

# Avalon

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**O**K. OK. Here I go. Vincent takes a breath and looks up. It's a mistake. The clot of faces before him stretches to the back of the classroom, like a sea that will swallow him up. The clock ticks on the far wall above them all, and the new boy, the one who looks like Vincent's dead brother Danny, has moved all the way up to the front. Vincent feels sick, but he stares down again at his notes and then it's okay. The green linoleum stops shifting under his feet. All he has to do is read his own handwriting. Not even that—all he has to do is read his own printing. He's been smart not to write his report, even though he's eleven and he's been writing for years. Instead, he's drafted it in careful block letters, with HB No. 2 Soft. He loves the feel of a pencil like that in his hands, the way it strokes the paper, but he'll have to be careful not to sweat and smudge the print.

"Avalon," he says. "By Vincent Morris."

He has to clear his throat twice, so that his words won't drown in his mouth.

"So, like, um, Arthur was this King. Of, um, England. Like where the Queen is now, right, and the palaces? So. He'd been fighting this guy Mordred, you know? He was pretty big, and vile, right? He *rocked*. And so this guy Arthur, the king, he suffered—"

"What's Avalon?" Rosie Steele's thin, dorky voice floats up the middle aisle. Rosie's sitting back behind the new boy.

"A car, you clot." That's Vincent's friend Jim. "Sheesh, what a clot. Like, utter."

"Shhhh!" And that's Mrs Armour.

The class holds its breath. Vince continues.

"The king suffered a grievous wound, a mortal wound, and he lay on the floor, I mean the ground, there, and it was cold, probably Christmas; they probably had snow that nobody shoveled—"

"What's a mortal wound?" Rosie again.

"Dead," Vincent says, looking up, surprised to hear the certainty in his own voice, off his script. Since Danny died Vincent knows dead, and it can just pop out of him like that.

"How can a wound be dead?"

"It means he's, like, dying. Going to die."

"Yeah?" Rosie's doubtful.

"Well, they can't tube him or shock him or anything, they didn't do that then, besides, it was a battlefield in, like ... They were far away from stuff. Anything. They were in Old England."

He's less sure about this part, and he feels the back of his neck grow warm. Mrs Armour is probably looking at him. *Dork, Vincent. Utter.*

But it's Mrs Armour's voice next. "And a *grievous* wound, Mr Morris?"

Mrs Armour always calls her students by their last names, as if they own briefcases and businesses and come

to school in three-piece suits. At the door as they leave each day she's warm, girlish. Sometimes she brushes Vincent's shoulder with her hand. *Good night, sweet Prince, Vincenzo*, she might say. He always hopes no one's heard, even though she says it to the others: *Anon, Stefano. Anon, Lorenzo. Till the morrow, Beatrice*. That's to Betty, who lopes around in her ski-doo pants and snow boots, and even though Vincent loves Mrs Armour, just then she really seems dumb.

"What's a *grievous* wound?" Mrs Armour asks him again.

"Well." He gulps. Danny had had a grievous wound. "It *was* pretty sad, this stuff," he says. "So there was grief. It was, um, the age of grief."

He'd read about this part. There was more to it than that. It was mystical ... no, *mythical*, that was it.

"It's mythical," he says. "Like, when you hear that someone, a leader, has a grievous wound, it means it's the end of stuff. The end of the kingdom, because the king has a wound and it can't be fixed. He sits on a bank and fishes or something, wishing it could be fixed so he could do his ruling and politics and stuff some more and bring riches and happiness to the people, and health care. A grievous wound, it's like the end of an era."

There is an awed hush in the room. Even the clock is quieter. The silence rings so loud that he breaks it himself. "The king fishes at Camp David or something."

"Vincent," says Mrs Armour. "Mr Morris. That's excellent. That's exactly right."

Buoyed, he carries on. "So, anyway, to get to Avalon this Arthur guy has to get the help of the Lady of the Lake, right, she lives in the lake and she has this white arm?"

His mother powders her arms like that. His mother smells like strawberries, and the thought of it makes him look down. His notes blur in front of him and he's no longer able to find his place. Still, things seem to be going well enough. He looks up, right over the head of the new boy on the front row. *Don't think about Danny, don't think about anything*, Vince tells himself. *Strawberries, nothing*.

"So he has to get his friend Sir Belvedere, no, I mean Sir Bevidere, um, no." He takes a breath. "Sir *Bedivere*, he has to get Sir *Bedivere* to throw his sword into the lake, so that the Lady can catch it. Once she catches it, she calls him a barge to Avalon, right? Like, a water taxi?"

Vincent read about a water taxi once, in *The Wind in the Willows*, but he has no idea what it is. He can't tell whether the class is with him or not, but even without looking he knows that the new boy is rapt. It's a struggle, to know whether to address him or not.

"So the sword's Excalibur, right?" he tells the top of the new boy's head. "Like in PlayStation? He got it from a stone when he was a kid, right, it was stuck in this rock up to the hilt and only he could pull it out so that's what made him king, he could get things outta things. So. Anyway. Sir Bevi— Sir *Bedivere* takes Excalibur to the lake, but when he gets there, right, he just hates to chuck it? He can't bring himself to; it's legendary and all? It's mythical? So he hides it under a tree at the seashore, or, no, at least—"

How could there be a tree on the seashore? Was that what the book had said?

"—He buries it. Yeah, that's right, he buries Excalibur in the sand." That was better. These books, they could get things wrong. "And he goes back to the battlefield and he says 'Hey man, yo, Art.'"

The new boy has his hand up now, but all Vincent can do is get through his report. Let somebody else answer

hands. He rushes on.

"'Bedivere,' Arthur says to him. 'Did you throw my sword in the lake? What did you see?'

'Nothing but wind and waves, my lord,' that's what Bedivere tells him. He doesn't realize, see, that he shoulda seen the Lady of the Lake, her arm, if he'd *really* done it."

Vincent glances up at the class. Again, it's a mistake. The new boy still has his hand up; now it's waving. Vincent coughs. He feels the room turning around him, and he backs up into the front of Mrs Armour's desk, wedging himself against it to keep his balance. Something hums in his ears; he grows hot. He scrapes his note cards against his forehead, then uses them to fan himself. It's as if his thoughts are a display of canned apple juice at the end of the aisle at Harry's Save-On where his mother took them Saturdays, a display that's suddenly tumbled down and spilled all over the floor for everyone to see. Danny had done that once, and look what had happened to Danny. It was a bad, bad thing.

"And?" From the window side of the classroom where she stands now, Mrs Armour fans the air at the open window as if to move some in Vincent's direction. She wears polka dots today, little green ones on a black background that match the green ribbon on her collar and the tops of the slash pockets on her hips. It's grosgrain ribbon, the broad, ribbed stuff. Vincent knows about grosgrain and about slash pockets because his mother sews, explaining each step to him as she goes. Mrs Armour's polka dot dress today, like all her dresses, is the best thing she could've worn.

"And. Um. Arthur. Right. 'You bum,' Arthur says to Sir Bedivere, 'you didn't throw Excalibur in the lake at all. Get back there. Do it.'"

Something in Arthur's way with Bedivere gets into Vincent's head and straightens out his thoughts, as if the grocery manager has come and rebuilt the juice display.

"So Beddie goes back, right? And he looks at the lake and he looks at the sword and he says 'Oh *man*, it's gonna rust.' And still he just can't do it. It's Excalibur. It's legendary and all. So he hides it under the tree again—"

There it is a second time, the mistake about the tree. It's out of Vincent's mouth before he can stop it.

"And back he goes," he says anyway. He may as well make the whole thing up now. "'Yo. Art,' he says.

'Beddie. Beddie. Ya did it this time?' That's Art saying that, right? Art's lying on the ground and he's got blood pouring out all over him from his mortal wound, from his grievous wound, it's *ugly*, man.

'Yeah,' Beddie says. 'I done it.'"

"*Did* it." Mrs Armour, by the window, softly.

"*Did* it. 'And what'd you see?' Art wants to know, he's no dummy. And I'll read you this part—"

Vincent raises his note cards nearly to his nose as if he's shortsighted, and though he can't find it on them anywhere, he remembers the line anyway. "Beddie says, 'Sir, I saw nothing but waves wan and waters deep.'" Over the top of the cards Vincent sees the new boy's hair, just the tips where it's sheared so close it stands like stubble in a winter field.

"And Arthur just blows up. He's had it, man. 'Gimme the freakin' sword,' he yells. 'I'll do it myself!' He's screaming, right, and so Sir Bedivere says 'well, freakin' frig you too,' and he grabs the sword and he runs back to the lake and he throws it in. And then the arm comes up and pulls the sword under and the barge comes and they

load him on and Beddie cries. And that's all. They row him away to Avalon. There's Queens and stuff on the barge already. Women 'n' stuff. His sister, Morgan La Fave."

"La Fay," says Mrs Armour gently.

"Whatever."

Vincent can't believe he's finished, he's got through it. In front of him, the class is silent. He doesn't know why, he doesn't care. He just wants to sit down. The rowing away part with Sir Bedivere on the shore, there's more to it than that but he can't get into it, certainly not in front of the whole class. That part's too sad for words. He starts to his seat. His legs are rubbery.

"A moment, if you please, Mr Morris." It's Mrs Armour. "Does anyone have questions for Mr Morris?"

Vincent wants to skip this part. It was when Charley Raines fell apart, after all, last week. Charley'd reported on heart transplants. He'd said that Dr Christiaan Barnard from South Africa had done the first one using the heart of a big dog that was known ever after as the Saint Barnard. Charley'd been defiant, as always. Charley reminds Vincent of his father, the way his father talks about his job to his mother in the evenings when he dries the dishes for her, and Vincent figures that Charley, too, will grow up to drive an Audi and have a secretary and live a long, happy life bossing people around.

The class had booed Charley. "He never transplanted no dog heart," they catcalled, but they left him alone, in the end: no one was really sure about heart transplants. They thought it might have been pig hearts, or baboons, or just a big machine with ribbed hoses like a vacuum cleaner. None of it seemed likely.

Charley had seized the moment and slunk to his seat, breathless. Mrs Armour still calls him Charlemagne, but he's been Dogheart in the schoolyard ever since.

Vincent doesn't want to be Dogheart, or Bedivere or Art. He just wants to sit down. Surely there'll be no questions for him. Surely he's been clear enough.

But there he is, the new boy. He still has his hand up.

Vincent looks at him, pleading.

"Why's he go to Avalon?" the boy asks.

What kind of a question was that? Vincent clenches his teeth. Did *he* write the dumb thing? Why should he have to account for it? With his fingertips he hangs on to the top of his desk, which he's reached by now. He clears his throat.

"He goes there to get healed, I think."

The boy is not persuaded. "Well, he goes there to die, don't he?"

"I guess," Vincent agrees.

"Well, which is it? How can he go to Avalon to get healed if he's going there to die?"

Vincent's eyes fog up then, and he sees Sir Bedivere standing in his chain mail on the shore of the lake, a lone figure in the darkening distance, gazing out over the water. Next to him leans an old grey tree that has a couple bare branches to it still and no more, not a single leaf, obviously not the kind of place you could hide a sword or anything else. There must have been bad weather on that lake, to rip off the leaves and the rest of the branches like that. The tree is so bare, so gaunt, just thinking about it makes Vincent feel he's lost his way in the dark, in the cold. An icy

wind sweeps down on him. *And anon they rowed fromward the land, and Sir Bedivere cried and said 'Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me?' 'Comfort thyself,' said the king, 'and do as well as thou mayst, for in me is no trust to trust in.'*

Vincent looks at the new boy again, who by now is spinning and fading around him with the rest of the class as if they're all a drawing someone's taken an eraser to. Far in the distance, he can see Mrs Armour's black hair and red lips. He can see her slash pockets, just barely. They're fading in and out like a transmission over a faulty data relay on *Star Trek*. Now the new boy's face takes up all the room in Vincent's eyes, wherever there still is room amid the yellow blotches that are growing there too. Vincent feels very hot; wet, too, as if he's been dropped in to a pool. He feels as though he could shuck water off himself with his hands. He feels like vomiting, and he does, over the front of his t-shirt as he goes down, and the last thing he sees is his brother Danny peering down at him, his hand waving frantically.

*Answer me, answer me Vince!* Danny cries frantically. *Did he go to be healed?*

**I**t's a week before Vincent's mother lets him return to school, and she has an audience with Mrs Armour first. Vincent's mother's brings a thermos of tea to Mrs Armour's classroom after school lets out for the day.

"Milk?" She's brought it separately, in a small bottle with a screw top.

"Please," says Mrs Armour. "You talked to the nurse?"

Vincent's mother had, last week when it had happened and she'd gone to pick Vinnie up.

"I don't know how to ask this," the nurse had said, pushing up the sleeves of her cardigan as if she were warm. School nurses never wore uniforms anymore, Vincent's mother had noted. Instead, the ubiquitous cardigan.

"Danny—" the nurse said.

"What about Danny?"

"He mentioned Danny. "

Vincent's mother had pushed at her own sleeves, but her cuffs had been buttoned at her wrists. What had Vinnie been doing, talking about it now? Danny had died years ago, strangling himself when he fell off a swing and got tangled in the ropes. Vincent had been seven then, and he'd appeared not to notice much, or to mind. Now Vincent was eleven, the age Danny was when he died, and Danny was still eleven. It had been odd to think about that last week, the business of having two eleven-year-olds, and as she'd talked to the school nurse Vincent's mother had had to sit down.

In the empty classroom after school now, Mrs Armour looks at Vincent's mother's thermos. She tries to cover her nerves. "Kids, they bounce right back, don't they?" she says.

She doesn't call him Vincenzo around his mother. She doesn't know what a mother will understand.

"I don't know. Do they?" Vincent's mother hasn't set out to be contrary. She simply doesn't know any more and wonders if Mrs Armour does.

"Did you know he was doing his report on King Arthur? Maybe you should have had him pick a different topic. Safer, you know, after Danny. Maybe *we* should have. I certainly should have been watching, I grant you."

Mrs Armour feels suddenly like defending herself, but feels, too, that she can be generous.

"Yes, Arthur, I knew. What was it about Arthur, for heaven's sake?"

"Maybe the betrayal?"

"What betrayal?" Vincent's mother puts her mug down on the miniature desk she's sitting in. Like Mrs Armour, she's small, and they've pulled two student desks together head to head in which to sit and talk. Vincent's mother's desk has a skull and crossbones carved into it, and then next to it a heart speared with a bone like the ones crossed beneath the skull, where Cupid's arrow would normally have been. ANGIE has been scratched into the desk twice, under the skull and again under the heart. Vincent's mother swirls her tea again. The mug Mrs Armour has provided has come from the teacher's lounge and tastes like bleach.

"Well, you know, Lancelot and Guinevere and that stuff." Mrs Armour reads psychology, and psychological novels when she tires of texts.

"I see." Vincent's mother doesn't see at all.

Mrs Armour waits. Finally she says, gently, "How long has it been since Danny?"

Vincent's mother looks up then, out of her mug, and stares at Mrs Armour, at her cherry red lips, her blooming cheeks. How did she manage to keep that much color in her face at the end of a long day, with all those kids? Was this what Vinnie saw, why he loves his teacher?

"July 16, 1997," she says. "How long ago is that?"

*Do the math*, Mrs Armour thinks, but it's never a thing that's said in school, and she doesn't say it now.

"Who is it, exactly," Vincent's mother goes on, "that Vincent thinks he might have betrayed?"

Mrs Armour doesn't know.

"Who was the new boy, the one in the front who brought it on?"

Mrs Armour doesn't know this either. She doesn't know what Vincent's mother means at all. Rosie Steele had been sitting in the front row waving her hand. Rosie Steele had had the questions that day. Vincent's always liked Rosie. They even pass notes. Prince Vincenzo and the Lady Rosalind.

Mrs Armour looks at Vincent mother and tells her: there's been no new boy in the class. Rose Steele was in the front row, and it was Rosie Steele who'd asked about Avalon, no one else at all.

The door to Vincent's bedroom stands ajar. His mother taps and goes in. He's lying on his bed upside down, his head at the foot. His computer is off, his PlayStation too. He doesn't even have his tv on. The room smells of his socks, and she opens the window on the far side of the bed.

"Mo-om—"

"Fresh air, sweetie. It's good for you."

She hopes he won't wave his feet while she's there, though it isn't the smell so much as the reminder he's growing up. Her own feet kick the *National Geographics* on the floor under the window. They seem to be all he's ever interested in. They could leave *Playboys* around, she thinks, and he'd never notice them. She eyes the bed. She wants to sit down next to him, but she doesn't want to do anything to compromise the moment, and any chance

she has.

"Vin, sweetie—"

"Yeah."

"Vin, little Rosie Steele phoned, asking after you." Immediately, she wishes she hadn't said that: *little*. It doesn't worry her for a minute that Rosie Steele hasn't phoned at all, that here she is telling him otherwise. She wants to see what he'll say—about Thursday, about anything at all.

"Yeah?" Vincent says. "I didn't hear the phone."

"On my cell," she lies.

"Rosie Steele called you on your *cell*?"

"Well, she called you."

"On your cell? How'd she get the number?"

"I don't know. Maybe she asked Mrs Armour and Mrs Armour gave her the wrong one by mistake. Daddy and I leave all our numbers with the school, you know, Vin, in case there's ever an emergency."

"Like Thursday?"

"Well, like Thursday, I guess. Did you think Thursday was an emergency?"

It was a question, wasn't it? For Vincent's mother, nothing can ever be an emergency again. Not after Danny. Disasters will come to her now languidly, as if they're launched on a breeze of cool destiny, on the silk balloon lines spiders ride in summer. If Vincent drowns in Bell's Creek some July or August, if leukemia sets in on him like a summer cold, if her husband is killed in traffic, has a heart attack, chokes on steak—none of it will need speed from her, there'll be no stopping it. She may as well save her strength.

Vincent hasn't answered.

"Vinnie?"

"Uhhm."

"What did you want me to tell Rosie? She might call again."

He rolls away from her and turns his head toward the open window. "I hate Rosie. Don't tell her anything."

"Well, darling, I guess she's worried. I think she thinks it's her fault, asking you all those questions about King Arthur and all. Right up there in the front row."

"She didn't ask me questions. Not about King Arthur, anyway. She asked me questions about what's a mortal wound. Like she didn't know. What a clot." *Utter*, he says to himself, and squirms onto his stomach.

"I see. And you knew?"

"Sure."

"How do you know?"

"Mo-om." He rolls back, out of irritation this time. But he doesn't look at her. "I just *do*."

"I see." Gingerly, she sits on the corner of the bed, holding her breath as if that can suspend her weight above it and keep him from noticing she's sat. "So that's what Rosie asked. And the new boy? He asked these other things? The things that upset you?"

"Danny. Danny asked."

She's hit through the chest, stunned. "Vincent."

He turns, eyes her straight on. "He looked like Danny, at least."

"What did Danny look like?"

Her voice sounds thin to her, asphyxiated. She hasn't breathed since she's sat down, and can't now. It's beyond her. Perhaps she'll never breathe again.

"Purple," Vincent says. "He looked purple, there were ugly black welts on his neck, and his face was all swollen. It was like two people's faces stuffed into one, and one of them's all purple and banged up. And he had a swing sticking out the side of his head."

He turns again then, flat on his back, and lunges his legs into the air with his hands under his hips as if he's trying a shoulder stand, then flings them down hard on the bed again. It shakes her off her corner of the mattress, and she stands, not breathing.

He sighs then, a long, dry sigh. "I hate Rosie Steele. I kissed her once. She told. I hate her."

He's crying now. She reaches for him, but he pushes her away.

"Of course he couldn't know," Alan reassures her. "The coffin was closed. Forget about it." They have a bottle of Glenmorangie between them on the oak table rather than their usual evening tea. She's made sure Vincent is asleep with his bedroom door closed tight.

She doesn't know how she managed to get through the rest of the day till Alan came home. She knew the coffin had been closed, of course she knew that. At the time, she didn't know whether it had been a good thing or bad, if anything then could have been good in the least. It was simply a necessary thing; the police had explained that to her. Even with what the funeral home could do, they'd needed a closed coffin. Not that she had seen for herself. Alan had kept her from that, had pulled her back and Vinnie too, ordering them into the house.

"Where could he have got it, then?" she asks.

Alan shrugs, drinks deeply from his glass, refills hers. "Who knows?" he says. "Who knows where kids get stuff these days?"

Vincent watches now. He watches everything as if life is a window on wonders and horrors alike, even when he knows he should be watching something else—the blackboard, the *AskJeeves* home page that will tell him the latest science facts, the clock overhead that will say how much longer he has for the quiz—he can turn his head over his shoulder whenever he wants to, just like that, and watch his time tick away. He watches the birds in the sky in the winter, how they fly away as if there's somewhere else, and the bugs in the grass when it's summer.

He'd rather watch than talk. The kids at school talked to him too much about it, Charley and his pals telling him how Danny would have looked, how bodies look once they're drowned or strangled or shot or stabbed or hanged. They'd seen it on CSI. Everybody knew. Didn't Vincent know?

Rosie said it wasn't nice, Charley talking to Vincent like that and Vincent letting him, and Vincent knew it was

true. He shouldn't talk; he shouldn't listen. His mother and his father didn't talk about it, and he shouldn't either. Every time with Charley and he betrayed Danny just a little more. Some things should stay private, and yet he hadn't been able to stop it.

Then one day he did; he just stopped; and now, instead, he watches. He lights matches under the flying ants when they come out in June, watches their wings go up like thread or baby hair in a zip of light and heat so fast they don't even know they've been hit. He watches the rest of them writhe in the heat, briefly, and stop—and under them then, once they're dead and gone, he sees there's nothing more at all, not even waves wan and waters deep.