Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Debut Fiction Sampler

— SPRING 2023 —

What Will You Read Next?

THESE ARE UNCORRECTED PROOFS.
PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
YOU CHECK YOUR COPY AGAINST THE FINISHED BOOK.

First published by Anchor, One World, Ballantine Books, Dutton, Viking, Knopf, and Random House, which are divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Astra House.
First published by Alcove Press.
First published by Seven Stories Press.

First Printing, 2023
First Printing, 2023



Printed in the United States of America.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE
These are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imaginations or a used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Spring 2023 Debut Fiction Sampler

— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

What Will You Read Next?

Save What's Left

ELIZABETH CASTELLANO

a novel

AN ANCHOR BOOKS ORIGINAL 2023

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events,
or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available at the Library of Congress.

Anchor Books Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-593-46917-0
eBook ISBN: 978-0-593-46918-7

Book design by Nicholas Alguire

anchorbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

NEVER BUY A BEACH HOUSE. Don't even dream about one. Don't save your money or call real estate agents or pick out a white couch. If you must do something, pray for the people who do own beach houses. Pity them. Certainly don't, under any circumstance, envy them.

Maybe it's too late for you. Maybe you've gone ahead and picked up some starfish tchotchkes and turquoise nonsense and you feel you're in too deep. Well, then let me tell you right now that those warm summer nights you're dreaming about will be spent arguing over parking restrictions and beach access. You won't paint or write or play tennis. You'll be too busy filing code enforcement complaints in the town attorney's office. You'll wake up to the sound of leaf blowers and you'll either spend half your life trying to protect a tree or cut one down. The village will be charming. The view will be beautiful. You'll attend countless meetings about

how to keep them that way. Do yourself a favor and put a lawyer on retainer. Don't waste any time about that. You will, without question, not be on speaking terms with at least one of your neighbors in a year's time.

And, if you're like me, you'll eventually end up in a courthouse conference room in some godforsaken town, nervously clutching a tattered, overflowing, cardboard Christmas box with a picture of a dopey snowman and the words, "Bring on the Snow!" The box will be filled with letters and emails and blueprints and surveys and photos that began as minor grievances but are now exhibits in a money-laundering scheme. And what you'll think to yourself as you stare at that stupid snowman and search frantically for a tissue to wipe away the sweat which now routinely rockets from the top of your head is this: *Why did I ever buy that house?*

The worst part about all of this, I mean the really worst part—worse than the alleged wire fraud or the ruined view or the mounting therapy bills—is that now I am one of these people. I'm now the kind of horrible person who genuinely cares about what so-and-so had to say about the traffic from the chowder festival. I'm the kind of person who has an opinion about whether the beach sticker should be placed on the front or rear bumper of the car. I know more than one person named Bunny. I spend weekends reconstructing osprey nests. I carry around Freedom of Information forms in my purse. I fantasize about a tsunami sweeping away my neighbor's house and floating it out to sea (preferably with them in it). I, honest to God, look forward to town board work sessions airing on Channel 36. I'm the kind

of person who has the town supervisor's cell phone number posted on my refrigerator and who has cried more than once in the town attorney's office. I'm that kind of person. The worst kind of person. I'm a beach person.

Three years ago, I didn't have a beach house. Three years ago, I was a normal person. I had a husband, a job, and a house with no view in Kansas City. Every Sunday, my husband and I would go to the same diner for breakfast. We'd order two omelets. We'd request the same waitress. We'd eat at the same table. We'd leave the same tip. We'd talk about work or we wouldn't talk at all. Then, one day, we went to a different diner and Tom ordered pancakes and he left me.

I don't know about you, but I'd like to think that if I were rotten enough to leave someone over pancakes after thirty years of marriage, I'd have the decency to have a good, juicy reason for it. I'd, at the very least, have the decency to make something up. You'd like to think there'd be some seedy affair or coming-out proclamation or witness protection situation. But, Tom didn't have any reason at all. He just looked up at me while he very casually poured his maple syrup and asked me, "So . . . do you think this is working?" I thought he meant the restaurant. I said I thought it was wonderful. I really did. I said, "I think it's wonderful."

I guess Tom hoped that I would say something like, "No, I see what you're saying. It's not working. Let's get a divorce." That would have been better. Then, we could have gone on enjoying our breakfast and possibly could have still made that stop at the estate sale on the way

home to buy yet another old radio to add to Tom's collection. Instead, Tom launched into a twenty-minute monologue about feeling trapped and stuck and in a rut and weighed down and a few more metaphors meant to say, "I just can't stand you anymore."

Tom said he needed adventure. He said he felt suffocated. He wanted to "find himself," a phrase he no doubt picked up from one of his many self-help manuals about breathing and thinking and eating and general basic living. Whether Tom's "self" was lost or never found in the first place, I don't know. But, either way, he felt the most likely place to find it was on the *Queen Mary 2* ocean liner. So, he went ahead and booked a solo ticket for a four-month world cruise. It was setting sail from New York in a week. "It's the only way," he said. "I've had a paradigm shift." This was the man who needed the butcher to put pieces of paper in between each slice of American cheese—the one who had me ironing his boxer shorts for thirty years. It was the man who told me every summer that a beach vacation was not necessary because we belonged to the YMCA and that traveling to Europe would be nothing but a headache.

While Tom continued to walk me through all the reasons why he now considered our life to be unbearably dull, I started thinking about a pain in my rib that I had for about three years in the '90s. I started thinking about it because the pain came back right around the time Tom mentioned that he was planning to purchase a tiny home and trailer it across the country when he returned from his world cruise.

The pain first started in 1994 when my daughter was

six. I woke up with a lightning bolt feeling in my rib and like any good hypochondriac, I immediately consulted my 1978 copy of *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy,* which I always keep on my nightstand in the event of such a situation. After a good deal of poking, I was able to identify the exact location of the pain—left side, fourth rib from the clavicle, smack-dab over my heart. If you're wondering how it is that I was able to poke a rib that was sitting directly over my heart, well, then you'll discover the reason why I married Tom in the first place. When I was twenty, I brought Tom home for Thanksgiving and my mother told me that if he ever asked me to marry him, I should accept because he was the best I would ever do considering my cup size, which was and remains nonexistent. This was bad advice. But, I took it. My mother also told me to never sign a prenup. This was good advice that I, of course, ignored.

Anyway, the pain in my rib lasted for about four days. On the fifth day, when it moved down my arm, I started writing my will. Lucky for me, my husband is a cardiologist. When he got home from work, he asked, "How was your day?"

"Pretty good," I said. "I think I'm having a heart attack." Something you should know about Tom is that he rides bicycles. Many people ride bicycles, but Tom has somehow managed to make it into a personality trait. It takes Tom at least fifteen minutes to enter or exit the house due to the amount of bicycle accouterments required for his everyday living. The news of my impending death did not interrupt this routine. When he finished clicking off his cleats and tucking them

neatly into a basket beneath the bench by the door labeled *Cleats,* he asked, "Right now?"

"What?" I said.

"Right now you're having a heart attack?"

"Yes, Tom," I said. "Right now. Right now, I'm having a heart attack." He walked over to me and asked me where it hurt. I pointed to the spot—fourth rib down from the clavicle, left side. Then, without saying a word, he took his index finger and gave me a tremendous poke right in that very spot. I lurched backward.

"You're not having a heart attack," he said and casually opened the refrigerator to gather the ingredients for his midafternoon cool-down protein smoothie.

"Well, I'm having something," I said.

"It's muscular," he said. "Muscular or skeletal. Classic presentation. I see it all the time." Tom was always saying things were classic presentations. I hated that.

Over the course of the next few years, the pain would come and go. I went to at least eight doctors. I had x-rays and MRIs and EKGs and all kinds of acronyms, which all came back perfectly normal. I was sick over it, the not knowing, I mean. I was sure there was a tumor buried somewhere in there, too small to show up on any scan. Then, one day, I was at the gynecologist and I happened to mention, just for the hell of it, that I get a terrible pain in my rib that seems to come and go at random. She said it was anxiety. She said everyone in the office had had it. "You're hyperventilating," she said. "Stop doing that." And that was the end of my rib pain.

This is a long way of explaining why I was doing highly noticeable breathing exercises at breakfast. I

resented Tom. God, did I resent him. Bad enough he was asking for a divorce, or a separation, or I don't even know what he was asking for. But, now, my rib pain was back and I would have to go around until the end of time practicing something called triangle breathing and chewing gum and sucking on mints, all while Tom gallivanted off into the sunset. That's the problem with a bad marriage. I don't mean a *bad* marriage. I mean, a just-okay marriage—one that isn't awful, but isn't quite good either. It's like a benign rib pain. It's not lethal. It's not causing excruciating pain. No one cares about it. You can still perform normal activities. It's just a worrisome annoyance that eats away at you until one day it decides to leave.

I'm sorry to admit that my first thought when Tom brought up the divorce was, *What will people say?* That's not true. My first thought was, *What the hell is a paradigm shift?* My second thought was, *What will people say?* I should be more evolved than this, but there you have it. Tom had thrown me a big surprise retirement party a few weeks before all of this. Everyone we knew was there. The decorations were still lying around. Balloons were still deflating in corners of rooms. I decided in the car ride home from breakfast that if people asked me what happened, I would tell them the only thing you could tell people in a situation like this—he left me for a younger woman. I would call her Jessica or Caitlin or Tiffany or something like that. I would say she had a degree in rhetoric from a liberal arts college on the Eastern Seaboard. I would say Tom is off playing shuffleboard in the Arabian Sea with her as we speak.

Good riddance, you're probably thinking. I thought that too. But, it was more complicated than that. It always is. When we bought our house in Kansas City, the old owners took the matching bedroom wall sconces and replaced them with two slightly different sconces—one clear glass, one frosted, both square. "Huh," we said, the day we moved in. They were almost right. They were just slightly wrong. We said we'd get them fixed. We said we'd find a matching pair. But, we didn't. We kept them. I slept on the clear side of the bed and Tom slept on the frosted. Thirty years and one terrible breakfast later, Tom and I had become the sconces. We were almost right. We were just slightly wrong. And no one had bothered to fix us. When we got home, I tore the sconces off the wall and fell into bed.

If I had a wedding ring, I might have very dramatically removed it and set it on the bathroom vanity or the nightstand or placed it in a little dish on the bureau and stared at it longingly for a while. But, I didn't have a wedding ring and neither did Tom. The night before leaving for our honeymoon in Saint Martin, I told Tom that I thought it would be best to leave our wedding rings in the safe in the closet of our cramped studio apartment on Seventy-Seventh Street. "We're going to be swimming," I believe was my argument. Tom agreed. A week later we returned to the apartment. Door open, safe empty, dirty dishes in the sink. "How did they get into the safe?" Tom asked.

"The key was in the lock," I said.

"Why?" Tom asked.

"I bought it for fire," I said.

We called the police, who confirmed that the robbers had more than likely lived in our apartment for the week. They ate our food. They slept in our bed. They watched our TV. They took our TV. "How did they know we'd be gone for the week?" Tom asked.

"I left a note on the door," I said.

"What?" Tom said.

"For the paperboy," I said.

"What did the note say?" a policeman asked me.

"It said: *Dear Rodney, We are going to Saint Martin for the week. Please do not deliver the paper.*" They never found the guys. We didn't get our rings back. We could have replaced them. But, we didn't. We didn't replace the sconces. We didn't replace the rings. And look what happened.

Before I told Tom to drop dead and get out of my sight, I had him set up the old VHS player that had been gathering dust at the bottom of our closet for the last twenty years. For the next week, while downstairs Tom excitedly packed for his cruise, I lay in bed upstairs and watched a tape of Carly Simon's 1987 concert on Martha's Vineyard. In 1988, my daughter was born premature and sick. During that time, I did a lot of weeping. I ate a lot of hospital cafeteria food and drank a lot of vending machine coffee. I did a fair amount of yelling, which was usually accompanied by more weeping. I did plenty of staring into space. But, I didn't do much sleeping—hardly any. Before this, I had been a world-class sleeper. I was one of those enviable people who could sleep on a bus or a train or any mode of transportation and wake up refreshed at my destination. And

then, just like that, it was gone. I haven't slept well since 1988.

I found insomnia to be an excruciatingly lonely experience. Many nights, I remember feeling like I wanted to be anywhere or anyone else. I drank tea. I tried to meditate. I wrote down positive thoughts in a journal. I even prayed. Nothing helped, not even a little. Then, I found Carly Simon's concert on TV and for whatever reason, it made me feel just a little bit better. And that's really all you need when you're in a deep rut. You don't need a miracle or a cure. You just need something that will make you feel the slightest bit better. And at that time in my life, I thought nowhere looked as perfect as Martha's Vineyard and no one looked as effortlessly cool as Carly Simon.

But, I will tell you this, Carly Simon's music is a lot more uplifting when you're not facing a divorce and it's possible that I now harbor an unhealthy and unreasonable resentment toward James Taylor. The first time I watched the tape, I thought about Tom and I cried. I cried through the whole thing. The second time I watched it, I thought about my daughter, Hattie, so I called her and she cried. And by the end of the week, after about the fifteenth replay, I thought about myself. I thought about beach houses. I thought about ferry boats and sea breezes and pink sunsets. I thought about fresh starts and silver bangles and coral Keds and shoulder pads. I didn't think about Tom. All right, fine, I thought about "finding myself." I had a paradigm shift.

"Cathryn is an author to watch.
A novel with a big heart that will captivate readers."
—Rochelle Weinstein, *USA Today* bestselling author of *When We Let Go*

THE FRIENDSHIP BREAKUP

a novel

ANNIE CATHRYN

Published in the United States by Alcove Press, an imprint of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Alcove Press and its logo are trademarks of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (hardcover): 978-1-63910-238-9
ISBN (ebook): 978-1-63910-239-6

Cover illustration by Sarah Horgan

Printed in the United States.

www.alcovepress.com

Alcove Press
34 West 27th St., 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: February 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER ONE

Right between the milk and the eggs, I go into menopause. Shoving my head into the store's cooler, I pretend to find the expiration date on the eggs as my own unfertilized eggs are expiring.

Please pass quickly.

Oh no.

The water works are starting.

Why am I crying?

There is a feeling of loss, but of what? *Loss of youth. Loss of my eggs. Loss of my best friend, Beatrice. Why is she ghosting me? Did I do something? I must have done something . . .* Before rehashing it for the trillionth time, I swipe at my eyes and chide myself to get it together. *You could be stuck in gridlock traffic with a full bladder.* Pushing this nightmarish thought away, I silently give thanks that I live in the Midwest and not L.A.

As I take my head out of the fridge, a busty blond twenty years younger than me bounces up in a miniskirt, tank top, and lavender Birkenstocks. She's dressed the way I should be right now, with this sudden heat rush creeping up my

neck. Then I remember it's only fifty degrees outside. Typical April weather in this small, barely there town. Last week, it dumped four inches of snow on us, and I thought I woke up in Antarctica.

I eye miniskirt girl again. Before Jessica Rabbit can ask me where the whipped cream is, I grab a carton of eggs, lower my head, and see my slippers. Ugh. *How did I forget to change out of them?* I guess I've been too preoccupied with the fact that my "bestie" isn't acting like my friend anymore.

Hurrying down the baking aisle, I park my cart in front of the decadent chocolate and on impulse pull out my phone once again to see if there are any updates from Beatrice. Scrolling through my texts, I stop on the last message I sent her weeks ago, asking how she was doing. She still hasn't answered. Or called me back. I haven't seen Beatrice at our daughters' soccer games either, because I've been using that time to work on my chocolate business. And at school drop-off, it's too rushed to say more than two words to anyone. Just this morning, I thought Beatrice saw me in the school parking lot, but when I waved, she turned and quickly got into her minivan. There's a possibility she didn't see me, I convince myself.

"Excuse me," someone says, startling me out of my delusion. I glance up to see a big, toothy grin with a sprig of greenery stuck in the middle. Cringing, I refrain from swiping a fingernail through my own teeth. *How can I tell the woman about her leftover spinach?* I don't know her—or if she is saving it for later.

"Do you know which chocolate is the best for fondue?"

I'd rather tell her where the toothpicks are, but I swallow down my words and point to my favorite brand. "This works well for dipping," I say with a forced smile.

Then, because I would want someone to tell me I had a sprig in my teeth, I whisper, "You have a little something right here." I point to my own two front teeth.

She throws her hand up to her mouth.

"That happens to me too, so I thought I'd let you know." I suck in a breath, hoping I didn't overstep.

She reaches into her handbag and pulls out a compact mirror. "I appreciate it. Sometimes my smoothies take a detour." She looks in the mirror and picks out the goosefoot. Then she grabs a bag of chocolate and reads the ingredients. The woman's unstained and wrinkle-free white button-down is properly tucked into her designer jeans, and her navy espadrilles are definitely not slippers. I zip up my purple hoodie to hide the red sauce splatter on my yellow T-shirt, then reach up and secure wisps of hair that have broken free from my bun.

"This will do. Thank you so much. I'm having a party tonight. Just a few close friends, and fondue will be a fun treat."

Her little party sounds lovely and reminds me of what I've been missing with my own friends.

"Enjoy," I manage to croak out as she continues down the aisle. "Don't forget the toothpicks."

"Oh yes! The bamboo skewers for the dippers," she calls over her shoulder.

I didn't mean for the dippers.

As soon as she turns the corner, I slap several boxes of baking chocolate and send them tumbling into my cart.

Is this what my social life has been reduced to? Small talk in Aisle 7? Perhaps my rattled appearance these days is one of the reasons Beatrice is disowning me. I cannot believe

anyone I know would be so superficial, though. That can't be it. Beatrice has seen me at my worst—with baby spit-up in my hair and black yoga pants I've worn three days in a row. I should make a better effort in the self-care department. It might uplift my mood anyway.

Now in Aisle 8, international foods and packages of chickpeas swimming in red hot chili sauce stare back at me. I flush again, like the scorching sun has bored a hole in the ceiling and found my face.

Is this menopause? My mom told me she'd started experiencing perimenopausal symptoms early. *What did that mean? How early? I'll be forty in three months. This early?* I wish I could call my mom for answers, but she wouldn't be any help on this one. I'm on my own. I sigh and tick off my symptoms in my mind. Hot flashes—check. Weight gain—check. Missed period—um, *maybe?* I need to look at my calendar. Extreme irritability—triple check.

My phone dings and I scramble for it, thinking it could be Beatrice. But it's another mom in our group, Lyla, posting "Lunch" on Facebook. As I examine the photo, I hear my husband Max's words echoing off the walls inside my head. "Fallon, my love, you know social media is the downfall of society." Judging by Lyla's photo of some sort of indistinguishable yellow pureed slop, he's right.

Max doesn't do social media because the last thing he wants is for one of his patients to find him. It's bad enough I see the social media community posts about the "McDreamy gyno" in town. The words conjure up images of my husband's hands between another woman's legs. I've learned to replace those thoughts with ones of cute puppies canoodling by a fireplace. *What choice do I have?* I knew what I was

getting myself into when I married him. I tell myself he's not at the strip club or into porn. It's a job. I've learned to roll with it.

As I push my cart into the checkout lane, the cashier eyes the eight different brands of chocolate in my cart. She asks me how I am, and tears spring to my eyes again. Her kindness reminds me of my loneliness. I want to explain the chocolates are for research, and not at all for chocolate therapy. Another delusion. I mumble something. *Who knows what?* I'm not making any sense. I throw on my oversized sunglasses and head for the door.

* * *

Loading my groceries into my Jeep, I repeat to myself, "Turn your pain into power." After reading that mantra in one of my self-help books, I can't stop thinking about it. I have emotional pain these days, with time constraints to get everything done, guilt over trying to do something for me when I feel as if I should be taking care of my family first or hanging out with my friends more . . . and these horrendous hot flashes aren't helping matters. As I toss the last grocery bag in the trunk and reach up to shut the hatchback door, something hard crashes into my backside.

Through gritted teeth, I manage to say, "Turn your pain into power." When I touch the tender spot and feel the bruise forming, I add, "Go stuff your mantra."

"Oh, my gosh! I'm so sorry." A woman pulls back her shopping cart and a box of diapers falls off the bottom. A little boy bounces a toy airplane off her hip. As she steps around the cart, her bulging belly, barely covered by a T-shirt, knocks into the cart, and I grab it before it hits me again.

Judging by the dark circles under her eyes, I realize she may be having a worse day than me. "Here, let me get those for you," I say, bending down to pick up the box of diapers. "It looks like you have your hands full."

"Thank you. I'm so sorry. I hope you're okay." She smooths down her hair, which is standing up in five different directions. Her boy, dressed in *Paw Patrol* pajamas, suddenly runs off, and she's screaming, "Benny, come back here right now!" She waddles after him.

A minute later, she returns with Benny. Tears stain her cheeks.

"Please be careful not to change the settings again," the woman says as she starts to hand him the phone. "Wait, let me open the app for you."

Her words strike me. *The settings!* As she's searching her phone, I pull out my cell and click into my contacts to check if my daughter, Maya, accidentally blocked Beatrice. But the settings appear fine. I wish that was the answer to this ghosting mystery. To be absolutely sure my cell is working, I text my old college roommate, Avery.

"Where is your car?" I ask the woman, who has now managed to smash several bags of groceries in her cart by sitting Benny on top of them.

She points to a silver minivan.

"Let me get this for you," I say and take the cart from her. The woman lifts her boy out and carries him on her hip. I don't blame her. She doesn't know me. As far as she knows, I could steal her child, her phone, and her groceries.

I remember days like this when Maya was a toddler. I never thought I'd fail at anything until I became a mother.

Then I failed daily. The piles of toys and paper in my house grew faster than my lawn grows in spring. Not to mention that I ran behind schedule everywhere I went, sometimes by hours because I couldn't find my keys. One time they were hidden in the freezer next to my emergency cookie stash; another time they were in the trash with the poopy diapers. On most days, I smelled like sour milk and Cheerios. I tried to keep my head up and take deep breaths, but it was hard to breathe under mounds of dirty laundry.

"It's been kind of challenging with my three-year-old and you know . . ." She glances down at her stomach.

"You must be exhausted. When are you due?"

"Two weeks."

"You're in the home stretch," I say and smile, following her to her van. When I was pregnant with Maya, she was late, and that extra week had me going crazy. I ate all the spicy food I could find. I even drove over railroad tracks to induce labor. Nothing worked. She'd arrived when she'd wanted.

While I load the woman's groceries, she straps Benny into his car seat. I want to tell her it won't always be like this—that it gets better—but she doesn't need to hear this from a stranger while she's in the throes of it.

So, when she returns, I say what Beatrice used to say to me, "You're doing a great job, Mama."

She throws her arms around me. Shocked, I slowly raise my arms to hug her back, trying not to squish the unborn baby between us. Then, just like that, she's on her way. Maybe we both needed that hug.

* * *

After returning home, I get busy testing a new chocolate recipe for an upcoming bachelorette party. If all goes well, this could be my big break and lead to more orders.

I whisk the heavy cream and shaved chocolate together, add vanilla, and blend. Inhaling, I'm intoxicated by the rich aroma and think about why it has taken me so long to make my own chocolate.

Once Maya was born, Max and I agreed I would stay home until she went off to school. Now, Maya has been in school full time for two-and-a-half years. It took that much time to organize my closets, sell my maternity clothes, decorate my home, and get a routine down for the million other things mothers do. Of course, I had to account for emergencies, like running to school to drop off stuff Maya had forgotten, like a snack, lunch, and gym shoes, which happens at least twice a week.

I finally got to a place where I could do something I enjoyed. Something so powerful it emanated from the depths of my soul.

Scientific studies say chocolate releases endorphins like sex. For me, making it is cathartic, although why I do it is more than that. If I'm being honest, it's because I'm turning forty and feel as if half my life is over, and I thought I'd have more to show for it. *If I don't do it now, when will I?* I'm starting small, with local orders, but I have big plans to open a chocolate shop one day. For inspiration, I follow a ton of chocolate shops and chocolate-related Facebook pages. Social media is at least good for that.

I lick the spoon and relish in the rush of sweetness on my tastebuds. Immediately, I'm reminded of my childhood with sweet Grandma Rose. Grandma stockpiled her pantry full of

Fannie May so she would always have something delightful to offer for a last-minute gift or to an impromptu guest—or, in my case, a sad child who'd scraped a knee or bumped her head.

With her kind eyes and comforting touch, she'd say, *"Chocolate makes everything better."* And I believed my wise grandma with her nine freckles that speckled her cheeks like kisses left by angels.

I spent a lot of time with Grandma Rose because my parents were workaholics. My mom never had fun parties like my grandma, and didn't make friends easily. I am nothing like my mom, which isn't surprising, now that I think about it.

On any given day, women filled my grandma's home—playing cards or crocheting together. I'd sit at Grandma Rose's feet, with my own box of chocolates, while the women drank tea and talked about the latest buzz in town—the new car the Smiths bought or the renovations on the library or the neighbor's cat who got stuck in the gutter during a rainstorm.

Their stories always started with, *"Did you hear . . .?"* I love those memories. When Grandma Rose got sick, those women were by her side, reading to her, recounting memories, and filling her room with love and laughter right until the day she crossed over. God rest her soul. Now that I'm an adult, those are the friendships I crave too.

Before being ghosted, I would have sworn I'd found this type of friendship with Beatrice. A montage of moments flickers through my mind, like the opening credits of *The Wonder Years*. Seven years' worth of moments, many of them in the mom trenches. Seven years . . . I take out my phone calculator. That's nearly eighteen percent of our lives. I read an article that said if a friendship lasts longer than seven

years, it will last a lifetime. I fight back salty tears so they don't drip into my buttery, smooth mixture.

Spooning the chocolate into heart molds, I glance past the oak kitchen table, pausing for a moment on the scattered, million-piece Lego set. Ignoring that mess, I then overlook the fifty-pillows-and-blanket fort covering the living room floor and rest my eyes on the matching framed photographs hanging in tidy rows above the gray sectional—a much more pleasant view. One of the frames holds a picture of me, Beatrice, Elenore, Vivian, Lyla, and Mel standing on the rocks lining a lake at a nearby park in our quaint town.

I remember that day well. Beatrice planned a Sunday Funday family outing for all of us. She reserved a small pavilion with picnic tables that she covered with red-and-white-checkered tablecloths. I made puppy chow mix and brought sliced watermelon. We grazed on finger sandwiches, potato chips, and various side salads. Lyla snuck in flasks of rum, and we spiked our sodas. We reeked of alcohol. When the forest ranger strolled by, we offered him cake, and he turned a blind eye to our shenanigans. Cake always works. As the sun kissed our skin, we played bocce ball, cornhole, and croquet until the kids crashed on a blanket under a tall maple tree.

That day, I ignored some of the women's side conversations about Mel, who was wearing a short skirt and a super tight bright pink tank top that accentuated her slender figure. Mel, a divorced, successful financial advisor, didn't quite fit in with the stay-at-home moms. She was invited because I'd vouched for her. She has since moved away, and I can't help but think she heard the murmurings. I feel bad now for not sticking up for her, but I didn't want to rock the boat with the other women.

Other than my guilt over Mel, I remember the day with fondness, and enlarged the photo of us women and framed it. Never mind that Vivian fell into the cold water right after the photo was taken, and Beatrice jumped in to save her. We fished them both out with a broken tree branch. All in all, it turned out to be a picture-perfect day—a happy day with our perfect friends. We even started most of our stories with, "Did you hear . . .?"

Over the years, these moms, especially Beatrice, had gotten me through days where I would have otherwise curled up into a ball and died from the stress of keeping up with Maya and the housework on very little sleep. The adult conversation stimulated my brain when most of my day consisted of baby babble.

Beatrice listened to me cry over my burnt spaghetti. She told me she had done it too. A white lie, of course, to make me feel better, because even I know it's near impossible to burn spaghetti in boiling water.

I can hear Beatrice's voice ringing in my ears, "You're too hard on yourself, Fallon."

Beatrice was the only friend I let see my daily chaos. She was so easy to open up to without feeling judged. There were a million and one stories of things going south, where Beatrice turned my big, ugly cries into big, snorting guffaws. I know we're worth fighting for.

My phone dings with a text from Avery, confirming my phone is fine. *Great.* Now I know Beatrice is ghosting me. *What did I do? WHY is she ghosting me?*

I shudder to think no woman would be so kind to me as my grandma's friends were to her, now that I'm being ignored. *What is wrong with me?* I sigh and shake my head.

Maybe I'm overreacting.

Or am I?

Am I going to die alone?

Gah! Chocolate is overflowing out of my molds and onto the counter. Ugh, so much waste. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand, leaving a streak of chocolate dripping onto the bridge of my nose. What a mess.

CHAPTER TWO

I could get a job in logistics after coordinating schedules down to the minute for the last seven years. I fill Maya's water bottle, grab a bag of pretzels, the sunscreen, and the bug spray, and place everything in her backpack.

"Maya, finish your breakfast."

"But it's soggy. I don't like it."

"Well, whose fault is that?"

Had Maya started eating it when I poured it, it wouldn't be soggy.

It's chaos all the time around here, and I only have one child. I don't know how those mothers with multiple children do it, especially the old woman who lived in a shoe. *Didn't she have like one hundred kids?* I get hives thinking about it.

No. I'm not sitting around eating bonbons. Okay, I am, but it's for my business. Totally different. Sometimes they contain alcohol, and I pair them with spiked coffee too.

Speaking of coffee—I need it now. Maya came into bed with us at one AM, and somehow I got sandwiched between

her and Max. I had visions of being a slice of cheddar in the middle of a panini. I was hotter than hell. Night sweats—another symptom of menopause.

Last night before bed, I made sure Maya had a small snack. Water on her nightstand. Diffuser pumping out lavender. Salt lamp lit. Night light on. CD player with soothing music. Closet door closed. Bedroom door open. Calming oil on her feet. Digestive oil on her tummy, and monster spray in the air. I cuddled up next to her and fell asleep. *How could I not?* It was like a spa in there, with absolutely no monsters lurking. Somehow, I woke up two hours later and made it to my bed.

Maya's coveted bear sits staring at me from our couch. The one she's slept with every single night since age one. *How could I forget to find her bear?* That's why she climbed into our bed in the middle of the night.

"Maya, can you please put your shoes on? We're leaving in two minutes."

"I need help with my socks," Maya says, standing there with her long, blue soccer socks in her hands. I go to reach for them, then pull my hand back. The pediatrician encouraged me to give her more responsibility to foster confidence. Putting her soccer socks on seems like a good place to start.

"Well, at least start putting them on, then I'll help you." Pulling socks over shin guards is a pain in the butt, even for adults.

Then, I am quick to say, "Bathroom stop before we leave, please." I've been reminding her for three years. If I forget, it never fails that we'll get down the block and she'll announce, "Mommy, I have to pee."

"I don't have to." She shakes her head and her brown ponytail swishes back and forth.

"Try." I shoo her toward the bathroom.

Her blue eyes shoot daggers at me for a moment before she huffs, turns on her heels, and stomps away.

Coffee. I need coffee. I look for the thermos that fits under the spout on the Keurig. Great. It's in the dirty dishes. I pump dish soap into it and quickly wash it.

"Maya, are you going?"

"I'm pooping!" she calls out.

I glance at the clock. Okay, deep breath. We still have time. I can swing by the coffeehouse to pick up five coffees before heading to the field. I debate calling the café ahead of time to place my order, so Maya won't be late, but I think we'll be fine.

I learned early on to give myself at least a half an hour lead time to get out the door. Throughout my life, I've always prided myself on being on time. Having a child makes being on time for anything near impossible. After making a cup of coffee, I resort to washing the pots hardened with spaghetti sauce and piled sky high in the sink.

Staring out the kitchen window as I scrub, I watch as my seventy-year-old neighbor, Mrs. Crandall, crouches over her small vegetable garden. I can't imagine the plants survived the recent one-day winter tundra. Mrs. Crandall has the worst luck. I remember when she decided to keep chickens and got the whole neighborhood up in arms. Apparently, our association bylaws forbid chicken coops because of the high risk of attracting disease-ridden rodents that gnaw through electrical wires, sparking little fires everywhere, which eventually turn into threatening wildfires throughout the entire

subdivision. Poof! Everything goes up in smoke. Absolutely no chickens allowed. The whooshing of the toilet flushing and the faucet running interrupts my thoughts.

"Did you go?" I ask.

"Yes."

I resist saying, "See, I told you." I am tired of saying it. I'm sure she is tired of hearing it.

I help her with her socks and redo her lopsided ponytail. She looks so cute in her white soccer uniform with the blue number seven on it. I snap a quick photo of her and kiss her on the forehead.

"Mommy, I want a booster seat like Cecilia," Maya says as she jumps down the four garage stairs. I cringe. She could seriously hurt herself.

"Cecilia is bigger and taller than you," I say, thinking about how tall her mother, Beatrice, is. I always wished for long legs too. "It's safer for you to be in the seat you have."

Dang, I forgot my coffee on the counter. I need my morning coffee before stopping at the coffee shop to get more coffee.

"Buckle in while I grab my thermos."

I remember the days when I had to buckle her in—one less thing to do. Yay for minor victories.

"Yes, Mommy. *Puh-lease*, get your coffee." Maya already understands I'll be a raving lunatic without it.

A wise philosopher once said, "I caffeinate, therefore I am." I fully subscribe to that way of thinking.

Returning from inside, coffee now in hand, I open the garage door. Purse, check. Car keys, check. *Backpack?*

"Maya, where's your backpack? How come you're not buckled in? We'll be late."

"Sorry, Mama."

My heart melts every time she says sorry. She's such a sweet child when she's not taking her sweet time getting out the door.

"That's okay. Just buckle up, buttercup."

Back in the house again, I scan the kitchen counters and chairs and find it in the bathroom. Yes, the bathroom.

Finally, back in the car, I turn the key in the ignition. "Manic Monday" blasts through the speakers. I jump and turn down the volume. Why yes, it is manic, but it's Saturday.

"Why are we going so slow?" Maya calls out.

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, glaring at the man on the bicycle taking up part of my lane. Cars fly by me in the other direction.

"Oh. We can't get around the *super* slow biker. We'll be late," Maya says, and huffs.

At age seven, she's already showing signs of my attitude.

I don't know why people bike on the busiest street in town. It's just an evil plot to piss off mothers. There are beautiful bike paths a hundred feet away. I should know—we pay taxes for them.

"That's dangerous. He's not even wearing a helmet."

"Yes, Maya. You're right. It's very dangerous."

We get to the coffeehouse with fifteen minutes to spare. I still think I can get Maya to the soccer game on time, with coffees for the other soccer moms. I haven't been to a game in four weeks because I've been renting a commercial kitchen to fill my chocolate orders. Each week, I try a new recipe at home. If I like it, I recreate it at the commercial kitchen. I've come up with half a dozen different chocolate concoctions. I'm growing my business and have given away more truffles

than I've sold, but I know that's all part of getting the word out.

Saturday morning is the only time the commercial kitchen is available to me, but today I skipped my time slot to go to the games. Max had been going in my place. It's not that unusual—it's always a mix of moms or dads or both parents. But I know Beatrice, Vivian, Elenore, and Lyla have been there every Saturday without me. I'm hoping the coffee will be a good way to show how much I've missed them.

In line at the café, I tap my foot. The woman in front of me is talking to the barista. "I'll take vanilla. No, wait—hazelnut. And make it coconut milk. No, almond. Let me think . . ."

I check my watch. My window of time to get to the game is slowly dwindling. Finally, I step up to the counter. I know how all my friends take their coffee, and it's not as simple as cream and sugar. Vivian adds a shot of wheatgrass. Beatrice puts a packet of collagen in her Americano. Lyla always asks for two pumps of hazelnut with almond milk. Elenore gets a non-fat caramel macchiato. I take mine with half and half and stevia. I'm thankful this café offers all these unique options.

After placing the order, I catch Maya with her tongue out.

"Maya, do *not* lick the condensation off the glass refrigerator door."

Now there's a sentence I never thought I'd say.

We make it—five minutes late. Before Maya joins her teammates, she turns to me and says, "Mama, I'm so glad you're here."

Her words touch my heart, and I blink back tears. Juggling the coffees, I lean down and kiss her cheek. "Me too. Good luck, buttercup."

This time is too precious to miss. I decide I'm going to change my commercial kitchen hours permanently to be at her games, even if it means finding a new kitchen.

Heading over to the bleachers with the tray of coffees, I'm happy that I haven't spilled any of it all over myself. This coffee run better work as an apology for being MIA. People bond over coffee.

"Maya is being benched. The game has already started." Coach Jack glares at me as I walk by the coaches' bench.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault. I got stuck at the coffeehouse." I hold up the container as proof. "Can you waive the rule just this once?"

"Rules are rules." He turns back to the field. Maya sits on the bench, kicking dirt. Had I known he'd bench her, I would've skipped the coffee.

Crap, I should have brought the coach one. I offer mine up as an apology. "I brought you a coffee."

"Thanks, you can set it there." Coach Jackass waves to an open spot beside him. I consider dumping it on his head. My heart is heavy in my chest. So much for my job in logistics and my perfect timing.

I wish I could take Maya into my arms and apologize, but I don't want to embarrass her in front of her teammates, especially Cecilia, who can be mean sometimes. Like the time she told Maya her pigtail hair ties didn't match and they looked dumb.

I scan the front row of the stands where the soccer moms usually hang out. Something's wrong. I don't see them. Instead, I see their husbands. Vivian's husband, Andrew, half smiles and averts his eyes. I sense something awkward is happening by the way the others barely glance my way.

Lyla's husband, Jim, notices I'm standing there with the coffees. "Those for us?" He laughs.

"Uh, well they were for the moms, but they aren't here."

"We were expecting Max," Jim says. Then he turns back to the field to watch.

"He had to work today . . . I guess you can have the coffees. Otherwise, they'll go to waste."

I hand each husband his wife's coffee. I'm left with Elenore's. Her husband is nowhere around. That's okay. I need it now. I wish I'd brought a bottle of Jameson to mix in.

The husbands say thanks and pretend to focus on the soccer game. Andrew yells, "Go, Grace!" I look, and she doesn't even have the ball.

Andrew takes a sip and chokes it down. "What's in this?"

"Oh, your wife likes wheatgrass. Enjoy."

Not one of them says where their wives are, which is suspicious. I turn to ask them, but they are in serious conversation now about baseball. Making my way up the bleachers to the top row, I take out my phone and click on Beatrice's Facebook profile. I missed the boat on something.

"Psst . . . psst."

A woman skirts close to me. She's wearing an oversize trucker hat, pulled low, and sunglasses that cover most of her face. She's got on black Uggs.

"Fallon, it's me." She clears her throat. "Elenore."

Now I understand the disguise.

"Oh, hi," I say. I haven't seen her in a while. Not since Lyla, the PTO president, and the Springshire Gossip Queen, called to inform me Elenore had gotten caught by the drama club, on stage with her pants down, messing around with the elementary school principal.

I can't imagine how Elenore's daughter, Penelope, feels. I fear the day Maya comes home from school and asks me why Elenore's mommy was kissing Mr. Lox, and I hope to God she hears nothing cruder.

Elenore's husband, Jeff, hasn't filed for divorce. I'm still scratching my head on that one, considering he's a divorce lawyer. Maybe he understands that, affair or no affair, if he divorces Elenore, he'll be the one who's screwed. I heard that some parents of the drama club children are suing the school and Elenore for emotional distress. Lyla recounted how "Poor little Mason, traumatized for days, missed a whole week of classes and won't step foot on the stage." Talk about a showstopper.

Elenore points to my phone. "I see you weren't invited either."

I follow her finger. My heart drops into my stomach. Plastered on Beatrice's page are three moms at the spa, in white robes with green masks, cucumbers on their eyes, clinking together flutes of champagne. I force myself to swallow the lump that's made its way into my throat. Now I understand why the husbands were acting so weird. They figured out I wasn't invited either, and didn't know what to say to me. Blinking back tears, I hover my finger over the "Like" button. *Do I let my "friends" know I know?* Before I spiral down this train of thought, loud clapping erupts, and I look up to see Cecilia limping off the field. Poor Cecilia—I clap for her as the assistant coach ices her ankle. I hope she's okay.

The coach lets Maya into the game, and I jump up and down like a crazy person. "Go, Maya!" After all my hoots and hollers, I settle back down into my seat.

Elenore says, "I've been dropped from the group because of . . . you know." She lowers her head in shame.

I nod and hand her the caramel macchiato. She needs it more than I do. I feel a little sense of relief that I'm not the only one left out, even though I have no idea why I've been dropped.

"Thank you," she says, and takes a sip.

I flash her a smile, then stare at the soccer field.

"You remembered how I like my coffee." Her voice shakes.

Maya scores a goal, and I jump out of my seat and cheer. *Take that, Coach!* I sink back down on the bench, triumphant, before remembering the spa picture, and the pit in my stomach returns.

"Will you meet with me to talk about what happened with the principal?" Elenore whispers.

"Of course," I say, hoping it will help her get things off her chest. Maybe she can also shed some light on why Beatrice is excluding me. "How about Monday after school drop-off? I'll text you later, and we can decide where to meet."

"Thank you," she says.

I open my messages and click on "Beatrice." I'll send her a text to remind her I'm alive and still her friend, which she seems to have forgotten.

Me: *We need to get together soon.*

Then I click on Lyla's name and text her.

Me: *Why aren't you at the soccer game?*

Lyla never misses a game. I need to confirm what I suspect to be true—that Beatrice is the organizer and Lyla is the follower. Lyla wouldn't pass up a good scoop either. She'll lap

this one up. I place my phone in my pocket and watch the rest of the game.

* * *

A few hours later, I get a text back.

Lyla: *You decided to go to the soccer game instead of joining us at the spa?*

Exactly what I thought. Lyla is following Beatrice, unaware that Beatrice is leaving me out. I start to text her back, but realize I don't know what to say. She replies first.

Lyla: *I see three dots that you're typing, but nothing comes.*
Me: ⚽

I need to figure out a way to save these friendships. A thought hits me: *I* should plan something. I don't have to wait to be invited by Beatrice. I could be the organizer for once. The thought of planning anything makes me want to hurl, but if I can pull it off and get back into the group, it will be worth the stress.

CHAPTER THREE

Elenore fidgets with her napkin. She's a nervous ball of energy on the other side of the table, clearly already highly caffeinated.

Glancing around the new coffee shop, I take in how cute it is, with its small, turquoise-painted wooden tables and funky artwork. I think the owner's children go to Springshire Elementary with Maya.

"Thanks for meeting me, Fallon," Elenore says, and tugs at her earlobe, a nervous habit I've seen her do many times.

"Oh, no worries." Reading the appreciation in her eyes, it strikes me that I may be the only friend she's talked to in a while.

Blowing the steam from my piping hot coffee, I refrain from asking her how she is. Not because I don't care. I do. It's because I suspect I know how she feels. Overwhelmed, embarrassed, mortified—take your pick.

Instead, she asks me how I am. I say the obligatory, "I'm good."

I can't pour my heart out to Elenore about my hurt feelings over the spa day, like a wounded puppy. I need to stay level headed. Gather intel.

"I've been thinking," Elenore says. "Do you ever get the feeling that life isn't turning out quite like you expected it to?"

I sit up straighter. She's hit the nail on the head. Life is not turning out like I expected it to. *I never expected to be ghosted by my friends.* But I realize she's referring to her life and how it's now been turned upside down.

"I'm here for you," I say, meeting her hazel eyes that are more light brown than green today.

"Thank you." The table trembles with each tap of her foot against it. She continues, "Well, I don't want to beat around the bush."

Those may not be the best choice of words, given her situation. I look past Elenore at the bakery section—or lack thereof: a sad display of picked-over oatmeal raisin cookies and rock-hard fruitcake, proof that no one eats them.

"It's been a rough few weeks dealing with rumors, as you probably can imagine," Elenore says, and leans forward.

I nod. Why yes, I can imagine, but maybe not on the same level.

"I didn't intend for it to happen." Elenore tucks a lock of her brown hair behind her ear.

By "it" I can only assume she means screwing the principal, but she could mean getting caught on stage. I don't ask her to clarify.

"I was feeling unwanted. I thought at first it was because I'm older now. I have wrinkles . . . that maybe I'm undesirable. I never thought I'd feel this way." My gaze is drawn to her crow's feet as water edges to the corners of her eyes.

I, too, have seen the fine lines around my eyes, the extra bulge in my stomach, the creases in my neck, and the chin hairs—gray, nonetheless. I still don't condone her behavior, but I can see where she's coming from.

She goes on. "But the truth is, I found out Jeff was on a dating app. Instead of confronting him, I fell into Mark's arms." She sucks in a deep breath.

It takes me a second to realize she's talking about the principal, who we never call by his first name. It's always been Mr. Lox. This revelation about Jeff being on a dating app surprises me. I would never have pegged him as the type to cheat. He's always been so buttoned up.

A tear escapes onto her cheek, so I hand her my napkin because hers is in shreds.

I want to smack some sense into Jeff for not realizing what he has. Elenore is a classy woman, who at one point had a solid modeling career. Yes, of course, she's older now, but I can still see how beautiful she is—inside and out. None of this is up to me, though.

Elenore sniffles. "I don't expect you to understand. Your marriage is perfect."

I practically spit out my coffee. I wouldn't go that far. If she knew about the three-year period where we were at each other's throats, she'd think otherwise. But that's all behind us now. I don't dredge up the past.

"Everyone has problems," I say.

"What is unnerving is the fallout from the affair. Being shunned by friends, lawyer bills adding up. I don't regret the affair. I regret getting caught."

She lowers her eyes and picks at a chip of loose paint on the table. I shift in my seat, trying to find the words to comfort her.

"Getting caught is unfortunate," I say after a beat. I'd be having nightmares if Maya caught Max and me having sex. I can't imagine getting caught in public. The whole situation is beyond messy and traumatic.

"It's not what you think, though. I didn't get caught by the kids. I don't know who started that rumor. The drama club director found us behind the curtain before any of the kids came on stage. By the time the kids appeared, we had composed ourselves."

My eyes widen. She's being sued and crucified in the neighborhood because everyone thinks the kids caught them. This is a game changer. Talk about drama. "I hope you have a good lawyer."

She nods. Then she chokes out in a whisper, "I love him." She wipes one eye with the back of her hand.

And there it is. The admission. At first, I think she's talking about Jeff, but she means Mr. Lox . . . Mark. Part of me is happy for her, but part of me wishes she would work it out with Jeff. This isn't how it should end. But cheating is tricky. I don't know if I could get over that.

I glance around the coffee shop again, hoping no one is eavesdropping. It's not a conversation you want anyone overhearing. Then I see her—Laura Gibson, Mason's mom. The boy supposedly traumatized by seeing Elenore and Mr. Lox lip-locked and tangled. I swear I have the worst luck. It doesn't look like she sees us. In my rush to hide my face, I accidentally knock my mug, and it goes crashing to the floor, cracking into a million pieces and splattering the rest of my coffee all over my suede boots. Everyone in the coffee shop turns to stare as Elenore jumps up to get napkins. Laura rushes over and gets right up in her face.

"How dare you come in here? Do you even know who owns this place?"

Mama Bear Laura has surfaced. That's the only way I can explain her outrage. You don't mess with someone else's child.

Elenore jerks backward. Her mouth drops open. I remember now who owns the coffee shop—another mom who is suing Elenore.

"And you, Fallon." She points to me. "I thought you had more class than to hang out with her."

I grab our purses and Elenore's arm and head for the door. I want to tell Laura off, but I bite my tongue, not wanting to make this whole situation worse than it is already.

In the parking lot, Elenore throws on her sunglasses and hugs me. "I didn't mean to put you in that position."

It's better than the position the principal put her in, but I don't comment on it.

"It's okay. I'll call you," I say, and get into my car.

As I pull away, my mind drifts back to our conversation. It's heartbreaking that Elenore is being left out because of her affair. Before Laura herded us out of the café like livestock, I never got to ask Elenore why the friend group is excluding me too. I wonder if she knows anything.

I check my phone again. There's still no reply from Beatrice.


"A compelling novel about the spiritual and bodily costs of the dogged pursuit of art."
–RAVEN LEILANI, author of Luster
A Novel
Dances
Nicole Cuffy

Published in the United States by One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

ONE WORLD and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Hardback ISBN 978-0-593-49815-6
Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-49816-3

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

oneworldlit.com
randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

FIRST EDITION

Book design by Dana Leigh Blanchette

[barre]

The princess has shed some of her earlier shyness and learned to trust her suitors. Her smile is as confident and bright as a new coin; gone is her earlier hesitation. There is plain, fresh-faced gratitude as she accepts a rose from each of her suitors. The roses are bright, white, scentless. She throws them, not cruelly but joyfully, almost ecstatically. It has been some fresh miracle, learning to trust these four princes, a dawning. No one has hurt her yet. She has not been hurt a day in her life, in fact, never so much as pricked her finger. She suspects that there is no such thing as suffering. She understands suffering in the abstract—it is what made her shy of her suitors at first, but that they have not caused her pain makes its possibility even more remote. No one has let her down yet. She can almost believe there is no such thing.

I am the princess.

My reality is dual: I am Aurora, the white princess, just turned sixteen, who knows no suffering, and I am also Cece, the Black dancer of twenty-two, whose toes are screaming from being en pointe for so long, who is sweating like a slave, and whose ankle is throbbing distantly from a slow-healing sprain. I am counting as I dance—there is little room in my head for much else, though for a flash I do wonder if I feel up to holding that last balance for a couple of extra beats. I step forward, taking my suitor's hand as I

rise en pointe in attitude derrière, ready for the first promenade. I am turned 360 degrees like a figurine, pivoting on the toes of my pointed foot, ankle protesting just outside the gates of my attention. I won't hold the balance too long, but I'll make sure to get my leg up nice and high in the arabesque to make up for it.

My second suitor approaches, and I steady myself, signaling the first suitor with a quick squeeze when I am ready for him to let go of my hand. For a brief moment, I am unsupported—or rather, I support myself—balanced on one leg. I bring both arms overhead in fifth position, the space between them an imaginary crown, and then I bring my arm back down, give my hand to the second suitor. Second promenade. I do this four times in total, ending with my high, unsupported arabesque. The music is swelling, the orchestra creating a big inhale. I tease the conductor a little bit by making the last supported pirouette a triple—he controls the music to match me. I smile mischievously at an audience I can't see beyond the lights. The music thuds to its dramatic conclusion as I flourish my arms in third position. *Oh Tchaikovsky,* I think.

At the barre, I drown out the clunky, repetitive accompaniment by playing Tchaikovsky's violin concerto in my mind. Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich—those were Paul's favorites. Demi-plié and then grand plié, butt low to the ground, knees reaching over the second toes. Tendus, foot caressing the floor and then pointing: *front, front, front fifth, front fifth, side, side, side fifth, side fifth, back, back, back fourth, back fourth, temps liés.* And then dégagés, slow and fast, the foot caresses and then flies—*front, side, back, side, side, back, side, front.* Rond de jambe, the foot sweeping graceful half circles into the floor, and fondus and développés, the legs growing long now, delicious bloom in the hips and the inner thighs. Frappes, the legs

loose at the knees, the feet playful. And finally, grand battements, lifting high, throwing the leg front, side, back, side. Company class is both repetitive and vital.

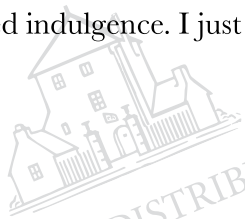
Alison is one of my favorite ballet mistresses at the company. She is perpetually in a good mood, her combinations are thoughtful, her corrections precise and gentle. She is in the middle of the room now, humming to herself and doing a kind of half dancing, sketching. I barely have to listen as she sets the next steps. I have been taking class with Alison since my student days at the School of American Ballet. The New York City Ballet does not hold open auditions; it pulls its dancers from SAB. Every class was a battle raged against imperfection. I remember the desperate thrill of it, the hunger. I stood out because of my Blackness, and I was determined then to obliterate it, to render my Blackness irrelevant with perfection.

Kaz, NYCB's artistic director, took an interest in me early. He would slip into a class of young dancers, study us with his trademark stare. And he'd stop in front of me, watching me up close, very rarely offering a correction—only looking. To have Kaz's eye on you was like an anointment, his very gaze material, an investiture. His fascination with me was unnerving, terrifying. His visits to classes were unpredictable. I never knew when he would be watching me, and so I had to constantly be perfect, beautiful. I was the only Black face in a sea of white and tan; I could not be anything but visible.

The pressure was enormous. I couldn't have a bad turn day, or a fat day, when, no matter which clothes I wore, which mirror I checked, which angle I viewed myself from, all I saw was my body taking up too much space. When my knee started to ache, I couldn't sit out for the big jumps at the end of class. I was a brick-brown kid from Brooklyn. There were people around me—students and faculty alike—waiting for proof that I couldn't be

graceful, that I was too heavy, too muscular, that my feet were too big, too flat, that I wasn't classical. Ballet has always been about the body. The white body, specifically. So they watched my Black body, waited for it to confirm their prejudices, grew ever more anxious as it failed to do so, again and again.

I mark the little flourishes, the movement phases with my hands and feet, and then my body knows what to do. This has always been a skill of mine, remembering. I have been doing this routine—or variations thereof—every day for seventeen years. It is as ingrained in me as the movements required for tying my ribbons. I don't have to think about it. Instead, I return to a favorite daydream of mine: I see the curtains rising, and the violin concerto is inflating, an orchestral bubble, and I can never work out whether it is I who appears first or my brother. Dwelling on Paul is a precious and carefully rationed indulgence. I just want him to see me now.



Préparation

Paul's arrival in the world came ten years before my own. I remember the bony press of my brother's lanky thigh against my knobby knee. There was, as there so often was, a record playing—Paganini, I think. In my small lap, I held the book Paul had brought home for me—an illustrated book about a ballerina, which neither of us could read because it was in Italian, but the last page of the book was a large watercolor of a girl in the middle of a grand pirouette en arabesque, pink-satin-clothed foot perfectly pointed. *That'll be you one day,* Paul told me. I ran a finger along the dancer's slender leg, reverent.

I tried to picture myself in the sparkling pink costume from the picture, spinning en pointe. I could almost feel it in my little body—the weight of the sequins and tulle, the weightlessness of the dance, the hard floor underneath my toes.

The dancer in the book had skin the color of a cloud in sunrise and straight yellow hair. My mother straightened my hair with chemicals over our kitchen sink, but given the thick grease she moisturized my scalp with and my utter disinterest in keeping my hair dry at all costs, it did not swing sensuously from my head but rather hung stiffly, like our homemade taffeta curtains. I couldn't picture that beautiful costume against my dark skin.

On the couch next to me, my brother was working with his

charcoals. Over the music, we could both hear our mother speaking sharply into the phone, and then Paganini's violin stuttered as she walked into the room. It was our mother's habit to walk around the apartment so heavily that she'd make my brother's records skip (Paul preferred the sound of vinyl to anything else).

That was your father, she told us. She spat the word *father* out like an accusation, like poison. I could never tell how my mother was going to feel about my father on any given moment. Now, she seemed angry. But the night before, I'd heard her crying in her bath. I'd opened the door and crept in, kneeling beside the tub. Her body was wavy under the water, transformed, her head leaning against the back of the tub, her eyes slightly wary. She'd crossed her arms over her stomach.

What's wrong, Mama? I'd asked.

She'd splashed water on her face, disguising the tears. *Nothing.* She'd sounded small. I'd noticed for the first time what a slight woman my mother was.

Now, she glanced down at my ballerina book and shook her head disapprovingly. *That what you want to look like? Is that why you like that ballet so much? Trying to dance your way out of being Black?*

Christ, Ma, said Paul. *Don't take you and Dad out on her.*

Don't encourage her. Celine, that *is not what we Black women look like. And it's not all we can do, dancing for the white folks.*

She can do what she wants. Isn't that the point? Let her be.

Who are you to reprimand me, boy? Can't even see straight, can you?

I looked between them, confused. Neither of them was looking at the other anymore. Or me. Or anything.

I think your tummy is pretty, I said to my mother, trying to be helpful.

But she only laughed an unhappy laugh. *You're just like your* father, *the both of you. Only difference is you two still got a chance to grow up.*

She left the room, the record punctured with staccato stutters.

She'll take him back again, Paul said. *They always do this.*

I looked up at him, not quite knowing what he meant but not wanting to reveal my ignorance. I didn't want him thinking I was a baby. *Mama's always mad at him,* I said.

Paul scoffed. *Can't really blame her.* He glanced at me and shook his head. *But it's never enough, is it? She just takes it out on us.* He checked that our mother was really gone and then fished something out of his pocket. He turned away from me, first bending all the way forward and then tilting his head back. When he turned back around, his nostrils flared and he smiled at my curious face. *You'll understand when you're older,* he said. *Hey, you haven't drawn me a picture in a while.*

Eagerly, I put my book away and got construction paper and crayons from my side of our room. When I came back, it looked like Paul had been crying, his eyes glassy and his hand absently rubbing his nose. I wanted to make something beautiful for him, but I kept stealing glances at him as he worked—the tip of his tongue kept peeking out at the corner of his mouth, there was a little crease between his eyebrows. His hands on the paper moved so beautifully, more graceful by far than my own clunky coloring. I tried to copy him. I saw him smile.

You trying to be like me?

I grinned and nodded.

He made some mistake I couldn't discern and threw down his charcoal, brought a hand to his forehead, smearing black there. *Shit,* he said.

My mouth opened in shock.

Sorry, he told me. *Whatever you do, Cece, do it pretty. They're always watching.*

I didn't know what he meant until I fell in love with dance, until I became used to the constant visibility.

[center]

My mother's birthday was Sunday, but I was busy dancing the matinee for *The Sleeping Beauty*, and I completely forgot to call her. For four days. We don't do gifts or cards, but I try to at least call her and wish her a happy birthday if I can't get out to Brooklyn to visit her. Sheepishly, I call her as I'm laid out on my back in the living room, doing my morning stretches. It's early, but I know she has her criminal law class at Brooklyn College this morning, so she will be awake. Ryn is boiling eggs, and their sulfuric stink leaks from our kitchen.

My mother takes a long time to answer, and when she does, she sounds slightly out of breath, like she's had to run to answer her phone.

"Happy belated birthday," I say.

"Happy birthday!" Ryn calls from the kitchen.

"Well, thank you," says my mother. "And thank you to Kathryn."

Kathryn shortened her name to Ryn when we got our apprenticeships with the company to sound more intriguing, but my mother never calls her Ryn.

"How's it going?" my mother asks. "What are you having for breakfast?"

"Ryn is making eggs," I say.

My mother and I generally keep our conversations at the surface level, but she is convinced that I must be anorexic because I'm a dancer. Asking about my meals is her way of checking in. It's not nearly as subtle as she seems to think it is, and I find it irritating. I pull my right knee into my chest, feel the sharp ridge of my patella against my palm. My ribs kiss my thigh as I take a deep breath.

"You know who I ran into the other day?" my mother asks.

"Who?"

"Señora Sandy."

Señora Sandy—Señora Ochoa-Famosa y Sandoval—was a small, freckled woman with an unruly halo of unnaturally red hair. She was a defector from the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, a fact she was fond of mentioning frequently to her students. Beginning when I was five, I took ballet classes from her in what would have been the living room of her cluttered Fort Greene brownstone, which seemed unbelievably lavish to me compared to the small Bed-Stuy apartment I shared with my mother and my brother and, intermittently, my father. Paul used to walk me to classes. He paid for them himself when my mother decided she didn't like how invested I was getting in ballet.

"I haven't seen her in forever," I say. "How is she?"

"She's walking with a cane now."

My mother says this in a faintly moralizing tone, as though this is what you get when you put your body through a career of ballet. I bite the inside of my cheek. I straighten my right leg, grabbing my heel and pushing my toes down somewhere above my head, a supine split. If my mother had ever had any use for dance, I believe her calling would have been African dance or contemporary—the two often bear a striking resemblance. She has the presence for it.

My mother is a latent Garveyite who keeps a framed map of

Africa over the dining table, and who, for the past two years, has been enrolled at Brooklyn College majoring in sociology and minoring in criminal justice so she can quit her job as a home-health aide and work for the NAACP. This accounts for at least some of her apathy toward my career. She is heavy in every sense of the word but the physical. She does everything with the full force of herself. It can be unbearable—most of all, I suspect, for her. She would have made a brilliant dancer, a heavy-footed modernist, consuming Katherine Dunham. If she'd had any use for dance.

But I resist heaviness, my presence is soft. It is ballet that chose me. But I chose it back, and I sometimes wonder if it wasn't, in part, a small act of rebellion. African dance is a pulse. It is thick, wise, and wild. Clamorous and uncanny. African dance says, *I am here.* Ballet says, *I am there.*

"She asked about you," my mother says.

"Oh?" I say, trying to picture what Señora Sandy would look like now, after so many years.

Señora Sandy was the first person to tell me I was a dancer. She was also the first person to tell me I couldn't dance with the New York City Ballet. *The life of a dancer is difficult,* she'd said. *A classical ballerina—a Balanchine ballerina—must have a certain body type. Long limbs, long neck, a small head, big eyes. Very lean and feminine. You, Cece, are not going to be that. You are athletic—powerful, thick muscles, you understand? Your butt sticks out, your chest is already budding, your mouth is not small like a doll's. There is a reason there have been very few Black ballerinas.*

She'd told me to set my sights on Alvin Ailey or Philadanco instead.

Dreams are for children, mami, she'd said. *You are a dancer.*

I'd left her studio when I was eleven, and got myself a scholarship to a prestigious school on the Upper East Side, owned by Luca Esposito and Galina Zaretsky. I paid for pointe shoes with

my babysitting money. By this time, my brother had lost his scholarship to the School of Visual Arts after only a year. I knew it bothered him, but he tried to pretend it didn't. He said the teachers didn't get him, and all his classmates were older than him anyway. He was working as a line cook and producing frightening sketches—full of lines drawn so furiously they tore through the page—in a dark apartment that smelled of liquor and stale sweat. I was on my own.

I wonder what Señora Sandy makes of me now.

"Anyway," my mother is saying, "I have class in twenty minutes. Tell Kathryn I say hello and have a good time at dance." A note of condescension.

We hang up and I toss my phone onto the couch and switch legs, pulling my left knee into my chest. I can feel my heartbeat against my quadriceps, faintly, like a whisper. Ryn walks in, chewing something. She is wearing a tank top and dance briefs. Her legs don't have a scrap of fat on them—all sharply defined muscle and bone. I pull my knee into my chest harder, watch my thigh spread as it is pressed between my calf and my breast.

"Want an egg?" Ryn asks.

"Yeah," I say.

I get up and follow her into the kitchen. I douse my boiled egg in salt, and shove most of it into my mouth in one vicious bite.

My brother made it bearable to live with my mother. I adored him. It was he, not my mother, who constantly encouraged my love of ballet, even if it meant he had to do bad things to afford it. On a late fall day as he was walking me to class, I saw for the first time that there was a side of Paul he kept from me. A side I didn't know. We didn't exactly walk together—he was tall, and one of his strides could easily fit two of mine. I walked a little behind

him, trying to place my feet exactly in his footsteps. In order to accomplish this, I had to do what was nearly a grand jeté, and then that became more fun than finding my brother's footprints, so I jetéd down Gates Avenue behind him. Paul was in one of his bad moods—he walked without glancing back at me, listening to Vivaldi on his old Discman. I knew it was Vivaldi because he had been playing it so loudly when he came to pick me up that I could feel the manic strings. He was not looking at me. I leapt bigger, hoping to catch his attention, but I was rewarded with not so much as a glance.

"Paul," I said. "Paul, watch me." But he couldn't hear me.

"Paul," said a much bigger, louder voice. This, my brother did hear.

He took his headphones off and turned. I turned too. There was a very large man coming toward us, one hand raised in a wave. He was dressed entirely in baggy denim, the cuffs of his jeans tucked into the whitest pair of sneakers I'd ever seen.

"What's good, cuz?" the man said. "I've been looking for you—I got twenty."

Paul scowled at him. "The fuck you want, homeboy? You see I got my little sister with me."

I frowned at the change in Paul's voice—it wasn't that he'd cursed but that his entire voice, his entire accent had changed. Our mother didn't like us to talk that way; she insisted we speak "proper English."

The man held up his hands. "My bad, man," he said. "I ain't realize she was with you." He smiled down at me. One of his front teeth was gold. "How you doing?"

My brother cut in before I could say anything. "Holla at me later—I got you then."

It was a dismissal, and the man seemed to understand it as

such. Once he'd walked out of earshot, I asked my brother, "Who was that?"

Paul turned his scowl on me. "Stop playing around back there and keep up. You want to be late?"

He put his headphones back on and began walking again at an even faster pace. I had to just about jog to keep up with him, so that by the time we reached Señora Sandy's brownstone, I was sweaty under my jacket.

I hesitated at the bottom of the stoop, hoping my brother would come out of his funk and say something nice to me. I thought I must have done something to annoy him, but I couldn't think what it was and I didn't know how to fix it. I tried so hard not to be an annoying little sister, but Paul's bad moods always felt like they were my fault.

"Well?" he snapped. I noticed that he was sweating too—it glimmered subtly at his hairline. And he was fidgeting with his oversized watch, shaking his knee back and forth. I wondered if he had to pee. "You going in or what? Because otherwise, what'd I walk you all the way over here for?"

I didn't move. I wanted my brother to say something kind, to undo the unpleasant aftertaste his mood had left on the day. But I was sure anything I said would be the wrong thing.

He sighed impatiently, rolled his eyes. He checked his watch, ran a hand over his face. His movements were jerky, like there was something inhuman possessing his body, and it hadn't yet figured out how to control the muscles smoothly.

"I can't keep walking you to and from class, you know. I'm busy—I'm working, I'm in college. You need to tell Ma that. You're big enough now."

I panicked. If Paul couldn't walk me to class anymore, then soon he wouldn't pay for my classes anymore either. And without

him paying, I was certain our mother would decide I was done with ballet once and for all. I began to cry.

"Jesus, Cece," Paul said. He placed one large hand on top of my head, reluctantly comforting. "Come on, stop it. People are going to think I hit you or something."

"Good," I cried. "I hope they put you in jail."

"You do? Why?"

I could hear a little amusement in his voice and it soothed me slightly. He was reemerging, my brother.

"Because you're mean," I said.

He nudged at my carefully pinned bun and I ducked my head away from him.

"Look," he said, "you don't have to worry about the money, okay? I'll still pay. You're going to be a famous ballerina one day, right?"

I nodded, my tears slowing.

"Then you need your classes." He nodded at Señora Sandy's front door. "Go in."

I went up the stoop, drying my face with my sleeve. Now that I wasn't crying anymore, I was angry. I never asked Paul to walk me to class. That was our mother—he could save his bad mood for her. And he'd messed up my bun. Straightening it, I walked in. I began to stretch like I saw the older girls do. Class would begin soon. The same exercises, my body settling into a comfortable pattern. Barre and then center; little jumps, big jumps. Ballet made it so that I felt nothing but music. Ballet would take it all away.

I am beginning the ritual of putting on pointe shoes. Center is my favorite part of class. Alison is giving us a moment to catch our

breath, drink water. I bend my shoes over the barre to warm up the shank. I've broken in these pointe shoes already so they mold to me, but they're still a little stiff. I tape my second toes because they're longer than my big toes and tend to lose the nail if I'm not careful. I slip on my toe pads—I usually stick with good, old-fashioned lamb's wool so I can feel the floor, but I'm being careful with my ankle, so I use the gel pads today.

I slip my feet into the shoes, lace the ribbons up and around my ankles, make a small knot and tuck it in so it won't dig into my Achilles tendon once I start dancing. And now, the sweetest part of class: I stand, come up onto my toes, listen to the whispered creak of my shoes yielding to me, bending, moving through the shapes my feet can make. Their life is short. Jasper puts his hand on my back and I wince. Not at his touch, but because I'm sweaty from barre and I'm worried that, upon touching my sweaty back, he'll be repulsed. But he only grins at me. I grin back.

"Love you, kiddo," he says.

We begin with adagio. I am growing up toward the ceiling like new, green life—développé to the side, arabesque, promenade in attitude, passé, pirouette attitude en dedans. I spin with my leg behind me, bent at the knee, arms stretched overhead. I catch a glimpse of my feet in the mirrors—I remember when I had to point with all my might to get them into the right shape. It is less effort now.

Jasper smiles at me as I finish the combination. He is handsome, flirtatious. I still get a fizzy feeling in my chest when I have his attention. His eyes leave me quickly. He is examining himself in the mirror now, and the feeling in my chest goes away. I try to lengthen my spine, mark the next combination with my hands. When I look in the mirror, all I can see is myself. I go into character, let my vision lose its focus. I pretend that the only thing before

my eyes is the black void of audience. I perform a series of turns across the studio floor with three of the other female soloists—Ryn, Sylvia, and Anya. Ryn has the most beautiful balance, Sylvia is a long-legged waif, and Anya is always calculated perfection.

I don't know when Kaz entered the room, but I see him now, watching me thoughtfully. I run to the corner to take a swig from my water bottle. Jasper passes by and playfully spiders his fingers up my spine. I turn and frown at him—I don't like him to act this way when we're at work. But he only chuckles and takes his turn to spin across the room. Jasper and I have been together for four years. Everyone in the company knows we're a couple. But to the public, we're a dream pairing. Critics gush about our natural chemistry. We get compared to Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gelsey Kirkland. This only works in our favor if we keep our personal life personal.

I glance at Kaz before beginning the next steps. *And* croisé fondu to the front, croisé fondu to the back, plié—use the floor—passé, and développé à la seconde, arabesque, into retiré and rond, double rond with plié, sous-sus, pas de bourrée into fifth, and pirouette, and again—go for double—and soutenu, other side. I watch myself in the mirror. Point harder, reach through the toes; stay on your leg; get your shoulders down; lift up more; higher, higher. Over my shoulder, I can see Kaz watching me too as he taps Ryn between the shoulder blades, a reminder to lift her chest, use her upper back. His look is intense, inscrutable.

Turns now: We travel across the floor. We venture out together in groups of five. I turn with Jasper—we have a way of turning in unison without really trying. I'm going for triples and, mostly, I make them. After I finish in a particularly dramatic arabesque, Jasper laughs and wraps an arm around my waist. I can't help but laugh too. He keeps his arm around me as we move to the right-hand corner to prepare for the same steps, other side. Kaz has

coerced our accompanist into making room for him on the piano bench. Every time I glance at him, his eyes are resolutely on me.

Petit allegro—we start with sautés, jetés, assemblés, sissonnes. Then échappé to coupé back, échappé coupé, chassé front fifth, and chassé effacé, assemblé croisé, and one, two, three, four, entrechat entrechat entrechat, hold. And on to the bigger jumps. The company flies across the floor. Sissonne side, *and* sissonne side, *and* tombé, pas de bourrée, glissade, pas de chat, relevé, entrechat six, relevé, tour jeté, *and* chassé développé croisé ta-ta-ta jeté croisé ta-ta-ta assemblé croisé, finish beautifully. The men try for a double saut de basque to finish.

At the end of class, as I'm peeling off my wet tights and shimmying into my warm-ups, Kaz approaches.

"Come to my office, darling," he says. "I want to talk to you."

From a few feet away, Jasper raises his eyebrows at me. I scowl at him.

Kaz defected from Soviet Russia in the early '70s, when Russian defectors were in high demand in the ballet world. He will tell anyone who listens that he defected out of love for his art and not out of disdain for the USSR. He still denounces decadence and capitalism. His office is spare and dark, the walls bare but for a portrait of Balanchine, the polished mahogany desk empty except for his thick old Mac and a lamp.

As I sit down Kaz smiles at me, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. I didn't notice how tense I was until just now; his smile relaxes me. I don't have much by way of family—my mother seems to think I'm a different species, my father was never consistently around, and I haven't seen or heard from my brother since I first got my apprenticeship at NYCB when I was sixteen. For me, Kaz and the company are it. Sometimes this feels rather precarious.

"How are you feeling, darling?" Kaz asks.

"Good," I answer.

He raises an eyebrow. "How is your ankle?"

It is throbbing distantly from class, but it's not the sharp, stabbing pain of a few days earlier.

"Better," I say.

Kaz sniffs. "Make sure you take very careful care of yourself," he says. "The body is precious. Yours is beautiful, an art. You cannot be careless with it."

I nod.

"Mi Yeong has done something terrible to her low back," he tells me. "I don't think she'll be able to do Saturday's show." He tsks.

Mi Yeong is first-cast for *The Sleeping Beauty.* She has been a principal for so long that the role kind of belongs to her. The Saturday-night show is our last performance for the spring season. I can't imagine Mi Yeong being out for it.

"*You* will dance Aurora Saturday evening," Kaz says.

I meet his eyes. His gaze is steady, uncanny. He is waiting for me to respond, and I can't think of what to say. All I can think of is how disappointed the audience and the critics will be to see a soloist take over a principal's role in the last performance. How I will have to be perfect. How this must mean something—Kaz is testing me either because he believes in me or because he wants me to finally, spectacularly fail.

"You are speechless?" Kaz asks. He is Russian, but his accent has always sounded faintly British to me. It has a way of making everything he says sound gentle yet full of gravitas.

"I—what about Mi Yeong's understudy?"

Kaz shakes his head. "You."

"Will Jasper dance Désiré?"

Kaz rolls his eyes. "As you wish."

Kaz holds an inexplicable contempt toward Jasper. *Jewels* was the first ballet I performed as a soloist. It is a Balanchine classic

in three parts: "Emeralds," "Rubies," and "Diamonds." I danced the second ballerina role in "Emeralds" and got a rave review in *The New York Times* after that performance. *Celine Cordell,* they said, *surpasses her eighteen years in maturity and grace. She dances with her entire body with a suppleness that suggests that her bones are made not of collagen and calcium but of honey.* This sounded kind of horrible to me, like a debilitating disease. I tried to downplay the review, but it must've gotten Jasper's attention. He asked to partner me soon after that. Kaz has been absolutely evil toward him ever since.

I inhale deeply, relieved. Even though I have partnered with Rohan—Mi Yeong's Désiré—before, I'll feel much more secure with Jasper. "Thank you."

Kaz waves a hand.

I am dismissed. I get up and nearly run out to tell Jasper the news.

The SECOND ENDING

a novel

MICHELLE HOFFMAN

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Ballantine is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Hoffman, Michelle, author.
Title: The second ending: a novel / Michelle Hoffman.
Description: First edition | New York: Ballantine Group [2023]
Identifiers: LCCN 2022037022 (print) | LCCN 2022037023 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593599136 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593599143 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3608.O4783 S43 2023 (print) | LCC PS3608.O4783 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220824
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022037022
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022037023

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

First Edition

Title-page image: yosuke14 / stock.adobe.com

Book design by Victoria Wong

CHAPTER ONE

Prelude in E Minor

There were no more children at home. No more overflowing laundry hampers. No more backpacks in the foyer. It was just the two of them. Three if you included Mrs. Wintour, which Prudence did.

A week ago, Prudence and Stuart had dropped their youngest child off at a prestigious Midwest college with a clock tower, granite buildings, and stone statues. Their eldest was already attending a prestigious East Coast college with its own clock tower, granite buildings, and stone statues. Now that they were back home in the Southwest, back in the desert, Prudence wept at tiny boxes of raisins in the grocery store, reached for old bath toys in the closet. Catching a whiff of baby lotion was like being tugged into a time machine.

The absence of her daughters unmoored her. She had not expected how much she would miss those beautiful creatures who could delight her one minute and aggrieve her the next.

A child's world, Prudence had discovered when her girls were young, is only as large as what is around them. Her daughters never cared about their mother's storied childhood, how she'd played for two sitting presidents and had tea with Isaac Stern. They cared only that she could make mud pies and killer vegan tacos. Prudence gave her children everything she herself had been denied. She read them

stories, taught them card games, and held them when they were sad. She nurtured them precisely so they would become independent adults. But the opposite had happened to Prudence along the way: She had grown dependent on them.

Prudence had tried to be brave the day she and Stuart dropped Becca off at college, but as she looked around at the cinderblock dorm room, a terrible thought occurred to her. She would never see Becca again.

"You okay, Mom?"

"Promise me you'll come back for Christmas and summer breaks?"

"Only if you don't turn my bedroom into a sewing room. Oh, wait, you already have one!" She hugged her mother. "Of course, I'll come back home."

Out in the hallway, Prudence could hear new roommates chattering while moms and dads lugged boxes and suitcases up the stairwells. The cheerful chaos depressed her almost as much as the worn linoleum floors. *How can they all be so happy?* She had to stop herself from popping her head out the door and yelling, "Which one of you has an extra Xanax?"

In an effort to delay the inevitable, Prudence began taking the clothes from Becca's bags and arranging them in the wardrobe.

"Mom, I want to do it myself."

"Just let me . . ."

Stuart placed a soft hand on his wife's shoulder. "It's time, Prudence. We have a flight to catch."

She squeezed Becca's shoulders. "If you cry, I'll cry," her daughter said.

Prudence wanted to do more than cry. She wanted to let out a guttural wail that would echo down the concrete hallway.

Instead, she said, "Don't forget me!"

To which Becca replied, "That would be hard to do, Mom."

—

Now, because she did not have to prepare dinner or run anyone to ballet lessons, Prudence lay listlessly in her chaise by the pool, where she indulged her new obsession with death.

The morbid thoughts had come without warning. She couldn't talk herself out of them. It was like falling in love suddenly and with the wrong person. It became a sickness. A fever. An illness with no known cure. She would die. Her memorial would attract gawkers. It wouldn't rain like it does in the movies. It'd be ridiculously hot. People would wear shorts and flip-flops. They'd bring their stupid water bottles and take pictures on their phones. They'd snap up those cheap plastic dolls on eBay first chance they got. Prudence at the Piano, they were called. Her grandmother had arranged for them, like that awkward Dick Cavett interview when she was eight—he'd asked what her favorite song was and she had replied, "Boogie Fever." Everyone laughed, of course, because he meant, what was her favorite song *to play.* Prudence would be remembered for that interview, which had racked up nearly three million views on YouTube.

"I'm going to die having been merely a circus act," she said to Mrs. Wintour. The eight-pound shih tzu cocked her head, and Prudence nodded the way you do when you're in the company of someone who just gets you. She stared out into the cinnamon-colored desert at the cholla and the brittlebush. It had been a rainless summer. The hot wind blew, the mesquite trees rattled, the yard was kindling. It just needed a spark.

It was six when the glass door slid open.

"There you are," Stuart said.

"Here I am," she said.

"Good day?" he asked.

"A day," she replied. "How are the banks?"

"Still up and running. Look, you're burning."

Prudence let out a long breath. "*Je vais mourir.*" For Prudence

spoke three languages, often lapsing into French when she was being dramatic.

"What?"

"I'm going to die."

"How?"

"I don't know yet."

"Ah."

"What a pity." She shook her head. "*C'est dommage.*"

Stuart unclipped his cuff links. "We're all going to die, you know."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

He shrugged, surveying his desert kingdom. He liked coming home to its marble floors and travertine walls. The mahogany-paneled billiard room gave him a thrill he found hard to name. The spectacular cactus garden, visible through floor-to-ceiling windows, was soothing after a long day of asset-backed securities. Then there was the pool, surrounded by teak sectionals and glass tabletops, ceramic pots cascading with succulents. It was a grand residence, and it was their home—a home made possible by the extraordinary success of one little jingle that Prudence had composed at the age of eighteen. And that was Pep Soda, on the air for thirty-one years. Kids turned it into a game in the schoolyard. Fraternity brothers sang it when they got drunk. Gardeners whistled it while trimming hedges. It was very catchy.

"You're obsessing," he told her.

Prudence did what she usually did in situations like this. She blamed her parents. "It's all that LSD my mom took back in the sixties. I'm damaged."

Prudence's parents had been hippies. They'd had long hair and listened to folk music and had not worn shoes.

"Yes, that's true. It was true last week, too, but you weren't baking in the sun talking about death then." Stuart stripped off his suit and jumped into the pool in his plain white briefs. He came up for air and said, "You know what I think?"

"Tell me."

"I think you're having a midlife crisis."

"Really?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I should buy a sports car then."

"You already have a Porsche," Stuart said. "A red one, even."

But a flashy car did not take away the acute realization that in exactly one year and two months, Prudence would be fifty. She was old, her children were gone. So were family dinners around the table, vacations to the lake, and endless trips to the grocery store. That wonderful day-to-dayness that gave Prudence purpose had pried her loose from the clutches of fame. Yet despite this sublime domesticity, she feared that her life would come to an end without accomplishing the one thing that eluded her.

Prudence woke the next morning with a nameless trouble in her heart. She went through a list: Her children were safe; Stuart was well; Mrs. Wintour was at her feet; they had not run out of toilet paper. She tried to tell herself to *carpe diem,* but then, while brushing her teeth, she counted four new gray hairs and saw her mother's face looking back at her. For the rest of the day, she could not find purpose in any task.

When Stuart came home that evening, the dry-cleaning bag with his French-cuffed shirts was still in the hall. There was nothing in the refrigerator except an expired carton of milk, a pint of molded raspberries, and a half-drunk bottle of Cristal he swore had been unopened yesterday. On the mail table was an AARP application ripped down the center.

He went upstairs to where Prudence was in the tub, legs draped over the sides, smoking a thin brown cigarette and reading a self-help book, *You Are a Badass*. From a portable record player, Scarlatti's Sonata in D Major echoed in the marble *en suite*. The Baccarat candy dish they received for their wedding twenty-one years ago, which once held gold-wrapped chocolates, was overflowing with cigarette butts.

Stuart sat on the ottoman in their bathroom and unlaced his shoes. "What's going on here, Prudence?"

"I'm learning how to stop doubting myself and start living an awesome life."

"You need to get out," he said.

Prudence exhaled a tassel of smoke. "I have nowhere to go," she announced. Prudence always had somewhere to go, usually somewhere fantastic and spontaneous. More than once she had caught a matinee on the way to the grocery store.

"I'm flying to London on business next week," Stuart said. "Come with me."

Prudence dipped the cigarette into the bath, where it made a sound like paper ripping. "Could you switch out the record? Mendelssohn, 'Songs Without Words in F-Sharp Minor,' please."

Stuart replaced the disc in its jacket even though other records had been tossed onto the ottoman without being put away. "What do you think?" he said, flipping through the stack of albums. He had no idea what he was looking for.

"About Mendelssohn?"

"No, London."

Prudence shifted in the tub. There was the ten-hour flight and the line at customs and the dog sitter and the packing and the jet lag and Stuart's long meetings. Not to mention the overpriced food. The last time she was in London, she paid twelve pounds for avocado toast. Toast!

"I don't feel like it." She was slowing down. This is what happened with age.

"This cannot continue, Prudence."

"Fine. I'll start a book club."

That sounded a little pedestrian for Prudence. "Really?"

"Sure."

"When?"

"Soon as I find a good book."

—

Stuart tried desperately to cheer his wife. First, he cooked her favorite foods, like roasted lemon chicken, tomato basil soup, and tuna salad Niçoise. But the chicken was dry, the soup was bland, and the Niçoise mushy. Not surprising since Stuart's culinary skills were limited to grilling burgers and hot dogs, two things that Prudence would not eat.

Stuart then bought her an emerald ring that he found in the silverware drawer a week later. He tried box seats to *Don Quixote,* dinner reservations at Dominick's Steak House, flowers, chocolate. A rare five-disc record set of Beethoven's *Bicentennial Collection* that he found at the Goodwill, of all places.

All to no avail. His once-vibrant wife was slipping away.

Prudence was in bed every day until afternoon. Her dinner went untouched each night.

This crushing ennui might have gone on for decades, as Prudence was a good forty years from her actual death, but the drinking and the smoking and the tubbing came to an abrupt end one morning when she was awakened by the hiss of hydraulic brakes. Then the doorbell. Then Mrs. Wintour barking.

Prudence answered the door in men's silk pajamas with a long strand of milk-white pearls knotted at her chest. Three large men in blue uniforms, the names Gil and Hector and Fred stitched in red on their left breast pockets, stood on the other side.

"Delivery for a Ms. Prudence Childs," Fred said.

Prudence did not remember any recent purchases that needed a moving van, as she had been consumed with the thought of dying and had not been out. Peeking over Gil's shoulder she saw an enormous truck with the words *Music Box Delivery Services* emblazoned on the side.

"I did not order a music box."

"It's a piano."

"I already have a piano," Prudence said flatly. She did, too—a spinet kept in her study, a room playfully dubbed "the Sewing Room," although it had never seen any actual sewing. It was on this spinet that Prudence had once played Disney scores for her children,

where, before that, she had composed jingles for cleaning products. But the jingles had been merely a job—the spinet may as well have been a typewriter.

Hector unfolded a document and handed it to Fred who handed it to Prudence who handed it back to Fred. "You'll have to read it to me."

"Ma'am?"

"I don't have my glasses."

Fred held the document as if a formal proclamation. "Says here, deliver to a Ms. Prudence Childs, 10534 Pricklypoppy Lane, Scottsdale, Arizona."

Indeed, that was her address. Indeed, that was her name.

"Where'd it come from?"

Fred did not care where pianos came from, only where they were going. "I don't know, ma'am."

"It must say on there."

It was eight in the morning and 95 degrees. Not the best sort of weather for moving large objects weighing nearly a thousand pounds. Fred and Hector and Gil wanted to get the piano off the truck and into the house and assembled before the temperature rose to triple digits.

"Says one six-foot, eleven-inch, Model B, grand Steinway, ebony finish from Longmont, Colorado."

A *Steinway.* A Model *B*. From *Long*mont.

It couldn't be.

Could it?

Prudence gasped and Fred frowned. Gil checked the time, Hector wiped his brow, and Mrs. Wintour splayed herself across the cool marble floor.

"Take it back," Prudence said. "I can't have it in my life now."

"Why's that, ma'am?"

"I have to start a book club."

CHAPTER TWO

The Cover of *Rolling Stone*

Exactly eight hours after the Steinway arrived in the Childses' marble foyer, Oscar-winning composer Curtis Lyons was seated on a massive sound stage in Burbank, California, knocking out his own furious arrangement of "Flight of the Bumblebee." Cameras panned to showcase a whir of finger acrobatics. Curtis was a marvelous musician with an excellent pedigree: a Performance Studies major at Princeton with a film scoring degree from the Berklee College of Music.

Curtis Lyons was competing on live television in a one-to-one battle against another pianist, Rakul Nagaraja. The reigning champion, Nagaraja had just completed a kinetic rendition of Scott Joplin's the "Maple Leaf Rag." The show's producers had played up the differences between the two men. They implied that calling Rakul Nagaraja a *pianist* was, perhaps, something of a stretch. He had not attended a prestigious music institute. He had not played with any symphonies. Mr. Nagaraja was an accountant for a large plumbing supply manufacturer. He had been taught by a neighborhood piano teacher in the suburbs of Akron, Ohio, and kept up his skills into adulthood, practicing each morning before work. He could play anything you put in front of him.

Inside the cavernous Burbank Studio 1, massive klieg lights and

tiers of descending flip seats allowed the audience to look down on the ample stage. Here in Studio 1, home to game shows and sitcoms, the cameras were busy filming the exciting conclusion of *Alexei Petrov's Dueling Piano Wars!* The discrepancies between its contestants were part of the draw. The very first episode had pitted a Juilliard graduate against a touring keyboardist for the Smashing Pumpkins. Then there was the beloved, white-haired conductor of the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra versus a fifteen-year-old wunderkind from Japan. And so on.

Each week, two dueling pianists performed a piece from each of three categories:

- Classical (1750–1820);
- Romantic (1820–1900); and
- Contemporary (1900–current).

The groupings themselves were a surprise to viewers who thought *classical* meant any music without an electric guitar or lead vocalist. They tuned in each week to the now-familiar sight of two nine-foot Yamaha CFX concert grands facing each other onstage. The spotlight shone down on the first pianist, who played something from the classical period. Then the focus switched to the second, who played their own prepared piece. After both contestants finished, the host, Alexei Petrov, critiqued the performances. The show cut to a commercial after each segment, at which time audience members would text in their votes. Whoever won two out of three categories was declared the winner and would go on to duel another pianist the next week.

Few at the network had believed in the show when it premiered in late June. The odds of success are slim for even the most innovative television concepts. Statistically, 80 percent of all new shows fail, and *Alexei Petrov's Dueling Piano Wars!* didn't have any of the stuff that tended to attract a wide audience. It lacked sex, drugs, and anyone resembling a celebrity. No spies. No billionaires. No dead bodies.

What were the chances for an eight-episode competition featur-

ing *classical music,* of all things? Best-case scenario, it would serve as low-budget filler and fade into obscurity by September, pacifying casual viewers through the summer months until the high-budget programming returned in the fall.

But no one had anticipated how much the camera would love the show's host. And what the camera loved, the audience loved. It was hard to stop looking at Alexei Petrov. The twenty-two-year-old Russian pianist had flawless skin and lush, sable-colored hair that gleamed richly under stage lights. His high cheekbones and full lips looked like they'd been carved from a block of the finest marble. He often curled his long, elegant fingers under his chin while he listened to whatever was happening on the stage, his smile as untelling as a da Vinci portrait. But it was Alexei's large, coppery eyes that were his most extraordinary feature. They were deep and roomy and could hide all sorts of things, most notably a long-standing ambivalence.

Nothing in Alexei Petrov's life had prepared him to be a TV star. He had been a gifted child and a hard worker. But it was only at the urging of a well-meaning piano teacher that Alexei's mother got the boy out of Russia. From Moscow to Paris to Los Angeles. The show wasn't his idea, yet here he was, the world at his expensively clad feet and a powerful television network capitalizing on his star power.

The duel between Curtis Lyons and Rakul Nagaraja was the season finale. When Curtis Lyons finished playing, his fingers momentarily hovered over the keyboard as if to keep the song from evaporating. He straightened and took a deep breath. The camera panned to his damp forehead then down to the fingers that he kept flexing as if to relieve a cramp. He took a bow. The audience clapped and hollered.

Dressed in a crisp, collarless shirt that would shortly become an Instagram sensation, Alexei Petrov said, "Mr. Lyons, to take sixteenth notes and play them as octaves at one hundred fifty beats a minute is a musical feat. But your performance tonight made me feel like I was in Cosmo Kramer's head and couldn't get out."

"Cosmo Kramer?" Curtis Lyons replied, flummoxed. "Like . . . Kramer from *Seinfeld*?"

The audience giggled. Even though a tutor had been hired to help Alexei Petrov perfect his English, he'd learned much more from watching old *Seinfeld* episodes on Hulu.

"You gave us one frenetic speed, like Kramer when he gets a not-so-bright idea."

The illustrious Oscar winner was not used to being compared to an unhinged nineties television character. He crossed his arms over his chest and drew his lips tightly together. The camera caught the reaction.

Alexei Petrov continued. "'Bumblebee' is a balance of crescendo and decrescendo, soft and loud, hurried and constrained. Rachmaninoff's arrangement gives the listener the feeling of one lonely bee, a single bee in turbulent flight. We who are listening imagine it as a kind of . . . ballet with wings." At this, Alexei paused for a few moments, caressing the air with his long fingers as if hearing the notes in his head. "Your version sounded as if an entire hive had been beaten with a mallet and booted off a cliff."

There it was again, that tittering from the audience. Alexei Petrov did not consciously aim to make fools of the contestants on his live television show. The audience, at this moment, had ceased to exist for him. He rose from his seat and strode across the stage, giving full view of his tailored trousers and Gucci loafers. He sat before one of the concert grands and played a passage of "Bumblebee."

"See what my right hand is doing?" he said to Curtis Lyons. "You have to make that right hand . . ." He played three measures over and over, a gold Rolex glinting from the stage lights. (Rolex, a sponsor of the show, had given him the watch but Alexei felt its bulk impeded his playing and had been repeatedly reprimanded for removing it before heading to the keyboard.) "Hear that? It is but the lightest touch, which you will only achieve through repetition."

It was a hallmark of the show, Alexei Petrov springing from his seat and playing the critiqued part of the piece. The first time he did it, producers had a fit. But the audience (and piano teachers the world over) couldn't get enough of Alexei's spontaneity. They were

in awe of this dapper musician who didn't talk down to them, as if he expected more of people than they expected of themselves. Alexei was biting, but he was never patronizing, something viewers responded to. "Playing is practicing" was an oft-used line. As was "See how clean that sounds?" He was a master of the catchphrase.

"Mr. Nagaraja's piece may not have been as demanding, physically," Alexei Petrov said, "yet he pulled off the syncopated rhythm that showcases a good rag. Your blitzkrieg of notes could only register as an assault."

Through Alexei Petrov's running commentary, the audience learned new terms like syncopation, *allegro molto, legato,* and *tempo rubato*. They learned that music composed by the Romantics—Liszt, Chopin, Puccini—was more intense and expressive than the heavily structured pieces of earlier composers such as Mozart and Haydn. They learned the difference between a fugue and a prelude, a sonata and a minuet.

They also learned to connect history to the contemporary, discovering that the intro of Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" was lifted from Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier"; that Beyoncé's "Ave Maria" was Schubert; that Janelle Monáe's "Say You'll Go" was borrowed from Debussy's "Clair de Lune."

Most live performances of classical music took place in gilded concert halls, in front of an audience of genteel patrons. But *Alexei Petrov's Dueling Piano Wars!* drew in a huge cross section of humanity, with a viewership of fourteen million from around the world. Alexei's biting critiques fueled the interest:

If I ever have to hear that Bach prelude played so unevenly again, I will douse myself in lighter fluid and beg for a lit match.

That sonata was so bland, I won't forget it once you leave the stage. I forgot it right as you were playing it to me.

I slept more during your performance of "Allegretto" than I did last night.

Over the course of two months, Bach went from being a relic from a distant era—exciting to those who championed sweater vests and argyle socks—to alive and relevant. Clips of the show went viral. You could bet the following morning's talk around the office would turn into a heated debate about whether one contestant's rapidly ascending fourths really held up to the other player's whirring theatrics. The show had given classical music a shot in the arm.

Alexei Petrov followed the instructions on the teleprompter. "We will be right back after a word from our sponsor, Flush 'N Clean toilet bowl cleaner. You flush, it cleans."

During the four-minute pause, Alexei went backstage, where someone handed him his phone and a bottle of water. He sat in the makeup chair and checked his messages while the makeup artist sponged his forehead. Les Strom, the showrunner, clapped his protégé on the back like they were the best of friends.

"Hey, kid, congratulations. What a great season. Blew everyone's mind."

"Thank you, Lester."

"If Mick Jagger and Van Cliburn had a baby, it'd be you."

Alexei Petrov smiled his Mona Lisa smile and continued scrolling through his phone.

Les Strom continued. "Hey, listen, slight change of plan when you go back out there."

Alexei hated these last-minute changes. The producers did it to him by design, so he would not have a say.

"It's no big deal, okay? You know how we'd planned for you to make the big announcement *after* you declare tonight's winner?"

"Yes. First the winner, then the big news, then I play 'Scarbo.' The End."

"Well, we've decided we want you to change up the order. You're going to make the big announcement first, then knock 'em all out with your performance. Your stuff has to happen before you report the winner."

Alexei did not like this. "Won't that steal their lightning?"

"Thunder, it's thunder, won't that steal their thunder."

"Won't that steal their thunder?"

"No, no, of course not. We just want to drag out the suspense. You know, give folks at home a few more seconds to get those final votes in while you give them a taste of what you can do."

That wasn't true.

The network had demanded the reordering because it did not want people tuning out immediately after the week's champion was revealed. Fourteen million people were watching, a bonanza in terms of commercial revenue. Alexei Petrov didn't always do as instructed, so to ensure everything went according to the network's plan, Les Strom would withhold the name of the night's winner until after Alexei made the big announcement and played "Scarbo."

It was crucial that the audience get a mind-blowing dose of what they could expect from Alexei in the future. "Scarbo," the third and most technically dazzling movement of Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit,* would give it to them.

Les Strom clapped Alexei on the shoulder, searching the tigerlike eyes that hid everything so well. "We good to go, buddy?"

Alexei would never get used to being called *buddy.* "Sure, Lester."

He knew what was coming next. One minute before he had to go back onstage, his phone chimed with the expected text. Alexei didn't have to look at it to know who it was from (his mother), what it said (to follow Mr. Strom's instructions), and why it was sent (in the interest of the show's success). Without answering the text, he handed his phone off.

Alexei Petrov went back out to center stage, bowed elegantly, and waited for the applause to die down. "Before I announce the champion of *Alexei Petrov's Dueling Piano Wars!* I have a special surprise for you. I would be honored to have you all back again. Would you like to come back?"

The camera panned to an enthusiastic studio audience. "This fall, on October 27, I will be the one in the hot seat. I will perform

live on this stage in a duel with a yet-to-be named pianist, maybe the only living person I might possibly lose to."

A roar burst from the audience. Though at this point, Alexei Petrov could have burped the alphabet and people would have approved.

"Cash prize—" He smiled, waiting for the fervor to die down. "The winner will be awarded a cash prize of a million dollars." Message delivered, fever pitched, Alexei sat at one of the enormous pianos and played "Scarbo." When he took his bow, the crowd, again, erupted into applause.

The announcement of the evening's champion, Mr. Rakul Nagaraja, came almost as an afterthought, the response noticeably polite compared to the electricity generated by Alexei's October surprise.

Les Strom couldn't have been happier.

Alexei, however, was not happy. If he had to put a name to what he was feeling, it would have been envy. Alexei envied the clear joy of someone who was motivated by success. (What most people recognized as success.) He even envied its opposite, the disappointment that seeped from Mr. Curtis Lyons like beads of sweat. For Alexei, a numbness had set in long ago. He did not get a rush from the applause that was so charged the floor vibrated. He could not remember the last time he laughed at a joke or cried at the opera. He could not remember how it felt to hold someone's hand. Or sleep together on a Paris afternoon. Even his memories were colorless now. He was on top of his game, adored by millions. But that was just a number to someone who wanted to be loved by only one.

CHAPTER THREE

Sleeping Beauty

Stuart returned from his morning workout wearing a damp shirt and the sweatband his daughters repeatedly told him made him look like a dork. He saw the delivery truck in his driveway. "Oh, wonderful, it came."

Prudence huffed. "This was you?"

"Yes, darling." He put his hands on the top of her shoulders. "Can you believe I found your childhood piano!"

"Where?"

"In your uncle's basement. When I told your uncle's fourth wife, Kaitlyn, I'd take care of all moving expenses, she agreed to let it go. Said it took up too much space."

"Why?" Prudence's eyes were electric with anger.

Stuart shrugged. "Maybe their house is too small."

"No, why did you think I would want it?"

Stuart was confused. He'd gone through an enormous amount of trouble to get the piano and did not understand why his wife was upset. "I thought it would get you out of your funk."

"I'm starting a book club."

That again.

Stuart didn't understand this latest fixation. He didn't know that this was the whole point. A book club was void of expectation. You

chose the book, read the book, talked about the book, and ate some cheese.

The piano was an entirely different matter. Prudence had been the youngest pianist to play Carnegie Hall. She had won a Grammy at sixteen. She had performed in the most venerable concert halls in Europe and she had become a magical figure. Admired. Worshipped. Looked upon as if she possessed the powers of gods. Proof of nature over nurture.

The reality was, it had been a hell of a lot of work. She had practiced from morning until night. There were days when young Prudence did not see the sun. Half the time she didn't know what city she was in. Her best friends were piano instructors. They called her an "old soul," which was the exact opposite of what Prudence wanted to be. As she approached adulthood, she feared she'd never fulfill the expectations set by her youth. The world would hold her to an impossible standard. There is no middle road for prodigies. There would be some sort of fall. There always was.

Prudence decided to walk away. She embraced the possibilities of a commonplace life. Pot roast for dinner and baths in the evening. A game of Scrabble on a Sunday afternoon. Too many people spent their whole lives running from the ordinary. They missed out on the best part.

Now the monster was back. The one that had devoured her childhood with sharp teeth.

Gil, Hector, and Fred stood in the marble foyer watching this exchange between Prudence and Stuart, all because Stuart had underestimated how much Prudence hated nearly every minute of her formative years.

He also underestimated how very large the piano was.

Fred checked his watch. "Ma'am, you want us to continue?"

Prudence considered. There was no way she was sending the piano back to her uncle's fourth wife, Kaitlyn.

"Continue," Prudence told Fred.

This made Stuart smile.

"Where you want it, ma'am?" Fred asked.

"Right here, of course."

Fred examined the cathedral ceiling and marble floor. "Sure? There's nothing to absorb the sound. Whole house gonna rattle when you play."

Prudence had no intention of playing. "I'm sure."

The piano had arrived in parts that were wrapped in soft blankets and secured with thick straps. As each large silver buckle was unfastened and each quilted blanket fell away, Prudence watched the monstrous instrument gleam with the sleekness of a killer whale bursting from the ocean. Her stomach felt as if it were filling with ice. Mrs. Wintour had a dog's sense and knew, however dogs know, that her mistress was upset. With a whimper, she pawed at Prudence's leg.

The piano took up nearly the entire foyer, which was large in and of itself. When the instrument was fully assembled, Stuart watched as the movers propped up its enormous lid, revealing an intricate network of metal and wire and pins and hammers. Stuart could not imagine his wife, at the age of five, having utter command of such a colossal instrument. He'd only heard her play the little spinet in the Sewing Room, each note absorbed by the clutter of books and furniture and unhung artwork. Hardly the stuff of concert halls.

"Wow, my love," he said.

"Yep," Prudence said, and she ran her finger along the edge, where two little chips had been made by her two front teeth.

"Mr. Childs," Fred said to Stuart, "just need you to sign some paperwork and we'll be out of your way."

"Right." He turned to his wife. "Play something, darling."

"It'll be too loud."

"Mm, make it good then."

"I don't think so."

"Please. It's so beautiful."

It sure was. It also made the most beautiful sound. This was one of the finest pianos ever built. Why did Prudence think she could resist its powers?

While Gil checked the weather on his phone and Hector folded

the moving blankets and Fred shuffled the paperwork, Prudence sat before the old Steinway, its keys oxidized to the hue of old newspapers. Then Debussy's "Clair de Lune" began to flow from her fingertips and a hundred years fell away. Gil looked up from his phone and Hector stopped midfold and Fred nearly dropped the clipboard.

Prudence played with a knowing melancholy. Like having to walk away from someone you believed you'd love forever. If the notes had a scent, they'd smell of gardenias. She closed her eyes and saw images of pale green rooms on empty Sunday afternoons.

It was that kind of a song. Prudence was that kind of a pianist. The feeling of ennui that had gripped her for the past month faded like smoke.

The three large piano movers were seized with tenderness as each nursed an old ache in his heart. Gil thought of eating meatloaf in his mother's kitchen. Fred pined for his grown sons. Hector pictured ballerinas, graceful and strong as they glided across the stage. He had never been to the ballet.

"Ms. Childs," Fred said, "I've been moving pianos for thirty years and I've never heard anyone play that way. You reminded me of the joy I had when I used to take my sons fishing. Why aren't you out there playing?"

"That's very kind of you. But no one wants to hear me play anymore," she said and pulled the fallboard down over the keys.

"I do," Stuart said.

"You have to say that, I'm your wife. Anything less, and you'll be sleeping in the garage tonight."

Oh, but she was wrong. The music had a strange, enchanting power—it had opened the lid of that black velvet box in Stuart's mind, the one where he kept his dream.

CHAPTER FOUR

Damn, I Wish I Was Your Lover

The morning Stuart flew out of Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport for London's Heathrow, Bobby Wheeler was in Redwood City, California, wondering how he was going to come up with the money he owed his former employer. Bobby Wheeler had worked his way up to Regional Mechanic for the Northern California District for Vantage Car Rental, which meant he got to visit all eight shops from San Francisco to Monterey, overseeing maintenance and repairs of the vehicles. He had his pick of the fleet, too. Usually a tricked-out Chevy Camaro or a badass, cherry-red Dodge Challenger. It was the best job he ever had, and he had screwed it all up.

Nobody would hire him now. Not after he ran up $88,642 for what he told his bosses were "travel expenses and invoices for car parts." Not after all the papers ran the story, with variations of the headline: REDWOOD CITY MAN TARGET OF ONLINE SCAM, EMPLOYER PAYS THE PRICE.

Vantage Car Rental had no interest in prosecuting, not if they could get their money back. So they made a deal. A payment plan, actually. If Bobby Wheeler made each and every payment in full and on time, he would avoid jail time. But to make the payments Bobby needed a job. Since he couldn't get a job, he would have to sell his Redwood City townhouse. He was fifty years old and finding an-

other place to live was going to be tough on his jobless, debt-burdened budget. He already bought his groceries at Dollar Tree.

It wasn't fair. That's what Bobby was thinking when the doorbell rang.

"Mr. Wheeler?" said a petite woman in a blue suit. Her voice was as warm and inviting as a bath.

"Yes?"

"Allison Lin, Zephyr Real Estate. You contacted me about selling your home?"

She shook his hand and gave a bit of a squeeze. Bobby Wheeler felt something inside of him stir.

He stepped aside. "Come in, please. Call me Bobby."

Allison Lin looked around, then turned her attention back to Bobby. It was more than attention, it was focus, and it made him feel special.

"How many bedrooms, Bobby?"

"Two."

"Bathrooms?"

"Two and a half."

"Bobby, you mind if I look around?"

"Be my guest." Bobby liked the way she said his name. She was pretty. She smelled good.

Allison Lin strode through the front room and into the kitchen and down the hallway and into the bedrooms. She opened cupboards, looked into closets, and peeked under beds.

"How much do you want to sell this for, Bobby?"

"A billion dollars."

She gave him a crooked smile.

"Nah, kidding, kidding," he said. "What do you think?"

"Market value on this place should be about $800,000. You're not going to get that, though."

"Why not?"

"There's a lot that needs to be repaired and replaced. The broken light fixture in the bathroom. Those warped cupboards in the

kitchen. Potential buyers will think you haven't taken care of this place."

"Okay."

"You're going to have to put some money into this place to sell it."

He hadn't counted on that. "Really?"

"You'll get it all back and then some, trust me. Possibly even multiple bids."

"Multiple bids?"

"That really drives the price up. Listen, this is the most expensive area in the world. The *world,* Bobby. You could make some good money here."

"I could?"

"Just sold a condo in Foster City that went twenty thousand over asking. Another in Belmont—a house—went *fifty* over list in a bidding war."

"No!"

"You're going to need to declutter, though. You've got boxes everywhere and to potential buyers, it makes them think there's not enough storage."

Bobby Wheeler scratched the back of his neck. "I like my stuff."

"You want buyers to be able to imagine themselves in your home, Bobby."

Bobby Wheeler could never imagine people in his home. What a nice thought.

"I've got some great ideas on how to stage it," Allison Lin said.

"Stage it?"

"Sure. We'll put in some furniture that's better suited for the space. Your recliner is great, but it really shouldn't be placed in the middle of the room in front of the television. You want it to feel warm and welcoming."

He sure did.

"What about all my stuff? Get rid of it?"

"What you don't want to get rid of, you can put in a storage unit.

There's a great company off El Camino—Mike's Attic. Tell him Allison Lin sent you."

He liked this woman. She was exactly what he needed in his life—someone who'd get rid of his mess and fix everything broken. "Was just waiting for you, darling."

She rewarded him with a weak smile.

Allison Lin studied her new client. He was a strange one. "I can get you a number for a handyman. In the meantime, start cleaning. I'll run some comps in your area and get back to you. You on board?"

Bobby Wheeler snapped off a salute and said, "Bobby Wheeler reporting for duty, ma'am."

FOR THE FIRST time in months, Bobby Wheeler felt happy. Things were moving in the right direction. He turned on some Van Halen and bounced around the house.

By three o'clock the next day, the closets were empty and the front room full. There were beat-up suitcases and mismatched chairs and dented lampshades. There were plastic crates filled with obsolete computer cords and back issues of *Car and Driver.* A box from that damn ex-wife of his. Of course, he got stuck with her junk. He was always holding on to other people's junk.

At a quarter after three, his phone rang.

He turned down REO Speedwagon. "Y'ello!"

"Mr. Wheeler?" It was Allison Lin.

"Heyyyy, you," he said as if they had already made a date. Like to a Giants game or something. Tickets behind home plate. "Thought I told you to call me Bobby."

"Uh, Bobby . . ."

"Got this place practically emptied out. Ready for tile guys, painters, you name it."

He waited for her praise.

"We're going to have to put a hold on that."

He stopped chewing his gum. "Why's that?"

"Mr. Wheeler, you've got a lien on your house."

"A lien," he repeated.

"As in, you owe someone money and they have possession of your house until you pay it off." He could hear the beep of a key fob unlocking a car door.

"Yeah, that. I was going to sell the house to pay them."

"It doesn't work that way. Legally, they have the right to sell the house."

"And reap the profits from multiple bids?"

Bobby did not like this Allison Lin. She lacked the enthusiasm of her counterpart the day before. "That's *if* we get multiple bids. For the time being, my hands are tied."

"How do I get this lien taken off my house?"

"Pay off whoever put it on in the first place."

"Then would I be able to sell my house and get multiple offers?"

Again, a pause. "Sure, Mr. Wheeler . . . look, when you get the lien paid off, give me a call."

Bobby felt the familiar stab of rejection followed by the tight grip of failure. It was a pattern.

"Shit." He kicked the box that belonged to his ex-wife. *Boof.* His size twelve foot made a crease in its worn side. He kicked it again. Because he was still mad at her for leaving him, even after all this time. He kicked the box again and a seam busted, spilling yellowed sheet music out onto the floor.

PRUDENCE WORE TASSELED loafers (sans socks) and had blunt, chin-length hair when Bobby Wheeler met her in the summer of 1986. He didn't know her as the youngest person ever to host *Saturday Night Live.* She was just the cute girl who worked part-time at Disc World, the record store next to the auto parts place where he worked on Bowen Street in Longmont, Colorado.

It was a regular old lunch hour when Bobby Wheeler first saw her. He had wandered over after eating the sandwich his mother had made for him, intending to buy the new Dire Straits album. He tried to make eye contact with a girl browsing the cassettes, but he was

distracted by the loud voice coming from the back of the store. Something about a box of records being dropped on the floor.

"I don't care about your hands, Prudence."

"That would make you the only one on the planet."

The manager continued to hassle her about cracked records and leaving the cash register drawer open. He was being a real asshole. Bobby Wheeler would have popped off at him by now. Not this girl. She wasn't flustered or defiant, just very sure of herself. He wished he had that kind of self-control.

It became a regular thing after that, him going in on his lunch hour. He liked to watch her work. She was great with customers. Always as passionate about their selections as they were and even more knowledgeable. She was smart and understood a shitload about music. She'd tap on the metal cash register with drumsticks to the beginning of "When Doves Cry." "Hear that uneven beat? That's syncopation." Or how classical music could be about sex. Sex! "Listen to Ravel's *Boléro*. It'll make you blush." Or how this composer, Rachmaninoff, loved fast cars just like Bobby.

They got to know each other quickly. She'd take him into the little soundproof room in the back of the store and play stuff he never heard of. John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie. Beethoven. A guy could get beat up for listening to Beethoven in 1986. But Bobby was falling hard.

"How do you know so much about music?" he asked her.

"It's always been inside me." She told him she'd only been fifteen when she went away to college in New York City.

"Wow, your parents let you go?"

"I don't have parents. I live with my grandmother."

"Are your parents dead?"

"No, just selfish. Anyway, I didn't last at Juilliard. I flipped out from the pressure. My grandmother won't let me forget it."

Prudence rolled up the sleeve of her pink Izod shirt to reveal a purple bruise on her right bicep. "She never messes with my hands, though."

This was all terribly troubling to Bobby Wheeler. He decided he had to find a way to save her.

But before he could figure out how, Prudence decided she would save herself. To hell with her grandmother's tantrums. She was going to run away from home.

Could she borrow some money?

"Don't leave, Peanut," he whispered. "Let's get married instead."

Prudence took a few days to think about it. The more she thought, the more the idea of marriage sounded good. Very grown-up. Marrying Bobby, she would no longer have to be Miss Prudence Paddington, Child Prodigy. She could be Mrs. Prudence Wheeler, Wife and Composer. She would be taken seriously. She would get away from her grandmother. Finally, she would have some peace and quiet.

Bobby Wheeler would be getting something, too. He had grown up in a house where rusted-out cars littered the yard, where the paint on the front porch peeled like an old sunburn. Until he met Prudence, it did not occur to him that there might be more for him. He could see then, through the window of youth, what he might become with a girl like Prudence by his side. A better, more refined version of himself. Someone the world might expect things of.

Or so he thought.

Turns out the young couple didn't have much in common. A month into the marriage, the cracks started to show. These weren't little cracks like you'd find in a teacup. These were big fissures like you'd find in the Grand Canyon.

Prudence complained about his music. "Could you stop playing that stupid record over and over? It's starting to scrape out the insides of my ears," she'd say.

"Seriously? It's Iron Maiden!"

He complained about her friends. "I'm not going to another play with your dumb friends."

"Seriously? It's Tom Stoppard."

Prudence didn't drink beer or watch wrestling on television. He didn't read poetry or eat sushi.

That crazy-ass piano was another big problem. He never did figure out how she managed to drag it around everywhere. It was part of her magic, he supposed. It would appear and disappear, as easily as if she had folded it up and deposited it into her purse.

The garage was the only room at Bobby's house that was big enough for the Steinway. His parents' garage, actually. Bobby lived at home with his folks.

The other Mrs. Wheeler couldn't stand the massive piano that had taken over her parking space. Bobby's mom was forced to park her 1978 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme—her pride and joy—on the street, where the neighbor's cat left muddy paw marks all over the hood.

Things got worse once Prudence was fired from the record store. (Could happen to anyone, leaving the keys in the door after closing.) Jobless, she would sleep all day and compose music all night. This drove Bobby's mother crazy. "Anyone smart enough to get into Juilliard at fifteen ought to be smart enough to find some *got*damn work," she said.

Bobby tried to stick up for his wife. "It's what she does, Ma, it's her art."

"Art, my ass." Bobby's mother started humming Prudence's latest melody, a simple tune that would eventually become Double Bubble Dish Soap. "That sound like art? Sounds like crap. If you were any kind of man, you'd learn how to handle your wife."

"Prudence is special, Ma—"

"Special, my ass. You're in for a long road, mister."

What could he do? They were living rent-free. He had to let his mother call the shots. Besides, trying to get Prudence to change her habits was like trying to reverse the jet stream.

There was never a moment's peace in that small house. The two Mrs. Wheelers argued constantly.

"You've been stealing my cigarettes, girly."

"I don't smoke Camels," Prudence said. "I smoke Marlboros."

"Would it kill you to wipe down the kitchen table after you eat? My playing cards are sticky."

Prudence doused the table—and the playing cards—with Fantastik. "That better?"

"Spoiled, is what she is," Mrs. Wheeler said to her son.

One night, it all exploded. When Prudence went into the garage to play her piano, Bobby followed her in, his mother not two feet away and feeding him his lines.

"She needs to get her butt back in bed," the senior Mrs. Wheeler said.

"Peanut, come on," Bobby said, "let's go to bed."

"I'm working." Prudence, pencil in hand, played a few notes then wrote on a pad of lined paper.

"You tell her enough of this nonsense."

"Pru, enough."

"Leave me," Prudence said.

His mom's anger radiated like a furnace. "You're weak," she hissed in Bobby's ear.

Bobby Wheeler never acted so much as reacted, responding to whatever was in front of him. He snapped. "Pru, would you just . . ." He gave Prudence a good shove, causing her to topple off the bench. Oddly, as if it had happened before, she did not use her hands to break her fall, but tucked them under her arms and landed on her face. Dazed, she picked herself up and ran off into the night.

She called the next morning for her sheet music. The day after that three guys showed up for the piano. A week later the three-month marriage was annulled.

Bobby Wheeler revisited that evening often, a wound he kept picking at, trying to convince himself it wasn't his fault.

All these years later, there was a knot of loneliness in his stomach that never went away. He didn't have many friends. Hadn't had a date in god knows how long. The closest he got to female conversation was watching those women chat on *The View* every morning. Was it so wrong to want someone in his life? Someone to love, someone who *got him*?

Bobby Wheeler wasn't a bad guy, he just never seemed to get it right.

Turning off REO Speedwagon, he scrolled through his playlist until he found "Clair de Lune." The first time he heard Prudence play it, he had been drawn to it immediately though he couldn't say why. It was sad and hopeful at the same time. He knew nothing about classical music but Prudence told him that didn't matter. "You have just as much a right to love it as anyone."

It was the only time he could remember not feeling stupid about something he didn't know. More than that, it was the first time he felt he had a right to love.

How can you give someone that feeling then take it away?

Sitting down in the middle of the dented lampshades and back issues of *Car and Driver,* Bobby Wheeler wept for Prudence. He wept for the magic in her fingers, for the poetry in her soul.

Bobby Wheeler gathered up the sheet music. That's when he noticed the envelope. The postage was dated November 14, 1986, a week before she'd run out on him. He snatched the letter from its envelope. "Dear Prudence . . ." he read out loud. "I'm writing to you because I've learned of your current circumstances and I strongly encourage you to get out of them. Your talent is the rarest of all and must not be wasted. Isaac Stern once said, people who have a God-given talent have the obligation to share it. They must not withhold their artistry. Please consider returning to Juilliard. Use this jingle for your great escape. Success awaits you."

It was written in rolling cursive that reminded him of the way his grandmother used to write. It was signed *Your friend, Mrs. Martinelli.*

Bobby Wheeler couldn't believe what he was reading. Your great escape? This Mrs. Martinelli had actually *encouraged* Prudence to leave him? Bobby had remembered Prudence talking about the lady, who had been her babysitter and piano teacher, too. But this letter—these were the words of an instigator. An accomplice!

He read the letter a second time before slowly turning it over. There, on the back, was a handwritten score with those famous

lines, known all over the world. An earworm before anyone had ever heard of the term. Oh my *god,* thought Bobby. The Pep Soda jingle! It'd been right under his nose the whole time. Prudence was a liar and a cheat. The great solo artist had a partner—at the very least—yet she had taken credit for this jingle and who knows what else?!

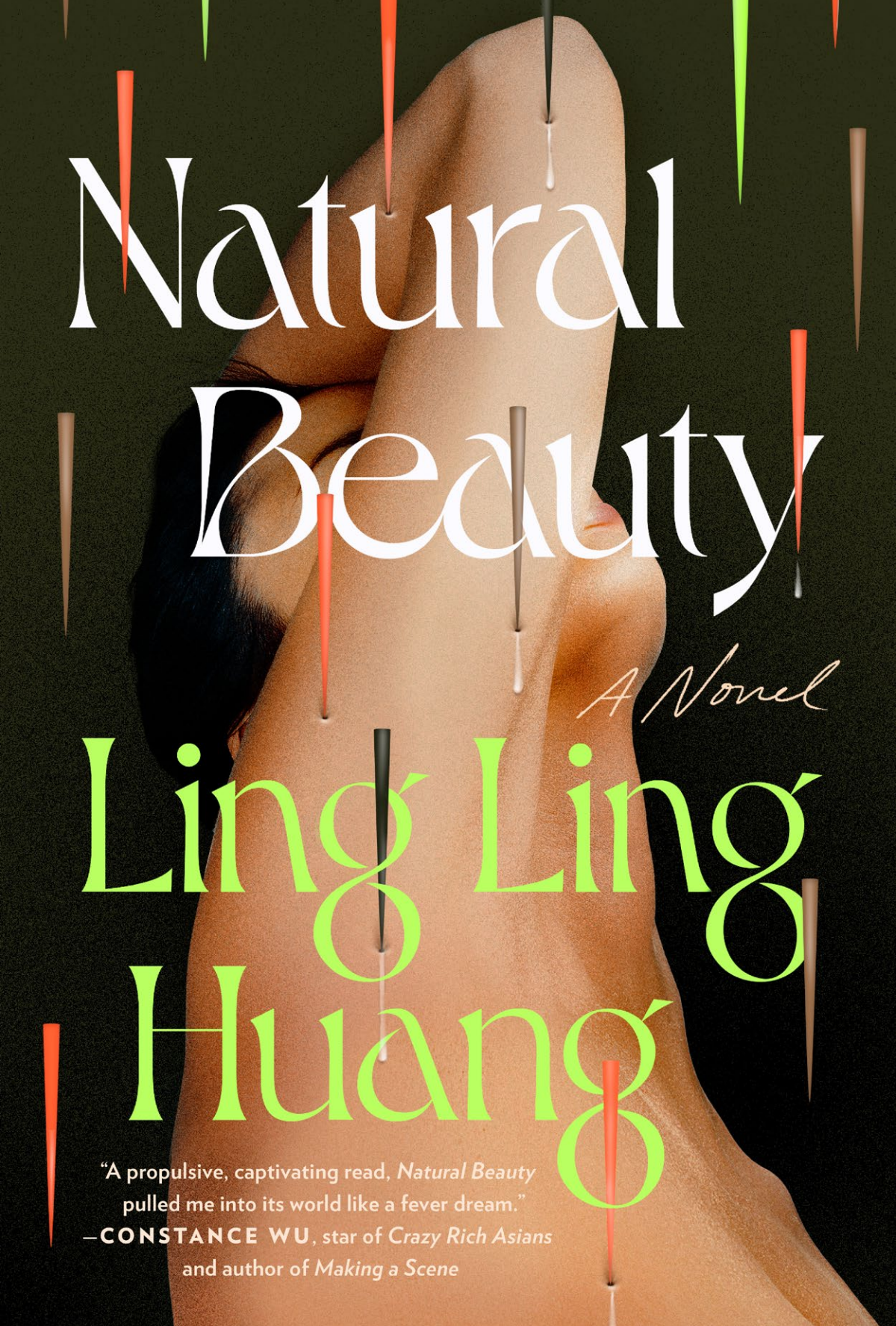
He turned off Debussy and double-tapped on Molly Hatchet, "Flirtin' with Disaster." Great fucking song. He turned the volume way up. He tried to jump up on his coffee table but needed the aid of his ottoman as a boost.

He played air guitar, rocking back and forth like a king. He whipped his head up and down, working himself into a sweat. Roaring out the lyrics, he imagined being up on a stage surrounded by his bandmates. The crowd went crazy. This was the persona he'd arm himself with. Rock god.

The song finished, Bobby Wheeler jumped off the coffee table (but lost his balance and fell against the recliner). He wiped his brow, took a bow, and picked up the letter, which he carefully slid back into its envelope.

Once more, he could feel his luck changing.

"See you soon, Peanut."


Natural Beauty
A Novel
Ling Ling Huang
"A propulsive, captivating read, *Natural Beauty* pulled me into its world like a fever dream."
—CONSTANCE WU, star of *Crazy Rich Asians* and author of *Making a Scene*

DUTTON
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Huang, Ling Ling, 1989– author.
Title: Natural beauty : a novel / Ling Ling Huang.
Description: New York : Dutton, [2023]
Identifiers: LCCN 2022027633 (print) | LCCN 2022027634 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780593472927 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593472934 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Black humor. | Satirical literature. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3608.U22483 N38 2023 (print) |
LCC PS3608.U22483 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220819
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022027633
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022027634

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Interior art: Pattern © giterichka / Shutterstock

BOOK DESIGN BY KRISTIN DEL ROSARIO

CHAPTER ONE

Even the door is beautiful. A single piece of dark heavy wood, like rich chocolate poured under an ancient stone archway carved with wings and scales. My hand rests on the golden doorknob, surprisingly hot to the touch. A twist and a push and I am pulled in by the deep pink carpets and the soft muted clinking of expensive products. Warm candlelight emanates from every surface. A light botanical smell fills the air.

People mill around, tightly wrapped in sumptuous wools and furs. They sniff, drip, and dribble substances onto themselves. Light gray mother-of-pearl inlays stripe the walls. When the light catches, they seem to move like the sudden falling of tears. In fact, the entire place feels unusually alive, as if I have stumbled into the womb of a slumbering giantess.

In the back, a tall man in a sharp black suit stands next to a woman caressing the sleeping sloth curled around her neck. He nods at her a few times before crouching down abruptly to catch a vial tumbling from a toddler's pudgy hand. He straightens and smiles at the child as he places the product out of reach. He moves with authority, towering over everyone. Balletic and rigorous in his economy of movement.

His dark blond hair is slicked close to his head, and his face has a rubbery quality, like it would hold a pressed handprint. The exception is his cheekbones, which slice the air like fins. I realize he looks familiar, though I can't remember where I've seen him. The wall behind him is light pink, filled with rows and rows of white ceramic jars, like gleaming teeth embedded in a healthy set of gums.

"Darling, you came! Welcome to Holistik."

Saje walks over with quick steps and slips an arm through mine. I worry that she can smell me, the November air not yet cold enough to keep me from sweating on my long walk here. Her smile is warm. "What do you think?"

She's wearing a silky nude jumpsuit, and dark red hair snakes over her shoulder, glinting in the dim lighting. Her irises are brown but have a surprising yellow edge I hadn't noticed last night. She is so tall in her animal-skin stilettos, I have to strain my neck to meet her eye.

"Would you be interested in working here?"

My jaw drops open and my mouth fills with cold air. I hastily shut it, embarrassed, and look at her for a few long seconds to see if there's any chance she's fucking with me. Her expression is unchanged—and looking around at all the products, so many specifically made to keep women from ever aging, I wonder if she's even capable of different expressions.

"Yes," I say, exalting her by craning my neck as high as it will go. She starts to explain the particulars of the job, the pay and benefits included, and I feel a wave of relief so intense, I have to reach out and grab the display table next to me.

"Thank you," I add, surprised to find myself blinking back tears.

Her smile widens, showing teeth. "No thanks necessary. I'm so glad I found you. I knew from the moment we met that you'd be the perfect addition to our little family here. I'll introduce you to Lilith in a moment. She'll be the one to show you around. Why don't you go downstairs? There's an employee closet where you can put your things."

CHAPTER TWO

I take the stairs down and pause. How different from my previous place of employment. Every bit as opulent as the floor above, this private space is enormous and inviting. A few women seem to float together on a cloudlike structure that acts as a sofa. They are homogeneously beautiful, as if airlifted from a movie set about popular high school girls. They are still in character, perhaps, since they don't acknowledge or even notice me. Gigantic shelves loom on the left, crammed with stone jars and crystal vials. A clean, faintly medicinal smell puts me at ease. It is cold down here, refreshingly so, and I love the clinical click of my shoes on the porcelain tiles.

The full kitchen is spotless, as if it has never been used. My view through the clear refrigerator door is blocked by a dense forest of rainbow-colored juices. I ignore my sudden hunger pangs and begin my search for the employee closet.

I pass a door with an electronic lock. A sign over it: *The Zoo.* Down the main hallway, a glass door. Beyond it, people dressed in white lab coats move with urgency. On a table in front of them, something wrinkled and translucent pumps like a beating heart.

Jellyfish, I think, though they look like crumpled plastic bags recently fished out of water. In the closet, I leave my bag and hang up my ratty old coat. At least the clothes I am wearing underneath are somewhat nicer. Long sleeves, as Saje had requested.

She had stomped in late, looking so filthy rich no one wanted to tell her the restaurant was closed. She was very beautiful, with skin so white it was almost translucent, and her long red hair was tucked into a lavender coat that looked incredibly soft. I could have believed someone was airbrushing her live image.

I had just finished another day of scrubbing endless dishes in piping hot water. It wasn't so bad once I'd gotten used to it. At the end of each night, I would kick off my shoes, eat leftovers from the kitchen, and strip the burned skin from my hands. I felt triumphant when I could get a large piece off all at once, like peeling off an opera glove. Months of lightly flaying myself had made the raw skin baby soft, and I sometimes fantasized about submerging my whole body in the sink, shedding everything.

"May I have one?" She slipped into the seat opposite mine, gesturing at my leftovers, coiling her legs beneath her.

I masked my surprise with politeness. "Sure. They're cold, though."

She picked at the soggy fries, pushing them through a small opening between her two front teeth. I was mesmerized by this action. The gap caused a soft musical whistle when she spoke, as if she had songbirds in her throat. She sighed and the birds took flight. I felt grimy sitting across from her, surely exuding the smell of recycled frying oil from every orifice.

"Man's greatest invention, don't you think? The potato with salt," the woman said, licking a finger.

I said nothing. Carla was glaring at me from behind the counter, prematurely accusing me of stealing a wealthy customer.

"Did you know that they can be toxic? Nothing serious. You won't die from a potato, but it can make you very ill," she said.

I smiled reflexively. Rich people have all the time in the world to pick up random anecdotes for small talk.

She suddenly leaned in, peering at me with an inquisitiveness that made me stop breathing. "Wait a minute. I know you."

I almost looked behind me. "Excuse me?"

"You look very familiar. Have we met?"

I gazed at her once more, carefully, before shaking my head. My hair, greasy from a day next to the fryer, didn't move.

"Have you been in the city a long time? Do you study here?"

Close enough, I thought as I nodded.

"What do you study?"

"I studied piano. At the Conservatory."

There was a look of recognition on her face.

She jabbed a fry at me. "I knew it. You're her! The Rachmaninoff girl!" she said. "Am I right?"

A quick nod.

"You're incredible! I love the piano, and I'm a huge supporter of the arts!"

"That's great," I say.

There's a pause before I realize I should thank her for supporting the vague "arts," which in this instance is me. "Thanks so much."

"What are you doing here? A bit far from the Conservatory, aren't you?" She was leaning in so close, I could feel her hot breath on my face.

"I'm not there anymore."

"Where are you playing next? I would love to see you perform."

I hesitated, still unsure of how to answer these types of questions. It had been almost three years since I had touched a piano. For a second, I imagined shrinking in size and bouncing on her fully cushioned lips instead of answering her.

"I don't really play anymore."

"You don't? Why!"

"It was just time to move on."

"How do you make a living?"

"I work here. Dishwasher." I showed her my hands.

Predictably, she gasped.

"But what a waste of your hands! Your talent!"

I shrugged.

"They must pay a fortune if that's what you're doing to yourself!"

"It's better than nothing. I get a lot of free food."

Before the restaurant job, I consistently found myself choosing between eating enough and putting money away for rent. I never went through with it, but there were too many nights when I waited for my roommates to fall asleep before creeping upstairs to listen to the quiet burbling of their cat's triple-filtered water fountain and to stand transfixed by the gleam of gold tops on her gourmet cat food.

"Stop by anytime. Ask for me." She was opening her purse and reaching inside. "I go to the Philharmonic every week, and I've never heard a pianist who can do what you do. You deserve better, and we can certainly give you more than free food."

I was startled to see a look of genuine concern in her eyes. The

card she slid onto the sticky tabletop was iridescent and embossed with the word *Holistik*. The script was so lavishly curled, the letters looked like they might sneak off the card to ensnare me. She turned it around and tapped on her name a couple of times.

Saje Bernsson.

She rose, encompassing me in her shadow. "My driver is waiting." She placed a cold hand over one of mine, shocking me. "I hope to see you soon." Putting leather gloves on at the door, she looked back at me, remembering something. "Wear long sleeves when you visit."

The wind let in a flurry of freshly fallen leaves, red as her hair. Feathers, too, inexplicably floated out from her open handbag. They swirled in the wind, eventually sticking to the dirty tile.

I find a bathroom across from the employee closet. The floor is spongy, and every step emits a whiff of something sublime. It appears to be a carpet made of woven eucalyptus, matted and pulverized to be plush and springy underfoot. A tub lined with jars of scented salts takes up half the room. I slip into the large celadon half egg, opening the carafes and smelling each one, almost compulsively. My bladder is full, but I can't imagine using the toilet, which looks like an art piece. In the mirror, I'm surprised to find that the soft light makes me look well rested. Not quite beautiful, but not completely out of place in this enchanted setting. A creamy soap is dispensed from a sculpture of a bathing woman, and I sink my hands into a dense fluffy towel before hurrying back upstairs.

Saje is waiting for me near the stairs with a strikingly beautiful young woman. A light gray gauze, more mist than coat, is

draped over her tight-knit dress and over-the-knee leather boots. She has long glossy hair the color of roasting chestnuts and dark green eyes with all the depth and chill of an overgrown forest. She can't be much older than I am, but on her face, there is more than a hint of superiority. I don't yet know this to be a trait shared by all Holistik girls.

"There you are! This is Lilith. She's our exceptional manager, and she'll tell you everything you need to know."

"Hi," I say, anxious under Lilith's cool gaze.

She dips her chin slightly in my direction as a greeting. "Are you headed back to the Gunks?" she asks Saje, who answers affirmatively before turning back to me.

"I am so happy you're joining us. A quick word before I leave?" Saje asks.

I glance nervously at Lilith. She covers a yawn with a tiny hand before stepping two paces away.

Saje's eyes glow with pleasure as she looks me up and down. "You already fit in so beautifully. As you can see, we favor an international staff."

I look around, but none of the other staff seem particularly international to me. If anything, I seem like a clear diversity hire. I lower my head in agreement like a good model minority.

"I want to warn you about some of our customers. They may assume you're from the Mainland or another country. It's offensive, especially in this day and age, but it might be best to let them think they're right and to focus on the products you're selling."

I try to smile.

"Exactly like that. And do bring up the formal piano training. Only if you're comfortable, of course. We have a few expensive hand creams that may sell especially well with your endorse-

ment." She reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. "That reminds me." She pops a little glass jar into my palm. "For your poor hands. I'll see you soon! Lilith will take great care of you." She walks away, leaving me alone with Lilith.

I look at the jar, unscrew the heavy lid, and dab a bit on my left hand. A light floral scent rises as the thick cream clings to my skin. Nothing like the watery stuff Ma would rub on my aching hands after long sessions of piano practice. She fortified cheap lotion or Vaseline with a liniment she made using Chinese herbs. Every night after dinner, no matter how exhausted she was, she would soften the calluses on my fingertips so they wouldn't split open. We would watch TV, I would read to her from a book, or she would tell me the things she missed about home. We always drank chrysanthemum tea, steeping the same tired flowers from the day before. The fingers of one hand would always run impatiently while she massaged the other one.

"You're just like me," Ma said. "Every morning in Cultural Revolution, we woke up and officers watch us carefully make sure we read the Little Red Book. I always keep my fingers moving. So small they can't see. But moving. Hope one day get out, can play piano again."

"She was his mistress," Lilith says coolly.

She had seen my eyes glazing over at the memory of my mother and assumed it was a reaction to the microscopic print on her translucent shawl. I look closer, focusing this time on the delicate name tag. Her eyes blink slowly at me with boredom as if to say, *Yes, I am the child of that famous director. No, I wasn't conceived in something as ordinary as marriage.*

"The lab downstairs will want to get samples from you and take measurements for your uniform. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. Come find me on the floor afterward."

I make my way back downstairs.

People in white lab coats run around, scanning and swabbing me with whirring devices.

"What's all of this for?" I ask the nearest young man.

"We're testing the composition of your body and facial skin to make custom products and supplements for you. They'll be ready at the end of your shift today. One of the many perks of working here."

He grins and continues circling my head with a protracted gray rod. I imagine him bringing it down on me repeatedly.

Next he brings me to a small room by the lab where he tells me my new Holistik uniform will be constructed. Another man sprays me with something before I enter, and the taste catches in my throat, faintly floral like jasmine tea, but mostly sticky.

"Semiochemicals for the worms. You're not afraid of worms, are you?"

In the room, I clear my throat to try and get it to unstick. The man gives me a thumbs-up from a little window. One by one, they start to descend. The room I had thought was empty is filled with thousands of worms, lowering from the ceiling on delicate string. They twist and somersault drunk figure eights. The sound of silk being spun is beautiful, a silvery hum with an indiscernible pitch. My mind can't help but try to transcribe it into music I can play. Suddenly, the little bleached bodies begin to retract, and a voice speaks over an intercom.

"You can come through the door now."

I hesitate and look back. A gentle wind starts blowing in the

room and I begin to feel faint. A hand grabs me—the man with the rod earlier has opened the door. His hand is warm and too tight around my wrist, as if I've done something wrong.

"It's all right, you're OK!" He steadies me and I try to blink away the white spots in my eyes. I feel sure that without his support, I would fall.

"What's happening to me?"

"You're OK," he says firmly. "Just a little cross-contamination. Something we use for the worms to make them obedient. For the silk extraction."

I look back through the window at the dangling silkworms. "Are they—"

He waves a hand impatiently. "They're OK. They're paralyzed for a bit while we extract and shape the silk, but they'll continue their life cycle afterward. The alternative is boiling them alive, so I think they would agree this is preferable. Even if they had memories, they wouldn't remember a thing."

He looks at me with his brows knitted together.

"I'll walk you upstairs," he says.

Through the little window, I watch as the air inside the room grows perceptibly stronger, blowing the silkworms until they fall en masse to the ground, a sudden shower of snow.

Lilith hands me a thick deck of illustrated cards as soon as I get upstairs. I flip one over. A long bell-shaped flower. *Borrachero tree* is written underneath, with a list of products and applications. The next card features a watercolor of golden wattles. The brushstrokes are so delicate I have to restrain myself from trying to lift the wattle's delicate fluff off the page.

"Think of these as take-home flashcards for our products," she says.

Hundreds of products, it turns out. Creams, powders, serums, cleansers, oils, dry oils, drips, essences, acids, toners. A never-ending treasure trove of human ingenuity. Each with unique ingredients, targeted benefits, and very specific application methods. As Lilith gives me a tour, my head spins with new information and my skin stings from trying all the products. By the end of the day, one of my cheeks is bouncy and soft, the other taut. My nose runs from an allergic reaction and my lips swell from a sticky gloss.

"You look beautiful!" a customer remarks as I pass her.

"Thank you," I struggle to say through numb lips.

"It's the venom," Lilith reassures me.

I look at her in alarm.

"From the Japanese mamushi. A pit viper." She laughs at my reaction. "Don't worry, the dosage is very precise."

Her laugh catches me off guard. Her beauty is severe and her expression serious, but when she laughs, her cheeks become rosy and full except for a small indentation in the right cheek. I imagine dipping my pinky toe into her dimple.

We pass a display case of empty glass jars, each one priced at several hundred dollars.

"What are these?"

She glances at them. "Snake food."

I look from the empty jars to her equally blank face and back again. "There's nothing in them."

"Well, it's not physical food. It's spiritual food to awaken Kundalini, the power serpent of divine energy that lives at the base of our spine."

A small silver pebble hanging on a delicate strand around Lilith's neck begins to hum. I stare in surprise. The vibration increases until it lifts slightly from her neck. She wraps her hand around the object and slips it off the chain. It swings open with a swift movement of her fingers, and she removes a handful of what look like tiny precious jewels, transferring them to her mouth.

"That reminds me," she says, pulling a velvet pouch out of a pocket. "Hold out your hand."

She extracts a lump of clear putty from the bag and dumps it onto my palm. It prickles a bit as it lands and hardens until it becomes identical to the pebble around her neck. I turn it over and over, trying to figure out how it achieved such a dramatic transformation.

"Beautiful, aren't they? We all have one. They're designed by Matthieu Ricard and powered by Avidia Tech. It's basically a physical Holistik app. It'll remind you when to take your supplements, and you can keep the most important ones inside so they're readily accessible."

"The pills and stuff are required?" Saje hadn't mentioned anything about this earlier.

"Along with monthly facials, massages, and skin treatments. The more experimental stuff is optional. Encouraged . . . but not mandatory. Some of the girls definitely take it too far, in my opinion." Her hands drop from my neck after she helps me put on my new accessory. The chain cinches suddenly and clasps on its own. She peers at a tiny gold watch on her wrist and frowns, pulling her hair back with an elastic. "We have to set up for a procedure."

I follow Lilith down a long dark hallway into the spa wing. Her pert ponytail and bangs bounce rhythmically as she walks,

reminding me of the metronome I used for piano practice as a child. Most of the doors are open, and my eyes take in sumptuous massage beds, steam rooms, and bright aqua whirlpools. When we step inside the last room of the hallway, I react with a loud gasp before I can stop myself. Lilith rolls her eyes as I recoil from the door.

"I know. It smells foul, but you'll get used to it."

There is a large gleaming tub in the corner and three wooden crates on the floor. Lilith pins her thick bangs to one side before opening a drawer and removing two sets of tongs. I take the pair she hands me.

"Ready?" Lilith pries off the lid of a box and hundreds of crabs scuttle out. "We toss them in there."

She works fast, panting as she picks up and deposits crabs into the tub with her tongs. I try to match her speed, but they are unwieldy and strong. The stench is unbearable, reminding me of the time the walk-in freezer stopped working at the restaurant. I was tasked with disposing of the catfish fillets, which had rotted and slimed together. I carried them in schools down the block to the dumpster and my fingernails smelled of fish for weeks.

The last crate is smaller, containing only a few fish.

"Remora," Lilith says, slowly lowering them into the tub.

"What kind of procedure is this?"

Lilith stops for a moment and stares at me with narrowed eyes. "You've never heard of the Chaoshan Mud Treatment."

"No."

"The procedure that launched a thousand copycat treatments."

"To be honest, I just learned about Holistik yesterday."

Lilith looks doubtful. "But you probably saw Victor, right?"

"I'm not sure. What does he look like?"

"You don't know what Victor Carroll looks like?"

"No."

"He's tall. He was wearing a black suit."

"Oh, yes, I saw him."

"Victor is the owner and CEO of Organic Provisions, the parent company of Holistik."

"*He's* the owner? Not Saje?"

"Saje is the face of Holistik, but Victor is the one who makes the decisions. Optically, it's better right now to have a female founder and owner. Drives a lot more revenue."

"Right."

"You've really never heard of Victor Carroll."

"No."

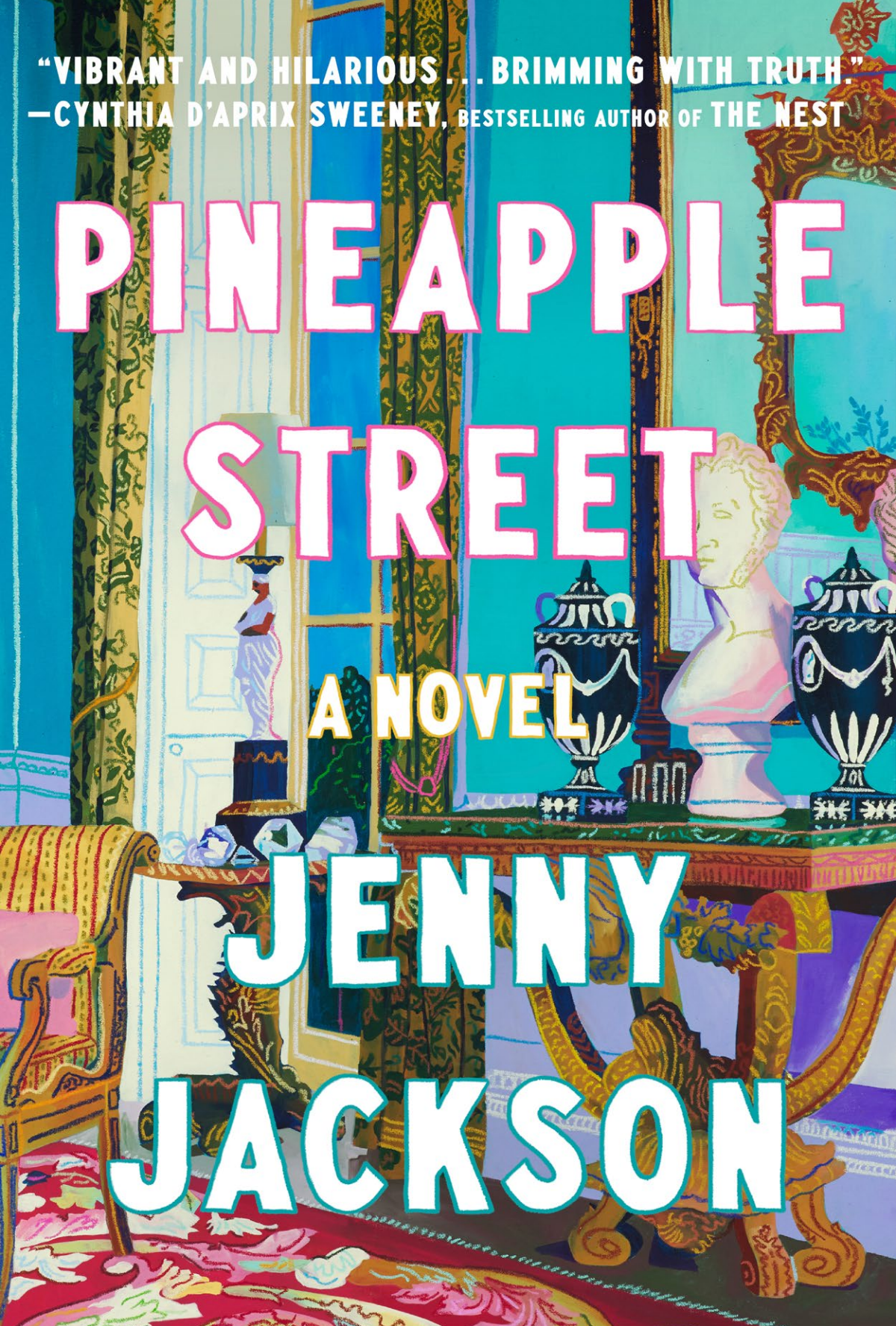
"Youngest *Forbes* 30 Under 30."

"No."

"Founder of Avidia Tech? Genysis Models, Psy-stems?"

I shake my head.

"Wow. Did you grow up under a rock?"


"VIBRANT AND HILARIOUS . . . BRIMMING WITH TRUTH."
—CYNTHIA D'APRIX SWEENEY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE NEST
PINEAPPLE STREET
A NOVEL
JENNY JACKSON

VIKING
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

A Pamela Dorman Book/Viking

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Jackson, Jenny (Editor), author.
Title: Pineapple Street : a novel / Jenny Jackson.
Description: New York City: Pamela Dorman Books; Viking, [2023]
Identifiers: LCCN 2022018944 (print) | LCCN 2022018945 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780593490693 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593654705 (international edition) |
ISBN 9780593490709 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Rich people—New York (State)—New York—Fiction. |
LCGFT: Domestic fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3610.A3519 P56 2023 (print) |
LCC PS3610.A3519 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220429
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022018944
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022018945

Printed in the United States of America
ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Designed by Amanda Dewey

Prelude

Curtis McCoy was early for his ten o'clock meeting so he carried his coffee to a table by the window, where he could feel the watery April sun. It was a Saturday, Joe Coffee was crowded, and Brooklyn Heights was alive, women in running tights pushing strollers along Hicks Street, dog walkers congregating at the benches on Pineapple Street, families dashing to soccer games, swimming lessons, birthday parties down at Jane's Carousel.

At the next table, a mother sat with her two adult daughters, drinking from blue-and-white paper cups, peering at the same phone.

"Oh, here's one! This guy's profile says he likes running, making his own kimchi, and 'dismantling capitalism.'"

Curtis tried not to listen but couldn't help himself.

"Darley, he's twice my age. No. Do you even understand how the app works?"

The name Darley rang a bell, but Curtis couldn't quite place her. Brooklyn Heights was a small neighborhood, she was probably just someone he'd seen in line ordering sandwiches at Lassen, or someone he'd crossed paths with at the gym on Clark Street.

"Fine, fine. Okay, this guy says, 'Cis male vegan seeks fellow steward of the Earth. Never eat anything with a face. Except the rich.'"

"You can't date a vegan. The footwear is ghastly!" the mother interrupted. "Give me that phone! Hmm. The whiffy here is terrible."

"Mom, it's pronounced 'wai-fai.'"

Curtis risked a quick peek at the table. The three women were dressed in tennis whites, the mother a blonde with gold earrings and a notable array of rings on her fingers, the daughters both brunette, one lanky with straight hair cut to her shoulders, the other softer, with long wavy hair loosely tied in a knot. Curtis ducked his head back down and broke off a crumbly bite of poppyseed scone.

"'Bi and nonmonogamous looking for a Commie Mommy to help me smash the patriarchy. Hit me up to go dancing!' Am I having a stroke?" the older woman murmured. "I don't understand a word of this."

Curtis fought back a snicker.

"Mom, give me the phone." The wavy-haired daughter snatched back the iPhone and tossed it in her bag.

With a start Curtis realized he knew her. It was Georgiana Stockton; she had been in his high school class at Henry Street ten years ago. He contemplated saying hello, but then it would be obvious he'd overheard their entire conversation.

"In my day, things were so much simpler," Georgiana's mother tutted. "You just went out with your deb ball escort or maybe your brother's roommate from Princeton."

"Right, Mom, but people my generation aren't giant elitist snobs," Georgiana said and rolled her eyes.

Curtis smiled to himself. He could imagine having the same exact conversation with his own mother, trying to explain why he wasn't going to marry her friend's daughter just because they owned

adjoining properties on Martha's Vineyard. As Curtis watched Georgiana out of the corner of his eye, she suddenly jumped up from her chair.

"Oh, no! I left my Cartier bracelet in Lena's BMW and she's leaving soon for her grandmother's house in Southampton!"

Georgiana tossed her bag over her shoulder, grabbed her tennis racket off the floor, planted quick kisses on both her mother and sister, and clattered past Curtis to the door. As she swept by, her tennis racket banged Curtis's table, sloshing his coffee, dousing his poppyseed scone, and leaving him frowning in her wake.

ONE

Sasha

There was a room in Sasha's house that was a portal to another dimension, and that dimension was 1997. Here, Sasha discovered an egg-shaped iMac computer with a blue plastic shell, a ski jacket with a stack of hardened paper lift tags still affixed to the zipper, a wrinkled pile of airline boarding passes, and a one-hitter with an old yellow lighter hidden in the back of a drawer. Every time Sasha mentioned to her husband that she'd love to put her sister-in-law's high school ephemera in a box, he rolled his eyes and told her to be patient. "She'll get her stuff when she has time." But Sasha had her doubts, and it was weird living in a home where one bedroom was entirely closed off, like a preserved shrine to a lost child.

On good days, Sasha could acknowledge how incredibly lucky she was to live in her house. It was a four-story Brooklyn limestone, a massive, formal palace that could have held ten of the one-bedroom apartments Sasha had lived in before. But on bad days, Sasha felt she was living in a time capsule, the home her husband had grown up in and never left, filled with his memories, his childhood stories, but mostly his family's shit.

When Sasha and Cord had been in the house for three weeks, Sasha invited her in-laws to dinner. "I'll make mushroom tarts and a goat cheese salad," she said in the email. She spent all morning rolling pie dough and even walked to the fancy market on Montague for pomegranate seeds to sprinkle over baby lettuces. She vacuumed the dining room, dusted the bookshelves, and put a Sancerre in the fridge. When her in-laws arrived, they had three L.L.Bean canvas bags in tow. "Oh, you didn't have to bring anything!" Sasha exclaimed, dismayed.

"Sasha," her mother-in-law trilled, opening the closet to hang her Chanel bouclé jacket. "We can't *wait* to hear all about your honeymoon." She carried the bags into the kitchen and proceeded to pull out a bottle of white Burgundy, two flower arrangements in low vases, a tablecloth with fleurs-de-lis on it, and three scalloped Williams Sonoma baking dishes with lids. She lined them up on the counter and, like a woman at home in her kitchen of forty years, opened up the cabinet to take down a glass for her wine.

"I've made mushroom tarts," Sasha tried, suddenly feeling like the lady at the Costco free sample table, trying to sell warm cubes of processed cheese.

"Oh, I saw in your email, darling. I gathered that meant it was a French-themed dinner. You just let me know when you're ten minutes away and I'll pop my coq au vin in the oven. I also have endives Provençal, and I brought plenty, so we might not need your salad. The candlesticks are in the drawer there, now let's go take a look at your tabletop arrangement and I'll see what else we need."

Out of solidarity, Cord ate the tart and the salad, but when Sasha caught him looking longingly at the endives, she gave him a thin

smile that said, "You can eat the damned vegetables, but you might have to sleep on the couch."

The agreement was new for all of them, and Sasha understood it was going to take some getting used to. Cord's parents, Chip and Tilda, had been complaining for years that their house was too big for the two of them, that it was too far from their garage, that they were tired of doing their own shoveling and hauling their own recycling out to the curb. They were investors in an apartment building two blocks away—the former Brooklyn Heights movie theater that was now five luxury condos—and they had decided to take the maisonette for themselves, moving in over the course of one week, using only their old Lexus and their housekeeper's husband, whom they paid three hundred bucks. That seemed like a quick divestment from a house they'd inhabited for four decades, but aside from their clothing, Sasha couldn't really figure out what they had brought to the new place. They had even left their four-poster, king-size bed in their bedroom, and Sasha felt more than a little weird sleeping there.

The Stocktons decided to let Sasha and Cord move into their vacant house and live there as long as they would like. Then, when they sold the place one day, they would split the money between Cord and his two sisters. There were some other pieces of the agreement designed to evade unnecessary inheritance taxes, but Sasha looked the other way for that bit of paperwork. The Stocktons may have let her marry their son, but she understood on a bone-deep level that they would rather let her walk in on them in the middle of an aerobic threesome with Tilda's bridge partner than have her studying their tax returns.

After dinner, Sasha and Cord cleared the table while his parents headed into the parlor for an after-dinner drink. There was a bar cart in the corner of the room with old bottles of cognac that they liked to pour into tiny, gold-rimmed glasses. The glasses, like everything else in the house, were ancient and came with a history. The parlor had long blue velvet drapes, a piano, and an itchy ball-and-claw foot sofa that had once belonged in the governor's mansion. Sasha made the mistake of sitting on it once and got such a bad rash on the backs of her legs that she had to use calamine lotion before bed. There was a chandelier in the foyer, a grandfather clock in the dining room that chimed so loudly Sasha screamed a little the first time she heard it, and an enormous painting of a ship on a menacingly dark ocean in the study. The whole place had a vaguely nautical vibe, which was funny since they were in Brooklyn, not Gloucester or Nantucket, and though Chip and Tilda had certainly spent summers sailing, they mostly chartered boats with crew. The glassware had ship's wheels etched in them, the place mats had oil paintings of sailboats, the bathroom had a framed seafaring chart, and even their beach towels had diagrams for tying various knots. Sometimes Sasha found herself wandering the house in the evenings, running her hand along the ancient frames and candlesticks, whispering, "Batten down the hatches!" and "Swab the deck!" and making herself laugh.

Sasha and Cord finished moving the plates to the kitchen and joined Cord's parents in the parlor, where he poured them each a small glass of cognac. It tasted sticky and medicinal and made Sasha weirdly aware of the small hairs inside her nostrils, but she drank it anyway, just to be companionable.

"So how do you kids like the place?" Tilda asked, folding one long leg over the other. She had dressed for dinner and was wearing a colorful blouse, a pencil skirt, sheer stockings, and three-inch heels.

The Stocktons were all quite tall, and with the heels her mother-in-law positively towered over Sasha, and if anyone said that wasn't a power move, they were lying through their teeth.

"We love it." Sasha smiled. "I feel so lucky to have such a beautiful and spacious home."

"But Mom," Cord started, "we were thinking we'd like to make some changes here and there."

"Of course, sweetheart. The house is yours."

"It really is," Chip agreed. "We're all settled at Orange Street."

"That's so kind," Sasha jumped in. "I was just thinking that the bedroom closet was a little tight, but if we took out those built-in cubbies in the back—"

"Oh no, sweetie," Tilda interrupted. "You shouldn't take those out. They are just the perfect thing for all kinds of bits and bobs—off-season footwear, hats, anything with a brim that you don't want crushed. You'd really be doing yourself a disservice if you took those out."

"Oh, right, okay." Sasha nodded. "That makes sense."

"What about this parlor furniture, though," Cord tried again. "We could get a really comfy couch, and if we changed out the velvet curtains we could have a lot more light."

"But those drapes were custom made for the room. Those windows are absolutely enormous, and I think if you took the drapes down you'd just be so shocked to realize how hard it is to get the right kind of thing there." Tilda shook her head sadly, her blond hair shining in the chandelier's light. "Why don't you just live here for a little bit and really get to know the place and put some thought to what might make you the most comfortable. We really want you to feel at home here." She patted Sasha's leg firmly and stood, nodding at her husband and teetering her way to the door. "Well, we'd best

be off—thanks for dinner. I'm just going to leave the Le Creuset here and you can run it in the dishwasher. No problem at all there—they don't need to be handwashed—and I'll take them home next time we come for dinner. Or you can just drop them at ours. And you can keep the vases—I noticed your tablescape was a bit spare." She slipped on her jacket, ivory and pink with a hint of lavender, looped her handbag over her arm, and led her husband out the door, down the stairs, and back to their newly furnished, totally not-nautical apartment.

WHENEVER PEOPLE asked Sasha how she and Cord met she would answer, "Oh, I was his therapist." (A joke—WASPs don't go to therapy.) In a world of Match and Tinder, their courtship seemed quainter than a square dance. Sasha was sitting at the counter at Bar Tabac drinking a glass of wine. Her phone had died, so she had picked up an abandoned *New York Times* crossword puzzle. It was nearly finished—something she'd never come close to accomplishing—and as Sasha studied the answers, Cord walked up to place an order and started chatting, marveling at the beautiful woman who also happened to be an ace at crosswords.

They'd gotten together for cocktails a week later, and despite the fact that "their whole relationship was based on a lie," a phrase Cord liked to use regularly once he discovered Sasha couldn't actually complete even the Monday crossword, it was pretty much the perfect romance.

Well, it was the perfect romance for a real, functional pair of adults with a normal amount of baggage, independence, alcohol use,

and sexual appetite. They spent their first year together doing all the things New York couples in their early thirties do: whispering earnestly in the corner of the bar at birthday parties, expending outrageous effort getting reservations at restaurants that served eggs on ramen, sneaking bodega snacks into movie theaters, and dressing up and meeting people for brunch while secretly looking forward to the time when they would feel comfortable enough together to spend Sundays just lying on the couch eating bacon sandwiches from the deli downstairs and reading the Sunday *Times*. Of course, they got in fights too. Cord took Sasha camping and the tent flooded, and he made fun of her for being scared to pee alone at night, and she swore at him and told him she would never set foot in Maine ever again. Sasha's best friend, Vara, invited them to opening night of her gallery show, and Cord missed it, stuck at work, and didn't understand the magnitude of his transgression. Cord got pink eye and had to walk around looking like a half-rabid bunny, and Sasha teased him until he sulked. But overall, their love was storybook stuff.

It did take Sasha a long time to figure out that Cord was rich—embarrassingly long, considering that his name was Cord. His apartment was nice enough, but normal. His car was an absolute beater. His clothing was nondescript, and he was a total freak about taking good care of his stuff. He used a wallet until the leather cracked, his belts were the same ones his grandmother bought him in high school, and he treated his iPhone like it was some kind of nuclear code that needed to be carried in a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, or at least wrapped in both a screen protector and a case thicker than a slice of bread. Sasha must have watched *The Wolf of Wall Street* too many times, because she always thought rich New York guys would have slicked back hair and constantly be paying for bottle service at clubs. Instead, they apparently wore sweaters until they

had holes in the elbows and had unhealthily close relationships with their mothers.

Cord was borderline obsessed with his family. He and his father worked side by side every day, his sisters both lived in the neighborhood, and he met them for dinner all the time, and they talked on the phone more than Sasha spoke to anyone. Cord did things for his parents that she couldn't fathom—he went with his father to get haircuts, whenever he bought new shirts he bought his father the exact same ones, he picked up the French wine his mother liked at Astor Place, and he rubbed her feet in a way that made Sasha leave the room. Who rubbed their own mother's feet? Whenever she saw it, she thought of that scene in *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta compared it to oral sex, and she got so upset she felt her eye twitch.

Sasha loved her parents, but their lives weren't intertwined like that. They were casually interested in her work as a graphic designer, they spoke every Sunday and texted a bit in between, and sometimes when she went home to visit she would be surprised to realize they had traded in their car for something new and never mentioned it, and once had even knocked down a wall between the kitchen and the living room.

Sasha's sisters-in-law were nice to her. They texted on her birthday, they made sure to ask after her family, lent her a racket and whites so she could join in family tennis on vacation. But Sasha still felt that on some level they would prefer she wasn't around. She would be in the middle of telling Cord's older sister, Darley, a story, and when Cord walked in the room Darley would simply stop listening and start asking him questions. Georgiana, his younger sister, would ostensibly be talking to everyone, but Sasha noticed her eyes never left her siblings. Their family was a unit, a closed circuit Sasha couldn't ever seem to penetrate.

The Stocktons were in real estate. At first, this made it feel even stranger to Sasha that their house was so cluttered. Shouldn't they be living in some kind of spare, *Architectural Digest* dreamscape? But it turned out their interest in real estate was less about selling single apartments and more about large-scale investing. Cord's grandfather, Edward Cordington Stockton, had inherited a modest fortune from his family. In the 1970s, he used that money to buy up property on the Upper East Side as the city teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. He spent forty-five dollars per square foot. That real estate was now worth twelve hundred per square foot, and the Stocktons were extraordinarily wealthy men. With his son, Cord's father, Chip, they bought up waterfront in Brooklyn, moving along Dumbo and into Brooklyn Heights. In 2016, when the Jehovah's Witnesses decided to divest themselves of their Brooklyn Heights properties, they jumped in, joining a group of investors to buy the famous Watchtower building, along with the former Standish Arms Hotel. Edward Cordington had passed away, but Cord now worked alongside his father, the third generation of Stockton men in New York real estate.

Paradoxically, the Stockton family had chosen to live in the fruit streets section of Brooklyn Heights, the three little blocks of Pineapple, Orange, and Cranberry streets situated on the bluff over the waterfront. For all their investment in converting old buildings to new high-end condos, they made their home in a section completely barred from significant change by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. There were little plaques on various homes in the neighborhood, signs that read "1820" or "1824." There were tiny white clapboard houses. There were leafy gardens hidden behind

wrought-iron gates. There were former stables and carriage houses. Even the CVS looked like part of an English hamlet, with walls of ivy-covered stone. Sasha particularly loved a house on the corner of Hicks and Middagh streets, a former pharmacy, where the tilework on the entryway spelled out "DRUGS."

Cord's mother's side of the family was perhaps of even more prestigious pedigree. Tilda Stockton, née Moore, came from a long line of political royalty. Both her father and brother had been governors of New York, and she had been featured in family profiles in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair.* She had married Chip Stockton when she was twenty-one, and though she had never had a proper nine-to-five job, she had earned a reputation as a wildly successful event consultant, mostly by connecting her wealthy socialite friends with her favorite party planners. For Tilda Stockton, no evening was complete without a vision, a theme, a tablescape, and a dress code. It all made Sasha want to hide under a pile of monogrammed cocktail napkins.

Sasha spent the months following her wedding trying to settle into her new Pineapple Street home. She decided that she was an archaeologist, studying the ancient civilization of her in-laws. But instead of Tutankhamen's tomb, she found an ashtray Darley made in sixth grade that looked like a malformed mushroom. Instead of the Dead Sea Scrolls, she found Cord's elementary school science paper on types of pinecones. Instead of the Terracotta Army, she found an entire drawer of free toothbrushes from a dentist on Atlantic Avenue.

Of the four bedrooms, Darley's room was the worst, but none of them was truly vacant. Cord's old room had been cleaned out when he left for college, but it still housed a silver gilt candelabra, a set of

Mandarin floor vases, and dozens of framed paintings, artwork that the family had acquired over the years but had no place to hang. Georgiana's room still held all her college textbooks and photo albums, along with an entire shelf of tennis trophies; and the primary bedroom, while emptied of clothing and jewelry, still contained the décor and furniture of the previous residents, and it was extremely hard for Sasha to achieve orgasm while the mahogany headboard that probably belonged to a congressman or secretary of transportation banged against the wall.

As she squeezed her empty suitcases into already-crowded closets, she pondered whether she might be allowed to replace the shower curtain. She would wait a few months.

Chip and Tilda decided to throw a housewarming party at their new apartment on Orange Street and asked that their children and spouses arrive early. It was on a Wednesday evening, because most of their friends spent their weekends at country homes and some liked to go up Thursday night. The Stockton parents' social life in the city existed only between Monday and Wednesday, before their friends scattered to the far reaches of Long Island and Litchfield County.

"What should I wear?" Sasha asked Cord, standing in front of the closet. She never knew how to dress around his family. It was like there was a mood board everyone else seemed to be consulting, but the vision eluded Sasha every time.

"Wear whatever you want, babe," Cord replied unhelpfully.

"So I can wear jeans?"

"Well, I wouldn't wear *jeans*." He frowned.

"Okay, so should I wear a dress?" Sasha asked, annoyed.

"I mean, Mom said the theme is 'upward and onward.'"

"I don't know what that means."

"I'm just going to wear what I wore to work. I'm sure most people will do that."

Cord wore a suit and tie to work, so that was about as relevant to Sasha's life as if he wore operating room scrubs or firefighter overalls. She was flummoxed, so played it safe and wore a pretty white blouse tucked into navy blue trousers, and the small diamond earrings her mother had given her for college graduation. She put on lipstick, and as she checked herself in the old mirror over the fireplace, she smiled. She felt classic, like Amal Clooney leaving the UN for dinner with George. Upward and onward, indeed.

When they arrived at the apartment, Cord's sisters were already there, Georgiana looking beautifully bohemian, her long brown hair cascading down her back, a floaty dress skimming her ankles, freckles dotting her nose, and Darley wearing a belted jumpsuit that had surely been featured in *Vogue Italia.* Darley's husband, Malcolm, was standing at her elbow, and Sasha breathed a sigh of relief. Early on she had identified Malcolm as an ally in the strange world that was siblings by marriage, and they even had a code they muttered when things got really weird: NMF. It stood for "not my family," and it exonerated them from any situation where they felt like outside witnesses to bizarre WASP rituals, like the time in July when the Stocktons had insisted on taking a professional family photo for their Christmas card and made them all wear shades of blue and white and stand in a semicircle around Chip and Tilda, who were seated in two chairs. The photographer directed them for nearly an hour, the sun baking down upon them as Berta, their housekeeper,

bustled in and out setting up the grill, and the gardening staff watered the plants, carefully avoiding eye contact. Sasha had felt like part of the Romney family and was completely mortified by the whole thing, but at least she'd been able to exchange pained glances with Malcolm. Together they were foreign-exchange students, united in their understanding that they had arrived in a deeply strange land.

Berta had been preparing all day for the housewarming party, and the dining-room table was groaning under the weight of silver platters of shrimp on ice, roast beef on crusty round melba, smoked salmon on toast points, and tiny one-bite crab cakes. She had poured glasses of white wine and arranged them on a tray that she would hold near the entrance, so that guests might begin drinking immediately upon arrival. Red wine was forbidden, obviously, mainly for the sake of the new rugs, but also because red wine teeth made everyone look terrible. Tilda was obsessed with teeth.

The guests began to arrive, and Sasha recognized many of them from her wedding. The Stocktons had so many friends at the wedding that Sasha had spent the entire reception shaking hands and trying to remember names, pausing only when her cousins pulled her out on the dance floor to shake it to "Baby Got Back." It was an elegant affair.

Cord knew everyone and was soon swept off to the study to show a bald gentleman his father's collection of watches. Some were rare military watches, some vintage Patek, some Rolex with matte and gilt dials, and they had been passed down from Cord's grandfather. They were so valuable that Chip had been approached by various auction houses with offers to buy them, but he declined. He never touched them or even looked at them, but Cord said Chip liked knowing he always had money in his apartment, like wads of cash

hidden under a mattress. (Sasha privately thought it might have more to do with the family aversion to decluttering.)

Georgiana was sitting on the sofa whispering with her godmother, while Darley and Malcolm were holding court with a small group from their racket club on Montague Street, showing them iPhone pictures of their children. Georgiana often looked prettily disheveled, her jacket slung over her shoulders and her wrists stacked with mismatched beaded bracelets, but Darley looked clean and expensive, her brown hair cut to shoulder length, her makeup barely there, a small gold watch and her wedding rings her only jewelry. Sasha stood awkwardly at the periphery, unsure how she might insert herself into a conversation. She was relieved when a woman with a helmet of blond hair made a beeline toward her and smiled broadly.

"Hi, I'd love another chardonnay, thanks so much," the woman said and handed her a glass smudged with greasy fingerprints.

"Oh, I'm Sasha," she laughed, putting her hand to her chest.

"Thank you, Sasha," the woman replied cheerfully.

"Oh, sure," Sasha recovered. She took the glass into the kitchen and refilled it from one of the bottles in the refrigerator and brought it back out to the dining room, where the woman took it with a whispered thanks and retreated to the table, where her husband was eating roast beef. Sasha made her way into the living room to look for Cord but was intercepted by a rotund man in a bow tie who handed her his dirty plate, nodding briefly before continuing his conversation. Confused, Sasha walked his plate to the kitchen and set it on the counter. This happened another four times before Sasha finally made it to Cord and glued herself to his side, nursing her own glass of wine and counting the minutes until she could go home. Could they smell that she wasn't a blue blood? Did her public school education waft from her hair as though she had spent a long day cooking

on a spattering griddle? She let her eyes roam around the room, studying the women around her. They were a pack of fancy poodles, and she felt like a guinea pig shivering with nerves.

Finally, the guests departed, and Chip dragged Cord into his office to give him an article he'd clipped from the *Journal.* (Chip and Tilda still clipped articles, refusing to forward links like everyone else.)

"Did you have fun?" Darley asked, tucking a shiny lock of hair behind her ear.

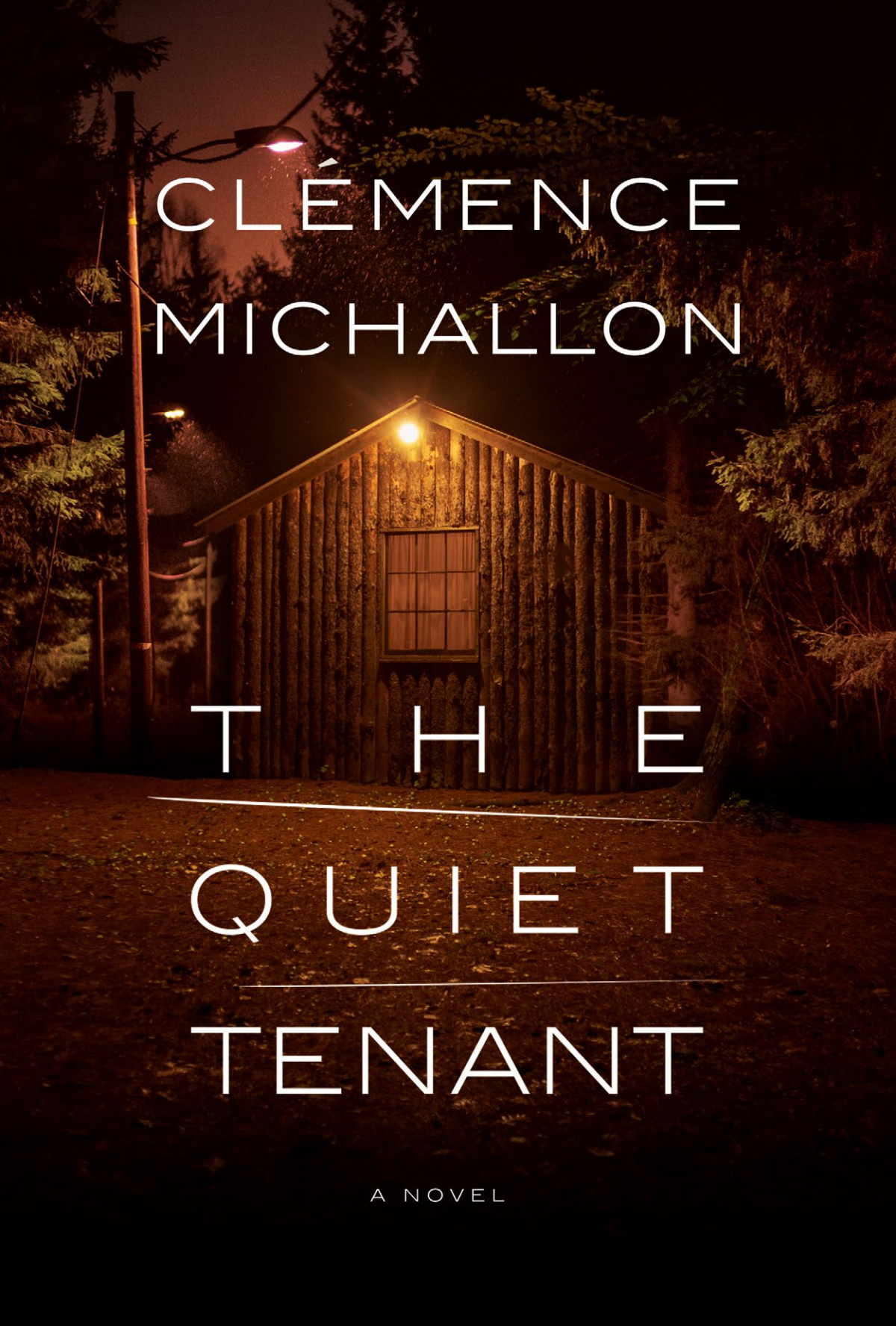
"Yeah, it was really nice," Sasha tried.

"Such a cool way to spend a night out," Darley said wryly, "hanging out with old people you don't know."

"There was one sort of funny thing," Sasha confessed. "People kept handing me their dirty plates. I mean, it was fine, but did they give you their plates too?"

"Oh!" Darley laughed. "That's so ridiculous! I hadn't noticed but you're wearing the same thing as Berta! They must have thought you were a caterer—shit! Malcolm!" She called her husband over to tell him.

Everyone laughed, Cord walking up to rub her shoulders to make sure she thought it was funny too, and Sasha played along, knowing deep in her heart that she would never wear a white blouse to a Stockton family party again as long as she lived.


CLÉMENCE
MICHALLON
THE
QUIET
TENANT
A NOVEL

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

www.aaknopf.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Michallon, Clémence, author.
Title: The quiet tenant / Clémence Michallon.
Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2023. |
"A Borzoi book"—Title page verso.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022014704 (print) | LCCN 2022014705 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780593534649 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593534656 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781524712471 (open market)
Subjects: LCSH: Serial murderers—Fiction. | LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) |
Psychological fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3613.I344475 Q54 2023 (print) |
LCC PS3613.I344475 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220629
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022014704
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022014705

Jacket images: (house) Sean Martin; (forest) Baac3nes, both Getty Images
Jacket design by Michael J. Windsor

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

CHAPTER 1

The woman in the shed

You like to think every woman has one, and he just happens to be yours.

It's easier this way. If no one's free. There is no room in your world for the ones still outside. No love for the wind in their hair, no patience for the sun on their skin.

He comes at night. Unlocks the door. Drags his boots through a trail of dead leaves. Shuts the door behind him, slides the deadbolt into place.

This man: young, strong, groomed. You think back to the day you met, to that brief moment before he revealed his true nature, and here's what you see: A man who knows his neighbors. Who always takes out the recycling on time. Who stood in the delivery room the day his child was born, a steady presence against the evils of the world. Mothers see him in line at the grocery store and shove their babies into his arms: *Can you hold her for a minute, I forgot the formula, be right back.*

And now he's here. Now he's yours.

There is an order to what you do.

He glances at you, a look that serves as an inventory. You are here. All two arms, two legs, one torso, and one head of you.

Then comes the sigh. A softening in the muscles of his back as he settles into your shared moment. He bends to adjust the electric heater or the fan, depending on the season.

You put out your hand and receive a Tupperware box. Steam rises from the lasagna, the shepherd's pie, the tuna casserole, whatever else it might be. The food, piping hot, leaves blisters on the roof of your mouth.

He hands you water. Never in a glass. Always in a canteen. Nothing that can be broken and sharpened. The cold liquid sends electric

shocks through your teeth. But you drink, because the time to drink is now. A metallic taste lingers in your mouth afterward.

He gives you the bucket, and you do what you have to do. You stopped feeling ashamed a long time ago.

He takes your waste and leaves you for a minute or so. You hear him right outside, the padding of his boots against the ground, the spray of the hose. When he comes back, the bucket is clean, full of soapy water.

He watches as you clean yourself. In the hierarchy of your body, you are the tenant and he is the landlord. He hands you your tools: a bar of soap, a plastic comb, a toothbrush, a small tube of toothpaste. Once a month, the anti-lice shampoo. Your body: always brewing trouble, and him, keeping it at bay. Every three weeks, he pulls the nail clippers out of his back pocket. He waits while you snip yourself back to presentableness, then takes them back. Always, he takes them back. You have done this for years.

You put your clothes back on. It seems pointless to you, given what follows, but this is what he's decided. It doesn't work, you think, if you do it yourself. He has to be the one to pull down the zippers, undo the buttons, peel off the layers.

The geography of his flesh: things you didn't want to learn, but learned anyway. A mole on his shoulder. The trail of hair down his abdomen. His hands: the grip of his fingers. The hot pressure of his palm on your neck.

Through it all, he never looks at you. This isn't about you. This is about all the women and all the girls. This is about him and all the things boiling inside his head.

When it's over, he never lingers. He's a man in the world, with responsibilities calling out to him. A family, a household to run. Homework to check. Movies to watch. A wife to keep happy and a daughter to cradle. There are items on his to-do list beyond you and your little existence, all demanding to be crossed out.

Except tonight.

Tonight, everything changes.

Tonight is the night you see this man—this very careful man, known to take only calculated steps—violate his own rules.

He pushes himself up, palms flat on the wooden floor. His fin-

gers are miraculously splinter-free. He secures the belt buckle underneath his belly button, pushes the metal against the tight skin of his midsection.

"Listen," he says.

Something sharpens, the most essential part of you rising to attention.

"You've been here long enough."

You search his face. Nothing. He's a man of few words, of muted facial expressions.

"What do you mean?" you ask.

He shrugs his fleece back on, zips it up to his chin.

"I have to move," he says.

Again, you must ask: "What?"

A vein pulses at the base of his forehead. You have annoyed him.

"To a new house."

"Why?"

He frowns. Opens his mouth as if to say something, then thinks better of it.

Not tonight.

You make sure his gaze catches yours on his way out. You want him to drink in your confusion, all the questions left unaddressed. You want him to feel the satisfaction of leaving you hanging.

Rule number one of staying alive in the shed: He always wins. For five years, you have made sure of it.

CHAPTER 2

Emily

I have no idea if Aidan Thomas knows my name. I wouldn't hold a grudge if he didn't. He has more important things to remember than the name of the girl who pours his Cherry Coke twice a week.

Aidan Thomas doesn't drink. Not liquor. A beautiful man who doesn't drink could be a problem for a bartender, but my love language isn't booze; it's people sitting at my bar and putting themselves in my care for an hour or two.

This isn't a language Aidan Thomas speaks fluently. He's a deer on the side of the road, keeping still until you drive by, ready to bolt if you show too much interest. So I let him come to me. Tuesdays and Thursdays. In a sea of regulars, he's the only one I want to see.

Today is a Tuesday.

At seven o'clock, I start glancing at the door. Keep one eye out for him and the other on the kitchen—my lead waitress, my sommelier, my absolute prick of a head chef. My hands move on autopilot. One sidecar, one Sprite, one Jack and Coke. The door opens. It's not him. It's the lady from the four-top by the door who had to go move her car to a new spot. One bitters and soda. A new straw for the kid at the back. A report from my lead waitress: the four-top didn't like the pasta. It was cold or it wasn't spicy enough. Their grievances are unclear, but they are here, and Cora isn't losing her tips because the kitchen can't work a food warmer. Placate Cora. Tell her to tell the cooks to redo the pasta, with a free side of something as an apology. Or have Sophie, our baker, send out a dessert if the four-top look like they have a sweet tooth. Whatever it takes to shut them up.

The restaurant is a black hole of needs, a monster that can never be sated. My father never asked me; he just assumed I would step in. And then he went ahead and died, because that's what chefs do—exist in a blur of heat and chaos only to leave you to pick up the pieces.

I pinch my temples between two fingers, try to fend off the dread.

Maybe it's the weather—it's the first week of October, still early fall, but the days are getting shorter, the air colder. Maybe it's something else. But tonight, every failure feels especially mine.

The door opens.

It's him.

Something lightens inside of me. A joy bubbles up, the kind that leaves me feeling small and a little bit dirty and possibly quite dumb, but it's the sweetest sensation the restaurant has to offer, and I'll take it. Twice a week, I'll take it.

Aidan Thomas sits at my bar in silence. He and I don't talk except for the usual pleasantries. This is a dance, and we know our steps by heart. Glass, ice cubes, soda gun, paper coaster. *Amandine* written in vintage cursive across the cardboard. One Cherry Coke. One satisfied man.

"Thank you."

I give him a quick smile and keep my hands busy. In between tasks—rinsing a shaker, organizing jars of olives and lemon slices—I sneak glances at him. Like a poem I know by heart but never tire of: blue eyes, dark-blond hair, neat beard. Lines under his eyes, because he has lived. Because he has loved and lost. And then, his hands: one resting on the counter, the other wrapped around his glass. Steady. Strong. Hands that tell a story.

"Emily."

Cora's leaning against the bar.

"What now?"

"Nick says we need to eighty-six the sirloin."

I hold in a sigh. Nick's tantrums are not Cora's fault.

"And why would we need to do that?"

"He says the cut isn't right and the cooking times are off."

I tear my eyes away from Aidan to face Cora.

"I'm not saying he's right," she says. "He just . . . asked me to tell you."

At any other time, I would leave the bar and deal with Nick myself. But he's not going to take this moment from me.

"Tell him message received."

Cora waits for the rest. She knows as well as I do that "message received" won't get Nick off anyone's back.

"Tell him that if we get any complaints about the sirloin, I'll handle them personally. I promise. I'll shoulder all the blame. Sirloingate will be my legacy. Tell him the food has been raved about tonight. And tell him he should worry less about the sirloin and more about his pickup station, if his guys are sending out cold food."

Cora raises her hands, like *All right, all right.* She heads back toward the kitchen.

This time, I allow myself a sigh. I'm about to turn my attention to a couple of martini glasses in need of a shine when I feel a gaze on me.

Aidan.

He's looking up from the counter, giving me a half smile.

"Sirloingate, eh?"

Shit. He heard.

I force myself to chuckle. "Sorry about that."

He shakes his head, takes a sip from his Cherry Coke.

"No need to apologize," he says.

I smile back and focus on my martini glasses, for real this time. In the corner of my eye, Aidan finishes his Coke. Our choreography resumes: A tilt of the head to ask for his check. A hand raised briefly as a goodbye.

And just like that, the best part of my day is over.

I collect Aidan's receipt—two-dollar tip, as always—and his empty cup. It's not until I wipe the bar that I notice it: a hitch, a change in our well-rehearsed pas de deux.

His coaster. The paper one I slipped under his drink. Now would be the time for me to throw it in the recycling bin, but I can't find it.

Maybe it fell? I step on the other side of the counter, look at the foot of the barstool he was sitting on just a few minutes ago. Nothing.

It's the weirdest thing, but undeniable. The coaster is gone.

CHAPTER 3

The woman in the shed

He brought you here.

His home revealed itself to you in flashes, quick glances when he wasn't looking. Over the years, you have gone over those images, clung to every detail: the house at the center of a patch of land. Green grass, willow trees. Every plant trimmed, every leaf tended to. Smaller buildings scattered around the property like tea cakes on a platter. A detached garage, a barn, a bike rack. Power lines snaking through branches. This man, you learned, lived somewhere soft and beautiful. A place for children to run, for flowers to bloom.

He walked fast, down a dirt path and up a hill. The house faded into the distance, replaced by a litany of trees. He stopped. There was nothing to grab onto, no one to call out to. You stood in front of a shed. Four gray walls, a slanted roof. Windowless. He held the metallic padlock, separated a key from the rest of the bunch.

Inside, he taught you the new rules of the world.

"Your name," he said. He was kneeling, yet still towering above you, hands on each side of your face so that your vision began and ended with his fingers. "Your name is Rachel."

Your name was not Rachel. He knew your real one. He had seen it on your driver's license after taking your wallet.

But he told you your name was Rachel, and it was vital for you to accept this fact. The way he said it, the growl of the *r* and the definitiveness of the *l.* Rachel was a blank slate. Rachel didn't have a past or a life to get back to. Rachel could survive in the shed.

"Your name is Rachel," he said, "and no one knows who you are."

You nodded. Not eagerly enough. His hands left your face and grabbed onto your sweater. He pushed you into the wall, arm lodged against your neck, wrist bones embedded into your trachea. There was no air, no oxygen at all.

"I said," he said, and the world started slipping from you, but not

hearing him wasn't an option, "no one knows who you are. No one is looking for you. Do you fucking understand?"

He let go. Before you coughed, before you wheezed, before you did anything else, you nodded. Like you meant it. You nodded for dear life.

You became Rachel.

You have been Rachel for years.

She has kept you alive. You have kept you alive.

BOOTS, DEAD LEAVES, deadbolt. Sigh. Heater. Everything as usual, except him. Tonight, he rushes through his ritual as though he's left water boiling on the stove. You're still chewing your last bite of chicken pot pie when he takes the Tupperware from you.

"Come on," he says. "I don't have all night."

It's not eagerness, this haste of his. More like you're a song and he's fast-forwarding through the boring parts.

He keeps his clothes on. The zipper of his fleece digs a crevice into your abdomen. A strand of your hair lodges itself in the clasp of his watch. He pulls his wrist away, wrestles himself free of you. You hear a tear. Your scalp burns. Everything palpable, everything real, even as he hovers over you like a ghost.

You need him here. With you. You need him relaxed and comfortable.

You need him to talk.

You wait until after. Your clothes back on for good.

As he prepares to leave, you run a hand through your hair. A gesture you used to deploy on dates, the elbow of your biker jacket on a restaurant table, your white T-shirt livened up by a cluster of silver pendants.

This happens. You remember bits of yourself, and sometimes they help you.

"You know," you tell him, "I worry about you."

He scoffs.

"It's true. I mean—I just wonder. That's all."

He sniffs, stuffs his hands into his pockets.

"Maybe I could help," you try. "Find a way for you to stay."

He snorts but makes no move toward the door. You have to hold on to that. You have to believe this is the beginning of a victory.

He talks to you, sometimes. Not often, and always reluctantly, but he does. Some nights, it's bragging. Other nights, it's a confession. Perhaps this is why he has bothered keeping you alive at all: there are things in his life he needs to share, and you're the only one who can hear them.

"If you tell me what happened, maybe I could figure it out," you say.

He bends his knees, brings his face in front of yours. His breath, minty fresh. His palm, warm and rugged against your cheekbone. The tip of his thumb digs into your eye socket.

"You think if I tell you, you'll figure it out?"

His gaze trails from your face to your feet. Repelled. Scornful. But always—this is important—a little bit curious. About the things he can do to you, the things he can get away with.

"What could you possibly know?" He traces the outline of your jaw, his nail grazing against your chin. "Do you even know who you are?"

You do. Like a prayer, like a mantra. *You are Rachel. He found you. All you know is what he has taught you. All you have is what he has given you.* A chain around your ankle, nailed to the wall. A sleeping bag. On an upturned crate, the items he has brought you over the years: three paperbacks, a wallet (empty), a stress ball (really). Random and mismatched. Taken, you inferred, by this magpie of a man from other women.

"I found you," he says. "You were lost. I gave you a roof. I keep you alive." He points to the empty Tupperware. "Know what you'd be, without me? Nothing. You'd be dead."

He gets up again. Cracks his knuckles, each finger a distinct pop.

You are not much. You know that. But in the shed, in this part of his life, you're all he's got.

"She's dead," he says. He tries it on for size and says again: "She's dead."

You have no idea who he's talking about until he adds: "Her parents are selling the house."

And then you get it.

His wife.

You try to think all the thoughts at once. You want to say what people say in polite society: *I'm so sorry to hear.* You want to ask, *When? How?* You wonder, *Did he do it? Did he finally snap?*

"So we have to move."

He paces, as much as one can pace in the shed. Rattled, which is unlike him. But you have no time for his emotions. No time to waste figuring out whether he did it. Who cares if he did? He kills. You know that.

What you need to do is think. Search the atrophied folds of your brain, the ones that used to solve the problems of daily life. The part of you that helped your friends, your family. But the only thing your brain screams is that if he moves—if he leaves this house, this property—you die. Unless you can convince him to bring you along.

"I'm sorry," you tell him.

You are so sorry, all the time. You are sorry his wife is dead. You are sorry, truly so, about the injustices of the world, the way they've befallen him. You are sorry he's stuck with you, such a needy woman, always hungry and thirsty and cold, and so nosy at that.

Rule number two of staying alive in the shed: He's always right, and you're always sorry.

CHAPTER 4

Emily

He's back. Tuesdays and Thursdays. As reliable as an eighty-six-proof whiskey, brimming with promises.

Aidan Thomas removes his gray trapper hat, his hair like ruffled feathers underneath. Tonight, he's carrying a duffel bag—green nylon, like something out of an army surplus store. It hangs heavily at his side, the strap tugging at his shoulder.

The door slams behind him. I startle. He usually shuts it in one cautious gesture, one hand on the handle and the other on the frame.

He keeps his head down as he walks to the bar. There's a heaviness to his step, and it's not just the duffel's fault.

Something is weighing on him.

He stuffs the hat in his pocket, smooths his hair, drops the duffel at his feet.

"Do you have my Manhattans?"

With a distracted glance, I slide two drinks in Cora's direction. She skitters away. Aidan waits until she's gone to gaze up at me.

"What can I get you?"

He gives me a tired smile.

I pick up the soda gun. "I have your usual." An idea comes to me. "Or I could make you something, if you need a little pick-me-up."

He lets out a breathy laugh. "That obvious, huh?"

A cool shrug, as if none of this matters all that much. "It's my job to notice."

His eyes go vacant. In the background, Eric gesticulates. He's describing the specials to a four-top. His customers drink him in, wide-eyed. Eric's so good at it, the showmanship. He knows how to earn his tables' affection, how to inflate his tips by two to five percent in a few sentences.

Sweet Eric. A friend who remained my friend when I became his

boss. Who has my back. Who somehow believes in me, in my ability to run this place.

"Let's try something."

I pick up a rocks glass, give it a quick shine. Aidan Thomas raises his eyebrows at me. Something is happening, new, different. He's not sure he likes it. It kills me to do this to him, when all he wanted was his usual Cherry Coke.

"I'll be right back."

I do my best to keep my stride casual. Behind the swing doors, Nick is hunched over four plates of tonight's special—breaded pork chop with cheesy mashed potatoes and bacon-scallion gravy. *Simple, but flavorful,* he told me. *Folks want to know what's on their plate, but they don't come here to eat stuff they could have made at home.* Like it was his idea, and not what my father started drilling into my head before I could even walk. *Real food, at good prices, too,* my dad used to say. *We don't want to cater only to the city crowd. They show up on weekends, but it's the locals who carry us through the week. We're here for them first.*

Eric passes me on his way out of the kitchen, three plates balanced on his left arm. Through the swing door, he sees Aidan at the bar. He pauses and turns back to give me a half grin. I pretend not to notice and step toward the walk-in.

"Is there any more of that elderflower tea we brewed at lunch?"

Silence. Everyone is either working or ignoring me. Yuwanda, the third musketeer of my trio with Eric, would know, but she's in the dining room, probably reciting the pros and cons of Gewürztraminer versus Riesling. I keep looking until I locate the pitcher behind a vat of buttermilk ranch. There's about a cup left.

Perfect.

I hurry back out. Aidan is waiting, hands on the counter. Unlike most of us, he doesn't reach for his phone the second he's alone. He knows how to be by himself, how to stretch into a moment to find stillness, if not comfort.

"Sorry about the wait."

With his gaze on me, I drop a sugar cube into the glass. Orange slice, dash of Angostura bitters. I add an ice cube, then the tea, and

stir. With a spoon—nothing cramps a bartender's style as tragically as plastic gloves—I fish a Maraschino cherry out of a Mason jar.

"Voilà."

He smiles at my exaggerated French inflection. A warmth pools in my stomach. I nudge the glass in front of him. He brings it up to his face, takes a whiff. It occurs to me, with blinding obviousness, that I have no idea what this man likes to drink aside from Cherry Coke.

"What am I having?" he asks.

"Virgin old-fashioned."

He grins. "Old-fashioned *and* a virgin? I suppose that makes sense."

Heat percolates under my cheeks. Immediately I want to disavow my body, my cheekbones reddening at the mere suggestion of sex, my hands leaving damp imprints on the counter.

He takes a sip and spares me from having to think of a witty retort, smacks his lips as he sets the glass down.

"Good."

My knees give in for an instant. I hope he can't see my shoulders, my face, my fingers, every muscle in my body loosen with relief.

"Glad you like it."

Fingernails tap the left side of the bar. Cora. She needs a vodka martini and a Bellini. I fill a martini glass with ice, turn around to search for an open bottle of Champagne.

Aidan Thomas swirls the ice cube at the bottom of his drink. Takes a quick sip and swirls again. Here is this beautiful man, who has done so much for our town. Who lost his wife a month ago. Sitting at my bar, alone, even though he doesn't drink. I have to think that if there is a gaping hole at the center of his life, then maybe maintaining this habit has brought him some form of solace. I have to think this—our shared silences, our silent routine—means something to him, too.

Everyone in town has an Aidan Thomas story. If you're a kid, he saved your ass moments before the Christmas parade. He showed up when you needed him, tool belt cinched around his hips, to fix your wobbly sleigh, right your reindeer's antlers.

Two years ago, when that terrible storm hit and a tree fell on old Mr. McMillan's house, Aidan drove up and set up a generator while he worked on the power line. He returned every weekend the following month to mend the roof. Mr. McMillan tried to pay him, but Aidan wouldn't take the money.

My family's Aidan Thomas story took place when I was thirteen. My father was in the middle of dinner service when the walk-in fried. I forget the details, or maybe I never bothered learning them. It was always the same thing—a faulty motor, a bad circuit. My dad was losing his mind, trying to figure out how to fix it while running the kitchen. A lovely man, who was there having dinner with his wife, overheard and offered to help. My father hesitated. Then, in a rare, *oh-what-the-hell* moment, he led the man into his kitchen. Aidan Thomas spent the better part of the evening on his knees, politely asking for tools and appeasing the frazzled staff.

By the time service ended, the fridge was cooling off. So was my father. In the kitchen, he offered Aidan Thomas and his wife glasses of pear brandy. They both declined: he didn't drink, and she was newly pregnant.

I was helping out that night, as children of restaurant owners do. When I went to refill the bowl of mints on the hostess stand, I found Aidan Thomas in the dining room. He was searching his coat pockets the way customers do at the end of a meal, hoping to locate wallets and cell phones and car keys. My father's laugh trickled from the kitchen over to us. My father, a great chef with an even greater temper, whose perfectionism so often devolved into anger. Relaxed. Enjoying a rare moment of reprieve in the restaurant he had built. As close to happy as he would ever get.

"Thank you for that."

Aidan Thomas looked up as if he had just noticed my presence. I wanted to catch my words, still hanging in the air between us, and swallow them back. You learn to hate the sound of your own voice at an early age, when you're a girl.

I waited for him to give me a distracted nod and hurry back to the kitchen, to humor me as most adults did. But Aidan Thomas wasn't like other adults. He wasn't like anyone.

Aidan Thomas smiled. He winked. And he said in a low, gravelly

voice that hit me somewhere deep, a part of my body I hadn't known existed until that moment: "You're very welcome."

It was nothing and it was everything. It was basic politeness and it was endless kindness. A halo of light landing on a hidden girl, plucking her out of the shadows, allowing her to be seen.

The thing I needed the most. Something it hadn't even occurred to me to crave.

NOW I WATCH as Aidan Thomas is frozen mid-sip, gazing at me through his glass. I am no longer the hidden girl, waiting for men to cast a light on her. I am a woman who has just walked into a halo of her own making.

He reaches over. Something shifts. A disturbance in the world, tectonic plates bumping against each other, miles below the Hudson River. His fingers brush against mine and his thumb grazes the inside of my wrist, and my heart—my heart, it's not even pounding at this point, it's just gone gone gone gone gone, can't handle it.

"Thank you," he says. "This was very . . . Thank you." A squeeze, a jolt of something indecipherable and priceless, from him to me.

He lets go of my hand, tilts his head back to empty his drink. His neck, his whole body lean, muscular, a smooth confidence.

"How much do I owe you?"

I take the empty glass and rinse it behind the bar. Keep my hands occupied so he can't see them shake.

"You know what? Don't worry about it. This one's on the house."

He takes out his wallet. "Come on."

"It's fine. I promise. You can . . ."

You can buy me one soon and we'll call it even is what I'd say if his wife hadn't died like five minutes ago. Instead, I unfold a clean bar mop and begin shining his glass.

"Next time."

He smiles and returns the wallet to his pocket, then gets up to put on his parka. I turn to set the glass on the shelf behind me. My arm stops halfway. Yes, I am jittery and my face is burning, but something just happened. I took a chance and it worked. I spoke and no disaster ensued.

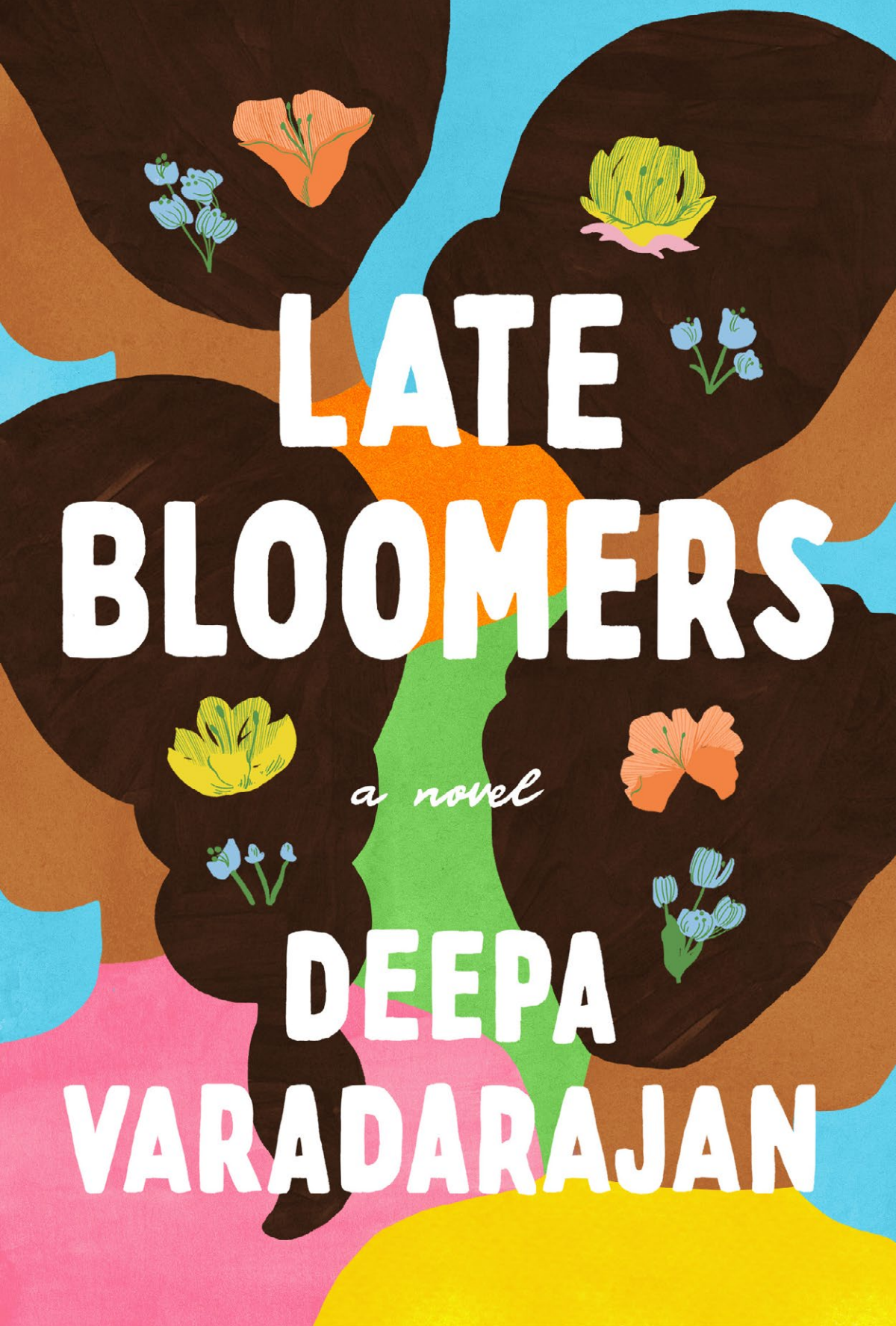
Maybe I dare, just a little bit more.

I turn around, lean against the counter, pretend to tighten the lid on a jar of pickled onions.

"Where are you headed next?" I ask, as if small talk were a staple of our shared vocabulary.

Aidan Thomas zips up his parka, puts the trapper hat back on, and picks up his duffel bag. It settles against his hip with a metallic clink.

"Just somewhere I can get some thinking done."


LATE
BLOOMERS
a novel
DEEPA
VARADARAJAN

Late Bloomers is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A Random House Trade Paperback Original

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Random House and the House colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Varadarajan, Deepa, author.
Title: Late bloomers: a novel / Deepa Varadarajan.
Description: First edition. | New York: Random House, [2023] |
Identifiers: LCCN 2022017703 (print) | LCCN 2022017704 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780593498026 (trade paperback; acid-free paper) |
ISBN 9780593498033 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Domestic fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3622.A724 L38 2023 (print) |
LCC PS3622.A724 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220411
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022017703
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022017704

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Book design by Caroline Cunningham

1

SURESH

All these internet women lie, I tell you. All of them. Funny that the anonymity draws everyone in. But it's also what keeps you from trusting a word.

Sometimes the lies are about the fundamentals: previous marriages, whether they have kids, what line of work they're in. Oh, and age. Age is a big one. The last date I went on was with a woman whose profile said forty-one. Impossible! There wasn't a chance that Ms. Mittal (formerly Mrs. Mittal) was a day under fifty.

My son, Nikesh, laughed at me when I told him about that one. "But, Dad," he said, "*you* are fifty-*nine*." Well that may be, but I didn't go around grossly exaggerating for sport. I was more reasonable about it all. On my profile, I described myself as "Suresh Raman, a healthy and active, five-foot-ten, fifty-five-year-old divorced man of Indian origin."

All right, so fifty-five was four years ago, the height was a rough estimate, and "active" was only an accurate description if it included toenail-clipping while watching CNN in my carpeted

den. But these were reasonable deviations from the truth. RDTs, I called them. So long as you kept it reasonable, where was the harm, really?

It was early evening now. I parked my SUV in front of a small, white brick house. I had to quash my misgivings—for the next few hours, at least. I reminded myself: This was a first date, a new woman, a clean slate.

I sniffed under my arms. Good, still powdery fresh. I'd left my house in Clayborn, Texas, two hours ago, but I blasted the AC the entire drive to Austin. Whatever my doubts about lying internet women, I'd never want a date to see unsightly wet patches blooming across my shirt.

I checked my reflection in the rearview mirror. Even at this hour, the late-August sun beamed harsh and unforgiving. My eyebrows looked like two furry worms wriggling around a pock-marked forehead. I licked my forefinger and tried pasting down the errant hairs. But it was useless. Hairs kept popping up in every direction. Oh well. Perhaps the restaurant would be dim and Mallika wouldn't notice the unruly duo dancing above my eyelids.

Mallika. We'd been emailing each other for two weeks. Now, this one did not seem like a liar. I couldn't be sure, of course, as I'd yet to see her in the flesh. At the moment, she was still three parts fantasy to one part reality—a concoction of my hazy, lonely brain. Though given the mendacious tendencies of these internet women, it was hard to maintain any fantasy for long.

Mind you, this wasn't just abstract cynicism talking. It came from months of experience. And in my months of experience, I'd learned that even when these internet women weren't lying about important things, like age, then they were lying about ridiculous things—things I wouldn't have even cared about had they told me the truth. But when I discovered they'd lied about it, I had to assume it meant something.

Last month, for example, I went out with this divorced real

estate agent from Baton Rouge named Usha. She lied about all kinds of trivialities. *Favorite Food: Italian*.

Trusting this preference in her profile, I suggested going to the Olive Garden on our first date. It had been a tiring six-hour drive from Clayborn to Baton Rouge, but I wanted to show her that I was sensitive to this detail about her—that I cared enough to remember. Upon hearing my suggestion, she shrugged and explained that Italian wasn't really her favorite. She wanted a steak. Feeling rebuked, I asked her why she didn't just say "steak" on her profile. She replied that she was afraid of scaring the divorced and widowed Hindu vegetarian men from answering.

Now, I wasn't an unsympathetic man. Or a vegetarian. And while I questioned the sanity of anyone who enjoyed masticating thick slabs of beef, I understood that a forty-two-year-old divorcée with two teenage kids needed to expand her pool of possibilities in any way she could. Only that wasn't all.

Over the course of that evening, which began and ended at Matthew's Steakhouse, I discovered that in the dozen emails and phone conversations leading up to our fateful meeting, she'd lied about her car (a Honda not a Volvo), her glasses prescription for nearsightedness (minus four, not minus two), her tennis elbow (she didn't even own a racket), and her subscription to *National Geographic* (ha!). None of those things in isolation would have caused me to do more than raise a puzzled eyebrow. But read together, the insignificance of those lies added up to one significant thing: She was a liar.

There had been countless such evenings. During the long (and sometimes multistate) drives back home, when disappointment sat in the back of my throat like undigested food, I'd say to myself: "Enough, old man, enough of this silly business." But at such moments, I too was a liar. For within minutes of pulling into my garage, I'd head straight for the buzzing glow of my computer. I'd check for new responses, answer the promising ones, and update my profile—the three-step ritual that had be-

come second nature to me, like the windshield-to-rearview-mirror-to-speedometer visual reflex of driving.

Nikesh called me "hooked." I'd describe my dating mishaps to him, and he'd say, "If they're so bad, then stop; or just stay local, at least."

Local? What was the point of trying to meet an Indian woman in Clayborn? They were all friends with my ex-wife, Lata, who'd left me, and would therefore be biased against me. And a non-Indian woman? That was too foreign to contemplate. But I didn't say any of this to my son. Instead, I'd meekly reply, "You're right—this is the last one. No more." But he wouldn't believe me. He'd chuckle and chide, "You're hooked, Dad."

He was right. I had yet to go on a good date, but I wasn't ready to stop.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a curtain flutter in the front window of Mallika's house, a ripple of black hair against the glass. Was Mallika peeking out? Was she wondering why I hadn't gotten out of the car yet, hadn't crossed the dried expanse of lawn to her front door?

I thumbed my brows one last time. I ran my palms over my grayed—but mostly full—head of hair. I unbuckled my seatbelt, leaned forward and then fell back again, my back hitting the leather with a loud smack. Why couldn't I sit here for just a little while longer? Just a few more moments to savor the Mallika of my hopeful imaginings and delay the inevitable disappointment.

For a second, I considered pulling out my phone and dialing Nikesh. I could ask him to tell me a joke and lighten my spirits. But then, maybe I shouldn't bother him at this hour. Six o'clock in Texas meant it was seven for Nikesh in New York. He would likely be busy—either at work late, or giving Alok a bath, or coaxing him into bed.

It startled me sometimes to think that Nikesh, my youngest, was no longer so young—no longer that spindle-legged teenager with an unruly mop of hair, but a thirty-year-old man with an

eleven-month-old son of his own, working long hours at a prestigious Manhattan law firm. My grandson, Alok, was by all accounts a sweet-tempered boy like his father. Thankfully, he'd inherited none of the Nordic sternness of his mother, Denise, a woman that neither I nor Lata had even met before Nikesh married her—correction, before he eloped with her, telling us about it only after the fact. No doubt Lata was still licking her wounds from the shock of their elopement. For my part, though, I was relieved not to publicly perform the role of delighted father of the groom. At least Nikesh had spared me the indignity of reciting some fraudulent speech about the joys of marriage in a Hilton ballroom, while our friends (Lata's friends, mostly) squirmed and Lata glowered behind me.

In truth, I couldn't find much fault with Nikesh. Oh sure, he might tease me now and then for being hooked on internet dating. But at least he was indulgent and kind to his aging, addled, romantic-idealist father.

My eldest, Priya, on the other hand, hurled harsher words my way: *post–midlife crisis; act your age; ridiculous; embarrassment.*

I tried not to take it too personally. It had been almost a year since Lata moved out, but the wound was still raw for my daughter, a thirty-five-year-old history professor in Austin. Oh sure, give her macro-level changes—civil wars, fallen empires, mass famine, and pestilence—those were her bread and butter, she couldn't get enough. But throw some micro-level change her way, and she turned on you.

Though in all fairness, I couldn't entirely blame Priya for being skeptical. If someone had asked me a year ago, I would have said the very concept of internet dating was ridiculous. Just a fast-food model of human connection. If nothing else, it was a sport left to the young. I couldn't say for sure when my scorn started to subside. But if I had to place a date on it, I'd say it was about a month after the divorce papers were finalized—maybe the thirtieth evening in a row that I found myself glued to the

evening news, a Crate & Barrel plate (chipped in the corner, so Lata left it behind when she moved to her own apartment) balanced on my lap, dragging a butter knife across the unyielding skin of a microwavable bean-and-cheese burrito. (It was a bitter month for my digestive system; even now, my gastroenterologist refers to it as "that unfortunate burrito period.")

That particular night, after loading the dishwasher with the handful of kitchen items Lata left behind—the aforementioned chipped plate, a mug that came free with a purchase of gas at the neighborhood Exxon station, a fork, an oversized spoon useful for scooping out generous amounts of salsa and sour cream—I readied myself for bed. I climbed onto the mattress, pulled the comforter to my chin and switched on the bedroom television, hoping to catch the Leno monologue before falling asleep. But just as the comedian began his routine, the oddest thing happened: I started to weep.

It was the first time I'd cried like that since Lata left me. But for some reason, at that particular moment, it struck me how much I missed her. Even during the worst phases of our thirty-six years of married life, when silences were thicker than the cement foundation underlying the two-story house we'd designed together, when our hands had long forgotten what the touch of a bare stomach or the soft inside of a thigh felt like, we could still take solace in one consistent form of togetherness. Late at night, every night, before nodding off on opposite sides of a king-sized bed, we'd watch the Leno monologue together. (Leno by default, because Lata could never stand Letterman's self-congratulatory laughter while delivering a joke.) And for those precious few minutes, we could be consoled by the intermingling sounds of our laughter. By the feeling that we weren't completely alone, together. It might not seem like a romantic or even an interesting marital ritual. But it was ours. Now, it too was gone.

The following day, I found myself typing three unlikely

words into Google: "Indian internet dating." What I discovered was a cornucopia of sites promising romantic fulfillment: Shaadi.com; DesiDating.com; IndianSingles.com. The sites seemed endless. Was there one for every flavor of desolation? Lonely-Middle-Aged-Ukrainian.com? Aching-for-Contact-Papua-New-Guinean.com?

In the end, though, some combination of loneliness and curiosity got the better of me. And late one night, unable to sleep, I logged on to a site. Within days, I'd read dozens of profiles, completed one of my very own, and made a discovery I hardly dared hope for: women wanted me. And not just one or two, but scores of them. Shalinis. Malinis. Sri Devis. Purvis. Forty- and fifty-somethings from all over the country responding to my ad. Good-looking too, some of them, in their pictures (though, of course, this was all before I became aware of the lying phenomenon). My initial reaction was to assume something was wrong with them. What else would propel them to go to such lengths—to meet me of all people? Not that I was a particularly insecure man. I knew I was okay—maybe not a prize bull but not a smelly boar either. But their responses—so obsequious, so eager to make contact. *You sound like a fascinating man. Your profile really caught my attention. Your answers were so funny, so clever.*

A few weeks of covetous attention and, as my children would say, it started going to my head. I began seeing myself less and less as a portly, indecisive man, who rarely knew the right things to say, who bungled his first marriage, who loved his children but felt his absentmindedness often bordered on neglect.

Instead, I'd entered a new world—one that enabled me to have what, left alone with dust and memories in a four-bedroom house, I secretly desired most: an escape from myself.

"Mallika?"

A petite woman, seemingly younger than the forty-three she

claimed to be, answered the door. She had honey-colored skin, kohl-rimmed eyes, and a slender, curvaceous figure encased in a form-fitting orange dress with embroidery on the bodice.

"Suresh?" Her voice was soft, with the lilting undercurrent of an accent.

For the next few seconds, we stared confusedly at each other. Her confusion was easily explained. It was likely due to the fact that I'd become a stuttering fool, incapable of forming a single declarative sentence: *Mallika? Yes, uh . . . I'm Suresh?* Who could blame her for looking so uncertain in front of a strange man who seemed painfully unaware of his own name. But the excuse for my befuddled state was even easier to explain: She was stunning.

In all my months as an internet dater, I'd grown accustomed to a certain disillusioning phenomenon: the face-to-face letdown. Weeks of buildup over phone and email culminating in disappointment at first sight. But standing on Mallika's doorstep, I felt none of that customary dissatisfaction, that feeling of air seeping out of my stomach like a needle-pricked balloon. I watched the dusky sunlight bounce against her silky hair, and a dizzying fume of elation wafted over me, almost as sweet as her rose-scented perfume.

"Shall we have Thai food for dinner?" I asked as soon as the fuzziness left my head.

"My favorite—you remembered. There's a place called Bangkok Garden close by."

Relief flooded through me. So far, so good: no sign of mendacity.

Holding the passenger door open for her, I noticed the smoothness of her right leg, the glistening sheen of her peach toenails, the peek of cleavage as she climbed into the car. I shut the door and walked briskly to the other side. Gulping discreetly, I scolded myself for behaving like a skin-starved schoolboy and started the car.

Soon enough, we were nestled in a corner booth at Bangkok Garden. A young waitress placed two sweating bottles of Singha and several steaming plates between us. I sipped my beer with relief, hoping it would loosen my tongue and counteract the near-paralyzing effect of her beauty. Perhaps sensing my nervousness, Mallika began to talk. She spoke exuberantly and at length: about her fondness for snow, her inexplicable fear of rabbits, her embarrassing habits like watching Ron Popeil infomercials late into the night and listening to country music stations while mopping her kitchen floor. She described her job, working as an administrative assistant for an elderly ophthalmologist who was going blind himself. She asked me about my job, and feeling more relaxed now, I told her how I'd worked as a systems analyst at Central Texas State University for almost thirty years, before taking an early retirement last year.

"You must have liked it—to have stayed there for so long?" She spoonED pad thai onto my plate first and then onto her own—a gesture of generosity that touched me.

I chewed a forkful of noodles and considered her question, deciding to answer it honestly. "Well, it was a good job. Reliable, paid decently, and I rarely had to work weekends. But I can't say I liked it. It was inertia that kept me there, really. And a lack of imagination about what else to do. And, of course, I had a wife and two children to provide for. My wife, Lata—I mean, *ex*-wife—didn't work. She works now—part-time at a library or some such thing. But she didn't work back then, so I was the sole breadwinner."

Mallika nodded, forking a broccoli floret. "I can't say that I much like working for an octogenarian ophthalmologist either. But it does pay the bills, which is important, now that I'm . . . you know, on my own."

I spooned two mounds of rice and green curry onto my plate, and then silently scolded myself for not offering some to Mallika first. Maybe she didn't notice. "So how long have you and

your husband been divorced?" I asked, trying to distract her from my selfish food-serving practices.

"No, we didn't . . . I mean, I'm not divorced. I'm a . . . a widow."

I paused, spoon hovering in midair. Widowed? This young? In our emails, this had not come up. I'd assumed she was divorced, like me. Mallika's cheeks flushed, and I struggled to mask my surprise.

"I-I'm s-sorry," I stammered. "How did your husband, I mean, your ex-husband—wait, are they still called husbands, if they die? Forgive me—that was insensitive. I don't know the proper terminology. But how did he . . . die?" I whispered the word "die," and then felt ridiculous for whispering.

Mallika picked at her Singha label. "Well, he died a few years ago. His name was Ajay. I'm sorry, but do you mind if we talk about something else?" She stared at her shiny nails scratching bits of paper off the glass. When she finally looked up, her expression was hard to decipher. I saw pain in her eyes, but was there something else in there too? Guilt or shame, maybe? Her face flushed again and she looked away.

I shook my head, trying to free it from irrational thoughts. I was being ridiculous. She didn't want to talk about her dead husband on a first date. It made perfect sense. There was nothing fishy about it. Those other internet women were just making me paranoid.

"No, of course we don't have to talk about it. I'm sorry." I busied myself by scooping rice onto my plate.

"Don't be. It's just that tonight has been really nice. Let's not spoil it with unhappy history. There will be time for that later." She smiled at me during the last sentence, and I tried not to gawk at her face—those radiant pink cheeks, those curling lashes, the delicate curvature of her cheekbones.

Later. There would be a later.

My stomach began to churn. For years, I suffered from too much acidity in my stomach. I lived with a near-constant, low-

level discomfort in my gut, easily exacerbated by spicy pickles, public speaking, employment evaluations, fights with Lata, and too much Taco Bell. But this—this was an entirely different topsy-turvy feeling in my abdomen.

Was it hope? Hope that there was actually someone out there in the world capable of making me feel joy, maybe even love? That such a person existed? Or was this feeling in my gut anxiety? Anxiety that, even if the chance of finding such happiness was possible, even if it was right in front of my face, I'd manage to bungle it somehow.

My wife—*ex*-wife—always said I suffocated her with my pessimism, sucked the joy out of her like a Hoover. In her characteristic myopia, she never stopped to consider that maybe she brought out the negativity in me, that my so-called pessimism was more acute in her judgmental presence. But bygones. Divorce was good for nothing if not the copious amounts of alone time. A perfect opportunity for self-reflection and reexamination. And it was possible, just possible, that I could be, at times, a tad disagreeable. A bit of a complains-first-thinks-later sort of person. All right, so I could be a real donkey. But that was all going to change. Mallika would only see the reformed me. The jovial me. The new and improved, happy-go-lucky Suresh Raman.

We made lighthearted conversation for the rest of dinner. A mint lemonade for me, a tea for her. A shared plate of sticky rice with mango. At the end of the night, I walked her to her front door and let my hand linger on her shoulder. She pecked me on the cheek and thanked me "for a wonderful evening." She closed the door with a sweet little wave.

All right, so maybe the date ended more chastely than I might have wished. But wasn't this a commendable thing too? My Mallika was a virtuous woman. A lovely, modest, old-fashioned kind of woman. The kind of woman a man could marry—would be lucky to marry. The kind of woman that some man already

had the great luck to marry and the greater misfortune to lose—through death. Likely a car accident. Or a heart attack. Or cancer.

At any rate, he was gone, and I was here, standing on Mallika's doorstep, inhaling the lingering scent of her perfume.

Blissfully, thrillingly alive.

THE GOSPEL OF ORLA

Eoghan Walls

Seven Stories Press
140 Watts Street
New York, NY 10013
sevenstories.com

College professors and high school and middle school teachers
may order free examination copies of Seven Stories Press titles.
Visit https://www.sevenstories.com/pg/resources-academics
or email academics@sevenstories.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Walls, Eoghan, author.
Title: The gospel of Orla / Eoghan Walls.
Description: New York : Seven Stories Press, [2022]
Identifiers: LCCN 2022033733 | ISBN 9781644212820 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781644212837 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PR6123.A455 G67 2022 | DDC 823/.92--dc23/eng/20220721
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022033733

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

I am sad to go but it is time now and there is no point in hanging around any longer. I leave my phone under the pillow. I don't leave a note because that is just for suicides. I don't want to make them sadder than they will be anyway but I also don't want them coming for me straight away. Last time they got me at the station but at least I hadn't bought a ticket so they don't know where I was going so they won't know where I am headed now.

I don't need to creep out full ninja as I can hear Dad snoring but I go into his room anyway to see Lily. She is down and will sleep until about half five in the morning. They are both deep sleepers until she gets thirsty at half five and climbs out of the cot into his bed and rocks him by the nose and that wakes him even if he has been drinking.

I will miss her but I can't bring her and can't hug her in case she wakes so I look at her for like a minute and touch her foot. Then I close the door and head downstairs and check my bumbag and rucksack and zip them up and tie my fringe out of my face and breathe and unlatch the door and step outside.

My bike is against the wall.

I walk it out the gate careful not to clunk anything.

The gate is creaky and Annie Pomfret's dog barks but he barks all night anyway and nobody pays him any attention. But I get out and check my zips again and there is no one up or down the street so I hop on and cycle out past the traffic light onto the bridge and there's no one in the Arms this late and I get down to the canal path sure no one sees me.

Now it finally seems like it might really work and I am happy.

I have piles of food in my bag and drink too and they are heavy enough but not too heavy. I have three chicken wraps from Boots and a big bottle of Fanta and a six pack of Hula Hoops squashed down to let the air out and four Curly Wurlys and fifty-four quid in my bumbag which should be enough to get at least one takeaway a day for two days if I get starving but I probably won't.

The plan is I am going to cycle to Liverpool get the ferry to Belfast then on to Drumahoe to Sinead's house and leave all this crap behind. Sinead would not chuck me out I am her dead sister's daughter and anyway I was born in Ireland I am like a citizen so if they want to take me back let them try. And I am taking the canals because nobody will look for me there. I got a book *Traffic-Free Cycle Paths in the Northwest* and could name all the rivers and villages I will pass through with my eyes closed. I left my phone so they can't GPS me and if they see my bike is missing they will be, – She must be on the roads! which is bullshit because I will be on the canals. I have googled everything and deleted my history. By the time they have figured it out I will be halfway to Ireland.

The towpath is dark but I have Mum's good light and it's not raining. A clear clear night. Moths are buzzing around the bike light and the muddy path is dry. When I clear the trees and pass out of the village I am nearly laughing. I pick up steam and slow to go under the bridge and the moon is massive. Really bright and pretty reflected on the water. And I reckon that is why I do not see the man in the bushes until he is right on me and the bike crashes into him and I go spinning off the path and he grabs the bike and I am hanging on his arm. He is holding me by my bag and my bike is swinging over the canal.

– Please, he says.

And I let go and I am in the water and help bloody hell is he going to rape me and kill me. He is tall and bearded and stank but I am in the water and the bike is on me and my clothes are stuck to my bike. And I kick and swim but the canal is not that deep but I am scared. I scream and say, – We have a dog, and climb up to the rushes and run. My trainers are full of water and so are my jeans and I run until I am down in the fields near Cooper's Ridge. The path is straight I have nowhere to go and I can hardly breathe and my throat is sore and I am getting an attack. But I do not hear him so I stop and hold my knees and try to listen past my breath.

He was mad hairy I do not know why he would hide in the bushes.

If he was trying to murder someone why would he be in the countryside? That would be stupid you are unlikely to find anyone to murder at this time of night.

I am still scared and out of breath and freezing but I can see him in the moonlight back where I crashed into him. He

seems to be sitting down and I try the counting thing to slow my breathing. Suddenly I think maybe he is not a murderer but instead I have hurt him and I could end up in prison.

I am too young for prison. Obviously.

Still though.

My bag came off in his hands.

I have no bike.

My breathing slows.

Not perfect.

But better.

I don't know what to do.

So I stand watching and he doesn't move and I reach into my bumbag and take out the Swiss Army knife and wish I had taken a bigger knife the kitchen one but God I did not think I would be using it. I take out the biggest blade and slowly walk back up the towpath.

– Hey, I say. – Hey you.

He is hunched on the canal bank squatting and I can see him and he is really wearing a blanket. I think he is just some homeless guy but homeless guys can be murderers too. The only light is moonlight but he has a beard mad hair and shiny eyes. Either he has opened my bag or it opened when he grabbed me but my food is all over the ground.

He is putting it back in.

I am still afraid but more angry now as that was my bloody food I bloody stole it. Why is he touching it and for that matter where is my bloody bike? In the water that's where. So I start shouting like, – Give me back my bag! and, – I have a knife, and then more like, – I am going to bloody stab you if you move if you even move! And he drops the food in the

bag and steps back into the bushes and bows his head. He says sorry over and over and his voice is deep and foreign and I grab for the bag and get it. Then I run past jabbing the knife about madly until I am on the village side of him and I reckon he could not catch me if I ran home.

And I will run but I am wet and I had a plan. Now I have no bike and I am scared but first I want to say something. So I turn and say, – What's your name? What's your bloody name?

He is squatted on the mud and looks up at me and says, – Jesus.

– Jesus? Jesus bloody Jesus like the Jesus Jesus?

He nods.

– Well bloody Jesus Jesus you ruined my bike. You owe me a new bike you arse.

And he says, – Sorry sorry, but now I reckon my knife isn't that big so I pull my bag tight and walk off and I don't look back and I don't run but when I get to the bridge I start crying but there is no one behind me. There is only one thing I can do which is go home and try this another day but with no bike I will not be able to take the canals. And I feel the world go out of control again and have to control my breath. So I do control it and walk back into Glasson shaking with cold and everything is still spinning when I hide my wet clothes in a bag at the bottom of my bed and change into pyjamas and lie back and wait and wait for sleep.

2

I wake to Lily taking socks out of my bottom drawer and putting them on the bed. She is playing Pack-the-Bag. It is seven thirty so she will have had her bottle and morning sleep but not proper breakfast. I hear Dad stumbling and cursing around the kitchen getting ready so he is not having a bad morning. Lily hands me my socks with the carrots on them and I say, – Tata.

– Tata Orla.

– Tata.

Dad will be making her porridge and I normally bring her down but I am sore down one arm and both knees. I pull back my sheets and see brown muddy crap on both legs and all over the sheets and I know I have to get this sorted. So I let Lily take my carrot socks and carry her past the stair gate down to the hall and call, – Dad take Lily. I need a shower, and head back to my room before he can shout back.

I am really tired.

My clothes are bagged up but covered in stuff that stinks of duck crap and probably is. He will know if he looks at them I fell in the water. But since Mum died I do my own washing

and I reckon I can get them done without him seeing.

No the real problem will be getting to the ferry with no arsing bike.

I check my bag.

The homeless guy only opened one wrap. Or maybe it bust in the fall. But I can't be sure he hasn't touched the others and the Hula Hoops will go stale and screw it I am dumping the lot. So I take out *Traffic-Free Cycle Paths in the Northwest* it is not even damp and put the food in my bedroom bin and pile all the clothes with my dirty washing in case the guy touched them too.

Fuck.

I mean I can get more food but it will take me longer now.

Even longer with no bike.

I hear Dad turn off the radio downstairs which means he is feeding Lily so I have a clean run at the washing machine. So I pull off my bedsheets too and stick them and washing and all in at sixty to get the mud off and head into the shower.

My leg is cut but the scab is dry and I am all bruised.

The shower feels lovely on my head.

I need to scrub at my legs and face to get the muck off. We still have some of Mum's back scrubbers so I fill one up with shampoo and press it on the skin to let the mud rinse off. It hurts when I press it but I don't care.

I could walk to Liverpool but actually I couldn't.

I could nick a bike at school. They are all always locked.

Taxis would be a hundred quid and that's a stupid idea.

Money. I'll get money.

Then I will get another plan.

So by the time I get to that I am brushing my teeth with

Dad shouting at the bathroom door that the woman from the council will be all over us if we are late again so I rush out in a towel and get dressed and find my mobile and he is already tooting the horn outside. So I grab the binbag from my room and toss it in the wheelie-bin and chug apple juice from the carton and grab my schoolbag and an apple and slip in the front seat.

And he's like, – Is that all you're eating?

– Yes.

He looks at me and I wonder if I still have mud on my face but I am sure I checked. Some mornings if he has been drinking he barely sees the world but today he is on the ball and he turns off the engine and curses and runs inside. I look in the mirror and wave at Lily.

– I'm going to school Lily.

– School?

– Yes I'm going to school.

– School.

I wasn't meant to come back.

Then Dad is here and he opens my door and shoves in my puffy jacket and a Belvita bar and it is chocolate chips. I don't need the jacket as it is near summer but I do like the biscuit so I take them both. As we drive off he keeps glancing at me.

– You need to eat love.

I shrug and get out my phone. There are so many WhatsApps I haven't checked it all night.

– You do, he says. – If you don't we'll get in bother.

I say nothing. We have had this fight before. I know and he knows that if the woman from the council tries to take custody off him it will not be because of my eating or lateness

but because they think he is an alco after Mum died but I don't think they will take me or Lily anyhow. Jamie says they don't split families if they can help it. But we both have said our bit before so I shrug and keep reading as he drives.

There are WhatsApps from Majella and Sinead about the barbeque at Isabella's and there are texts and WhatsApps from Suzie B and Michaela and what looks like half of the class about some concert that Suzie B was at with a massive car crash she nearly died in. Same old same old boring shit.

There is still no text from Jamie.

His mum must have him blocked.

I shouldn't even be here I should be halfway to Liverpool on my stupid bike and I want to scream but I can't show anything or the game will be up so I look in the back and watch Lily.

She is fine with George Pig.

I am going to miss her when I go.

It will take longer now but I am going to bloody go.

When we get into school there are parents fighting for parking and we are not even the last in. I get out of the car and Dad says, – Orla.

– What?

His eyes are far older than they looked when I was young.

– I love you pet. Take care.

I slam the door and put my head against the rain and head in.

WE ARE A

HAUNTING

A NOVEL

TYRIEK WHITE

Permissions Acknowledgments tk

Astra House
A Division of Astra Publishing House
astrapublishinghouse.com
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK
ISBN: 9781662601712

First edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Design by Richard Oriolo
The text is set in Utopia Std.
The titles are set in Bouchers Sans 2.0.

PROLOGUE

One day, I fell backward into a scar in the world, a fall sudden and lasting. A portal took me whole, sent me traveling across a pulse that could split me down the middle. I tumbled out the other side, a terrible moaning like a hive of meat bees.

I had been pedaling down the block on an unkempt length of road on Flatlands, barreling ahead, ripping along twisted storefronts and storage lots. The smell of hot metal filled the air, lodged itself at the back of my tongue and burned as I tried to catch my breath. I had reached the Belt Parkway and the creek widened, blooming into the bay and into the Atlantic, the dark basin, murky with trash and wildlife, boats twinkling in the distance. The water emptied into a reservoir where it was drained and then treated. There were heating and waste stations, chimneys that gagged out heavy smoke and stray embers into the clouds over the land. A bridge reached over the harbor, kept Far Rockaway at bay, the lights from ferries and small boats parting the

darkness. In the distance, I saw the shape of Boulevard through the fog, apartments stacked atop one another, our city in the clouds, embassies of time, crashing dimensions and histories, the cursed, the lost, the all-seeing. No different from Ingersoll Houses, or Marcus Garvey, or Tilden; Chelsea, or Pink Houses, or Brevoort; Farragut, or Walt Whitman Houses, or Baisley Park. No different from Saint Nicholas, or Queensbridge, or Mott Haven.

You died without telling me what it was like to be in two places, without designation, without home, no matter how hard you try to make one for yourself.

When I reach out for you, tipping over, into a slippage of time. I feel my body grow open, my hand wrapped in another. This is Nana, blood rushing to her fingers, her hands the color of pink salt. We are in the doorjamb of a temporary house. I see a shoal of folk near the center of a settlement farther down, along the gray water. I follow the sound. A dirt path like a welt stretching toward the sea. I slip through the cattails and the buttonbushes, under the river birches and needles of the bald cypress. The smell stays with me, on my hands and in my hair. The smoke above the huts on the beach carried spiced meats and greens. Through the bramble, the band of sweet pepperbush, I see the shore open up, the ocean flat. Cloudy. The person standing in front of me didn't look like anyone I knew but felt like you. A ways down the beach I heard a crowd; the smell of fresh meats and spices from an open market. High tide sounds like a stampede. My feet are sinking into the loam, the wet paste of sand and dirt. I am barefoot in the duckweed. You see me, the same expression in my dreams, a sad smile.

"Oh, baby, when did it hurt so bad?" you ask. Not why does it hurt, or where does it hurt, but when? I feel like all the times, the time before me, an ache that was precolonial, a Paleolithic expanse of sorrow. You are Cybele carved in Anatolian stone.

"You were just gone one morning," I tell you. "And I know it sounds like I blame you but I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"That's not fair."

"Are love and sacrifice not dark synonyms for one another?"

I turn away, take a few steps up the beach. When all felt lost, being seen through your grief, really seen, was all that mattered. *What if*, I always thought, *if I never met you, never felt you gone because you weren't there in the first place*. In my mind, it was like being without something from birth—sight or a limb—and how it compared to having the thing, losing it, then living the rest of a life without it. Inevitably, the thing dries and crumbles like sand and one is forced to dream away the incessant drum of missing, make themselves anew. When you died, Pop told me I'd only think of life in two phases: life with you and life without you. Said when he lost his own mother, folk could only see him as an unfinished body, what was sundered, removed. Never how he created a new whole, had to reimagine what those parts left could amount to. After he'd finished his stories, I would try to drift to sleep without thinking about the old him, the sawed-through flesh and muscle, the hacking of bone, the dark blood that painted the emergency room. I tried to imagine anything else besides the yellows and browns his body leaked, the pus, the clotting of fluid, a cursive written on his skin and across smocks and sinking through sheets. If I never knew you, perhaps I'd still be who I was before you died. I would never do the hard work of looking beyond myself to see others suffering along with me, that the world and the human condition were threaded around the work of community, our care for one another. I feel my gut stir when I look back at you—remorse. I want you to know the new ways I could love, which I had learned for better or for worse.

"Here," you say, easing me into the current. A cool wind from the ocean had pelted sand into my hair. It stung my eyes, made me shiver down to my toes. There was a hole in the night sky, where it all goes in the end, some giant we've mistaken for sun or light. I have this strange feeling of culmination, what could be made of all those histories, an infinite process—hilltop city of seven waters. "I'll tell you everything."

PART ONE

BEFORE YOU LEAVE (2008)

There are mostly women in housing court. It's not like men don't get put out—she had put Virgil out years ago, in the middle of night, and that was her husband. This was just who was left. When a home is emptied out, usually the men take what they can and the women are left to put it all back together again. They were old and young, exhausted, often bounced around buildings, across plazas, directed to addresses across town. You need to go here for a copy of your voucher. The main housing office can verify your proof of address. This form needs to be notarized. Women who worked all kinds of hours to keep a roof over somebody head. *Women like Momma*, Audrey thought, *who would've spent a lifetime in waiting rooms, behind counters or glass windows, filling out paperwork—all to keep it together.*

The central air nipped at the tender parts of her arms, the pinch of flesh above the elbow. The judge listened to the statements her landlord made.

Audrey was sixty-three and fed up with it all: the ring cycle, the taxing of spirit, the cost of forms, subway fare. There was a young woman Audrey kept seeing at the main desk asking questions. She was a nurse at Methodist; Audrey knew because she was still in her scrubs. The woman explained how she had walked from Ingersoll Houses, down the stretch of Myrtle to Jay Street, to get here. Now she had to walk to Atlantic, all the way across the park, to get to work. Audrey asked what she was here for.

"My brother did something stupid," the woman said, almost through closed eyelids. "Now they can evict me and my son 'cause my name is on the lease."

Audrey couldn't afford an attorney, but her cousin, Gloria, had a son who was studying for the bar and worked as a public advocate at a nonprofit. Demetrius was a nervous boy, with hands like saucers that seemed too large for his wiry frame. He kept adjusting his cuffs when he spoke to the judge. "Social Security hasn't increased her benefits in years, and with medication, cost of living . . ."

"It's still not up to your client to make that decision," the judge said, which Audrey found peculiar.

She hadn't paid last month's due, nor had she cared to the month before. Not even the month before that. She continued writing her checks for her rent-controlled apartment, all for the same amount as she had before the last increase. The landlord wouldn't even call somebody about the ceiling or the stuff that came up out of the drains every so often, but he asked for extra dollars more each month. In that regard, yes, she was guilty.

When they filed out of the courtroom, Demetrius turned to her to apologize.

"It's all right, baby," Audrey said, and shrugged. "What can you do?"

"If I can get them to give us another day," he said, holding open the door for her.

The sun was hardly over the other side of the East River, laboring over the skyline, peeking through the alleys and streets. She waved the young

man away and caught the subway back down to Flatbush, flipping through the *New York Post*.

Audrey got off at her stop and walked toward her building. There were women her age gathered by the corner, dressed in polished leather flats and church hats, *Watchtower* pamphlets in hand. The ladies who ran the tenant association sat outside on the sidewalk, gossiping in beach chairs. Their husbands played dominos out front the bodegas or tuned their cars up in their driveways. They would be out there until dusk, drinking cold beer across from the park.

When Audrey finally closed the door behind her, she dropped her bags and removed her clothes. Turned the kettle on. Let the silence wash over her, looking out the window as light strained through the blinds. Shadows moved across the apartment walls. She watched them flutter, looked along her shelf—the glass figurines, the decorative plaques from the senior center, wood-sculpted ornaments, picture frames of her grandbabies Satoia and Colly pouting at her, the ceramic succulents, the actual succulents planted in small clay pots.

Audrey had meant to call her her granddaughter the night before. Key had been gone a year or so. Now she looked down at her from a family portrait done at a shop at the Albee Square mall, those precious babies on either side of their mother in their Sunday clothes. Behind them was Dante, the husband, with those heavy eyes of his.

Where are you going to go? she asked Virgil. He sat in an armchair across the room, grunting at something only he could see.

Are you going to stay here?

Still no answer. He didn't say much when he was alive either.

THE JUNE HEAT set the day in its lap and wrapped the city in its arms as proof. Audrey pulled a weed from the soft soil of the small garden and wondered whether the day had ever wanted room to grow. It sits all day and

every day, the world in its lap, watching trees stretch toward its light. Audrey looked up, jealous of the day, wondering, *Is it ever jealous of me?*

As the sun hung over the trees, the mosquitoes would join, a song of blood. Audrey usually worked in the mornings, before the heat, planting green onion and cucumber. Today, she had to begin a little before noon. The soil was dark and rich between her fingers. The garden was a square plot behind her apartment building. When she had found it years ago, abandoned and littered with drug vials, soda cans, and other scraps, she had cleared the plot out and begun putting down a layer of topsoil. She then began working her tiny piece of land, despite her bad knees and lower back that flared up if she bent too long.

Audrey gathered some of what she had been growing. Sweet blueberries, tomatoes crossed with mustard greens, leeks, and a couple peaches from a slender tree. Being close to the soil cooled her skin under the noon sun. It took her mind away from the fact that it would be gone soon. Her home wouldn't belong to her anymore, as if it ever had.

When she was a young girl, she would spend every summer on her grandfather's farm. She hated it. It was the fifties, and Audrey was more interested in going to the cotillions, the debutante balls, drinking tea with fancy Southern women who offered their homes for plantation tours—than toiling over farmwork. She watched a carrot seed grow and milled around, doing a bunch of yard work when she'd rather just clean the house. You'll thank me later, her father would say. He showed her how to plant the seeds, in rows along the furrows they made, measuring how deep into the earth, how far apart. His big hands kneaded hers into the cool, damp soil. She was more interested in the movie theater that offered tickets for ten cents, the diner so crowded at midnight that folk spilled out onto its back porch, the boys who were wide as the trees that lined her grandfather's property.

Back then every boy in North Carolina had a car and no reasonable curfew. They spoke slowly, more to her body's cadence. Not like Georgia boys or Mississippi boys, too fast with mouths full of rocks or gold. Virgil was no different, talking to her as sweet and slow as growing molasses. He was sun-

dried and tall, blocking the sunrays from her eyes when she looked up at him. He was just a boy then, genuine, but with something unquenchable behind his eyes. He drove his car too fast and came home when the sun was just above the hills. Audrey hoped to beat the morning, before the dew set over the land like a spirit, before her grandfather—old as all hell—rolled out of bed to check the farm.

The sun climbing higher and higher, her grandfather would ride into town on the back of his wagon, tumbling among the canvas bags stuffed with the potatoes he'd harvested. He had been a sharecropper as a young man, on the same plantation he had worked as a boy. He always told the story of how he got the farm, how a slave ended up with a few acres for some crops and a mule. Her father forced them to sit around and listen, sprawled across the carpet of Grandpa's den, warming their hands around mugs of lemon juice and honey in boiled water. At the end of one of those summers, as the sun rose later and later, one morning the carrot was fully bloomed. She stared in wonder, this orange stump with roots disappearing into the soil. It was the brightest thing she had ever seen.

Audrey looked up now, sweating, surrounded by fruit flies. Across the street were building fronts, lopsided and too close to one another, packed along the sidewalk like crooked teeth. Nina Simone's live interpretation of "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" played from her stereo, a cheap wireless speaker shoved into the soil, tucked somewhere between the greens and peaches. Key had bought it for her one Christmas, tired of her mother's complaining about cheap earbuds. Above her hung a billboard advertising an old discount at Jack's World from years ago. Car horns blared over the distant buzz of construction and busy halal carts. Her joints throbbed, her knees heavy with water.

"RENT CONTROLLED?" JOYCE EXCLAIMED, from behind the smoke of a cigarette. Her blood was hot and streaked her butterscotch skin, even in the winter. Despite the wrinkles around her eyes, she still looked like a little

girl with two missing teeth and ponytail braids. "I'd give anything to hear you say that back in Warren County."

They sat at the kitchen table of Joyce's apartment on the eleventh floor, hollering over the running water and sirens below. The windows were wide open because she was cooking at least three pounds of pork shoulder for a baby shower. She catered; Joyce and her son would show up with a dozen aluminum pans, wire chafers, and some Sterno cans. She even made coquito in the winter and sold it around the neighborhood. "What poor Spanish woman did you scam out of her recipe?" Audrey would tease.

Joyce got up and moved to the stove. Joyce had worn her sureness in her shoulders since she was young, ambling through the world with an ease that may well have been just pure luck. Even though Audrey had looked after her when they were girls, she had always felt Joyce didn't need much of anyone. Audrey had always been jealous of that, she herself an awkward thing tumbling through life, bumping its edges like finding your way through a dark room. It was like everyone else had the light on.

"Where do you even go after forty years?" Audrey asked no one. Her sister put the top back on some collards.

"Maybe we should put you in a home?"

"If you don't quit it," said Audrey.

"You know I'll put you up," Joyce said through a grin. "It'll be like when we used to sleep in the cellar during them hurricane warnings."

"And Momma would let us eat all the sweets we could bring down there."

They laughed, Audrey leaning back before rubbing her knees. Joyce checked the oven once more.

"Don't nobody owe you anything," Joyce was saying. "And you don't owe nobody. If you were to up and leave, no one would complain."

It was simple enough—she could just up and leave. It was so simple, it seemed foolish not to. But people mistake being poor for complacency. Audrey knew she couldn't afford to stay. Even so, she could raise the money. She could go to her church; the pastor was happy raising impromptu offerings

for members in need. *They could have a fish fry and raffle*, Audrey thought, *invite the whole neighborhood*. She imagined Joyce with some obscene amount of whiting, hands caked in flour and seasoning. Key, with her kids hanging at her hip, would serve folks who'd wandered by from the smell, the line snaking halfway down the block. When Audrey thought about it, her face grew hot with tears. If she did raise money from other poor people, she wouldn't give it to some landlord. She had worked all her life in Brooklyn and deserved not to be kicked out of her own city. Deserved not be taken advantage of for the rest of her life. Normal people didn't have to transcend their surroundings. Maybe something else was wrong and there was a reason women like her found themselves in courtrooms, in shelters, or on the streets, or dead. Why should she have to transcend a goddamn thing?

AUDREY WAS IN love with Virgil around the summer of 1969, when she had seen him one morning on her way to work. It was a new city, not on fire anymore but still full of smoke. The uprisings had changed the city—not toward a solution for the certain death Black folk felt around them, to which they responded with fire, but toward something maybe worse. The glass and debris would be cleaned from the streets. Virgil had moved north a few years ago—to make a real living, he'd told her. That's just what folk did back then. He worked at the navy yard and smelled of seashell and burning metal. He lived with his wife and kid in a lopsided walk-up in Bushwick. He'd come by almost every weekend for Audrey, something she waited for all week. She had grown to be *of* this place, looked like she belonged in New York like subway tokens and Anthora cups. Big hair, gold hoops, and long, knee-length coats. She'd run out when he'd pulled up to her apartment, soca blasting out the windows of his white '68 Corona. Joyce, who lived with her for a while, would kiss her cheek, waving from the front steps as the van pulled off.

Audrey had a studio in Flatbush, above a fish restaurant that left the room heavy and damp from the steam below. Sometimes she'd invite him

up. Virgil told her his dreams, how he wanted to tour with a band through a dozen cities. He had his eye on this Fender bass guitar. It had caught his eye through a shopwindow on his way to the docks.

"What about the yard? Ain't you say you might get moved up to the main building?"

"I thought so, too," he said, looking down at her wiry hands. "New shift leader. I could've stayed down south if I wanted to be somebody's boy."

His hair coiled, snapping at the teeth of her comb as she ran it through, black like the shell of a beetle gathering food in the moonlight. Bringing his face up to hers, she saw in his eyes what she'd already felt—an almost painful desire to be washed in some kind of infinite. She slept with him in the middle of her apartment, seeing only the lines of his skin under a silver half-moon and halogen street lamps.

Virgil reminded Audrey of Warren, the back of her grandfather's wagon, the cool balm of morning before the day would break open and sunlight would heat the fields. Virgil had been brought to her because he ran errands with traders in town. Really, it was his eyes, Audrey thought—reflective pools that led down the same endless path she'd grown familiar with. "My mother always said if you were dropped into a well," Virgil would tell her, "you don't find your way out by looking down." They spent that whole summer together, making their way through the city and everything it could offer. The matinees for less than a dollar on Tuesday mornings, sitting under the cherry blossoms in Prospect Park, getting pink sepals in the tight curls of their hair. One night, or a collection of days eased into twilight, she decided she had come to love Virgil. Maybe under the glow of a moving picture, the baroque innards of Kings Theatre on Flatbush Avenue, latched on to some frequency tucked away deep inside them both. Maybe it happened as he became a part of her place; his must lingered in rooms, stopped her in the middle of doorframes, brought up memories of nights prior, and sent heartbeats to the floor of her belly. He made shelves for walls and nooks, fixed up the legs of coffee tables and a soft, rolled-arm sofa he bargained away from someone he knew

leaving town. He built flower boxes out of plywood to satisfy Audrey's green thumb until the apartment was filled with monsteras and umbrella trees; strings of nickels and English ivy tangled from high places and curled toward the light whenever the sun cut across the studio before noon. He bought groceries when he could, would spring up some days with pounds of rice and a few racks of beef, leave one out for Audrey to cook that night, and stack the rest in the freezer. One time, when trying to nail the base of a swing-arm wall lamp above a bookstand, Virgil hammered right through the plaster. Left a hole in the wall about the size of a fist.

"Oh shit," he said, getting down from his stepladder to admire his work.

"My landlord is gonna take my deposit," Audrey scolded.

"We'll get it fixed."

"You really don't care, do you?"

"It's just a wall, that's easy," said Virgil. "Now, if it was this ceiling . . ."

"I'd be in trouble."

"We'd be in trouble."

"Maybe we can get a house one day," Audrey thought aloud, looking up at the foggy lamp stretched above them. "One of those fresh ones they're building in Queens or Long Island. Maybe even move back south. Stretch out."

"We got away from Warren," Virgil said quietly. "Why would we ever go back?"

"Home is good for you," she said, staring out the window. "Peace is good, too."

Audrey would let herself be dragged to the Village or uptown, wherever Black folk could dance and scream in peace, a cavernous hall or backroom—couldn't have been Half Note, maybe even smaller—hoping she looked as pretty and sensual as Eartha Kitt, or the women in *Jet* magazine under "Beauty of the Week." Virgil would lug his bass guitar around in its leather case, sweating through his knit polo, shining like a cinnamon stick in whiskey under the bar lights. He rolled his own tobacco in two quick motions, whipping open an army knife and licking an envelope, kept drinks on the table

before they were finished. He'd sneak glances at Audrey between pulls, lean in, and talk into her neck when the music settled, sugar at the bottom of sweet tea before it was stirred. And if the house band played "Jimmy Mack," he'd dance with her in the aisle, let Audrey sing along in his ear, "*When are you coming back?*" She would stroke his cheekbones, high cliffs along the sea, play in his stubble until she wandered upon an ingrown, whisper how she would rub him in castor oil and ease it out. And when the band called him on to fill in around midnight, he'd play cool, hang his head bashfully as he rose to his feet. But Audrey knew just how nervous he was, his anxious heart, had felt its drumming, and counted the cigarettes, and felt his left foot tapping the sticky hardwood all night. Virgil would find his way with only his hands and ears. The bass would make the music a body, full and whole, could trouble the clouds for a rainstorm. He'd find his way blind on that stage, sweat and sweat.

For information on additional debuts, the inside scoop on our upcoming titles, giveaways, and more, visit us at **PenguinRandomHouseLibrary.com** and **BorrowReadRepeat.com**.

Join Our Network: /PRHLibrary

Penguin Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Re@d
BORROW. READ. REPEAT.