**Drafke, Charmaine**

**Word Count: 1651**

**A Gift or Curse**

Alison had only met the legendary author, Bryce Caradin, once in a local coffee shop. She had been struggling with her follow-up story, and her due date was approaching quickly. Alison knew the success of her first novel was as much a happenstance of timing as it was talent, and the pressure to follow it up with something remarkable was too much. She had been struggling with character development and was wearing down the backspace button, apparently quite loudly, when Mr. Caradin approached with a sheepish grin. He admitted he could spot a struggling writer when he saw one. He introduced himself, as if anyone in the world of literature wouldn't recognize him, and asked if he could help. After discussing her story, Mr. Caradin completely deconstructed her work and helped Alison rebuild it into something that she still considers some of her best work. They shared a dish of scones and spent the rest of the morning discussing the future of the literary world, respective influences, and their favorite characters and works of fiction. Bryce Caradin was known as an unapproachable but brilliant fiction artist, but Alison couldn't imagine a more friendly and supportive person. They exchanged contact information, but she never met him again. She received a beautiful flower arrangement with a note that simply read "Even better than I imagined, B.C." when the book hit the New York Best Seller's list, and she knew it had to be from him. She sent an email thanking him for the flowers but never heard back. That was four years ago.

Alison heard rumors about Bryce Caradin during the months before his mysterious disappearance. He was having meltdowns, didn't make deadlines, and canceled all appearances and his book tour. So when a crate addressed from him showed up at her door, she was eager to know its contents. Alison sets the wooden crate on her desk in anticipation. As she starts to pry it open, she imagines a collection of classics, maybe even a first edition. She also imagines an ugly piece of art that she would have to display simply because it was a gift from the famous B.C. It is like buying a lottery ticket when there is an impending unimaginable jackpot. While you know you are holding something that will probably be in your recycling bin soon, you start to imagine all the wondrous possibilities that could be if you won. Inside she finds a mass of manuscripts, and her heart skips a beat then begins to race. Unpublished works by Bryce Caradin! They are short stories, handwritten and mostly untitled. *These are priceless, but why would he send them to her*, she wonders? She sifts through the first piece that has a title, *Didn't See it Coming*. Alison reads a story about a man who is struck by lightning and loses his sight. The story isn't noteworthy or even very creative, and there is something familiar about it. She picks up the next story and reads about a car accident a few teenagers got into on their way home from spring break. There is no plot, no climax, nothing. But again, there's a familiarity to the story. In the next piece, she reads about a cat named Buffy that saves her companion dog from a coyote and suddenly realizes why the stories are familiar. They aren't stories; they are accounts of actual events.

The hair on Alison's arms raises and her breathing stops. *What the hell?* She recalls the news she was watching during lunch. She pictures the fluffy little terrier and the beast of a cat in the news story. She remembers the reporter saying "Just this morning..." but that's impossible. She sets the manuscript down and moves to her phone. She googles "cat saves dog from coyote" and selects news. There it is. She clicks the link, and there she reads that just this morning Buffy the cat saves the family dog from a mangy looking dog that many think was probably a coyote. She had received the crate at 10 am from UPS. This means it had to have shipped yesterday. The account of what happened this morning simply could not have been written yesterday.

Alison returns to the crate of stories... accounts... *predictions*. She knows she is overreacting, but the creative writer in her decides to investigate. She moves the crate to the floor and sets up in her normal reading area in front of the couch. She begins reading more of the work sent to her. Some stories sound familiar. She googles those that she doesn't recollect and can find mirror stories of actual accounts online. Details are uncanny. Each work is dated three days before the incident occurs. Caradin writes that two 757 passenger planes in Bosnia nearly collide due to a terrorist hack on November 15th. Alison finds a link to BBC news from November 18th when two passenger planes nearly collide due to a computer malfunction. Four days later, the article was updated to reveal that further investigation found that the base computer hadn't malfunctioned. It was hacked. Another document was written in September about a business deal that went south in Puerto Rico causing the loss of fourteen hundred and thirty-two jobs. The incident provoked a destructive mob protest that lasted days and caused severe damage in the San Juan business district. Alison remembered the story. After checking online, she can verify the mob started three days after Caradin wrote about it, and the job loss numbers reported were exactly the same - fourteen hundred and thirty-two.

Alison stands up, walks to the window, and loses herself in thought. *This is impossible. Bryce doesn't seem like a joker, but maybe he likes practical jokes? Who should I call? This is crazy. It's not a joke, but it's obviously not real. Is this a test of some sort?* She walks to her desk and takes off the business card from her corkboard. Until now, she kept it there for inspiration. She calls Bryce's number feeling he wasn't going to pick up. As the voicemail starts, she hangs up. She texts him: *B.C., this is Alison Reed. I received your funny joke box today, but I'm not laughing. Call me.* She puts the phone down, looks at the box, and decides she needs air.

As Alison walks through her neighborhood, she imagines the possibilities of seeing the future, considers the responsibility. She knows it isn't possible, but she starts to imagine all the opportunities and the inability to control anything. *No one would believe you unless there was a way to prove it.* She is lost in thought as she hears a blood-curdling scream from behind her. She spins around just in time to see a sedan swerve to barely miss a small child who had just fallen off his bike, lose control of the vehicle, and slam into a garage. The driver's car crinkles like an accordion. *He was going too fast.* Alison can't move, can't breathe, and is starting to see spots. She didn't see him driving too fast; she had read it just a short while ago. Her knees are weak, and she can hear her heartbeat in her head. She feels her legs go out from under her as she begins to lose consciousness. The mom who was just screaming calls out that an ambulance is on its way, and Alison starts to pull herself together. She regains her strength and slowly moves to the car.

*Black Corolla, blue shirt, Sox ball cap*. She repeats this to herself as she walks to the crumpled up car. She hesitates as she recognizes the Toyota symbol on the back of the car. *Corolla, check*. She gets closer from behind and sees the blue collar on the man in the passenger seat. *Check*. Her stomach drops as she approaches the driver side and recognizes the White Sox logo on the ball cap that is now on the dashboard. *Check. Oh my God.* One of the manuscripts Alison read described this scene exactly. She reaches for the phone to try calling B.C. again and realizes it is still on her desk.

She begins running, faster than she ever has before, and yet she seems to be getting closer to her apartment in slow motion. She finally reaches the steps, lets herself into the hallway and sprints up two flights to her door. She isn't sure why she is running exactly. She didn't want to verify what she already knew. She looks for the manuscript she had already read, throwing other works around in her frantic movements. She finds it and reads it again. *The scene unfolds in front of a young woman who is lost in thought as the mother scoops up her son in relief and calls for an ambulance.* Alison was part of this story, and it was dated three days ago!

She grabs her phone from her desk and realizes she has a missed text from B.C. It reads: *No joke, did you read the story in the red binder?* She calls him, and he answers.

"Alison? Are you ok?" Bryce asks.

"No. What the hell? Do you know what I just saw? WHY would you send me these? Where are you? Bryce, I can't..." she is cut off by Bryce.

"Alison, find the red binder." Click. He hung up. Alison is angry and scared and about to be completely undone. She slowly walks to mess she made and searches for the red binder. She finds, sits at her desk, and starts to read.

The last page finishes with this final line: Alison, in her quest for answers, lets go of all hope and accepts her fate. On the next page she reads a note from B.C.: *Alison, I am so sorry*.