



“LIGHTS” by Perie Wolford

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LIGHTS

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I'd like to thank the creators of 1989 movie the "Abyss". Also Stephen King for writing such an amazing novel as the "Tommyknockers". Both inspired me greatly when I was writing this story.

I wrote "Lights" in 2011. And it was originally a screenplay. It was never produced though. And was gathering dust on one of my shelves until 2015. That is when I decided to give the story another life and transform it into a novel.

I've written it over the summer of 2015, and being far away from the sea physically, I could mentally feel the salty breeze and hear the crushing of waves against one another. I hope you, the reader, would also be able to enjoy the ocean, and the sun, and the sense of mystery.

I'd like also to thank my beta-readers, Tony Williamson and Brad Lane! Thank you guys so much!

Chapter 1

1

They were on their way home, at last.

The first year of college seemed interminably long, but now they were finally off for the summer, headed back home; thank sweet God. The sleek blue surface of Cooper's excessively high-class convertible gleamed in the sun as the car made its way down one of the Californian coastal roads, Cooper ripping through the road.

He was going way too fast, almost like a crazy bullet. Bradley didn't like it. But he was letting it be because he was anxious to get home too, the sooner the better. It was just that he wanted to get there in one piece. Sensing Bradley's discomfort, Cooper slowed down a little, and tried to pretend to be a somewhat responsible driver. Which was a difficult task for him, since he never was a responsible driver to begin with, and he had no real intention of becoming one now.

The sun was blazing this time of day, heating exposed surfaces to the extreme. But the salty smell of ocean was refreshing, especially after weeks and weeks spent within confinement of the university campus.

Bradley grew up near the ocean and he could never stand being away from it for long. Anything longer than two weeks usually rendered him borderline depressed and home-sick. The exception being a trip to Florida when his father's cousin faced her untimely death when Bradley was little. It was East Coast back then, a little different from the West Coast where Bradley was born at. But, it was still the same littoral scenery everywhere. Bradley felt more at-home in Florida than he did say in New Mexico or Oklahoma.

Going to college was also an ordeal for him, for that same reason. He never liked to travel to begin with, but sometimes one has to. He couldn't say he hated it in New York though, the proverbial Big Apple. But he couldn't say he loved it there either. It was okay.

Well, he *would* have hated it there for sure if it wasn't for Tag, whom he usually called by his family name, Cooper. Tag always reminded Bradley of home with his perpetually bronzed skin and his stereotypical blond-haired surfer-boy look. If it wasn't for Tag being there with him, Bradley probably wouldn't have made it through the year at all. If it wasn't for Tag, he might have bailed on the idea of getting an education altogether. To a certain extent he didn't even need it or at least he thought he could have survived without it. He had thoughts about returning to his home town after college anyway. And there wasn't much of movie-making there.

Tag was nineteen, same as Bradley. And they'd been buddies for years, ever since middle school or maybe even earlier than that. Tag was an improbable half-breed between a nerd and a rich jock, with a pinch of surfer boy fused in the mix as well. And it was all a weird combination. But it worked for him regardless.

He never played football in his life, but he had a naturally well-built physique. He had done some water sports and surfing back in the day but not enough of either of those to be accountable for his good looks. He liked to wear sci-fi T-shirts a lot; T-shirts that hugged his hung beautiful body just the right way and yet reeked of nerd-y-ness—the Star Trek/Star Wars prints and everything. Bradley liked those T-shirts, a lot.

Tag knew of course that Bradley was gay. Bradley told him so himself at his fifteenth birthday party. He was the first person to whom Bradley opened up. And Cooper was supportive of it. They were best friends forever after all. Cooper couldn't spend two days without Bradley, let alone the idea of alienating his friend for good just because of his unorthodox-for-a-small-town sexual orientation. For all Tag knew, it was even better that way. That way Tag got a chance to tease Bradley relentlessly every chance he got. Good-naturedly of course. Cooper was a humorous type, quick for a joke, or a prank. His sense of humor was blatant but effective. It worked on Bradley for one, even if jokes were sometimes at his very own expense.

Tag knew Bradley liked his body, looking at it and everything. He caught Bradley leering countless times. Especially those times when he had no shirt on, showing off lean muscles on his chest. Or when he had nothing on at all, sporting just a shower towel, flaunting his big bulge. He used his body to his advantage on a full and regular basis. Bradley could rarely say no to him once he showed some skin. It didn't work every time, but it worked good 80% of the cases. Also it gave Cooper a better understanding of how teenage girls were using their bodies to get their way. Not that he learned much from it, drooling over some particular girl, tending to her every command. But at least he knew how it worked if roles were reversed. Cooper was also a cuddly type. He didn't mind at all putting his arms around Bradley, jumping on him puppy style, ruffling his hair, touching his hands, or using his leg as a pillow when the two watched a movie, usually some sci-fi flick. He enjoyed those things, not in a sexual way of course, but in a way that he could be innocently physical with his best friend. Gave him a sense of belonging.

Between the two of them, Cooper was the high-energy lets-think-about-the-consequences-later guy and Bradley—the smart guy. Smartness ran in Bradley's family it seemed, with his Grandparents owning a book shop in Bradley's hometown, a small bay town 35 miles north-west from San Antonio. And his Grandparents were the ones who raised him too. Bradley's parents died when he was two, an unfortunate car accident that took both their lives and became a subject banned for years from discussion in the family, his family being his Grandparents that is. He didn't even remember his real parents much. They were both scientists. The kind of scientists who liked to apply knowledge practically, do research on site rather than in controlled lab environments. They were often away. It was hard to say if he even missed them. He liked to think he didn't miss them. But sometimes he had to admit he did.

Nevertheless, his Grandparents took good care of him and they had nurtured a taste of reading in him from early age. That was why, unlike Cooper, Bradley enjoyed a good book or two. Cooper was more into video games, blasting zombies' heads off and digging for make-believe alien artifacts on non-existent planets. But they shared a passion for movies and consequently—photography, which ultimately spoke for career choices for both of them.

While on the road, Cooper kept playing those horrible 8-bit song mixes, his truly insufferable obsession of late. He glanced at the breathtaking ocean view in the rear window, the sunshine spilt over its surface. He loved that sight, much more than he did the New York City sights of ridiculously high buildings. Buildings oppressing a person with concrete and glass, omnipresent crowds of people, and absolutely no air, not compared to the coastline. But more than anything in the world he loved that small bay town that was now looming up ahead. That was where he was born at, by the ocean, and he was proud of his roots. He felt like he belonged here more than anywhere else in the world. And having wealthy parents, he sure had travelled all over. But this here was his most beloved place of all.

Cooper was excited about the time he and Bradley were going to spend here over the summer. He missed his boat so much, for one. His boat was more of a luxurious two-hundred-thousand-dollar yacht. But he liked to call it just 'a boat'. He enjoyed his dad's money, of course, but he wasn't one to brag about his family capital or rub it in people's faces (unless somebody really asked for it). Besides, it wasn't the boat itself that he was missing; it was the feeling of being afloat, the feeling of being out in the open; the air, the sun, and most of all—the privacy.

There were so many people in New York. It was ridiculous at times, and he wasn't used to that. He missed places that had a population rank of less than a thousand people per square mile. Out in the sea, there sometimes was just one person (or less) per a square mile and Cooper loved it.

He turned down the volume on his CD player and gave Bradley a gentle nudge.

"Hey, sleeping beauty," he said. Bradley opened his eyes sleepily and gave Cooper an irritated look. He liked to sleep on the road. Oddly that was one place where his sleep was undisturbed; otherwise he was usually a light sleeper.

"Almost home," Cooper chirped, encouraging Bradley to wake up. Bradley looked down the hill—just two miles ahead was a cozy coastal town sitting in the midst of a small secluded bay—the sandy crest of a beach blending into the rocky woody terrain. Bradley was looking forward to spending his summer break at home, more than anything.

"Wanna grab a burger?" Cooper suggested, his stomach grumbling. They were on the road for hours.

Bradley yawned and rubbed his eyes. "You're paying."

Cooper grinned.

"And that's not because you're rich. That's because I paid last time," Bradley clarified.

"Right," Cooper said, still grinning. The two of them might as well have one wallet. They were always sharing whatever money they had and there was never a question of paying back or calculating debt or anything. They just trusted each other completely. Cooper slowed down and pulled over to a small roadside diner they used to frequent when they were little. They used to pedal from one end of town to another, just to get those burgers, back in the day.

Up the hill, the small diner with a set of orange-tinted wall-windows, was overlooking the ocean directly. The owners of the place obviously wanted to capitalize on the view as much as was possible, especially with a constant influx of eyeballing tourists. The fact never occurred to Bradley

before. You don't much think about investments or payback when you're eleven. But now, being nineteen and knowing too well that the family bookshop was redlining for the past several years, he felt a little resentful about the way this property was utilized dexterously to its full advantage.

A couple of regulars had late lunch, chewing on their burgers with their eyes glued to the screen—old TV re-runs. It wasn't the peak hour Bradley guessed. He was finishing his own burger. Cooper was done with his ten minutes ago; the guy just scarfed food down almost without chewing, totally forgetting about manners. And now he was playing with Bradley's brand-new digital camera.

Bradley had been saving for it for almost an entire year. He could have asked Cooper to help him out of course, since money was almost never a problem for him, not something as miniscule as four thousand dollars anyway. But Bradley decided against it. He wanted to earn it, even if it was going to take him a year, which it did. But it was worth it nonetheless. The camera was amazing and he loved it even more knowing how hard he worked to get it. He felt like he truly deserved having it now. And it was a great feeling. He felt proud of himself.

Cooper loved the new camera too, mostly because of its technical qualities and not all of Bradley's hard work invested in it. Cooper was planning to put it to good use. There was a summer project to be filmed they signed up for together. Cooper already had a specific idea in mind for that. He focused the camera on Bradley, starting recording and adjusting depth of field settings (ones that give you blurry movie-like backgrounds) as he went.

"Hey Bradley, say hi," he chirped aiming lenses at his friend. Bradley never really enjoyed being under the aim of a camera. His passion was *to aim* the camera, at somebody else, at say an actor, a cute actor or whatever. He wanted to be behind the camera, not in front of it.

"Quit it," Bradley commanded. Cooper smiled and stopped the recording obediently. His plan was not to aggravate Bradley, on the contrary—butter him up.

"So, have you thought about what you wanna do for the summer project?" Cooper asked nonchalantly.

Bradley looked up at him from under his brows. "No, not really."

"Do you want to think about it now maybe?" Cooper proposed. He obviously wanted to share something.

"Do you?" Bradley asked accusatorily. All he could think about right now was getting home, opening the front door of his family's bookshop and getting a lungful of that specific scent the old books have, books that failed to sell since the 1970s, and probably would never sell now, but were kept on shelves nonetheless. Cooper nodded positively. Judging by his weird behavior, Bradley started to suspect he already had an idea in mind. But it was probably the kind of idea Bradley was not going to appreciate.

"And?" Bradley encouraged. "Do you have an idea?"

"A documentary short film! How's that?" Cooper blurted out enthusiastically. But it was only a premise, a premise devised specifically to hook Bradley up, under false pretenses. Bradley was well aware of that. He knew his bud well.

"I'm not hating it," Bradley evaluated wearily.

Cooper smiled. "Good, good..."

"Elaborate," Bradley suggested, getting a little annoyed now.

"Okay, hear me out," Cooper began and lifted his hands in a defensive gesture that said it all. "This might sound a little crazy, and you're not gonna like it but..."

"Crazy, right...Sounds exactly like your department," Bradley said, not giving him a chance to finish. "I'm *not* gonna like it, that's right! You said it."

"There's a *'but'*," Cooper argued. "Just hear me out. That's all I ask."

"Okay, but I'll probably veto it anyway, so you wanna save us some breath?" Bradley asked.

"Five minutes, give me five minutes of your time and then decide," Cooper persisted.

"Okay, you can have five minutes, I mean if you're so keen on wasting breath."

"Can you just shut up, for five minutes? I don't wanna hear a single word out of you until I'm done, okay?" Cooper asked.

"What is this all about, Cooper?" Bradley asked, sighing.

"Five minutes, no talk, just listen," Cooper said. He wasn't asking for much really. Bradley could give him five minutes.

"Okay," Bradley replied, caving in.

"Promise me you won't open your mouth until I'm finished," Cooper requested.

"Am I not allowed to finish my burger?" Bradley asked sarcastically.

"You know what I mean. Promise?" Cooper asked pleadingly.

"Okay, I promise," Bradley agreed, shaking his head. He was going to regret it.

"Good, now listen. The idea is uber-cool!"

Bradley already wanted to comment at the use of *uber-cool* regarding their mandatory summer project. One that was going to be presented before the dean of the faculty, one that could establish their professional potential and determine if they would have a career in movies. No, he didn't like that for sure. He might have not cared much about his career in Hollywood but he still didn't want to be embarrassed before the dean.

But he kept his promise and restrained himself from butting in, for the next five minutes at least.

"Okay, my mom and dad are out of town for the next few weeks, right? We'll have the boat pretty much for ourselves. Imagine this, a group of four handsome people take it out into the sea to have a little fun, right? They have drinks, fool around, things like that. They are celebrating coming home for summer...You have the picture, right?"

Bradley didn't even have to speak to be able to express his feelings about it. But he nodded anyway.

“Hear me out, you promised,” Cooper warned, poking his index finger at Bradley. “Okay, so here are these peeps on a boat, having fun...And then...IT happens.” Cooper made a big ta-da gesture at that, meant to introduce an impressive plot element. But it came off rather comical instead, sinking his project in Bradley’s eyes.

“Guys see *the lights* in the sky...The lights are moving, moving fast, and erratically, like in a very weird way, not like a plane or anything terrestrial...Guys freak out, they act out...The lights come closer, girls scream! There’s this eerie noise starting to come from the thingies. You know, I can totally mix it up in the studio, create an illusion, you know...some otherworldly sounds, grinding metal, deep rumble.”

So far it sounded so cheap and ridiculous that Bradley wasn’t sure if Tag was serious or it was all a joke.

“And then...the camera goes off...Nobody knows what the hell happened next. And we get like a million hits on YouTube or something,” Cooper finished enthusiastically.

“YouTube? You want our video project to be intended for YouTube, seriously?” Bradley asked in disgust. His dream was to get his short films circling prestigious film festivals, not YouTube. Anyone with a camera...no, scratch that. Anyone with a smartphone could make short films for YouTube, even amateurs with gaping lack of experience in photography could make short films for YouTube.

“You’re not allowed to talk, for the next...” Cooper said and checked with his wrist watch. “A minute and a half.”

Bradley made a zipping-his-mouth gesture, exasperated.

“There’s more,” Cooper said. “I know you don’t like it but before you say *no* there’s one more thing I want you to consider.”

Bradley swiveled his hand gesturing for Cooper to continue.

“Hear me out, hear me out,” Cooper said, stalling. He wanted to make a dramatic pause before spilling the beans, because the next part was going to make the sale. He was sure of it. Bradley raised his eyebrows in a menacing manner. He wasn’t enjoying all the drama.

“I got Veronica...and Danny...to shoot with us,” Cooper said finally, accentuating Danny’s name the best way possible. Bradley’s face changed. Cooper had calculated it correct. He was surprised. His eyebrows lowered and his expression changed from aggravated to almost elated. He got elated like that every time Danny’s name was mentioned.

“You got Danny?” Bradley asked.

Cooper grinned. “You heard me.”

“So you just called him up and asked him to go shoot some stupid alien video with us and he said yes?” Bradley asked, suspicious. Danny wasn’t the kind of guy who liked to go out much. Cooper nodded excitedly. He couldn’t help beaming and practically shining with enthusiasm all over.

“I didn’t ask Danny. I asked Veronica. And I specifically asked her if she could bring Danny along. She said yes,” Cooper explained.

“Are you sure he’s gonna even come?” Bradley asked, anger dissipating.

“He might not but...” Cooper said, looking at Bradley from under his brows, sly. “Are you willing to pass on a chance?”

Bradley wasn’t. There was a good chance that Danny might come. Veronica could be persuasive. And she usually made it a point of getting Danny out of the house. The boy spent so much time in a chair with a book he’d soon be rooted to it. She would probably do her best at getting him out. And even a slim possibility of spending time on a boat with Danny was thrilling.

Bradley secretly lusted over the boy for years, since high school. But he never seemed to be able to gather enough courage to come up to him, whatever rare opportunities he had for it, and ask him out on a date or whatever. Saying hi to him on the street was the most Bradley could manage. Getting Danny into the confined space of Cooper’s boat would eliminate a chance for Bradley to hide away from him. And that was at the same time exhilarating and terrifying, but mostly exhilarating.

“So, lights in the sky, eh? You mean like a UFO encounter? You want to make a UFO encounter video?” Bradley asked, trying to take that “*project*”, for the lack of a better word, more seriously.

“I want to fake one,” Cooper clarified, nodding. Bradley had difficulty putting it together in his head, it was so ridiculous.

“It’s gonna look absolutely real, I’m telling you,” Cooper hurried to elaborate while he still had Bradley’s attention. “We’ll make it look real. You know I am a wiz when it comes to special effects. Nobody’s gonna guess it’s fake.”

“Right, because people are dumb,” Bradley said mockingly.

“It will be like one of those UFO footages online, that in the back of your head you know is totally fake, but you still click and watch it, right? Only ours will be better, much better,” Cooper promised. “So what do you say? Are you willing to give it a try? I mean, if it in any way fails to satisfy your high demands, we can always do something else for the project. Consider it a sort of warm-up.”

Bradley sipped his soda. “Sounds kinda stupid, to be honest,” he said, putting his verdict in words. “I don’t think it’s gonna work for a summer project. More so, I’m pretty sure it’s not even gonna work as a warm-up. I’m not sure it’ll even work for YouTube to be completely honest, but...”

Cooper knew there was going to be a ‘but’.

“But if you want to try and see for yourself how dumb it’ll be, then sure, okay, I’ll do it,” Bradley finished, trying to hide excitement in his voice.

“To be clear, I’ll be directing the thing and you will be shooting it, with your mouth shut, right?” Cooper asked. He was getting cocky now.

“Are you sure Danny is up to this?” Bradley asked again. They both knew that the only reason why Bradley was getting himself signed up for this convoluted mess of a project was because of Danny. If there was going to be no Danny on that boat, the deal was going to be so off.

“Totally! You have my word,” Cooper lied. But he was pretty sure he’d manage to put everything together, the way he always did. There was still time.

Bradley sighed. “Cooper, you're nuts. Do you know that?” he asked, prickling his friend good-naturedly. Cooper always came up with the most insane ideas ever. That was just Cooper for you. He could legitimately pass for a mentally insane person.

“I’ve been told,” Cooper said, wide grin on his face. “So are you in?”

“Sure, why not. It's not like I have anything else to do this summer,” Bradley said and Cooper lightened up.

“Awesome!”

3

Mickey Hughs, a twenty-two-year-old police officer trainee who looked even younger than that, shifted inertly from one archive drawer to another, retrieving select files and documents as he went.

The files he seemed to be interested in were color-coded blue and had a yellow bookmark sticking out of them. Mickey had a small collection of about two dozen of them so far, and two dozen more sitting on his work desk waiting. God only knew how many more of them there were still left inside those two-foot-long metal drawers, about a hundred of which there was in the Archive Room A alone. And then there was the Archive Room B. But Mickey couldn’t even begin to wrap his head around that idea.

He looked out the window instead. A small window was sitting high above the archive stands, nearly under the ceiling, and the sole purpose of it was to provide some natural light coming in, in case there was a power shortage. But Mickey wasn’t a short fellow and his height gave him an opportunity to use the window for observation purposes instead, even though he still needed to get up on his toes a little to do so. The window was overlooking the town center, the central park to be specific, far across the street, and in the distance there was a glimpse of the town’s beach.

Oh, the beach!

Mickey definitely felt like he could use some quality time out at the beach today. It was summer time, for God’s sake and the weather was beautiful. Plunging his heated body into the clear cool water would be bliss. But he was stuck here at work instead. And he was afraid there was nothing he could do about it. He piled his assortment of blue-coded files all into one cardboard box and headed out of the Archive Room A and into the main hall.

When he walked in, he found Sheriff Deputy Gregory Decker in the exact same pose he left him about an hour ago. Hunched over his desk, Decker was sorting through all the blue-colored files Mickey was bringing in. His whole body looked still, almost as if he was sleeping, but his eyes were restless, going from page to page, scrutinizing every word meticulously. Decker was a big guy in his forties, intimidating when one first met him, but rather kind and warmhearted on the second glance. Mickey walked over to his desk and plopped his box on it, sighing melancholically as he did so. He lingered, giving Decker time to notice his presence.

“I brought the second quarter cases. Do you want me to start on the third quarter next?” he asked tentatively. He wanted desperately for his shift to end on time today, if not earlier. But, Greg didn’t seem to care much about Mickey’s wants. Greg was too busy even to cast a glance at the boy. His eyes were studying documents the blue files contained and they could bear no distraction.

"You do that," he said simply. That was not the answer Mickey was hoping for. But there was no arguing with Decker. Mickey might one day, after years of collaboration and working back to back, learn a few tricks that could manipulate Decker into being less of a workhorse, and making everybody around him be workhorses as well, but Mickey didn't have such power yet. The only two people who knew Decker well enough to know the tricks were his children, Danny and Veronica. And, before his wife died, she was of course the one most adept at knowing how to operate Decker and push the right buttons. But she died unfortunately, eleven years ago, making him close himself into his protective shell even tighter.

"Do you have the figures yet?" Mickey sighed hopelessly. The perspective of being dismissed early today disappeared without a trace. Greg gave a light shove to a pile of documents sitting on his desk. It moved several inches and reached the desk's edge precisely, the trademark move for Decker, one that couldn't be mastered by any of his coworkers without having the documents fall over the edge and scatter on the floor.

"They're all yours, Scout," Greg answered and a slight grin adorned his face. Mickey pressed his lips into a thin line. He hated being called *Scout*, but again, there was nothing he could do about it. He lifted the documents wearily and looked at Greg one last time.

"So...I take it we're staying in late again?" he asked. There was still a dull glimmer of hope that Greg would dismiss him before the dark. Greg didn't put his eyes off the papers even for a second. Mickey, or *Scout*, as he liked to call him, wasn't really worth wasting precious work time on him, not nearly, maybe in a few years if he behaved, maybe then, but certainly not yet.

"What do you think?" Greg snapped. Mickey sighed. The hope was dead now.

Okay, maybe getting out of the office early today wasn't an option, but he still wasn't eager to return to the archives just yet. He could enjoy a conversation at least, or as much of a conversation there could be with Decker. Greg wasn't a talkative type. Still, Mickey wanted to get his mind off the papers, just for a moment, so he began, "Douglas McBride called again. He said he saw a shimmering light in the water last night..." He probed, accentuating the 'shimmering light' part.

"Underwater," Mickey corrected himself, and then added, "Out of the bay area."

Greg looked up at him. Well, what do you know? Maybe Mickey *was* beginning to learn tricks after all.

"The light?" Greg asked with his eyebrows up. The very word was forever associated with a tragic accident that cost his wife her life. But Mickey didn't know anything about it. All Mickey noticed was a slight change in Greg's face. But even that was enough to give away Greg's interest in the subject. And it wasn't the first time Mickey picked up on that either.

"Yeah, he said he saw and I quote...*a red shimmering light moving deep underwater, around 1:30 AM*...You want to check it out? I mean we could call McBride in and ask him a few questions. Or we could go take a look ourselves at whatever he might have seen out there," he asked with a tangible hope in his voice. Wouldn't it be just wonderful to sail off into the sea right now? Even raging afternoon heat wouldn't stop Mickey. All he needed was a single word from Decker and he'd be on it as fast as a Road Runner.

"McBride is a drunk," Greg roared and his eyes returned to the papers. "If he calls again tell him he better be sleeping at night, like everyone else does. He has no business surveying the bay area."

Mickey sighed, nodded. Okay, it seemed like the conversation was over now. He was hoping it would unfold into something interesting, but he was wrong. It was going to take time learning to push on Greg's buttons.

"Okay...I just thought it might be nice to have some time outside of the office for a change. We do have a boat," Mickey said.

Greg's eyes shifted back to Mickey with leaden coldness. "This report is due Monday. The department is on my ass about it. We have two days left and four-days-worth of work. What do you suggest we do about *that*?" he asked dismissively. "Go start on that third quarter. Do me a favor, would you?"

Mickey nodded silently. He headed in the direction of the archives rooms, unhurried.

"Okay," he muttered under his breath.

"Besides, you know me," Greg added, instantly feeling bad about being so harsh with the boy. He didn't want him to think he was some sort of tyrant. "I'm not setting my foot on a boat unless it's an emergency. I am not a sea person." He didn't know why he felt the need to make it clear about the boat with Mickey. There was no particular reason to bring it up at all. There were other officers who usually handled the boat. Decker even caught rumors about his allegedly extreme sea sickness (or phobia) circulating among the officers. He was pretty sure Mickey had heard about it by now. But he just felt like saying it out loud as well. He needed to say it so that this conversation wouldn't happen again.

Mickey looked at him a little confused. "Why didn't you transfer to the land then? I mean if you don't like the ocean?"

Greg gave him a look. "You just keep busy, okay? We have a ton of work."

"Got ya," Mickey said and disappeared in the hallway.

4

With a slight screech of tires, Cooper pulled over in front of Bradley's family bookshop. An old two-story building was perched up on the hill, surrounded by vegetation, and had a pretty good view opening up at the bay from there.

Bradley got out of the car, the scorching sun threatening to give him sunstroke. He quickly found refuge under an old-fashioned green awning. That was the awning he and his grandpa hammered to the front wall of the shop with their own hands, attaching it just two inches above the show window. Nothing said 'home' more than that awning. Bradley was elated.

He waited for Cooper to open the trunk and hand him his backpacks.

"Careful with that," Bradley warned. There was his new camera equipment in the backpacks. He didn't want anything to happen to it, knowing how clumsy Cooper could be sometimes, dropping things, or toppling things over, or shattering things to pieces. Everything in Cooper's universe was replaceable. It wasn't the case for Bradley at all. He knew the cost of things.

"Yeah, yeah," Cooper said, waving him off. "We'll be waiting for you at the docks. Six thirty. Don't forget."

Bradley nodded reluctantly. He was beginning to have reservations about the whole thing.

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” he said, still weighing it in his head if he should go or not. He could easily bail on it if he wanted to. He wasn’t even sure Danny would show up. And he sure as hell didn’t want to third-wheel it with Cooper and Veronica.

“See you there,” said Cooper cheerfully and jumped into his car. He had a lot of things on his to-do list. And he needed to get on it. Bradley watched him drive off, burning tires as usual, and again wondered how Cooper had never been involved in a car accident, at least once. It was a true miracle.

Bradley turned to face the bookshop, looked it over. The shop had seen better times for sure. But it wasn’t falling down just yet. It was holding. The walls were still standing. Everything else Bradley could fix. Besides he was so happy to finally be home that he barely even noticed the gaping holes in the awning, flapping away in the wind. Or the cracks in the window glass with pieces of duct-tape stuck over them hastily. Not that the duct-tape wasn’t a good-enough solution to the problem. It was holding!

It was home. And it was perfect just the way it was.

Bradley closed the front door behind himself, careful not to disturb a bunch of jingly bells hung above it to notify the shop owner of a customer’s entrance, and stepped into the gloomy silence of an empty customer-less shop.

The last time he’d seen a customer here was months ago, a real customer too, and not Mrs. Ashburn who was an old friend of the family and would purchase exactly one book every two weeks. Or better to say exchange it for one she “purchased” previously. It was a good thing that Bradley argued his grandma into putting out a magazine stand a few years ago. That was a relative success. A lot of town’s housewives liked to come over and paw through a fresh copy of their favorite magazine while chatting up Bradley’s grandma. Some of them even bought a copy afterwards. But that wasn’t much of a business anyway. The majority of town’s households had subscriptions.

Bradley lowered his backpacks down to the floor and took a moment just to inhale. The familiar odor the old books give off was in the air, as always. He liked those books regardless of the miniscule sales they pulled in. They smelled of home for him and therefore were priceless. He looked over the book stands and shelving, hundreds of books inhabiting them. They were good books, great books actually. But people in town wanted new books now. Current authors, contemporary narratives and up-to-date adventures. Everyone had moved on with the times, everyone except Bradley’s grandma unfortunately. She never ordered any of those new books. She simply didn’t know the names of any popular-at-the-moment authors. And whenever she learned a new promising name, it was no longer relevant. All she knew was the classics like *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

Bradley wedged himself between two of the book stands and reached for a dusty old copy of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* sitting so high and deep in the corner that no one would ever be tempted to take it out from its seclusion. He held the book and ran his fingers gently over its leathery surface. The book opened on page 82 precisely without any effort from Bradley’s fingers. There was something stuck in between pages 81 and 82. It was a sepia-toned photograph of a young married couple. Both boy and girl stared at Bradley from the picture, their happy young faces adorned with beautiful smiles. They were Bradley’s parents, the photo taken several days after the wedding. And it was the only tangible thing he ever had left of them. And it was a secret too.

His grandma never wanted for a child to get upset over the loss of his parents. He was barely two years old when they died. He wasn't old enough to grasp the concept of life and death yet. So Mrs. Gallaher decided never to bring them up ever again. She locked down all the photographs in a chest up at the attic and made grandpa Gallaher swear he would never speak of them again, at least not in the boy's presence. Their efforts proved futile though. Bradley still managed to collect bits and pieces of information over the years. And he kept his findings a secret, not wanting to upset his grandparents over it.

One day he snagged a key to his grandmother's chest. He opened it, of course. He knew exactly what he was going to find there.

He looked through all the pictures and kept only the one, so that no one would notice the absence. It was a photograph taken after the wedding, probably the very time he was conceived. Bradley looked at his parents' faces. He couldn't remember them, not really, not the lines of their faces anyway. All he could remember was something shapeless and vague. Like bits of his mother's lullaby she sang to him, things he couldn't quite put into words. He was too little back then.

He wedged the photograph back in the book carefully and put it back on the shelf, warmth spilling over his insides. He knew they loved him. He didn't even remember them, but he knew they loved him. He was certain. His grandparents loved him too, of course, more than anything in the world, their little *Bee*. But it was the parents' love that was forever indestructible. He wished he remembered more of them though. But he didn't. Some things belonged to the past.

"Found what you were looking for?" Mrs. Gallaher asked, standing in the end of the aisle and looking at her grandson with half a smile on her face. Bradley shuffled away from the stand. Maybe his grandma did know he had the photograph. But it didn't matter now anyway. He was no longer a child. He no longer needed to be protected. Although he knew for fact his grandma would strongly disagree.

"Hi, Grams," Bradley said, smiling. He approached her, wrapping his hands around her. It was wonderful to be home again.

"Hello, darling," said Mrs. Gallaher warmly. She was happy Bradley was home too. This was where he belonged.

"Nobody's interested in these books anymore. Why do you still keep the shop open?" he asked, swerving the conversation away from the subject of his parents, in case she wanted to bring them up, which she never did. Mrs. Gallaher gave him a stern look. She was not an idiot and she was not marasmic just yet.

"I'm not keeping the shop open for the customers, whom I still have, young man," she said and started towards the backroom—her permanent headquarters these days.

"The only person I keep this shop open for is and always was..." she said and jabbed a thumb at her chest, "Me!"

"Well, me and your deceased grandpa of course. May his soul rest in peace," she added. "But these days I keep it open just for me. I am still enjoying running it as much as I did fifty years ago, when it was first opened. It gives a sense of purpose to my life and in my age it is important to have a purpose. You need something to make you get up every morning, you know, no matter the hernia."

“If you say so,” Bradley said, sighing. This wasn’t the first time they had this conversation. As much as he loved the shop, it was a sinking ship and he didn’t think they could afford to keep it open just for the pleasure of having it open anymore. There were so many different ways they could use the space for profit. If anything, they could make a few bucks renting it. But his grandma was stubborn. She was not going to close the shop, end of discussion.

Mrs. Gallaher lumbered into the office-like backroom, wooden floor screeching relentlessly every step she made. She sat herself down, sighing and groaning, at a big raggedy Alder wood desk, one that Mr. Gallaher used to sit at, and Bradley used to sit at his lap when he was younger, trying to make sense of all the meticulously kept balance books his grandpa was always revising. That desk brought up a lot of memories like that. So did a bunch of other stuff around the house. It was only now that Bradley noticed how many associations things in the house had with the past: a book could make him recall his parents; an awning could make him think of his grandpa. It was good to be home. If only he could never leave.

“People read more books back in the day, sure. And now all you kids are fascinated with is that...electronic communication,” she said, waving off the very silliness of it.

“I, for one, still prefer an old-fashioned book” Bradley disagreed. She looked at her grandson lovingly.

“I know you do. And that is again something you should be thankful to this very shop. If it wasn’t for this shop, who knows if you would even be able to recognize a book if you saw one. It’s all about those darn Kindles, tablets, laptops now, isn’t it?” she grumbled and looked at her grandson. “It’s nice to have you back home.”

He smiled, nodded. “It’s nice to be home,” he said. “You have no idea.”

“I knew you would miss home badly. But I still wanted you to get proper education, or at least try. It’s important, you know. Education is very important, and not just because it helps you with jobs. It also teaches you discipline. And it teaches you patience. And it makes you learn how to use this...” she said and pointed her index finger at her head.

“I know,” Bradley agreed wearily. “You’ve told me that before, grams.”

She nodded. “Well, it bears repeating. So how bad was it?”

“It was tolerable,” he said. “I do enjoy learning. It’s just that I miss home when I’m away from it.”

“Home is not going anywhere. It’s gonna be right here, waiting for you, you know,” she said. He smiled.

“Are you hungry? You want me to fix you something to eat?” she asked and reached for the desk’s edge to help her pull herself up again. These days even getting up was a hassle.

“No, thanks,” said Bradley and his grandma relaxed in her chair again. “We grabbed burgers on the way here.”

She nodded. “Roast beef for supper then?” she asked.

It was almost traditional in the Gallaher family to have roast beef for supper on Sundays, along with many other traditions which Bradley gradually forgot over the course of the last nine months, while he was away.

"I'm not sure I'll be home in time for supper," he admitted and grimaced a little.

He still couldn't decide if he was going or not. He was tempted to stay, stay right here and have roast beef for supper. And then he would crawl into his own bed and forget about everything, cocooned in the warmth of his grandmother's love.

"Are you going to go out tonight?" she asked.

"It's Cooper. He's dragging me along. He wants to have a boat trip, film something. You know how he is, a big bag full of crazy," he explained. Mrs. Gallaher grinned.

"Just you and Tag?" she asked, looking at him as if she could read his mind.

"Veronica's gonna be there," Bradley said, matter-of-factly. "And Danny."

Mrs. Gallaher grinned wider. Bradley was trying to conceal his affection for the boy, but he was doing a poor job at that. Mrs. Gallaher knew her grandson well. She knew how his face changed every time Danny's name was mentioned. She wished he would do something about it already, but her grandson was just too darn indecisive.

"Oh, you remind me of your grandfather so much," she said, sighing.

Bradley looked at her. "Really?"

"He was just the same, so afraid to admit he liked me, God only knows why. I liked him back! What was the worst thing that could happen if he told me, ah? Do you have the answer for that? I had to take matters into my own hands, eventually, or else you wouldn't even be standing here now. I guess you've taken this...indecisiveness of yours right after him," she confided.

"I guess I'm afraid he wouldn't like me back," Bradley admitted.

He was so glad he didn't have to avoid the subject of him liking boys anymore. He sure did when he was younger. Not that he was afraid his grandma wouldn't understand, well maybe just a little. But he didn't want her to worry about him more than she already had. That's why he decided not to tell her. But his concerns turned out to be unfounded in the end, as Mrs. Gallaher once again took matters into her own hands and ordered a romantic gay novel one sunny day.

She left it out in the open for Bradley to discover, along with a couple of educational brochures on gays and gay sex. She didn't even make a big deal about it and let Bradley handle it the way he felt comfortable. He kept it silent for a couple of days, not sure how to bring the subject up. He knew she loved him, of course, and accepted him, but still talking about it seemed uncomfortable.

He'd probably never have summoned courage to talk to her about it out loud if she herself didn't bring up the subject a few days after he found the book. She was damn sure he read it by then. Bradley was generally a fast reader, and she presumed he devoured a book about not a boy and a girl in love, but two boys, in one sitting no less.

“So did you enjoy the book?” she asked, matter-of-factly, keeping her eyes on the papers. Bradley froze in his tracks when she said it, his heart taking up the fast pace.

“Because if you did I could order more of those, you know,” she quickly added. “I mean if you want to. Do you want to?”

He didn’t know what to say. Of course he wanted it. That was one of the first glimpses on what it was like to be gay, besides Internet porn. It was Cooper of course who showed Bradley gay porn, the two of them gaping at how anal sex worked, mouths ajar. That same day Cooper let Bradley touch him over his jeans, his bulging dick hard and throbbing under Bradley’s fingers. But it quickly became uncomfortable and they decided not to continue any further. His grandma’s offering was more about love though. It was much less embarrassing or forbidden. At a tender age of fifteen it felt nice to have some guidance through confusing subjects of gay love.

“We could even make a small section of romantic books like that, *just for boys*, you know,” she said encouragingly and winked. “I’m sure a few young fellas in town would be interested. What do you say?”

He nodded carefully. “Sure, that’d be nice,” he muttered, his voice suddenly croaky.

Mrs. Gallaher grinned. “You are just like your grandpa, God rest his soul.”

“I’ll try to let him know about how I feel. I promise,” Bradley promised to his grandma. He wanted to learn to be more...decisive.

“You do that,” she said looking at him. “You do that.”

“I’m gonna go up to my room. I think I could use a shower,” he said.

“Okay, honey,” she said. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Okay.”

5

Cooper's convertible came to a sharp halt in front of a two-story house sitting in solitude up a hill, far away from clusters of town dwellings. The house was situated perfectly to have an almost observatory view over the bay waters. Cooper looked at the house through the windshield as a cloud of dust raised by his tires enveloped the car and scattered away, slowly, driven by the ocean breeze. Dust settled but Cooper could see no sign of Veronica still. He honked a couple more times, impatient.

Veronica was standing in front of a big human-size mirror hung on the wall in her bedroom, applying finishing touches of lipstick leisurely. She was not in a hurry. She had a beautiful body with a rather pale skin tone. She looked at herself in the mirror and almost admired her dark long curls that complimented her skin nicely. Her big blue eyes were to kill for. She was stunningly beautiful, and she was damn well aware of the fact. She also knew how to use her body fully to her advantage.

Her makeup was done now. Her hair was done. But she was prancing around in her underwear, white bra and pink panties, no clue yet what she was going to wear tonight. She was not at all ashamed walking around half-naked in front of her little brother, Danny, a year younger, who was killing time sitting on a window sill with a book in his hands.

Honk, honk... Cooper was still honking outside, but Veronica didn't care for a second about making that one wait. He was a boy and as all boys, straight boys at least, he needed to be taught patience, when it came to girls especially. She could make him wait for an hour if she wanted to. And he needed to learn to be okay with that. It was Danny who peeked through the shutters dutifully to check on Cooper.

"Cooper's here," he said and looked at his sister who finally decided to open the dresser.

"He'll wait," she announced firmly, indifferently. Cooper wasn't the first guy waiting for her and, if God was merciful, he wasn't going to be the last.

"Are you gonna call dad?" Veronica asked while pondering over the choice of clothing. The dresser was packed to the top but Veronica sighed as if it was all but empty. She didn't think she could pick anything good from what was in there even if she had a gun pointed to her head. That riddle required some thinking time.

"I already have. I said we were hanging out with Cooper at his house tonight."

Veronica nodded. "Good choice! What did he say?"

"I don't think he's too happy about Cooper. But once he knew I was coming along with you, he gave us his blessings," Danny explained. Their father, Greg Decker, was always worried about Veronica, and never worried about Danny. Danny was a responsible boy and it was Veronica who was a rebel. Between the two of them Danny resembled their mother the most, with his wits, intuition and gentleness. Veronica on the other hand took a lot from Greg himself. And he was a handful.

She turned around to show Danny her first choice: a simple pink skirt with a big white belt and a matching pink top. She ignored Cooper's obstinate honking, concentrating on striking a pose instead.

"What do you think?" she asked. Having a gay brother sure had its advantages, aside from a couple of disadvantages, like him not liking to party and all, and being overly introverted. He was practically irreplaceable helping her find the right dress though. Danny gave it one glance and said, "No! Not for the boat party."

Veronica took it off obediently. If there was anything she believed in, it was that gays had an immaculate taste in clothing. She tried something else and turned to Danny again, assuming a nearly cover girl posture.

"The skirt yes, the top would be a no," he commented, shaking his head disapprovingly, and the top was gone in a second.

"Is Bradley gonna be there?" Danny asked, matter-of-factly. Veronica was waiting for that question to pop. It was an ace up her sleeve actually, in case Danny was reluctant to go. But he wasn't as unwilling to go as she anticipated. Maybe he got tired of sitting home, at last. Or maybe he suspected Bradley would come. It was Cooper's private boat party after all, and Bradley and Cooper were best buds.

"Yes, he'll be there. Him, me, you and Cooper, just the four of us," Veronica chirped and watched Danny's face brighten substantially.

It was a win-win for him since he both didn't like crowded parties and preferred the intimate ones, if possible with all the attendees being people he already knew, and secondly, he liked Bradley.

It could be a perfect opportunity for Danny to spend some quality one-on-one time with him. And while Danny was at it with Bradley, Veronica would enjoy an evening of spurning Cooper's advances, without having to worry about her socially awkward brother, which was always a drag.

She found a matching top at last and slipped into it. She turned to Danny, awaiting his approval.

He nodded positively. "I kinda want to borrow that top," he said with a grin. Veronica smiled and approached the mirror to check it out.

"So, do you want me to ask Cooper what Bradley's *deal* is?" she asked while reapplying lipstick, God only knows why.

Danny furrowed his brows but hesitated to refuse the offer. The idea was tempting. He was thinking about Bradley a lot lately. And it would be nice to know if his infatuation was a one-way situation or if Bradley could actually feel the same way. But asking Cooper out loud was equal to asking Bradley himself. And Danny wasn't sure he was desperate enough yet to do so. He didn't like to be the one making the first step.

"No, don't," he said. "I just want to have a chance to talk to him and get to know him better. It's all I want."

"Your call," Veronica said quite indifferently. If *she* was in Danny's place she would waste no time asking around at all. She would grab the guy by the balls, take him into the bedroom or something. If she was a gay guy, she would be such a slut. Being a girl though she couldn't allow herself such luxury, not in a small town like this. People talk! She needed to keep up appearances, for their father's sake at least. She did love their father.

"Do you think he might like me?" Danny asked, in a whisper. Veronica turned away from the mirror and looked at her brother.

"If he didn't like you, he'd be the stupidest guy on the planet," she said, quite warmly. She could do that sometimes, turn into a warm and heartfelt human being, and then go back to her regular unsympathetic self in a snap. She took something out of her jewelry box and approached Danny. It was a beautiful bracelet she was holding in her hands, woven from blue and black leather stripes. Danny liked it a lot, she knew.

"Put your left hand up," she commanded and Danny did. She tied the bracelet around his wrist.

"There! Now you look amazing. He'd be stupid not to like you," she said smiling. The bracelet did kinda complete Danny's choice of clothing. Veronica didn't have bad sense of style either. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful," Danny whispered.

"You are beautiful," she countered. "Don't forget that. There isn't a guy in the world that wouldn't fall for you."

Danny smiled timidly. He didn't have half the confidence his sister had when it came to self-image.

"Confidence is the key," she started, returning back to her normal self. Cooper honked again interrupting her.

“Okay, I think we better go out now,” she said. She knew as well—enough was enough. She wasn’t really going to make Cooper wait all day long. Teaching your man to behave was a rather gradual process.

6

When Bradley entered his room and closed the door behind himself, he felt immediately relieved to be back home, but at the same time strange to be home again. For the past eight months his dorm room was his home. He got used to it, a lot. His entire life was spent here in this room but suddenly he felt estranged from it. He felt like he was merely a guest here. He looked around, making a mental note of all the stuff inhabiting the room, his stuff: his old action figures gathering dust on a shelf above his bed, movie posters of the movies he loved, his favorite books on Film History, his hard-earned and majorly out-of-date filming equipment. It was his room after all.

He emptied his backpack making room for the extra gear he’d need tonight. Cooper’s idea might have been stupid but Bradley was a perfectionist. If he was going to be involved, he would at least make an effort at doing it the professional way. Cooper didn’t know the first thing about lighting the scene, although he was kinda good with visual effects and graphics. The two of them had always divided areas of expertise quite effectively. The only problem however was that they would always have to work in tandem to be at their best. Individually they had their weaknesses.

Done with packing lighting umbrellas, Bradley approached one of the book shelves. There was one particular book his eyes searched for. The contents of the book however had nothing to do with Bradley’s interest in it. It was an old book with a greenish cover. And Bradley didn’t even know what it was about. A romantic novel of sorts was all he knew. He took the book into his hands and it became clear that there were a lot of extra objects wedged between the pages. Those were the photographs.

It was a collection of photos he and Cooper had taken back in high school when they had an outing at the beach one sunny summer day, with their classmates. Bradley flipped through the photos until he found a picture of Danny. He was standing among a group of other guys in their swimming wear, smiling broadly. They weren’t exactly friends back in school, Danny and Bradley, but they knew each other well, since the two of them had a lot of the same classes. They even talked a few times, very briefly though.

Bradley crawled into his bed, holding a picture of Danny in his hand—Danny and his painfully green swimming shorts, the color of radioactive acid. Aside from that he looked gorgeous, a lot like Cooper too: blond hair, big blue eyes, lean torso. Cooper’s hyperactive personality was shining through though. And Danny was more of a closed book, a riddle you had to solve to get to the core of it. Where Cooper was in a way simple and one-dimensional, Danny was complex and polyhedral. Bradley liked that.

He began falling asleep looking at the picture. He was beat from hours on the road and it was perfect timing for an afternoon nap. His mind was not made up about tonight and the question of whether or not he would go was still open. He wasn’t going to think about it right now though. First he needed a nap. He even considered flipping a coin to determine if he should go or not. He was getting strangely worked up about it. He wanted to see Danny but he was beginning to get anxiety over it. He felt electric and not in a good way.

He just needed some sleep.

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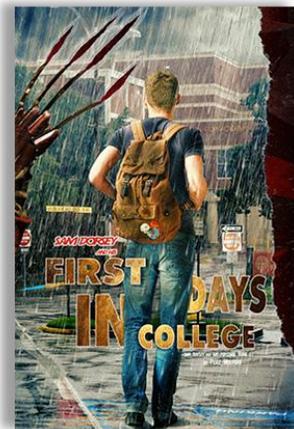
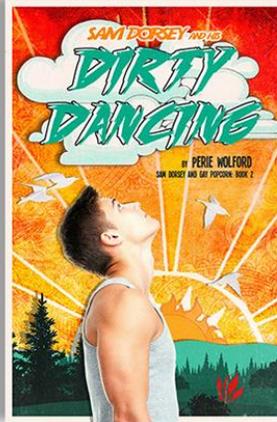
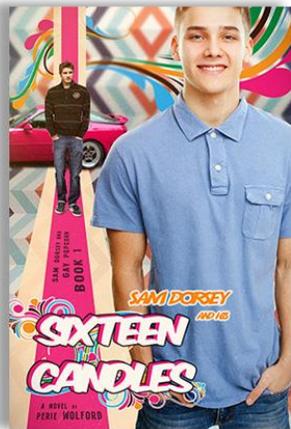
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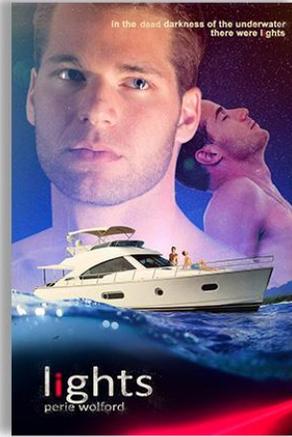
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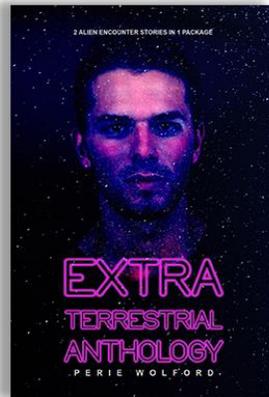
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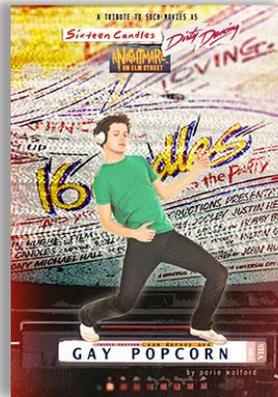


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