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— FALL 2022 —



What Will You Read Next?

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Excerpt from *Jackal: A Novel*
© 2022 by Erin E. Adams

Excerpt from *Ghost Eaters: A Novel*
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Excerpt from *Such Sharp Teeth*
© 2022 by Rachel Harrison

Excerpt from *House of Hunger*
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FALL 2022
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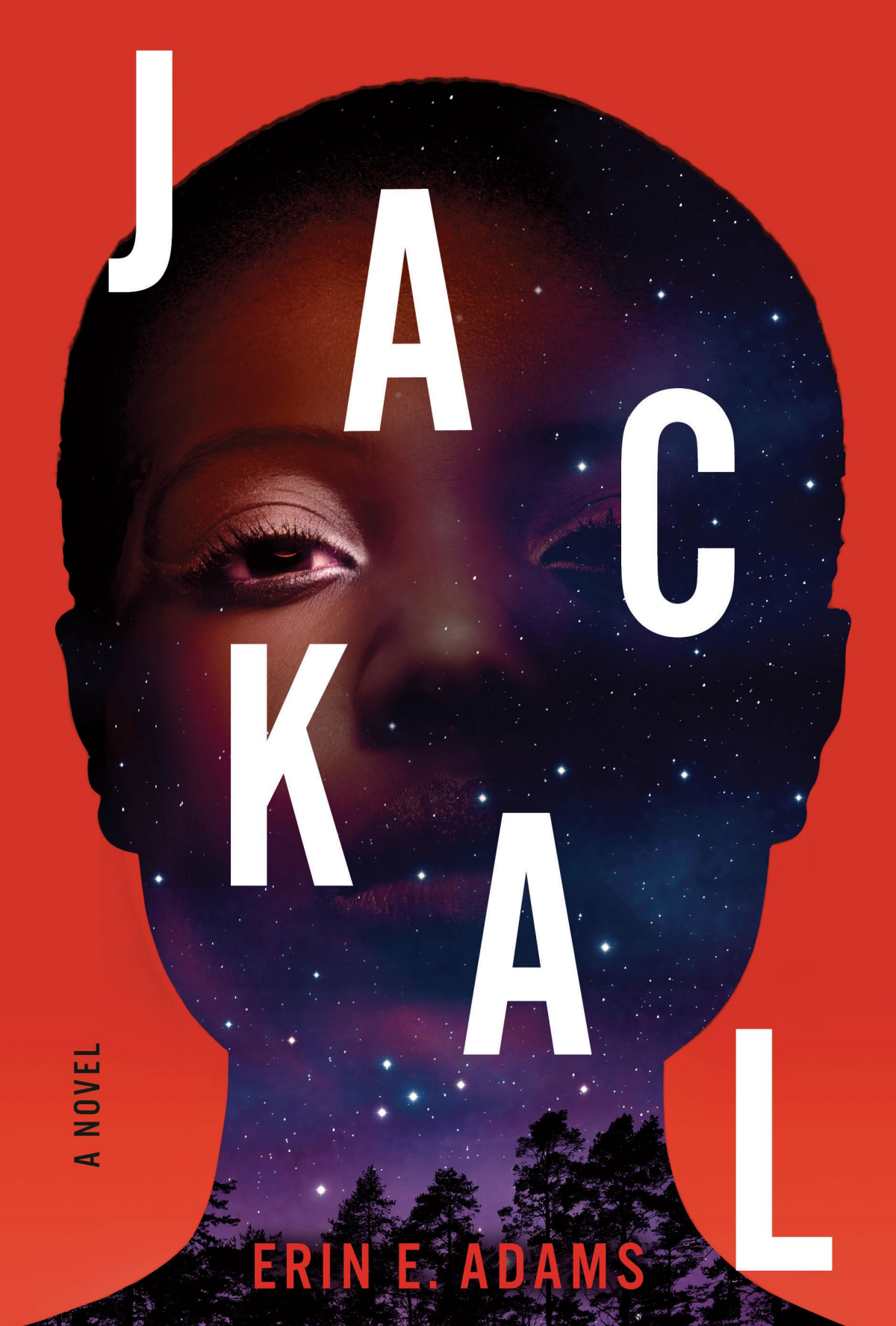
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A NOVEL

ERIN E. ADAMS



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ALICE

June 1985

Tanisha Walker loved the stars. She didn't memorize the paths of the cosmos or their patterns. She just loved the look of them. The fact that she could see them so clearly was the only part she liked about moving to a town as small as Johnstown. Her husband told her their daughter would be safe. After all, the only place safer than the suburbs was the middle of nowhere. They'd moved because he'd gotten a job at the steel mill. With the finite resource running low, he was brought in to help put the place to rest. A full transition would take years, but the town knew men like him coming meant the beginning of the end. The industry had dried up.

Upon arriving, Tanisha didn't trust the place. If pressed, she couldn't say why. The best answer she could give was: It felt too safe. Tanisha had grown up in the city and was numb to loud noises and erratic personalities; her calm demeanor belied her understanding that danger always lurked right around the corner. But they had moved to a town without corners. Danger didn't need a place to hide, it preferred to fester. First it would smile and bring you German chocolate cake. Then it would wait out in the open on your front porch until it felt good and ready.

Tanisha's daughter, Alice, was named for the writer of a book Tanisha had read in high school. The book was banned. Tanisha read it anyway because she liked the cover. Alice was Tanisha's only child.

Born a full two months early, at thirty-two weeks, she was three pounds, four ounces, and fit in the palm of her father's hand.

I think Alice came early because she couldn't wait to see the world.

However, her premature arrival meant they'd kept her in the hospital for those two months while her lungs grew to their full capacity. There the nurses talked to her on their lunch breaks, the residents checked on her between rotations, and every night at 11:00, her parents came to bathe her and rock her to sleep. They were both dead tired but elated to spend time with their daughter.

From the beginning, Alice was loved.

She was always loved.

She will always be loved.

Small-town living agreed with Alice. She loved to explore the forest and play "Let's Get Lost." Her favorite meal was sauerkraut and sausage. She had no tolerance for anything remotely spicy. And she had never met a potato she didn't like. Like her mother, she loved the night sky. But unlike her mother, she was not dazzled by the stars. She loved how the darkness between them went on forever. If she stared long enough, she felt like she could fall up into the vast blackness above.

Alice wasn't a picky child, but she did have a favorite jacket. No matter the weather, she'd wear it. Tanisha hated it. Unable to say no to his daughter, her husband got it for Alice anyway. It had unfinished denim edges and its fluffy white shearling reminded Tanisha of the rich white girls who had stuck gum in her hair on her train rides to school in the city. Even so, Tanisha would have lived as that jacket, wrapped around her daughter, for the rest of her life.

When she turned ten, Alice finally felt the differences between herself and her peers. Ever the optimist, Tanisha let her daughter live in blissful ignorance for as long as she could. Of course Alice was aware of the color of her skin, but she hadn't yet mastered what it meant. At first, the differences were slight and revolved around her

hair. To get it done, she went to a lady's house, not a salon. She got braids *before* she went on vacation. And in swim class, she had to wrap her hair in a tight swim cap or else her mother would "kill" her. She forgot the cap once and cried. She told her instructor about her mother's stance on getting her hair wet, and her mom had to have a meeting with a lady from the state that day. Alice wasn't allowed to say "Mom would kill me" ever again, unless she really, really meant it. Alice was beginning to understand how she was different. She just didn't have all the words yet.

Early summer is fickle. On Friday, June 21, 1985, the temperature dipped just enough to be chilly. Still, Alice begged to go exploring outside with her friends, a request Tanisha almost always denied if there wasn't an adult. Mostly because of the stories about the woods. Always some nonsense about shadows. Tanisha hadn't lived in Johnstown long enough to have mastered the adage "if you think you saw something . . . no, you didn't," but she was wise enough to glean the truth behind the lore. Shadows hid danger. Danger for Black girls was different. It didn't obey the boundaries of stories. For them, it was always real.

But so much time in this small town had made Tanisha easy. She didn't always lock her doors anymore. She had stopped interlacing her keys between her fingers when she walked alone at night. After a few years, her guard had finally come down. For the first time, she agreed and offered Alice her favorite jacket.

"Mom," Alice whined, "I don't need it. It's fine."

"If you get sick, you'll be upset," Tanisha warned. "And don't forget to wear your bandana if you happen to 'find' yourself in the woods." Tanisha looked down at her daughter knowingly. "I put it in the pocket. Please, Munchkin."

Alice looked at the jacket and the bandana and for the first time she understood that these two totems were more than Day-Glo and denim, they were her mother's care. Alice took the jacket and did her best to conceal her smile as she ran out the front door and off to play.

With her jacket around her waist, Alice and her friends streaked past houses and haphazard gardens until they reached the last house on the block before the woods began. The dirt driveway extended past the garage and dissolved into an array of Eastern hemlock trees. At the end of the driveway, there was a boy she'd never seen before.

One of Alice's friends whispered, "He said he found a deer skull last night! There're still brains inside."

Another rolled their eyes to the back of their head and let out a zombie groan, "Braaaaainnns . . ."

Without a second thought, all her friends took off toward the tree line. Alice faltered. This new boy looked odd. Too young to be out there alone or very small for his age. He looked angry. For the first time, she felt a hint of her mother's worry. She fished around in her jacket for the bandana. In the afternoon sun, its orange hue made her eyes ache. She would look like a total loser and she knew it. Alice shoved it back into her pocket and then remembered the swimming cap incident. She had never seen her mother cry until that lady from the state talked to her. Alice didn't like seeing her mother cry. Her mother asked her to wear the bandana like a necklace, but Alice had a better idea. She flipped the stiff fabric up and wrapped it around her head, like a crown.

"Alice," someone called. The voice was soft, she couldn't be sure who it was, but it was coming from the trees. She took a step toward the woods. A chill passed through her. Her mom was right. It wasn't as warm as she thought. Freshly crowned, Alice put on her favorite jacket, turned up its fluffy collar, and ran into the woods after her friends.

The streetlights came on.

Night fell.

Her friends made their way home.

Alice didn't.

Before Tanisha could call them, the police knocked on her door. They sent a female officer because the department thought this

needed a woman's touch. In reality, none of the men on the force was up for the task. When Tanisha answered, the officer spoke with a heavy sense of duty.

"Ma'am, do you recognize this?" she asked. The officer held up a plastic bag.

Tanisha shook her head. "No. Wait." She leaned in to get a closer look. The officer tried to pull the bag back, but it was too late. Tanisha could smell it. The plastic couldn't contain the sharp metallic tang of blood. The evidence bag slid over the fabric—whatever it was, was soaked. The bag moved in the officer's hand and a shearling collar shifted into view. Tanisha reached out and grabbed it to get a closer look. The cold slickness of the bag did not match the warmth that the liquid inside once contained. While the officer stepped back, she could not stop the realization building in Tanisha. Though the denim jacket was stained with blood and mud, the collar shone through.

Tanisha's life stopped. Time continued, but she was forever divided: There would always be before this moment and after it. With each passing second, the pain of the present robbed the past of its luster. Tanisha, like any mother would, tried to do the impossible. She saw time marching forward, and she wanted to turn it back. But like the heavy bag in her hands, time slid out of her grip. The weight of the jacket brought her to her knees.

Tanisha had wanted Alice to be seen so she wouldn't become a hunter's prey. She'd had that title long before she reached my eyes.

You can't stop a mother from seeing the good in her child, even in their most abject state. After hours of questions and paperwork. After her husband broke down and put himself back together. After they walked down the long hallway to the morgue. When they showed her Alice, all Tanisha saw was her daughter's serene face. She didn't look at the hole in her chest. She didn't ask about the innocence taken. She didn't seek out Alice's missing organ, her heart. Instead, Tanisha chose to see what little serenity Alice had left.

Walker Tragedy Ruled an Accident

March 13, 1986

JOHNSTOWN, PA—Alice Walker’s tragic death has been ruled accidental after months of investigation. The medical examiner’s office released this statement: “After a thorough investigation, we have concluded that Walker got lost and succumbed to the elements. Injuries previously considered to be foul play have been deemed animal activity. We take this time to remind parents to ensure their children’s safety when hiking and playing in the woods. Children should be under adult supervision at all times. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Walker family tonight. We hope this answer offers them some solace.” Walker’s parents could not be reached for comment.

ONE

June 17, 2017

Welcome to Johnstown: Home of the World's Steepest Vehicular Inclined Plane.

All of that, every single word, is emblazoned on a massive billboard visible about a mile outside of town. Because of the angle of the train's approach, the Inclined Plane is the first and only landmark I see. It means I've reached my final destination. The journey here has been rife with spotty cell service, dotted with tiny towns and abandoned industries consumed by thick forests. Yes. After fourteen years away, I, Liz Rocher, am returning to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The rust belt.

Home.

I take another gulp of my train wine. The cheap varietal burns my palate. *Varietal. Palate. Who do you think you are?* There it is. Judgment. One of the many things I ran from when I left.

The train slows. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the window. With my thick natural hair and dark skin, my Appalachian origins are unexpected. I buzzed all my hair off a little over three months ago. It's finally settled into its new length. Returning home with no hair means no protection. That's why this trek required a trip to Harlem to get a decent wig. Her name is Valerie. On the box, she looked like a pop star. On me, she looks like a PTA mom. Between the wig and my rumpled business casual, I look like a mockery of what I've become: a "city girl."

You'll never be rid of that backwoods, small-town stink. There it is again. My therapist, a tall white woman who gives me names for my feelings, would call that voice my anxiety. The tightness in my chest is my impostor syndrome. The occasional inability to catch my breath is a perfectionist tendency. Neat little notes in her records. My next sip of wine becomes a full gulp, finishing off the split.

"This stop is Johnstown, Pennsylvania."

I gather my things. My phone lights up with a notification from the office. Sales never sleeps. I've taken the weekend off, but I have work to do. I always have work to do. If I don't, I ask for more. The first time I did, my then-boss laughed and asked, "Trouble at home?" Implying that I didn't have ambition, I had misplaced avoidance. I smiled back at him with all my teeth. In two years, I had his job and an engagement ring on my finger. I don't have the ring anymore, but the work is a constant. Sometimes I wonder how he knew. I try to open the document but it refuses to load. A single bar of service flickers in and out. *Great.* I cling to my technology, like the rind of this place won't get on me if I'm shiny enough.

Moving into the aisle, I have to peel my dress pants off the backs of my thighs. I chose slacks over sweats because I feel powerful in a suit. In control. Every sweaty wrinkle threatens to break that illusion.

The train comes to a stop. What should have been an eight-hour journey became ten because of delays, and my body is sore and stiff. I turn my head to stretch my neck. A ligament pulls tight all the way down the center of my back, pinching right behind my heart. My eyes land on a red sign at the top of the open train door.

Exit.

My suitcase is above my head. One good pull and I can roll off this train. Or I could stay? Ride on to Pittsburgh. Take a flight back to New York.

My phone rings.

Melissa Parker.

How does she always know exactly when to call? I answer it.

“You’re here!” she says.

I glance across the car, half expecting her to pop out from one of the empty seats. “How do you— I’ve been delayed for— Are you tracking my trip?”

“*Someone* won’t stop asking when you’re going to get here.” Mel is more than enough reason to come home. Her daughter, my goddaughter, Caroline, is another.

I lift my bag into the aisle, but I don’t leave the train just yet. A few passengers slide by me.

“Last call for Johnstown!”

I look back at my seat. *Seats*. Plural. I paid for both of them back in January when Mel called me and said, “I’m getting married.” No hello. No how are you. No delighted scream. No girlish cheering. Mel started the call with a statement. She ended it with a date. That’s how I knew she was serious. I bought tickets. The details would come later. She’d made a New Year’s resolution to live in the “present.” After more than ten years of living with her boyfriend, Garrett Washington, Melissa Parker was going to take his last name. Then, I had been all too eager to attend because I was finally who I imagined myself to be: Successful. Great job. Great fiancé. I’d become a New Yorker who had plans to move to Connecticut in three years.

“How does it feel to be home?” Mel asks.

“My home is dead.” The phone is warm on my ear by the time this unprompted observation spills out of me.

“Liz,” she replies. “Stop being so damn dramatic. It’s one weekend.”

“Fine.”

Let it be known, I buried this place. When I look at a map of the United States, my eyes drift over all 309 miles of a state that isn’t quite the heartland or the coast. As I stand in this Appalachian intercostal of America, I find myself in a liminal expanse. A cruel riddle.

“Can I get a weekend for my wedding?”

I see the conductor waving at me. This is it. *Last chance, Liz.*

I knew Melissa Parker was a good person when she shielded me

from spitballs in the cafeteria in middle school. I'd stumbled into some quintessential '90s bullying. My sin? Being the only Black kid who wasn't "Black." One of three in my entire school, I was the one who didn't fit in. I didn't sound like them or listen to rap or have any rhythm. To my white classmates, these were compulsory to the definition, leaving me at the mercy of this shameful smattering of stereotypes. Cue the spitballs. The other Black kids were no help. I don't blame them; they were swimming for their own social lives and I was tainted water. Branded an Oreo, through and through. Whiteness influenced my speech, mannerisms, and pop-culture preferences. Mel and I hadn't said more than a few words to each other before then, but when she saw my matching lunch of a soft pretzel and fries, she knew we were meant to be. That's what she says. We both know it was because she herself was a white girl who didn't fit in. She wasn't rich, her blond wasn't from a box, and she wasn't interested in power over kindness.

"You get exactly forty-eight hours," I say before yelling to the conductor, "Wait!" A quick hoist of my bag, a sprint down the aisle, and I'm off the train. It lets out directly onto the tracks. "My God, this place is remote," I say to Mel.

"That's just the station."

The train pulls away. The landscape mounts. The flat coast is a distant memory now. Eastern hemlock trees crowd in, bringing darkness with their density despite the dwindling daylight. I'm in the wild. *Breathe*. I name the things around me:

Phone.

Gravel.

Trees.

"Garrett just sent me a picture of the view at the venue. It's stunning," Mel says. I can hear the tinny sound of her mixing something in her kitchen. Baking. Probably her cake. Mel got the *idea* to get married in January. She only seriously started *planning* two months ago. This ceremony is the definition of haphazard, last-minute, and thrown together with a hope and a prayer.

“Glad you finally decided on a place the day before the ceremony,” I tease. “Where is it?”

“We’re using Nick’s place?” The upward inflection is there to make sure I’m okay. I’m not the biggest fan of her brother, Nick.

“Like, his house?”

“His land,” she clarifies. “It’s . . . picturesque?”

Saliva pushes past the wine on my tongue. I don’t reply. I’m not gonna say it until she does.

“It’s . . . the woods. We’re in the woods, okay?” This double insistence tells me all I need to know. “Elizabeth Rocher. Please tell me you’re gonna be cool.”

“Wh—what do you mean?” I almost fool myself with the validity of that question.

“I don’t know—we were going to grab the ballroom at the Holiday Inn, but they’re closed for the weekend because a pipe burst. We were gonna do it in the yard, but Nick offered. It’s beautiful, Liz. Just beautiful—”

“I understand, but I—”

“Please don’t tell me you’re gonna run?” Her voice gets tight with emotion.

I choke back my laugh. *Too late.*

“I didn’t mean that,” Mel backtracks.

“Yes, you did.” Mel is the only reason I survived Johnstown. I know what this wedding means to her. “You are so lucky—” I start.

“Thank you!”

“So lucky,” I repeat as I walk toward the station.

Because everything here is on a hill, the station itself is a ways from the tracks, down two flights of suspiciously steep steps. I stop at the top.

Before I confess something to Mel that she already knows, I look over my shoulder, checking that I’m alone. “It’s, umm . . . it’s just me. Okay?”

“I know.” Mel brightens her voice, instantly adjusting to the pain in mine. “I don’t want that asshole here. I want you.” After a beat she adds,

“I need you here. Believe me.” As much as she can read me, I can read her. Something’s wrong.

“What’s up—”

Snap!

A loud sound cuts through the air. It’s something distinctly natural, like the breaking of a massive branch or a tree. I whirl around, nearly dropping my phone.

“Liz, you still there?”

I scan the train tracks. In the corridor between mountains, I see forest on either side. The sound doesn’t return. It must have been a branch on the tracks. Or my imagination. It wouldn’t be the first time my mind has birthed something out of fear. Or boredom.

“Yeah. I’m—I’m here, Mel.”

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I hang up. We don’t need to say hello and we’ve never said goodbye. This conversation is an extension of the one started in middle school when we’d tie up the internet connection talking about boys and the depth of our feelings. No matter what, we can pick back up without ever missing a beat.

I descend the steps to the station. There is a kiosk at one end and bathrooms at the other. Straight ahead of me is a set of doors leading to the street. A few passengers go through them to meet their rides. The conductor climbs the stairs behind me and locks the exit to the tracks. Now there’s only one way out. A bottleneck.

Sweat pools in the kitchen of my hair. I push my nails under the back of my wig and dig through my short, thick curls. My fingers find the hollow where my skull joins my spine. I massage it. The bruise that was once there is gone, but the tightness and tenderness remain. Instead of giving me any release, my muscles tense and wetness trickles down the back of my neck. I give my scalp one last good scratch and fix my wig.

I sit on the metal bench near the door of the station and call a cab. If I could stand being in an enclosed space with my mother for more

than five minutes, I would have had her pick me up. Another reason I've spent so many years away. I need protection from every aspect of "home."

I'm here for Mel's wedding and to answer a question:

If I can't trust myself, then who?

One thing any breakup does is make you doubt every part of yourself. A bad breakup? A nasty one? The first few weeks I mismatched my shoes. The second month I skipped meals because I couldn't tell when I was hungry. After almost fumbling a major account, I had to do something. I was planning to cancel on Mel. But Mel, this wedding, and this town are the only certainties I have left in my life. The last person I trusted was Mel. The last right choice I made, beyond any doubt, was leaving this town. I'm here to confirm that. This weekend is going to be uncomfortable. Awkward. Painful. And it should be. I can't wait. Because once I remember how to trust myself, I will start to mend.

Waiting for the car, using the pad of my thumb, I search the underside of my left wrist. There, I find a thick, shiny melanin relic of my childhood trauma in the woods. The scar blanches under the pressure of my fingers. It was roughly made and badly healed. I search it for the uncomfortable spot where the nerves go awry. Depending on the day, it's either too sensitive or strikingly numb. I prefer numb.

I look out. On the wall across from me is a massive topographic map of Johnstown. Another bottleneck. Built in the bottom of a valley, layers of mountains jut out at the edges and everything spirals open from the Conemaugh River at its center. When I first saw this map in fourth grade, I said, *Whose idea was it to build a town in a ditch?* I can already hear my therapist wanting me to unpack that statement. What has this town ever done to me?

It's a wonder it didn't flood immediately. It did eventually. Three times. When we visited the Flood Museum in elementary school—because it was a disaster, of course there's a museum—I don't remember who, but someone (not me) asked: *Where are all the Black people?* My teacher, Mrs. Kohler, replied, *Look at the pictures, sweetie. They weren't here yet.* Like every small-town citizen in America, my teacher believed

Black people were an alien anomaly in white suburban perfection. She never questioned where the photographer focused their lens or the history of this town. I should have. I didn't stay long enough to start.

The sun dips in the sky, sending the first traces of orange rays through the station window. For a sunset, it's bright and rich. I can't help but trail my fingers in the amber of it. If there's one thing you don't get in the city, it's this: unblemished nature. I push the door to the street open and step outside.

The light but distinct smell of stagnant water hits my nose. Water and something else. Something rotten. The scent isn't coming from the river. It's seeping off the buildings and into the air. No matter how long ago the floodwaters receded, in some places, the smell of river water and decay never left.

This station must be older than I thought. I turn back and look up at the walls. There, at least fourteen feet above my head, sits a plain brass bar. Some buildings have the muddy lines, others have these ominous indicators. Either way, they mark where the waters reached in 1889, 1936, and 1977. The 1889 tragedy is the only one known by name. It was so devastating people here simply call it "the flood." Water got up to sixty feet in some places, more than four times the height of the bar above me. Thinking of water that deep reminds me I don't know how to swim. Kind of, but not really. I know how to not-drown, does that count?

I don't need my grade school history unit to know that this town was once a true industrial center. I can tell by the brick buildings. They're sturdy even in their decay. The business of removing things from the earth didn't work out in the long run. Still, this town persisted. New, flimsy-looking developments are piecemealed between abandoned properties. While the new buildings are bright white with modernity, the weight of this place won't be lost so easily. Just like the people here, it will take much more to wash it away.

Where the town stops, the mountains and the woods begin. Wild, enveloping, and vast, the forest is thick enough to inspire campfire stories of monsters and mayhem. I'd forgotten how much wild there is.

Trees surround the town and carry on into the distance as far as I can see. Looking out, my heart beats uncomfortably in my chest.

Something makes the small of my back prickle. Attention. Someone's watching me. I turn around and see that the station is empty. I look over to the parking lot. Immediately, I find a pair of eyes burrowing into me. I push back with my stare. People in this town smile and nod and say hello. I don't. I meet the gaze with an unspoken challenge. *What the fuck are you looking at?* That usually works. Not this time.

The eyes staring at me belong to a woman. Nondescript in her Blackness and her clothing. Jeans. Short salt-and-pepper hair. A worn gray T-shirt. No jacket. No bags. She's in the middle of the parking lot, perched on the base of a streetlamp, with seemingly no destination in mind. She isn't even turned toward the town. Her body faces the trees, but she's looking at me. Strangely comfortable, like I've had the audacity to wander into her living room. Her eyes are bright and hollow at the same time. Like a drowning person, her stare can't help but pull me in. This woman needs something and I am *not* about to give it to her. As I turn away, I see her stand and start making a beeline toward me.

"Ma'am?" Her voice is loud and harsh. She picks up her pace and holds a flyer out in front of her. What was once white and crisp is now folded and yellowed. Someone clearly threw this one away and she fished it out of the trash.

I turn away. "No, thank you."

"Just a minute of your time. I need your help—" She launches into some pitch. I try to tune her out, but her eyes draw me in. I don't listen to her words, but she has my focus now. I'm judging her before I realize it. I make a catalogue of her appearance: Her clothes are dirty, she is unkempt, there's dirt under her uneven nails, her shoes are worn. It felt like I walked into her living room, because I did. She lives outside this station. The shame that wells up in me is unavoidable. I know I'm supposed to think kindly about homelessness. I know what I should say and what I should do. Smile. Listen. But all I want to do is scream at this woman to get away from me. It's not her fault. It's this place. This is

what it can do to a person. A city can do the same, but in a city I won't be mistaken for this woman. I've been mistaken for nannies, retail employees, any Black woman other than myself. Here, the make of my bag, the quality of my clothes, the timbre of my voice, the style of my hair, none of that matters. My skin speaks first, and it is too close to this woman's for comfort.

"No, thank you," I say in a huff to end our one-sided conversation.

She cuts her eyes at me. "Well, aren't you bitter?"

Looks like I'm not the only one judging. "Excuse me?"

"Nothing good comes from being hateful and hollow."

"I don't—I'm not . . ." I start, but stop myself. Do I hate this woman? I don't want to, but I can't deny the feeling.

She steps closer to me, and I stay still. "But if you're angry?" She raises an eyebrow. "That's useful." She offers the flyer again.

I frown back at her. "I'm not angry." The paper flutters between us. It's something homemade and sad. I grab it.

A car horn honks. It's my cab. *Thank God.*

"Coming!" I wave. I fold the flyer in my hand and scan for a trash can. Of course, there aren't any. I shove it into the narrow back pocket of my pants. My suitcase rumbles over the pavement as I race toward the car. Before I get in, I glance back at the woman and see her hunched figure retreating across the parking lot. Like before, her focus is on the trees, not the town.

I get in the car. The driver loads my bag in the back. He pulls away and we head up into the hills. My hands fidget, looking for a task. I check my phone. No service. No access to work. No access to me. I look out my window and breathe and name:

Purse.

Phone.

Wrist.

Tree.

Tree.

Tree.

“A Gothic-punk graveyard tale about what haunts history and what haunts the human soul. An addicting read that draws you into its descent from the first page.”

—**CHUCK WENDIG**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Book of Accidents*

ghost a novel eaters

clay
mcleod
chapman



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PROLOGUE

a ghost story

three years ago

Tripping our asses off in the cemetery is Silas's idea. We dose back at his dorm to give the acid a head start. By the time we abandon campus and hop the wrought-iron fence surrounding Hollywood Cemetery, the four of us are all well on our way to peak fry.

"What're we doing what're we doing," Amara keeps repeating under her breath, a giddy litany. "What're we doing what're we—"

"Remember your partners," Silas whispers as he scales the fence first. He just high-jumps those spikes like a grave-robbing Olympian. Now *that's* some gold-medal trespassing.

Poor Tobias can't seem to find a foothold on the fence. His tattered Vans keep slipping, reminding me of that puny kid on the playground who doesn't have the upper body strength to pull himself up the monkey bars on his own. He's too embarrassed to ask for help, shooing Silas's hand away whenever he offers it. "I got it, I got it," he keeps muttering under his breath.

Amara and I are the only ones left on the street, so we plant our hands on Tobias's scrawny ass and heave-ho him over. I can literally

feel the bone in his butt cheek as we push. From where I'm standing, it looks like he takes flight for a moment, just a beanpole of a bat flapping his wings through the bruised purple sky.

Amara is next. She starts to shriek, practically impaling herself on one of the rusted spears. We all shush her—try to, at least, in between laughing our asses off. She flips over the fence and falls flat on her face. It's far too dark for me to see her land—Silas won't let us use the flashlights on our phones—so there's a hot second where I worry if Amara's cracked her skull open on a tombstone or something. But she's cackling like an absolute candy-flipping witch, rolling around in the grass, so we know she's still breathing.

“Come on, Erin.” Silas beckons through the bars. He's gripping them with both hands, leaning his face through the gap. He's a convict and I've come to break him out. “Your turn.”

I can't help myself. His face is right there. Lips *right there*. I lean in and kiss him through the fence. Flecks of rust dig into my cheeks, smearing my makeup. Here comes the lockjaw.

“Jesus, guys,” Amara whispers-but-not-really-whispers. “Get a tomb already.”

Suddenly I'm second-guessing myself: *I can't climb over this*. What if I lose my footing and fall on one of those spikes?

“Easy does it,” Silas says. “I got you.”

Silas and Tobias each grab a foot and hoist me up while I pull on the top rail. Imagine a cheerleader pyramid, where these two strapping young lads lift me over their heads and I perform the most absolutely fucking perfect hip-over-head airborne tumble you've ever seen, both feet landing directly on a headstone, a total *Bring It On* crowd-goes-wild dismount.

You'd be wrong. I land on my ass. Hard.

Silas hovers just above me. “You okay?”

“I think I broke my hip.”

“You'll live,” Silas says. “Take my hand.”

Silas says hop on one foot.

Silas says pat your head.

Touch your nose.

. . . Silas didn't say.

The four of us take in the meandering rows of tombstones tilting like loose teeth. The cemetery's called Hollywood because a few Richmond natives became celebrities way back whenever, returning home only after they kicked the bucket to get buried in their native soil. Everyone returns to Richmond someday. Mostly this place is full of dead Confederates, but there are a few forgotten starlets in the ground. Tourists take photos next to their gaudy graves—but tonight, hours after the cemetery gates close and the only occupants are six feet under, all 135 acres of this place belong to us.

“Follow me,” Silas says. “Watch your step.”

Tobias trips on cue. Tripping while tripping, *hardy har*. He's practically blind on the best of days, even with his wire-rimmed specs. Swap out the daylight for some liquid sunshine and add a few granite stumbling blocks and it's no wonder he can't stay on his feet.

“Where are we going?” I have to ask.

“You'll see.”

Silas never tells us what he's got hidden up his sleeve. That would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it? He has this uncanny ability to rally the troops, enlist the rest of us to do just about whatever he wants—and what he wants most out of life is to *gogogogo*. His lust for life is addictive and thrilling and downright exhausting all at once. Who cares if we have to wake up tomorrow morning for class? Haven't we realized academia is merely for sheep? Silas says we're better than all the other undergrad lemmings, and who are we to argue? Sounds good to me. He can somehow convince us to forget our inhibitions, to lose ourselves in the white heat of the moment. To hop trains in the dead of night. To embark on random road trips with no destination. To take jaunts through haunted plantations that last until the sun rises over the abandoned tobacco fields.

This city is ours, he always says. The Four Musketeers. All for one

and one for Silas . . .

We found each other through our mutual admiration for post-modern authors during our freshman fiction writing workshop. Paul Auster cosplay, basically. Silas wants to be David Foster Wallace, bandana and all. Tobias called dibs on DeLillo. Amara has an unhealthy obsession with Pynchon, so she claimed him. Silas said I had a Lethem streak in me, but I've never read him. *L'eggo my Eggers*, I said, hoping to sound pithy. *I'm ready to be the world's first Erin Hill*. The literary world was our oyster and Silas made me feel like I was its black pearl.

"Something bit me." Amara groans as she smacks her palm against her bare shoulder. Figures she didn't dress appropriately for grave robbing. "How much further?"

"Almost there."

"Can you just tell us where we're going, Silas? I'm getting eaten alive out here.

"Patience," Silas says. "Good things come to those who wait . . ."

A cherub perched on a pillar twists its neck toward me just as I pass it. I stop to make sure, staring at the chubby naked baby with brittle wings. Its washed-out eyes blink back.

Oh, good, I'm not just imagining it. Glad I cleared that up.

Its chiseled features have been sanded down, all the decades of rain and cold weather erasing its face to a gray plane. But it still has its eyelids, opening and closing over two slopes of stone, a pair of rotten eggs stuffed in its sockets. The headstone is too small for an adult.

Oooh, shit . . . A baby is buried here. Did I just say that out loud? I can't tell for sure. I run my hand across the tomb, tracing every letter with my fingertips like I'm reading braille:

LONNIE NADLER. GOD'S LENT CHILD.

"Erin?" Silas takes hold of my arm, bringing me back. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

“Stay with me,” he says, taking my hand and leading me through the undulating row of graves—and in my head, I think it’s in my head, I say *stay with me, stay with me, stay*.

The headstones won’t keep still. The marble flexes. Tombstones turn my way as I walk by. They may as well be dancing toadstools, their inscribed umbrella caps bobbing along—

BELOVED WIFE. IN LOVING MEMORY. GONE TOO SOON. ABSENT IN BODY, PRESENT IN SPIRIT.

I just have to keep cool. Breathe in deep. Don’t freak.

“What’re we doing,” Amara keeps reciting. “What’re we doing what’re we doing . . .”

We’re pushing our personal boundaries, I imagine Silas might say. *We’re living life to its fullest. We’re turning this city into our own personal playground and howling at the moon*. But he keeps quiet, silently guiding us through the bobbing headstones.

Tobias won’t talk. Won’t peek out from his shell. The acid isn’t helping, I can tell. I don’t want to know what personal horror movie is projecting across the inside of his skull right now.

But I don’t care. My world is me and Silas. My hand in his. He’s leading me along, always my guide. I don’t know if my feet are touching the ground anymore. I could be a balloon, for all I know. My arm is a string and Silas is running through the cemetery while I whip in the wind.

“Here we are,” he says, stopping before a mausoleum that seems to be some bizarro cross section of Masonic and Egyptian architecture. The concrete is covered in kudzu—nope, scratch that. It’s spray paint. I have to squint to make out what’s scrawled across the vault. Even then, the warped words don’t want to keep still long enough for me to read them. All I can make out is—

RISE, REVENANT OF RICHMOND, RISE!

The gate to the tomb should be locked—shouldn’t it?—but Silas pries it open no problem, hinges giving in with a rusted wail that echoes throughout the rest of the cemetery.

“No fucking way,” Amara says. “I’m not going in there. There are spiders!”

“Then wait outside,” Silas says. “You’re on lookout.”

The mausoleum swallows Silas right up. Tobias ducks his head in next, as if he’s Silas’s lost shadow, careful not to clock his noggin against the top of the doorway.

Wait for me, I imagine Silas’s shadow saying, *wait for meeeee!*

Amara looks at me. At this point in our friendship, the two of us have perfected our psychic abilities, communicating with one another strictly through brain waves.

Are you really going to do this? she asks with her eyes, her voice coming in loud and clear in my head.

I, uh . . . guess so? We’ve come this far, you know?

The fuck, Erin? She’s not pleased, clearly. *For real?*

Come with me!

No, no way.

Fine. Party pooper. I duck into the mausoleum and immediately feel the drop in temperature. The chill is thick. It seeps through my skin, reaching deep, all the way to the bone.

I have a quick minute to myself while Silas and Tobias plot together and Amara confronts the massive expanse of slumbering corpses just beneath her feet outside.

I do what I always do in moments like these: I pull out my Sharpie from my pocket and find a free spot on the wall. The inhabitant of this mausoleum will forgive me one small indiscretion, considering the countless others who have already thrown up their own graffiti. Couples have scribbled their names: PAUL + HANNA 4-EVA. A few rudimentary pentagrams. Loopy-lettered tags: ZOMBI. LONG LIVE VIDEO FAN. GHOSTBUSTAZ.

My contribution is relatively simple in comparison:

ERIN IS HERE

Present tense. Not past. I'm leaving a little part of myself behind.

I'll always be here.

"Jesus, it's freeeezing," Amara squeals behind me. She can never be alone for long. She knows this, I know this. Silas *definitely* knows this. She can't stand being by herself. She slides up next to me and threads her arm through mine, shivering. "Miss me?"

"Always," I say. The two of us hunch together in our ringside seats to Silas's séance.

"Everybody sit in a circle," he says.

He's brought candles. Of course he has. His backpack is like a one-stop shop for all your supernatural needs. He pulls out the appropriate paraphernalia and gets to illuminating.

"I'm not sitting on somebody's grave," Amara snipes—and for once I don't disagree with her. I can hear the chitinous limbs of insects flexing all around us. Some mile-long centipede is winding up my leg and it won't stop, no matter how many times I try swatting at it. *I'm coming for your cooooch*, the centipede utters as it rounds the bend. *Coochie-coochie-coooo!*

"Come on," Silas says, snapping me out of it. "Mr. Pool won't mind."

"Who's that?" I ask.

"Ever hear of W.W. Pool? Some call him the Richmond vampire, but that's just bullshit. He's really a revenant."

Amara's snort reverberates through the tight confines of the crypt.

"Sorry," she says. "What's a . . . a reve-whatever . . ."

"Revenant. Someone trapped between the living and dead."

"Poor him," I say, my focus drifting to the liquid-like shadows cast by the candles. I don't feel any wind but they certainly seem to be flickering from some external force, rippling outward.

"Give me a hand," Silas says to Tobias while running his fingers along the crypt's marble shutter.

Tobias hops to it without protest. "Yeah, okay." It's the most I've heard him talk all night.

Silas says help me break into this tomb.

Silas says help me dig up this grave.

Silas says . . .

“Um,” Amara starts, “what’re you doing?”

“I just need to get his tongue.”

“I’m sorry, what? Come the fuck again?”

“They say if you can cut out a revenant’s tongue, you can speak to the dead.” Silas says it so matter-of-factly, as if this is the most normal thing in the world.

“Nope,” Amara says. Her voice bounces off the mausoleum walls. “Goodnight, I’m out.”

“A little too late to back out now, don’t you think?”

“Are you kidding? You never told us we were gonna be chopping off crusty body parts!”

“Would you have come if I had?”

“Hell no!”

I watch from the sidelines as Amara and Silas continue to bicker.

“And why exactly did we have to drop acid for this?” Amara asks.

“Why not?” is Silas’s answer. Always his answer. “It helps with the spiritual connection. There’s somebody I want to talk to.”

His mother, I think. Silas doesn’t say her name out loud. He doesn’t have to. We all know she passed away when he was nine years old. He freely shares that she’d been in a car accident, but I’m the only one who knows Silas was buckled in the backseat when a sixteen-wheeler smashed into their Toyota Matrix on the interstate. Silas told me about their vehicle spiraling through the air, how he lost himself in the vertigo of the moment, how he remembered watching his mother’s hair whip around, fanning around her face as her neck twisted . . . and twisted. Suddenly they were staring at each other, his mother’s bloodshot eyes peering into the backseat through the gap in the headrest, her chin perched between her shoulder blades. Her spinal column had curlicued to the point of near decapitation. The only thing keeping her head physically attached to the rest of her was her

corkscrewed skin.

Not that it stopped her from talking. *She looked so confused. She didn't understand what was happening to her. She was already dead by then, but she was still talking to me. Telling me everything was going to be all right. That I was going to be okay. That she loved me.*

Silas walked away from the wreck without a scratch. *A miracle*, he said. That's when he started believing in ghosts. Always chasing after his mother.

The mausoleum wall has crumbled along the corner. All it takes are a few swift kicks administered by Silas's heel for it to give away. The rock disintegrates, exposing a casket inside.

"Fuck this," Amara moans. "Fuuuck this so muuch."

"You take that side," Silas instructs Tobias. "Just help me pull."

The boys are busy busting out some Podunk Dracula or whatever the hell Silas called him, leaving me and Amara to wig out. We both know this is fucked. Amara doesn't need to convince me, but she'll blame me because she can't blame bulletproof Silas, and of course she'd never blame herself.

My attention drifts toward the mausoleum entrance. To the dark pressing in.

". . . Guys?" Nobody pays attention to me. "Guys!"

"What?" Silas asks. "What is it?"

"Ghosts" is all I can say as I point to the doorway. The cemetery is full of them. Orbs of light wash over the graves. They're drawing near. Floating our way.

"You see them too, right?" I whisper. "Please tell me you see them."

"What are they?" Amara asks, awestruck.

"Run," Silas says.

Silas says . . .

Silas says . . .

Silas grabs my wrist and yanks. My arm snaps taut before the rest of my body is whisked out of the tomb. I can't look away from the

balls of light bouncing through the rows of graves, the ghosts stretching their spectral bodies out farther and farther.

Wait. Those aren't ghosts.

Flashlights. We're being chased by cemetery security. Well, fuck a duck. We're booking it through the world's most impossible obstacle course. I count three beams behind me. There's more of us than there are of them, which means maybe one of us will be lucky enough to survive the night.

"Go go go!" Silas shouts over his shoulder.

Amara screams. She's done for, I know it. There's no way she's going to make it. I'll bail her out later, I promise myself. My parents will fork over the money to spring her from jail. Can you even bail a pal out on your Amex?

Tobias takes the lead. He doesn't even look back. Fucking long-legged gazelle in drain-pipe jeans. He's leaping over graves like his life depends on it. *Oh shit oh shit oh shit*, he pants between each pump of his legs before banking left and vanishing among the headstones. Good as ghosted.

Silas hasn't let go of my wrist, thank god. I'd be done for without him leading the way, guiding me through the endless maze of graves. I'm thinking far too linearly to be running for my life right now. I want to run straight while the headstones won't stay in a single-file line.

The cherubs cheer us on, clapping their tiny hands. A granite angel solemnly shakes her head. I can't help but think of my mom, how disappointed she'd be in me right now.

"Run faster," Silas says. "Come on, Erin!"

He yanks my arm to the left and it nearly pops out of its socket. Before I can see where I'm falling, we land on the ground. Blades of grass scratch my neck. Silas presses his palm over my mouth and I know I'm supposed to be still, be quiet, but everything inside me is shrieking.

A grave. We're lying on someone's grave, hiding behind their

tombstone.

I'm trying so hard to hold my breath as a rent-a-cop waddles right on by, key chain jangling. Silas and I cling to each other and squeeze, compressing our bodies together to fit behind the headstone. Even after the guard passes us, we don't move until we know for certain the coast is clear.

"Think we can make a break for it?" he asks. I inhale Silas's words. I can taste them on my tongue. The sun will be coming up in a couple hours. We could run or we could . . .

"Stay." I kiss him so hard that the back of his head hits marble but he doesn't pull away. I run my fingers through his hair and can feel dead leaves tangled within it. "Stay with me."

I want to keep hidden within the shadow of the tombstone, our heads pressed against it, chests rising and falling with every frantic breath, hearts never settling, inhales tethering together until we've syncopated our exhales, breathing in and out in unison, sharing a pair of lungs.

My hand wanders down his chest and lands on his pants.

"What're you doing?" he asks.

"What do you think?"

"You sure? I don't have any protection on me."

"Yes."

"We have to keep quiet."

"Very quiet," I whisper.

Silas's hand runs down my waist. That's his hand, isn't it? It takes a moment for me to realize those aren't the infinitesimal legs of a centipede lockstepping their way across my skin.

I need to focus on his body. Focus on his flesh. Focus on his hands. I can feel the coarseness of his fingertips as they tunnel beneath my shirt—and for just a moment, I slip out of reality. They're not his fingers anymore but the squiggly insects that call these coffins home, that squirm through the muck and mud and feast on the flesh of every last corpse in this godforsaken cemetery. Long forgotten

starlets. The corpses of dead Confederate generals.

And now me. I'm next. I have this stupid poem running through my head from when I was a kid—*the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout*—and now that I've thought it, I can't un-think it.

The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out—

Silas's fingers burrow their way into my body.

worms crawl in—

I know I'm just buckling under a bad trip, but it doesn't stop the worms from foraging through my skin. I need to stay focused. Follow Silas through.

worms crawl out—

Silas's lips mash into mine, but his lips aren't lips, they're maggots. I feel one slip in and tumble upon my tongue, down my throat.

worms play—

My zipper exhales. Silas has found what he's looking for. What I've offered. I just have to work through the trip. If I keep my eyes closed, it won't be so bad. I just have to hold on to Silas.

Hold on . . .

Hold . . .

Now I hear them. All of them below. The dead. We must have woken them. Agitated their eternal slumber. Now they're moving around, tumbling in their caskets, awake and aware of us writhing above them. I can hear the creaking of their brittle fists and I can't stop myself from picturing them all jacking off just underneath us, hundreds of bones draped in papery husks, buffeting against the tight confines of their coffins.

We've raised the dead. Every last gasp, every slipping sigh that escapes my mouth must send them into a frenzy. They're cheering Silas on with their parched voices, *Go go go!*

They want me.

I can't feel Silas anymore. The second he releases himself inside me, his body loses all of its contours. The entirety of his physical be-

ing bursts over me and the thing I'm holding in my arms is no longer flesh but a knot of worms, all of them tangled into one another, writhing against my skin, working their way through me and over me and oh god they won't stop squirming they're feeding on me *crawling in crawling out playing pinochle on my snout.*

SUCH SHARP TEETH



A
WEREWOLF
NOVEL

Rachel Harrison

AUTHOR OF CACKLE

BERKLEY

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I

Moths flutter around the fluorescent bulb as it blinks into the dark outside the bar. I lean back and lift my gaze to the night. There's no light pollution out here, and the stars are fierce. The moon is full, so I give it a wink.

"Did you just wink at me?"

Ian's so tall he blocks out the moon. When he's in front of you, there's nothing else. He's all there is.

"I did wink," I say. "But not at you. Sorry."

"All right," he says. "Glad we cleared that up."

"Apologies for any confusion."

He doesn't say anything else. He turns away from me to exhale, releasing a calm river of smoke toward the parking lot.

"Are you disappointed?" I ask him. "Did I give you false hope for a second there?"

"Well, yeah, but I've had false hope since we were thirteen, so I'm used to it," he says, turning back toward the light so I can see his good-natured grin.

It's been so many years since I last saw that grin. My heart begins to thump mutinously inside my chest. Maybe his hope isn't false after all.

All right, then. Time to go.

"I should head home. My sister will be jealous if she thinks I'm out having too much fun while she's stuck home. Sober."

"Tell Scarlett I say hello," he says.

"I will," I say, patting my pockets to check for my wallet, my keys. "Happy we ran into each other. Good to see you."

"Yeah," he says. "We should run into each other again while you're still in town."

I search for a cool, noncommittal response among the assortment I store readily under my tongue. I fumble. My lips part but offer nothing.

"Or not," he says, shrugging his massive shoulders. He pushes his glasses up his nose, the same squarish black Ray-Bans he wore in high school. Behind the thick lenses, his eyes are a striking, unusual blue. Cobalt.

"No, yeah," I stammer. "I mean, yes. Of course."

Horrrifying.

"You good to drive? I can give you a ride," he says.

"I'm good. One beer. I can walk in a straight line for you, though, if you like. ABC's backwards."

"Could you?"

"I'm shy."

He laughs.

"All right." I take my car keys out of my pocket. I slip my index finger into the key ring and flip them around. "Good night."

"Bye, Rory."

I'm curious if he's watching me as I walk to my car. The restraint it takes to not sneak a glance over my shoulder. Shameful.

I'll leave this part out when I tell Scarlett.

If I tell Scarlett.

Despite her current situation, she seems to have retained her position as a hard-core romantic. She's like Mom. If I tell her I bumped into Ian Pedretti, forget it.

I get into the car and turn the heat on, thawing myself from the October chill. I pull out of the parking lot, stealing a quick look in my rearview.

Ian is still there, finishing his cigarette.

I forgot about the mist. There's an ever-present mist that skulks around here like a townie. It tumbles down from the mountain, seeps out of the woods, and slathers itself across the dull suburban landscape. It might be the only defining quality of my hometown. Persistent mist.

Even with my brights on, there's negligible visibility. I drive slowly around the winding curves of Cutter Road. I used to know it by heart. I could drive it in the dark no problem, but it's been a long time since I've been back. I didn't think it was something I could lose. I thought that the map of this place was etched into me, that I could navigate from muscle memory, but I guess time erases the things you least expect.

A yawn crawls out of me. It's dramatic about it. The heat has me sleepy. I need to stay awake and alert for the five minutes it'll take me to get back to Scarlett's. Doesn't seem like too monumental a task, but after years of being able to zone out on the subway,

passively observing stops and the occasional kerfuffle, the additional attention required for driving seems like a big ask. I turn off the heat and crack open the windows, hoping the fresh air will keep me honest.

In comes the signature campfire smell of autumn, but also something else. Something more potent and less appealing. I sniff.

It's wet animal.

The distinct scent of damp fur.

It's overpowering. I consider closing the window, but then my phone chimes.

My eyes obediently flick over to the illuminated screen, and . . .

Thud.

Time leaps ahead, dragging me by the neck. It leaves me with my lungs convulsing, a hideous screeching in my ears. My seat belt is tight, at my throat like a knife.

My car is facing in the wrong direction. I inhale, and it's just burning rubber.

I hit something.

I hit something.

The sound, that grievous thud, replays loudly in my head. It's relentless, with a severe disorienting urgency.

I pull at my seat belt, attempting to loosen it, so I can breathe, but it's dead set on anchoring me in this hellish moment. I feel around for the button with a trembling hand. I find it eventually, and the seat belt releases with a fast snap. I open the car door and stumble onto the road.

The cold pulls me out of the fog of my shock. I do a quick examination of my body. Extremities seem to be intact. I feel my face. Aside from the wide gape of my mouth, there's nothing concerning. I move my neck side to side.

I'm fine.

Car? Not fine. My front bumper, the grille, whatever, is now so deeply indented, it's the shape of a V.

What did I hit? What could possibly cause that much damage? A deer?

I clench my teeth and take a minute to allow the reality to fully set in, as much as I'd prefer to hang out in the cozy palm of denial. I brace myself for the inevitable cycle of emotions. Anger at myself for being an irresponsible driver, frustration at the situation in general. Remorse for the animal I almost certainly killed.

I wasn't speeding. I was going only thirty, thirty-five at most. But if the sound and the state of my car are any indication, RIP. I guess I should check to make sure I don't abandon a concussed house pet, some freshly maimed family dog. If that's what I hit and there's a chance that it's somehow still alive, that means there's a chance I can save it.

I turn toward the road. Mist curls in all directions; it peels from the night like the skin from ripe fruit. There's a glittering black smear on the road, mostly eluding the reach of my headlights. I step toward it, holding my breath, preparing my apology to Spot or Bambi.

My presence disrupts the mist, and between my headlights, aggressive starlight, and a cruel, gawking moon, I can see the mess I've made.

I can't even tell what kind of animal it is. Or was.

It's inside out. The impact must have skinned it somehow because there's no evidence of fur. Giant worms of intestines unravel across the road. The wet abstract of organs contrasts against the pale shock of bone. It's a shapeless horror. An absolute massacre.

“I’m sorry,” I tell it, searching for some hint of its identity. There’s a lot of it, whatever it is. Too much. Guessing a deer? I scan for antlers.

There’s a lump. I squint, stepping deeper into the haze. My eyes adjust, and I can see that the lump is fur. A neat mound of fur. Beside the mound, staring up at me with dead glassy eyes, is a head. I was right. It was a deer.

How is this possible? I was not going over thirty-five. And even if I was . . .

Something possesses me to reach out and hover my hand over the carcass. It’s cold. There’s no heat coming off it, no warmth at all. I just hit it. If it just died, wouldn’t it still be warm?

I linger over the deer, wondering, until I realize I’m not required to turn in an autopsy report. It’s not a mystery I need to solve. I killed it. I feel bad; that’s it. My punishment is I’ll likely never be able to stomach meat again. I’ll be a vegetarian and a conscientious driver.

I sigh and straighten my legs.

I pause to listen. I hear something. Labored breathing. A sharp inhale followed by the slow rip of an exhale. It repeats.

I bring my hand to my chest. Its surf is steady. Rise, fall. Rise, fall. It contradicts the sound. But if I’m not making it, what is?

There’s an onslaught of darkness, confusing me for all of two seconds before I realize something has passed in front of the headlights.

Until I realize I’m not the one who killed that deer.

I turn around.

It eclipses the headlights, concealing itself in darkness. I can make out a vague outline, trace an enormous mass sliced from shadow. It suddenly shifts between the headlights, uncoiling it-

self. The light scalds my eyes, forcing a brief retreat into the refuge of my head. I'm tempted to let them stay there, to leave my eyes closed and maybe just never open them again, never face whatever it is in front of me. But something else—maybe survival instinct or curiosity—wins out.

I open my eyes, and at first they struggle against the brightness. All I can see is that whatever's there, positioned between me and my car, it's standing upright.

A bear. It's a bear. It's the size of a large bear. It's got four limbs. A head. Fur.

I blink, and the scene comes into focus.

I've never seen a bear like this. Its proportions are weird.

It stands on the pads of its feet. They're not really paws. They're big but narrow, and they've got fur, only it's sparse, and where there's none, grayish skin is stretched tight over thin splinters of bone. Its toes are each about the size of my fist, and from them extend thick black nails, sharp, almost like talons. Its legs are long. Slim pale muscles slither around exposed bone, fur detaching in certain places, like around the knees. The legs have a disturbing bend to them. They're not straight. They won't straighten. They're hind legs.

It's slouched, concealing part of its torso. There's fur missing there, too. Its skin has been pulled too taut; there are obvious rips where the thing is fleshless. I can see a sickening twist of ribs and spongy insides, but most of it is shadowed by the curtain of its arms. The thing pulls them forward but leaves them limp. They dangle down past its knees.

Its hands are marred. Leathery tangled mitts. Bones peek through recessions of fur. Its giant knuckles are bald. Its fingers have way too many joints; they bend and unbend and bend.

I look up at its head.

A whiteness escapes its wide-open jaws. Froth pours through its fangs. Beyond its snout, two red eyes bore into me. The color of them, it's unreal.

It can't be real.

Did someone slip something into my beer?

I feel the skepticism creep across my expression, my eyebrows sinking, eyes narrowing as I study the thing standing in front of me. My doubt releases me from my fear, and for a moment the creature isn't real and I'm safe.

It must sense this, because it rears back, head up, opening its chest to the sky, arms wide. I can hear the awful creak of its jaw as it unhinges to an alarming degree, the separation between its teeth staggering. It begins to scream. The torturous pitch funnels ice into my veins. It's agonizing.

The scream splits, harmonizing with itself. It's like there's more than one voice.

Animals shouldn't be able to scream like that.

It's going on forever. I don't know if it'll ever stop. Should I run? Why haven't I already started running?

The thing finally stops screaming. It collapses onto all fours. It turns to me, and the clarity of its red gaze is unnerving. I understand.

It's angry. I hit it with my car. I interrupted its dinner.

And it's starving.

I run.

I take off into the mist. I'm a runner but this is different. Running for your life is different. It sucks.

I'm vulnerable on the road. There's nowhere for me to hide. If

another car comes, it's more likely to hit me than be able to help me. I veer into the woods.

The wet carpet of moss swallows my footsteps. I dodge branches, hop over rocks. I know it's following me because it's not stealthy. It doesn't need to be because it's huge and fanged and fast. It's got that predator confidence. It knows it can catch me because it's the predator. And I'm prey.

It's not the first beast to see me this way. Might be the last, though.

My thoughts distract me. My run becomes increasingly reckless. A wayward arm smacks a cluster of low foliage. The rustle is thunderous.

I can't think. I can't think about what's happening. I can't stop to conjure the image of what's hunting me, pause to marvel at the horror of it. No time for *How?* or *Why?* or *What the ever-loving fuck?* Its snarls cleave the quiet; its hot breath is at my heels. Any hope of escape is obliterated. I'm not going to outrun the thing. I can't. I'm not getting home to my sister, who needs me. I can't go any faster.

Is this it, then? My final thought: *This is as fast as I can go.*

I spit dirt and blood from my mouth. The pain is disorienting. I'm facedown. The gentle creep of insect legs along my cheek is the only sensation I can decisively identify. The rest is just nebulous torment.

My ankle, maybe?

The brutal bloom of heat on my shoulder interrupts my analysis, and I'm flipped over onto my back. It's done easily, like I have

no weight, like it's nothing, like I'm nothing. My body is not a factor, except right now I know it's the only factor. I go rigid.

It looms above me, the moon providing a direct spotlight, a wraithlike glow. Honestly, I could do without it. *Fuck you, moon.* I don't need my death by large inbred animal to have good lighting. Dark would be fine. Preferable.

I could close my eyes, but it's kind of hard when the thing looks the way it does.

I can almost hear the chiding of my future self, if there were to be a future self. Or maybe it's the chorus of outsiders who might someday read about what happened to me and wonder aloud, "*Why didn't she?*" "*Why didn't she wriggle away?*" "*If it were me, I would have punched it in the face!*" "*I would have fought back!*" "*I would have screamed!*"

Why didn't I? Why don't I?

Because I can't.

I can't.

It lowers itself down. It sniffs me, starting at my feet. It's removed my boots, or they've come off somehow. Not sure. I can see now that my ankle is twisted, bloody. My jeans are torn to shreds. They were my favorite jeans, too.

The soft twitch of my grin meets a salty wetness. I'm crying.

Scarlett.

I'm grateful we never had that special twin thing. We were disappointed as children that we didn't have that connection. She broke her collarbone at a soccer game, and I was across town having the time of my life sleeping over at Ash's. Double-fisting s'mores and dancing along to music videos on MTV. No phantom pain. No nothing.

Right now I hope she's on the couch reading, or sketching, or

strumming absentmindedly on her guitar, feeling no pain. No twin telepathy. No inexplicable, all-consuming, utterly devastating fear.

As long as she isn't feeling what I'm feeling.

The soul-eviscerating terror of staring into the red eyes of this thing. It's so close to me now, its blood-slick snout pressed to my chin. It's definitely not a bear. Whatever it is, it's not natural.

In a swift, savage motion, it buries its face into my side.

The scream that escapes me is bloodcurdling, so monstrous that the creature unclamps its jaws and shoots me a look of what's maybe surprise. I can feel each puncture wound from each individual tooth with unfortunate lucidity. It stings, it burns. It's a shin on the corner of the coffee table, a bone you know is broken right away. It's a rally of all the pain I've ever felt, doused in acid. The hurt is transforming my mind. I can't stop screaming.

The thing is no longer deterred by it. It returns to slurp at the pulp of my wound.

"No!" I'm screaming. "No!"

Blood bubbles from my mouth. A sobering cold begins to inch its way through me. Everything darkens.

"No!" I sputter the word into multiple syllables. My mouth is flooding, tongue drowning in thick tangy blood.

It pulls away fast, taking some of me with it between its teeth. Strips of my skin dangle from its fangs. It stands and turns toward the sky, toward the dark of it. Fat clouds shroud the moon. It's completely lost, concealed from view.

My whimpering returns its attention to me. It looks down at me and cocks its head to the side. The movement has a certain innocence about it.

But then the clouds pass, and the moonlight returns with its

menacing sheen. The thing growls at me, its thin lips rippling, gory fangs bared.

And just as it descends toward me, another animal decides to hurry by, maybe thinking the predator is preoccupied. Whatever the animal is, it must be more appealing, because the thing dashes after it, leaving me alone in the clearing, in a patch of bright silvery moonlight.

My breath collapses. I try to tilt my head down to see how bad it is. My entire side is covered in blood. It's been gnawed. Bitten. Butchered. The violence of it weakens me. Maybe it's the blood loss, or it could be the profound devastation over having had this done to me, having been vandalized in this way.

The carelessness, the disregard for my body, for my life. It's robbed me of my strength, my resolve. I let my eyes close without the faith I'll open them again.

I'm awakened by a rough pink tongue slobbering over my face. My drowsiness is slow to fade, my consciousness faltering.

A yell ruptures my stupor. I'm abruptly, terribly aware of my circumstance. There's a smiling spaniel panting just above me, and beyond it stands a woman in running clothes with her hands covering her mouth, horrified by the sight of me.

"Are you okay?" she asks, hysterical. "Are you okay?"

It's such a stupid question.

My voice is hoarse, but I manage to speak.

"I don't fucking know," I say. "Call nine-one-one."



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ALEXIS HENDERSON

HOUSE
of
HUNGER

a novel

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Chapter One

To bleed is to be.

—from Vanessa, *Bloodmaid of the House of Hunger*

Before she was first bled, when she still had the name her parents gave her, Marion Shaw was a maid at a townhouse in the South of Prane. On that morning—the morning she would later come to identify as the beginning of her second life—she knelt on the hard wood floor of a parlor, sleeves rolled up to her bony elbows, a scrub brush in her hand.

Across the room, in an upholstered armchair, Lady Gertrude sat, watching her work. She was a shrewd woman, blue-eyed with silver hair and a pinched aristocratic nose, spattered with age spots and freckles. While other nobles preferred to leave their maids to their labor, Lady Gertrude preferred instead to preside over them, watching with a falcon’s eye as if to ensure that her help earned every penny she paid them.

“You missed a spot,” she sneered, seizing her cane to point at a minuscule stain on the floorboards.

Marion batted a dark curl out of her eye. She did what little she could to mind her tone. “I’ll be more careful, milady.”

“You ought to be. There’s girls more handsome and less sluggish than you who’d be happy to have your position,” she said, and she bit down on a brittle tea cookie, spitting crumbs when she spoke again. “You’ve grown slow . . . and lazy. I can see it in your eyes. The little light there was in them has long gone out, and now you expect to drag yourself through my halls on your hands and knees like a common drunk. With your hair unkempt and your apron stained—”

“Rest assured this floor will be spotless by the time I’m through with it,” said Marion, cutting her short. She could feel the rage pooling in the pit of her belly like bile. “You have my word.”

At this, Lady Gertrude merely frowned, the slack skin of her brow wrinkling like fabric. Marion couldn't help but think that she was rather lonely. Long widowed, without children of her own, or companions or family to speak of, apart from Sunday mass she had no means of social stimulation. Thus, every day she followed Marion from room to room, watching her scrub the floors and polish the silver, sometimes (if her health allowed it) going so far as to trail after her into the kitchens, where she'd remain until her aching knees drove her back to the comfort of her parlor.

Marion polished the floor until she could see her own reflection in it—wide-set eyes gaping back at her, a firm nose and full lips slightly parted, tongue tucked behind her teeth, skin a deep tawny, hair a mess of curls. She frowned at herself just as the church bells rang twelve. With a ragged sigh, Marion peeled her gaze from her own reflection, dropped her scrub brush into the bucket with a splash, and pressed slowly to her feet.

In accordance with the new labor laws, all workers were promised an hour's rest at the top of their seventh hour of work, a precautionary measure enacted after no fewer than six girls worked themselves to death after twenty-hour shifts in a cotton mill. And while Lady Gertrude was not a particularly kind woman, she *was* a great adherent to order and strict regulation, regardless of whether it was a benefit to her. Thus, when the clock struck noon, she was quick to dismiss Marion.

Unlike many of her set, Lady Gertrude couldn't afford to buy herself a townhome more than a spitting distance from the more . . . *unsightly* corners of Prane, and it took Marion only a few minutes to reach the cusp of the slums. Here, Marion's pace quickened and she felt her spirits lift, if only slightly.

Gradually, the fine brick townhomes gave way to shanties and warehouses, cast in a pall of smog. Marion shouldered down the crowded streets of the stockyards and adjoining meat market, trudging through half-frozen manure and past the racks of cattle corpses that hung, swinging, by the hooves. Instinctively, she rounded her shoulders against the blast of the coming cold. Fall had only just begun, but it was unseasonably cold that day and the streets were thick with snow and slush.

Outside the crowds spread through the stockyards, rounding the corrals where the cattle huddled—shuddering from the cold or the fear of the coming butchery or both. Marion trained her eyes on her boots

as she passed them by. Almost ten years of walking every day through the stockyards and she still couldn't bring herself to look those beasts in the eye.

Marion kept walking. The seething smog was low-slung, and so thick that the sun could barely shine through it. The streets were thronged, as they always were at midday. Crowds gathered around the vendor stalls, and if Marion had coin to spare on a bit of roast eel or herring, she might have joined them. But she didn't, so she went about her way, navigating the crowds and icy streets, snow slush leaking into her boots as she walked.

A vicious wind circled down the alleys and ripped at her coat as she neared her favorite place to sit, a dark doorstep at the back of an abandoned warehouse, on the cusp of Prane, overlooking the trenches and the long scar of the northern railroad beyond them.

It began to rain, and Marion retreated into the shadow of the awning, fishing a pack of matches and her last cigarette from the back pocket of her coat. She lit the smoke and nursed it, cupping her hand to shield it from the wind. Between draws she wheezed and shivered, blowing smoke through her fingers to warm them.

The cigarettes did wonders to calm her hunger pangs, and at a halfpenny a pack they were far cheaper than the offerings of the roadside food vendors who, as far as Marion was concerned, always overcharged.

“If it ain't the jewel of Prane.”

Marion turned to see Agnes wading toward her through the thick of the crowds. She raised a hand and Marion greeted her with two raised middle fingers in turn. Agnes was a gaunt, jaundiced matchstick girl with pale brown eyes and thinning hair that she wore in a braid that hung, like a rat's tail, down her back. Like Marion, Agnes had spent the early years of her childhood pickpocketing on busy street corners. In fact, that was how they'd met, and they soon learned that thievery was a trade better suited to two. So Agnes would act as the distraction—chatting nonsense with their targets, keeping them occupied—while Marion crept up from behind to nab a coin purse or slip a silk handkerchief from the breast coat of a passing lord. But at age ten, when the legal repercussions of thievery became too steep, Agnes had taken up honest work on the factory line where she made matches—dipping wooden sticks into sulfur—from dawn until dusk.

Soon after, Marion secured a position as the scullery maid of Lady Gertrude.

Still, despite their new occupations, every day at noon the two girls made a point to meet at the same street corner where they'd first met. But Marion and Agnes weren't friends, because Marion didn't *have* friends. The way she saw it, friends were a luxury reserved for people who had the spare time to spend with them—like the girls who wandered main street with their parasols and bone-white gloves, retiring to their parlors in the afternoon to take a bit of tea and talk. No. Girls like Marion and Agnes had no use or time for companions. They were simply fixtures in each other's lives, a part of Prane's habitat, like the reeking miasma and the crows and the rats that roamed the streets in packs at night.

Marion passed Agnes the nub of her cigarette and slipped both hands into her skirt pockets, doing what little she could to keep herself warm. She had another five hours of work ahead of her, and it was hard to scrub floors with cold-stiff fingers.

Agnes pulled on her cigarette in silence, the smoke leaking through the gaps of her missing teeth. She looked haggard from the time she'd spent slaving away on the line, breathing the toxic, phosphorous fumes day in and day out until the chemical stench filled her up like a second spirit. That was something Marion's mother used to say. That folks in Prane had two souls—one made of the stuff of the heavens, the other from miasma.

Agnes took a final pull on her cigarette and flicked the butt into the trenches. "Ugly day, isn't it?"

Marion shrugged. "No worse than the others."

"But it is. The days are shorter than they ever were before, the nights are longer. And the sun, it doesn't rise as high as it used to. I swear it. The summers aren't as warm. Fall is shorter. The winters are colder." Agnes shook her head. "I can feel the change."

"Prane doesn't change," said Marion, and it was true. Prane was the northernmost city of the South. It existed in the rift between the worlds—the arctic North and the punishing heat of the industrial South. And so, Prane was never one thing or another. In the night, the light of the city was such that it seemed the sun never fully set; in the day the gray pall of smog made it seem like it never fully rose. Thus, the slums of Prane felt much like a realm caught between, in perpetual indecision, as if the skies couldn't decide what

they wanted to be.

Never fully day. Never fully night.

Never anything at all.

And though she knew nothing else, Marion had come to hate that indistinction . . . and most everything else about Prane too. She sometimes wondered if there was a single person in the slums who found something, anything, to love about the place. Agnes, for her part, seemed resigned, even content. But begrudging contentment was not the same as happiness. At best it was familiarity, and at worst defeat. It certainly wasn't the same as true fondness.

Marion lowered herself to the stoop beside Agnes, wincing a little as the snowmelt seeped through her skirts. Her gaze drifted north. In the distance, she could just make out the night train's station on the cusp of Prane—a beautiful structure of glass and iron with its own clock tower that only ever called the hours of the night. Marion had visited the station only once, on her eighth birthday. She had begged her mother to let her see it, in lieu of a proper birthday gift. And so, that evening, they had ventured down to the station.

Marion's mother had lifted her up onto her hip to peer into the night train's windows, and she had caught the briefest glimpse of its cabin—its seats upholstered with red velvet, its windows draped with brocade and dyed silks. Each cabin was lit by the shimmering chandeliers that dangled from the ceilings. They didn't care that the men in the three-piece suits scowled at their presence, or that the women clutched their skirts and coin-fat purses closer at their approach.

Marion and her mother had merely laughed and smiled and watched in awe as the northerners (you could tell them apart from the touring southerners based on their fine clothes and the way they tilted their chins, just so) boarded the train and settled themselves for the journey north. There was a bloodmaid among them, a black-haired girl with a fine mink muff who smiled at Marion through the window. At seven past twelve, Marion and her mother watched from the platform as that great, black-iron beast roared to life and charged into the dark of the night.

Every time she heard the keen peal of the night train's horn, she felt the same stirring in the marrow of her bones that she had as a child, standing on the platform alongside her mother. She loved the sound

and the feeling of the train's approach. Sometimes she imagined herself onboard—sitting among the northern nobles and men of Parliament—a gilded, one-way ticket in her pocket that cost more than ten times what a maid like Marion earned in a year.

Agnes eyed her through a cloud of cigarette smoke. “Still looking north?”

“Nothing else to look at.”

“Then I suppose you won't be wanting this.” Agnes reached into the shadows of her coat and withdrew a folded newspaper. She stole one every day, in a kind of unspoken agreement, an important part of their ritual. Agnes brought the stolen paper, and Marion the cigarettes, and together they made the most of what little time they had to spare.

The wind tore at the edges of the newspaper as Agnes opened it and spread it flat across their thighs. They didn't bother with the headline stories—long articles about taxes and tariff wars and cholera outbreaks in the slums. Instead, they skipped to their favorite section, the matrimonial advertisements at the back of the paper.

It was the top of the week, so there was a large selection of adverts to comb through. One for a respectable physician seeking a maiden wife. Another for a widowed cleric with a parish in the country in want of a wife of “impeccable morals” and a mother for his *nine* children (he requested that the lucky woman be no older than two and twenty). At the bottom corner of the page, an advert for a self-described spinster, aged thirty-eight, seeking a bachelor of fortune to receive with “kindness and affection.”

Marion and Agnes read each of these adverts in their best mockery of a posh accent, illustrating the postings with wild imaginings about the appearances of the subjects, their homes and lives and favorite proclivities.

“He might be a fit for you,” said Agnes, with a sly smile. She tapped an ad for a navy officer in want of a “wholesome” maiden, and Marion laughed aloud. She was many things, but wholesome she was not. Virtue, in the conventional sense, had never become her. At twenty, she'd shared beds with several women, and she enjoyed indulging readily in the delights of the flesh. She and Agnes had had a brief tryst one summer, but there was no real feeling between them, and things had ended badly. They'd since decided

they were better smoking companions than lovers.

Agnes squinted down at the paper. “At a salary of four hundred a year maybe he’d be a fit for me too. I could be a maiden.”

“Somehow I have a hard time picturing that,” said Marion, turning the newspaper’s page. And it was then that she saw it, an advertisement in the midst of the matrimony column. Unlike the other postings, it was printed in the most peculiar shade of scarlet. And the letters were different, larger and filigreed, the dips and curves of each one sweeping into the next like cursive. It read:

WANTED: Bloodmaid of exceptional taste. No more than 19. Must have a keen proclivity for life’s finer pleasures. No references required. Candidates will be received by mail at The Night Embassy, 727 Crooks Street, Prane or personally from 10 to 12 in the evening hours. Girls of weak will need not apply.

Below the posting was a crest—the crude face of a frowning man with olive branches in his hair—the seal of the House of Hunger, one of the largest, and most feared, in the North.

Agnes hissed through her teeth at the sight of it.

In Prane, bloodmaids were regarded as symbols of opulence and depravity in almost equal measure. They were said to spend their days as the cosseted charges of their noble, northern masters—strumming harps, powdering their upturned noses, studying arts and languages, stuffing their cheeks with frosted tea cakes and chocolates and other delightful confections to sweeten their blood to the taste.

The worst of their job was the bleeding, which bloodmaids did frequently to satisfy the carnivorous appetites of the nobles, who relied on the healing properties of their blood as a lavish remedy for their varying ailments. According to the newspapers, blood was purported to cure a number of diseases including, but not limited to, tuberculosis, rubella, measles, syphilis, rickets, and arthritic pains. Some even believed that blood contained youth-preserving properties, especially when taken directly from the source and consumed while still warm.

But the way Marion saw it, work was work, and the work of a bloodmaid was far easier than that of

the average factory hand in Prane. Besides, Marion had heard it rumored that upon the end of their tenure bloodmaids were rewarded with lavish pensions that ensured they'd live their remaining days in accordance to the same standard of luxury they'd been accustomed to during their time as bloodmaids. Marion had heard stories of retired bloodmaids being gifted seaside villas, even entire estates, in the Southern Isles complete with full households—footmen, drivers, stable hands, and even bloodmaids of their own.

Agnes glowered down at the newspaper. “They’ve got some nerve to advertise a posting for a blood-whore in the matrimony column of all places.”

In the South, the prejudice against bloodmaids ran deep, and Agnes was far from the only person in Prane who harbored ill feelings toward the blood trade. Some girls, even beautiful ones, refused to consider the position of bloodmaid as a matter of principle. Such was the stigma against the profession. Marion had heard it said, many times over, that mothers would rather see their daughters become harlots on the streets of Prane than bloodmaids in the North. And many a southern priest had preached from the pulpit about the immortal dangers of bleeding, the toll that dark work took on the body and soul. There were ample rumors about girls drained of blood and spirit, returning to the South penniless and pale after years of bleeding with nothing but their scars to show for it.

“Where else would you have them place it? A bloodmaid could hardly be called a servant.”

“Well, they’re far from wives,” said Agnes, and when she spewed the words she flecked the newspaper with spit. “Whoring for a night lord is nothing like a marriage.”

Marion saw little difference between the two. Both the act of becoming a bloodmaid and the act of becoming a wife were a kind of amalgamation of fealty and flesh, blood and fidelity. And why sell yourself to a penniless man when you could sell yourself to a lord of the North? “I don’t see how the two are so different. I’d rather bleed to sate the appetite of a night lord than bleed on the birthing bed, bearing the children of a man I hardly love.”

An ugly wind ripped down the alleyway, so violent it nearly snatched the newspaper from Marion’s hand. But she held fast, folding it quickly and slipping it into the inner pocket of her coat for safekeeping.

Agnes studied her with a furrowed brow, and Marion could see the silent accusation in her eyes: *traitor*:

But before Agnes had the chance to open her mouth and say it, to warn Marion of the North and all its horrors, the dull toll of the church bells echoed down the alley, beckoning them back to their work.

New York Times Bestselling Author of
THE FINAL GIRL SUPPORT GROUP

GRADY HENDRIX



HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE

BERKLEY

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Chapter 1

Louise thought it might not go well, so she told her parents she was pregnant over the phone, from three thousand miles away, in San Francisco. It wasn't that she had a single doubt about her decision. When those two parallel pink lines had ghosted into view, all her panic dissolved and she heard a clear, certain voice inside her head say:

I'm a mother now.

But even in the twenty-first century it was hard to predict how a pair of Southern parents would react to the news that their thirty-four-year-old unmarried daughter was pregnant. Louise spent all day rehearsing different scripts that would ease them into it, but the minute her mom answered and her dad picked up the kitchen extension, her mind went blank and she blurted out:

"I'm pregnant."

She braced herself for the barrage of questions.

Are you sure? Does Ian know? Are you going to keep it? Have you thought about moving back to Charleston? Are you certain this is the best thing? Do you have any idea how hard this will be alone? How are you going to manage?

In the long silence, she prepared her answers: *Yes; not yet; of course; God no; no, but I'm doing it anyway; yes; I'll manage.*

Over the phone she heard someone inhale through what sounded like a mouthful of water and realized her mom was crying.

"Oh, Louise," her mother said in a thick voice, and Louise prepared herself for the worst. "I'm so happy. You're going to be the mother I wasn't."

Her dad only had one question: her exact street address.

“I don’t want any confusion with the cab driver when we land.”

“Dad,” Louise said, “you don’t have to come right now.”

“Of course we do,” he said. “You’re our Louise.”

She waited for them on the sidewalk, heart pounding every time a car turned the corner, until finally a dark blue Nissan slowed to a stop in front of her building and her dad helped her mom out of the back seat and she couldn’t wait—she threw herself into her mom’s arms like she was a little kid again.

They took her crib shopping and stroller shopping and told Louise she was crazy to even consider a cloth diaper service, and discussed feeding techniques and vaccinations and a million decisions Louise would have to make, and bought snot suckers and diapers and onesies, and receiving blankets and changing pads and wipes, and rash cream and burp cloths and rattles and night-lights, and Louise would’ve thought they’d bought way too much if her mother hadn’t said, “You’ve hardly bought anything at all.”

She couldn’t even blame them for having a hard time with the whole Ian issue.

“Married or not, we have to meet his family,” her mom said. “We’re going to be co-grandparents.”

“I haven’t told him yet,” Louise said. “I’m barely eleven weeks.”

“Well, you’re not getting any less pregnant,” her mom pointed out.

“There are tangible financial benefits to marriage,” her dad added. “You’re sure you don’t want to reconsider?”

Louise did not want to reconsider.

Ian could be funny, he was smart, and he made an obscenely high income curating rare vinyl for rich people in the Bay Area who yearned for their childhoods. He’d put together a complete collection of original pressing Beatles LPs for the fourth-largest shareholder at Facebook and found the bootleg of a Grateful Dead concert where a Twitter board member had proposed to his first wife. Louise couldn’t believe how much they paid him for this.

On the other hand, when she suggested they should take a break he’d taken that as his cue to go down

on one knee in the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and propose. He'd been so upset when she said no that she'd finally had pity sex with him, which was how she came to be in her current condition.

When Ian had proposed, he'd been wearing his vintage Nirvana *In Utero* T-shirt with a hole in the collar that had cost him four hundred dollars. He spent thousands every year on sneakers, which he insisted on calling "kicks." He checked his phone when she talked about her day, made fun of her when she mixed up the Rolling Stones and the Who, and said, "Are you sure?" whenever she ordered dessert.

"Dad," Louise said. "Ian's not ready to be a parent."

"Who is?" her mom asked.

But Louise knew Ian *really* wasn't ready.

Every family visit lasts three days too long, and by the end of the week Louise was counting the hours until she could be alone in her apartment again. The day before her parents' flight home, she holed up in her bedroom "doing email" while her mom took off her earrings to take a nap and her dad left to find a copy of the *Financial Times*. If they could do this until lunch, then go on a walk around the Presidio, then dinner, Louise figured everything would be fine.

Louise's body had other plans. She felt hungry now. She needed hard-boiled eggs now. She had to get up and go to the kitchen now. So she crept into the living room in her socks, trying not to wake her mom because she couldn't handle another conversation about why she wouldn't let her hair grow out, or why she should move back to Charleston, or why she should start drawing again.

Her mom lay asleep on the couch, on one side, yellow blanket pulled up to her waist. The late-morning light brought out her skeleton, the tiny lines around her mouth, her thinning hair, her slack cheeks. For the first time in her life, Louise knew what her mother would look like dead.

"I love you," her mom said without opening her eyes.

Louise froze.

"I know," she said after a moment.

“No,” her mom said, “you don’t.”

Louise waited for her to add something, but her mom’s breathing deepened, got regular, and turned into a snore.

Louise continued into the kitchen. Had she overheard half of a dream conversation? Or did her mom mean Louise didn’t know she loved her? Or how much she loved her? Or she wouldn’t understand how much her mom loved her until she had a daughter of her own?

She worried at it while she ate her hard-boiled egg. Was her mom talking about her living in San Francisco? Did she think Louise had moved this far away to put distance between them? Louise had moved here for school, then stayed for work, although when you grew up with all your friends telling you how cool your mom was and even your exes asked about her when you bumped into them, you needed some distance if you wanted to live your own life, and sometimes even three thousand miles didn’t feel like enough to Louise. She wondered if her mom somehow knew.

Then there was her brother. Mark’s name had only come up twice on this visit and Louise knew it ate at her mom that the two of them didn’t have a “natural” relationship, but, to be honest, she didn’t want a relationship with her brother, natural or otherwise. In San Francisco, she could pretend she was an only child.

Louise knew she was a typical oldest sibling, a cookie-cutter first child. She’d read the articles and scanned the listicles, and every single trait applied to her: reliable, structured, responsible, hardworking. She’d even seen it classified as a disorder—Oldest Sibling Syndrome—and that made her wonder what Mark’s disorder was. Terminal Assholism, most likely.

When people asked why she didn’t speak to her brother, Louise told them the story of Christmas 2016, when her mom spent all day cooking but Mark insisted they meet him for dinner at P. F. Chang’s, where he showed up late, drunk, tried to order the entire menu, then passed out at the table.

“Why do you let him act like that?” Louise had asked.

“Try to be more understanding of your brother,” her mom had said.

Louise understood her brother plenty. She won awards. Mark struggled through high school. She got a master's in design. Mark dropped out of college his freshman year. She built products that people used every day, including part of the user interface for the latest iteration of the iPhone. He was on a mission to get fired from every bar in Charleston. He only lived twenty minutes away from their parents but refused to lift a finger to help out.

No matter what he did, her parents lavished Mark with praise. He rented a new apartment and they acted like he brought down the Berlin Wall. He bought a truck for five hundred dollars and got it running again and he may as well have landed on the moon. When Louise won the Industrial Designers Society of America Graduate Student Merit Award she gave the trophy to her parents to thank them. They put it in the closet.

“Your brother is going to be hurt we have that out for you and nothing for him,” her mom had said.

Louise knew that her not speaking to Mark was the eternal elephant in the room, the invisible ghost at the table, the phantom strain on every interaction with her parents, especially with her mom, who hated what she called “unpleasantness.” Her mom was always “up,” she was always “on,” and while Louise didn't see anything wrong with being happy, her mom's enforced happiness seemed pathological. She avoided hard conversations about painful subjects. She had a Christian puppet ministry and acted like she was always onstage. The few times she lost it as a mother she'd snap, “You're embarrassing me!” as if being embarrassed was the worst possible thing that could happen to someone.

Maybe that's why she was so certain about her decision to have this baby. Becoming a mother would allow her and her mom to share something just between them. It would bring them closer together. She suspected all the things that annoyed her about her mom were exactly the things that would make her an incredible grandmother.

As Louise brushed eggshell off the counter, she thought that shared motherhood might form a bridge between them, and gradually the walls Louise had needed to protect herself would come down. It wouldn't happen overnight, but that was okay. They'd have a lifetime to adjust to each other's new roles—a

daughter becoming a mother, a mother becoming a grandmother. They would have years.

As it turned out, she got five.

Chapter 2

The call came as Louise desperately tried to convince her daughter that she was not going to like *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

“We just got all those new library books,” she said. “Don’t you want—”

“*Velverdeen Rabbit*,” Poppy insisted.

“It’s scarier than *The Muppet Christmas Carol*,” Louise told her. “Remember how scary that was when the door knocker turned into the man’s face?”

“I want *Velverdeen Rabbit*,” Poppy said, her voice firm.

Louise knew she should take the path of least resistance and just read Poppy *The Velveteen Rabbit*, but that would happen over her dead body. She should have checked the package before letting Poppy open it, because of course her mom hadn’t sent the check for Dinosaur Dig Summer Camp like she’d promised, but she had randomly sent Poppy a copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* because she thought it was Louise’s favorite book.

It was not Louise’s favorite book. It was the source of Louise’s childhood nightmares. The first time her mom had read it to her she’d been Poppy’s age and she’d burst into tears when the Rabbit got taken outside to be burned.

“I know,” her mom had said, completely misreading the situation. “It’s my favorite book, too.”

The book’s emotional cruelty made five-year-old Louise’s stomach hurt: the thoughtless Boy who abused his toys, the needy toys who pathologically craved his approval no matter how much he neglected them, the remote and fearsome Nana, the bullying rabbits living in the wild. But her mom kept picking it for her bedtime story, oblivious to the fact that Louise would lie rigid while she read, hands gripping the sheet, staring at the ceiling as her mom did all the voices.

It was a master class in acting, a star turn by Nancy Joyner, and getting to deliver this performance was the real reason her mom kept picking the book. By the end, they'd both be crying, but for very different reasons.

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."

Louise had dated a girl at Berkeley who had that exact quote tattooed on her forearm and she wasn't surprised when she found out that she gave herself tattoos with a sewing needle taped to a Bic pen. *The Velveteen Rabbit* confused masochism with love, it wallowed in loneliness, and what kind of awful thing was a Skin Horse, anyway?

Louise wouldn't make the same mistake with Poppy. There would be no *Velveteen Rabbit* in this house, even if she had to fight dirty.

"You're going to hurt the feelings of all those new library books," Louise said, and instantly Poppy's eyes got wide. "They're going to be sad you didn't want to read them first. You're going to make them cry."

Lying to Poppy felt awful, pretending inanimate objects had feelings felt manipulative, but every time Louise did it she felt less guilty. Her mom had manipulated them throughout their childhoods with impossible promises and flat-out lies (*elves are real but you'll only see one if you're absolutely quiet for this entire car ride; I'm allergic to dogs so we can't have one*) and she'd vowed to always be honest and straightforward with her own child. Of course, the second Poppy turned out to be an early talker, Louise had adjusted her approach, but she didn't rely on it nearly as much as her mother. That was important.

"They're really going to cry?" Poppy asked.

Dammit, Mom.

"Yes," Louise said. "And their pages are going to get all wet."

Which, thank God, is when her ringtone activated, playing the hysteric escalating major chords of "Summit" with its frantic bird whistles, which meant the call came from family. She looked at her screen, expecting it to read "Mom&Dad Landline" or "Aunt Honey." Instead it said "Mark."

Her hands got cold.

He needs money, Louise thought. He's in San Francisco and he needs a place to stay. He's been arrested and Mom and Dad finally put their foot down.

"Mark," she said, answering, feeling her pulse snap in her throat. "Is everything all right?"

"You need to sit down," he said.

Automatically, she stood up.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Don't freak out," he said.

She started to freak out.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Mom and Dad are in a better place," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said and carefully put his next sentence together. "They're not suffering anymore."

"I just talked to them on Tuesday," Louise said. "They weren't suffering on Tuesday. You need to tell me what's happening."

"I'm trying!" he snapped, and his words sounded mushy. "Jesus, I'm sorry I'm not doing it the right way. I'm sure you'd be perfect at this. Mom and Dad are dead."

The lights went out all over Southern California. They went out across the bay. They went dark in Oakland and Alameda. Darkness rolled across the Bay Bridge, and Yerba Buena turned as black as the water lapping at its shores. The lights went out in the ferry building, the Tenderloin, and the Theater District; darkness advanced on Louise, street by street, from the Mission to the park to her building, the apartment downstairs, the front hall. The entire world went black except for a single spotlight shining down on Louise, standing in her living room, gripping her phone.

"No," she said, because Mark was wrong about things all the time. He'd once invested in a snake farm.

"They got T-boned on the corner of Coleman and McCants by some asshole in an SUV," Mark said. "I'm already talking to a lawyer. He thinks because it was Mom *and* Dad we're looking at a huge settlement."

This doesn't make any sense, Louise thought.

"This doesn't make any sense," she said.

"Dad was in the passenger seat so, you know, he got it the worst," Mark continued. "Mom was driving, which she totally shouldn't have been doing because, dude, you know how she is at night and it was pouring down rain. The car rolled and it sliced her arm off at the shoulder. It's horrible. She died in the ambulance. I find knowing these details makes it easier."

"Mark . . ." Louise said, and she needed to breathe; she couldn't breathe.

"Listen," he said, soft and slurred. "I get it. You're where I was earlier, but it's important to think of them as energy. They didn't suffer, right? Because our bodies are just vessels for our energy and energy can't feel pain."

Louise's knuckles tightened around her phone.

"Are you drunk?"

He immediately got defensive, which meant *yes*.

"This isn't an easy call for me," he said, "but I wanted to reach out and tell you that everything is going to be okay."

"I need to call someone," Louise said, feeling desperate. "I need to call Aunt Honey."

"Call whoever you want," Mark said, "but I want you to know that everything really is going to be okay."

"Mark," Louise snapped, "we haven't spoken in three years and you get drunk and call and tell me Mom and Dad are . . ." She became conscious of Poppy and lowered her voice. ". . . are not doing well but it's okay because they're energy? It's not okay."

"You should have a drink, too," he said.

"When did it happen?"

Silence on his end of the phone. Then:

"Those details don't matter . . ."

That triggered her internal alarms.

“Yes, they do.”

He made it sound casual.

“Like yesterday around two in the morning. I’ve been dealing with a lot.”

“Forty-one hours?” she said, doing the math.

Her parents had been dead for almost two days and she’d been walking around like nothing happened because Mark couldn’t be bothered to pick up the phone. She hung up.

She looked at Poppy kneeling on the floor by the piano bench whispering to her library books and petting them, and she saw her mom. Poppy had her mom’s blond hair, her delicately pointed chin, her enormous brown eyes, her undersized frame. Louise wanted to swoop down, gather her up, bury her face in the sweet smell of her, but that was the kind of grand theatrical gesture her mom favored. Her mom would never think that it might scare Poppy or make her feel unsafe.

“Was that Granny?” Poppy asked, because she adored her grandmother and had learned to recognize the family ringtone.

“It was just Aunt Honey,” Louise lied, barely holding herself together. “And I need to call your grandmother. You stay here and watch one episode of *PAW Patrol*, and when you’re done we’ll make a special dinner.”

Poppy bounced up. She was never allowed to use the iPad by herself, so the exciting new privilege distracted her from her sad library books and from who’d been on the phone. Louise got her settled on the sofa with the iPad, walked to her bedroom, and closed the door.

Mark had made a mistake. He was drunk. He had once invested thousands of dollars in a Christmas tree factory in Mexico that turned out to be a scam because he had a “gut feeling” about it. Louise needed to know for sure. She didn’t think she could stand it if she called home and no one answered, so she called Aunt Honey.

Her fingers wouldn’t go where she wanted and kept opening her weather app, but finally she managed to make them tap on Aunt Honey’s number in her contacts.

Her aunt (great-aunt, technically) picked up on the first ring.

“What?” she barked through phlegm-clogged vocal cords.

“Aunt Honey,” Louise said, then her throat closed and she couldn’t say anything.

“Oh, Lulu,” Aunt Honey croaked, and those two words contained all the heartbreak in the world.

Everything went very quiet. Louise’s nervous system made a high-pitched tone in her ears. She didn’t know what to say next.

“I don’t know what to do,” she finally said, her voice small and miserable.

“Sweetheart,” Aunt Honey said. “Pack a nice dress. And come home.”

Louise’s mom also had a pathological inability to discuss death. When their uncle Arthur had a heart attack and drove his riding lawn mower through a greenhouse, she’d told Mark and Louise she and their dad were going to Myrtle Beach for a vacation, then parked them with Aunt Honey. When Sue Estes’s older sister died of leukemia in fifth grade, her mom had told Louise she was too young to go to the funeral. Her friendship with Sue was never the same after that. Her mom had claimed to be allergic to all pets, including goldfish, for their entire childhoods, and it wasn’t until Louise got out of grad school that her mom revealed she’d simply never wanted anything in the house that might die.

“It would have upset you and your brother too much,” she’d explained.

When Louise had Poppy, she vowed to be honest about death. She knew that stating the facts plainly would be the best way for Poppy to understand that death was part of life. She would answer all Poppy’s questions with absolute honesty, and if she didn’t know something they’d figure out the answer together.

“I’m going to Charleston tomorrow,” Louise told Poppy that night, sitting on the story-time chair beside her bed, in the glow of the plastic goose lamp. “And I want you to understand why. Your grandmother and grandfather had a very bad accident.” Louise saw safety glass exploding, metal tearing and twisting. “And their bodies got hurt very badly. They got hurt so badly that they stopped working. And your grandmother and grandfather died.”

Poppy shot up in bed, smashing into Louise like a cannonball, wrapping her arms around her ribs too tight, bursting into a long, keening wail.

“No!” Poppy screamed. “No! *No!*”

Louise tried to explain that it was okay, that she was sad, too, that they would be sad together and that being sad when someone died was normal, but every time she started to speak, Poppy wiped her face back and forth against Louise like she was trying to scrape it off, screaming, “*No! No! No!*”

Finally, when she realized Poppy wasn’t going to stop anytime soon, Louise eased herself up onto the bed and held her daughter in her arms until she cried herself to sleep.

So much for explaining death the healthy way.

Louise held Poppy’s feverish, limp body for hours, wishing harder than she’d ever wished before that for just sixty seconds someone would hold her, but no one holds moms.

She remembered her mom holding her in her lap while they sat in Dr. Rector’s waiting room, where it smelled like alcohol swabs and finger pricks, distracting Louise by telling her what all the other children were there for.

“That little boy over there?” her mom had said, pointing to a six-year-old picking his nose. “He picked his nose so much that all he can smell now are his fingerprints. They’re getting him a nose transplant. And that one chewing his mother’s purse strap? They accidentally swapped his brain for a dog’s. That little girl? She ate apple seeds and they’re growing apple trees inside her tummy.”

“Is she going to be all right?” Louise asked.

“Of course,” her mom said. “The apples are delicious. That’s why they’re here. They want Dr. Rector to plant some oranges, too.”

Her mom remembered everyone’s birthday, everyone’s anniversary, everyone’s first day at a new job, everyone’s due date. She remembered every single cousin or nephew or church person’s entire life calendar like it was her job. She wrote notes, she dropped off pies, and Louise couldn’t remember a single birthday when she hadn’t picked up the phone and heard her mom singing the happy birthday song on the other end.

That was all over now. The cards on every occasion, the phone calls on every birthday, the Christmas newsletter going out to however many hundreds of people—none of it would ever happen again.

Her mom had opinions. So many opinions that sometimes Louise felt like she couldn't breathe. *The Velveteen Rabbit* was Louise's favorite book; you should never throw anything away because it could always be reused; children shouldn't be allowed to wear black until they're eighteen; women shouldn't cut their hair short until they turn fifty; Louise worked too hard and should move back to Charleston; Mark was a misunderstood genius simply waiting to find his place in the world.

All those opinions, all her crafting, all her notes and phone calls, her constant need to be the center of attention, her exhausting need to be liked by everyone, her mood swings from euphoric highs to depressed lows, it made her mom who she was, but at an early age it also taught Louise that her mom was unreliable in a way her father was not.

Louise had never seen her dad upset in his life. In middle school she'd recorded *Kurt Cobain Unplugged* over the video of his paper presentation at the Southern Regional Science Association. When he found out, he'd taken a long moment to absorb the information and then said, "Well, that'll teach me to have a big head."

When she wanted to know about electricity he'd showed her how to use an ohmmeter and they'd gone around the house sticking its test probes into wall sockets and touching them to batteries. She'd used her Christmas money that year to go to RadioShack and buy Mims's *Getting Started in Electronics*, and she and her dad had taught themselves to solder, making moisture detectors and tone generators together in the garage.

Louise slid out of Poppy's bed, careful not to wake her, and crept into the kitchen. There was something she needed to do.

She stood in the dark and scrolled through her contacts until she found "Mom&Dad Landline." She looked away while she got her breathing under control, then touched the number.

They still had an answering machine.

"You've reached the Joyner residence," her father's recorded voice said in exactly the same rhythm she'd heard for decades. She knew every pause, every change in inflection in this entire message. She mouthed along with it silently. "We're unwilling or unable to answer the phone right now. Please leave a

clear and detailed message after the tone and we'll call you back at our earliest convenience.”

The machine beeped, and across the country, in her parents' kitchen, Louise heard it click to “record.”

“Mom,” Louise said, her breath high and tight in her throat. “Dad, hey. I was just thinking of you guys. I wanted to call and say hi and see if you're there. Mark called tonight and . . . if you're there . . . if you're there, please pick up.” She waited a full ten seconds.

They didn't pick up.

“I miss you both and I hope you're okay and . . .” She didn't know what else to say. “And I love you. I love you both so much. Okay, bye.”

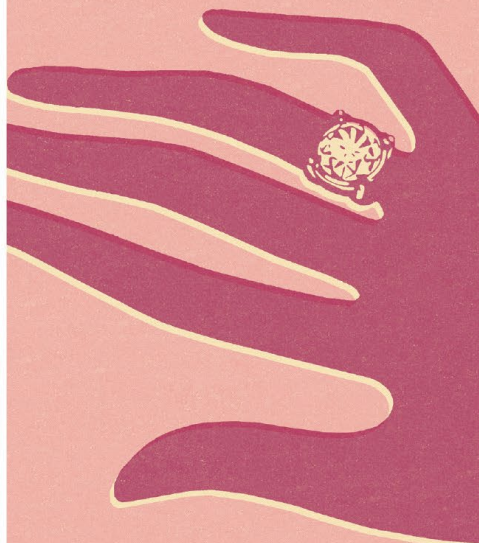
She went to hang up, then pressed the phone to her mouth again.

“Please call me back.”

She hit disconnect, then stood alone in the dark. A sudden sense of certainty filled her entire body and a clear voice spoke inside her head for the first time since it had told her she was pregnant with Poppy:

I'm an orphan now.

mother thing



a novel



ainslie

hogarth

"Gory and irreverent and totally irresistible."

—Courtney Maum, author of *Touch* and *Costalegre*

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1

THE NIGHT RALPH'S MOTHER flayed her forearms, a woman in a red dress handed him a business card. I know how *woman in a red dress* sounds because I thought the same thing at first. When I got back to the ICU waiting room with our sodas, I said, what do you mean *woman in a red dress*, a Jessica Rabbit type came va-va-vooming down the hall, pendulum hips pounding sound waves into the souls of dicks?

Christ, said Ralph. No. He cracked his soda and took half of it down. The dress was floor-length, thick cotton, a chaste cream turtleneck underneath. She would bring ambrosia salad to a church potluck, you know what I mean? Secretly hates her nephews, never swims in public. Would definitely take in and gaslight a feeble sister.

I frowned. What do *you* know about ambrosia salad?

I know it's got marshmallows. Isn't that enough? Then he paused, still hitched to the red-dressed woman's memory: nice

hair, he said, more to himself than to me. Very—he searched for the right word—*muscly* braid, hanging in front of her shoulder all the way down to her waist. White-blond, but not fine. Fuzzy around her face. And those *eyes*.

What about her eyes?

He started with how the woman had glided up to him, gently, as though he might spook. And he might have, absorbed the way he was: elbows on his knees, fingertips together, mesmerized by the slow jellyfish motion he made with his hands. The card appeared in front of his face, and with a whispered spell, *Thank you, sir*, it was in his hand. He looked up, seized so completely by her bottomless brown eyes that the waiting room's relentless torments—flickering fluorescents, tacky surfaces, cast of swollen-eyed kin—evaporated completely.

Then I arrived with the sodas.

Soda because if either of us has more coffee, our colons are going to disintegrate. But we need caffeine, have to stay awake. Poor Ralph isn't leaving this hospital until he knows for sure whether his mother is going to make it. There would be no *go home and get some rest* for Ralph; no *we'll call you when we have more information*. Ralph just wasn't that kind of son.

"Bottomless brown eyes," I repeat, wincing as I open my can, a mysterious habit with an origin I've buried for good reason I'm sure.

"They were strange. Almost *frothing*."

I sip my soda, slurp the rim. "Brown hot tubs."

He frowns. "You're thinking about diarrhea."

"Well, obviously, Ralph. You're thinking about diarrhea too."

"Only because I know that you are."

"Perfect body temperature, thick enough to hold you. Might actually be better than water."

He admits with a shrug that it *would* be nice to sag nearly suspended, perfectly warm, in a pool of slack shit. “It would have to be ethically sourced, of course.”

“Of *course*. Completely voluntary.”

“Naturally. Oh, except . . . well, I don’t know.” He sinks in his seat, starts to bring his hand to his chin, then thinks better of it, reminded by the conversation, perhaps, of all the bodily fluids that’ve passed through these rooms. A sensible instinct that I’ll now try to keep in mind for myself.

“What?”

“I mean, do we want to lounge in the feces of someone who’s old enough to consent to it?”

I shift into the soothing articulation of mutinous AI: “Ethically extracted from exclusively breastfed infants, ORGANICA baths are available in three therapeutic densities, and—” I stop, struck with the realization that hot tubs are essentially artificial wombs: our bootleg attempt to revisit that safest, most perfect, capital-*H* Home, and therefore the worst imaginable thing to be describing to someone whose mother is currently dying. I set my soda down on the side table, drag my hands down my face.

“You really shouldn’t do that in here,” Ralph warns.

And of course he’s right, I’ve forgotten already. I rub my hands on my thighs instead, cleansing them against the exfoliating grain of the denim.

“Maybe we should get a hot tub,” I suggest, a gently used surrogate with deep, jetted seats and a marbled liner.

“I don’t know. Seems like a whole *culture*.” He whispers the word *culture*.

“*Culture*,” I mimic him.

“*Pervert culture*.”

“Plus they’re expensive. And where would we find all that human shit?”

He smiles, blows a little laugh from his nose, then glances warily at the mechanized double doors, which would, sooner or later, wheeze open with information about his mother. His genuine love for her is evident in his expression right now, the muscles of his mouth and forehead clenched, anticipating the loss already, all the luster leeches from his skin.

Her depression had become, it sounds awful to say, just so *grating* in the days leading up to this: *cloying* and *relentless*, with no end in sight as far as she was concerned, having refused all forms of medication and therapy, but now that she was quiet, now that she might be gone, Ralph was being pummeled by the full typhoon of his love for her, one of life’s cruelest tricks, that the extent of this love waits to reveal itself.

I burrow beneath his arm and he pulls me into him, my length along his, ear against his chest, the top of my head grazing his jaw. I draw his hand to my mouth, take a nip of his skin between my teeth, try to suck the sadness from his pores like venom. He shakes it free as he always does when he’s not in the mood for my biting and drinks more of his soda.

Humans like to put their mouths on the things they love. I remember seeing two mothers on the subway once, babies wrapped snug to their chests with their sleep-soft mouths gaping skyward. “Have you chewed on her feet yet?” one mother asked the other. “Oh, *God*, yes,” the other mother replied.

I imagine the gentle pressure I’ll apply to my own baby’s foot one day, practice longingly on my bottom lip, the bounce of her new flesh between my teeth. And how she’ll look at me without recoiling, letting me because she doesn’t know any bet-

ter. She won't even realize that we're not the same person, not for a while.

I'll encourage Ralph to have a bite, and he'll be just delighted. Though he likes their necks best, protected by the pressed flesh of cheek and chest. He likes their translucent fingernails too; the indents of their knuckles and knees; how quickly their profound suspicion becomes puzzled amusement becomes wriggling joy.

I'd chew on Ralph's feet if he'd let me; if it'd soften the razor-sharp edges of what he'd just seen: his own mother, still as seaweed, washed up on the basement carpet, which was so saturated in blood that it squished beneath his feet and wrung pale around his knees when he slid to her side. *No, no, no, no*, he muttered, fumbling for a pulse, relieved to find the gentlest vein still whimpering in her throat.

He screamed, *CALL AN AMBULANCE!* So I did, right away, without asking, without thinking. They said, *Nine one one, what is your emergency?* And I said, *I don't know!* I hollered down to Ralph, *Ralph, what happened?* And he shouted back, *Mom's had an accident, there's blood everywhere*, so that's what I told them: *My mother-in-law's had an accident. There's blood everywhere!* Maybe Ralph didn't realize at first what'd happened, thought she'd *accidentally* snapped her veins against that kitchen knife's cold blade.

A short while later a team of paramedics marched in and, with the orderly calm of ants, strapped her to a gurney and pulled her up the stairs. The ceaseless squeal of their bloody boots against the hardwood, the hymnal repetition of their internal communications, Ralph and I helpless as ghosts. We followed them out the front door, watched them slide her into

the back of the ambulance. “We’re right behind you, Laura!” I shouted, and one of the paramedics nodded at me, as if to let me know that’d been the right thing to say.

And Ralph’s reactions to everything up until this point had been predictable because they were always predictable. Ralph Lamb had never contained a single surprise in his whole life. He was grief-stricken on the way to the hospital, as anyone would be, anxious while they worked on her in emergency, as I was—all the understandable and expected behaviors of a devastated anyone.

But then the doctors finally emerge to tell us that they haven’t managed to save her. They tell us that we need to make arrangements with a funeral home. That they’re very sorry and they did all they could, and do we want the clothes she was brought in? And Ralph, again quite predictably, nods, yes, please, and accepts a clear plastic bag containing her bloody housecoat and nightgown the way a child handles a goldfish won from a carnival, steeled by the magnitude of what’s been passed to him. He brings the bag to his face, evaluating its contents: fabric dense and red and wrinkled as placenta. And that’s when he, quite unpredictably, hands me the business card from the woman in the red dress. “Can you drive me here?” he asks.

I look down at the card. I don’t understand what he’s talking about at first. Cheap white stock, black writing you can feel beneath your thumb: *Find out why.*

I stretch my lungs with a gulp of overprocessed hospital air, hold it till I can figure out what to say, but nothing comes.

“Turn it over,” he says.

I exhale with emphasis. There’s an address on the back, not far from the hospital, along with a picture of a single, lashless eye: almond shaped with a circle and a dot in the middle. I

realize that the woman in the red dress with the bottomless browns and the ambrosia salad recipe is a seer—a medium or a psychic or whatever they prefer to be called. I assume they must have a preference, in which case that should really be on the card too. What if we call her the wrong thing and she takes offense and blinds us both with a spell?

I blink at the card for a moment until a man coughs and I remember that it's late, and there are other people in this ICU waiting room: swollen-eyed kin with their feet out, pinching blankets beneath their chins, trying to make their cumbersome bodies comfortable but also polite, aware that if they're lucky, in a little while they'll lose consciousness, sink, spread, off-gas like great snoring molds, beyond reproach.

Everyone is horizontal-ish except for one woman, maybe a hundred years old, peering so deep into nothing that it has to be something. Some *thing*. Every flap of the woman's flesh—lips, ears, nostrils, eyelids—curls inward. One of her unblinking eyes is as cloudy as Ralph's mother's engagement ring, an oval opal, set in four diamond prongs and an elegant gold band, thin as a hair. She'd promised to give it to Ralph one day when he was ready to propose to someone, but when I came along, and he was ready to propose, she didn't want to anymore, didn't think it suited me and maybe Ralph should check out Kay Jewelers in the mall because Irena had told her they were having a pretty significant sale.

She'd been wearing it tonight when she died. I noticed a plump of blood had parted around it, connecting again at her cuticle, restored, dripped whole from her fingertip. The ring was still shimmering despite the mess, commanding the respect of so much blood.

Ralph and I, we were going to have a baby soon. Soon,

soon, soon. Maybe a girl, who'd be proud to inherit her grandmother's ring, or a boy, who might love someone so much one day that he'll want to claim them with an heirloom. *Selfish not to, Abby, think of the children, Abby.* And an impulse, raw and manic as lightning, screamed through my nerves, sidled the ring up off Laura's bloody finger, and thumbed it deep down into my pocket while Ralph continued to pace, to mutter *no, no, no, no, no, nos*, behind stiff hands, blinders, pressed against his temples.

Right away hot, frantic guilt snatched my chest. The impulse cackled, climaxed and drowsy, distracted enough for me to quickly pull the ring back out of my pocket, start to force it back onto Laura's uncooperative hand. But then the front door banged open, the paramedics thundered down, Ralph stopped muttering and turned to me so I had to hide it again, first in my palm then back into my pocket, the mischievous impulse satisfied, cackling harder as it fluttered away.

Back in the ICU waiting room old Opal-eye blinks, turns her head, fixes her gaze on me, like she knows what I did, what's hiding in my pocket, and a cruel thought violates the folds of my mind, residue left over from the evil impulse: *I got the ring anyway, Laura, it's mine now, isn't it, now that you're dead.* I press my pocket, feel the ring's undeniable *there-ness*. I need to close myself off to mischievous impulses and bad thoughts. But it's hard because no one ever taught me how.

"Can you drive me?" Ralph repeats. I'm still transfixed by the card. *Find out why. Find out why. No, I think, no, I can't drive you to this quack who's going to take all the cash in your wallet, lie to your face, and play with your pain.* And in his right mind, Ralph wouldn't want me to either. In his right mind, he wouldn't have given this card a second thought; he'd have

taken it to be nice of course, because that's the kind of person he is, but then he'd have thrown it away or, more likely, slipped it into his wallet and forgotten about it until it was time to get a new wallet, find it again one day when he was emptying this one and feel low, drift back to this terrible night in the fluorescent ICU and into the bottomless browns of the woman who'd given it to him. I'd ask him what was wrong and he'd tell me what he'd found. I'd make him his favorite dinner from *Secrets of a Famous Chef*—chicken à la king—and give him a nice, enthusiastic blow job before bed.

“Oh, Ralphie,” I say, and pull him close and hold him and start to cry, my poor baby, feeling every bit a thirty-one-year-old orphan. But he's not crying with me. He's assumed the posture of a human cannonball: arms stiff and straight down his sides, chin tucked in like a braced nut sack.

I let go and look him over, sniff the sobs back into my head as though saving them for later. “Okay, listen, I just have to say for the *record*.” I look around at whatever invisible entity stirs to attention when somebody says that, careful, though, to avoid the old woman's knowing opal eye, which may or may not still be fixed on me. “I don't think this is a great idea. You have no idea who this woman is, Ralph, you have no idea what's waiting for you here.” He stares at me, wide eyes battered, exhausted, definitely about to ask me again in the exact same way, *I know, but can you drive me?* And I can't bear to hear it, honestly, if he asks me that way one more time, I'll scream, I really will, scream and startle all the melting, gaseous molds in this waiting room so they sit up and blink at me and shake their heads. “But if this is what you want to do right now, then, yes, I can drive you.”

“Thank you.” He stands up, chugs the dregs of his soda, and

heads for the exit. I quickly gather our things—jackets, garbage, Laura’s bloody clothes—and follow him, retracing our steps from earlier till we finally find the frosted revolving door we came in through.

We both shatter in the freezing cold, confused and isolated as Martians, just landed and groping for truth. I’d felt the same way once before, leaving the casino with Ralph’s mother in a daze, short an entire precious night and an upsetting amount of money. On the drive home she wrangled my wheezing anxiety by promising to just let me handle it, swearing on her good-luck charms not to say a word to Ralph, then as soon as we walked through the door, she plopped her plastic bag of troll dolls on the counter and told Ralph just how much I’d lost, *a decent bite out of your savings, the poor thing*, and halfheartedly begged him not to be mad at me: *Go easy on her, Ralph, she’s so ashamed.*

I’d never been to a casino before in my life and I haven’t been back since. I just got so carried away with the lights and the bells and everything so dreadful and cold and eternal. Ralph’s mother loved the slots. She loved her rituals and her charms and I was hoping that I would go with her and she’d win lots of money and she’d love me as much as one of her grinning, big-bellied troll dolls.

“Ralph.” He’s marching ahead of me, warm huffs caught and held by the cold. Winter never lets you forget you’re alive. Maybe that’s why it makes people sad. “Ralph!” Louder this time. “Slow down!”

He spins around. “Sorry. I just want to get away from there.”

“It’s okay.” I catch up to him, pass him his coat. “Do you have cash? We’re going to need cash I think.”

“Oh, good point.” Feeding his arms through the sleeves,

ousting the hat I'd shoved there hours ago. He picks it up, smacks the snow from it. Keeps walking toward the car. "How much?" he yells over his shoulder.

"I don't know." I punch my arms through my own coat sleeves, catch my neck with my scarf. "But it can't be cheap, can it? I mean if a massage is a hundred dollars, then surely talking to the dead is going to be more."

"I know you're making fun of me, but that makes sense."

"I'm actually not even making fun of you, I think it makes sense too." I dig my hand into my coat pocket, press the lock button on the car keys a few times. "There." I point in the direction of the honks.

Ralph changes course accordingly. "Okay, so let's just take out, I don't know, two hundred bucks? Does that seem reasonable?"

"Sure." I nod, ducking into the driver's seat. Ralph ducks in after me. "Two hundred, just in case."

Inside Ralph's mother's car it always smells like a refrigerator drawer. Another good-luck charm, a pair of fuzzy pink dice, sways from the rearview mirror. Ralph is nervous, hands clasped and pulsing between his knees, curly hair peeking from beneath his hat in boyish hooks that break my heart.

I drive us to the all-night ATM drive-through, which is new to the area, and usually very busy, but not at 1:30 a.m. on a Thursday night. The big yellow poles meant to guide your car along the side of the building are wrapped in garlands of plastic pine needles, a few in silver-and-red wrapping paper. Happy holidays from the bank, because why not? Though a full month into the new year it seems they should have taken all of this down by now. The charm of holidays preserved only by the fact of their passing, and the bank should know better than to

toy with people's emotions this way. Usually institutions are very respectful of these types of rules, and it gives the lingering garlands an ominous feel.

It'd been Ralph's last Christmas with his mother. My first. "I'm sorry I couldn't get out and get you anything," she'd said on Christmas morning, rubbing her knees through her housecoat, every word a great, quivering labor.

"Oh, Mom, that's okay." Ralph reached over, squeezed her hand.

"It's not okay, I should have gotten you something, even something little, everything you've done for me already, moving in here to take care of me and I can't even be bothered to get you a card? I'm just so selfish, just so unbelievably selfish. It makes me sick. I make myself sick."

I stood listening in the kitchen, sipping coffee and Baileys. So far Ralph had been good about not taking the bait, using the various methods he'd cultivated since moving out a decade ago to steel himself against her influence. It took Ralph a long time to become his own person, or at least something resembling his own person, freed from the responsibility of keeping his mother alive. She was always trying to extract compliments from him, forgiveness, reassurance that she was a good person, a good mother. It used to be that Ralph *had* to participate, had to rise to her needling, otherwise she might just go ahead and kill herself. I'd told him she'd never, ever do that—that it was a method, a manipulation, a lie.

"We're going to have a great Christmas," I'd heard Ralph say, but she'd been weeping too heavily to reply.

I spent the morning on Baileys, Bloody Marys in the afternoon, small amounts of controlled, intentional poisoning. "I'm

facing my darkest period head-on,” Laura said when she’d wandered into the kitchen for her cigarettes, “no drugs, no alcohol.” At that point I was deep into the wine coolers, mashing cream cheese and mayonnaise and sharp cheddar together to form a cheese ball, which I ate half of all by myself, then couldn’t shit till New Year’s.

The ATM machine is beeping, it wants things from me: my approval, my particulars. It rewards my obedience with money, fresh and hot from the oven.

I put the money in my wallet, slide it into my back pocket. Its folded heat emanating into my butt cheek. “God,” I say, squirming into the heat a little. “No wonder this place is so busy all the time.”

The address on the card is just a few blocks away now. I try to drive as quietly as I can, crunching slow over delicate snow in this middle-of-the-night dark. Some houses are still done up with lights and wreaths and grinning reindeer, and some are not; all of them quiet and sleeping and trusting the world not to fuck with them. Long icicles drool from the snarling grills of parked cars, just in case.

We pull up to a Laundromat in a small brick plaza, unexpected on an otherwise residential street. It’s flanked by a dreamily lit florist on one side and an intimidatingly laid-back take-out restaurant on the other, offering only full hot chickens and radioactive slaw.

“This is it,” I whisper.

Ralph nods, careful not to make noise. It’s unwise to stand out from quiet, middle-of-the-night dark. Like how your body has to imitate water to stay alive in it, arms and legs undulating with the waves to keep your head up and breathing. This

quiet, middle-of-the-night dark could drown you if you didn't conform to it completely. Especially here, now, parked in front of this strange Laundromat in the hour after Laura's death. If we're too loud or bright, her spirit, sore and confused, might spot us, smash the car windows, pull us screaming and clawing into a glowing red crack in the pavement.

Then I notice it, wedged in the corner of the Laundromat's big frosty window: the small, lashless eye from the business card. Red. Winking neon.

"Look," I say.

"I see."

We stare at it, huffing steam into the air together.

"So, what now?" I ask.

Ralph stares at it in silence for a long time until he finally closes his eyes, drops his head. "Let's go home."

I squeeze his hand. "Okay."

And I start to drive.

Back to Ralph's childhood home, where he first lived with a mother and a father, then just a mother, then a mother and a wife, and now just a wife.

The house is in a neighborhood of tall, proper homes that'd been erected tight as matches within walking distance of what had been an extremely successful gin distillery. Similar, but not identical, appointed with enough thoughtful detail to harvest boundless loyalty in the employees for whom they'd originally been built.

Now the century-old distillery is a popular event venue. Mostly weddings. On Sunday mornings Ralph's mother would sniff around the alley for discarded centerpieces and flower arrangements, accompanied from time to time by Irena from

next door, and Irena's dog, Cud, a fourteen-year-old Pomeranian, which hung from her hip like a colostomy bag and always had a look on his face like you'd forgotten to wish him a happy birthday.

Ralph and I would roll our eyes at each other when Laura elbowed her way through the back door, arms in full bloom, obscuring her face like the poor disguise of a very inept spy.

"I know you think it's crazy," she'd say, "I can feel your looks"—slamming the vase on the table for emphasis, actually mad, not a joke—"but what's crazy is letting a hundred-dollar centerpiece go to waste!" To Laura, collecting these centerpieces simply made good sense, consistent with the meticulous penny-pinching she'd employed without shame to buy this house, and feed her son, and put him through school.

This steady supply of \$100 centerpieces, rotting through wedding season, gave the house a damp, jungle-ripe quality you could taste. I could taste it now, that same humid influence, but different. Like a river of gore had rerouted itself through the house on its way out of hell.

I'd half expected the house to absorb the blood, suck it into its bones and hold on to Laura forever. A little loyalty to its longtime master, not this sprawling, indifferent mess.

Ralph is staring at the paramedics' bloody boot prints, fingers straight against his temples again, rubbing, as though trying to work an explanation from the chaos of dragged heels and clipped treads. It was one of the curses of Ralph's brain, to always be looking for answers, Brain insisting that they existed, of course, they just had to be figured out, and then everything would be fine.

"Ralph." I grab his arm, pull him from his trance. "Go to

bed. When you wake up, all of this will be gone, okay? You're not allowed to say no, you have to go."

"Abby, it's two in the morning. You're exhausted."

"You're exhausted. Go upstairs or I'll beat you up." I make a fist and graze it against his chin, then quickly kiss where I've touched him, like, don't make me hit you, baby, because I love you, but I will.

He smiles and hugs me. I seep through his arms like Play-Doh. There's no greater feeling than being squished to death by Ralph. "Good night, my love," I croak, lungs at half capacity. "You're gonna feel better tomorrow."

I feel him nod into my shoulder, then he releases me and goes up to bed.

I open the pantry, all of her cleaning products on the bottom shelf so they didn't leak into anything else and poison us. Laura told me a story about that, a family who kept a leaky drain-clog remover above their potatoes and onions under the sink, slowly poisoned to death by it, the whole family, incremental symptoms like a plague: diarrhea, then vomiting, then motor function decay. Cleaning products are serious chemicals. If you drink them, you die.

I feel angry with Laura that she didn't just quietly gulp some of these neon poisons: a few bundles of froth to clean from around her mouth, maybe, *maybe* some diarrhea, a nice lady-size amount, sub-spa-grade ORGANICA gracefully contained by her pants. A Virginia Slims suicide: Laura wearing a coral button-up shirt and white ankle-length chinos, sprawled peacefully on a spotless kitchen floor, limbs lean, bent ladylike, an empty tumbler glazed in electric blue rolling from her lifeless hand.

I fill a bucket with lemon-scented, biodegradable suds and kneel at the craze of bloody prints. Run my fingers along the stubborn ridges of her dried blood, let my sponge inhale a few rounds of soapy water, then empty it over the mess. The prints liquefy, invade one another before disappearing. Quickly they're almost gone. Maybe with them, their memory: in the morning Ralph will have forgotten about his mother completely, forgot he ever even had a mother. Tomorrow Ralph will be a man born spontaneously, a miracle, appearing with a pop and falling sparkle next to a stream; a wayward water-lily boy, deep in one of the last magical forests on earth: glowing fresh skin speckled with sun, gummy mouth wide and crying from the shock of suddenly being alive, jerking his tight fists in the novel way babies do, curiously protective of their palms. Tomorrow Ralph will be a man raised by the wildflowers and critters of the forest, which will be alive forever as long as we buy biodegradable soap.

When the water in the bucket pinks to red, I empty it, refill the water, feed it more glugs of biodegradable soap. It works everywhere but in the basement, where I discover it's worthless against so much blood-steeped carpet. I scrub and scrub and make everything worse.

One last thing to do before I go to sleep: put the opal ring in my tiny Kay Jewelers box, put that tiny box into a resealable plastic bag, boil a pot of water, and pour it slowly over a concentrated patch of frozen ground in the backyard. This way I'm able to penetrate the soil with a spade, dig a decent enough hole, bury the ring in the trembling shadow of a bare, brain-shaped bush where Ralph will never, ever, find it.

It's nearly morning by the time I wash up and snuggle in

next to Ralph, whose snore skips a beat to squeeze me in his sleep, then resumes as though nothing had happened. I fall asleep in an instant, knowing that downstairs the house is clean, the ring is hidden, and when Ralph wakes up, he'll be a wayward water-lily boy, born from the earth, and Laura will never have existed at all.



DAPHNE

A NOVEL

JOSH
MALERMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BIRD BOX*

Daphne is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are 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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First Edition

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A tie game with summer-league rivals, friends and family in the bleachers, the ball in your hand at the free-throw line, is no time to ask the rim a question. Yet that's what Kit Lamb does. Even as she lifts the ball, elbow in, left hand supporting, even as it seems like nothing could chop her focus, and nothing has yet, not in this game, not even when she made the and-one that led to this moment. A question for the rim:

Will Daphne kill me?

Kit almost laughs as she releases the ball. There's a hitch in the shot to be sure. She's embarrassed of her own question, even if nobody else could've heard.

The ball leaves her fingertips, the gym is haunted-house quiet. But the question remains suspended in her head. And with it, the image of the woman Daphne, Kit's own idea of her, the horrid centerpiece of Natasha Manska's Samhattan myth; Daphne in denim, Daphne with patches, Daphne the madwoman who smells of smoke and whiskey.

The ball goes through the net.

So, that's a yes. An answer Kit doesn't have time to think about right now.

Chaps inbound quick from the baseline, but one second is not enough for their star forward to get off a full-court shot.

Samhattan wins.

By one.

Kit is mobbed by her teammates. So many howling voices, so much love. None louder than Dana, who is as sweaty as Kit; Dana, who shot a meager one for eleven but got the steal that led to Kit's game-winning three-point play.

"Legend!" Dana yells. "*Legend!*"

Kit can't stop smiling. As they lift her up, as friends and schoolmates rush the floor. As music explodes through the gymnasium PA.

Even as she worries too.

Not about the answer the rim gave her. Not about that *yes*. Not yet.

For Kit Lamb, success never feels entirely *true*. In moments when she's supposed to be the winner, it's more like she's in a theatrical reproduction of someone else's victory.

"*LE-GEND!*" the other ballers shout.

She can see the players from Chaps on their knees, yes, heads hanging, yes. But did this really happen? Did she hit the game-winning free throw with one second to play?

"Holy shit," she says, rising up now on the shoulders of her teammates, her best friends. "Holy *shit!*"

It's all becoming real now. The inviolability of this moment. It's replaying behind her eyes. Or, rather, before them, as if she's home, watching the triumphant sequence on *SportsCenter*. Who cares if there's less than forty people in the gym?

Who cares about absolutely anything else in the entire world?

"*Legend!*" Dana shouts again. Her visage: ardent mirth. Other girls pick up the shout. Even the parents holler. Kit's own looked happily stunned. They even look a little younger. Coach Wanda steps before them and nods Kit's way just as she's interrupted: she's

gotta shake the hand of Chaps's head coach. Wanda stresses this all the time: sportsmanship. No matter how much it hurts. But Kit is impressed her coach acknowledged decorum when it feels this *good*.

Who can think of anything else?

The lights look particularly bright in the rafters. The gym feels like a mecca. A heaven. Nirvana. Kit has arrived somewhere. No, she doesn't think this means she'll be playing in the WNBA (though the vision does cross her mind; Betnijah Laney seeing this shot, Sue Bird winking); rather, she's fantasized about this exact scenario a hundred thousand times, as Coach Wanda made the girls shoot free throws after every practice, at their most tired, at their worst, like they would be in a game. The place Kit has arrived is not a location but a goal: she is living a fantasy, and the fantasy is no longer that.

This is true. Every bit of it.

But . . .

. . . is the answer the rim gave her also true?

Will Daphne kill me?

Yes.

And so maybe it's not so improbable, after all, thinking of something else.

“LEGEND!”

Everybody is saying it, in rhythm, a chant. *Le-gend*. As if Kit Lamb at the free-throw line will one day be immortalized in stained glass high up the brick walls of the Samhattan High School gymnasium. The communal word echoes off the ceiling, curls out those open windows, circles Kit's head like cartoon birds in a dream.

LE-GEND

LE-GEND

Like the legend of Daphne, told to the ballers last night, in the dark of Dana's living room. Almost the entire team slept there to ensure nobody would stay up too late before the big game, yet wasn't it Natasha's story of the Woman Who Could Not Be Killed, the lumbering seven-foot colossus in denim, wasn't it that very story that kept Kit up all night, eyeing the darkness, thinking the very question she would eventually ask the rim at the free-throw line tonight?

Will Daphne kill me?

Like she killed so many others . . .

"Fuck this," she says, still held aloft.

Because this is not the time to feel bad. Now is not the time to punish herself for feeling good.

Smiling (tempered now, though, and do her best friends notice?), she tries to remember a phrase she saw online, wrote down in her journal. Strong words that, she's long hoped, might deter the next all-out panic attack.

"Why are you thinking about that?" she asks herself.

No, this is *not* the time to be thinking about panic. Anxiety. Fear.

But she's asked it. And, despite the cacophony in here, she heard herself ask it.

And the tremble she heard in her voice reminds her of the first she ever heard there:

The night she called 911 on herself.

Hello? I think I'm dying . . .

She looks to the gym doors. Sees they're closed. Okay. She breathes a little better. Why? She doesn't know. A feeling. Security. Nobody can get in without opening a door first. She looks to her friends below. Glad for the people she sees. Checks for another. One she might not know.

She wears makeup, Natasha said last night. To hide her blue face.

“Aren’t you so happy right now?” Natasha asks. She’s holding up Kit’s right leg. Natasha hasn’t made a basket all year. Natasha is one of the funniest people Kit knows. That’s why hearing her tell that story last night was so unsettling.

Nothing funny about that one.

“Kit,” Natasha says, “they’re gonna hang your fuckin’ jersey from the rafters.”

“Easy,” Coach Wanda says, stepping into the crush of players (and friends now, right? Yes, Kit recognizes their faces, all of them; good). Coach extends a hand up to Kit. “Heck of a shot, Lamb.”

Kit shakes the hand. Doesn’t want to think of the question she asked the rim but thinks of the question she asked the rim.

The rim has never lied to Kit. Not once.

And here the rim said *yes*.

Stop it now, she tells herself. *You fucking won*. Then, to all: “*We fucking won!*”

Coach Wanda is trying to get the girls to stop swearing, but it’s no use. Kit Lamb just hit the fucking game-winning free throw with a second to go on the holy-shit clock.

Let the ballers howl. Let them shout *legend* till they’re blue in the face.

Kit thinks of that, *blue in the face*, as the world continues to blur with excitement. She thinks of Natasha’s story, the seven-footer named Daphne dying in her car, parked in her own garage, her bare hands gripping the wheel long after she died.

They say Samhattan’s paramedics pried those fingers loose with wrenches.

They say Samhattan’s bogeywoman was blue in the face.

“*Kit!*” someone shouts. Should sound like unbridled joy. Sounds more like warning.

Kit looks to the doors. One is open.

Is she going to have a panic attack . . . *right now?*

“Kit Lamb for the win!”

She might. She knows this amplification well. It comes unannounced, of course. Nobody hears a panic attack coming. Not until it’s too close to dodge.

“Kit!” Dana shouts. *“We love you!”*

Kit smiles. Tempered, though.

“You stole the ball!” she calls back. And Dana makes a muscle with one arm. It’s funny. Kit should remember it forever. Will she? Or will her memory of this night always be centered on the anxiety she feels, held high in the sky on the shoulders of soulmates?

She wants to cry. So much triumph. So much love.

“KI-IT! KI-IT!”

It’s the nature of panic that it is *believed* by the sufferer. Kit’s never read about somebody avoiding an attack by telling themselves they’d gotten through the last one.

“Okay, let me down,” Kit says. Not loud enough for her friends to hear. There’s heat at the base of her neck. Always the place it begins.

She looks to Dana. To Natasha. To Coach Wanda. To the doors. To those windows high up the brick walls.

Will Daphne kill me?

No. She refuses to let this question continue.

“Daphne is a fucking myth,” she says.

But she’s thinking about her. Thinking about Daphne.

“A *myth*,” she repeats. Her voice tiny on the spectrum of sound in the gym. There’s Mom and Dad. There’s Emily Holt. Beck Nelson. Kennedy Lichtenstein. Tammy Jones.

Friends.

Family.

“Myth . . .”

Something incredible, something unexpected, something rare happens: Kit talks the heat away.

“And this?” she says. “This is real, Kit. This is your life.”

The anxiety ebbs. Pride in the shot she made exists alone, untouched, untethered.

As it should.

Now isn’t the time for myth.

Now is the time for legend.

She raises her arms and howls, and everybody in the gym are wolves with her.

And soon they lower her back down to the gym floor. The floor on which she just shot the shot of her life.

“Pizza,” Natasha says.

“Yes,” Kit says.

But first, Kit finds Coach Wanda.

“Thanks for believing in me,” she says.

Coach imitates shooting a free throw with perfect form, the same way she’d been teaching the girls to shoot them for years.

“Go eat,” she says. “Go be happy.”

Kit smiles, but Coach’s words feel large.

Go be happy . . .

Is she? Can she be?

No heat at the base of her neck. But a long battle seems to stretch out before her. She sees it extending through the walls of the far side of the gym: all of life, linear, ahead. And anxiety, panic, somewhere in the shadows off to either side of the path. Whatever path she and her best friends take from here.

The question returns, yes:

Will Daphne kill me?

But the question is lost, for now, in the blind bliss of friends

unaware of how close they stand to that path. And lost, too, in the sudden mob of teammates pulling Kit across the floor, toward the locker room, toward the rest of the night, what should be the best night of her life.

Just before getting there, she looks to the closest rim, the one she saw the ball, her ball, sail through.

“Yo, cheeseball,” Natasha says. “You gonna kiss it? Come on, already. Let’s go.”

The rim’s never lied to Kit Lamb before.

“Coming,” she says.

And she follows Natasha and the others into the locker room, where rapid voices discuss big things, even if some of them are disguised as small. And as she approaches the celebration, Kit thinks no, the rim’s never lied to her before.

Then, more celebratory howling. Including Kit herself.

And everybody in the locker room are wolves with her.



Kit Lamb’s Jolly Journal—The Day Before the Big Game

People say you can’t leave a paper trail when you’re committing a crime, and so this feels like I’m committing a crime. I’m doing it this way, freehand, to hide it (these WORDS, yo) from ever getting out online or anywhere close to that. THAT’S WHY (and this feels big): I’m writing it on actual . . . paper. Amazing, yeah? Yeah. Mom and Dad, if you ever read this, please recognize how backwards the world is: it’s now NOT a paper trail when you use paper because nobody reads this shit. Ha. In FACT, if someone were to find my Jolly Journal (oh, how I love that ironic name), they would probably throw it out, thinking it had fallen out of the pocket of the year 1990. So, like I said: hello Journal, I am here to tell you secrets, to hide things, big things, like:

How I really feel about the world.

Okay. Everybody is different and everybody has their own take, their own feelings, their own worldview, but some of us like to keep ours safe. It's not that I don't want anybody to know the real me, it's just . . .

There are parts of me I like and parts I do not and anyway I would like them all kept behind glass before I know exactly what I want to do with them.

Capiche?

What's that, Jolly? What are the parts I like?

HA. We'll get to that. But I can say a couple easy ones for now: I'm a good friend. This is true. And I'm brave. Sort of. Brave insomuch as I'm scared all the time but I keep plugging away and so I must be brave. This is mostly true. I do not hide from my biggest enemy. I face it. Mostly. HELLO, enemy of mine, THY NAME IS:

ANXIETY

Was that supposed to feel good? Writing it down? I think it was. I know it was. That's what I read online. All over the place people tell you it's better to talk about it. They say you'll go mad if you keep it bottled up inside. But here's the thing: if you're not freaking out, the last thing you wanna talk about is freaking out. And if you ARE freaking out, well, ha, then the LAST thing you wanna talk about is freaking out.

You see my problem, Jolly?

Yes. You do.

And it didn't feel good. Writing it down. It felt huge and now I wanna cross it out. Maybe that's because I wrote it in all caps. But hey, that's how I do. If I'm gonna do, I do. That's how I do. That's how we all do. Still, let's try it again, but smaller:

anxiety

Okay. Wow. That looks more like it. Feels more like it too. It's small and lowercase and sneaks up on you and takes you DOWN. Holy shit, does it take you down. And there's no explanation for it, is there?

I saw a ton of that online too. A ton of good stuff about how there is no rational reason and so, Kit? STOP LOOKING FOR ONE. And oh boy, I can relate to that. I've looked for the reason all over my room, all over the house. All over my head. Because how can you expect someone to just . . . take it . . . without knowing why? Hey, look at me, I'm nervous! Why? Well . . . I don't know why. And guess what? What? That makes me . . .

. . . more nervous.

Here's a word that comes up a lot: COMPOUNDS

People love using that word because . . . it's true. It's like cycles, right? One bad feeling comes (anxiety) and then a second bad feeling (shame for feeling anxiety) and then a third round (anger for feeling shame) and a fourth and it feels like you're getting punched in the stomach when all you're really doing is sitting at a table during lunch and listening to your friends and, OH NO, all the bad feelings arrive, they're all here.

In town.

In YOU.

It's infuriating, isn't it? You're not allowed to think about it (anxiety) or else it comes but if you don't think about it . . . it comes.

Not real fair.

Listen, Jolly, tomorrow is a big game. Playing Chaps in the Summer League finale. I can only guess Diana Taurasi doesn't write down how scared she is before the WNBA finals. But I could be wrong. Maybe that's exactly what she does. And maybe that's why she's fearless?

She doesn't let things compound. She gives it all a head fake and all that bad shit goes flying by and she's got an open lane and—

Oh, what do I know about her in real life? She's extraordinary. What do I know about extraordinary?

SECRET: I want to be extraordinary too.

What do I need to do? Sign me up.

Tonight, we're all sleeping at Dana's to "make sure we all get some rest," but really we all just want to hang out and I think maybe it's because we're all actually scared. I like to think I'm not alone on that front. I'm not the only one who lies in bed in the dark and worries that anxiety is gonna come squishing up the stairs like a worm, crawl under my door, crawl up my bed frame, into my bed, into my ear, into my head, into my mind, where it'll lay eggs and then there won't just be this one thought but a thousand of this one thought, like a planet with tons of moons, all in my head, these worms crawling around in the dark while I lie in the dark and the only thing I can do is to wait for them all to die.

That's it, Jolly. The only real cure I've discovered at least.

You just gotta wait for the anxiety to die.

Oy.

Okay. Gonna get ready for Dana's and for the game tomorrow.

Think we'll win?

I wanna say yes.

And so, you know what?

Yes.

But if you say a thing, does that make it so? Or does that make it not so? Does it support it? Or does it jinx it?

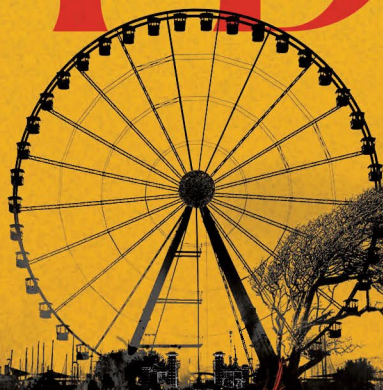
Sorry, Jolly. I'm a handful.

But at least I'm trying. And by the next time I talk to you, the game will have been played.

Who knows? Maybe I'll walk out of the gym a hero, my mind empty of all this clutter. Maybe I'll play so freakin' good my enemy will leave me alone, noble in defeat, aware that even someone as ordinary (but potentially extraordinary) as Kit Lamb deserves a break from too much thinking.

We shall see, Jolly. We shall seeeeeeeeee

HIDE



KIERSTEN
WHITE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Hide is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are 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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THE AMAZEMENT PARK OPENED IN 1953.

GET LOST IN THE FUN! posters advertised, and it was true: Crowds surged through the gates in the morning and didn't stumble out again until the sun had set, and spotlights at the exit guided them free. The maps were useless, the You Are Here guides impossible to find. It was a park designed to swallow. Trees loomed over lush grounds. Signature topiary lined every walled and wandering path, adding to the sense of wonder. Roller coasters, swings, carousels, games, houses of love and fun and terror—though the house at the very center was always closed for refurbishment.

The park was open from mid-May until early September. WHITES ONLY was on signs in the early years, heavily implied when such a thing became harder to officially declare. And, for one week every seven years, it was free. The gates would swing wide, and the summer migrant workers and distant relatives of the wealthy townfolk, normally too poor to enjoy something designed purely for escape, would wander in, wide-eyed. There were no ticket sales, no attendance numbers, just a joyfully packed park.

In 1974, during the free week, a prominent businessman from upstate decided to visit. He hadn't been invited, but he was considering investing since a cousin-of-a-cousin owned the park. He wanted to see the attractions for himself first, though. He brought along his wife and two children and made it a holiday.

Their little girl, five, was never seen again.

One of the migrant workers was arrested for her murder, but the negative publicity left a stain that didn't wash out. So the Amazement Park closed its gates.

Eventually, the rumors died. The plants grew. Nature slowly co-opted the buildings, the rides, the roller coasters. What didn't crumble rusted, and what didn't rust leaned, and what didn't lean sagged under the weight of ivy and neglect.

Somewhere, very close to the center—the house that was always closed, where few ever even got, owing to the odd layout of the park—a shoe had caught on the low branches of a topiary. Unchecked, the verdant beast slowly grew higher and higher until the shoe was eye level.

It was patent leather, dulled and cracked with weather and time. The perfect size for a five-year-old foot.

IT TAKES MONEY TO MAKE MONEY, her dad used to say.

He also once said *Come out, come out, wherever you are*, dragging the knife along the wall as music to accompany the dying gasps of her sister. Mack might have imagined the gasps, though. Who could say.

She couldn't, and even if she could, she wouldn't.

She's not saying anything right now, either, sitting across from the manager. The meeting was mandatory, a "shelter requirement," though she's been here several months now and this is the first one.

"Come on, Mackenzie. Help me help you." The woman's smile is painted on like her cheekbones and eyebrows, and just as artfully. Her expression doesn't shift at all in the face of Mack's silence. It's impressive. Does she do stamina reps in the quiet dark of her bedroom, lifting the corners of her lips over and over, careful not to disrupt her eyes?

The manager clasps her hands together, fingernails painted dark red. "I'll be honest with you. Things are going to change around here. I believe that we can help only those willing to help themselves. These shelters have stagnated—no hope, no progress. How can we live in a society without progress?"

The voice is animated, but the eyes remain untouched by the sentiments or the smile. Expressionless. Like they're hidden behind something. Mack feels an odd affinity for this woman, along-

side an instinctive wariness. But she disagrees. The point of a shelter isn't progress. It's *shelter*.

"I've looked at your file." The woman gestures to a blank manila folder on the desk. Mack suspects it's empty. She hopes it is. "It's bad luck you're here. I understand. No social safety net to fall back on. A few months without a job, without rent, and it's hard to dig yourself out. You need to move on with your life. Contribute to humanity. All you need is a little good luck first."

"Donation bins could use tampons more than luck." Mack's voice is soft and dry with disuse.

The woman cracks, something triumphant behind her eyes. Mack shouldn't have spoken. The woman holds up an envelope. "It just so happens, some luck has come in the mail. Whether it's good is really up to you. Right now, it's an opportunity. And I think you're perfect for it."

Mack has never been perfect for anything in her life. *Perfect* feels like a foreign word, stiff and uncomfortable. But maybe it's a job. A little money to get presentable and she'll have an actual chance. As long as they don't pry. As long as they don't look too closely. She could make it work.

She takes the sheet of paper the woman slides across the desk. It's thick. It feels expensive. Mack is suddenly aware of her hands—her bitten fingernails, her shiny burned palms, her ragged cuticles. If she sets down the paper, will she leave a smudge? It's hard to be embarrassed at this point in her life, but the idea wriggles beneath her skin.

She's so worried about leaving a fingerprint—one that will somehow count against her in this imaginary job interview—that it takes her several seconds to process what she's reading.

"Is this a joke?" she whispers.

The woman's smile doesn't budge. "I know it sounds like one. But I assure you it's legitimate."

"Who told you?"

Finally, the woman's cheeks relax, and her eyebrows draw close. "What do you mean? Who told me what? That it's legitimate?"

About me, Mack thinks. *Who told you about me?* But the woman's confusion can't be feigned. Can it? If she can paint on a face, can she paint on emotions, too? Mack drops the letter. There are no fingerprints. But the words have left smudges across her mind.

"Why are you giving this to me?" Mack knows how lost she sounds, how scared, but she can't help it. "Why *me?*"

The woman laughs, a single dismissive burst. "I know it seems silly. The Olly Olly Oxen Free Hide-and-Seek Tournament. It's a children's game, for god's sake. But it's a chance to win fifty thousand dollars, Mackenzie. You could use that to actually move up in the world. You're young. You're intelligent. You're not a thief, you're not an addict. You shouldn't be here."

No one should be here. They all still are.

The woman leans forward intently. "It's run by an athletic company, Ox Extreme Sports. I can put in a good word and get you registered. There's no guarantee you'd win, but—I think you have a shot. It's more about endurance than anything else. Besides, you strike me as someone who's good at hiding."

Mack's chair scrapes back, jarring them both. But Mack can't be in this room, can't think, not while she's being looked at. Not while she's being *seen*. The woman doesn't know about Mack's history, and still, somehow she *knows*.

"Can I think about it," Mack states. It's not a question.

"Of course. But let me know by tomorrow. If you don't want the spot, I'm sure someone else will. It's a lot of money, Mackenzie. For a silly game!" The woman laughs again. "I'd enter it myself, but I can't go more than twenty minutes without needing to pee." She waits for Mack to laugh, too.

She's still waiting as Mack slides out through the door, not even a whisper in her wake.

Everything about the shelter is designed to remind them that nothing is theirs. There are no lockers. No alcoves. No closets. No bedrooms. In a featureless box of a space, the ceiling looming so far overhead a bird lives in the beams, there are cots. Each has the

same stiff white sheets and scratchy blankets. The area beneath the cots is to be kept clear at all times. They are not allowed to use the same cot more than two nights in a row. Anything not cleared by nine A.M. will be confiscated and thrown out, so they can't even leave their meager possessions on the cot that is not theirs.

When the cots are all filled, Mack is as good as hidden. She's small. She's quiet. But now she feels as though a spotlight has been trained on her. Everyone else has already cleared out for the day. Some will go to whatever work they've found. Several will sit outside on the sidewalk until they're allowed back in at four P.M. The rest, who knows. Mack doesn't ask. Mack doesn't tell. Because she goes somewhere she doesn't want any of them to know about, either.

Hidden behind a half wall, choked with the scent of burning dust, an old water heater sizzles and rages. She has permanent shiny burns on her hands from where she scales the water heater, wedges herself between walls, and shimmies up.

The bird in the beams she has named Bert. It's been building a nest, finding scraps of trash, even hair. But what is it building it for? How will it find a mate, have eggs? Won't it live forever alone, safe and protected in the dusty dark up there? Mack lies on her stomach all day, three beams over from Bert, just existing. Patient and empty like the nest. And then when it's four P.M., she shimmies down and joins the weary throng claiming a cot that will never be their own.

She'll be able to think up in her spot by the bird, safe and hidden. But she has until tomorrow to decide. Maybe she won't think until then.

She stops midstride.

All the cots are stripped. Including the one she used last night. The one she left her pack on because she wasn't allowed to bring anything into her mandatory meeting. For *security* reasons.

Her pack is gone, which means she now owns only what she's wearing. Which means she can't even wash her clothes without

standing over the sink, naked. And what public restroom will let her do that? She'll be noticed. She'll be seen.

She knows better than to ask the women who run the shelter to return her bag. They won't, and she'll be labeled trouble. Her time here is over. She can't sink beneath what little security she already had. She's seen what it looks like, what it costs.

Olly olly oxen free. A gradual corruption of the phrase "All ye outs come free." But nothing is ever free.

In the office, the blond woman's smile has not dropped a single millimeter, as though she was waiting. As though she knew.

"Okay," Mack whispers. "I'll do it." *Come out, come out, wherever you are*, he sings in her head.

She won't. She'll win.

And after all, her life doesn't depend on it this time.

FOURTEEN COMPETITORS. Seven days. The list is set. Arrangements have been made for delivery inside the park—food, gas for the generator, blankets and cots and whatever else is needed. Supplies have been gathered for outside the park. Cellphone jammers. Movies and books for the interminable wait. Power washers for the inevitable ending.

The list is distributed, along with photos. Everyone is expected to memorize it. Few do. The competitors are tacked onto the wall at Ray's diner one by one. No one is supposed to bet on the outcome—it's strictly against the rules—but it doesn't stop them from ranking, making predictions, picking a favorite. The competitors can be divided into two groups.

Those who are best described as aspiring:

- A social media fitness model
- A graffiti artist
- A YouTube prank-show host
- An app developer-slash-house sitter
- A jewelry designer-slash-dog walker
- A zealous CrossFit instructor
- An actress with severe food allergies

Those who are best described as stalled:

A writer with severe people allergies
A boy equal parts banished and lost
The kindest gas station attendant in Pocatello, Idaho
A veteran
A solar panel salesman
An eternal intern
And Mack, who is nobody, if she has her way

Seventeen hours on a bus to another bus to a third bus to a glorified minivan, and finally Mack is delivered to the middle of the middle of nowhere. She often wonders which is more anonymous: a big city with so many people to notice that no one notices anyone, or the empty countryside where no one lives. Stepping off the van into a swirl of dust, greeted by no one, she suspects the former. She can see for what feels like miles in either direction down the road. Which means she can be seen, as well.

If she doesn't win, will they give her a bus ticket back? Or will she be stuck here? She doesn't even know where *here* is, unsure what state she's in. It's green, wildly so, with huge trees and droning insects. It seems flat, but she can't see beyond the road or the trees.

She sits on the side of the road, clutching the Ox Extreme Sports duffel bag she was given. It contains seven shirts and four pairs of pants. They're all a weary shade of black. New but already faded, somehow. They feel familiar.

There's also a toiletries kit, which feels like a tender mercy. There were several granola bars and a bottle of water, but those disappeared a few hours into the seventeen she spent getting here. Hungry is hungry. No point in stretching out what she has when she can have the luxury of a full stomach once.

After an hour, her unease sharpens, pulling ever tighter. No one has come. The trees loom at her back. The road stretches, empty.

Has the game already begun? Has she already lost?

It could be worse. She's endless miles from where she knows,

but she has clothes. Toothpaste, a toothbrush, deodorant, a comb. A sturdy bag. She's technically ahead of where she was before.

The protest of a much-abused automobile suspension greets her long before another van pulls up. She's resigned. It's here either to pick her up—*found!*—or to deliver her to the actual game.

It spews out three people and then unceremoniously continues along the infinite road. Two women and a man. A boy, really, Mack gets the sense. He can't be much younger than she is, and he's far taller, but something—the boyish part in his hair, the round face, the long-sleeved white button-up worn tucked into ill-fitting, cheap navy slacks—suggests he was dressed by someone else.

One of the women is put together with an artist's attention to detail. She is as much makeup and hair product as she is person, and Mack is dazzled by the visual perfection. It's almost hard to look at her. The other woman wears a black tank top over baggy cargo pants. She limps slightly as she shifts off the road and next to Mack.

The limping woman, her buzzed head emphasizing her large dark eyes, regards Mack without shame. The beautiful woman doesn't regard Mack at all. She scowls at her phone, holding it ever higher as though reception could be found that way. And the boy looks everywhere but at the women he is with. A fine sheen of sweat is on his forehead, wet spots at his armpits. He looks ready to flee.

Someone here is more terrified than Mack. It's comforting.

"Fucking kill me, there's really no reception," the beautiful woman finally says, still clutching her phone as some sort of talisman. "Lighting is too harsh, anyway." For the first time, she looks at Mack, who has shifted farther back from the road, almost to the tree line. "Did they tell you anything?"

Mack shakes her head. When the van picked her up at the bus station, the driver had only said, "Oxen Free?" He even asked her what it was, but she mumbled an answer and pretended to fall asleep.

"Ava," the woman with the buzzed head says.

“What?” the beautiful woman snaps.

“Ava.”

The beautiful woman throws both hands in the air. “What?”

The buzzed woman lifts an eyebrow, patience wearing thin. “We didn’t talk in the van, so I’m introducing myself. *I’m Ava.* And you are . . .”

Finally, the beautiful woman relaxes, snorting a laugh. “God, sorry, I’m such a bitch when I’m hungry. I’m Ava, too. That’s why I was confused.”

“May the best Ava win, Ava Two.” Buzzed Ava’s wry smile shows dimples deep enough to get lost in.

“I intend to.” Beautiful Ava’s tone is more playful than vicious. She retreats into the trees, snapping several selfies. Buzzed Ava turns to Mack expectantly.

“Mack.” Mack offers her name as a complete sentence, hoping it will be accepted as such.

Buzzed Ava sits on the ground, stretching one leg easily in front of herself and manually positioning the other. “Good to meet you, Mack. I hope I beat you, and it’s not personal.”

Mack doesn’t answer. It’s a competition. Of course they want to win.

Buzzed Ava nods toward the boy, who has crossed the road and is standing on the other side, staring resolutely away from them. His shoulders are turned inward, his posture less anticipation than defeat. Already.

“That’s LeGrand. He got picked up the same time as me, before Ava Two. When I took off my jacket, he twitched so hard looking away, I thought he’d break his neck. Poor kid is terrified of women. Might give him an edge. He’ll be so desperate to avoid seeing us, he’ll never come out.”

“I think he’s gay.” Beautiful Ava sits on the ground next to buzzed Ava. Beautiful Ava is slender and bony. Buzzed Ava is thicker, strong looking. Mack admires and envies the line of her shoulders, the heft of her core. Her looks challenge in a different way than beautiful Ava’s, but both draw attention.

Mack's own hair is cut short enough that she could be a guy, or she could be a girl. She wears oversize shirts and baggy pants, hands shoved in pockets to throw her shoulders forward and hide her breasts. Ava and Ava hide nothing.

Mack thinks she'll beat both of them.

"Not gay," buzzed Ava says, pulling up a long strand of grass and holding it to her mouth. She blows on it, but no sound comes out. "If he's that scared of female skin, he's gotta be interested." She leans back, squinting toward Mack. "What's your story?" There's something equal parts playful and appraising in the way a single bold eyebrow raises.

None of these people are Mack's friends. No one is her friend. No one will be. She can play nice and hope a mumbled answer satisfies buzzed Ava, but she doesn't think it will. So she goes for the other tactic.

"Fuck off," Mack answers.

Beautiful Ava scowls, offended by proxy. Buzzed Ava's look shifts, but not in a threatened or angry way. "Cool." She turns back to the road.

Mack retreats further into the shade, but in spite of her dismissal, both Avas eventually join her there. The sun is relentless and droning, like the insects around them. After an hour or two, another van bumps along to them. Beautiful Ava runs up to greet it, but it's the same story. Hired and dropping off. Over the course of the day, three more vans come until finally there are fourteen people waiting. They all seem around the same age, midtwenties, give or take a few years.

Mack feels more at ease now. With so many people there—several of whom are desperate to establish dominance and be noticed, talking and laughing loudly—she barely registers. Except to buzzed Ava, who brazenly stares at her and winks whenever caught.

When the last van pulls away, everyone looks down the road, waiting.

♦ ♦ ♦

Five hours later and the mood has shifted considerably. Everyone is sweaty. There's nowhere to sit but the ground. No phones work. No one has any food or water—though one expertly muscled man increases monetary offers for food by the hour. One of the women, a brunette who looks like a toothpaste commercial with her dazzlingly white smile, cries. Several vow to leave scathing reviews of the experience online. A couple of the men suggest walking down the road to find the nearest town, but the fear of missing the competition keeps them in place. Everyone is short-tempered and angry. Except LeGrand, who stays at a distance, looking utterly lost, buzzed Ava, who is taking a nap with her arms for a pillow, and Mack, who knows she's two full days from being too hungry to function. A ghost of a smile haunts her face.

She can win this.

As the gentle bruise of evening spreads, a bus arrives. Apologies are delivered with water bottles and sandwiches. Their hostess, a woman well past middle age with a jewel-toned pantsuit and hair that exists in defiance of gravity, is so genuinely excited to greet them it's hard to hold the scheduling mix-up against her. A P.M. where an A.M. should have been, missed emails, no service, a litany of excuses made softer by calories and hydration . . . though several of the women will never forgive her for the indignity of having to pee in the woods.

Everything will be explained, the woman promises. But they have a long drive ahead of them, and if they could file into the bus quickly quickly quickly, so much to discuss, so much to prep, such a thrilling week ahead of them!

Water is gulped, food devoured, jokes exchanged. The bus toilet is gratefully and extensively taken advantage of. Seats are claimed, already sorting the contestants. LeGrand sits alone. Beautiful Ava no longer sees Mack, focused on those more on her level. Buzzed Ava follows Mack to the middle of the bus and sits next to her without asking. It's a problem. Mack wants to be invisible, wants to be underestimated, wants to be unseen. It's a hide-and-seek competition, after all.

Night arrives. The bus starts. Fourteen heat-exhausted and re-hydrated heads bob in near unison.

No instructions are delivered. Everyone is already asleep.

While they sleep, a tour.

Buzzed Ava's dog tags fall free of her tank top. One set her own. One set not. Her head falls onto Mack's shoulder. Mack's head rests against the soft fuzz of Ava's. It's the most human contact either of them has had in years. They sleep through it.

Beautiful Ava, aspiring Instagram model, has found beautiful Jaden, aspiring CrossFit gym owner. She has no sponsors and he has no gym, but they are lovely with hope and promise. Beautiful Ava's head rests against the window. She snores. She would be mortified to know she did it in public, but no one except the driver and their hostess is awake to hear. The driver keeps his eyes on the road with aggressive determination. He wields the steering wheel like a shield. The hostess wanders the aisle, touching each forehead with feather-soft fingers, like a blessing or a benediction.

The benediction misses LeGrand, tucked in the back, lost and alone even surrounded by people. This is not his world, and he doesn't know how to exist in it. Nothing, *nothing* makes sense. He dreams of digging for vegetables, his fingers hurting, digging deeper and deeper and finding nothing, knowing he should find something, should be looking for something, but all he can do is keep digging in the dark and the dirt. He's not looking for vegetables. He's digging a grave, and it hurts, and he hurts, and he's terrified he knows whose grave it is.

Ian has a notebook on his lap. His pen, the most expensive thing he owns, has fallen on the floor. He won't realize it until they're off the bus and he's already lost it. How can he write without it? He doesn't manage to write anything with it, either, but he'll be convinced it's the lack of pen holding him back. He came for inspiration. Also for money. A little bit of money, a little bit of security, and he could write the great American novel.

Brandon looks pleasant even in his sleep. There's something

wholesome and helpful in the way he slumbers completely upright, as though ready to dive into service should someone need help. Regardless of what else happens, he's already had a great time and will be happy with the results. Honestly, he doesn't even know what he'd do with the money if he won. He can't quite imagine beating everyone else. It feels petty to want to win, almost mean. Because him winning would mean thirteen people lose. This is an adventure. A vacation. He hasn't taken a day off since he started working at the gas station at fourteen. But Grammy isn't waiting for him anymore. He's been a little lost since she died. An adventure is all he can ask for.

His seatmate slumps, head lolling for hours. There's still paint on his hands from where he tagged the last bus station. He's ready to leave his mark on the competition. Hopeful that he can create something here that will follow him back out into the world. He'll be the next Banksy. *No*. He'll be the first Atrius. (His real name is Kyle, and he hates it and everything Kyle was and could be. But he made the mistake of spelling Atreus wrong, so any chance he has of being googleable is taken by a health insurance company. A branding failure by someone determined to exist outside of brands.)

Christian fell asleep with a smile but secretly despairing. No one here seems like a good contact. His idea to do this for potential business opportunities seems as unlikely as actually winning the stupid thing. Maybe he'll meet someone from Ox Extreme Sports. Everyone needs a good salesman. If he has to knock on one more door and smile while asking about solar panels . . .

YouTuber Sydney and app developer Logan connected in the forest in the way Christian wished he had managed to with someone. They're going to make a new app together based on Sydney's fledgling YouTube prank show. A national prank competition. It's gonna be huge. They're glowing even in sleep, secure in their imagined brilliant future. Dinners with Musk, charity summits with Gates, partnerships with Frye Technologies, and so many terrible pranks to get there.

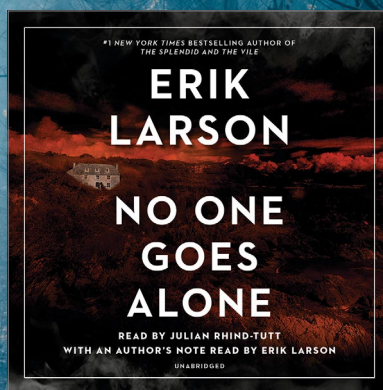
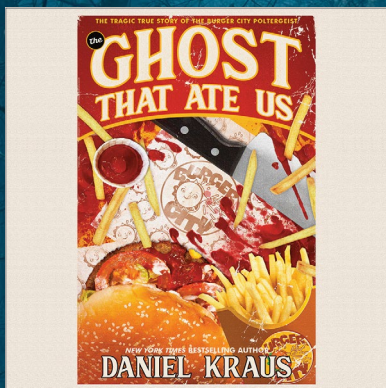
Rebecca has priced out exactly how much it would cost to go from an A to a C. She thinks C is big enough. The agent she met with told her she had potential, but she'd need a little more up top for him to be interested. She's never been able to settle on whether he meant professionally interested, or casting couch interested. C is the letter that will get her her dreams, and \$50,000 is the number that will get her to the letter she needs. She sleeps with her EpiPen-filled purse clutched against her chest like a security blanket.

Rosiee just wants to sell some fucking jewelry. Just once. Just to prove she's not the loser her mother always predicted she'd be. But silversmithing requires silver, and silver requires money. She's been hiding from her ex for four years. She can hide for a week, no sweat. Her ear is so heavy with jewelry, it clinks against the window where her head rests. The hostess's eye lingers over the snake twined around Rosiee's wrist. So pretty. She actually has talent.

In the front of the bus is Isabella, the eternal intern. She's interned at more places than she can remember. She wants face time with Ox executives, too. She needs a salary. God, she needs dental benefits. Fifty thousand dollars won't even cover her student loans for the education she borrowed herself into the ground for. The incredibly expensive degree that has yet to land her a single income-producing job. She grinds her teeth in her sleep.

The bus bumps along the deep tunnel of night, sealing in fourteen desperate dreamers against the world.

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