

THE  
UNSINKABLE



*A Novel*

GRETA

JAMES



JENNIFER E. SMITH

NATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
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We set out to be wrecked.

—J. M. BARRIE,

*The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island*



BEFORE





## Chapter One

Greta is standing at the window of a hotel in West Hollywood when her brother calls for the third time that day. Across the street, there's a billboard with a sleek white yacht surrounded by turquoise water, an ad for a new kind of beer, and something about it—that feeling of being adrift—makes it easier to say no when she finally picks up the phone.

“Come on,” Asher says. “It’s only a week.”

“A week on a boat.”

“It’s a ship,” he corrects.

“It’s the last thing I need right now,” Greta says, turning from the window, where the light outside is dreamy and pink. She’s just come from a photo shoot for the cover of her second album, which has been pushed to July. If it were up to Greta, she would’ve moved it back even further, but apparently, that’s no longer an option. Instead, she’d been summoned to Los Angeles to spend three days in a warehouse surrounded by flashing cameras and frowning studio execs in suits and sneakers, the pressure to get this right all over their faces.

It’s been two months since she last performed live—not since the week after her mother died, when she fell apart onstage—but everything else has continued to march ahead, the business part of things still grinding forward mostly without her.

On the desk, next to the hotel stationery, there’s a plate of chocolates with a note from the hotel manager that says, *We’re so happy you’re with us*. Automatically, Greta thinks of her mom, who no longer is, whose

absence feels so breathtakingly final that even this is enough to make her heart drop.

“Why don’t *you* go?” she says to Asher, trying to imagine spending all that time on a boat with her dad. The Alaskan cruise had been her mother’s idea. It was all she talked about for nearly a year, right up until March, when an artery ruptured in her head and the whole world seemed to stop.

Now it’s only a month away. And her dad is still planning to go.

“We can’t let him do this alone,” Asher says, ignoring her question. “It’s too sad.”

“He’ll hardly be alone,” Greta says as she wanders into the bathroom. “He’ll have the Fosters and the Blooms. They’ll take care of him.”

She stares at her reflection in the mirror, her face still made up from the shoot. Red lips, white skin, green eyes lined with charcoal. Her dark hair, usually so wild, is now sleek and tamed. She sets the phone down on the sink and switches to speaker, then twists the tap and begins to scrub it all off.

“He’ll be a fifth wheel,” Asher insists, his voice bouncing around the bathroom. “It’s depressing. One of us has to go with him.”

“Right,” Greta says. “You.”

“I can’t.”

She straightens again. Her skin is now pinkish, but she looks more like herself, which is always a relief. She grabs a towel and pats at her face. “The thing is,” she says, picking up the phone again and walking back out into the room, where she flops onto the bed, “he actually likes you.”

“Greta,” he says, impatient now. “You know I can’t do it.”

She knows this, of course. Asher has a wife and three girls under the age of five. He has a job with a boss and a regular work week, an HR department, and a set number of vacation days, which mostly get used up when the kids are sick. He hasn’t been on a plane in years.

Greta’s already been on three this week.

She sighs. “What are the dates again?”

“End of May, beginning of June.”

“I’ve got to be in the city for Gov Ball on the fifth,” she says, almost indecently relieved to have a legitimate excuse, no matter how much she’s dreading it. But this does nothing to deter Asher.

“Lucky for you,” he says, “it gets back on the fourth.”

“You know this isn’t just any show. It’s important.”

“More important than Dad?”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s not like I’m asking you to choose,” he says. “You’ll be back in New York in time to do your thing. And I’ve heard Alaska is beautiful this time of year. Still a little cold, maybe, but that was just Dad trying to save some money—”

“Asher?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“Sure you can. You love the water. Remember that time we took the canoe out on—”

“You know what I mean.”

He goes silent for a moment, then says, “It wouldn’t just be for him, you know.”

And that’s what finally gets her.



SATURDAY



## Chapter Two

Greta stands beneath the wide shadow of an enormous ship, wondering how such a thing could possibly float. It's a hotel on rudders, a skyscraper tipped on its side, a monolith, a beast. And it's her unlikely home for the next eight days.

The name of the ship is painted across its broad white side. It's called the *Escape*, which is the only thing so far today that's made her want to laugh.

Hundreds of people are milling around her, fancy cameras dangling from their necks, all of them eager to climb aboard and begin their Alaskan adventure. To the left, the city of Vancouver disappears into the sky, which is now silver, heavy with the threat of rain. Greta was here once for a show, but as with so many of the places she travels to, her views were pretty much limited to the inside of a music venue.

"It's got eleven decks," her dad says, stepping up beside her with a map of the ship. He's wearing a too-thin windbreaker and a baseball cap he got for free when he opened a new bank account. It's been three months now since her mother died, and for the first time in his life, he looks every inch of his seventy years. "And eight different restaurants. Four of them buffets."

If her mom were here, she would've said: *Wow!* She would've said: *I can't wait to try them all.* She would've squeezed his arm and beamed up at the ship, all eleven decks of it.

But Helen isn't here. It's only Greta, who still can't believe that Asher managed to talk her into this.

“Cool,” she says, an attempt at enthusiasm, but it obviously falls flat, because her dad simply gives her a resigned look and returns to his map.

This was supposed to be a celebration, a fortieth-anniversary trip; they’d been planning it for nearly a year and saving up for it even longer. Last Christmas—a full five months ago now—Helen gave Conrad a calendar with photos of glaciers, and he got her a new fleece to replace her old one, worn and thin from years of gardening in it. They bought a pair of binoculars to share, the kind that hang heavy around your neck, and every time there was an article about Alaska in the newspaper, Helen would clip it out, put it in an envelope, get a stamp, and then mail it—actually mail it—to Greta with a Post-it note that said “FYI,” as if she were going too.

That new fleece—light blue and impossibly soft—is in Greta’s bag, which is currently being carried aboard the ship. Her mother never ended up wearing it. She’d been saving it for the trip.

The ship’s horn blows, and the line to board moves ahead. Behind her, the other four adults—even at thirty-six, Greta can’t help thinking of them this way—are already making plans, debating between the casino and the musical for their first night out. They’re longtime friends of her parents’ and each couple has their own reasons for being here: the Fosters both recently retired and the Blooms are about to turn seventy. But everyone knows the real driving force was Helen, whose excitement about this trip was so infectious, she somehow talked them all into it.

A steward walks past, and Greta watches him pause and take a few steps back in her direction. He points at her guitar case, which she’s had slung over her shoulder since they stepped out of the taxi.

“Would you like some help with that, ma’am?” he asks, and she tries not to flinch at the *ma’am*. She’s wearing a short black dress with Vans and sunglasses. Her hair is tied up in a messy bun at the top of her head, and there’s a leather jacket draped over the arm not carrying the guitar. She’s not someone accustomed to being called *ma’am*.

“That’s okay,” she says. “I’ll hang on to it.”

Her dad grunts. “You couldn’t pry that thing from her even if she fell overboard.”

“I don’t blame her,” Davis Foster says as he comes up behind them, holding a map of Vancouver over his bald head as it starts to drizzle. “It’d be a real shame to lose it.”

Greta has known the Fosters since she was twelve, when they moved in next door. They were the first Black family on the block, and Greta had immediately fallen in love with their youngest son, Jason, who was two grades ahead of her. Nothing ever happened until much later, when they both found themselves living in New York, and even then, it was never serious, mostly just when they were both between relationships. None of the parents ever had a clue, which was by design. If they had, they probably would’ve started planning the wedding a long time ago, which is the very last thing either Greta or Jason would ever want.

Davis nods at her guitar case. “I bet it’d be worth a fortune on eBay,” he jokes, and his wife, Mary, gives him a whack across the chest. He doubles over in mock pain. “I was kidding.”

Mary is tall and slender, with dark brown skin and a pixie cut that makes her eyes look huge. Right now, they’re fixed on Greta. “We all know it’s worth a lot more in your hands,” she says, and there’s something protective in her gaze. Right from the start, Mary and Helen had been instant friends. Davis used to joke that they should call the little garden path between their houses *the black hole*, since the moment one of them crossed over for a visit—a bottle of wine in hand, always—they were as good as lost. At least for a few hours.

Now Greta can almost feel Mary’s determination to look out for her. It’s comforting, like her mom is still here in spirit.

“You know what you should do?” Eleanor Bloom says in her faint Irish accent, looking all lit up at the thought. She’s wearing a designer raincoat, and her long silvery hair is perfect, as always, even in spite of the dampness. “You should play a little show at sea. It would be brilliant to see you perform.”

“I don’t know...” Greta says, though of course she *does* know: there’s no way she’s playing on a cruise ship. Not ever, if she’s being honest, but especially not now.

“I saw there’s a variety show on the last night,” Eleanor continues, undeterred. “Anyone can sign up. I’m sure they’d be absolutely gobsmacked to have a real professional turn up there.”

“All the performers are professionals, honey,” her husband, Todd, says in his usual mild-mannered way. Other than his wife, Todd’s main passion is birds; he spends his weekends out in the marshes looking for egrets and other waterfowl. Once a year, his birding club takes a trip to some far-flung place that he views only through a pair of binoculars, but he’s never been to Alaska before, and a field guide to the state’s birds has been tucked under his arm all morning, already full of dog-eared pages. “They get pretty good people on these ships,” he tells Eleanor. “Comedians, magicians, Broadway dancers.”

“But not rock stars,” Eleanor points out. “Not people like Greta James.”

She says this last part like Greta isn’t standing right there beside her, smiling politely, like she’s talking about someone else entirely: Greta James the guitarist, the indie singer-songwriter with a cult following, as opposed to Greta James, daughter of Conrad and Helen, who learned to play guitar in the open garage beside the shelves of tools, with only Asher’s gerbils—banished from the house because of the smell—as an audience, and who now feels like a kid again as she waits to start this bizarre sort of family vacation, a poor replacement for the most important member of the group.

Across the way, she spots a man heading toward the end of another line. In a sea of older couples and young families, he sticks out. He has a trim beard and a square jaw and he’s wearing glasses that are either incredibly nerdy or incredibly hip; it’s hard to tell which. When she notices that he’s carrying an old-fashioned typewriter—cradled under one arm like a football—she wants to roll her eyes. But then she sees him clock her guitar case, and there’s nothing to do but exchange slightly sheepish smiles before he disappears into the crowd.

“Just think about it,” Eleanor is saying, and Greta turns back to her.

“Thanks, but—”

“This is small potatoes for her these days,” her dad says, arching an eyebrow. He doesn’t say it like it’s a compliment.



There's a brief silence, and then Eleanor—trying not to sound deflated—says, “I suppose you're right. It was only a thought.”

“Not at all,” Greta says, shaking her head. “I just...I don't get a lot of time off, so...”

What she doesn't say—what none of them say—is that all she's had is time off lately.

Mary fixes Greta with an admiring look. “I remember you practicing away in that garage all those nights—”

Davis lets out a booming laugh. “You were god-awful, kid. But you were certainly determined. Gotta give you that.”

“That's just it,” Eleanor says, turning back to Conrad. “How many people actually grow up to do the thing they dreamed of when they were young? You must be so proud.”

Conrad's eyes drift over to meet Greta's, and they stare at each other for a long moment. Eventually, he nods.

“Yes,” he says. “We're very proud.”

Which is a double lie. He's not. And there's no *we* anymore.

## Chapter Three

The room is so tiny, she can sit on the edge of her bed and touch the wall. But Greta doesn't mind. She's spent the last fourteen years in New York City, where space is a luxury, so she's well versed in the art of living compactly. The bigger problem is the absence of any windows. By the time she booked the trip, all that was left were interior cabins. So while Conrad's room has big glass doors that open onto a veranda, Greta's looks more like something out of a minimum-security prison: small and beige and just barely functional.

*Seven nights, she thinks. Only seven nights.*

She sets her guitar on the bed beside a thick black binder. Inside, there's a day-by-day itinerary of the trip. They'll be at sea for the rest of tonight and tomorrow, cruising the Inside Passage (the inside of what, she has no idea); after that, they'll travel on to Juneau, Glacier Bay, Haines, Icy Strait Point, and then spend another full day at sea as they return to Vancouver.

There are separate laminated pages for each port of call, filled with recommended tours, lists of restaurants, suggested hikes, and points of interest. There's also a fairly ridiculous amount of information about the ship itself: floor plans and menus, instructions for making spa appointments, detailed descriptions of each club and bar, every lecture and game night. You could spend an entire week deciding how to fill your week.

Greta snaps the binder shut. It won't be long now until the ship sets sail, and she doesn't want to be burrowed inside it like a mole when it does. If she's actually going on this trip—which it would seem, at this point, that she is—she'd at least like to witness the beginning of it.

After all, that's what her mom would have done.

Outside, there are a few people bundled on Adirondack chairs beneath the low Vancouver sky, but most are dotted around the edges of the ship, peering either out at the city or at the hunched gray mountains that loom across the water from it. She finds a spot between an elderly couple and a group of middle-aged women in matching pink sweatshirts that say *Fifty Is the New F-Word*. They're laughing as they pass around a flask.

Greta leans on the rail and pulls in a deep breath. The harbor smells of brine and fish, and far below, dozens of tiny figures are waving up at them madly, as if they're about to set off on a dangerous voyage instead of an eight-day all-inclusive cruise with four buffets and a water slide.

A few birds circle above, and the breeze is heavy with salt. Greta closes her eyes for a minute, and when she opens them again, she can sense someone staring at her. She turns to see a girl—probably no more than twelve or thirteen—standing a few feet down the rail. She has light-brown skin and black hair, and she's staring at Greta with a very specific kind of intensity.

"Hi," Greta says, and the girl widens her eyes, caught somewhere between excitement and embarrassment. She's wearing pink Converse sneakers and skinny jeans with holes in the knees.

"Are you...Greta James?" she asks, her voice full of uncertainty.

Greta raises her eyebrows, amused. "I am."

"I knew it." The girl lets out a surprised laugh. "Wow. This is so cool. And so weird. I can't believe you're on this cruise."

"Honestly," Greta says, "neither can I."

"I'm obsessed with your album. And I saw your show in Berkeley last year," she says, the words tumbling out in a rush. "Dude, you can *shred*. I've never seen a girl play like that before."

This makes Greta smile. She hadn't been expecting much overlap in the Venn diagram of people who go on Alaskan cruises and people who go to her shows. She fills good-sized venues and her songs are played on the radio and she has fans all over the world; she's even been on the cover of a

few music magazines. But she's rarely recognized on the street outside of New York or L.A. And hardly ever by anyone this young.

"Do you play?" she asks the girl, who nods enthusiastically. There's no sheepishness about it, no modesty: the answer is simply yes. She plays.

Greta remembers being that age, already full of confidence as she started to realize that a guitar was more than just a toy, more than even just an instrument. Already, she knew it was a portal, and that she was talented enough for it to take her somewhere.

Her dad was the one who'd bought that first guitar. Greta was only eight; it was supposed to be for Asher, who was twelve, but even then he had little interest in anything but football. It was acoustic and secondhand and much too big for her; it would be years before she'd grow into it. Some nights, when Conrad got home from work, he'd stand in the open mouth of the garage, the tip of his cigarette burning bright as he watched her try to work out the notes like a puzzle. When she landed on the right ones, he let the cigarette dangle from his lips while he clapped.

That was back when he loved that she played. When music was still a subject without controversy for them. Every night after dinner, he'd put on an old Billy Joel album while they did the dishes, the two of them singing over the sound of the faucet to "Piano Man" while Helen laughed and Asher rolled his eyes.

The girl picks at the peeling paint on the rail. "I've been trying to figure out 'Birdsong,' actually," she says, referring to a not-particularly-popular track off Greta's EP, a choice that makes her like this kid even more.

"That's a tricky one."

"I know," she says. "Way trickier than 'Told You So.'"

Greta smiles. "Told You So" was the first single off her debut album, which came out a couple years ago, and it's her most popular track by far, having achieved a level of success where people tend to know it even if they've never heard of Greta James.

"Not into the mainstream stuff, huh?" she says to the girl, who gives a solemn nod.

"I prefer the deep cuts."