

A person is lying on their back on a lush green lawn. They are wearing a red and white plaid shirt, a grey tank top, and light blue denim shorts. Their legs are bent at the knees, and their arms are crossed over their chest. A pair of black sneakers with red accents is visible near their feet. The title text 'the most dangerous thing' is written in a large, cursive font across the upper half of the image. The letters are white with a blue sky and white clouds pattern overlaid on them. The background is a dense, green grassy field.

# the most dangerous thing

LEANNE  
LIEBERMAN

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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**Summary:** In this novel for teens, Sydney grapples with depression, social anxiety and her growing desire for a physical relationship with her boyfriend.

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*For my sister, Marcy, and my Gibridge sisters.*

# One

**BY SIX THIRTY MY EYES ARE** wide open in the dim morning light, but I can't move. There's a weight on my chest holding me down with fierce intensity. I need to roll over, pick up my phone and open the Sudoku app. Today I'm having trouble rolling over for the phone, the weight is so great. This is new. Come on, I tell myself, get going. If I can beat the game, then I can get out of bed. Then I'll be able to do all the other things, like putting my feet on the floor and getting dressed and brushing my teeth. By then, half the battle will be won.

I still haven't picked up my phone. My eyes feel like deadweights, like someone has bolted them into my face. Not even the new pink ballet flats I planned to wear today can lure me out of bed.

I need to get up so I can go to school, graduate and then go to university to study commerce. Then I can get

a great job and make enough money to buy a condo I can hide in. I know this isn't the best logic, but it forces me to reach for my phone and open the Sudoku app. If I lose I don't have to get out of bed, but if I win I have to get up.

I always win, and by seven I am in the shower.

Once I get going, I can shake off most of the heavy feeling, blast some of the fog out of my brain. It is almost always there to some degree, weighing me down. At least at school, in classes like math and chem, I can forget about it. There's no room in my brain for the fog when I'm trying to solve a calculus problem.

I bike to school and grind through my morning classes without making too much eye contact, barely saying hi to my lab partner, Paul. By lunch I'm ready to eat my bagel with cream cheese, cucumber and sprouts, my apple and my brownie, and talk to Sofia and Fen.

Sofia is waiting for me by our lockers. She looks me up and down, checking out my outfit: leggings, my favorite blue-and-white-striped, long-sleeve T-shirt, a blue blazer and a pearl necklace.

"What's with the pearls?" she asks.

"They're not real," I say, stroking the shiny beads. "I thought they would be good with my jacket for the investor's club."

"Does that start today?" Sofia looks stricken.

"Yep. You promised."

"Yeah yeah." Sofia opens her locker and pulls out a yogurt. "Fine, let's go meet the junior investors."



“Is Fen coming?” I look around for him.

“No,” Sofia says, “he said he was going to work out at lunch today.”

Fen has recently become entirely about his body. He even joined the rugby team, although he dislocated his shoulder last term.

Sofia, Fen and I met in eighth grade because we were assigned lockers next to each other. Sofia introduced herself by complimenting me on the sparkly shoelaces in my Converse sneakers. I had worn them because my regular white laces had broken that morning, and the only ones I could find were these gold-and-silver ones my sister, Abby, gave me. Sofia’s taller than me, very skinny and really into fashion. Today she has on tall black boots, leggings and this kind of complicated tunic top with pieces of ripped fabric hanging from the shoulders. Even though Sofia also hangs out with other artsy kids who want to study fashion design, we still have our lockers in the same place as we did in eighth grade three years ago.

Sofia and I head down the hall to the math wing, where the investor’s club meets. “I think you’re going to get into this investing thing. It’s all about making money,” I say. Sofia and I both believe money can make you happy, or at least happier.

“I do like money,” Sofia says. “I just like design and fashion better.”

“You need some business sense so you can figure out how to run your fashion house.”

“You don’t understand,” Sofia says, running her fingers through her long hair. “I’m going to be the designer for a company and hire someone like you to figure out the business plan.”

“Right,” I say. “But you still have to know if my plan is any good.”

Sofia sighs. She’s willing to come because she knows I can’t go by myself, and that’s the kind of friend she is.

Sofia and I sit at the back of the room eating our lunch, waiting for Mr. Weston to start. I notice Paul come in with one of his friends and sit close to the door.

Mr. Weston begins by passing out donuts and then starts talking about this year’s contest. He pulls up the website on the Smart Board and explains the different kinds of investments we need to make and the timeline of the contest. The team that makes the most money wins a prize. Mr. Weston pulls up a few other sites to help us watch the markets. I follow closely, taking notes on my phone and bookmarking sites. As Mr. Weston speaks, the rest of the fog in my brain dissipates. Not only is the contest about making money, but it’s the best kind of applied math—math with risk and strategy.

I whisper to Sofia, “My zeyda will help us. He’s been teaching me already, and he’s vicious at this kind of stuff.”

Sofia nods as if to say, *yeah, yeah, yeah*.

When the first bell rings to signal the end of lunch, we file out of Mr. Weston’s room into the hall. Sofia and



I are heading toward our lockers when I hear Paul call, “Hey, Syd.” We wait for him to push his way through the crowded hallway.

“I didn’t know you were interested in investing,” he says.

I nod, forcing myself to look at Paul. We never talk outside of class.

Sofia says, “She does it for real too.”

I kick her. “Not really.”

Paul grins. “Now I know who to go to for stock tips.”

If we stand around talking too long, we’ll be late for our afternoon class, so Sofia says, “Gotta go, see you” for both of us.

“Bye,” I add.

“Hey, Syd,” Paul says. “Do you want to meet after school to work on chem?”

“Um, I’m busy today,” I say. I always visit my zeyda on Mondays.

“Can I text you?” Paul asks.

“Sure.” Paul and I have texted before about school-work. I give a half wave, and Sofia and I start heading down the hall.

“Do you think he likes you?” Sofia asks.

“Who, Paul? No, he’s just my lab partner.”

“Maybe, but he was looking at you. I mean, really *looking* at you.”

“I didn’t notice.” This is a lie. I’m also wondering why Paul needs to text me. We could talk in class tomorrow.

“Syd,” Sofia says, “that’s because you weren’t even making eye contact.”

“That’s not one of my strengths. You know that.”

“Well, I think he’s into you,” Sofia says. “And I think he’s kinda cute.”

I raise my eyebrows at Sofia. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Sofia lifts her hands in defeat, and I turn away to head down the stairs to my next class. On the way there my phone pings. I stop to look at a message from Paul: **Talk to you later.** I’m not sure what to do with this, so I shove my phone in my pocket and keep on walking.

I’ve known Paul since eighth grade. We sat next to each other in science class, in the back row, and ended up being lab partners because neither of us knew anyone else in the class. Paul didn’t even say hi to me the whole first year. At first I thought it was because he was shy, but then I realized he didn’t speak English very well. He would use his translator to figure out the lab sheet, and we would work silently together. He was even worse at making eye contact than I was. Mostly he talked in Cantonese to the kid next to him. I found this a little annoying, but I was used to it. Almost half the kids at my school speak Cantonese or Mandarin at home instead of English. Paul and I were lab partners for ninth-grade science too, but it wasn’t until tenth-grade science that he actually started talking to me. I guess he was one of those people who wouldn’t speak English out loud until he felt confident. Now he doesn’t even have an accent anymore.

This year we're taking chemistry together, and Paul happens to be in my math class too. Sometimes at lunch he'll wander down the hall to my locker and we'll compare our math or finish a lab.

I can also talk to Paul normally, which sounds a little weird, but I have a hard time talking to most people. Paul is easy to be with because he's so relaxed and has such an easy smile. I even told him a math joke once. I called our math class LCD. He didn't get it. I had to explain. LCD, lowest common denominator—get it? It means our class is full of kids who are bad at math, who should be in applied, not academic.

Paul had stared at me. I can't believe you just made a math joke.

I can't believe you didn't get it.

It was a math joke. He looked incredulous.



I continue down the hall to my creative writing class. No one knows I'm taking this elective. Sofia thinks I'm taking English, although if she thought about it, she would realize I took English last term. Eventually my parents will see the course listed on my transcript, but they probably won't pay much attention to it. They don't look closely at my reports because they know I always get high grades, and because Abby's reports are so wildly unpredictable. She'll decide that geometry is interesting

and do well, then decide calculus is useless. Or she'll claim the basketball unit in her mandatory gym class is discriminatory because she's under five foot five and refuse to participate.

My writing class is just a class to take for fun. Mostly I'm interested in math, because it's the main prerequisite for commerce and because there's always a correct outcome. Sure, there might be multiple ways to get to the answer, but in the end there's a final resolution. It's not like other subjects, or even life, where there are gray areas and lots of possible answers. When I finish a math test, I go over the answers and then I try to figure out my mark. Sometimes I'll even write it at the top of my test with a question mark. Then I figure out the percentage.

Mom would be very excited if she knew I was taking writing. She's suggested I take something artsy for years. *To expand your horizons*, she says. She likes that I have a plan for financial success, but sometimes she looks at me wistfully and says, *What about a dream, something improbable, a little romantic? Your life shouldn't be too planned out, Syd. Leave some room for spontaneity and art.* Then she'll sigh and say, *When I was your age I wanted to be an actress.* If she's feeling really dramatic, she'll add, *Even your father has artistic dreams.* She means my dad's obsession with architecture. Dad has a collection of books on architectural wonders of the world, everything from the pyramids in Giza to the Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai. Dad does not have "artistic dreams." He's a civil engineer,

and his interest in architecture focuses on the technology and design of structures, mainly bridges. If you have lots of time, he'll lecture you on the beauty of I.M. Pei's Louvre pyramid or Gaudi's La Sagrada Familia.

I take a seat at the back of the writing class. I don't know anyone well in the class, and that's fine with me. So far, the writing assignments have been within my comfort zone. I've even been able to participate in the editing sessions, where you have to read your work out loud to a partner. This guy Dean and I usually work together. He's skinny and wears his hair in a long ponytail, and I can tell he's even more nervous than me. He likes to write sci-fi stuff, the more battle scenes, the better.

In class we've been practicing things like setting a scene and writing dialogue, and there hasn't been too much discussion of art. To me, art is scary. Art is where the dark edges of your life show through. I don't want people to see the fog or the dark inside me.

Sometimes I worry that the fog is showing anyway, that I'm breathing it out everywhere I go. I wish I could put on a fake sunny facade, and people would buy this as my true self, or at least as the self I'm presenting to the world. For the writing class, there's a poetry assignment coming up and a story we'll have to write by the end of the term, but I'm pacing myself. Mrs. Lee, the writing teacher, says stories and poems don't have to be about ourselves. I'm planning on being very creative and very impersonal.

Today we're working on descriptions of people, and that still feels safe. I write a vivid portrait of Abby, starting out with some wordplay. That's mostly what I like to do, breaking down words and then building them up again.

*Abigail, a gale, a storm, Abby blowing in and then out, a whirlwind, a whirling wind, a winding whirl, like an unfurling curl, a raging girl.*

*Abby, a bee, a buzzing bee, so busy, here and there, everywhere, raging, mother hive, alive, a buzzing bee, Abby.*

When I have to turn to Dean and share some of my work, I manage to read a whole paragraph out loud to him. My face burns with embarrassment, and I can't look at him. When it's over, I hear him mumble, "I like that," and then my face goes red from the compliment.

After writing class, I have Mandarin. It's a good way to end the day because there's a lot of memorization and "repeat after me" as Mr. Wu, our teacher, tries to get us to say words with the right intonation. I'm not very good at pronouncing the different sounds, but I thought learning Mandarin would be helpful for my business future.

After class I head back down the stairs to my locker. Before I even get there, my phone buzzes. Paul has texted me a picture of a fluffy high-in-the-sky cloud. It's a beautiful picture, but I'm not sure what to do with it. I stare at my screen. Finally I write back, **Nimbostratus?**

**Cumulus. Looks like?**

Oh, this is a game. Okay. I squint at the picture.  
**A kitten?**



**Maybe. I think a sheep.**

I type a smiley face back because I'm not sure what else to write.

As I put my phone down to pack my bag, Paul sends another picture, this one of a cloudy sky with a hole in the center.

? I type back.

**It's a fallstreak hole, altocumulus.**

This is a little weird. I write back, **You taking grade 9 science again?**

**No.**

I've got my jacket and backpack on and am strapping on my helmet. **Your turn**, Paul writes.

**For what?**

**Send me a picture.**

**A cloud?**

**Anything.**

I look out the window. The sky is gray, threatening rain.

**Let me think about it.**

Fen comes down the hall with his distinctive jerky walk, and I quickly hide my phone, as if he might see the texts from Paul. Fen would want to know all about the texts, ask too many questions and have opinions about them too.

Sometimes I wonder why Sofia and I still hang out with Fen, or why we ever hung out with him in the first place. He's not interested in fashion or finance or even personal grooming beyond the bare necessities of hygiene.

Fenny's also not much to look at. He's very thin and has an awkward Adam's apple, bad acne and a twitchiness about him that makes it hard for him to sit still. Sometimes I feel like suggesting he needs to change his ADHD meds, but that probably wouldn't go over well. Still, he's incredibly smart and patient. He's tutored Sofia in math since eighth grade and proofreads essays for both of us.

Also, Fen got me into long-distance biking. Before I met him, I just rode around the city, more for transportation than sport. Then Fen took me out riding near his grandparents' house out of the city, where there's not much traffic and only countryside to look at, and I've been hooked ever since. Once when we were out there, Fen suggested that maybe we could be more than friends, which was embarrassing and awkward and horrible, and I stammered something that meant no. To Fen's credit, he's never said a word about it again, and he still takes me biking. Still, when I see Fen I think, *Fenny, penny, scrawny neck, chicken neck, lame duck, walks like a duck.*

"How was rugby?" I ask him.

"Grueling." Fen fiddles with his lock.

I step away. "Smells like it."

Fen grins. "One must suffer to look good." He steps away and flexes.

I sigh. "Yeah, Fen, you're way more buff than you used to be."

"Yes!" Fen punches an arm into the air. "I'm at my dad's this weekend. You in for biking?"

“Sure. When?”

“Don’t know yet.” Fen grins. “Think you’ll make the whole ride this time?”

I roll my eyes. “That was just that one time.” On our last ride, Fen and his dad had to come find me in the car because I bonked out on the ride back.

Fen’s got his backpack and jacket on now and is ready to head outside. “You coming?” he asks.

“What about Sofia?”

“Ah, she’s flirting with the new math teacher again. I saw her on my way out.”

I shrug and start walking beside Fen. Maybe I’ll keep Paul’s texts to myself for a while. I’m not sure what to make of them yet anyway. Who sends cloud pictures?

Fen and I head outside into the gray day. It’s not raining, but the air is so damp it feels like it is. We get on our bikes and say goodbye. Fen’s going to his dad’s house, and I’m heading west across the city to Zeyda’s house.

Traffic moves slowly, leaving me lots of time to think. Why is Paul sending me pictures? Sofia would say it’s because he likes me. She’d ask me if I like him, if maybe I might be in love, and then she’d tell me some long-winded story about her aunt in Croatia who fell in love and what happened to her. It would be one of Sofia’s stories that comes to a weird ending with no real conclusion. I’ve never thought of Paul as a potential boyfriend. I’ve never thought of anyone that way. Most girls seem to want a boyfriend the way they want a designer

purse or a really expensive pair of leather boots—as a status symbol.

Back when we first met, Paul was shorter than me, barely over five feet, and he had a little kid's voice. Now he's at least six inches taller than me and, well, he's a guy. He wears his hair differently too. It used to flop into his eyes. Now it's shorter, and he gels up the front. I pause for a red light and reach for my phone to take a picture of the taillights reflecting in a puddle. I could send that to Paul, call it *my ride*, but maybe that's not the right thing.

I forget about Paul as I get closer to the ocean, closer to Zeyda's neighborhood. He lives on the west side of the city, past Kitsilano, on the way to the university. From the road his house doesn't look like much, just a front door level with the sidewalk and a garage, but the back of the house descends a cliff to the beach, with four different levels and the most amazing views of the ocean, the mountains and downtown. Zeyda and Bubbie built the house in the seventies, and it has a distinctive west-coast style—all cedar and glass—that hasn't been updated in years. My bubbie had a thing for Chinese antiques, and the house is stuffed with vases, ornate tables and scrolls. On clear days you can sit in almost any room and watch the boats go by—sailboats, motorboats, cruise ships and giant container ships going to and from China.

Zeyda has lived alone in the house ever since Bubbie died three years ago. Mom and Dad have been trying to convince him to move to a retirement home because

he had a stroke last year, but he refuses. Zeyda can talk and walk again, but he doesn't move very fast and he can't climb stairs, so he lives on the main floor of his house and his caregiver, Crystal, comes every weekday. Zeyda is the most stubborn, opinionated person I know. He's also racist, sexist, grumpy, rude to strangers and cheap. He regularly fights with Mom and threatens to write her out of his will. Still, I visit him all the time. I know he's lonely, and it's my job to help him. Also, I love him.

Zeyda and Bubbie spent a lot of time taking care of Abby and me when we were little, especially me. When I was seven, I fell down the stairs in our house and broke my leg. I was in a cast for a long time. I remember lying on a mattress in the living room, first in a lot of pain and then in total boredom. Mom took some time off work, and Bubbie and Zeyda looked after me the rest of the time. Zeyda spent hours lying on the floor with me, designing winter wear for my paper dolls and teaching me how to play every card game he knew. He also tutored me in my schoolwork, especially math. Bubbie cooked and read to me and told me stories and taught me Yiddish songs. We spent a lot of time looking at her collection of fashion and home-decorating magazines.

Zeyda used to own a coat factory, but ever since he sold it and retired, he spends most of his time managing his money. He's teaching me about investing, and in exchange I'm giving him lessons on how to use a computer so he can do online trading. I've also been showing him how

to use social media, but he's not interested in people, only money. Zeyda gave me five thousand dollars for us to invest together. Then he decided we needed to invest another five thousand in Abby's name. It wouldn't be fair to your sister, Zeyda had said, even if she doesn't come and visit.

I didn't bother telling him Abby would visit if he stopped saying sexist things in her presence.



I wheel my bike past the side gate at Zeyda's house and lock it to the fence. The ocean is gray, the tide right in against the base of the house. I take a quick picture of the rocks against the cliff with the ocean coming in. It's not bad, better than the one with the puddle and taillights. I hesitate a moment and then send it to Paul. I'm not sure what it means, but it's a good picture, and if clouds are Paul's thing, then the ocean is mine.

When I was in seventh grade and my anxiety first became really bad, I thought being near the ocean might save me. I thought that if I walked on the beach every day, I could fight off the nervousness I constantly felt. The waves would carry away my unease and leave me with some other feeling, something fresh and new. I biked to the beach almost every day, and if the tide was low I ran as fast as I could on the hard wet sand, until I was breathless, watching the seagulls take flight in front of me.



Sometimes running helped, sometimes it didn't. Still, I carried the idea around in my head for a long time, like a chant. *The ocean will save me.* Sometimes I imagined walking into the water and letting it swallow me up. Not to drown, just to feel the water instead of fear surrounding me. I wasn't crazy though—the ocean is freezing here, except maybe on the hottest summer days. Now I think riding my bike might save me.

I come back to the front of the house and ring the bell. Crystal answers the door. She's barely five feet tall and wears jeans and a sweatshirt, with her hair in a long braid. She has the biggest smile of anyone I've ever met. Even when she's complaining about her kids or worrying about money, she's laughing. I always thought she was about twenty-five until I saw pictures of her kids, who are in their twenties.

"Hi, Sydney," Crystal says. "Your grandfather is waiting for you."

I take off my shoes and jacket and leave my backpack in the front hall. Zeyda's in his usual spot, slumped in his recliner, looking out at the sea. He turns to look at me. "You're late," he says, not smiling.

I kiss the top of his bald head. "I said I'd be here around four."

"If you say 4:00 PM, you should be here at 4:00 PM."

"There was traffic, and I didn't want to get killed on my bike. Besides, you had somewhere to go?"

Zeyda doesn't leave the house much anymore, except to go to his *shul* on Saturdays and occasionally to the casino, if Crystal will take him. She's under pretty strict orders from Mom not to take him too often.

Crystal brings me a mug of mint tea and a cookie like the ones Bubbie used to make, and I sit next to Zeyda by the big window overlooking the sea. "See any whales today?" I ask.

Zeyda shakes his head.

My phone beeps, and I take it out of my pocket. **Nice photo**, Paul writes. **Where?**

I write back, **Near Jericho beach.**

**Send another?**

Zeyda sits up in his chair and rubs the bags under his eyes. "Who is sending you messages? Your mother?"

"Just a friend."

"Your Sofia?"

"No, a different friend."

"A boyfriend?"

"Not a boyfriend. He sends me pictures of clouds." I hold up the phone to show Zeyda the fallstreak hole.

"What kind of boy sends you things on a phone?"

I'm not sure how to answer that. "A nice one?"

"You like this guy?"

I shrug.

"Is he Jewish?"

"Who cares?" I type, **Maybe later, kinda busy now.**

**Okay, see you tomorrow.**

"I care," Zeyda says. "It used to be important who you dated, who you married. Now"—he lifts up his hands—"it's nothing."

I try not to roll my eyes when Zeyda says, "That's not how we did it in my day." And then he's quiet, and I know he's thinking about the past again, about Bubbie and his life before his stroke. He used to be more interested in the world around him. Now he doesn't want to go anywhere. I take a breath. I'm supposed to be cheering him up.

"Did you check the stock prices yet?" I say, pulling out my tablet.

Zeyda's eyes clear. He nods. "The TSX is up, but my oil stocks are down. It's those environmentalists protesting again!"

I cut Zeyda off before he gets going on politics and tell him about investor's club and the contest. He looks through my stock options and makes some suggestions, mostly about investing in mining and gold. Apparently natural resources and high tech are what it's all about. At least talking keeps Zeyda in the present and not lost in missing Bubbie and thinking about the way his life used to be. I need to keep him cheered up so I don't get dragged down with him. Zeyda's cloud is even heavier than mine today, and if I'm not careful we'll both be falling into the same dark place, and who will get us out then?