Summer Reading

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Excerpt Sampler 2023

What Will You Read Next?

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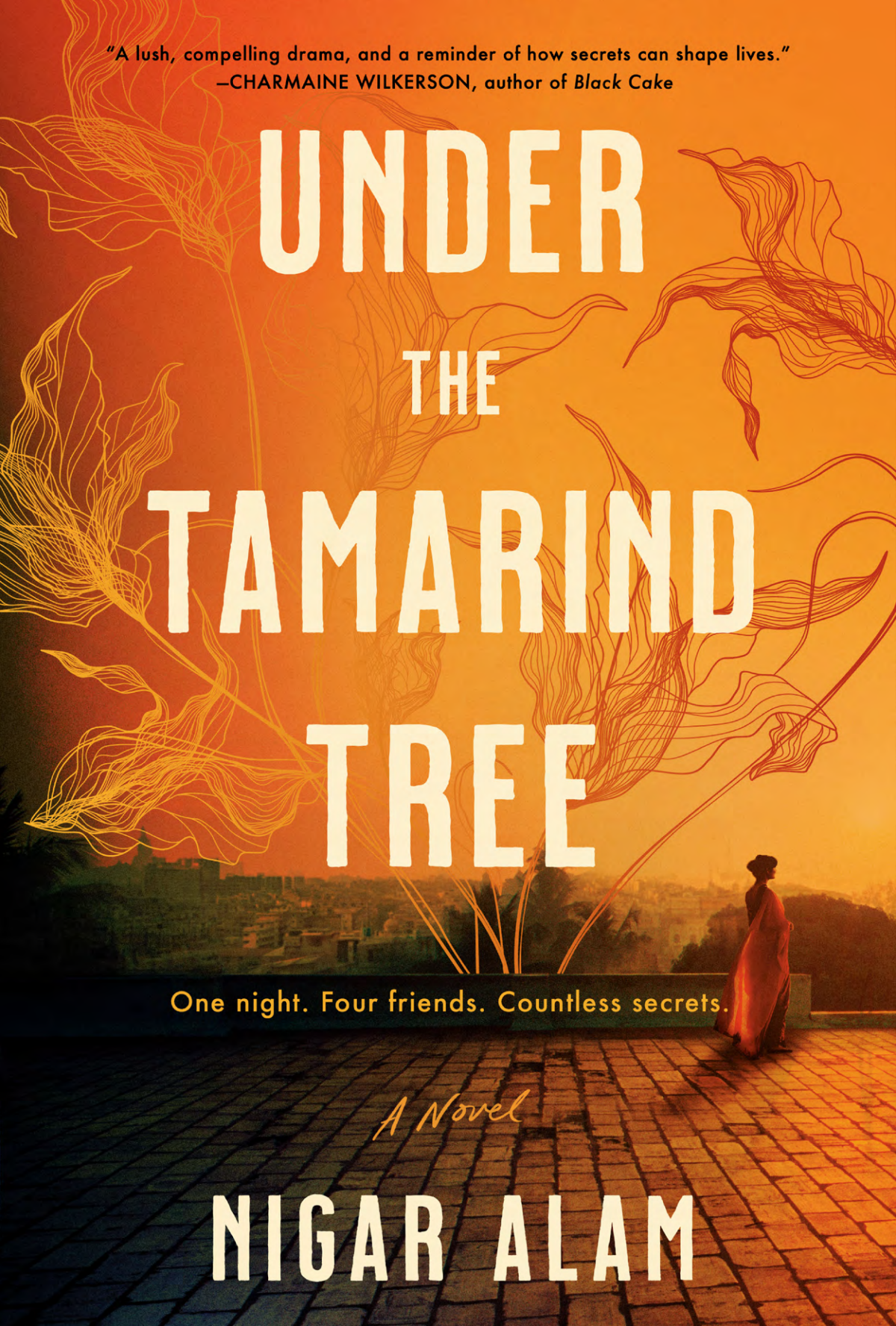
What Will You Read Next?

"A lush, compelling drama, and a reminder of how secrets can shape lives."
—CHARMAINE WILKERSON, author of *Black Cake*

UNDER THE TAMARIND TREE



One night. Four friends. Countless secrets.

A Novel

NIGAR ALAM

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This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Prologue

Nine-year-old Rozeena stared ahead, squinting in the dark at the hordes of shouting people racing toward her family. Were those sticks and spears raised above their heads? Why were they so angry?

Her mother grabbed Rozeena's wrist and pulled her off the tonga. She landed hard on her knees, but her father didn't stop to check the bleeding skin below her frock's hem. Her mother only yanked harder, pulling and dragging until Rozeena got up running. She had to run so fast she had no breath left to ask why they couldn't go home. Wouldn't they be safe if they just went back? It wasn't even far.

The house in front of Rozeena exploded into flames.

Fire leapt into the night sky, and dense smoke entered her nose, scorching her insides. September's humidity already dripped streams of sweat down her face and back. Now it all bubbled to a boil.

Rozeena spun to her mother. Light from the flames swirled on her face. She stood frozen in place, confusion and fear contorting her mouth into pained twists. Swiveling on her feet, Rozeena searched for her father and Faysal. But they weren't there. Bodies with bundles

of clothing, and suitcases, and children in their arms ran around haphazardly, their screaming faces blurred by darkness.

She turned back to her mother. "Ammi, I can't find . . ."

But a mass of people was racing toward them now, from the direction of the fire. Every second, the men grew closer and louder as did their thunderous, angry yelling. Why? Her mother didn't wait to find out. She turned and ran, her hold like an iron cuff on Rozeena's wrist.

Crowds pushed against them from the front and back, until they ripped right through her mother's tight grip.

Rozeena was pitched away.

Bodies shoved against her, colliding from all sides as she scrambled to her feet trying to keep her head up, eyes searching. Two women ran toward her, mouths open, arms waving overhead. Were they neighbors? Would they take her to her mother? But instead of stopping, the women charged into Rozeena, throwing her flat on her back. Gasping to catch her breath, she tried to stand up against the wave of bigger, stronger bodies, but her already bleeding knees fell hard on the ground, over and over.

"Rozee? Rozee!"

Her head shot up. "Here! Here!"

She spun around, searching, and saw Faysal. His face grew in size running toward her, the whites of his eyes reflecting the light from the burning house behind her.

"Rozee!" he screamed again. "Run, Rozee, run!"

Where to? Behind her was the raging fire and the approaching mob, and in front, from a lane across the street, a bigger, even louder group of men emerged.

Faysal pushed her toward the fire, pointing at the house next to it, a safe house where their parents were headed. It would lead to another house, behind it.

"Another house? A safe house?"

He shook her by the shoulders and aimed her toward it. "That way! Just run, Rozee, run!"

Without looking back, she ran like she'd never run before.

That was the last time Rozeena saw her brother.

1

NOW, 2019

Rozeena tightens her fingers around the mobile phone, but it slips down her damp palm. Her other hand flies up to meet it, pushing the phone back to her ear.

"Your voice," she says, a bit breathless. "It's the same." She leans forward in her veranda chair, as if it'll bring her closer to him.

Haaris laughs softly. "Well, I suppose it's the one thing that remains the same, Rozee."

Her throat constricts at the nickname. Only elders or close friends call her Rozee. At eighty-one, she doesn't have many left.

"Is everything all right? Are you all right?" She frowns at the black-and-white tiles under her slippered feet.

"Yes, yes. I'm well," he says. "Just finished breakfast. Around nine o'clock in the morning here."

In Minnesota. She's gotten a little news of him from friends of friends over the years and now detects the slight change in his accent, from the British English Rozeena still speaks, to the harder "r" of the Americans in *morning here*.

Her shoulders relax somewhat at hearing he's not calling from his

deathbed, and she sits back in her polished rosewood chair. She hadn't recognized the number flashing on her screen when she'd answered the phone. A call with a US country code could've been any one of her old colleagues or distant relatives.

But it'd been Haaris.

She realizes the extent of her surprise as she wipes her hands one by one on her kameez. The soft cotton of her long, blue tunic absorbs the moisture of her palms, but her heart still races, heating her from within. Reaching down, she plucks away the fabric of her shalwar from the backs of her knees. Her face feels damp as well, though Karachi's evening breeze is cool as always, even in July.

She hasn't heard from Haaris in fifty-four years.

Gusts from the Arabian Sea rush toward her, setting the giant palm branches into a powerful spin in the far corner of her garden. She lifts her face to the evening, calming herself to regain control. Silver strands of hair whip in the breeze and she tries to shove them back into her low bun with one hand, but they resist. Let it go, she tells herself, and leaves them to dance on her cheeks.

"I can hear the wind," Haaris says, incredulous. "I can actually hear the Karachi wind."

She smiles. "Yes, it's as loud as ever, but only here closer to the sea. The old neighborhood is congested now, tall buildings and complexes of flats all built up where there were spacious houses." Our houses, she wants to say, but instead says, "I'll be going inside soon. It's past seven o'clock in the evening here." She hopes her statement hurries him into explaining why he's called.

The sun has already dropped low behind the line of tall, pencil-like ashok trees on the right side of her garden. Soon, the call to prayer will burst from loudspeakers at mosques near and far. Five times a day, the azaan thankfully drowns out the continuous buzzing of her neighbors' air conditioners. Beyond her boundary walls all the new houses are giant two-story, sand-colored concrete boxes made

wider and noisier by air-conditioning units clinging to every side. Rozeena's single-story home, one of the older ones in this newer neighborhood, is well-balanced. The house that lies behind the veranda is equal in size to the garden that lies in front.

"It's raining here today," Haaris says finally and quietly. "It's not a rainy state, Minnesota. But these days it's raining inside and out."

"Inside and out?"

He exhales audibly. "Three months ago, my grandson died."

A soft gasp escapes her lips. "Oh, Haaris, how . . . I can't . . . I'm so sorry," she flounders. The death of a child—but not death in general—still shocks her. She remembers that dreadful saying, *The smallest coffins are the heaviest*.

After a few moments of silence Haaris speaks, his voice conversational again even though Rozeena heard it catch a second ago. Men of his time are masters at bottling up their emotions.

"Has it rained there yet?" he says. "Or is it waiting for the fifteenth?"

She smiles. He remembers the unpredictable arrival of the monsoon season, unpredictable in its intensity too, sometimes flooding the streets and other times only muddying the dust clinging to leaves. Up north they get the majority of the rains—in the fertile valleys of the Indus River and even further north over the massive Himalayas. But when Karachi does get showers, it somehow rarely happens before July 15. Families can confidently plan all sorts of outdoor events before then, including elaborate weddings.

"You remember," she says.

"I remember everything, Rozee."

She searches his words, his tone, his diction. What is he really saying? Does he want her to apologize, or is he going to?

"But right now, I have a favor to ask," he continues.

"Oh?" Her guard is up instantly.

"I have a granddaughter, his sister. Her name is Zara. She's

fifteen years old and in Karachi these days visiting with her parents, my son and his wife. They visit every summer." He pauses. "Zara says she wants to do something by herself in Karachi, some 'good' while she's there. Her parents of course are scared to let her out of their sight, after her brother."

"Yes, of course."

"So, we're trying to find something very safe for Zara to do." He takes a deep breath. "You remember my oldest sister, Apa, who still lives in Karachi? Well, she mentioned you need a temporary maali."

"A maali? How does she know?" Confused, Rozeena wonders why her servant situation is being discussed.

"I think Apa heard through a mutual friend," Haaris says. "You know how news travels." Rozeena and Apa don't socialize directly, but it's a small world, this city of over fifteen million.

And Haaris's information is correct. Rozeena does need someone to tend to her garden now that Kareem, who's worked for her for more than fifteen years, has fractured his tibia. A speeding rickshaw crashed into his bicycle last Wednesday when he was on his way to his fifth house for gardening work. The following morning, the eldest of his six sons arrived at Rozeena's house, ready to fulfill his father's duties. Of course she sent the eleven-year-old away, straight to the school in which she'd enrolled him, and with a stern warning not to miss a single day.

How will they be anything but maalis if they don't go to school? she wanted to say to Kareem that evening in the hospital. But Kareem knew this well and was grateful for Rozeena's help over the years. Rozeena just hoped that Kareem's other employers would also continue to pay his wages and keep his family afloat.

"Since you need a maali," Haaris says, "I was thinking it would be wonderful if Zara could do the work and be your temporary maali."

The phone feels hotter against her cheek. Her breath comes faster. Haaris has gone from staying away and silent for more than fifty years to suddenly injecting himself into her life by depositing his granddaughter at her doorstep.

Why?

It's too close, too dangerous, for herself and for her son.

Haaris explains how Zara would do the maali's work, and her parents would worry less if she worked in a home like her own grandfather's. Rozeena stops herself from saying that their homes, like their lives, were never alike.

"And Apa knows this?" she says instead, doubting his older sister has agreed. Apa would never sully the family reputation by allowing her grandniece to be a maali, even if just for the summer.

"Apa will tell herself a comfortable and acceptable version of Zara's time at your house." He pauses, before almost pleading. "Will you do it, Rozee?"

She's too surprised by both his telephone call and his odd request to answer immediately.

"It would help," he continues.

"I'm certain Apa can find something else for Zara to do."

"Yes, maybe. But I don't know if Zara would agree. I'm not saying she's being difficult. No, no. Of course I don't mean that." He sighs. "But what she's gone through . . . Well, you can imagine, can't you, Rozee?"

She nods into the phone, and Haaris continues as if he can see her.

"That's why I want Zara to be with you, under your care. There's no one else who can help her like you can."

Rozeena nods again. She has always taken care of people. It's who she is, even before she was a trained doctor, and even now, years after retirement. But the risk is too high.

"Most of the people I knew in Karachi have moved out, or moved on," Haaris says. "Of course you don't have to agree to this, especially after all the . . . the quiet of these past years."

The past is exactly what she fears. It's what can destroy her little family, crush her son.

"I can't do this, Haaris."

"Please, Rozee. Please, just think about it. For Zara. For her sake."

For her sake. For his sake. It's the past all over again. She pushes it away to focus on practical matters.

"How long is she in Karachi?"

"Well, her parents have already taken so much leave from their work this year. Most likely they'll have to come back to Minnesota before Zara's summer vacation is over. But then I'll go to Karachi to travel back with her."

Rozeena's breath catches and simultaneously the azaan erupts in the air. Another call to prayer starts within seconds, from a farther mosque. Then another from the opposite direction. Echoes surround Rozeena like old memories rolling toward her.

Haaris is coming back.

She swallows hard, but her mouth remains dry.

He doesn't speak until the loudest azaan has ended. "That was beautiful," he says then, and she imagines his eyes closed, his dark lashes long and resting on his cheeks as he listens to the azaan from the other side of the world.

After an entirely sleepless night, Rozeena gives her answer the next morning.

Starting today, Zara will be Rozeena's maali.

Haaris is grateful, and Rozeena is scared. There will have to be

strict rules and schedules, so her son and Zara never meet, so the past has no chance of entering her dear son's life.

In reply to Haaris's thank-you, Rozeena types out:

It's for the child.

She repeats the statement to herself over and over again. Perhaps by bearing the risk to help young Zara, Rozeena will finally be able to atone for what happened fifty-four years ago.

Later that day, after proper introductions are shared, Zara's parents wave through the rear window of a white BMW as it slowly pulls away from Rozeena's house. Initially Zara's parents had been apprehensive, but by the end of the visit, they'd approved of Rozeena, her lone existence in a house with a staff of servants, her past life as a pediatrician, her location so close to theirs, and of course her friendship with Haaris. Zara had nodded at everything her parents said, including how interested she was in gardening, a new but true passion. They're staying with family only two streets down, but Rozeena notices before they leave that Zara's parents' anxious faces and shaky palms seem as if they're leaving something precious far, far behind.

Rozeena isn't surprised, of course. They've suffered the worst kind of loss already. Their son was in a friend's car when it happened. All the other boys survived the crash.

She glances up at Zara now, tall like her father, and like Haaris. She wears black leggings under a light pink kameez like girls do in Karachi these days, and her straight dark hair falls well below her shoulders. She looks quite grown up with it parted down the center and framing her oval face. But she waves back at her parents like a

child, smiling and swinging her raised arm side to side so it's visible even from a distance. As soon as the car turns the corner though, her smile fades as her hand falls.

"Should we go back inside now?" Rozeena says.

Zara's eyes are big and brown, also strikingly like Haaris. "You can't even tell it's a desert here." She looks up and down the road. "My friends always ask me if Karachi is just, like, sand dunes and camels and stuff."

They stand in a bubble of abundant sweet jasmine from the thick rows of bushes growing outside all the homes' boundary walls. Tall coconut palms, ashok trees, and giant neem trees stand inside the walls, some looming over sparkling swimming pools. The street is otherwise empty as it is in the evenings, with only a hint of diesel from the main road where buses honk and rickshaws sputter in the distance.

"Well, I'm sure you've ridden camels on the beach at Sea View." Rozeena turns to lead Zara back inside. "And it's certainly a desert here. If I don't take care, a lot of care, all of this will shrivel up and die," she says, stopping inside the gate to gesture at her garden. Her maali does all the hard work, of course, but Rozeena manages it.

Zara joins her at the bottom of the driveway, and Rozeena's driver, Pervez, pulls the black metal gate shut behind them. Other than the long driveway leading up to the car porch on the right side of the property, the rest of the land is neatly cut in half, with a large rectangular garden in front of the house. A wide wooden pergola juts out from its center above the tiled veranda.

Rozeena cuts across the grass on her way to the veranda and points out plants and bushes that are in immediate need.

"The organic fertilizer is coming on Wednesday, but before then the water tanker best arrive, otherwise—"

"They'll all shrivel up and die," Zara interjects, and quickly bites her lip.

Rozeena says nothing until she's settled in a veranda chair. The change underfoot from grass to tile always requires extra attention. She knows full well the dangers of broken hips at her age. As she smooths her peach-colored cotton kameez over her lap, she pulls the matching chiffon dopatta down to form a V on her chest. The breeze cools her throat as she considers how Haaris's granddaughter is not really the silent, agreeable girl she was in front of her parents.

As Zara leans back on the other wooden chair now, Rozeena says, "What did your grandfather tell you about me?"

Zara shrugs. "Nothing," and then adds, "What did he tell you about me?"

Straight to the point, like Rozeena herself. "He told me your brother died. I'm so sorry."

"Well, that's me." Zara raises her hand like someone called her name in school.

Rozeena imitates the gesture, not unkindly. "Me too."

Zara's mouth is open, as if unsure of what to say.

Rozeena shifts in her chair. Even after all this time, it's difficult to talk about. "I lost my brother too, long ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Zara bows her head.

"Thank you. No one's ever said that to me before," and to answer Zara's puzzled look, adds, "Those were different times."

She doesn't say that in those days, loss wasn't spoken of, perhaps because there was too much all around, and for too many families. Instead of remembering the pain and releasing the anguish, they used that energy to protect whatever was left behind.

2

THEN, 1964

Ten Days Before

Rozeena woke thinking of Haaris. In one more day he'd be back from Liverpool, and then she'd know, or at least begin to discover, what he'd meant by his last goodbye.

The four of them had gathered in Zohair's garden that night—Aalya from upstairs, Rozeena from next door, and Haaris from across the street—neighborhood friends who might never have met. Three of them had crossed the border seventeen years ago with their families, refugees of Partition who by chance landed here, on short Prince Road. Only Haaris's family had firm roots in Karachi. Seven generations of amassing wealth had established the Shahs among the powerful elite, their branches spreading past their import/export business and into local government as well.

But as always, that night in Zohair's garden Haaris was simply the friend they'd grown up with. As he told them he'd be back in only six months this time, his eyes lingered on Rozeena's. She'd held his gaze, and her breath, until he turned away, slowly.

Now, at the end of the day, Rozeena set the thought aside for the

hundredth time. There were more important things. She pulled off her stethoscope and looped it around her neck.

"Your lungs are clear," she said to Gul, Aalya's maid from next door. "There's no wheeze at all. Are you in any pain?"

They sat facing each other on the only two chairs in Rozeena's free clinic, the tiny storeroom tucked in the corner of the boundary wall at the back of her house. Gul looked as she always did in her clean shalwar kameez, with her hair in a neat, tight braid down her back.

Aalya's mother did most of the housework herself and only called upon Gul once in a while for cleaning or washing. It was a convenient arrangement for both since young Gul had no other work. She'd only recently married and arrived from the village to join her husband, Abdul, who was Zohair's cook in the downstairs portion of the house. Abdul and Gul lived in the servants' quarters behind the house.

Rozeena's gaze fell to Gul's leg which wouldn't stop bouncing as her eyes flicked around the room. When they hovered on the single window again, Rozeena turned to check it. But there was nothing outside except the night made darker by the tamarind tree, so overgrown it shrouded most of the sandy lot at the back of the house. Even the old wooden swing hanging from the branches was hidden in the shadows.

"You were having dinner. I shouldn't have come and—"

"It's all right," Rozeena said. "But tell me, what's bothering you?" She planted an encouraging smile on her face, trying to erase the exhaustion Gul must've noticed and assumed was from a busy day.

Gul didn't know that Rozeena had seen only one patient in her new pediatric clinic downtown. She hadn't told her mother, of course, because one patient meant nothing when every day brought more expenses to the household, the latest being her father's old car that

had started knocking at every left turn. But the blue Morris was still running, so Rozeena avoided discussing the ominous sound with her mother. After the sewage pipe burst last month, Rozeena had noticed a shift in her mother. Uncharacteristic panic had spread across her face as they stood behind the house that day, foul-smelling waste rising from the earth and bubbling up at their feet.

"We'll have it repaired," Rozeena had said quickly, waiting for her mother's veneer of strength to return.

Instead, her mother's spine had curved as if weighted down. "How much more can we fix? Soon it'll be just this, and no house." She shook her head at the rising rot. "And then Sweetie will have her way."

It was the first time in years that Rozeena witnessed her mother's apprehension, and that her mother mentioned the future they'd been trying to avoid since Rozeena's father died of a sudden heart attack eleven years ago. But now, every new expense could be the final blow, the one that would bring her mother's brother, Shehzad, but mostly his wife, Sweetie, to their front gate ready to snatch away their life and independence in Karachi.

Because what would people say if Shehzad's own sister was living in such conditions, with the house crumbling around her?

Shehzad and Sweetie were bent on avoiding any missteps that could cause disfavor among their new crowd. They'd risen in society over the years and had managed to secure a place in the top tier, for themselves and their children. Shehzad ran the Lahore office of Sweetie's family business, but Sweetie ran Shehzad and their family life, determined to shine worthy of their status in society.

Rozeena and her mother's downward slide would definitely be a blemish. The only respectable solution would be to swoop in and take them to Lahore.

Until now Rozeena's mother had refused her brother's help in order to stay free of the strict expectations that would certainly come

with it. For one, Sweetie would've arranged Rozeena's marriage in her late teens or early twenties, like she had for her own daughters. It was the way things were done, she'd say. Girls didn't need careers. They needed to get married at the right time.

And if Sweetie had her way now, would Rozeena be allowed to work, earn her own money, make her own decisions?

Facing her mother over the rising heat of sewage, Rozeena had insisted she'd have the pipe repaired in no time. Her mother had finally pushed back her slight shoulders and lifted her chin. But after that day, Rozeena noticed her mother's shoulders curving in whenever she thought she was alone.

"I took datura," Gul blurted now. "That's why you don't hear anything here." She thumped her chest. "They say if you light a match to the dried leaves and breathe in just a little bit of the smoke, it helps with the breathing disease." Her voice dipped as Rozeena frowned.

"I've told you to stay away from datura." Rozeena released a breath to lessen the frustration and fatigue in her tone. "It's not safe. You can even . . ." How many times before had she warned Gul?

Whether people called it datura, thorn apple, or jimsonweed, the folklore medicinal plant was a poisonous analgesic and hallucinogenic. Yes, a paste of its crushed leaves could soothe and heal burns. Inhaling the smoke of burning leaves did relax muscles and could rid Gul of an asthmatic spasm. Rozeena didn't deny the medicinal properties of natural remedies. Many medicines came from plants after all, even aspirin. But regulation was needed, and formulas and dosages had to be monitored.

"Where did you get the datura?"

Gul bit her lip and shrugged.

"It came from some hakim, didn't it? I saw the new store sign in the market. You know, just because a person calls himself a hakim doesn't mean he studied in a college to learn medicine. Most hakims just cook something up in their kitchens and sell it to you."

Gul nodded, but Rozeena knew the girl didn't really believe that these hakims, the doctors of traditional remedies, preyed on the poor and illiterate. To add to the confusion, there were some hakims who had studied homeopathy and pharmacology. People like Gul, however, were bound by access to the closest, cheapest care, which was also the most suspect. That's why Rozeena offered this free clinic, if only Gul would listen.

But now Gul's attention was back at the window.

Rozeena jumped up this time and marched over. "What's out there, Gul? What do you see?"

Leaning into the pane, Rozeena squinted in the dark. The loose fabric of her pale blue sari brushed against her back, tickling the inch of bare skin between blouse and petticoat. Cool November air swept over her face, and a prickly shiver ran through her. Something out there was bothering Gul, but there was only the side boundary wall in the distance and beyond that the back of Aalya's house, rising tall.

Gul leaned right and left trying to get a glimpse out the window, but Rozeena positioned herself directly in front. Folding her arms across her chest, she waited for an answer.

"I saw something," Gul said finally, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I saw Zohair Sahib. He was at the bottom of the stairs." She motioned toward the spiral concrete staircase clinging to the back of Aalya's house. "I was near my quarters when Aalya Bibi came out of her door, alone, and came downstairs." She paused. "There are guests visiting for dinner. If they see Aalya Bibi with Zohair Sahib in the garden . . ." She didn't need to complete her sentence.

Log kya kahenge?

What would people say? What would they think?

What was Aalya thinking? Mere gossip could ruin her reputation and her family's social standing in a second. Rozeena clenched her jaw. Recently, she felt distant from Aalya. She used to know everything about Aalya, as if they were the same person, but now Rozeena

felt more and more in the dark with each passing day. Why was Aalya meeting Zohair?

This was Gul's real reason for banging at the back gate tonight. Confessing about using datura was a filler while she gathered courage to inform on her employer's daughter. Rozeena was utterly grateful for the information but also had no time to spare. She ushered Gul out of the storeroom, and they exited the back gate together.

"And remember, no datura. You don't have any more in your room, do you?"

Gul insisted she was well now and didn't need any more cures. They reached Aalya's house in quick, long strides, and as they entered the back gate, shrill laughter sprang into the night. Gul went into her quarters behind the house, and Rozeena hurried along the side of Aalya's house toward the front garden.

Glancing up at the windows, Rozeena curled her fingers into a fist, bracing herself for the faces that might appear in search of the laughter. She'd curled her fingers the same way holding Aalya's small hand that first day when they stood waiting for the school bus.

"Take care of her," Aalya's mother, Neelum, had said, placing her daughter's hand in nine-year-old Rozeena's. "Aalya doesn't know these things. How to be in school, how to sit and listen."

Aalya didn't even know English yet, Rozeena thought. What would the nuns think? She nodded at Neelum but wondered how many words she could teach six-year-old Aalya on the bus.

"Promise me," Neelum insisted, squeezing the girls' hands as if she could meld them into one. "Promise me you'll make her just like you, so much like you that people will think she's your little sister."

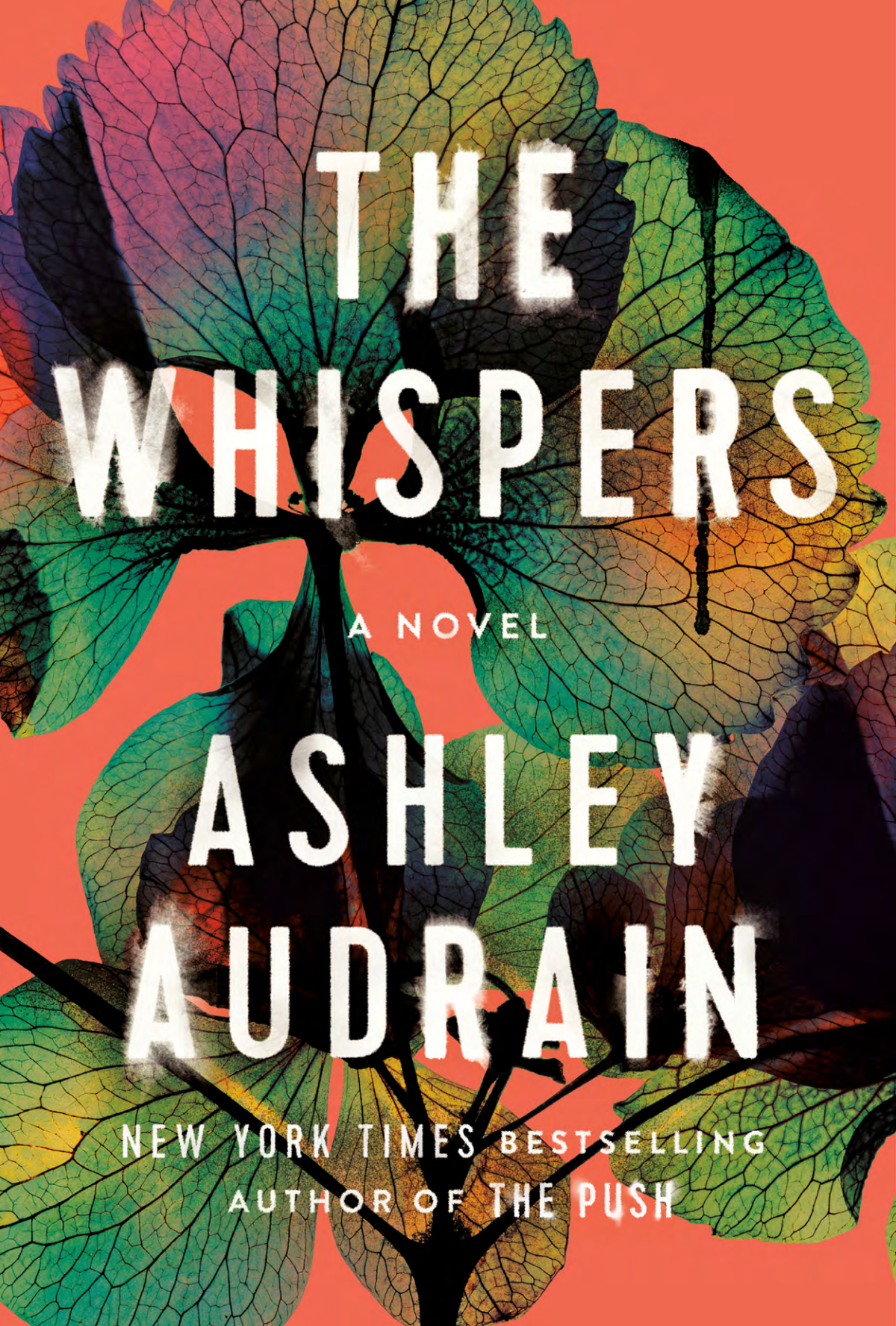
Rozeena's family had arrived from Delhi a few weeks before. She didn't know where Aalya's family had come from, but migrants and refugees were pouring into Karachi from all over, and Rozeena's father had told her to simply accept and be grateful, and not to pry. The past was painful for many, and Rozeena knew that well.

This was her chance to start afresh too.

So when the bus arrived, and Neelum released her, Rozeena's grip had remained tight around Aalya's hand, vowing to do it right this time.

Now, Rozeena came to a sudden halt. Before her, the garden lay bathed in extra lights to impress the dinner guests tonight. Everything glistened—the water trickling down the three-tiered fountain in the center, the thick grass outlined by pearl-dotted jasmine bushes, the bougainvillea bursting with bright pink flowers climbing up the front boundary wall and arching over the gate like a fairy tale.

And there, in the corner farthest from Rozeena, Aalya stood under the full, dense canopy of the giant tamarind tree, her back turned to everything except Zohair.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He lifts two fingers to his nose and smells the child's mother as his eyes grow wide in the dark of his kitchen. The clock on the oven reads 11:56 p.m. His chest. Everything feels tight. Is he having a heart attack? Is this how a heart attack feels? He must move. He paces the white-oak hardwood and touches things, the lever on the toaster; the stainless-steel handle of the fridge; the softening, fragrant bananas in the fruit bowl. He is looking for familiarity to ground him. To bring him back.

A shower. He should shower. He scales the stairs like a toddler.

He refuses to look at himself in the bathroom mirror.

His skin stings. He scrubs.

He thinks he hears sirens. Are those sirens?

He wrenches the shower handle and listens. Nothing.

Bed, he should be in bed. That's where he would be if nothing had happened. If this was just another Wednesday night in June. He dries

himself and places the towel on the door's hook where it always hangs. He fiddles with the way the white terry cloth falls, perfecting the ripple in the fabric like he's staging a department store display, his hands twitching with an unfamiliar fear.

His phone. He creeps through the dark house looking for where he's put it—the hallway bench, the kitchen counter, the table near the foot of the stairs. His coat pocket, that's where it is, on the floor at the back door, where he'd dropped it when he came into the house. He brings the phone upstairs, his legs still feeble, and stops outside their bedroom door.

He can't be in there.

He'll sleep in the spare room. He lies down slowly on the double bed, noting the care with which the linens have been smoothed and tucked, and places the phone beside him. He has an aching urge to call her.

What would he say? That he misses her? That he needs her?

It's too late.

But he stares at the phone anyway, imagining himself hearing the steady march of the ringtone while he waits for her to pick up. And then he closes his eyes and sees the child again.

Sometime later he feels the mattress tremble. Someone has joined him. He waits to be touched. But no, it's a vibration. And then again. And then again. There's a streak of tangerine light piercing through the room. He swipes his thumb across the reflection of his bleary face on the phone's screen to answer.

The pained pitch of her voice. He has heard it before.

"Something terrible happened," she says.

SEPTEMBER

The Loverlys' Backyard

There is something animalistic about the way the middle-aged adults size each other up while feigning friendliness in the backyard of the most expensive house on the street. The crowd drifts toward the most attractive ones. They are there for a neighborly family afternoon, for the children, who play a parallel kind of game, but the men have chosen nice shoes, and the women wear accessories that don't make it to the playground, and the tone of everyone's voice is polished.

The party is catered. There are large steel tubs with icy craft beer and bite-size burgers on long wooden platters and paper cones overflowing with shoestring fries. There are loot bags with cookies iced in each child's name, the cellophane tied with thick satin ribbon.

The back fence is lined with a strip of mature trees, newly planted, lifted and placed by a crane. There's no sign of the unpleasant back alley they abut, the dwellers from the rehab housing units four blocks away, the sewers that overflow in the rain. The grass is an admirable

shade of green. There's an irrigation system. The polished concrete patio off the kitchen is anchored with carefully arranged planters of boxwood. There is a shed that isn't really a shed—its door pivots, there's a proper light fixture.

Three children belong to this backyard, to the towering three-story home that has been built on the double lot, unheard-of in an urban neighborhood like this. The three-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, are in matching seersucker, and they've let the mother of this audacious house style their hair nicely, swept, patted. The older boy, ten, insists on wearing last year's phys ed uniform with a stain on the T-shirt. Hot chocolate or blood, the guests will wonder. But Whitney's husband had convinced her to pick her battles wisely in the fifteen minutes before the party begins.

By three thirty in the afternoon, she has let go of the urge to rip the gym shirt off him, to wrestle him into the powder-blue polo she bought for the occasion. She has let go of the hosting stress and feels the satisfying high of everyone enjoying themselves. She has impressed them all enough. She can tell from the glances, the subtle pointing between friends who notice the details she hopes they will. She thinks of the photos that will smatter social media tonight. The hum is loud and peppered with laughter, and this air of conviviality satiates her.

This noise is the reason Mara, next door, doesn't come. She got the heavy-cardstock invitation in her mailbox the month prior, like everyone else, and slipped it straight into the recycling bin. She knows these neighbors don't really want people like her and Albert there. They think she's got nothing to offer anymore. Her decades of wisdom don't matter in the least to those women, who march around like they've got it all figured out. But that's fine. She can see and hear everything she needs to through the slats in the fence, while she tidies her own garden, plucks at the tips of new weeds until her lower back is too sore, then

she'll move to the mildewed patio chair. She notices something in the crispy-petaled branches of her hydrangea bush. She gives it a shake. A paper airplane falls nose first into the dirt. Another one she's missed. She found several in her yard Thursday morning. She bends to collect it as she hears Whitney's voice crest above the guests, greeting the couple from across the street.

That couple, Rebecca and Ben, make a point of finding the host as soon as they arrive. They've got twenty minutes and a potted orchid to give her. Rebecca has to get to work. Ben has Rebecca to appease, or he'd have stayed home. He is quiet while Rebecca and Whitney exchange pleasantries. Whitney compliments and inquires, she paws Rebecca's hand and then her shoulder, and Rebecca concedes. She is charmed in a way she isn't usually. She hopes nobody interrupts.

Ben's hair is still damp from the shower, and he smells like the morning. He feels Whitney glance at him while she speaks to his wife. His hand is in the back pocket of Rebecca's white jeans. He pulls her closer. Rebecca can sense that he isn't listening to her conversation with Whitney, not really, and she is right. He is watching the magician twirl a colorful scarf around one of Whitney's giggling twins, the girl, she has found Ben's friendly eyes. He's not overly social with other adults, but the children are always drawn to him. He is the favorite teacher. He is the playful uncle. He is the baseball coach.

From across the yard, Blair watches as Ben and Rebecca find subtle ways to touch while they listen to Whitney orate, like they still find in each other every last thing they need. They are childless, child-free, and so they have not yet been irrevocably changed, not like the rest of them. They speak to each other in fully composed sentences with civ-

ilized inflection. They probably still fuck once a day and enjoy it. Fall asleep in the same bed with their limbs tucked into each other's crevices. Without a pillow wedged between them to separate her side of the bed from his, to imagine the other isn't there.

Blair watches her best friend, Whitney, begin to drift as she wraps with Rebecca, in subtle search of her next conversation. Aiden, the loud man who sleeps on the other side of Blair's barrier pillow, booms from the corner of the backyard. He has an audience, always an audience. He is building to a punch line she has heard before, he has caught Whitney's attention as she passes, and Blair is painfully aware she is standing by herself. She looks for Jacob, Whitney's husband, whom she spots with a couple she hasn't met. A toddler with tight braids wedges herself between the mother's legs. Jacob is gesturing to his house, drawing the shape of the roof with his finger, explaining a part of the design. He's wearing his signature black T-shirt and black chinos rolled at the cuff, he is sockless in crisp white designer sneakers, his hair, his brows, the rims of his Scandinavian eyewear, it's all intense and cool, but he's so gentle. He lifts a hand in Blair's direction, hello. She blushes, she has been staring. He is easy to stare at. Her eyes search again for his wife.

Whitney is speaking now to a group of mothers from her older son, Xavier's grade. They have a group chat that Whitney rarely responds to, because she doesn't know the answers to the questions they ask about the first-term project and the hot lunch menu and the deadline for ordering class photos. But she likes being in the group chat anyway. Sometimes she chimes in with an emoji, as she arrives at the office early in the morning to her third cup of hot coffee and the pleasure of silence and thought. Thumbs up. Red heart. Thanks for the updates! Nothing helpful, slightly mocking. Whitney can feel the women's attention follow her now as she makes her way to say hello to their

husbands, who stop their conversation, straighten their backs as they greet her.

Blair catches Rebecca's attention instead, and it's their turn for the pleasantries now. Blair can think only of the weather, always the goddamn weather, how early the evenings grow cool now, and then Rebecca's grueling hours at the hospital, where she's due in forty-five minutes. But Rebecca loves those grueling hours. The two women have nothing in common but their proximity. Rebecca offers herself to Blair as an on-demand medical encyclopedia, answering every text she sends about her daughter's new rash or barking cough or itchy eardrum or grayish-colored poop. The kinds of things that can occupy Blair for days. Blair wonders how it feels to be so purposeful. To wear white denim to a family barbecue.

Rebecca's eyes fall every few seconds to Blair's seven-year-old daughter. She can't stop looking at her. Wondering what it would be like to be here with her own. She lets herself run with this version of her future and it gets longer and longer and longer, like the scarf from the magician's hat. The girl is drawing in chalk on the patio concrete with the twins, who are waiting for their turn with the rabbit. The two women watch Blair's daughter together now, each pretending to be more amused by the children than they are.

Whitney joins them, her drink refreshed, and Blair and Rebecca come alive. She drapes her hand on Blair's shoulder and pretends not to be annoyed by the chalky colors covering the twins' palms. How sweet they are together, Whitney drawls, how good Chloe is with

the littlest ones. She takes an inconspicuous step back, in fear of powdered handprints on her dress.

Rebecca tries to imagine what it's like to be interested in doing this kind of thing, the hosting, the display. She has three minutes left and her brain will tick through all one hundred and eighty seconds because that is what it does. She, too, comments on Chloe's good nature while the seconds tally.

"Delightful" is the word Rebecca uses. Blair smiles, downplays her only child's perfection, but she is buoyed in the way only this kind of comment can achieve. As perfunctory as it might be.

The word "delightful" makes Whitney wonder where her undelightful son is. She can't see him in the backyard. Blair said she last saw him a half hour ago, standing at Mara's fence with his face between the slats. He is never where he is supposed to be. Whitney has warned him to be on his best behavior, to entertain the smaller children, to be friendly. Just this once. Just for her. He should be out here. The magician is nearly done.

Maybe he just needs a moment alone. Blair says this slowly, quietly, wondering if she shouldn't.

But no. Whitney will find him.

Can't he just do what she asked him to? Can't he be more like Blair's daughter? She thinks of his perpetual pouting, of how it borders on a scowl, people asking why he's in a grumpy mood when it's just the way he looks. Long faced. Morose. In need of a haircut he won't agree to. She moves quickly through the house calling his name. The pantry. The living room. The basement playroom. She shouldn't have to do this in the middle of a party with fifty-odd guests in the backyard. Is he hiding? Has he sneaked the iPad again? *Xavier!* Must he always push her

buttons like this? She hurries to the third floor and opens the door to his room, and he is there, on his bed, with the stolen loot bags for the children emptied around him. Every last one. There is chocolate on his face and on the sheets. He is licking the icing from a cookie wrapper stickered with another child's name.

"XAVIER! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?" She swoops to rip the licked cellophane from his hands as he shrieks and recoils from her. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?"

Xavier's face crumples and his bottom lip curls down like that of a child half his age, and she will not allow the irritating whine that will crescendo next, the whine that makes her want to smack him. "NO!" she shouts, grabbing him by the arm as he whimpers and goes limp. She cannot stand him like this. "GET UP, YOU LITTLE SHIT!"

But then she lets go. Because she realizes the jovial purr below has deadened.

The party has gone silent. There is only the thump of her furious heart in her ears. And the ringing of her own venomous, murderous yelling. The familiar echo of her rage. The fear of possibilities registers. And then she notices. The wide-open window. Everyone has heard.

The shame pulls her to the ground. To the nest of discarded satin ribbons from the cookies, the ends cut like the tip of a snake's tongue.

She knows then what she has lost.

NINE MONTHS LATER

1

Blair

THURSDAY MORNING

It's five thirty in the morning on a Thursday in June. Blair Parks sips her coffee and thinks about her husband spreading the thighs of another woman as wide as butterfly wings.

She imagines him smelling her. And then tasting her, his tongue circling, flicking.

Blair's hand covers her mouth. She puts her cup down.

She can't sleep. But she's been doing this in the morning now, indulging these obscene thoughts. Nothing feels good about starting her day like this, but it helps to satisfy her obsessive worrying so she can move on. Otherwise, she'll find herself consumed when she doesn't want to be. Staring at the shelf of stain removers at the store, the ones in commercials that desexualize middle-aged stay-at-home mothers like her, while she imagines a younger woman's mouth filled with her husband's semen.

She pours a second cup that won't taste as good as the first and thinks

about how hungry she is for something more. Although what, she can't name. The problem isn't just boredom. Or a wistful longing. Not her sedate, ten-year marriage and the ticking clock to complete irrelevance. Is this normal? Is this how other women her age feel?

The idea of saying any of this aloud, to anybody, makes her diaphragm tighten. More than usual. It's better to lift her chin and quietly face whatever hour is ahead of her. And the next hour after that, lest anyone suspect she's this miserable. It's beneficial for everyone, she knows, if the indifference takes over. If she soldiers on, without the energy to care about what it is she really wants. Or how she really feels when her alarm goes off in the morning.

Vulnerability, she knows, is something she should work on, something women are now supposed to exercise like a muscle. The books and podcasts and motivational speakers have told them so. She tries to admire the ones who admit they've made choices they regret and resolve, loudly, to change. But that kind of upheaval is not for her. She cannot see any other life for herself. And she cannot separate the shame of having gotten it all so wrong.

Another cup later, her daughter's bedroom door squeaks on its hinges upstairs. Her footsteps tap down the hardwood in the hallway. The toilet flushes in their only bathroom, and the plumbing hisses through the house. Blair wipes her hand across her tired face.

Somewhere along the line, blaming Aiden for the way she felt about her life became convenient. He's been a reliable depository for her anger. She dumps and dumps and dumps, and he never seems to overflow. In her mind, there was little consequence to this—they are married, and separation isn't an option for Blair. The dismantling, the shape of everything changing. The perception. The impact on the daughter upstairs. She can't fathom it.

The water runs from the bathroom tap. She hears Chloe pop open the mirrored cabinet where their three toothbrushes share a cup. She

puts a bagel in the toaster for her daughter's breakfast. She's already taken the cream cheese out of the fridge so it's room temperature, the way Chloe likes it.

Attributing her misery to an underperforming marriage had helped her cope well enough, until a week and a half ago, when she found a tiny piece of foil wrapper in the pocket of Aiden's jeans. Less than a square inch. Garbage, to any other person who was to pick it up from the laundry room floor after turning the pants inside out for the wash. But she recognized the texture of the ribs in the packaging. And the emerald jewel tone. It looked exactly like the condoms they used years ago. Every morning since she found it, she's opened the drawer where she keeps it and places it on her palm to wonder.

There are countless other things it could be from. A granola bar. A mint from a business lunch.

But more than any proof she has, is a feeling.

She'd once heard them described as the whispers—the moments that are trying to tell you *something isn't right here.* The problem is that some women aren't listening to what their lives are trying to tell them. They don't hear the whispers until they're looking back with hindsight. Feeling blindsided. Desperate to see the truth for what it is.

But maybe she's just paranoid. Too much time on her hands to think.

She hears Chloe's feet hit the stairs and spreads the cream cheese carefully. The wide-open thighs come back to her. Aiden's fingers opening the woman's tight, waxed lips. How nice he'd be to her afterward. Maybe she makes him laugh. The hair rises on Blair's arms. She thinks again of how Aiden didn't ejaculate during the only night they had sex last month. Of how he's been checking his phone more than usual.

Chloe is nearly at the bottom of the staircase. She closes the imaginary thighs and puts the halves of the bagel together. And then she turns around and forces herself to smile, so that like every other morning of her daughter's life, Blair's beaming face is the first thing Chloe sees.

2

Rebecca

HOURS EARLIER

The resident briefs her as they hustle through the double doors to the resuscitation bay, their sneakers squeaking on the resin floor. She feels the humid air from outside before she sees the paramedics push the gurney into the hands of her team. A ten-year-old male found unconscious at 11:50 p.m., suspected primary brain injury from a fall, no obvious signs of trauma. The nurse steps back as Rebecca snaps on the blue gloves and turns to lift the patient's eyelids.

Her hands pull back. The child's face. She looks up at the nurse on his other side.

"I know him. His name is Xavier. He lives across the street from me."

"Do you want to—"

"No." She shakes her legs to get the feeling back. The curtain is about to lift. "I'm okay, I'm fine. Vitals? Let's go, come on."

Her hands are firm on his small body as she calls the orders, and in seconds the choreography she's performed for years takes over. Tracheal

intubation. Veins punctured. CT scan ordered stat. She is never with a child on the trauma table for long, but each minute is crucial and methodical, each second squeezed of its potential, and yet at the end, when everything that can be done is done, she only looks back on those minutes as a mass of time with either one outcome or the other.

"The parents, are they here? Where are they?" She peels off her gloves and pitches them in the garbage bin. She looks back to Xavier's gray face, his mouth gagged open with the tube she'd guided into him. She brushes back a strand of his damp hair. The ground where he landed would still be wet from yesterday's rain. She touches his cheek.

Hundreds of parents have sat waiting for her in the vinyl-covered hospital chairs. The ease with which she can form the words sometimes concerns her. But she has never known her patient before. She has never watched them wash the neighbors' cars in a mound of suds, or known that their bike is cobalt blue with neon-green handlebar grips. She's never had to tell a friend that her child may never recover.

Her adrenaline settles as she leaves the trauma room. She sees the reflection of fluorescent light on the hallway floor, and her senses start to return: the respiratory fellow being paged, the whine of a child in the waiting room, the antiseptic in the air. She takes her phone from her pocket. She wants to call Ben, to feel the calm of his voice, but he'll be asleep already. And Whitney is waiting for her.

Rebecca knocks on the open door of the small room where they've put her. She's sitting at a round table, staring at the box of rough tissues she's been given. She doesn't look up.

"Whitney, I'm so sorry."

Whitney moves her head slowly like a robot with a battery running down. She says nothing. Rebecca takes the seat beside her and puts her hand on Whitney. She does this, touches the parent on the arm or the shoulder, to make the words she says next feel more personal, less routine. This had been, years ago, a part of the emotional order set she

created for herself. Empathy hadn't always come as easily to her as it does now. When she was younger, she'd been better at other parts of her job, things that were definitively measured, assessments of her competency. Things she could prove.

Whitney's eyes close as her mouth opens, but her voice is strained. The beginnings of words she has forgotten how to form.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Rebecca waits for her to repeat what the first responders reported: that she checked on him before she went to sleep, and he was gone from his bed and the window was open. She looked down to see him on the grass below. That she has no idea what happened. C*ome on, Whitney, tell me exactly that.*

She thinks of the backyard, the rectangle of manicured grass the paramedics would have lifted him from. Rebecca had last been there in September for the neighborhood party.

She doesn't want to think of Whitney's anger that afternoon. Of the child's cries from his room as she screamed at him.

"I want to talk to you about Xavier's condition."

Whitney covers her face with one hand. "Just tell me if he's going to die." Her voice squeaks in an octave barely audible.

Rebecca reaches for Whitney's other hand. Her fingers are cold and curled into a fist. Whitney pulls back, but Rebecca squeezes her firmly until she gives in. Rebecca isn't intimidated by much, but there was something about Whitney when they first met. Her verve, her polish, the astuteness of her words when she spoke.

But over time, as their lives quietly orbited each other's, that effect wore off. There is a strong sense of familiarity about someone whose life shares such close physical proximity, given all the possible coordinates on the planet. She and Whitney breathe from the same tiny pocket of air. She sees her garbage cans on Wednesdays and knows they don't

recycle everything they could. She knows she has a shopping habit, sees the stacks of packages teetering at the front door, nice department stores, courier bags left for the nanny to collect. She knows one of them—either Whitney or Jacob—doesn't sleep well. Rebecca sees the kitchen lights flick on when she comes home in the middle of the night. She sees the empty wine bottles in the transparent blue recycling bags.

The backyard party isn't the only time she's heard Whitney yell. Right through those towering panes of glass at the front of her home, the unmistakable pitch of a mother who has had enough. She'd felt unsettled every time, like she had at the barbecue, embarrassed to have heard her. What else happens in that house, she isn't sure, but that kind of speculation makes her uncomfortable. She is a doctor, and what she cares about are facts. She finds comfort in facts.

"Xavier has significant injury—we're worried about his head. He's in the ICU, in a medically induced coma to rest his brain. They're going to talk to you there about what to expect for the next little bit, okay? In situations like this, we learn a lot in the first seventy-two hours. I know this is hard to hear, Whitney, but I need you to understand there's a possibility he might not regain consciousness."

Whitney is unmoved.

Rebecca pauses to soften her voice. "Do you understand?"

She feels Whitney's hand begin to quiver and she looks closely at her striking face. The tight sheen of her forehead. Her microbladed eyebrows. Of the outward perfection.

"Is Jacob with the twins?"

Whitney closes her eyes and shakes her head. "London. For work. Our nanny came over right away, but I had to wait for her." Her voice curls. "I couldn't go with him in the ambulance."

Rebecca tells Whitney she'll take her to see him now, that he's intubated, and there is swelling. That this might frighten her, but he's not in

any pain. Another doctor will have to take over from there. The door slides open behind them and Rebecca turns to see a nurse with two police officers.

They'll want to speak with Whitney; it's routine. Rebecca registers the discomfort of this, although the questions they'll need to ask don't concern her, not technically. Rebecca shakes her head in their direction—*Please, not now, not yet*—and the nurse guides the officers down the hallway instead.

"There are studies that show patients in this condition know when family members are with them. You can hold his hand and talk to him, like you would if he was awake. Okay?"

Whitney stands and gathers the hem of her sweatshirt in her hands. She lets Rebecca slip her strong, steadying arm under her as they walk down the hall. Until Whitney becomes rigid. She turns her face toward Rebecca and their eyes meet for the first time.

"Is this why you don't have children?"

Rebecca pauses. She doesn't know what to say. This job? This hospital? This constant fear of something going wrong, the unbearable pain if it does?

She thinks of the hours she has spent on the floor of her bathroom. The bloody orbs sinking to the bottom of toilet bowls, the dancing strings of mucus. The weight of the hand towel on her lap on the way to the hospital.

Why doesn't she have children? Because she cannot keep her own alive.

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,
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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.

SILVER NITRATE

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *MEXICAN GOTHIC*

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An engorged, yellow moon painted the sky a sickly amber hue, illuminating a solitary figure. A woman, standing between two sycamore trees.

It had rained, and the earth was slippery as, breathing with difficulty, she ventured toward the cabin. The woods felt awake and dangerous, with the sounds of crickets and rolling thunder in the distance. There was a thin humming. Was that a bird? It was too high-pitched, that noise.

The woman pressed a hand against her lips and stared at the cabin, with its welcoming lights. But that oasis of warmth was distant. A twig snapped, and the woman looked behind her in terror. She began to run.

The noises of the night were now mixed with the patter of her feet. She flew forward, and her hands desperately pulled at the front door—there was a *thump*, so loud it sounded like a cannon—until she finally managed to burst into the cabin. She immediately shut the door, bolted it, and stepped back, waiting. Her eyes were wide.

The crash of an axe against the wood made the woman jump. Splinters flew. The woman screamed, pressing back farther into the room as a man hacked his way through the door. The scream was an annoying squeal that made the levels jump into the red. The man lingered at the threshold, clutching the axe. He began advancing; his breath was heavy, punctuated with an annoying pop.

"Demon possession again?" Montserrat asked. Her eyes were on the VU meter; on her knee she balanced a notepad.

"Ghosts," Paco said.

She scribbled in the notepad. "I thought you were into ninjas."

"We're still doing the ninjas. Just not now."

"A ninja moratorium."

The woman screamed again. Montserrat pressed a button. The image froze on the screen. She spun her chair around.

The padded room smelled faintly of the pine-scented air freshener that the other sound editors liked to spray around to cover up the fact that they were smoking inside. The whole place was a bit of a mess. The editors regularly left pizza boxes and empty bottles of Pepsi around the mixing room, along with the scent of cigarettes. "No food or smoking in the editing room" said a sign half hidden behind the random stickers the editors had pasted on it over the years. In theory, this admonition made sense, especially when you were dealing with film. You didn't want to smear a workprint with grease. In practice, though, all editors were supposed to eat in front of the monitors. You were constantly working your ass off in post-production, trying to make up for missed deadlines. Montserrat had never been in a facility that was perfectly neat and organized. Editing rooms all looked like war zones unless a client was poking their head around.

Still, she might have tidied up if Paco hadn't ambushed her. Unfortunately for him, this particular mixing room was small and, unlike the bigger rooms, didn't have a client area with a couch. Paco was sitting uncomfortably on a chair, by the door, next to a pile of tapes and vinyl records, and from the look of his position he was probably getting a cramp.

"So, what do you think?" Paco asked.

"I think this is the kind of shit you shouldn't have to be fixing in post-production. Did you shoot these scenes inside a washing machine? The sound is terrible. Those levels are way too hot."

"I know, I know. But what can you expect with these budgets?"

"It's going to take me a couple of weeks."

"I need it to be done in five days."

Montserrat shot him a skeptical look. "Not likely. Mario will tell you as much."

"Come on, I'm not asking Mario, I'm asking you."

"I don't want to be stuck here from the crack of dawn until midnight because you forgot to hire a person who can hold a boom mike in the right position."

"Don't do this to me. I've got hundreds of units due at Videocentro and can't run the duplicates if the master is a mess. Don't you get overtime for this stuff? Must be a hefty check."

"I wish," she said.

Though there was the yearly discretionary bonus. The full-timers got the aguinaldo mandated by the law, but freelancers like Montserrat couldn't count on that. They had to rely on the gratitude of their employers. At Antares, Mario gave his editors a turkey, a bottle of cheap whiskey, and a Christmas bonus. It was never a generous bonus—it shrank or expanded at whim—this despite the fact she was by far the best sound editor at Antares. She was also the only woman on the Antares team, aside from the receptionist, which was probably why she never became a full-timer, never had the right to an aguinaldo, and instead had to rely on Mario's mercurial temper: the editing business was a boys' club. There were a few women working at studios writing the scripts that were used for subtitling and dubbing. There were also female translators, though those were often freelancers who were contracted for single projects. But full-time female sound editors? Those were as rare as unicorns.

"Look, I have to meet someone for lunch," Montserrat said, grabbing her leather jacket from the hook by the door and slipping it on. "Why don't you talk to Mario and we'll see what he says? I'd love to help, but he was raging about an unpaid dubbing—"

"Come on, guys, I always pay even if I'm a few days late. As soon as I offload those videos I'll be golden, I swear."

Montserrat didn't know how true that was. Paco had scored a modest hit with an *Exorcist* rip-off a few years before. Mexican horror movies were scarce these days. Paco had reaped the benefits of a nascent home video market a few years back. But he wasn't doing well anymore. Four years before, René Cardona III had tried the same concept: shooting a low-budget horror copy of a hot American film with *Vacaciones de Terror*. Although *Vacaciones* was a blatant attempt at mixing *Child's Play* with *Amityville*, the film had one semi-famous star in the form of Pedro Fernández, whose singing career had assured at least a few butts in seats. *Vacaciones de Terror* and its obligatory sequel had performed decently, but the market for local horror productions wasn't substantial enough to support two filmmakers intent on churning out scary flicks, and Paco didn't have a singer to put on the marquee.

Not that there was a market to produce anything with a semi-decent budget at this point. The best that most people could hope for were exploitation flicks like *Lola La Trailera*. Paco was, if anything, a little better

off than most Mexican filmmakers, since he'd managed to rope a few Spanish financiers into his moviemaking schemes and so the bulk of his output was meant for the European market. He'd dump a bunch of copies at Videocentro, then sell the rest to Italy, Germany, or whoever had any dough to spare. Paco's work was slightly more nutritious fare than what most of the other exploitation hounds offered, but nothing to get excited about.

"Montserrat, come on, darling, you know I'm solid. How about we do this: *I* pay you the overtime. I'll throw in . . . oh, how much would you want?" he asked, reaching into his pocket and producing a wallet.

"God, Paco, you don't have to bribe me."

"Then you'll do it?"

Montserrat had been working at Antares for the past seven years. She'd never made it into the two big film studios, but you had to be the son of someone to edit at a place like that. Positions were passed down through the STPC and STIC like knighthoods. Now that Estudios América was being dismantled, the movie business was even more of a mess than before, and competition for positions was cutthroat. Antares had been, when you added all the pluses and minuses, not that bad.

Not that bad, that is, until the previous year, when the company had hired a new sound editor. Everyone loved young people and despised old ones. Help wanted ads always specified "35 and under," sometimes even "30 and under." Samuel, the newest member of the team, was definitely under thirty. Mario had funneled a bunch of assignments to Samuel, in part because his youth meant he was one of their lowest paid employees. Antares saved money with Samuel. And, as a result, Montserrat had been pulled from several projects. She'd gone from working five, sometimes six days a week, to three, and she was sure Mario was going to cut her down to two by December. Maybe they'd end up assigning *this* job to Samuel.

Crap, she needed to make more money. Her sister didn't ask her for anything, but Montserrat knew she was hurting a little. She had been working only part-time for half a year now; the cancer treatments were too exhausting for her to manage her usual workload at the accounting firm. Montserrat tried to chip in when she could.

"Follow me," she muttered, looking at her watch. She'd be late if she didn't step out now.

Paco and Montserrat walked down a long hallway decorated with wall-to-ceiling mirrors and back toward the reception area. The mirrors were supposed to be "wall art" and lend an air of class to the joint, but the results were more tacky than elegant. The reception area was the only part of the studio that looked semi-decent. Instead of shabby, patched-up furniture, the room boasted two black leather couches. Behind a big desk a big sign with silver letters said "ANTARES" all in caps.

Candy was behind the desk. She had bright yellow neon nails that week—she changed them often—and smiled at Montserrat happily. Candida, who liked to go by Candy, handled reception and all manner of assorted tasks. She was the person who kept track of who was using which editing bay at any given hour of the day. She wasn't supposed to schedule anything until Mario said so, but Montserrat sometimes skipped the queue.

"Candy, is Mario back from that business lunch yet?" she asked, hoping the answer was yes but the receptionist shook her head.

"Nope."

"Crap," Montserrat said. "Okay, this is what we'll do: Candy, can you slot me in for some night work tomorrow? Put me for the whole week, beginning at seven in my usual room. I need to work on Paco's latest picture."

"Oh, what's it called?" Candy asked, looking at Paco with interest.

"*Murder Weekend*," Paco said proudly.

"Sounds cool. But, Montserrat, I need to know the pricing, the green form—"

"Put it down before someone grabs the time slot," she said. "I'll show it to Mario later and fill in the green form."

Before Candy could ask another question, Montserrat waved them a curt goodbye and stepped outside.

She shook her head, thinking about the long nights that awaited her. Too many people thought they could skimp on the audio portion of a shoot. Then they ended up with ambient noise, cutoff tracks, or low sound quality. They often expected miracles, too, from their sound editors, and Montserrat had to deliver those miracles for a measly amount of cash. She wasn't even on staff, for God's sake. Mario didn't believe in hiring people full-time because it was cheaper and easier to keep

them coming in by the hour. That way, when he didn't need someone, as he had with Montserrat lately, he could cut them off without sweating it.

The problem was that Montserrat *liked* editing at Antares. A full-time job for a TV show would be steady money, but it also meant she'd have to work with a lot more people. Two audio editors in the same room, and then maybe the lead editor and the director giving notes while they worked. She knew someone who had made the switch to working as a sound recordist because it at least meant less insane schedules, but she despised sets, with all their technicians and actors. Small productions, low-budget flicks, these appealed to her because she often worked alone, no need for a gigantic team of ADR experts, foley artists, and music supervisors to suffocate her. People. She didn't wish to deal with people, although sometimes she feared she'd end up with a vitamin deficiency from spending all daylight hours inside, and she'd start talking back to the characters on screen, like an editor she knew did.

Montserrat wondered if she shouldn't poke her head around the set of *Enigma*. Cornelia could introduce her to her contacts, or there might even be an opening with Cornelia's TV show. She hated the idea of a desk job, but maybe there was freelancing she could do on the side to augment her paycheck. Research. Administrative work. Something other than audio editing, because audio was uncertain: canceled gigs, clients changing their minds, or the composer scoring a film being late, which meant *hurry*, *hurry*, *hurry*.

No one cared about the audio, anyway. People noticed only when you fucked it up, not when you got it right. It was a thankless job that had her sometimes catching three hours of sleep on one of the couches around Antares so she could keep working through the night.

Montserrat made it into the restaurant on time and took a booth, ordered a coffee and a slice of pie. Tristán arrived twenty-five minutes later. His coat was a lush plum color with big buttons and a wide belt.

His hair looked a little ruffled, and he was wearing his sunglasses, which he took off with practiced theatrical panache as he sat down at the table. "Well! They were out of Benson and Hedges at my usual newspaper stand, so I had to walk around."

"I thought you were a snob who only bought imported cigarettes."

"I'm trying to save money this month. Dunhills are out of the question for a few weeks," he said, taking out his lighter and a cigarette. "You've been waiting long?"

"Yes," she said. "You shouldn't smoke."

"Keeps me thin, and I have to have at least one vice."

"Maybe, but we're sitting in the non-smoking section," she said, pointing to the sign behind him.

Tristán looked around and sighed. "Now why'd you seat us here?"

"Because it's full in the smoking area and they said there's no way we're getting in there."

"Maybe I can ask for us to be moved," he said and raised his hand, trying to attract the attention of a waitress.

"Please don't," she said, poking at the slice of pie she had almost finished eating. She'd assumed he'd be late and had been wise enough to order quickly.

"Miss?" he said.

A waitress turned around. He threw her his careless, sixty-watt smile that was all teeth. The smile had a success rate of 70 percent. The waitress approached him, notepad in hand.

"Are you ready to order?"

"I'd like a Diet Coke. Could you move us to the smoking section?"

"It's full."

"If there was a table that opened up, could we move there? What's your name? Mari. That's nice. Mari, would you be able to keep an eye out for a table for us?" he asked. "As a special favor for me, please."

He spoke with that deep, velvet-smooth voice he always used when he wanted to get something. The voice had a success rate of 90 percent. The waitress smiled at him. Montserrat could tell by her expression that she was wondering if she didn't know Tristán from somewhere. She had that curious look people got around him. Maybe she'd remember him later.

"Well, all right," the waitress said, blushing.

"Thank you, Mari," he said.

Tristán Abascal, born Tristán Said Abaid, was Montserrat's age. Thirty-eight. They'd grown up in the same building, and they both loved movies. But their similarities ended there. Tristán was tall and handsome. Even

the years of drug use and the car accident hadn't completely marred his looks. He wasn't the same crazy-beautiful boy he'd been, but he still cut a striking figure. And although it had been about ten years since he'd acted in a soap opera, some people still recognized him.

Montserrat, on the other hand, was small and plain. When they were kids, the others mocked her limp. After three surgeries, her foot had improved quite a bit, though it pained her when it got cold. Now that there were bits of silver in her hair, her plain face was only growing plainer.

"So, the good news is I found a place. It's in Polanco and it's the right size," he said spinning his sunglasses with one hand and smirking. The doctors had done a good job with his left eye; there was but a faint scar under it, and the eye was still smaller than the right one, a little lopsided, that pupil permanently dilated just a tad more than the other. It gave his face a faintly mismatched air where once before it had possessed an elegant, near-perfect symmetry. Nothing terrible, but he was self-conscious about it, even after many years. He wore the sunglasses all year long, everywhere he went. In the first few months after the accident, he even wore them indoors.

"How much is it?"

He gave her a figure, and when she raised her eyebrow at him the smirk grew into a big smile. "It's a bit pricey, I know. That's why I'm laying off the Dunhills. I'll need all the voice work I can get. Work has slowed to a trickle."

"You too? We should buy a lottery ticket."

"Cash flow problems?"

"Not dire, yet. But I'd like to help Araceli with her expenses."

"How's she doing?"

"Good. I mean, as good as she can get. We're hoping it'll go into remission, but despite all the treatments and the limpias, nothing's changed."

"I should stop by and say hi to her sometime."

"She'd love that."

The waitress came back with his Diet Coke and a glass filled with ice. Tristán smiled at her as she poured the soda. He ordered a Monte Cristo sandwich and fries. She knew he'd poke at his food and eat little.

"I need to be out by the thirtieth, and I have the movers booked and

everything, but I'll have the keys sooner than that. I was thinking we could look at it before the move. How about Friday?"

"I'm probably going to be stuck doing a rush job all week."

"In that case could I borrow your car? I wanted to take a few small things on my own."

Montserrat had three loves. One was horror movies. The other was her car. The third was Tristán.

She'd always loved him, first when he'd been simply "El Norteñito," that slightly confused boy from Matamoros with the funny accent. She grew up in Tristán's kitchen and had even learned to cook meatballs the way his Lebanese mother did. Montserrat's parents were divorced, her mother was seldom home, and her sister Araceli was a terrible cook, so she much preferred eating with him.

Theirs was the bountiful affection of children who sat close to the TV set, mouth open, and watched monsters carrying maidens away. After his braces were removed, Tristán morphed into a cute teenager, the one all the girls had a crush on; she too had a crush on him. Around that time, Tristán started taking acting and singing lessons. He was no good with the singing, but he did get work modeling for fotonovelas and as an extra in several forgettable flicks before landing a steady gig at Televisa.

By 1977, when the twenty-two-year-old made his debut in a soap opera, he had the chiseled good looks of a star, and Montserrat's love became a roaring passion that was eventually dampened by his utter indifference. She loved him still, but it was not with the desperate romantic yearning of her younger years. She'd eventually admitted that Tristán was a bit of a shit at times and more than a little fucked up. He could be a horrible, selfish prick, and his numerous personal problems took their toll on their friendship.

Yet she loved him.

However, despite this deep affection, she would not give him her car. She immediately tensed and put her cup down.

"Is that all you wanted? To borrow my car?"

"Come on, no. It's been a while since I last saw you. I wanted to say hello."

"And conveniently borrow my car."

"It would only be a tiny trip."

"No. You're not going to lug around your mattress on top of my car to save yourself money with the movers."

He laughed. "I'm not tying the mattress to the roof of your car. Come on, Momo."

"No. That's it, no. Take a cab. Or have Yolanda drive you there."

Tristán's lips were pressed tight together, and he was staring at her. But she wasn't going to let him have the car. She'd wanted a car the Saint drove on the TV when they were kids, a Volvo P1800. Since she couldn't get one, she'd settled on a Volkswagen that ran like a dream. It was white, immaculate, and kept safe and sound in a reliable garage spot she rented a block from her home. It was not the car of a TV hero, but it was her precious four wheels, and she didn't need Tristán stinking it up with his cigarettes, imported or not.

The waitress came by and told them she could move them to the smoking section. Montserrat took her cup of coffee, and he grabbed his soft drink. When they sat down again Tristán again toyed with his box of cigarettes. Montserrat extended a hand and placed it over his. "I'd like it if you stopped smoking."

"I've told you, it keeps me thin."

"If not for your health, think about your teeth."

"That's why I have veneers."

"Tristán."

"We switched sections so I could smoke."

"We switched because you're a stubborn fucker," she said, almost hissing at him.

"Mmm," he replied as he lit his cigarette and took a drag. "Yolanda and I broke up, so she's not driving me anywhere."

This startled her. Usually, Tristán called Montserrat at the end of his relationships. He used her as a confessional booth.

"What? When?"

"Two weeks ago."

"You didn't say anything over the phone."

"I was trying to figure out if I could patch it over. I mean, seriously patch it over, not just flowers and a box of chocolates. Therapy, maybe. Couples counseling."

"That's a bit—"

"Mature of me?" he asked.

"Unusual," Montserrat said. "I thought you two were going to work on that movie."

"We're not on speaking terms. It's impossible to get funding, anyway. You have to beg for grants and kneel in front of Conaculta," he said.

"What did you do?"

"Why do you always assume *I* did something?"

"You didn't cheat on her, did you? She was nice."

"You didn't even like Yolanda," he muttered, irritated.

"Well, she was nice for *you*," Montserrat said. "She was a bit of a snob, but you enjoy that."

"Are you still seeing that vet with the bad hair?" Tristán asked. He sounded a little spiteful, but she didn't take the bait.

"That was a year and a half ago. And 'seeing' is a big word. If you go out with someone twice you are not seeing them," she said calmly. "Anyway, we're talking about you and Yolanda, not me."

"I didn't cheat on her," Tristán said, tapping his cigarette against the small, amber-colored ashtray. "If you must know, she wanted to get married and have a baby."

"Kiss of death, that," Montserrat muttered.

"Maybe I should get serious about someone, do the whole wedding and baby thing."

"Do you want to have a baby?"

"No! But I would like to be happy, and sometimes I think I'm too fucked up to make it work with anyone. I'm going to die alone, wrinkled and ugly, devoured by my cat."

"Don't be stupid. You don't even have a cat. Besides, you're lovely."

"My God, I like it when you lie to me like that," he said, grinning with unmitigated pleasure. He really was too vain.

"I guess now I understand why you said you needed a new apartment. And I thought it was because your old apartment had a roach problem."

"Roaches and silverfish. I'm hoping the good thing about this new place is I'll at least avoid an insect infestation."

"Silverfish love eating starches, you know?" Montserrat said. "They'll eat books and photos. They're ravenous little monsters."

"That's why I never had you over. It wasn't a nice apartment. It was cheap, though," Tristán said with a sigh.

She knew he had never had her over because he had been fully immersed in Yolanda, and he didn't need Montserrat when he was captivated by the fresh bloom of a new relationship. When he was single, though, he stuck to her like glue. It irritated her when she recalled Tristán's inconsiderate behavior, his patterns. In six months, he would meet someone new and forget Montserrat's phone number until a malady befell him or he started getting bored.

"I need to run," Montserrat said and checked her watch. She folded her napkin and placed it by the empty cup of coffee.

"Where are you going?"

"I told you I had less than an hour for lunch and you were late."

"You can't leave me eating by myself."

"I am," she said. She grabbed her jacket and put it on.

"What about marriage? Should I crawl back to Yolanda?"

She took out a couple of bills and placed them on the table. "Because you're afraid of growing old and being alone?" she asked, her voice coarse, even though she didn't want to sound angry.

"Yes. What? Don't stare at me, it's a good enough reason. Isn't it?"

"It's not," Montserrat said as she zipped up the jacket. He was irritating her with his little lost boy look, that wounded, wide-eyed expression. "Maybe you'll meet someone interesting in your new building."

"Sit down and eat with me. I'm not done chatting with you."

"Maybe you'll learn to be punctual," she said, which earned her a glare and a huff from him.

She slid her hands into her pockets and walked out of the restaurant. When she got back to Antares the reception area was empty and there was a sign that said "Ring the bell," which meant Candy had gone to fetch herself lunch. Montserrat meant to head to Mario's office to see if he was back, but he ambushed her in the tiny closet-like space that passed as their staff room, with a sad, half-dried fern in a corner and a toaster that had a broken lever so you had to keep pressing on it. There was a working coffeepot, which was the reason Montserrat had headed there. She placed her jacket on the back of a chair and poured herself a cup.

Before she had a chance to take a sip, Mario walked in. He had splashed soup on his cheap tie during lunch. "Who exactly do you think you are, booking time for Paco without my permission?" he asked.

"I told Candy we'd fill out the green form when you came back."

"You are not supposed to do that. If I'm not around, you're supposed to talk to Samuel and let him figure out the schedule."

"I didn't see Samuel."

"He was right in the office. If you'd checked with him, you might have seen Paco has an overdue bill—"

"Fine. I'll fill out the green form."

"You have to start paying attention. I can't run a business if you're goofing around. You're a decent sound editor, but you have a terrible attitude," Mario said, moving past her and almost making her spill her cup of coffee as he elbowed her on the way to the coffeepot.

"What? How do I have a terrible attitude?"

"You do. Everyone complains about it."

"Who?"

"Samuel, for one. He organized that team-building exercise last month, and you were the only one who didn't show up."

"You're kidding me, right? The 'team-building exercise' was drinking beer in very big glasses and pinching waitresses' behinds. I don't need to play sexist caveman games with the boys to do my job."

"Sexist," Mario said, crossing his arms. "I suppose now you're going to say that you're getting picked on because we're all being sexist here."

"I *am* getting picked on. You're giving Samuel the best jobs, you're pushing me to the sidelines," Montserrat said, knowing she shouldn't be getting this worked up or speaking this honestly about the situation, but it infuriated her when people tried to belittle her. "Come on, Mario, we both know you're fucking with me."

"See? That's what I'm talking about. No one can talk to you because you simply explode," Mario said, rolling his eyes. "It's as if you get your period twenty out of thirty days of the month."

"I'm not the asshole pitching a hissy fit over a green form."

"That's it. Out you go. You're not scheduled this week," Mario said, majestically pointing a finger at the door.

"What? No! I'm doing that job for Paco."

"You're not. You call next week to see if you have shifts. You're getting seven days off unless you apologize for being disrespectful."

"I haven't done anything!"

When Mario was in a bad mood, he became a petty tyrant. She knew from experience that the answer was to bow her head and blurt out a half-assed apology. That's what Samuel or the boys did when Mario was grumbling and stomping through the building. But if there was anything she hated, it was having to stomach a bully. Every single fiber of her body resisted the impulse to grovel, even when she could see by the look in Mario's eye that he expected her to. Maybe it had been the comment on sexism that had gotten him riled up. Whatever it was, Montserrat would be damned if she was going to take a reaming from this guy.

"Well? Are you going to apologize?"

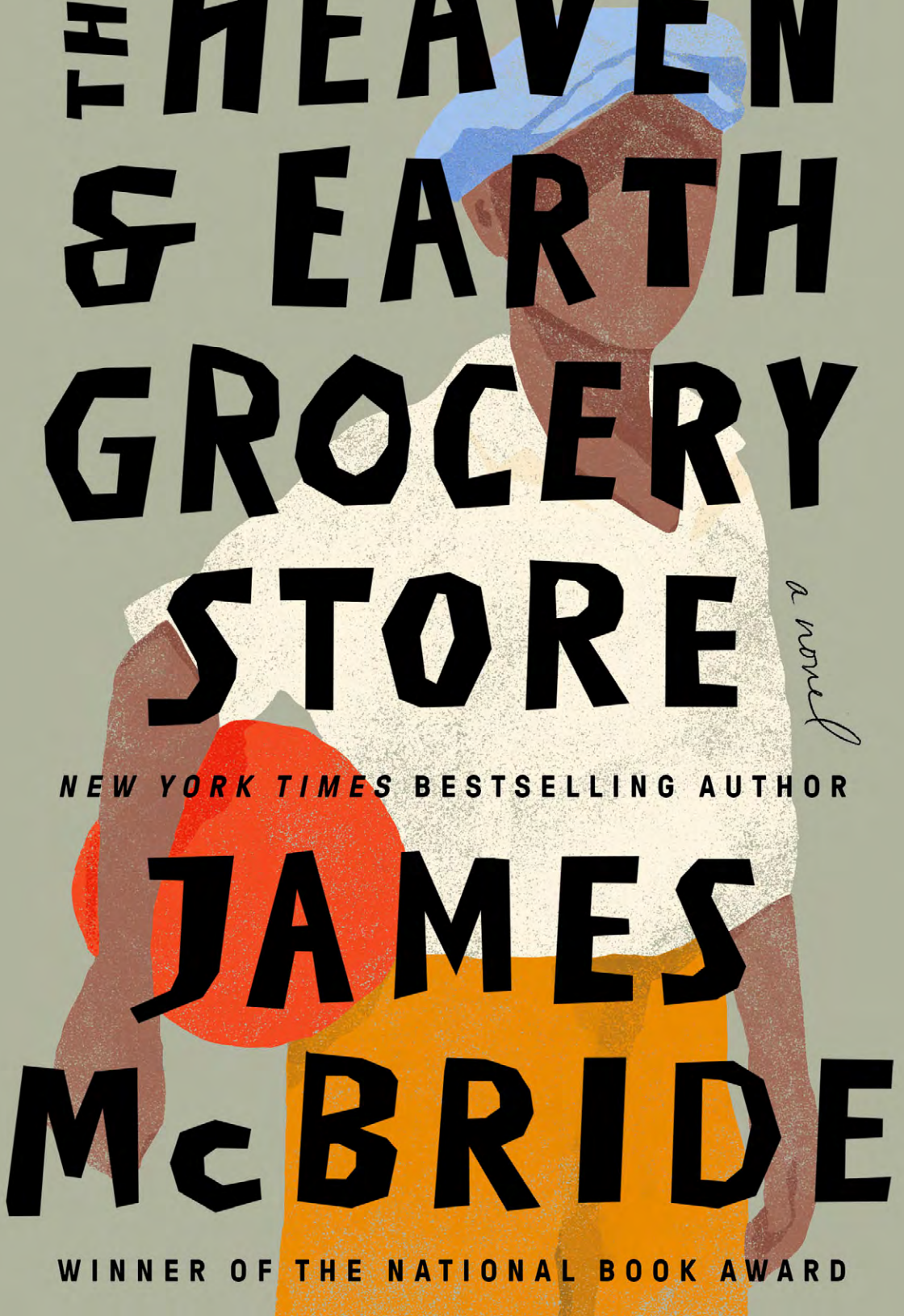
Montserrat slammed her cup down on the rickety plastic table where they were supposed to have their meals. "I'll take the seven days off. Maybe when I come back you won't be such an ass," she said, gathering her jacket under her arm and storming out of the room.

As soon as she opened the front door, she knew she'd messed up. She shouldn't have gone off on him. Mario had been baiting her. He was probably itching for excuses to let her go, and she was giving them to him on a platter. Well, there was nothing to be done about it that day. Mario would probably change his mind in a few hours. He usually did. If he didn't call her in the morning . . . well, fuck.

Montserrat put on her jacket with a quick, fierce motion and hurried to her car. She desperately needed to find alternative sources of income, because this job wasn't cutting it anymore.

THE HEAVEN & EARTH GROCERY STORE

a novel



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES McBRIDE

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

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THE HEAVEN & EARTH GROCERY STORE

By James McBride

Chapter 1

The Hurricane

There was an old Jew who lived at the site of the old synagogue up on Chicken Hill in the town of Pottstown, Pa., and when Pennsylvania State Troopers found the skeleton at the bottom of an old well off Hayes Street, the old Jew's house was the first place they went to. This was in June 1972, the day after a developer tore up the Hayes Street lot to make way for a new townhouse development.

We found a belt buckle and a pendant in the well, the cops said, and some old threads -- from a red costume or jacket, that's what the lab shows.

They produced a piece of jewelry, handed it to him, and asked what it was.

A mezuzah, the old man said.

It matches the one on the door, the cops said. Don't these things belong on doors?

The old man shrugged. Jewish life is portable, he said.

The inscription on the back says "Home of the Greatest Dancer in the World." It's in Hebrew. You speak Hebrew?

Do I look like I speak Swahili?

Answer the question. You speak Hebrew or not?

I bang my head against it sometimes.

And you're Malachi the dancer, right? That's what they say around here. They say you're a great dancer.

Used to be. I gave that up 40 years ago.

What about the mezuzah? It matches the one here. Wasn't this the Jewish temple?

It was.

Who owns it now?

Who owns everything around here? the old man said. He nodded at the immense, gleaming private school seen through the dim window. The Tucker School. It sat proudly atop the hill, behind wrought iron gates, with smooth lawns, tennis courts, and shiny classroom buildings. It was a bastion of monstrous gleaming elegance, glowing like a phoenix above the ramshackle neighborhood of Chicken Hill.

They been trying to buy me out for 30 years, the old man said.

He grinned at the cops but he was practically toothless, save for a single yellow tooth that hung like a clump of butter from his top gum, which made him look like an aardvark.

You're a suspect, they said.

Suspect shuspect, he said with a shrug. He was well north of 80, wearing an old gray vest, a rumpled white shirt holding several old pens in the vest pocket, a tallis on his sleeve, and equally rumpled old pants, but when he reached inside his pants pocket, his gnarled hands moved with such deftness and speed that the state troopers, who spent most days ticketing tractor-trailers on nearby Interstate 76 and impressing pretty housewives during traffic stops with their bubble gum lights and stern lectures about public safety, panicked and stepped back, their hands

on their weapons. But the old man produced nothing more than several pens. He offered the cops one.

No thanks, they said.

They milled around for a while longer and eventually left, promising to return after they pulled the skeleton out of the well and studied the potential murder scene some more. They never did though, because the next day God wrapped His hands around Chicken Hill and wrung His last bit of justice out of that wretched place. Hurricane Agnes came along and knocked the power out of four counties. The nearby Schuylkill River rose to a height of seven feet. To hear the old black women of Chicken Hill tell it, "White folks was jumping off their rooftops in Pottstown like they was on the Titanic. All those fancy homes down there were swept away like dust. That storm killed everything it touched. Drowned every man, woman, and child that come near it; wrecked bridges, knocked down factories, tore up farms, that thing caused millions in damages -- millions and millions – that's white folks language, millions and millions. Well, for us colored folks on The Hill, it was just another day of dodging the white man's evil. As for the old Jew and his kind that was on this hill, they got all their time back from them that stole everything from 'em. And the Jew lady they wronged, Miss Chona, she got her justice, too, for the King of Kings fixed her up for all the good things she done, lifted her up and filled up her dreams in an instant in only the way He can. That evil fool, called hissself Son of Man, he's long gone from this country. And that boy Dodo, the deaf one, he's yet living. They put that whole camp up there in Montgomery County now on account of him, the Jews did. Theater owners they was, God bless 'em. And all them folks that was running behind them Jews for the body they found in that old well, they can't find a spec against 'em now, for God took the whole business –the water well, the

reservoir, the dairy behind it, the skeleton, and every itty bitty thing they coulda used against them Jews and washed it clear into the Manatawny Creek. And from there, every single bit of that who-shot-John nonsense got throwed into the Schuylkill, and from there it flowed into the Chesapeake Bay down in Maryland, and from there out to the Atlantic. And that's where the bones of that rotten scoundrel whose name is not worthy to be called by my lips was deadened by God's will is floating to this day. At the bottom of the ocean, with the fish picking his bones and the devil keeping score.

As for old Malachi, the old women say, the cops never did find him. They come back for him after the hurricane business died away, but he was long gone. Left a sunflower or two in the yard and that's it. Old Mr. Malachi got off clean. He was the last of 'em. The last of Jews 'round here. That fella was a wizard. He was something. He could dance, too… Lord…That man was magic…

Mazel tov, honey.

Chapter 2

A Bad Sign

Forty-four years before state construction workers discovered the skeleton in the old farmer's well on Chicken Hill, a Jewish theater owner in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, named Moshe Ludlow had a vision about Moses.

Moshe had this vision on a Monday morning in February as he was cleaning out the remnants of a Chic Webb one-night stand at his tiny All American Dance Hall and Theater on Main Street. Webb and his roaring 12-piece band was the greatest musical event Moshe had ever witnessed in his life, except for the weekend he managed to lure Mickey Katz, the brilliant but temperamental Yiddish genius of klezmer music out of New York City, to play a full weekend of Family Fun and Yiddish Frolic at Moshe's All American Dance Hall and Theater two months before. Now *that* was something. Katz, the kid wizard of clarinet, and his newly formed seven-piece ensemble braved a furious December snowstorm that dropped 14 inches in the eastern Pennsylvania mountains to make it to the gig, and thanks to blessed G-d they had, because Moshe counted 249 Jewish shoe salesmen, shop owners, tailors, blacksmiths, railroad painters, deli owners and their wives from five different states, including upstate New York and Maine, who came to the event. There were even four couples from Tennessee who drove through the Blue Ridge Mountains for three days, eating cheese and eggs, unable to keep kosher on the Sabbath, just to be with their fellow Yids -- and right before Hannukah, for which they all should be at lighting candles for eight days. Not to mention one of the husbands was a fanatic and believed that the fast of Tisha B'av, normally celebrated in July, should be celebrated twice a year instead of once, which meant staying home every December and starving and peppering the walls with pictures of flowers for three

weeks straight as a show of thanks to the Creator for His generosity in helping the Jewish people of Eastern Europe escape the pogroms for the relative peace and prosperity of America's Promised Land. Thanks to him and the weather, all four couples were in a foul mood once they arrived, having squeezed into two ancient Packards -- one of which had no heat -- and driven through the savage snowstorm. They announced plans to leave immediately when they heard talk of more snow, but Moshe talked them out of it. That was his gift. Moshe could talk the horns off the devil's head. "How many times in life does one get to hear a young genius?" he said to them. "It will be the greatest event of your life." He led them to his pocket-sized room in a rooming house on Chicken Hill, a tiny area of ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town's blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn't afford any better lived, set them before his warm wood stove, filled them with warm iced tea and gefilte fish, and amused them with a story of his Romanian grandmother who jumped out a window to avoid marrying a Haskala Jew, only to land atop a Hasidic rabbi from Austria.

"She knocked him to the mud," he exclaimed. "When he looked up, she was reading his palm. So they got married."

That brought smirks and chuckles to their faces, because everyone knew the Romanians were crazy. With their laughter ringing in his ears, he rushed back to the crowd who waited anxiously in the snow for the theater doors to open.

As Moshe made his way down the muddy roads of Chicken Hill to his theater on Main Street, his heart sank. The makeshift line that had formed an hour before had exploded into a mob of close to 300. Moreover, he was informed that the temperamental

genius Katz had arrived but was inside the theater in a foul mood, having braved the terrible storm, and was now threatening to leave. Moshe raced inside and found to his relief that his always dependable helper, an old colored man named Nate Timblin, had settled Katz and his band backstage before a warm wood stove, serving them hot tea in water glasses, fresh kosher eggs, gefilte fish, and challah bread, all neatly laid out, buffet style. The young Katz seemed pleased and announced that he and his band would set up as soon as they finished eating. From there Moshe went back outside to stall the waiting crowd.

When he saw that that more were coming -- stragglers rushing from the train station carrying satchels and suitcases -- he grabbed a stepladder and climbed atop it to address them all. He had never seen so many Jews in one place in America in his life. The reform snobs from Philadelphia were there in button-down shirts, next to iron workers from Pittsburgh, socialist railroad men from Reading wearing caps bearing the Pennsylvania Railroad logo, and coal miners with darkened faces from Uniontown and Spring City. Some were with wives. Others were with women who, given their fur coats, leather boots, and dazzling hairdos, were not wives at all. One fellow was accompanied by a blonde *goy* six inches taller than him, clad in gay Irish green, complete with a hat that looked like a cross between a cloverleaf and the spikes on the Statue of Liberty's crown. Some yammered in German, others chatted in Yiddish. Some yelled in Bavarian dialect, others spoke Polish. When Moshe announced there would be a short delay, the crowd grew more restless.

A handsome young Hasid in caftan and fur hat, bearing a gunny sack, his curly hair jammed into the hat he wore cocked to the side as if it were a fedora, announced he had come all the way from Pittsburgh and would not dance with a woman at all, which caused laughter and a few harsh words, some of them in German, about Polish morons dressing like greenhorns.

Moshe was flummoxed. "Why come to a dance if you're not going to dance with a woman?" he asked the man.

"I'm not looking for a dancer," the handsome Hasid said tersely. "I'm looking for a wife."

The crowd laughed again. Later, under the spell of Katz's spellbinding wizardry, Moshe watched in wonder as the man danced like a demon all night. He frolicked through every dance step that Moshe had ever seen -- and Moshe, who spent his childhood a *fusgeyer* -- a wandering Jew -- in Romania, had seen a few: horas, bulgars, khosidls, freylekkhs, Russian marches, Cossack highsteps. The Hasid was a wonder of twisted elbows, a, rhythmic gyroscope of elastic grace and wild dexterity. He danced with any woman who came close, and there were plenty. Moshe later decided the guy must be some kind of wizard.

The next four nights were the most extraordinary gathering of joyful Jewish celebration that Moshe had ever seen. He considered it a miracle, in part because the whole business had nearly fallen apart before it even got off the ground, thanks to a series of flyer notices he'd sent out weeks before to drum up advance ticket sales. Using a Jewish cross directory that listed synagogues and private homes where traveling Jews

could stay, Moshe sent flyers to every country Jewish synagogue, boarding house, and hostel between North Carolina and Maine. The flyers, proudly proclaiming that the great Mickey Katz Road Show of Winter Yiddish Fun and Family Memories from the Old Country was coming to The Great American Dance Hall and Theater in Pottstown Pa., on December 15, were printed in four languages: German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. But Moshe had badly underestimated the organizational power of country Jewish rabbis, and most of the notices were lost in the ongoing rush of death notices, bar mitzvah commitments, once-in-a-lifetime sales, kosher cow slaughtering requests, tallis-making services, business dispute refereeing, *mohel* (circumcision) mixups, and marriage arrangement snafus that were the daily bread and butter of a country rabbi's life. The few souls who had the presence of mind to open Moshe's letters containing the flyers only added to the confusion, for many were fresh immigrants from Eastern Europe who didn't speak English. They considered any letter that bore a typed address some kind of government notice that meant immediate shipment of you, your family, your dog, and your green stamps back to the old country, where the Russian soldiers awaited you with a special gift for your part in the murder of the Czar's son, who of course the Russians killed themselves and poked his eyes out to boot but who's asking? So the flyers were tossed.

Moreover, Moshe sent the wrong flyers to the wrong congregations. The Yiddish flyers went to German-speaking congregations. The German flyers were sent to Yiddish *shuls* who despised the German-loving snobs. The Hebrew ads went to Hungarians who everybody knew pretended they couldn't read English unless it referred to Jews as

"American Israelites" -- in Hebrew. Two English ads went to a Polish congregation in Maine that had vanished, the greenhorns up there likely having frozen their *tuchuses* off and dropped into the ice somewhere. One Baltimore merchant even accidentally forwarded his Yiddish flyer to the advertising department of The *Baltimore Sun,* which caused a ruckus, the advertising executive being under the impression that the Jewish clothing store merchant from East Baltimore's Jewtown who regularly advertised in *The Sun* intended it for Yiddish speaking customers only. In actuality, the kind merchant was translating the flyer from Yiddish to English in the back of his store when an argument between two customers broke out in the front the store. When he stepped out to quell the fuss, his Yiddish-speaking wife wandered into the back storeroom, recognized the words "*Baltimore Sun"* among the papers on her husband's crowded desk, stuffed the half-translated flyer into an envelope along with their weekly advertising check, and mailed it to the paper. The ad executive who received it was too dumb to know the difference between advertising and editorial, forwarded it to the city desk with a note saying, "Run this tomorrow because the Jew always pays," whereupon the night city editor, a devout well-meaning Catholic, handed it to a new 19-year-old Hungarian copy clerk -- hired, in part, because he claimed he could speak Yiddish. The kid sent the whole badly translated mess back to advertising with a note saying, "This is an ad." The advertising department placed it in large font on page B-4 on a Saturday on the last day of *Sukkot*, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the gathering of the harvest and the miraculous protection the Lord provided for the children of Israel. The result was a disaster. Moshe's original flyer read, in Yiddish:

"*Come see the great Mickey Katz. Once in a lifetime event. Family Fun and Jewish Memories. Red hot klezmer like you've never heard before.*"

The translated ad read in English:

Mickey Katz is coming. Once a life, always a life. Watch the Jews burn and dance and have fun."

The ad caused panic and fury in East Baltimore's Jewtown, as many of its residents still remembered how the town's first rabbi, David Einhorn, spoke out against slavery during the Civil War and was run out of town, his house burned to the ground. They demanded the merchant close his store and quit the city.

Moshe nearly fainted when he got word of the disaster. He sped to Baltimore and spent $400 straightening out matters with the good-natured merchant, who kindly helped him write a second, better ad. But it was too late. The first ad was too much for Baltimore's Jews. It was simply too good to be true. A klezmer dance? With the great Mickey Katz? Why would a star like Katz play for poor salesmen and tailors in the freezing hills of eastern Pennsylvania? In an American theater? Owned by a *fusgeyer,* a Romanian? *Fusgeyers* don't own theaters! They wander around and sing songs and get the crap beat out of them by the Czar's soldiers. Where is Pottstown anyway? Were there any Jews there at all? Impossible! It was a trap!

The result was that only four Jewish couples from Baltimore bought advance tickets to see the great Katz, and Moshe had been counting on Baltimore's Jewish community in big numbers.

Three weeks before the concert, $1,700 in the hole to his cousin Isaac in Philadelphia, from whom he borrowed the theater rental and deposit money, and feeling lower than he felt when his father died, Moshe dropped to his knees, prayed to G-d for spiritual renewal, felt none, and found himself moping around the back storeroom of Heaven and Earth, the sole Jewish grocery store in Chicken Hill. The owner, a rabbi named Yakov Flohr, felt sorry for the young Romanian and offered to let Moshe study Hebrew from his Talmud, which he kept in the same storeroom where his youngest daughter Chona toiled. She was a cripple with polio, with one leg shorter than the other, requiring her to wear a boot with a sole four inches thick. Chona spent her days sorting vegetables and making butter by stirring yellow dye into creamed milk stored in barrels.

Knowing he was up to his balls in hock and needed G-d, Moshe took the rabbi up on the offer and spent several afternoons glumly poring through the text, thinking of his late father and peeking at Chona, whom he dimly remembered as a quiet, mousy young thing as a child but who now, at age 17, had developed into quite a package. Despite her foot and limp, she was a quiet beauty, with a gorgeous nose and sweet lips, ample breasts, a sizable derriere that poked against the drab, loose-fitting woolen skirt, and eyes that shined with gaiety and mirth. Moshe, at 21 in full bloom himself, found himself looking up several times from his Hebrew studies to gawk at Chona's rear end as she stirred the butter on those cold Pennsylvania nights, the swish of her hips moving with the promise of the coal stove in the far corner that heated only half the room. She turned out to be a spirited soul, full of wry humor and glad to have

company, and after a few days of easy conversation, regaling him with warm jokes and smiling with her bright gay eyes, young Moshe finally confessed his problem: the upcoming concert, the massive debts, the money already spent, the wrong ads, the demands of a difficult star. “I’m going to lose everything,” he said.

It was there, in the back of the rabbi’s store, standing over the butter barrel, a churn in her hand, that Chona reminded him the story of Moses and the burning coals.

She put down her churn, glanced at the door to make sure no one was watching, went to the desk where he sat, opened the dusty pages of her father’s Talmud -- which they both knew she was forbidden to touch -- and flipped to the story of Moses and the burning coals. She was a student of religion, she confided, and the story of Moses always brought her solace.

It was there -- the collapse of his theater imminent, peering at the holy Talmud with one eye and the lovely hand of the beauty Chona with the other, his heart throbbing from the first flush of love -- that Moshe came upon the story of Moses and the burning coals, which Chona read to him in Hebrew, of which he understood every fourth word.

Pharaoh placed a plate of burning coals on one side of the infant Moses and a plate of sparkling coins and jewelry on the other. If the infant was intelligent, he would be attracted to the sparkling gold and jewelry and would be killed as a threat to the Pharaoh’s heir. If he touched the black coals, he would be perceived as too stupid to be a threat and allowed to live. Moses started to reach for the coins, but as he did an angel appeared and deftly moved his hand to the hot coals, burning his fingers. The child put

his fingers in his mouth, stinging his tongue and giving him a life-long speech impediment. Moses spoke with a defect for the rest of his life, but the life of the leader and most important teacher of the Jewish people was saved.

Moshe listened in rapturous silence, and when she was done he found himself bathed in the light of love only Heaven can deliver. He returned to the storeroom for several days, filling himself with words of the Talmud, about which he had been previously ambivalent, and the young flower who led him to words of holy purpose. At the end of the third week of Talmud lessons, Moshe asked Chona to marry him, and to his amazement, she agreed.

The next week Moshe deposited $140 in Yakov's bank account as a gift, then approached Yakov and his wife with his marriage proposal for their daughter. The parents, both Bulgarian, were so overjoyed that someone other than a cyclops was willing to marry their disabled daughter – so what if he was Romanian? -- they readily agreed. Why not next week? Moshe asked. Why not? they said. The modest wedding was held at Agudith Achim, the tiny *shul* that serviced Pottstown's 17 Jewish families. It was attended by his Moshe's cousin Isaac from Philadelphia, Chona's deliriously happy parents, and four Jews that Yakov had drummed up to create the necessary *minyon* of ten Jews for a religious service. Two of the four were Polish workers from the Pennsylvania Railroad train yard who had hustled up to Chicken Hill to grab a kosher bite. The two agreed to attend the wedding but demanded $4 apiece for cab fare to Reading, where they were expected to report to work the next morning. Yakov refused,

but Moshe was happy to pay. It was a small price for marrying the woman who brought him more happiness than he ever dreamed possible.

So inspired was he by his new love that he forgot all about the $1700 he'd spent. He sold his car for $350, borrowed another $1200 from Isaac, and spent the money on ads, this time properly placed, then watched in amazement as ticket sales zoomed. Over 400 tickets were sold.

For four nights Mickey Katz and his magical musicians poured forth the most rousing, glorious klezmer music that eastern Pennsylvania had ever heard. Four nights of wild, lowdown, dance-till-you-can't Jewish revelry. Moshe sold out of everything – drinks, food, eggs, fish. He even put up 20 exhausted New Yorkers in his theater's second floor balcony normally reserved for Negroes. The four couples from Tennessee who had threatened to leave stayed the entire weekend, as did the Hasid dancer who swore he would dance with no woman. It was a rousing success.

The morning after the festivities ended, Moshe was sweeping the sidewalk in front of his theater when he saw the dancing Hasid hurrying towards the train station.

Gone was the fur cap. In its place was a fedora. The caftan had been cut into a sportcoat-length jacket. Moshe barely recognized him. As he approached Moshe spoke out. said, "Where are you from?" he asked. But the man was fast and silent and already moving down the sidewalk past him. Moshe called to his back, "Wherever you live, it's home to the greatest dancer in the world, that's for sure."

That did it. The Hasid stopped, reached into his gunny sack, and without a word walked several steps back to Moshe, handed him a bottle of *slivotiz,* plum brandy, then turned and continued down the sidewalk moving fast.

Moshe called out cheerfully to his back, "Did you find a wife?"

"I don't need a wife," he said, waving a hand without looking back. "I'm a *twart* of love."

"A what?"

"A sponge cake," he said. "Don't you Romanians know anything?" Before Moshe could reply, a distinct pop was heard -- a tiny explosion like the sound of a cork popping, but louder. Both men froze. They looked up at the tiny tangle of houses on Chicken Hill behind Moshe's theater. A small puff of black smoke wafted into the air, apparently from one of the scruffy homes, the smoke vanishing into the sky.

"That's a bad sign," the Hasid said, then rushed off.

Moshe called to his back, "What's your name?"

But the Hasid was gone.

THE UNFORTUNATE SIDE EFFECTS OF HEARTBREAK AND MAGIC

A NOVEL

BREANNE RANDALL

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The sun was cold, the teakettle refused to boil, and the wretched scent of old memories burned from the logs as Sadie Revelare built up the fire. Even the grandfather clock, which never paid attention to time, warbled out ten sad magpie notes.

A sign I must not miss.

Sadie threw the tedious old clock a withering look and kicked it at the base. It swung its gold pendulum as though wagging its finger in warning. Irritated, but not one to mess with the sign, she crossed herself with a cinnamon stick and then crushed it under her boot heel on the front porch.

Back inside, the house echoed its silence like a gentle reproach. Gigi had already left for the day. Seth had been gone nearly a year. Not that she was counting the days. She wouldn't give her brother that satisfaction. She glanced at the toothbrush holder as she washed her face. One lone toothbrush.

Long ago, she let herself dream of her own house, a pair of toothbrushes, maybe even water spots on the mirror from a child brushing their teeth too close.

But her curse made that impossible, and she'd given up on romance too long ago for it to make a difference now. Some people needed flowers and pretty words. Sadie needed truth and kept promises. She finished getting ready, and on her way out the door, with coffee in hand, the clock chimed again.

"I took care of it!" she shouted back.

But on the short drive to work she had to swerve twice: once to avoid a snake in the road and another time to dodge the crow that nearly swooped into her windshield. She shivered. Portents of change and death, respectively. Still. She shrugged them off. Business didn't stop for bad omens. Actually, it thrived on them.

The winding canyon road was in its full autumnal force as Sadie rolled down the window, the chilly air kissing her face. She inhaled the smell of leaves and mossy rocks and the promise of a sharp noon wind. But there was something else there too. River silt.

"No, no, no." Her foot pushed harder against the pedal as she rounded the last sharp bend faster than she should, and Two Hands Bridge came into view.

Despite the lack of rain, it was flooded. Only a little. But enough. Sure as sunshine daisies, it was the third bad omen of the morning. There was no more ignoring it.

Even townsfolk who didn't believe in magic knew what a flooding meant: someone was about to return.

She slowed down, her tires sluicing through the muddy water, her knuckles white against the steering wheel.

Cindy McGillicuddy, a neighbor from a few doors over, slowed down as she approached in her four-by-four truck, the back weighed down with a dozen bales of hay for the horses she kept. She rolled down her window and then pointed at the bridge.

"River flooded," Cindy said knowingly. She was a no-nonsense kind of woman, her six-foot frame built with solid farmwork muscle. And even she was worried about the flooding.

"I know." Sadie sighed.

"Maybe your brother is coming back, huh?" Cindy said hopefully. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

Sadie forced herself to smile, even though it felt tight against her teeth. Sure. Nice.

"Maybe. Either way, I'm sure everything'll be fine."

Sadie drove away, knowing that Cindy would spread the news far and wide. She took her duties as the town's resident busybody seriously. There wasn't a pie that Cindy's finger wasn't in, and if you needed help or information, she was always the

first stop. She was a meddler, but in the way of a good fairy who secretly dropped off food for families that needed it or brought firewood to the elderly who were too weak to chop it themselves.

Everything is fine. It'll be fine, Sadie told herself again.

Sadie hated that word *fine*. It was a Band-Aid, a sugar-coated pill to mask the bitterness beneath. *Fine* was what you used when it was anything but. But fine was what she had to be because if it wasn't, everything would unravel. Sadie so often walked the line between who people expected her to be and who she really was, the lines blurred until sometimes she forgot who she actually wanted to be. But the townsfolk had expectations. And she liked to exceed those as often as possible.

Still, her fingers tingled with fear. *Someone is returning.*

Who, who, who? The question echoed through her head as she arrived at A Peach in Thyme, the café she owned with her grandmother. The day was still waking up, but her mind was already caught on the hamster wheel. The single word was like a constant drop of water as she started mixing up three batches of carrot-cake cookies with cream cheese frosting. The ginger would humble the eater while the carrots would take them back to their roots.

Maybe she had her brother in mind; maybe she didn't. At any rate, she'd timed everything perfectly, as she always did. The kitchen was warm and comforting as a hug, the smell of the oven heating up reminding her that everything would be okay. She settled into the noise. The *shick* of the whisk against the metal bowl, the slide of the baking tray against the counter, the whip of the dish towel as she settled it over her shoulder. The repetition and ritual soothed the constant stream of persistent thoughts. The unwanted, obtrusive worries that only went away when she was lost in the rhythm of movements and measurements.

But when the first batch of cookies came out so spicy that she had to spit a mouthful out in the sink, a tingling began in her toes and worked its way up her body. She tried to brush it off by throwing a dash of ginger over her shoulder and dabbing lavender oil behind her ears, but it clung firm. The rituals weren't working. The images kept slithering in. The flooding river. The snake and the crow on the road.

"Rule number six," Sadie groaned. One of the more unfortunate rules her grandmother had pressed into her since childhood. Seven bad omens in a row meant a nightmare was around the corner. And she'd just reached bad omen number four.

Sadie had learned the rules of Revelare magic, growing up at her grandmother's feet, her grubby little toddler hands searching for earthworms as Gigi explained why mustard seed helped people talk about their feelings and how star anise could bond two people together. The sweet tang of tangerine rinds scented the air as her little fingernails were perpetually stained orange.

And always, Gigi warned her how their creations would speak to them. If you were in love, things tended to turn out too sweet. If dinner was bland, you needed some adventure. And if you burned a dessert—well, something wicked this way comes.

Sadie listened to those lessons among the bitter rutabagas and wild, climbing sweet peas, drinking in every word, and letting them take root in her heart. She grew up comfortable with the knowledge that she was strange, weaving the magic around her like ribbons on a maypole.

Now, she made her living from selling that strange. A little dash of dreams in the batter and a small of drop of hope in the dough. The magic had been in her veins for so long, sometimes she forgot who she was without it. Like layers of phyllo dough, they were nearly impossible to separate.

Gigi had arrived and was in the front, "pottering about" as she called it. Sadie could hear the crinkle of plastic wrap being taken off pitchers. The clink of jars bumping into each other. Common little noises that turned the café into a symphony. The cookies, perfectly spiced this time, were fresh out of the oven for the early customers, the sweet scent beckoning them in like a childhood memory. Mason jars filled with fresh lavender and wild buttercups dotted the tables, and the pot of crystalized ginger sugar was turned just so toward the pitcher of hazelnut-infused cream.

The glass case brimmed with orange-essence croissants sprinkled with candied zest, the card in front reading, "Will cause enthusiasm, encouragement, and success." Its neighbor, the fruit

and basil tartlets that glistened like a long-forgotten dream read, "Use for good wishes, love, and serious intent." And the cinnamon streusel cake that some locals swore would turn your day lucky had a card that simply said, "Stability." Generations ago, the townsfolk would have rebuked or shunned such blatant displays of magic. Now, even if they didn't understand it, they welcomed it with relish and a rumbling stomach. It was part of a routine that had woven itself into the DNA of Sadie's days. And it was about to begin again.

Sadie excelled at routine. The tiny town of Poppy Meadows, much like Sadie herself, ran like clockwork. All up and down Main Street lights were clicking on, tills were being counted, and "Closed" signs were rattling against the glass as they itched to be flipped. She settled into the rhythm, her shoulders relaxing as she scanned the wooden walkway connecting the hodge-podge of brick-front buildings. Her eyes traveled to the end of the street, where a nineteenth-century, steepled white church stood. Its stained-glass windows, which local legend claimed caught prayers in the wind, were casting jewels of light on the sidewalk, when a figure caught her eye. No. It couldn't be—

"Sweetheart," Gigi hollered in her foghorn voice.

"Coming!" Sadie called quickly, stomach churning as she shook herself out of the past and pushed through the double doors into the kitchen. Absolutely not. It was impossible. And much like everything else in her life, she shut the door on the thought. The possibility of who it might be. She'd trained herself to take every thought captive, shoving them away where they were safe in darkness. Otherwise, they'd spiral out of control into full-blown anxiety. It didn't always work. Even now the tightness was squeezing her chest again.

"Sugar, if you don't move this honking bag of flour, one of us is going to trip and break our neck." With Gigi, someone was always going to break something, get a "crick," or "ruin their lovely hands."

"Maybe some necks deserve to be broken, Gigi," Sadie answered sweetly, hoisting the twenty-five-pound bag of flour and settling it against her hip.

"Stop that or I'll pop you one. I know when you're talking about Seth. You get that mean little gleam in your eye."

Before Sadie could answer, she tripped on the rubber mat that lined the floor and watched, as though in slow motion, as the flour cascaded against the ground and billowed into a cloud of white.

A mess in the kitchen was bad omen number five.

"You little pissant!" Gigi laughed with her deep smoker's rumble. Gigi—a nickname that made her grandmother sound much more French and much less feisty than she actually was—shook her head. Her short hair was a cotton-candy puff, perfectly curled as always and a peculiar shade just between rust and copper.

"I know, I know. *'Disaster follows me around like stupidity follows a drunk,'*" Sadie quoted, gritting her teeth as she secured the top of the flour.

"Says who?" Gigi demanded, rounding on Sadie with a hand on her hip and a look that threatened trouble.

Sadie shrugged.

"That brother of yours isn't too old to have his mouth washed out with soap." Gigi sighed.

"But he'd have to actually be here in order for you to do that." Her voice went flat as oat cakes as she absentmindedly smoothed her apron.

"Don't go down that road, sugar," Gigi said as Sadie's eyes slid into the past. "Whoever digs a pit'll fall right into it. It wasn't your fault."

"I'm sure he'd say differently," Sadie said with pursed lips.

"That boy has got his own demons to fight," Gigi said. "And he will. Now, I'll get this cleaned up before we open while you go wipe that mess off yourself."

At the bathroom sink, Sadie rinsed her mouth and tried to finger-comb the flour out of her long auburn hair. She hoped for the best, refusing to glance in the mirror, as that was only to be done at dawn, midday, or dusk, for fear of what else might appear in the reflection. It was one of the many oddities that were as sure as sunshine in the Revelare family, like burying found pennies in the garden at midnight, always wearing green in some form

or another, and never whistling indoors. These were truths that Gigi had taught Sadie from the cradle.

The bell tinkled merrily as Sadie opened the front door and stood there a moment, letting the last of the morning chill clear her mind. She could smell waffle cones from the ice-cream parlor a few stores down on the right, and bacon wafting across the street from the diner. The half wine barrel full of marigolds on the sidewalk swayed in a sleepy morning hello. The streetlamps winked out, one in particular blinking a few times, as though sending her Morse code. Her shoulders loosened. Even without magic, this would still be the most perfect place on earth to her.

Just as she flipped the sign to "Open," Bill Johnson stood at the threshold, his kind face lined and worn with a smile that fell into place like it was meant to be there. He was a little younger than Gigi and held a special place in Sadie's heart for the simple fact that he was secretly in love with her grandmother. His flannel shirt, fresh and clean as always, hung loosely on his lanky frame. His shaggy, grayed hair gleamed smooth in the morning light but failed to hide his large ears that stuck out like jug handles.

"Morning, Sadie," he said, ducking his head.

"Good morning, Bill. What'll it be for you this morning?" Sadie asked warmly, walking behind the counter while making sure her apron was tied securely in place.

"What's Gigi Marie recommend?" he asked, staring behind the counter, as though his eyes could drill a hole through to the kitchen.

"She recommends you mind your own taste buds, you big galoot," Gigi called from the back.

"Surprise me, then," he said with an indulgent smile.

Sadie, her back straight and shoulders squared, poured his coffee: black with two sugars, because that part of his order never changed. Then she cut him a slice of peach mascarpone pie and put it in a to-go container.

"And what does this do?"

"If anything has been ailing you, you'll feel right as rain today." Sadie grinned. "And it might just give you a bit of extra energy, to boot."

"I could use it." Bill raised his eyes to the heavens.

"Old Bailer?" Sadie guessed, and Bill nodded. The restoration of the local landmark had been experiencing some unexpected setbacks.

"That place is twelve thousand square feet of trouble," he said right before his eyes swiveled to Gigi like a magnet. Her grandmother stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. He cleared his throat and bid them both a good morning before leaving, but not before Sadie saw the flush that colored his cheeks.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?" Sadie demanded with a grin. "Poor Bill has been sweet on you for ages. Why can't you be nicer to him?"

"Hush," Gigi barked with harsh laughter, "Nobody's after a doddery old fool like me. And don't you pretend like half the young men in this town aren't pining away for you, Revelare name or no. Why do you think that boy proposed to you?"

Just then, they both shivered as the back of their necks grew warm. They looked up to see Ryan Wharton walking by. As he caught Sadie's eye, he gave her a sad smile and a half wave before trudging on. He was the temptation Sadie had almost given into. Not out of love—nothing like it. But comfort. Companionship. Someone to hold her hand or listen to the story of her day. In the end, though, it wasn't fair to him. He deserved more than lukewarm affection, especially since he'd been in love with Sadie since they were in grade school. Her need to do the right thing was greater than her desire for the relationship. She'd wished, more than once, that she could do something for herself, no matter the consequence of injustice. But the guilt always ate at her before she could follow through.

"Speak of the devil." Gigi laughed with indulgence. "None of the boys around here are good enough for you. Because that's what they are—boys."

"It's a good thing I'm not in the market, then," Sadie said drily, pouring herself another cup of coffee. She added a blend of cinnamon and sweetened German cocoa and swirled the spoon around thoughtfully.

"I've told you a hundred times. Love is more important than magic, sugar." And Gigi, who was never prone to displays of physical affection, laid a gentle hand on Sadie's cheek for the briefest of moments.

"Easy for you to say. You don't have a curse that'll take yours away," Sadie said, sliding an arm around her grandmother.

"Honey, I've got curses coming out my ears."

"You do?" Sadie asked, startled.

"Never you mind." Gigi pulled her in for a hug and patted her waist. "Now, get back there and finish those cookies before I sugar 'em to death."

Sadie hurried to her dough, checking the timer as she did and wondering what kind of curses Gigi was talking about and what had brought on the physical display of affection. With eight minutes left, she gave the frosting a contemplative stir.

Heartbreak for Sadie wasn't a passing folly, to be recovered from with time and chocolate and tears. Because of her curse, it could take everything from her. Which made falling in love a risk that wasn't worth taking.

Something drew her to the oven despite the six minutes left on the timer. Peering in, panic scorched down her body like chili flakes when she saw the cookies were starting to burn at the edges. The message was clear as cold ice: *"Something wicked this way comes."*

"No, no, no," she whispered, hastily grabbing the nearest dishtowel. But the pan burned her hand through the fabric.

She yelped and dropped it on the stovetop with a reverberating clang. Someone, or some*thing*, had turned the oven up to five hundred degrees. She waved the dishtowel frantically, trying to fan away any scent of the evidence, because if Gigi caught so much as a whiff, she'd banish Sadie from the kitchen for the day.

She hurriedly scraped the burned cookies into the sink and turned on the garbage disposal. A familiar fire was burning along her veins, and her fist ached to hit something. The sixth bad omen. The sachet of lavender and buckbean she kept in her apron pocket was doing little to keep her calm the way it was supposed to.

In front of her, peppered on the countertop and the long wall shelves, she eyed her canisters. Each one had a label, written by Gigi. There was no cinnamon, basil, clove, or marjoram. Instead, "Youth" sat next to "Friendship," while "Love," "Kindness," and "Forgetfulness" were relegated to their own section. "Stability," "Health," and "Fertility" kept "Good Wishes" company, while "Misfortune" was pushed to the back like a dark secret.

Sadie reached for the glass jars labeled "Traditions" and "Protection." She inhaled the scent of freshly ground cinnamon before sprinkling some into the dough. Traditions—would this do the trick?

With careful fingers, she grabbed a pinch of salt and whispered a quick blessing over it before dashing it into the bowl, hoping it would keep whatever was coming at bay.

Sadie stirred the ingredients in with her wooden spoon, carved by hand from the white oak tree in the forest behind Gigi's backyard. Her grandfather had loved wood carving in his spare time. He had passed away when the twins were six, and she didn't remember much about him other than his famous pastrami sandwiches and the little wood figurines he'd sculpt for her. He had traveled a lot for work as a technician and would always bring Gigi a small collector spoon from whatever state he'd visited. Sadie had loved those little spoons, tracing her finger over the intricate filigree or studying the resin design. She hadn't thought of those spoons in years.

"Querido amado." A high, musical voice barged into her sanctuary just as she slid the baking tray into the oven. "Did a tornado hit in here?"

Sadie turned and frowned at the raven-haired woman. Raquel, her best friend since childhood, scanned the room with wide, expressive eyes. Even when she was still, she somehow seemed to be in motion. Fingers or foot always tapping, eyes so thoughtful you could practically hear her talking even when she was silent.

"I thought I banned you from coming in here if you couldn't say anything nice," Sadie retorted, holding up her wooden spoon like a sword.

"I'm not worried until I see the fire in your eyes." Raquel laughed. "That's when I know we've really got a problem."

Sadie hugged her best friend and then pinched her on the arm.

"Ow!" Raquel cried, her face drawn into a frown.

"Pinching is my love language." Sadie shrugged, checking the timer.

"What's wrong?" Raquel demanded, leaning against the counter and eyeing her best friend, waiting.

Sadie's lips pursed. She never could hide anything from Raquel and found it rather inconvenient the way best friends could see into you even when you refused to look yourself.

"Hello!" Raquel snapped her fingers. "You in there?"

"I'm thinking."

"You're always thinking. Sometimes it's healthy to just say what's on your mind, you little control freak."

Sadie laughed.

"I'm just—you know, just wallowing in a bit of self-pity. Freaking out about being alone for the rest of my life. I had a minor panic attack over toothbrushes this morning. So, you know, the usual."

"Were the toothbrushes on fire? Did they insult you?"

"More the fact that there was only one."

"Exactly how many toothbrushes do you need?" Raquel demanded, arching a perfectly lined eyebrow.

"I'll only ever have one. You know, because I'll always be brushing alone." Sadie dragged a finger along the countertop, trying and failing to stop the ache that bloomed in her chest.

"Do you want me to brush my teeth with you? All you have to do is ask, you know."

"Shut up." Sadie laughed again. "It's just the curse," she started.

"The curse, the curse," Raquel chattered. "When are you going to let that go? Listen, you're not alone. Nobody is abandoning you. Your brother is going to come back. Gigi's not going anywhere. Neither am I. You run a successful business. You're loved. We're all here to support you." The words came out in a

rush, like they'd been rehearsed. For all Sadie knew, maybe they had. She wondered when she'd become the friend who had to be talked off a ledge so often that Raquel had a speech for it.

Sadie took a deep breath and let the words wash over her. Reassure her. But for some reason, they couldn't pierce completely through her armor. Because the truth of the matter was that Seth *wasn't* back, and even if he did return, there was no guarantee he wouldn't vanish again. Gigi wouldn't be around forever. They'd both leave. Just like her mother. Just like Jake.

"And now that I've buttered you up . . ." Raquel started.

"Oh no." Sadie groaned, again folding the thoughts in half and tucking them away. "What are you roping me into this time?"

"Let me start off with the good news." Raquel was practically beaming. "They said *yes*!"

"Did you propose to someone I should I know about?"

"Hilarious. And no. You're the only one for me. But the school board said yes to *Carrie*!" she squealed. "I had to sign an agreement swearing I'd personally clean the blood off the stage, but it's totally worth it."

Sadie laughed. Raquel was the local high school music teacher and always directed the musicals. Sadie had been cornered into her fair share of sitting through hours of long auditions and backstage teenage meltdowns.

"What do you need me for?" she asked with resignation.

"You're an angel, you know that? I was wondering if you and Gigi could help with the gym costumes. You know, the toga-like ones?"

"Your parents own literally the only costume store in town! They don't have anything?"

"Um, excuse me. The Mad Hatter is a costume and *tux rental* store. We also do prom dresses. And no, they don't have what I need. I was also thinking maybe you'd want to host a bake sale or something to raise funds?" Raquel smiled obscenely.

"Okay, okay," Sadie said, laughing. "Done."

"Now I just need someone to help me with the lighting. It needs some strong design. Know of anyone who could help?"

Before Sadie could answer, the air in the kitchen suddenly pulsed with an energy that felt like endless summer nights where anything was possible, or of first frost on Christmas morning. It was anticipation, pure and clean.

Sadie nervously wiped her hands on her apron again, her stomach dropping to her feet. The "Traditions" and "Protection" hadn't had time to bake through yet.

"No, no, no," Sadie moaned with a hand over her mouth. The noise of the world faded to a hum. It buzzed in her chest like a painful memory. The kitchen went eerily quiet, even the popping and creaking of the hot oven gone silent.

Beyond the double doors, something pulled her. Something warm that smelled like sweet summer peaches.

Pushing the door open a sliver, she peered out the front window. The hum turned into a roar, and her ears burned hot as she saw him.

The omens. The flooded river. That quiet voice in her head snickering and whispering.

Jacob McNealy.

He stood on the sidewalk like a living, walking daydream. Her mouth went desert dry, and it was like she'd been thirsty for years and hadn't realized it. Looking at him was like stretching your limbs after a long nap.

The first heartbreak that had sparked her curse to life.

And seeing old sorrow before noon was the seventh bad omen. A nightmare was on its way.

Carrot Cake Cookies with Cream Cheese Frosting

These will humble the eater and remind them of their roots, where they came from—you know. Carrots help you understand that to find fulfillment, you have to seek answers from your past, no matter how gritty it is. The salt and cinnamon ensure that those traditions and memories will be protected. Focus on positivity while baking, or they'll turn out bitter. I adapted this recipe from my Uncle Sun, who brought back a bag of lunar white carrot seeds from his tour in Vietnam.

Ingredients

For the cookies

1 c. all-purpose flour
1 tsp. baking soda
½ tsp. salt
1½ tsp. ground cinnamon
⅛ tsp. ground nutmeg
½ tsp. ginger
¼ c. coconut oil melted and cooled to room temperature
½ c. dark brown sugar
¼ c. granulated sugar
1 large egg
¼ c. peach puree (can use baby food or just puree canned peaches)
2 tsp. vanilla extract
1 c. shredded carrots

1 c. old-fashioned oats
½ c. sweetened coconut flakes
½ c. raisins

For the frosting

1 oz. cream cheese at room temperature
1 c. powdered sugar
1 T. milk
¼ tsp. pure almond or vanilla extract

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with a Silpat baking mat or parchment paper, and set aside.

2. In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Set aside.

3. In the bowl of a stand mixer, combine coconut oil and sugars, mix until smooth. Add egg and vanilla extract, and beat until well combined. Next, add the shredded carrots and peach puree. Mix until combined.

4. Slowly add flour mixture until just combined. Stir in oats, coconut, and raisins.

5. Drop cookie dough by heaping tablespoonfuls, 2 inches apart, onto prepared baking sheet. Bake for 10–12 minutes or until cookies are slightly golden around the edges and set. Remove cookies from pans; cool completely on wire racks.

6. While the cookies are cooling, make the cream cheese glaze. Mix together the cream cheese, powdered sugar, milk, and extract in a medium bowl. Using a spoon, drizzle the glaze over the cooled cookies. Let cookies sit until glaze hardens up. Serve!

"Clever, dark, and hopeful . . . a love letter to reading and the power that childhood stories have over us long after we've grown up."
—V. E. SCHWAB, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*

The WISHING GAME

A NOVEL

MEG SHAFFER

The Wishing Game 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.

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PROLOGUE

May

Every night Hugo went for a walk on the Five O'Clock Beach, but tonight was the first time in five years his wandering feet spelled out an SOS in the sand.

He traced the letters carefully, drawing them large enough that they could be seen from space. Not that it mattered. The tide would wash the Five clean by dawn.

It had been a bit of whimsy on Jack's part naming it the Five O'Clock Beach. Destiny, Jack said of finding this little patch of Atlantic forest twenty-odd years ago. These ninety acres right off the coast of southern Maine formed a near-perfect circle. Jack Masterson, who'd created Clock Island on paper and in imaginations, could now build it in real life. In his living room, Jack kept a clock with the numbers marked by pictures of places on the island—the lighthouse at the twelve, the beach at the five, the guesthouse the seven, the wishing well the eight—which led to conversations like . . .

Where are you going?
Five O'Clock.
When will you be back?
By the lighthouse.

Places were times. Times were places. Confusing at first. Then charming.

Hugo found it neither confusing nor charming anymore. One could go mad living in a house like that. Maybe that's what happened to Jack.

Or maybe that's what happened to Hugo.

SOS.

Save Our Sanity.

The sand was so cold on his naked feet it felt wet. What day was it? May 14? May 15? He couldn't say for sure, but he knew summer would be here soon. His fifth summer on Clock Island. Maybe, he thought, one summer too many. Or was it five summers too many?

Hugo reminded himself he was just thirty-four years old, which meant—if he was doing his maths correctly (unlikely as painters weren't known for their maths skills)—he'd spent almost 15 percent of his life on an island playing bloody nanny to a grown man.

Could he leave? He'd been dreaming of leaving for years, but only the way a teenager dreams of running away from home. It was different now. Now he was making plans or at least making plans to make plans. Where would he even go? Back to London? His mum was there, but she was finally starting over—new husband, new stepdaughters, new happiness or something like it. He didn't want to be in the way.

All right, Amsterdam? No, he'd never get any work done there. Rome? Same story. Manhattan, then? Brooklyn? Or five miles away in Portland so he could keep an eye on Jack from a close but healthy distance?

Could Hugo do it? Could he abandon his old friend here with no one left to help him tell one hour from the next, the lighthouse from the guesthouse?

If only the old man would start writing again. Pick up a pen, a pencil, a typewriter, a stick to write in the sand . . . anything. Hugo would even take dictation if Jack asked him to—and he had offered.

"Please, for the love of God, Charles Dickens, and Ray Bradbury," he'd said to Jack as recently as yesterday, "write something. Anything. Wasting talent like yours is like burning a pile of money in front of a poorhouse. It's cruel and it stinks."

They were the very words Jack had thrown into his face years ago

back when Hugo was the one drinking his talent to death. They were just as sharp and true now as they were then. Millions of children out there, and former children too, would weep with joy if Jack Masterson ever published a new book about Clock Island and the mysterious Master Mastermind who lived in the shadows and granted wishes to brave children. Jack's publisher regularly sent boxes of fan mail to the house, thousands of children urging Jack to write again.

SOS, those letters begged.

Save Our Stories.

But Jack had done nothing for five years but futz around in his garden, read a few pages of a book, take a long nap, drink too much wine at dinner, and fall into his nightmares by the time the little hand was on the Nine O'Clock Dock.

Something had to change. Soon. At dinner tonight, Jack hadn't made it to the bottom of his wine bottle as usual. He'd been quieter, which was either a good sign or a very bad one. And no bitter riddles either, not even Jack's favorite . . .

> *Two men on an island and both blame the water*
> *for the loss of a wife and the death of a daughter*
> *but neither ever married, and neither's a father.*
> *What is the secret of the girls and the water?*

Too much to hope that Jack was coming out of it? Finally?

Hugo strode across the sand to the edge of the tide. He let the waves creep up close to his toes but no further. He and the ocean weren't on speaking terms anymore. Was this eccentric? Yes. But that was fine. He was a painter. He was supposed to be eccentric. Once, he'd loved the ocean, loved seeing it every morning, every night, seeing all its facets, all its faces. Not many people knew what the sea looked like in all seasons under all phases of the moon, but he did. Now he knew the ocean was as dangerous as a sleeping volcano. At peace, it was magnificent, but when it wanted to, it could bring down kingdoms. Five years ago, it had brought low the small, strange kingdom of Clock Island.

Jack might believe in wishing—or he had once upon a time—but

Hugo didn't. Hard work and dumb luck got him to where he was. Nothing else.

But tonight, Hugo wished and wished hard that something would shake Jack from his apathy, break the spell, give him a reason to write again. Any reason. Love? Money? Spite? Something to do besides slowly drowning himself in overpriced Cabernet?

Hugo turned his back on the water. He found his shoes and dusted the sand from them.

When he came to Clock Island, he'd sworn to himself he'd stay one or two months. Then he said he'd stay until Jack was back on his feet. Five years later and here he still was.

No. No more. Time's up. Time to go. By this time next spring, he'd be gone. He couldn't sit and watch his old friend fade like ink on old paper until no one could read the writing anymore.

His decision made, Hugo started for the path. Just then, he saw a light come on in a window.

The window of Jack's writing factory.

The writing factory that only the housekeeper had set foot inside for years . . . And today was her day off.

The light in that window was low and golden. Jack's desk lamp. Jack was sitting at his desk for the first time in years. Was the Mastermind putting pen to paper again?

Hugo waited for the light to go out, proof it was a mistake, a whim, Jack looking for a lost letter or misplaced book.

The light stayed on.

It was too much to hope for, and yet Hugo hoped for it with all his heart and wished for it on every star in the night sky. He wished and hoped and prayed for it.

Prayed for the oldest miracle in the book—a dead man coming back to life.

"All right, old man," Hugo said to the light in the window of the house on Clock Island. "It's about bloody time."

Make a Wish

Astrid woke from a deep and dreamless sleep. What had woken her? Her cat jumping on the bed? No, Vince Purraldi was sound asleep curled up in his basket on the rug. Sometimes the wind woke Astrid up when it rattled the roof of their old house, but the tree branches were quiet outside her window. No wind tonight. Although she was scared, she got out of bed and went to the window. Maybe a bird had tapped on the glass?

Astrid gasped as the room was flooded with white light, like a car's headlights but a thousand times stronger and brighter.

Then it was gone. Is that what had woken her? That blast of light in her room?

Where had it come from? she wondered.

Astrid grabbed her binoculars hanging off her bedpost. She knelt at the window, binoculars pressed to her eyes, and gazed across the water to where a lonesome island lay like a sleeping turtle in the cold ocean.

The light flashed again.

It had come from the lighthouse. The lighthouse on the island.

"But," Astrid whispered to the window, "that lighthouse has been dark forever."

What did it mean?

The answer came as suddenly to her as the light in her window.

Quietly as she could, she left her bedroom and slipped into the room across

the hall. Max, her nine-year-old brother, was sleeping so hard he was drooling on his pillow. Ugh. Gross. Boys. Astrid poked Max in the shoulder, then did it again. It took twelve shoulder pokes to get him to wake up.

"What. What? Whaaat?" He opened his eyes, wiping away the drool with his pajama sleeve.

"Max, it's the Mastermind."

That got his attention. He sat straight up in bed. "What about him?"

She smiled in the dark.

"He's come back to Clock Island."

—From *The House on Clock Island, Clock Island* Book One, by Jack Masterson, 1990

CHAPTER ONE

One Year Later

THE SCHOOL BELL RANG at two thirty, and the usual stampede of little feet followed. Lucy took backpack duty and lunchbox duty while Ms. Theresa, the class's teacher, called out her usual warnings.

"Backpacks and lunch boxes and papers! If you forget anything, I'm not bringing it home to you and neither is Miss Lucy!" Some of the children listened. Some ignored her. Thankfully, this was kindergarten, so the stakes were pretty low.

Several of the kids hugged her on their way out the door. Lucy always relished these quick squishes, as they called them. They made the long draining days of being a teacher's aide—refereeing playground fights, cleaning up after potty accidents, tying and retying a thousand shoelaces, and drying a thousand tears—worth the endless work.

When the classroom finally emptied, Lucy slumped in her chair. Luckily, she was off bus duty today so she had a few minutes to recover.

Theresa surveyed the damage with a garbage bag in hand. All the round tables were covered in bits of construction paper, glue bottles left open and leaking. Fat pencils and fuzzy pipe cleaners were littered all over the floor.

"It's like the Rapture," Theresa said with a wave of her hands. "Poof. They're gone."

"And we're left behind again," Lucy said. "What did we do wrong?"

Something, obviously, because she was, at that very moment, prying a wad of gum off the bottom of the table for the second time that week. "Here, give me the garbage bag. That's my job." Lucy took the bag and dropped the gum into it.

"You sure you don't mind cleaning up alone?" Theresa asked.

Lucy waved her hand to shoo her away. Theresa looked as exhausted as Lucy felt, and the poor woman still had a school committee meeting today. Anyone who thought teaching was easy had obviously never tried it.

"Don't worry about it," Lucy said, taking the trash bag. "Christopher likes to help."

"I love when the kids are still young enough that you can trick them into doing chores because they think they're playing." Theresa dug her purse out of the bottom desk drawer. "I told Rosa she couldn't mop the kitchen because that was for grown-ups, and she literally pouted until I let her do it."

"Is that what being a mother is?" Lucy asked. "Pulling a long con on your kids?"

"Pretty much," Theresa said. "I'll see you in the morning. Tell Christopher hello."

Theresa left, and Lucy glanced around at the classroom. It looked as if it had been hit by a rainbow-colored tornado. Lucy walked around every table with the trash bag in hand, scooping up sticky paper apples and sticky paper oranges, sticky paper grapes and sticky paper lemons.

When she finished the cleanup, she had glue all over her hands, a paper strawberry stuck to her khaki slacks, and a crick in her neck from bending over the short tables for half an hour. She needed a long ten-thousand-degree shower and a glass of white wine.

"Lucy, why do you have a banana in your hair?"

She turned around and saw a slight wide-eyed black-haired boy standing in the doorway staring at her. She reached up and felt paper. Good thing she'd been practicing self-control for a couple of years as a

teacher's aide, or she would have let loose a string of creative expletives.

Instead, and with as much dignity as she had remaining, she peeled the paper banana out of her hair.

"The question is, Christopher, why don't *you* have a banana in your hair?" She tried not to think about how long the banana had been stuck there. "All the cool kids are doing it."

"Oh," he said, rolling his hazel eyes. "I guess I'm not cool."

She stuck the banana gently onto the top of his head. His dark hair had just enough of a wave that it always looked as if he'd been hanging upside down for a few hours. "*Voilà*, now you're cool."

He shook off the banana and slapped it onto his worn blue backpack. He ran his hands through his hair, not to settle it down but to refluff it. She loved this weird kid of hers. Sort of hers. Someday hers.

"See? I'm not cool," he said.

Lucy pulled out one of the tiny chairs and sat down, then pulled out a second one for Christopher. He sat with a tired groan.

"Are too. I think you're cool. Sock hunt." She grabbed his ankles and put his feet on her knees for her daily archaeological excavation into his shoes to dig out his socks. Did he have weirdly skinny ankles or unusually slippery socks?

"You don't count," Christopher said. "Teachers have to think all kids are cool."

"Yes, but I'm the coolest teacher's aide so I know these things." She gave each sock one final tug up his leg.

"You aren't." Christopher dropped his feet onto the floor and clutched his blue backpack to his stomach like a pillow.

"I'm not? Who beat me? I'll fight her in the parking lot."

"Mrs. McKeen. She throws pizza parties every month. But they say you're the prettiest."

"That's exciting," she said, though she didn't flatter herself. She was the youngest teacher's aide, and that's about all she had going for her. She was, at best, average in every other way—shoulder-length brown hair, wide brown eyes that always got her carded, and a wardrobe that hadn't been updated in years. New clothes required money. "I better get a certificate that says that on Award Day. You have any homework?"

Lucy stood up and started cleaning again, wiping down the tables and chairs with Lysol. She hoped the answer was no. He didn't get much attention from his busy foster parents, and she tried to make up for what he didn't get at home.

"Not a lot." He threw his backpack onto the table. Poor thing, he looked so tired. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his shoulders drooped with exhaustion. A seven-year-old child shouldn't have eyes like a world-weary detective working a particularly grisly murder case.

She stood in front of him, cleaning bottle dangling from a finger, arms crossed. "You okay, kiddo? You sleep any last night?"

He shrugged. "Bad dreams."

Lucy sat back down next to him. He laid his head on the table.

She laid her head on the table and met his eyes. They were pink around the edges like he'd been trying not to cry all day.

"You want to tell me what you dreamed about?" she asked. She kept her voice soft and low and gentle. Kids with hard lives deserved gentle words.

Some people like to talk about how resilient kids are, but these were people who'd forgotten how hard everything hit you when you were a kid. Lucy still had bruises on her own heart from the knocks she'd gotten in childhood.

Christopher rested his chin on his chest. "Same thing."

Same thing meant the ringing phone, the hallway, the door open, his parents on the bed seemingly sound asleep but with their eyes wide open. If Lucy could have taken his bad dreams into her own brain, she would have done it to give him a good night's sleep.

She put her hand on his small back and patted it. His shoulders were thin and delicate as moth wings.

"I still have bad dreams too, sometimes," she said. "I know how you feel. Did you tell Mrs. Bailey?"

"She told me not to wake her up unless it's an emergency," he said. "You know, with the babies."

"I see," Lucy said. She didn't like that. She appreciated that Christopher's foster mother was taking care of two sick babies. Still, somebody had to take care of him too. "You know I meant it when I said you can

call me if you can't sleep. I'll read to you over the phone."

"I wanted to call you," he said. "But you know . . ."

"I know," she said. Christopher was terrified of phones, and she didn't really blame him. "That's okay. Maybe I can find an old tape recorder and record myself reading you a story, and you can play it next time you have trouble sleeping."

He smiled. It was a small smile, but the best things came in the smallest packages.

"You want to take a nap?" she asked. "I'll put down a mat for you."

"Nah."

"You want to read?"

He shrugged again.

"You want to . . ." She paused, tried to think of anything that would distract him from his dreams. ". . . help me wrap a present?"

That got his attention. He sat straight up and grinned. "Did you sell a scarf?"

"Thirty dollars," she said. "Yarn cost me six. Do the math."

"Um . . . twenty-two? Four! Twenty-four."

"Good job!"

"Can I see it?" he asked.

"Let me get it out, and we'll wrap it and write a letter."

Lucy went to the desk where she and Theresa locked up their purses and keys every day. Inside a plastic grocery bag was Lucy's latest creation—a spiderweb weave scarf knitted in a soft, silky pink and cream yarn. She carried the bag over to the table and pulled it out, modeling it for Christopher like a feather boa wrapped around her shoulders.

"Like it?"

"It's girly," he said, shaking his head side to side as if weighing its merit.

"A girl made it, and a girl bought it," Lucy said. "And I'll have you know, back in the nineteenth century, pink was considered a boy's color, and blue was considered a girl's color."

"That's weird."

Lucy pointed at him. "You're weird."

"*You're* weird," he countered.

Lucy lightly tapped him over the top of the head with the end of the scarf, and he laughed.

"Go get our letterhead," she said. "We have to write our thank-you note."

Christopher ran for the supply closet. He loved the supply closet. That's where all the fun stuff was hidden: the new packages of construction paper, the bags of pipe cleaners, the glitter, the markers, the pens and colored pencils, the Halloween decorations. There was also some nice stationery, donated by the mother of one of last year's kids who owned a local office supply store. Lucy had claimed the sky-blue paper with white clouds for their "company."

"Can I write it while you wrap it?" Christopher asked, running back to the table with the paper in hand.

"You want to write the letter?" she asked as she carefully ran the lint brush over the scarf. She sold about one or two scarves a week on Etsy. To most people, the extra thirty or forty dollars a week wasn't worth the time it took to knit a four-needle scarf. But for Lucy, every penny of that money mattered.

"I've been practicing letters," Christopher said. "I wrote a whole page last night."

"Who did you write a letter to?" she asked as she folded the scarf neatly into quarters and wrapped it in a sheet of white tissue paper.

"Nobody," he said.

"Who's Nobody?" she asked. "New friend?"

"I just wrote nobody," he said.

"Okay." Lucy didn't push him. Especially because she had a very good idea who he'd written his letter to. More than once she'd caught him writing notes to his parents.

I miss you momy. I wish you wer at my school piknic today. Lots of moms came today.

Dad today I got a star on my homwork.

Little letters. Heartbreaking notes. She'd tried to talk to him about it,

but he never wanted to admit to writing to his parents. It embarrassed him. He understood they were dead and probably thought other kids would laugh at him if they knew he still talked to them sometimes.

Christopher squared the cloud paper in front of him on the table and got out his pencil.

"What's the scarf lady's name?" he asked. The kid was smart enough to already know how to change the subject.

"Carrie Washburn. She lives in Detroit, Michigan."

"Where's that?"

Lucy went over to the map of the United States on the wall. A blue star marked where they were—Redwood Elementary School in Redwood Valley, California. She pointed her finger at the blue star and then ran it halfway across the map and stopped near Lake Erie.

"Wow. That's far," Christopher said.

"I wouldn't want to walk there," she said. "Detroit gets very cold in winter. Good to have a lot of scarves."

"I know where the Mastermind lives."

"Who?" she asked. The non sequiturs of small children never ceased to amaze her.

"The Mastermind from our books."

"Oh," she said. "You mean, Jack Masterson? The author of our books?"

"No, the Mastermind. He lives on Clock Island."

Lucy wasn't sure how to reply. Christopher was only seven, so she wasn't in any hurry to tell him that the characters he loved in books and movies weren't real. He didn't have a lot to believe in right now, so why not let him think that the Mastermind from their Clock Island books was a real guy out there granting real kids' wishes.

"How do you know where the Mastermind lives?"

"My teacher showed me. Want to see?"

"Go for it, Magellan."

"What?"

"Magellan. Famous navigator. Had a rough time in the Philippines. Probably deserved it. But that's beside the point. Show me Clock Island."

He hopped up and pointed at the tip-top far right corner of the map. "There," he said, and Lucy was surprised to see he'd gotten it exactly

right. His fingertip touched a patch of water right off the coast of Portland, Maine.

"Good job," she said.

"Is it really Clock Island?" he asked, scrunching his face at the map. "Is there a train and unicorns there?"

"You mean like in the books?" Lucy asked. "Well, it's pretty amazing there, I hear. Did you know some people think the Mastermind and Jack Masterson are the same person?"

"But you said you met him."

"I did meet Jack Masterson. A long time ago. He, um, signed a book for me."

"He wasn't the Mastermind, right?"

Damn. He had her there. The Mastermind always hid in shadows, shadows that cloaked him in darkness and followed him wherever he went.

"No, he didn't look like the Mastermind when I met him."

"See?" Christopher was triumphant. Nothing made a kid happier than proving a grown-up wrong.

"I stand corrected."

Christopher traced a line from Clock Island back to their city—Redwood, California. "That's really, *really* far."

His face was scrunched up tight. Maine was about as far as you could get from California and still be in the same country, which was precisely why she'd moved to California from Maine.

"Pretty far, yeah," she said. "You'd want to fly there."

"Can kids go?"

Lucy smiled. "To Clock Island? They can, but they probably shouldn't without an invitation. The island is private, and the Mastermind owns all of it, like it's all his house. It would be kind of rude to show up without being invited."

"Kids do it in books all the time."

"True, but still, let's wait for an invitation." She gave him a wink.

Lucy knew better than anyone about the kids who showed up uninvited on Clock Island. Not that she was going to tell Christopher about that, not until he was older anyway.

He dropped his hands from the map and looked at her. "Why aren't there any more books?"

"I wish I knew," Lucy said as she went back to wrapping the scarf with tissue paper and twine. "When I was your age, they were coming out four or five times a year. And I read every one of them the day they came out. And about ten times the week after."

"Lucky . . ." Christopher said wistfully. The *Clock Island* books weren't very long, 150 pages or less, and there were only 66 of them. Christopher would have read them all in six months if she hadn't doled them out to him one week at a time. Even so, they'd finished the whole series and started over from Book One a few weeks ago.

"Don't forget the letter to our customer." Lucy winked at him.

"Oh yeah. How do you spell Carrie?" he asked, putting his pencil on the paper.

"Sound it out," she said.

"*K-A*—"

"It's a *C*," Lucy said.

"Carrie starts with a *C*? *C*- is a *K* sound," he said.

"But so is *C*, sometimes. Like the *C* in C-hristopher." She booped his nose.

Christopher glared at her. He disapproved of booping. "There's a Kari in my class," he explained as if Lucy wasn't as bright as she looked. "It starts with a *K*."

"You can spell names a lot of ways. This Carrie is with a *C*, two *R*s, and an *I-E*."

"Two *R*s?"

"Two *R*s."

"Why?" Christopher asked.

"Why does it have two *R*s? I don't know. Probably being greedy."

In his child's hand, Christopher carefully blocked out the words *Dear Carrie* and he made sure to put both *R*s in the name.

"Your spelling and handwriting are getting a lot better."

He smiled. "I've been practicing."

"I can tell."

Lucy included a thank-you note for buying a hand-knitted scarf from

the Hart & Lamb Knitting Company in every package. Not a real company, just her Etsy store, but Christopher got a big kick out of being "co-president."

"What do I write now?" he asked.

"Something nice," Lucy said. "Maybe . . . *Thank you for buying a scarf. I hope you like it.*"

"I hope it keeps your neck warm?" Christopher asked.

"That's good. Write that down."

"Even if it's a supergirly scarf."

"Don't write that."

Christopher laughed and started writing again. Making him smile or laugh was better than winning the lottery, although she'd have a lot more time to make him laugh if she did win the lottery. She glanced over his shoulder as he wrote. His writing was getting really good. Even a few months ago he was misspelling about every other word he wrote. Now it was just every fourth or fifth word. His reading and math skills were improving too. That hadn't been the case last year when he'd been shuffled between half a dozen foster homes. This year he had a steady living arrangement, great therapists, and Lucy tutoring him every weekday after school. His grades had been stellar ever since. If she could only do something about those bad dreams and his terror of ringing phones.

She knew what he needed, and it was the same thing she wanted for him—a mother. Not a foster mom with two sick babies who demanded every minute of her day. He needed a forever mom, and Lucy wanted to be that mom.

"Lucy, how much money do you have in your wish fund?" he asked while printing his name carefully at the bottom of his letter.

"Two thousand two hundred dollars," she said. "Two-two-zero-zero."

"Whoa . . ." He stared at her with wide eyes. "All scarf money?"

"Almost all of it." Scarf money and any babysitting job she could get. Every day she thought about going back to waitressing, but that would mean never getting to see Christopher, and he needed her more than she needed money.

"How long did that take to make?"

"Two years," she said.

"How much do you need?"

"Um . . . a little bit more."

"How much?"

Lucy hesitated before answering.

"Maybe two thousand," she said. "Maybe a little more."

Christopher's face fell. The kid was just too good at math.

"That'll take you another two years," he said. "I'll be nine years old."

"Maybe less? Who knows?"

Christopher dropped his head onto the letter he was writing to Carrie in Detroit. Lucy went over to him, lifted him out of his chair, and held him in her lap. He wrapped his arms around her neck.

"Squish," she whispered, hugging him tightly. It would be two years until she was his mother the way things were going. At least two years.

"We're gonna get there," she said softly, rocking him. "One of these days, we're gonna get there. You and me. I'm working on it every single day. And when we get there, it'll be you and me forever. And you're going to have your own room with boats painted on the wall."

"And sharks?"

"Sharks all over the place. Sharks on the pillows. Sharks on the blankets. Sharks driving the boats. Maybe a shark shower curtain. And we'll have pancakes for breakfast every morning. Not cold cereal."

"And waffles?"

"Waffles with butter and syrup and whipped cream and bananas. Real bananas. Not paper bananas. Sound good?"

"Sounds good."

"What else are we going to wish for while we're wishing?" This was Lucy and Christopher's favorite game—the wishing game. They wished for money so Lucy could buy a car. They wished for a two-bedroom apartment where they both had their own rooms.

"A new *Clock Island* book," he said.

"Oh, that's a good one," she said. "I'm pretty sure Mr. Masterson is retired, but you never know. Maybe he'll surprise us one of these days."

"You'll read to me every night when I get to live with you?"

"Every night," she said. "You won't even be able to stop me. You can put your hands over your ears and scream, '*LA LA LA CAN'T HEAR*

YOU, LUCY,' and I'll keep on reading."

"That's nuts."

"I know it. But I'm nuts. What else do you want to wish for?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"What? Our wishes? Of course they matter." She pulled him back a little so she could meet his eyes. "Our wishes do matter."

"They never come true," he said.

"You remember what Mr. Masterson always says in the books. '*The only wishes ever granted—*'"

"'*—are the wishes of brave children who keep on wishing even when it seems no one's listening because someone somewhere always is,*'" Christopher finished the quote.

"Right," she said, nodding. It amazed her how well he remembered the things he read. He had a little sponge for a brain, which is why she tried to pour so much good stuff into it—stories and riddles and ships and sharks and love. "We just have to be brave enough to keep wishing and not give up."

"I'm not brave, though. I'm still scared of phones, Lucy." He gave her that look, that terrible disappointed-in-himself look. She hated that look.

"Don't worry about that," she said, rocking him again. "You'll get over that soon. And trust me, a lot of grown-ups are scared of their phones when they ring too."

He rested his head against her shoulder again, and she held him close and tight.

"Go on," she said. "One more wish, and then we'll do homework."

"Um . . . I wish for it to be cold," Christopher said.

"You want it to be cold? Why?"

"So you can sell a lot of scarves."


Two-time winner of the PULITZER PRIZE
COLSON WHITEHEAD
CROOK MANIFESTO
A Novel

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First Edition

ONE

From then on whenever he heard the song he thought of the death of Munson. It was the Jackson 5 after all who put Ray Carney back in the game following four years on the straight and narrow. *The straight and narrow*—it described a philosophy and a territory, a neighborhood with borders and local customs. Sometimes when he crossed Seventh Avenue on the way to work he mumbled the words to himself like a rummy trying not to weave across the sidewalk on the way home from the bars.

Four years of honest and rewarding work in home furnishings. Carney outfitted newlyweds for their expedition and upgraded living rooms to suit improved circumstances, coached retirees through the array of modern recliner options. It was a grave responsibility. Just last week one of his customers told him that her father had passed away in his sleep "with a smile on his face" while cradled in a Sterling Dreamer purchased at Carney's Furniture. The man had been a plumber with the city for thirty-five years, she said. His final earthly feeling had been the luxurious caress of that polyurethane core. Carney was glad the man went out satisfied—how tragic for your last thought to be "I should have gone with the Naugahyde." He dealt in accessories. Accent pieces for lifeless spaces. It sounded boring. It was. It was also fortifying, the way that under-seasoned food and watered-down drinks still provide nourishment, if not pleasure.

There was no retirement party when he stepped down. No one gave him a gold watch for his years of

service, but he'd never lacked for gold watches since becoming a fence. The day Carney retired he had a box of them in his office safe, engraved with the names of strangers, as it had been a while since he made the trip to his watch guy out in Mott Haven. His farewell to the stolen-goods biz mostly consisted of rebuffing former clients and telling them to spread the word in their criminal circle: Carney is out.

"What do you mean, out?"

"I quit. Done."

The door onto Morningside, carved out of the building to facilitate the night trade, became the innocent route for afternoon deliveries. Two weeks after the Fortuna robbery, Tommy Shush knocked on the Morningside door with a black leather briefcase tucked under his arm. Carney took a look at the diamonds to test his resolve—and bid the thief good luck. The next day Cubby the Worm, one of his white regulars, showed up after hours with "some real hot stuff." Cubby specialized in unlikely hijackings that took years to off-load—the man was up to his eyeballs in Chinese pogo sticks and pantyhose encased in plastic eggs. Carney turned him away before he could describe this week's misbegotten haul, nothing personal.

They stopped coming by, the thieves, bit by bit, only momentarily glum, for there was always another hand, another conduit, another deal to be made in an enterprise as vast, complicated, and crooked as New York City.

* * *

"Touch it—it won't bite. It's like grabbing a cloud of heaven."

Across the showroom Larry reeled in a customer, a wizened specimen who flipped a red beret around and around in his hands. Stoop-shouldered and wilting. Carney leaned against his office doorway and crossed his arms. A reliable subset of his clientele consisted of old men splurging on simple things they had long denied themselves. Then the creaky chair's springs poked through too many trouser seats, or the doctor offered remedies

for poor circulation and obscure pains, and they came here. Carney pictured them, counting his blessings, the old men who lived alone in slant-floor railroad apartments or dim-lit efficiencies: bus drivers looking for new armchairs to eat soup on while they pored over racing forms, cashiers at one-hour dry-cleaning joints who hankered for something to prop their tired feet on. The abandoned. They never haggled about prices, ticked off to break into the savings but proud to have the money on tap.

The article in question was a 1971 Egon club chair in tweed Scotchgard upholstery. A tank of comfort, aprowl on Pro-Slide brass casters. "Heaven," Larry repeated.

When the customer entered the store he'd shaken Larry's hand and introduced himself as Charlie Foster. Now he danced his fingertips across the green-brown fabric and chuckled in delight like a toddler.

Larry winked at Carney. When Rusty, Carney's longtime floor man, threw out his back and was laid up for three and a half months, Carney needed a fill-in. Larry showed up on the second day of interviews and stayed.

Larry was a study in controlled ease, a slow unfurling of pure style. Greet him when he punched in and he'd raise two fingers in a hold-on gesture as if in the middle of a transatlantic call with foreign powers, then respond after he changed out of his striped vest, flare trousers, and suede bucket hat or whatever groovy plumage he'd chosen that day. Once in his salesman costume, he'd finally offer a velvety "What's up, baby?"

He belonged to that tribe of black player so nimble in his skin that all others were *baby*—old man, young mother, red-faced beat cop. Your average square would use the word *slick* to describe him, on account of that jaunty smile and stream of hectic patter, which Larry would take as a compliment. Slick was an asset in the sales game. He was only twenty-one but had lived many lives, even if Carney suspected he had emerged full grown from a vat of Harlem Cool five minutes before he first laid eyes on him. Line cook at a Madison Avenue hotel; topiary wrangler at two

cemeteries; chauffeur for the wife of a Connecticut marble magnate; "gassing doggies at Gotham Veterinarian," which Carney assumed required some sort of specialized training or licensing, but no matter. And now Deputy Sales Associate at Carney's Furniture on 125th Street, "Fine Furniture for the Community for Over 15 Years."

"Never stays late, always has a date," Carney's secretary Marie liked to sing, stealing the tune from *The Patty Duke Show*. Like Carney's late cousin Freddie, Larry claimed as his hunting grounds uptown, downtown, and every meridian of pleasure in between. Hearing Larry's chronicles of New York at night, and its multifarious cast, was like getting a morning-after report from Freddie in the good old days. It lifted Carney's spirits.

Carney kept Larry on after Rusty got back on his feet. There was more than enough work and it allowed Carney more time off from the floor. It was as if the store had always been the four of them. Even when withered and hungover, Larry never let a customer see the misery. *Keep your secrets in your pocket*—an unspoken job requirement at Carney's Furniture. Marie sometimes wore sunglasses to cover a black eye but never ratted out her husband Rodney. Carney of course was well practiced in hiding his crooked aspects. Only Rusty was what he appeared to be, a genial Georgia transplant still befuddled by the city after all these years. As far as Carney knew. Perhaps Rusty was the most accomplished performer of them all, and come quitting time ran around performing brain surgery or routing SPECTRE.

Another siren passed up Morningside Ave.

"Is it sturdy?" Charlie Foster asked. "I like a sturdy chair." He poked the left armrest as if nudging a water bug with his shoe to make sure it was dead.

"Like the USS *Missouri,* baby," Larry said. "You buy cheap, you get cheap, right? Egon prices these babies nice because if they do that, they make it up in loyalty. That's how we do business, too. Sit, my brother, sit."

Charlie Foster sat. He appeared to merge with the club chair. Shedding years of worry, from his expression.

That's a sale. Carney returned to his office. He'd bought the new executive chair in April and repainted last Christmas but his office had changed little over the years. His business-school diploma dangled from the same nail, his signed picture of Lena Horne remained in its holy perch. Business was good. The fencing sideline had allowed him and Elizabeth to buy the place on Strivers' Row and sprung them from their cramped first apartment before that. Made possible the expansion of the store into the bakery next door and helped them to ride out numerous rough patches. But buying 381 and 383 West 125th Street? That was all Carney's Furniture. He bought the two buildings from Giulio Bongiovanni the first week of January 1970. A new decade, full of promise.

If you'd said when he signed the lease that one day he'd own the joint, he would've told you to get lost. *Carmen Jones* was holding its movie premiere down the street at the Hotel Theresa and as he held the keys in his hand for the first time it was like all that light and noise were for him. The property wasn't much to look at, but it might make a man his fortune. For the first two years he dropped off the rent by hand at the Fifth Avenue offices of Salerno Properties, Inc., not trusting the U.S. Postal Service, as if at 12:01 A.M. on the second of the month the marshals were going to bust down the door and throw his shit out in the street. He felt the 12:01 A.M. thing had happened to someone he knew, or his father had known, but now that he was settled and middle-aged recognized it as a tall tale. Most likely.

Carney met the landlord for the first time when he called Salerno about expanding into the bakery. One of the baker's regulars had been alarmed to find the store still closed at five past seven, then noticed the legs sticking out from behind the counter. Out of respect for the dead, Carney waited forty-five minutes before inquiring about the lease.

Giulio Bongiovanni let his staff handle the tenants, but he'd been curious about Carney for a long time. 383 West 125th had been a cursed retail spot since before Bongiovanni took over the real estate side from his father. Two furniture stores, a men's haberdashery, two shoe stores, and more had come to swift ruin after signing the lease, and the bad luck had followed the owners even after vacating the space. Cancers you'd never heard of that afflicted body parts you'd never heard of, divorces to be studied in family law courses for generations, a variety of prison time. Crushed by a large object in front of a nunnery. "It got so I was afraid to rent it," Bongiovanni told Carney.

"I'm doing okay," Carney said. The man subjected him to a never-seen-a-Negro-like-you-before look, not a novel experience for Carney. He reckoned it occurred more frequently these days, all over. Lunch counters, the voting booth, next thing you know they're running successful furniture businesses in Harlem.

"More than okay," Bongiovanni said, and he gave Carney permission to break through the wall into the bakery.

Giulio Bongiovanni's roots on 110th Street went way back, to when East Harlem was the biggest Little Italy this side of the Atlantic. He talked like a guy from around, but distinguished himself with his tight polyester polos and Muscle Beach physique. When asked about his regimen he attributed it to positive thinking and Jack LaLanne, whose show he watched daily and vitamin shipments he awaited monthly. "Don't knock the Glamour Stretcher," he said, posing in a forty-five-degree twist. "It's not just for the ladies, as you can see for yourself."

His grandfather had operated two grocery stores on Madison, and his father had bought 381 and 383 West 125th Street as investments when the Jews split the changing neighborhood. The family groceries still thrived, although the Bongiovannis no longer lived upstairs. They had decamped themselves for Astoria after World War II and now Bongiovanni was leaving the area for good. "The city is going to hell," he told Carney when he proposed the business deal. "The drugs, the filth. I'll take Florida."

Carney was flattered that the Italian thought he had the scratch to buy the two buildings, that the white side of town recognized his successes, then quickly assumed something was wrong and Bongiovanni was dumping bum properties on him. The city itching to condemn, some expensive disaster in the sewer below, or the final version of the Curse of 125th and Morningside finally come due. None of that turned out to be true, although Mrs. Hernandez in apartment 3R of 381 had a mysterious stain in her bathroom wall that returned each time it was patched and repainted and which bore an eerie resemblance to Dwight Eisenhower, a curse if ever he heard one. "He stares at me," she said.

Bongiovanni asked Carney if he was ready to be a landlord. "People calling you all hours, the water's too cold, the heat's too cold, my wife hates me?"

Carney meant to feast upon their complaints and grievances like they were a big bloody steak and potatoes. "Yes."

"Good man." They did a deal for the two buildings and three months later in Miami Bongiovanni keeled over while doing his sunrise calisthenics—aneurysm. The family brought him home and buried him with his ancestors in Calvary Cemetery in Woodside, plum view of the expressway.

Churn. Carney's word for the circulation of goods in his illicit sphere, the dance of TVs and diadems and toasters from one owner to the next, floating in and out of people's lives on breezes and gusts of cash and criminal industry. But of course churn determined the straight world too, memorialized the lives of neighborhoods, businesses. The movement of shop owners in and out of 383 West 125th Street, the changing entities on the deeds downtown in the hall of records, the minuet of brands on the showroom floor.

Carney's legit trade had transformed during the four years of his criminal retirement. Argent, his biggest client, the name he built the store on, was bought by Sterling in '68, who phased out their lines two years later. Sears swallowed up Bella Fontaine and assumed exclusive dealership. Collins-Hathaway overextended

themselves in their Canadian expansion and got wiped out in last year's recession. Carney kept their Authorized Dealer plaque up above his desk as a souvenir.

To replace the hole in his inventory, Carney signed up with DeMarco, the American arm of the big Norwegian concern Knut-Bjellen, currently specializing in low-slung, boxy "lifestyle components." Palette: earth tones. Market research warned that the U.S. consumer was suspicious of "foreign"-sounding household products, so DeMarco renamed their lines for the American market, rechristening their modular couch system the Homesteader, their recliner the Mitt. The product moved so Carney didn't care what they called it.

His only complaint concerned the photo shoots in the DeMarco brochures and literature, which unfolded in far-off ski lodges and mountaintop aeries. Prodigious fire in the hearth, rust- and mustard-colored lifestyle components arranged around it, and white ladies with furry hand muffs and white guys in wool turtleneck sweaters adrift in dopey bliss on the shag. Carney didn't want to put people in a box, but he wondered how many of his customers saw themselves reflected there. The shag.

"Welcome to my chalet," Carney said whenever their latest catalog arrived.

Hope y'all niggers like fondue, Freddie chimed in from beyond.

Another siren. Business, orderly business, unfolded inside the walls of Carney's Furniture, but out on the street it was Harlem rules: rowdy, unpredictable, more trifling than a loser uncle. The sirens zipped up and down the aves as regularly as subway trains, all hours, per calamity's timetable. If not the cops on a mayhem mission, then an ambulance racing to unwind fate. A fire engine speeding to a vacant tenement before the blaze ate the whole block, or en route to a six-story building kerosened for the insurance, a dozen families inside.

Carney's father had torched a building or two in his day. It paid the rent.

This was a radio car's siren. Carney joined Larry and Charlie

Foster at the window. On the other side of 125th, two white officers hassled a young man in a dark denim jacket and red flare trousers, their vehicle beached on the sidewalk. The cops pushed him up against the window of Hutchins Tobacco, known for cigarettes without tax stamps and for its vermin problem. The flypaper was booked all year round, no vacancies, the chocolate bars in the candy counter thoroughly weeviled. Hutchins locked his front door and glared from behind the glass with his hands on his hips.

The 125th Street foot traffic bent around this obstruction in the stream. Most did not stop; nothing special about a roust. If not here, somewhere else. But the manhunt had people edgy and off their routines. They lingered and muttered to one another, sassing and heckling the policemen even as they remained at a distance that testified to their fear.

The taller cop swept the man's feet apart and patted the inside of his legs. An onlooker howled, "Touching his junk?"

"What'd he do?" Carney said.

"They pulled up, tackled him like he robbed a bank," Larry said.

"Acting crazy," Charlie Foster said. "Looking for those Black Panthers."

"Black Liberation Army," Larry said.

"Same thing."

Carney didn't want to interrupt when there was a fish on the line, but the disagreement between the Panthers and the offshoot Black Liberation Army was about more than names. The philosophical dispute encompassed the temperament of the street, law enforcement's current posture vis-à-vis Harlem, and all the sirens. Step back and maybe it contained everything.

* * *

"Reform versus revolution," Carney explained to John. Two and a half weeks earlier, May 12th. The verdict in the Panther 21 trial had come down and his son had questions.

"It's like in my store," Carney said. "Reform is changing what's

already there to make it better, like stain-proof upholstery, or wheeled feet, and then wheeled feet with brakes. Revolution is when you throw out everything and start new. You know the Castro Convertible?"

John nodded. The TV commercials were inescapable.

"The convertible sofa is revolution," Carney said. "Takes every idea we have about sleeping, about space, and flips them upside down. Living room? Boom—it's another bedroom." He paused. "Bet you didn't know the inventor of the convertible bed was a black man."

John shook his head.

"Leonard C. Bailey, businessman and tinkerer. Filed a patent in 1899 that the U.S. military put into mass production. You can look it up. Revolution."

He had entered that stage of a black man's life when some days the only thing that got him out of bed was the prospect of sharing stories of Black Firsts and neglected visionaries of their race.

John nodded vaguely. Carney picked up the pace. "The Panthers are opening food pantries, they have that free-breakfast program, legal aid—reform. The BLA wants to overthrow the whole system."

"If they're for reform, then why did those Panthers try to blow up the subway?"

"Just because the cops said it, doesn't make it so."

That afternoon the longest and most expensive trial in New York City history had wrapped up in a surprising acquittal. The Panther 21 had been arrested two years ago, fingered by undercover cops who'd infiltrated the organization. They faced one hundred and fifty-six counts of attempted murder and arson and etc. in a conspiracy to blow up the Bronx Botanical Garden, various police precincts, a few subway lines, as well as Alexander's, Korvettes, Macy's, and other department stores for good measure. The retail targets were an anti-capitalism thing, presumably, but it was unclear what they had against flowers.

John asked if they wanted to blow up Carney's store, too. Car-

ney told him there were probably a lot of white stores to blow up before they got to his.

It took the jury ninety minutes to deliberate and twenty minutes to read out the one hundred and fifty-six Not Guiltys. "The undercover agents made up their stories out of whole cloth." A humiliating turn for Frank Hogan, the Manhattan DA. What's the world coming to when you can't railroad a bunch of Negroes?

"Why would the cops lie?" John said.

"Why does anyone lie?" Some things a boy has to figure out for himself.

Carney tried to picture himself as a kid, asking his father about political action. Inconceivable. Big Mike Carney pegged the civil rights movement—"these so-called righteous brothers"—as fellow hustlers. How much were they skimming when they put their hand out for soup kitchen donations, pocketing from the overhead when they cut the ribbon for a new rec center? Work rackets for a living and you see them everywhere, the possibilities, the little crack where an enterprising soul might sneak in a crowbar.

For a black boy growing up in Manhattan, John had an inspiringly naïve outlook. Fighting for survival made you think quick; John took the time to consider the world from every angle, claiming as his right the luxury of thoughtfulness. Sometimes Carney saw him as a version of the boy he might have been if he'd grown up in a different apartment, where there was food in the cupboard when he got home from school, with a mother to greet him, one who had not died young. A father who was not crooked. Carney liked that there was a version of that boy somewhere, even if it couldn't be him.

May took after her mother. Strident and assured, a flinty fifteen years old. A week after the Panther 21 trial, Carney and the kids were eating breakfast in the dining room. To exercise a paternal muscle Carney skipped his Chock Full o'Nuts ritual to spend time with John and May before school.

May tapped the newspaper. "These are some heavy dudes," she said.

Carney took the *Times*. Someone had claimed responsibility for the police shooting Wednesday night. Two cops guarding DA Frank Hogan's apartment were in critical condition, machine-gunned by "two young black males" in a car. Hogan had been under guard since last summer, when the house of John Murtagh was firebombed. Who was John Murtagh? The judge in the Panther 21 case.

Last night, the shooters had dropped off packages at the New York Times Building and at the offices of WLIB in the Theresa, down the street from his store. The packages contained a .45-caliber bullet, license plates from the car identified in the attack, and a note:

May 19, 1971

All Power to the People,

Here are the license plates sought after by the fascist state pig police. We send them in order to exhibit the potential power of oppressed peoples to acquire revolutionary justice.

The armed goons of this racist government will again meet the guns of oppressed third world peoples as long as they occupy our community and murder our brothers and sisters in the name of American law and order. Just as the fascist marines and army occupy Vietnam in the name of democracy and murder Vietnamese people in the name of American imperialism, and are confronted with the guns of the Vietnamese liberation army, the domestic armed forces of racism and oppression will be confronted with the guns of the black liberation army, who will mete out in the tradition of Malcolm and all true revolutionaries real justice. We are revolutionary justice.

All Power to the People
Justice

The syntax dizzied but he got the gist. "Militant," Carney said.

"Somebody has to say it," May said. "Vietnam. The ghetto. It's the same."

"The Man sure keeps busy."

"It's not funny." She snatched the paper back.

"I'm not laughing."

"Did you get the tickets?"

Carney winced. "I told you they're sold out, honey."

"You said you'd get them."

John dragged a pencil through a maze on the back of the box of Honeycomb cereal.

The next night there was another attack, successful this time. Saturday morning Carney was going over the accounts with 1010 WINS on for company. *All News. All the Time.* The newscaster mentioned the Colonial Park Houses on 159th. Carney had customers who lived there, he had arranged deliveries. A little after ten on Friday night, Officers Waverly Jones and Joseph Piagentini had been returning to their patrol car when they were ambushed from behind. Jones was black; he was shot twice. Piagentini, the white cop, was shot eight times. Aunt Millie was on duty at Harlem Hospital when they wheeled them in. "It was a damned mess." Mayor Lindsay attended their funerals, all choked up on the telecasts.

The NYPD described their response as a *show of force.* "A motherfucking siege" is how a man in line at Chock Full o'Nuts described it, paying for his bag of doughnuts ahead of Carney. "I was in the war." Patrolmen staked out corners, a new magnitude of prowl cars hit the streets, with unmarked units shadowing them for extra protection. Midnight raids on suspects. Activists and movement figures on downtown lists were rounded up. It reminded Carney of the '64 riots, or '68 after they shot King. There was a special hotline to call if you knew anything.

At 240 Centre Street they downplayed the BLA link at first. Now they embraced it, Carney noticed. Three more attacks on

policemen followed in the coming days, nonlethal—the same party, or copycats? Edward Kiernan, the head of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, held up Piagentini's bullet-perforated shirt on TV and implored every cop on duty to carry a shotgun. "With a pistol, the odds are one in five that you will miss," he said, "but with a shotgun the odds are ninety-nine to one of a hit."

That was lynching talk. Percy Sutton told him to quit it. Sutton—Tuskegee Airman, lawyer to Malcolm X, and currently Manhattan borough president—would have set Big Mike's eyes rolling. "This is New York City, not Alabama," he said. "We don't do 'shotgun justice.' "

The days passed. The manhunt continued. The sirens continued.

* * *

First week of June. Start of another wilting New York summer. The air-conditioning unit over the front door wheezed and coughed like a crosstown bus, but it got the job done.

It was cool beneath the machine. Carney, Larry, and Mr. Foster huddled there. Carney supposed the crowd across the street contained various uptown factions: movement sympathizers, young people drunk on the counterculture, revolution-minded folks who frowned on shooting cops in the back, and those who just wanted to go about their business without getting fucking involved. Like Mr. Charlie Foster, whose expression soured at the display.

A dark brown Plymouth rounded Morningside and honked, sending bystanders scrambling. It pulled up on the curb and disgorged two white plainclothes. The detained man shook his head as they hollered at him.

"Pigs," Larry said.

"When I was coming up, they hear you say that, make you a cripple," Foster said.

"*Constables,*" Larry amended.

The patrolmen handcuffed the man. One of the plainclothes

gripped his neck with one hand and steered him forward with the other. When Carney was little, his father worked at Miracle Garage in between jobs. The owner, Pat Dodds, had this gray mutt out back and when the dog made a mess somewhere, he grabbed the dog's neck and rammed its face into it. That's how the cop grabbed this young brother's neck.

For a moment it appeared that the young man stared into Carney's eyes, but with the sun where it was the man would only see his own face reflected in the store window. Such was the character of light on 125th Street at that time of day, making everything into a mirror. The plainclothes shoved him into the backseat. The sedan lurched and retreated from the sidewalk. The radio car followed suit.

This tall brother in a floppy suede hat started a "Power to the People" chant, but it didn't catch. With the cops' departure, there was nothing to bind them. They moved their feet, as if the WALK/DONT WALK sign had switched. Carney thought: GAWK/DONT GAWK.

Charlie Foster cleared his throat and donned his beret. Something had put him off the sale, it was written in his posture. "I'll have to think about it," he said.

Larry protested. Carney slunk back to his office. It was a bust.

Mr. Foster hit the street a minute later. Sometimes Carney wanted to say, "Buy it, for Chrissakes. Do something for yourself!" Some black men of that generation trained themselves to not have permission, all those Charlie Fosters denying themselves since before Carney was born. He conjured the lonely scene awaiting Foster at home—then checked himself. Maybe the man was happy and satisfied, hoisting squealing grandchildren all day like barbells. He didn't know anything about these men, their choices and consequences. Just that they were looking for a comfortable chair. Occasionally Carney wove a private dread into a universal condition.

He took the stack of MEMORIAL DAY SALE signs off his desk and dropped them in the trash can. The sale had gone gangbusters,

he'd make it an annual thing. When Carney heard they were renaming Decoration Day and moving it from May 30th to the last Monday in May, he hadn't seen the point. He sure did like the receipts, though. Three-day weekend, time on your hands, sometimes the mind starts thinking about home goods. It was the first time since he could remember that he approved of something the government had done.

Above Carney's desk, left of the window onto the showroom, hung the Polaroid that Rusty had taken of him and Elizabeth and the kids in front of the store in 1961. May was four, John maybe two. No matter when a picture was taken, Elizabeth looked the same: lovely and imperturbable. It had been a nice Saturday, the four of them enjoying one another and the weather. May's mouth curved the way it did when she suppressed a smile.

He didn't want to disappoint her, but he'd run out of leads. He called Larry over.

"What's up, baby?"

Carney told him the Jackson 5 were playing Madison Square Garden next month.

"That's a hot one," Larry said, in a weary, insider tone. He had "friends in the industry" from a former incarnation and occasionally doled out improbable gossip to him and Rusty and Marie during slumps. A tidbit about the harmonica player on War's third album, or scout's-honor intelligence from Aretha Franklin's dentist.

"May's been asking."

Larry shook his head. "If I had that in, I'd be going myself."

Carney'd made the rounds. The Dumas Club was a bust. Inside dope on pending legislation, who to bribe downtown, when influence was the currency and when it was cash—these things the Dumas members excelled in. They were not so savvy when it came to Jackson 5 tickets. Lamar Talbot, whom people called "the Black Clarence Darrow" for no reason Carney could discern, had represented the Garden in a wrongful death suit. Construction worker killed while laying the foundation, Afro American lawyer

at the table might smooth it out. No dice. "I save their bacon, and look how they do me."

He specifically remembered Kermit Wells bragging that Berry Gordy, the father of Motown Records, was his first cousin. He cornered him after a scotch tasting. Wells claimed that Carney had misheard; his wife's friend was related to Berry Gordy, but she and his wife had had a falling-out. Plus, Kermit added, if he had an in, he'd grab those tickets for himself.

Carney's father-in-law, Leland Jones, cooked the books for sundry entertainment lawyers and managers who'd kept him in orchestra seats for decades. It shriveled his pride, but Carney hit him up. For May's sake. Whenever he heard Leland's voice nowadays, the trembling delivery announced how much the years had diminished the man. Had Carney despised him once? Strong emotions were wasted at this point. He asked after his showbiz contacts.

"I haven't talked to Albert in quite some time," Leland said. "And Lance Hollis passed away years ago."

Lately Carney was afraid to turn on the radio, lest one of their goddamn songs remind him of his failure. Who had he forgotten?

Munson. It had been a while.

Carney usually left a message when he called the 28th Precinct. The man was a rambler. Today someone picked up on the third ring. "Anyone seen Munson? Who's this?"

Another siren. He said his name.

Munson got on the phone. "Carney," he repeated, as if trying to place him. The detective's voice scraped: "Why didn't I think of it before?"

And like that, in the time WALK turns to DONT WALK, Carney was out of retirement.

Seishi Yokomizo

A classic Japanese murder mystery from the author of *The Honjin Murders*

THE DEVIL'S FLUTE MURDERS

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CHAPTER 1

The Devil Comes and Plays His Flute

As I take up my pen to begin recording this miserable tale, I cannot help but feel some pangs of conscience.

To tell the truth, I do not want to write it. I have no pleasure in putting down in words all the misery it holds. The events I am to describe are filled with such darkness and sadness, are so cursed and hate-filled, that not a word I write can possibly offer the faintest glimmer of hope or relief.

Even as the author, I cannot predict what the final sentence will be, but I fear that the relentless dread and darkness that precede it may end up overcoming the readers and crush their very spirits in its grasp. By their nature, stories of crime and mystery leave little enough good feeling in their wake, but this case in particular is so foul that even I feel it is perhaps too extreme. On that point, it seems that Kosuke Kindaichi and I are in agreement. When I asked him to provide me with his case files, he was hesitant about agreeing.

In truth, I should have written about this case before two or three other Kindaichi adventures I have published in the last few years. The reason it comes so late is that Kindaichi was reluctant reveal its secrets to me, and that was mostly likely because he was afraid that unveiling the unrelenting darkness, twisted human relationships and bottomless hatred and resentment within might discomfit readers.

However, as the booksellers grow louder in their demands, I have resolved to offer up—with Kindaichi's full agreement—the

whole story. Naturally, despite my protests over its writing, and the fact that it gives me no pleasure to do so, now that I have taken up the task I will give this case everything it deserves.

As I write this now, my desk is covered with all the various materials Kosuke Kindaichi provided me, but among them the two objects that stir my heart most are a photograph and a single-sided vinyl record.

The photograph is roughly postcard size. It features the half-length portrait of a gentleman in his middle years. When it was taken, the subject was forty-two years of age. (As an aside, all the ages given in this story are *kazudoshi* in the traditional way of counting—meaning the child is born one year old, and a year is added on every New Year's Day. The reason being, when this incident occurred, Japan had not yet adopted the Western style of figuring age.) Forty-two is, as they say, an unfortunate age for men. Perhaps it is the influence of that superstition, or thoughts of the horrific incident I am about to recount, but as I look on the picture, I sense a heavy shadow lying over the man's countenance.

His complexion is perhaps somewhat dark. His forehead is broad, and his hair parted neatly on the left. He has a proud nose, a furrowed brow and dark eyes that look as if they are troubled by some internal turmoil, a discord hidden forever within. His mouth is small, with lips on the thin side, though they do not give any impression of harshness. Rather, there is a femininity or weakness about them. Even so, his jaw is quite prominent, hinting that beneath the apparent fragility exists a powerful will that could burst forth with sudden violence if pressed. He wears a plain suit, but the bolo tie hanging down his chest reveals a certain artistic sensibility. So, the impression of the picture as a whole is that of an aristocratic, relatively

handsome man, but who could he be? He is, in fact, a key figure in this horrific incident, the former viscount Hidesuke Tsubaki. It was just six months after this picture was taken that Tsubaki made his fateful disappearance.

The other item that draws my attention so powerfully is a ten-inch vinyl record published after the war by the G— record company, of a flute solo entitled "The Devil Comes and Plays His Flute".

The composer and flautist both are that same Hidesuke Tsubaki. In fact, the composition was completed, and the performance recorded just one month before his disappearance.

I do not know how many times I played this record before I began to draft this story. And no matter how many times I listen to it, I cannot help but be struck by the creeping dread that fills it. That is not solely due to any associations with the story I am about to recount. The melody itself is somehow eerie, with an unfamiliar distortion in the key. It transforms the basic melody, which is itself full of darkness, into something deranged and terrifying.

I am no kind of musical expert, but there is something about this piece that reminds me of Doppler's flute song "Fantaisie Pastorale Hongroise". However, while Doppler's work is rather merry, Tsubaki's "The Devil Comes and Plays His Flute" is filled with misery and heartbreak from start to finish. And the crescendo section is so frenzied that even an utterly tone-deaf listener like me cannot not help but feel my skin crawl, as if I were listening to the enraged, wretched shrieks of dead souls sounding out across the midnight sky. "The Devil Comes and Plays His Flute"…

The name is clearly a reference to the line "The blind man comes and plays his flute" from Mokutaro Kinoshita's poem, "Harimaya". However, this piece contains not a hint of the

sentimentality that Kinoshita's poem does. Its sound is the shriek of the devil's flute, as the name so aptly indicates. It is a melody of bitter hatred, as if it were drenched in foul blood.

If even someone as unfamiliar with the music as I can feel that unnaturalness, I can only imagine the shock and horror that must have filled those connected to the incident each time they heard this piece begin playing out of nowhere after Tsubaki's disappearance. Given the eerie melody and the events I am about to recount, it is indeed quite easy to imagine.

"The Devil Comes and Plays His Flute"… Looking back, this piece of twisted music always held the key to unlocking the mysteries central to the horrors I am about to recount.

The year of these incidents, 1947, was one that kept the newspapers busy. I can recall at least three major events that caught the public's attention that year. The connections between two of them are already commonly known, but the strange thing is that the third, which everyone assumed to be totally unrelated, was actually deeply connected, if less openly.

I am referring here to the horrific Tengindo Incident, a crime which sent shockwaves throughout Japan.

Tengindo! I am sure that even just seeing the name written sends chills down the reader's spine. What happened was so shocking that surely everyone can recall it, even today.

There is likely no need to go into the details, which even the foreign press called "unprecedented in the history of crime", but I will still give a brief outline. It was 15th January of that year, at around ten o'clock in the morning. A lone man showed up at Tengindo, a jewellery shop famous even for luxurious Ginza. The man was around forty years old, his complexion somewhat dark. He gave the impression of an aristocratic, relatively handsome man, but on his arm was a city health officer band, and in his hand a bag like that a doctor would carry.

He went to speak to the manager in his office at the back of the shop and showed a business card from the Tokyo Department of Health, bearing the name Ichiro Iguchi. He claimed that someone in the area had been spreading an infectious disease, and that he would need all staff who had been in contact with customers to take some preventive medicine.

Later, some would argue that the manager and his staff had been too eager, in ways reminiscent of the war, to blindly obey a government official, but this man calling himself Ichiro Iguchi presented such a calm, reassuring demeanour and respectable character, that no one saw any cause for suspicion.

The manager immediately called his staff into the office. Since it was still too early to expect customers, and the staff were already done arranging the showcases, every member rushed in when called. The cleaning crew from the back even came too, and in the end thirteen people all told, including the manager, crowded into the room together.

When he saw that everyone was present, the monster calling himself Ichiro Iguchi took two bottles from his bag and mixed some of the contents from both into enough teacups for everyone. He then told them to drink. Totally unaware of the horrible fate that was only seconds away, those good folk did as they were instructed and drank the mixture. Within moments, they were afflicted with all the miseries of hell.

The cups had contained potassium cyanide. The staff fell like dominoes, collapsing where they stood. Some stopped breathing as soon as they did, while others lingered on, moaning and gasping in despair.

The monster Iguchi looked on his work, then gathered up his things. He fled the manager's office and grabbed a handful of the jewels on display, then disappeared into the bustling Ginza streets. The intense investigation that followed revealed

that his theft was shockingly small, amounting to only some 300,000 yen in value.

The gruesome crime was discovered just ten minutes after the murderer fled, when a customer happened to come into the shop and, hearing unusual sounds and cries for help from behind a door in the back, looked inside. The discovery sparked an unprecedented commotion.

Of the thirteen victims, only three were saved. The other ten, I regret to say, passed away before the police or doctors could arrive. And so, that is what became known as the Tengindo Incident. The planning of this crime was so simple and effective that it could have gone down in the annals of crime history as a work of genius. However, the brutal, cold-blooded viciousness of it shocked the public like none other, even in those wicked days after the war's end.

And although the extreme nature of the crime at first suggested it would be a simple matter to find the murderer, this proved to be untrue. The police were unable to track him down, and so the incident took on an even greater power over the public mind.

Naturally, the police held nothing back. They followed every lead in trying to find the criminal, tracing his flight after the murder and even uncovering where the Ichiro Iguchi business card had come from. They were able to create a photo composite, based on interviews with the three surviving victims and two or three witnesses who saw him burst out of Tengindo, and used it to enlist the help of the public at large. The appearance of that composite during the manhunt helped put this case I write about in motion. It was edited and improved five times, and each time every newspaper in the country published it anew. All the various little tragedies that resulted are likely still fresh in the public mind.

The composite triggered a flood of letters and anonymous tip-offs to police. The sheer volume sent the police into chaos as they followed up on every letter that came in saying that "so-and-so in such-and-such village looks just like the picture". Even though they knew most leads would end up a bust, the detectives had to approach each one as if it were a real chance. They contacted all of the identified people to come in for questioning.

There were also quite a few cases where police officers on the street grabbed someone because he resembled the picture, which caused its own sort of trouble. This was not just in Tokyo, either. It was a nationwide frenzy.

This is where we will find the connection to the story I am going to relate in these pages.

As I wrote before, the Tengindo incident took place on 15th January, and some fifty days later, on 5th March, the morning paper featured another story that caught the eye. It was a prelude to all the horrific things that followed.

This was all before Osamu Dazai wrote his work *Setting Sun*, about the decline of the aristocratic class after the war, so we did not yet have ready terms like "the sunset clan" or "sunset class" to describe these people, newly bereft of their noble privilege and falling into ruin. But, if we had, then I think it likely that this case would have been the first to see the term used.

The 5th March morning edition reported that Viscount Hidesuke Tsubaki had apparently vanished. This affair was the first public glimpse into the aristocratic class's sad fall, so of course the world was fascinated. Viscount Tsubaki had actually disappeared four days previously, on 1st March. At ten o'clock in the morning, the viscount wandered out of his house without a word of explanation to his family, and never returned. When

he left, he wore a plain grey overcoat over an equally plain grey suit, and an old fedora on his head.

The family at first did not believe he had actually vanished. Or rather, they did not wish to believe it, so they waited for two days, then three. Of course, during that time they did try contacting various friends and family to try and track down his whereabouts, but they learned nothing. Finally, on the afternoon of the fourth day they filed a missing person's report with the police, and that was the first public hint of the tragedy to come.

There was no note, but from the viscount's reported attitude around the time in question, everyone felt the most likely explanation was suicide, so the police department issued a nationwide alert and had his picture published in the morning papers the next day. The picture they used is the same one that now rests on my desk.

Given the lack of a note, even if his disappearance was due to suicide, there was no hint as to his reasons. However, it was not difficult for people to imagine one.

The viscount had apparently lacked the vitality necessary to deal with all the changes and turmoil rocking Japanese society at the time. He was a gentle, somewhat delicate and polite gentleman, to such an extent that he seemed almost completely unequipped for daily life. He had held a middling position with the Ministry of the Imperial Household until the end of the war, but lost it when the ministry was scaled down and replaced with the Imperial Household Agency.

Some also said that the situation at his home was the reason for the disappearance.

The viscount's mansion in Azabu Roppongi survived the firebombing of Tokyo, but that fact ended up bringing him no end of misery. After the war, his wife's brother the Viscount

Shingu had moved onto the estate with his family after his own house burnt down, as did his wife's uncle Count Tamamushi and his mistress. Those around Tsubaki said that this situation was simply too much for the sensitive viscount's nerves.

The estate in Azabu Roppongi was Viscount Tsubaki's home; however, in point of fact the property remained in his wife Akiko's name.

The Tsubaki family was a noble one, and one of the most prominent of the old aristocratic lines, but it had produced no notable members since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and although the family had received titles from the Imperial family, their yearly stipend had dwindled. In Hidesuke's youth they had been reduced to poverty, and he himself had struggled to maintain the basic appearance necessary for a man of his station. He had been saved by his marriage to a member of the Shingu family.

Akiko's family, the Shingus, were peers of the old feudal daimyo lineage rather than of the ancient court nobility, and even among the aristocracy, were famous for their wealth. And what is more, the Shingu family were backed by the even greater personage of Count Tamamushi. He was Akiko's maternal uncle and had been a leader of the House of Peers and a guiding force of the influential Kenkyukai parliamentary faction. He had never taken a ministerial role himself but had always remained a powerful political force in the shadows.

Hidesuke Tsubaki had often wondered why Count Tamamushi would assent to letting his darling niece marry a man such as him, and there were rumours that the count eventually came to regret the marriage, accusing the viscount of being an incompetent, impotent weakling who spent all his time blowing on a flute.

To a forceful, obstinate man like the count, someone like Tsubaki with no concerns for social influence or ambitions at

all, must have seemed utterly ineffectual indeed. Yet when that same man looked on his nephew Toshihiko Shingu, who filled his life with liquor, women and golf, the count praised him as being a true figure of nobility. That should indicate just what kind of man Count Tamamushi was.

The wilful count and dissolute brother-in-law came into Viscount Tsubaki's house and began denigrating him as an incompetent almost immediately. Those who knew him spoke of how even the mild-mannered Tsubaki was pushed beyond the limits of his tolerance.

Putting all of that aside, when Viscount Tsubaki's whereabouts were still unknown and the newspapers still filled with the news, his record company saw the opportunity and attempted to cash in by releasing the recording of "The Devil Comes and Plays His Flute". As I have mentioned, that work was actually filled with great meaning, but no one at the time recognized the fact. What's more, as a particularly sombre flute solo, rather than a more accessible popular song, it was simply not very well received.

No one learned what had become of Hidesuke Tsubaki for nearly two months, although many were already certain of his suicide. After the war ended he had spoken often about death, and said that if he had to die, it would be best to do so quietly alone somewhere in the mountains, where no one would find his remains. Which, it seems, is what he tried to do.

On 14th April, forty-five days after Tsubaki left his family home, his body was discovered in the woods covering Mount Kirigamine in Nagano Prefecture. The police had made a preliminary identification based on his clothing and belongings, and a message was sent immediately to the house in Roppongi.

When word arrived, there was some dispute within the household over who would go to claim the body. The shock

of his disappearance had weakened the viscount's wife Akiko terribly, and indeed she was not by nature particularly well suited to such things, so everyone decided that their daughter Mineko would go instead, and her cousin Kazuhiko said he would accompany her. He was Hidesuke's nephew, but on top of that he had also been the man's flute student.

Still, it would not do to send the pair alone, as they were much too young. Kazuhiko was twenty-one-years-old, while Mineko was only nineteen. They would need someone with more experience of the world to go with them. The family agreed that Kazuhiko's father Toshihiko would be best suited, but he himself was reluctant. He mocked his younger sister, saying that he would rather find a high-class prostitute or someone to play golf with, than go to claim his brother -in-law's body.

In the end, though, Akiko's insistence and the promise of a decent bit of pocket money for a night on the town convinced him to go . The three were also joined by young Kotaro Mishima, the orphaned son of Hidesuke's friend, whom he had taken in after the war. In fact, it was he who dealt with all of the red tape when they arrived on the site, and did so very efficiently.

The body was autopsied and then taken for cremation in the town of Kamisuwa, near where it had been found, but what shocked everyone was that even though the surroundings and the inquest both suggested that Hidesuke had gone to his place of death and taken cyanide directly after leaving his home on 1st March, the body had barely begun to decompose. Naturally, his appearance was not quite what it had been when he was alive, but his daughter, nephew and ward were all three able to identify the corpse at a single glance. Presumably, that unusual preservation had something to do with the cold local climate where he was found.

And so, Hidesuke Tsubaki left this world. If he had indeed died on 1st March, he had done so still a viscount, before Japan's new constitution abolished the peerage on 3rd May. We must assume that Tsubaki had decided that he would die a member of the aristocracy, as he had lived. Everyone thought that this discovery had closed the case of Viscount Hidesuke Tsubaki's disappearance. However, it turned out that they were mistaken.

Some six months later, the devil came in truth, blowing his cursed flute with wild abandon, and the world had cause to look at the disappearance again from a new angle.

CHAPTER 2

Viscount Tsubaki's Parting Note

Kosuke Kindaichi's lifestyle in 1947, the twenty-second year of the reign of the Showa Emperor, was a strange one.

He had been discharged from the army only the previous autumn, and without a home to return to had settled at the Pine Moon Inn, a *kappo ryokan*—a traditional lodging specialized in dining—in the Yamanote area of Omori, Tokyo. An old friend of Kindaichi's, Shunroku Kazama, had become a successful general contractor in Yokohama after the war, and he put his mistress in charge of the *ryokan*. Kindaichi ended up staying in a room there and settled down like he'd grown roots.

Luckily, his friend's mistress was a kind woman, and she took to looking after him like he was her own younger brother—though, in fact, she was the younger of the two. Kosuke Kindaichi was an energetic man of action when he was on a case, but the rest of the time he was as indolent as a cat. That meant he required quite a lot of care as a tenant, but the mistress never made a single complaint, and even went so far as to offer him a bit of pocket money. Kindaichi took full advantage of this and settled in like a stone in mud. As comfortable as he was, though, there were occasional difficulties.

One of these was that, as his reputation spread, more and more clients came to ask for help, both men and women. Even the men were often hesitant to visit him in in his private rooms, but for older women in particular, it took quite a lot of courage to step alone through the door of that out-of-the-way *ryokan*.

Then, having mustered that bit of courage and gone through the gate, they found themselves in a small room in an isolated annexe building only about four and a half tatami mats in size, squeezed in with Kosuke Kindaichi. It was not a comfortable situation.

The visit that began this case was on 28th September 1947.

Kosuke Kindaichi sat across from a discomfited woman in that same small annexe room. She looked to be around twenty years old. She wore a pink cardigan sweater over a crêpe de Chine blouse with a black skirt. Her hair was cut short, and overall she was quite plainly dressed for a modern young woman.

It would have been hard to call her a beauty, with her prominent forehead over too-large eyes, and cheekbones and chin that were too small. On balance, her whole face seemed out of proportion. It made her look almost foolish, yet at the same time she gave off an aura of great pride. Her air of irritation was not unusual for Kindaichi's clients, who were often unhappy at being forced into such a position, but that didn't explain the dark shadow that seemed to envelop her whole body. They sat in silence.

He observed the woman closely, but from his guest's perspective it likely seemed he was just sitting there calmly puffing on his cigarette. She, on the other hand, sat uncomfortably. She seemed a loss as to how best to break the silence, and occasionally fussed at her knees. After their initial exchange of greetings, Kindaichi waited for his guest to open up, while she seemed to be waiting for him to draw her into conversation. He was, sadly, not at his best at times like this.

Suddenly, the ash from his cigarette, grown long in the silence, fell from the tip. The woman stared at the fallen ash on the tabletop, her eyes wide in surprise.

"Um—" she started, just as Kindaichi let out a breath, and the ash puffed into the air.

"Oh!" she cried out, and pressed her handkerchief to one eye.

"Oh, no, I-I'm so sorry. Did it get in your eye?" Kindaichi hurriedly bent forward across the table.

"No, no…" The woman rubbed strongly at her eye once or twice, then quickly pulled her handkerchief away and gave him a small, chiding smile. The smile revealed charmingly discoloured teeth. For that moment, at least, the dark shadow wrapped around her seemed to lighten just a little.

Kindaichi rubbed at his shaggy head and said, "I-I beg your pardon. How clumsy of me. Is your eye all right?"

"Yes, it's quite fine, thank you," the woman said, her original pride restored. She was clearly straining to maintain a diplomatic tone, but at last they had found room to speak.

"So, you talked to Chief Inspector Todoroki at the police station, I hear?" Kindaichi asked.

"I did, yes."

"And he said you should come to me?"

"That's right."

"Well then, what can I do for you?"

"Oh, well…" The woman hesitated a moment. "My name is Mineko Tsubaki."

"Yes, you said that earlier."

"I'm sorry, of course you wouldn't realize from just my name. My father was Hidesuke Tsubaki. The Tsubaki who disappeared last spring?"

"A disappearance last spring…" Kindaichi muttered to himself for a moment, then his eyes widened. "You mean Viscount Tsubaki?"

"Yes, though he would no longer be a viscount, or anything else…" Mineko said, her voice cold, almost self-mocking, and

she stared squarely at Kindaichi with wide eyes. He scratched furiously again at his tousled hair.

"Well, well, well… That's really something." Kindaichi frowned as he looked closely at the woman's face. "But what brings you to me now?"

"Yes, of course, that's… Well…" The dark shadow enveloping Mineko's body seemed to grow more intense, as did her aura of frustration. She twisted her handkerchief between her fingers in irritation and said, "I know that this story may sound silly, but for us, it's deadly serious."

She looked sharply at Kindaichi, and it was as if her overlarge eyes were drawing him in. "I wonder if my father truly is dead."

Kindaichi gaped in surprise and jerked as if an intense shock had run through his body. He gripped the sides of the table as if to steady himself and asked, "Wh-why do you say that?!"

Mineko folded her hands primly on her knees and stared at him in silence. The shadow wrapped around her seemed to swell and billow like dark flames. Kindaichi took up his cup and sipped at the tea, long gone cold, to calm himself.

"From what I read about that case in the papers, they found your father's body in the mountains somewhere in Nagano, didn't they?"

"Yes, on Mount Kirigamine."

"How many days was that after he left your house, again?"

"It was the forty-fifth day."

"I see, so then the body must have been quite badly decomposed and hard to identify. But I thought the newspapers said he was clearly recognized as the Viscount Tsubaki."

"Oh, no, the body had barely decomposed at all. It was almost disturbing, how little it had."

"Then you viewed the body yourself?"

"Yes, I claimed his remains. My mother didn't wish to."

There was a hint of darkness in her tone when she said the word "mother" that made Kindaichi peer more closely at her face. Mineko seemed to notice that and lowered her gaze, her ears reddening, but soon looked up again. The blush receded, and the quiet shadow wrapped itself around her more tightly.

"At the time, then, you were certain the body was your father's?"

"Yes, I was," Mineko said, nodding. "I believe it even now."

Kindaichi narrowed his eyes at her in consternation. He started to say something, then had second thoughts, and said instead, "Were you alone at the time? Did no one else go with you?"

"My uncle and cousin were with me. And Mishima-san."

"Did those people know your father well?"

"Yes, of course."

"And did they also confirm that the body was your father's?"

"They did."

"So, after all of that," Kindaichi said eventually, his brow furrowed, "why has this doubt about your father still being alive come out now?"

"Kindaichi-san!" Mineko's voice grew suddenly emphatic. "I believed that body was my father's, and I still believe it to this day. But, even without any decay, the shape of his face was so different from when he was alive. Maybe it was all of the anguish and misery he endured before his suicide, or the pain after he took the poison, but I remember in that instant someone whispering that he was like a different person. I even felt it myself. So, later, when people started pushing me, saying perhaps the body wasn't my father's, even though I am absolutely

convinced that it was, I couldn't help but feel shaken. And now, as his daughter, and the person who most closely examined his remains, when others see my uncertainty, of course they start to feel it, too. My uncle was so uncomfortable that he barely looked at Father's face."

Her tone grew dark again when she mentioned her uncle.

"Your uncle, that's…?"

"My mother's older brother. Toshihiko Shingu. He was also a viscount, before."

"So, then, your cousin would be his child?"

"Yes, his only son."

"I see. Now, did your father have any distinguishing marks on his body?"

"If he had, then there would have been no room for doubt."

Kindaichi nodded and went on. "Yes, I can see that. But who is it that started bringing all this up in the first place? Saying that the corpse wasn't your father's?"

"My mother." There was a coldness in her voice at this. It was so sharp, and so hard, that Kindaichi could not help the surprise showing on his face.

"Why would she do that?"

"Mother never believed that he killed himself. When we still had no idea if he was alive or dead, Mother never once thought it possible. She insisted that he was alive somewhere, in hiding. She seemed to be convinced he was dead for a time after his body was found, but before too long she stopped believing. She said we were all being fooled, and that the body wasn't his. She even started saying that he had used someone as a body-double and was still in hiding."

Kindaichi sat looking at her. Some unnameable emotion began to seethe deep in his gut, but he kept the unease to himself. "Surely, though, that's just your mother's love speaking?"

"No, no, not at all." Mineko spoke as if the words tore at her throat. "My mother is afraid of him. Afraid that he is alive, and that he'll come back someday to get his revenge…"

Kindaichi's eyes narrowed in disbelief. She seemed to feel she had said too much. The blood drained from her face, but she did not turn away or avert her eyes. She stared straight at him, as if defying his unbelieving gaze. The shadowy flames wrapping around her billowed higher.

Since the question had touched on marital issues, Kindaichi would not ask any more unless Mineko offered more on her own. Naturally, she hesitated to do so.

Kindaichi decided to change the subject. "I understand that your father left no note behind. So, your mother must have—"

"No, actually, there was a note," Mineko interrupted him.

Kindaichi was taken aback. "I'm sure that the newspapers all said there was no note!"

"It showed up much later. At the time, the fuss around my father's disappearance had settled, so when I found it, I kept it within the family. We didn't make it public out of worry it would set off more rumours and gossip."

Mineko took an envelope out of her handbag and handed it to Kindaichi. He saw that the front read "To Mineko", and the back "Hidesuke Tsubaki". The characters were written in a clean, delicate hand. It was, of course, already open.

"Where was it hidden?"

"It was in the pages of one of my books. I had no idea about it. Last spring, I rearranged my shelves and moved unneeded books or ones that I'd already read into storage. Then, in summer, I went to air them out and check for insects, and it fell out."

"May I read it?"

"Of course."

The letter said:

Dear Mineko,

Please, do not hold this act against me. I can bear no more humiliation and disgrace. If this story comes to light, the good name of the Tsubaki family will be cast into the mud. Oh, the devil will indeed come and play his flute. I cannot bear to live to see that day come.

My Mineko, forgive me.

There was no signature.

"I suppose there is no doubt that this is your father's handwriting?"

"None."

"But what does he mean by this 'humiliation and disgrace' he says can't bear? If he was talking about the loss of his title, then I can't see how that that would reflect on his house, since it affects the entire class of peers."

"No, that isn't it…" Her tone was biting. "Father was indeed concerned about such things, but that's not what he meant."

"Then, what…?"

"Father… my father…" Sweat began to bead unpleasantly on Mineko's forehead. Her breath grew heavy and fierce, as if she were possessed. "In spring, the police came and questioned my father as a suspect in the Tengindo murders."

Kindaichi once more gripped the edge of the table in shock. It was like someone had hit him with a hammer. He gasped and cleared his throat, struggling to find something to say.

However, before he could, Mineko spoke on in a sharp, haunted tone.

"In truth, the photo composite that they kept revising and publishing in the newspapers looked exactly like my father. It was… unfortunate. However… That is not what drew the police's attention to him. Someone sent them a letter tipping

them off. I do not know who it was. But whoever it was, it is without a doubt someone in our household. Someone living at the estate, and within the Tsubaki, Shingu or Tamamushi families, I'm certain."

In that instant, Mineko's face appeared to Kindaichi like that of a terrible witch, and the dark shadow that lay across her seemed to burst into raging black flames.

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