hi Jeanne.”

“Hi Coach.”

“I’ve got some numbers for you to crunch,” he said, handing her a clipboard. She glanced at all the columns and tick marks. About an hour, she realized. “Can I get this to you by Wednesday?” she asked.

“Perfect,” he said. “Honestly, we’re good today. Don’t you have summer reading to finish? Let me guess. You’re on page three hundred.”

“Four-fifty,” she said. “A hundred to go.”

He smiled, impressed. “Is it any better?”

“I like the ‘stranger in a strange land’ idea,” she said. The novel was about discrimination. The heroine was a refugee forced to flee to a different nation. The citizens were resentful and they persecuted her. “She doesn’t learn from her mistakes.”

“I know a lot of people like that,” he said.

“Can I stay?” she asked. “I’ll sit in the corner and read if you need anything.”

“Great,” he said.

With a dozen balls thumping, the gym sounded like a jungle movie or a marching band with only drums. She loved it. She'd helped since freshman year. She started off fetching jerseys, stray balls, and the like. Now she helped Lewis keep track of everything. On the bench with her clipboard, they picked apart their opponents' weakest players. "Evidence over intuition," Lewis had said. "Data over gut feelings."

"Let me know how it ends," Lewis said.

She sat in the northwest corner and listened to the drumbeat before becoming engrossed. She set her phone by her foot so she wouldn't constantly glance at it while waiting for her mom to respond. Jeanne really didn't know what to do about Mom.

When Mom didn't come home one night a year ago, Jeanne had called Beatrice, who didn't get back to her for over a day. In the meantime, she called the police. Mom had been out with a date, it was late, and she'd fallen asleep on his couch.

Mom fell over herself apologizing to Jeanne—"Oh, honey, I am so sorry that I worried you"—but the next week Mom acted like the Wicked Witch of the West. Maybe not on purpose but Jeanne hated hinting at any of her mom's shortcomings. Her friends' parents tracked their phones. Jeanne wondered if she could track her mom's phone.

As Jeanne's book raced toward its ending, the heroine wavered between courage and going back where she came from. The people in her new land were brutal. They stereotyped her and her individuality was lost. But someone had cut off her ability to return to her old country. There was no hope there but the girl was telling herself maybe she needed to save others. Yet she was just a teenager. Jeanne didn't know what the girl was going to do, but the book was speaking to her.