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— FALL 2023 —



What Will You Read Next?



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Fall 2023 Debut Fiction Sampler

— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

What Will You Read Next?

Grave Expectations: A Mystery

by *Alice Bell*..... 3

It's Not a Cult: A Novel

by *Lauren Danhof*..... 21

And Then She Fell: A Novel

by *Alicia Elliott*..... 35

The Christmas Orphans Club: A Novel

by *Becca Freeman*..... 53

You, Again: A Novel

by *Kate Goldbeck*..... 73

The Stranger Upstairs: A Novel

by *Lisa M. Matlin*..... 105

Jonathan Abernathy You Are Kind: A Novel

by *Molly McGhee*..... 131

The September House

by *Carissa Orlando*..... 141

The Night of the Storm: A Novel

by *Nishita Parekh*..... 173

The Other Half

by *Charlotte Vassell*..... 193

GRAVE EXPECTATIONS

A MYSTERY



ALICE BELL

"Fast, funny, and furious, this book has bags of humor, bags of heart, and a proper murder mystery at its core." —Janice Hallett, author of *The Appeal*

A VINTAGE BOOKS ORIGINAL 2023

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A Dead Girl

The train was two carriages long in its entirety, with rattling single-glazed windows, and it wound its way contentedly along the country line at whatever speed it felt like. It stopped at every tumbledown station it passed through, and this one was so small—a half-length platform of pebble-dashed concrete, covered in ivy at one end and collapsing at the other—that Claire almost didn't realize it was her stop. In the end it was Sophie who roused her from staring, unseeing, out the window.

“Hey,” she said, waving a hand in front of Claire's face. “I think this is it.”

“Oh, shit!”

Claire grabbed the bags and clattered out onto the platform just as the engine revved up once more. They turned and watched the train chunter off into the gathering darkness, then took stock. The letters on the sign were starting to peel off, but this was Wilbourne Major all right.

“*Ohmigod*,” Soph commented as Claire shrugged on her coat. “This place really is in the middle of nowhere.”

Claire turned ’round to look at her. Soph was in her usual bright turquoise velour tracksuit—Claire had almost forgotten what she looked like in anything else—the matching jacket and bottoms separated by a sliver of almost luminous midriff. Her chestnut curls were swept back into a high ponytail, and she had a few sparkly mini hair clips in the shape of butterflies decorating the sides of her head. In fact it looked as if a giant butterfly had landed in the October gloom. Claire was struck, as she was more and more now that she was entering her thirties, by the strong protective urge she felt toward Sophie.

“Aren’t we getting picked up? Where the *fuck* is the car?” Soph swore a lot—like, a lot a lot.

“Dunno.” Claire checked her phone. “I haven’t got any signal, of course. Figgy said she’d be here, though.”

“Let’s go this way . . .” Sophie walked off the platform and through the hedge behind it. It turned out that the car park joined almost directly onto the platform, and there was indeed a car waiting on the far side of it. It was a very shiny black Audi.

“*Oof*,” said Sophie as they walked toward it. “How rich are they, again? Maybe this weekend won’t be a total write-off.”

“I know, right?”

“Didn’t you say everyone who has an Audi is a dick, though?”

“Yeah, they totally are. If you ever see someone driving like an arsehole, it’s, like, always an Audi.”

“Isn’t that like saying everyone who’s rich is an arsehole?”

“I’m comfortable with that generalization,” Claire replied, picking at the loose threads in her coat. “But shh. That’s Figgy.”

“Sure, don’t want to offend your rich arsehole friend. LOL.” Sophie pronounced it *el oh el*.

Figgy Wellington-Forge opened the driver's door and unfolded from the car like a sexy deck chair. She was very tall and was wearing a blue-and-white striped, figure-hugging woolen one-piece, as if she was off to an Alpine après-ski and not standing in mizzling rain in an English car park. She seemed exactly the same as she had been back in her university days with Claire.

"*Dah-ling!*" she cried, striding forward and bestowing Claire with four (four!) air kisses. "So good to see you." Figgy was one of those people who stretched their vowels to breaking point, so what she actually said was "Seeeeeooo good to seeeyeeew!"

Claire slung the battered rucksack and carryall into the back seat, and Soph slid silently in after them. She sat in the middle because she liked to see the road. Claire sat in the front and then leaned back to fuss with the position of her rucksack, as a pretext to shoot Sophie a warning glance.

"Right!" Figgy exclaimed brightly. "If we get a bit of a wiggle on, we should get to the house in good time for dinner. Mummy is doing shepherd's pie."

Claire considered this. She'd had worse Friday nights than someone's mum making her shepherd's pie. It was getting truly dark now. When Claire looked in the rearview mirror all she saw was the occasional oncoming headlight sparkling off Soph's lip gloss and her wide, dark eyes. Like those of most teenagers, Sophie's emotions passed across her face as quickly and obviously as clouds in front of the sun, but sometimes she switched off entirely and became totally impassive. It was quite scary.

Figgy shivered and put the heaters on full blast, then broke the silence that Claire suddenly realized had gone on for some time. "So! How was your journey? God. It. Is. A. *Nightmare* getting down here, isn't it?"

Claire opened her mouth to agree—the trip from London

had in fact taken the entire afternoon and a good portion of the evening—but Figgy didn’t wait for an answer. She carried on chatting almost nonstop, while driving with the speed and abandon of someone who thinks they are a very good driver.

The car barreled through the village of Wilbourne Major along back roads to Wilbourne Duces (an even smaller village, which seemed more like a collection of houses around a pub and a postbox), and out into narrow lanes that twisted through fields. Claire found an opening eventually.

“Who’s going to be here for the weekend, then? If you don’t mind me asking,” she said.

“Well,” replied Figgy, intermittently taking her hands off the wheel to count off on her fingers, “it’s going to be almost all the family. There’s Nana, obviously. She’ll be hard to miss, she’s the old lady in the wheelchair. Eighty-four on Sunday! Then there’s Mummy and Daddy—Clementine and Hugh to you, I suppose. My sister-in-law, Tuppence, is here, too. She’s married to my oldest bro, and brought their kid, Alex, along. Oh, and Basher’s here, of course. He’s the middle brother and he used to be a proper police detective, but he *totally* quit after the party last year. Bit of a sore spot with the ’rents, so maybe don’t ask about it. Actually a huge sore spot. Massive drama.”

“Sorry, did you say ‘Basher’?”

“Ye-e-e-s! Sebastian, really, but nobody calls him that. I’m sure you met him. He came to a party at halls once.” Claire vaguely remembered a grave, blond young man with gray eyes eating all the Chilli Heatwave Doritos at a weekend pregame before what was definitely not a pub crawl for Figgy’s birthday (because pub crawls were unsanctioned by the uni, ever since a first-year chem student got alcohol poisoning).

“That’s a load of people,” said Soph, who always kept track

better than Claire. She often had to give Claire name prompts. “Especially if more are turning up for the main party tomorrow.”

“It sounds like heaps, but it’s actually less than last year,” said Figgy. “Is it a problem?”

“Nah,” said Claire. “I’ve, um, had bigger groups.” This was in fact untrue, but there was no reason to tell the truth.

“Gosh, it’s so amazing you could come, you know—you really saved my bacon. Usually we take turns to arrange entertainment for the family get-togethers, and I totally forgot it was my go this time. But when I ran into you, I was just like: Oh. My. God! Perfect for Halloween, you know? You look fabulous, by the way,” Figgy added, lyingly.

Claire was in the middle of what was turning out to be an indefinitely long lean patch. She was wearing battered trainers with holes in the heels, a pair of black jeans that were so worn through they were gray, and a fifteen-year-old wool coat over her one nice winter jumper, in deference to the fact they were visiting a rich family. Her dyed black hair was showing about three inches of mousy roots, in contrast to Figgy’s perfect white-blond French plait. Figgy wasn’t totally unkind. This hadn’t stopped Claire asking for a fee about 150 percent higher than her usual rate, to which Figgy had readily agreed. So readily that Claire realized she should have plumped for 200 percent.

“Yeah,” she said, offering a smile. “It should be good. It’s a big old house, right?”

“Mmm! It has *wings*. Grade Two listed, because of the library. Of course, really it all belongs to Nana. She keeps joking that she’s going to change her will and have Mummy and Daddy out on their ear. They’ve properly rowed about it a few times, so I hope it doesn’t kick off in front of you. That would be so embarrassing! It’s just, you know, such an expensive old place to run,

and I think Nana is worried that Mummy and Daddy are struggling. But honestly, Mummy would rather sell a kidney than that house.”

There was a pause as Figgy changed up a gear, releasing the clutch so abruptly that Claire jerked forward about six inches and heard one of the bags in the back fall off the seat.

“Whoops! Anyway, you don’t need to worry about all that. It’s a lovely place, really. I think the house is a couple of hundred years old or something. And the land used to have a monastery, so there are some ruined bits of wall and things that are much older. That’s why the house is still officially called the Cloisters.”

“There’d better not be any grim dead monks hanging about,” interjected Sophie from the back.

“There’s supposedly *heaps* of ghosts,” said Figgy happily. “Including this very creepy monk. Every time there’s a death, he’s meant to appear to the next member of the family who’s going to pop their clogs! Although nobody has ever actually seen him—at least not for hundreds of years. Monty made Tristan dress as the monk and hide in my wardrobe once, though, the beast.”

She gave no explanation of who either Tristan or Monty was. Claire imagined some boisterous cousins who visited every summer to have adventures, like the extremely smug children from the Famous Five. Boys in knee shorts and long socks who said “Rather!” and drank loads of ginger beer and lemonade to wash down doorstep-size ham sandwiches.

Figgy suddenly swerved right, onto a neat dirt road that sloped downward. Unidentifiable trees knotted their arms together overhead. The car began scrunching over gravel, and Claire got a glimpse of an imposing gray stone portico before Figgy swung around the side of the building and came to a stop at the back.

There were lights on here—Figgy explained that the family spent most of their time in and around the old kitchen.

“All these bits used to be for, you know, looking after the house,” she said as she got out of the car. “Pantries, and rooms for some of the important servants, that sort of thing. It’s been converted into the family home, so the rest of the place can be used for”—Figgy waved her hands vaguely—“weddings and corporate away days and shooting parties, and so on.”

She led them through a heavy green wooden door, which opened directly into a large room with a flagstone floor and whitewashed walls. Claire was immediately disoriented by the bright light, the explosion of savory smells, and an assault of loud hooting from the family. It was a kind of wordless, elongated vowel noise in place of an actual greeting, to herald their arrival.

A shorter, squatter, older version of Figgy bustled over, though where Figgy’s skin was a delicate white porcelain color with perfect blush cheeks, this woman was more bronzed, as if she spent most weekends gardening. She had a perfect feathery blond bob and a deep pink cardigan with a string of neat pearls hanging around her neck, but she also had a powerful welly-boots aura. This was not just a mum. This was an M & S mum.

“Hellooooo, dahlings! I’m afraid we couldn’t wait to eat, but there’s plenty left,” said—presumably—Clementine, giving out air kisses that left a strong rose-scented perfume in their wake. “I’ll make up some plates. Come in, come in! Say hello. Hugh was just going into the other room to watch the rugger.” Here Clementine gave an exaggerated eye roll, as if to intimate that they were all girls here—ha, men and their balls!

“That woman never met a Laura Ashley print she didn’t like,” said Sophie, talking quietly in Claire’s ear. “I bet she has a knit-

ting circle of dearest friends and hates every one of them. I bet she has a plan to kill each of them and get away with it.”

Sophie had a habit of being unkind about people when she first met them (and also after she'd first met them), but in this case Claire had to admit she was right. Clementine had an intensity to her kindness that hinted at a blanket intensity to all her actions.

They paused to look around. The room they were in was clearly the old kitchen but had been converted to an all-purpose family room. It had a high ceiling hung with bunches of dried flowers and herbs, and was bright and warm. In front of the door where they'd come in were a couple of creaking armchairs, and a much-loved sofa faced a smoldering fire. A sturdy wooden table ran off to the left, taking up almost the whole length of the rest of the room, toward a large blue Aga at the far end. The table still held the remnants of a family meal, as well as a few remnants of family, who were getting up to be introduced.

In contrast to his wife's crisp consonants, patriarch Hugh's voice was a kind of Canary Wharf foghorn. It went well with his vigorous handshake and his job “in finance.” He had a ruddy complexion, the pinkish red inflammation of a white man who drank a lot of red wine and ate a lot of red meat. His watery blue eyes squinted out of a once handsome face that was losing its definition at the edges, like a soft cheese.

“Hugh looks like a man who never misses an episode of *Question Time*,” murmured Sophie, cocking an eyebrow.

Claire bit on the inside of her cheek and managed to give a noncommittal “mm-hmm” in response to Hugh's greeting. He was folding up a broadsheet paper. There was a story with the headline “I Don't Care What the Wokerati Say, I Won't Stop Putting Mayonnaise in My Welsh Rarebit,” and she looked at this in disbelief and confusion for long enough that Hugh noticed.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it? Can’t do or say anything these days. Corporate political correctness is running amok everywhere, and you can’t even bloody eat food how you want!” he said, misreading her expression. “Now people are complaining that if you make rarebit with mayo, it’s cultural appropriation! Can you believe it?”

Claire considered the best way to answer this.

“No,” she said. “I cannot believe people are doing that.” She was aware that (a) she would probably fall into this newspaper’s definition of wokerati, and (b) if she was able to conceal this from Hugh like a ratfuck coward, she might be able to get a bonus for good behavior on top of her already-inflated fee.

“‘Putting some mayo in your Welsh rarebit’ sounds like a sex thing anyway,” commented Soph. “Newspaper columnists are all perverts.”

Claire bit the inside of her other cheek. Fortunately, this conversation was rescued by the introduction of a third new family member. Hugh gave an awkward side-arm hug to the newcomer, a woman in her forties. “This lovely creature is Tuppence. M’boy Monty, my eldest, had the good sense to tie her down!”

Everything about Tuppence was meek: meek ponytail, a swathe of meek pashminas and layered cottons in various browns, and a meek, limp handshake. Even the cold she appeared to have was meek. She kept mopping her nose with tissues that were overflowing from her sleeves, rather than blowing it once, to have done with it.

But when she said, “It really is nice to meet you!” Claire decided Tuppence was her favorite person in the world. “My husband can’t be here this weekend,” she said, answering a question that Claire had not in fact asked. “He and Tristan are working on an important case at their firm.”

“Er, sorry—who is Tristan?”

Figgy elbowed in and took Claire's coat. "Sorry, should have said, darling. Tris is my youngest bro, youngest of the four of us. He's an absolute brat, honestly."

"They're both lawyers at Monty's firm in London," said Tuppence. "But we'll have to make do without them this time, I suppose."

"Interesting," whispered Sophie, close to Claire's ear. "Tuppence actually sounds quite pleased to be rid of Monty. This family is definitely going to turn out to be a mess, I love it. LOL."

"Most families are a mess," replied Claire, with an apologetic grimace. "Uh, I mean . . . um, organizing events for families, you know—a nightmare."

To Claire's surprise, Tuppence covered her mouth at this and looked at the ceiling. "As long as we don't put mayonnaise in the rarebit," she said as she looked back at Claire. Claire couldn't have sworn to it, but she thought Tuppence might have winked.

That seemed to be all the family present in the kitchen. Of Nana, Tuppence's child, or the improbable Basher, there was currently no sign. Clementine reappeared, putting down a loaded plate and leading Claire to sit at the table. Sophie stuck her tongue out at the back of Clem's head and declared that she was going to look around—which meant roaming the house to nose through as much of people's private lives as possible.

"So, Claire!" said Hugh, who had conjured a bottle of wine from nowhere. "Last name Voyant, yes? HA!"

Claire loaded an exploratory forkful of pie as Figgy sat down next to her. "Nope. Hendricks. Good one, though." This was her polite stock response to a joke she had heard about a million, billion times.

Hugh was struggling manfully with the corkscrew, and Clem-

entine took the bottle without speaking and opened it for him. Her expression was dispassionate.

“Terribly exciting, though,” said Clementine, giving a jovial little shrug. “Very unusual kind of entertainment to do, you know. I was really interested when Figgy said she’d hired you.”

“Mm-hmm. This pie is really great, thank you,” said Claire, shoveling it down. She was quite hungry because she’d only had a thing of Super Noodles for lunch before she got on the train. In contrast, Figgy was taking small and delicate mouthfuls and savoring each, as if she were a judge on *MasterChef*.

“Claire and I were at university together, d’you remember me saying, Mummy?” said Figgy. “And I ran into her and, when she told me her job, I thought it would be so quirky and spooky. I was only saying to Claire in the car, it’s perfect for Halloween. Didn’t I say that, Claire?”

“Yes, you did. And yeah, this is usually quite a good time of year for me.”

Claire noticed that everyone in the room was sort of hanging around, watching her. It was a strange feeling. She didn’t think they were trying to be rude, but it seemed a bit like they were privy to a rare zoological exhibit. Just as she thought of them as common or garden posh dullards, Claire realized that they saw her as the lesser-known drab weirdo. It wasn’t that people didn’t quite often think she was weird, but they were usually more subtle about it; or, having hired her, were more engaged with the weirdness. And she had seen enough horror films to know that a bunch of upper-class people inviting you to their family home for Halloween weekend, and then examining you like some sort of game bird, was a potential recipe for disaster. She looked around, but Sophie was still off exploring.

Perhaps realizing that everyone was staring at Claire in silence, Clementine abruptly announced that there wasn't a pudding, but there was fruit, which made Hugh grumble under his breath. He sidled off to watch the rugby. Figgy finished eating and started helping her mother to tidy up, which made Claire feel awkward. She concentrated on her plate instead. Her wine-glass kept magically refilling as she ate, and soon she was feeling quite hot and sick from all the carbs and alcohol that she had hoofed into her stomach.

As if sensing this, too, Clementine led her away to a neat twin bedroom. Clementine's powers of observation and/or telepathy were unnerving, but the fact that it was a twin room pleased Claire, because it meant there was enough room for Sophie to keep herself entertained. All the furnishings were cream or white, and the walls and ceiling were a bit higgledy-piggledy. The walls didn't join up where you'd expect them to—like something a child had tried to make out of Play-Doh. There was a little en suite shower and toilet, though, which was probably more complex than a Play-Doh house would allow. It was very nice. A lot nicer than her flat in London.

Claire opened the window to cool down and suppress her nausea. She was leaning out, collecting deep lungfuls of clean country air, when she realized it wasn't as clean as she'd expected. The dense and delicious smell of weed was wafting through the autumn night. Then she caught the sound of quiet talking and, remarkably, Sophie laughing.

It took her a few minutes of self-consciously creeping around cold corridors in the dark, but eventually Claire found a heavy curtain that was concealing a set of French doors. On the other side of these was a discreet patio, with a couple of tables and chairs and one of those big garden wood-burner things.

Sophie was staring into the flames. Next to her, a teenager with blue hair was clutching an asymmetrical black cardigan around themselves and holding about two-thirds of a massive joint.

“All right?” said the teenager, jerking their head up in greeting. They were a good few inches taller than Sophie, looked maybe a couple of years older—enough to legally buy a pint, at least—and appeared to have shaved stripes into one of their eyebrows. “I’m Alex.”

“Huh, I assumed you were younger. Figgy made it sound as if you’re, like, twelve. Are you *-andra* or *-ander*?”

“Neither. Does it matter?”

“Nope,” said Claire.

“Cool. Don’t tell Granny Clem about the weed.”

Claire thought about this. “Er. I won’t if I can have some.”

“Mutually assured destruction,” said Alex, whilst breathing out another thick herbal cloud. “I like it.” They passed her the joint and moved away from Sophie to get closer to the fire. Claire took the joint but exclaimed, “Fucking Christ!” and nearly dropped it when someone else entirely said, “You must be Claire.”

Claire leaned over to peer at the other side of the wood burner. There was a very old lady sitting in a wheelchair, wrapped (as is traditional for little old ladies in wheelchairs) in a couple of tartan blankets. Her eyes were twinkling and she looked very much like she was about to laugh. Leaning on a table near her was a man Claire just about recognized as the Dorito eater from Figgy’s party years ago. He had shaved all his messy blond hair off, which made him look gaunt and tired.

“That’s Basher and Nana,” said Sophie. “They’re all right. I like them.”

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Nana said. “You’re Claire. Figgy’s friend from university.”

“Yeah, that’s me,” said Claire. She took a modest hit from the joint and passed it back to Alex. It felt weird smoking weed in front of someone else’s granny—great-granny, even. “Um. Basher and I have actually met before.”

“Hmm,” said Basher. “I think I remember.”

“Wait, you’re the medium?” said Alex, suddenly interested. “Cool. That’s cool. So you can talk to ghosts then.”

“Yup.”

“You really expect us to believe that?” asked Basher.

“Erm, no. Not really. Most people don’t, obviously,” said Claire.

Nana laughed and her eyes twinkled again. “Very good answer. She’s got you pegged, Bash, dear.”

“You don’t *look* like a medium,” said Alex, passing the joint again.

Emboldened by the positive reception, Claire took a healthier pull this time and spent a few moments looking up at the sky. It had become a very clear night, and this far from a city she could see all the stars scattered everywhere, like broken glass in a pub car park.

“I dunno,” she said after a bit. “What are mediums supposed to look like?”

“Yeah, all right, fair enough. Do you have a—a whatchamacallit. A spirit guide?”

“Yup, I do.”

Basher snorted at this.

“I do, though!” Claire protested.

“Yes,” Basher said. “I expect he’s some Native American chief-tain. Or a poor Victorian shoeshine boy?”

“No, *actually*,” said Claire, who was feeling the effects of what really was very good-quality weed. “Ah—nah, I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“You know you have to now!” cried Alex.

“Yeah, g’wan. It’ll freak ’em out,” said Sophie.

“Okay, okay. She’s a girl in fact.”

“Ah yes,” said Basher. “With long dark hair, and she is going to crawl out of the TV?”

“That’s a whole other thing. That’s a movie—that’s not real. Duh,” Claire replied.

“Of course, I apologize. So what is your ghost’s tragic backstory? A Georgian waif who died at Christmas? A poor misfortunate who pined to death in the fifties?”

“Don’t be boring, Uncle B,” said Alex. “You sound like Dad when you get all smug.”

“She’s not a Victorian waif,” said Claire, who was starting to get a bit annoyed by Basher and was keen to prove him wrong. “She’s from the noughties. She died when she was seventeen.”

“Ah, very convenient,” said Basher. “No historical research required with a ghost from your own generation.”

“Well, joke’s on you, because I studied history, so if I wanted to make up a period-accurate ghost I could. But I don’t need to,” said Claire. She was trying to freak them out a bit, but it wasn’t really working.

Sophie rolled her eyes.

Claire looked up at the diamond sky again and started laughing. “It’s funny—she’s not anything. She’s just normal really.”

“Am not, weirdo,” said Sophie. “I’m exceptional.”

“She’s annoying,” Claire corrected. She looked over the flames at her friend, bright-eyed and smirking, standing in the clothes she had been murdered in. “Her name’s Sophie and she’s been eavesdropping on you for, like, half an hour already.”

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

IT'S
NOT
A
CULT

A NOVEL

Lauren Danhof

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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PROFESSIONAL AND LAW-ABIDING

THIS WASN'T GOING TO go well.

I knew it. He knew it. The frowning lady with her arms crossed, glaring down at me from the anti-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace poster, knew it.

“I’m sorry I’m late! Thank you for still seeing me!” I plunked down in the office chair, the plastic boning of my medieval corset digging into my armpits. Droplets of water fell from the ends of my hair onto my résumé. The smeared ink complemented the mustard stain nicely.

The man across the desk from me looked at my disheveled appearance with concern. “Are you okay, Ms. Glass?”

“Oh! Yeah, I—I’m sorry. My shift at Maypole ran late, and I didn’t have time to change. I’m the wench.”

“The wench?”

“Uh, yeah, I work the Drench-the-Wench booth at the Renaissance fair.” I pulled the laces loose at the bottom of the corset so I could breathe. “So, like, people pay money to try and dunk me, but I get to shout insults at people all day, so it’s okay, I guess.” I glanced down and realized my massive skirt was leaving a dark ring of damp carpet around my chair. “It’s just a temporary thing. I started a couple months back. You know, after I left my MA program there was, like, nothing. The job market isn’t great, as I’m sure you already know—or maybe you don’t, seeing as you have a job—but I’m this close to selling a kidney on the black market.”

He let out a small laugh, but I couldn't tell if it was genuine or uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and reached for my résumé, pausing for a moment as he held it by the corner, trying to decide where to lay the damp document down on his desk.

"You, uh, have a master's degree in English?" he asked.

"Well, technically no. I was studying early medieval literature and did three semesters, but dropped—postponed completion for an undetermined amount of time." I leaned back a little, trying to slow my breathing from the frantic run through the parking garage, up two flights of stairs, and down a never-ending hallway to this guy's office. What was his name again? Mr. Wilson? Mr. Wheelhouse? "I kind of realized not many people are looking for someone to quote *Beowulf* nine to five." I laughed at my own quip, but Mr. Whatever was still distracted by my soggy résumé. Finally, he laid it on top of a menu from a Thai place, then steepled his hands and stared at me.

"You applied for the position of Internal Integration and Implementation Architect Assistant II. What skills do you have that would make you a good fit for this job?"

I reached for the bottle of water in my bag while I quickly glanced around the office for some clue as to what this company actually did. I had applied to so many jobs, at this point they were all starting to run together. The office was bare besides a floor plan stapled to the wall with all the emergency exits marked. The fluorescent light flickered and hummed. I took a sip of water while breathing in and immediately choked.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm—I'm fine!" I sputtered, dropping the half-empty bottle, spilling the remaining water straight onto my lap. "Shit!" I winced. "Sorry." His expression remained confused. Gah, what *was* this dude's name?

"Sorry about that . . . yes, so . . . specific skills. Yeah, I am very confident that as far as implementing and integrating, I would be a great asset, and as far as the internal assisting and architecting, I'm your girl . . . although, I don't know about the II part—is that like the sequel? Internal Integration and Implementation Architect Assistant II: The Revenge of the Copy Machine."

Seriously? Nothing? Stop making jokes, Glinda.

“The ‘II’ refers to the level of experience of the employee. A level II requires at least seven years’ experience working within a related field,” he said without batting an eye. “How many years’ experience did you say you had in integrated systems?”

“Technically . . . zero.” I bit my lower lip and glanced down.

“Ms. Glass, why do you think you would make a good fit in this position?” These corporate types were so good at signaling disapproval with only the slightest facial movement—a raised eyebrow, a slight crease around the corners of the eyes. It was really quite fascinating, watching him silently judge me.

“To be honest, Mr.—er—sir, I know I can communicate, despite the contrary evidence at this particular interview. I can talk and I can write, and I can do both things pretty damn well. I’m smart and I’m passionate and I want to learn. So, I enter this big, bright world full of possibilities, but I don’t find a job listing that says, “*Smart, passionate communicator, apply here.*” I find an endless list of tedious-sounding positions so vague in their description that I’m not sure I’m reading about a job or the ingredients list on a bottle of shampoo. So, I guess what I’m trying to say is . . . I probably should shut up now.”

Mr. W glanced up at the evacuation poster and then turned to me. “I can appreciate your honesty.”

Really? Maybe I could salvage this.

“Tell me, Ms. Glass, what would you describe as your greatest weakness?”

I should have been ready for it. It’s a standard interview question. And maybe the lack of preparation for the question truly revealed my apathy toward this generic office job and my own propensity for self-sabotage. But in that moment, teeth chattering from the AC vent blowing directly onto my wet hair and clothes, the equally standard answers, strengths disguised as weaknesses—“*too honest,*” “*works too hard,*” all of that—fell through the cracks in my brain.

“My greatest weakness? Can a person’s entire personality be their greatest weakness?” I sighed and leaned back. “My mom

would probably say that my greatest weakness is my sarcasm—or, no, wait, my skepticism. But she’s in a cult, so I don’t think her opinion on that counts.”

His eyes widened. “A cult?”

Crap. I hadn’t meant to bring that up.

But I could get out of this, just had to think on my feet, stop talking about the goddamn cult—

“Yeah, my mom’s in a cult.” *Stop talking.* “It’s a whole thing. Robes, chants, magic visions.” *Enough, he gets it.* “Their leader says that aliens or some shit visited him, and now he knows the secret to eternal happiness and peace.”

A wave of uncomfortable silence swept the room. Mr. W shifted in his chair and pretended to study my résumé again. Finally, he cleared his throat and stood. I jumped to my feet, nearly knocking the chair back.

“Ms. Glass, I want you to know that I appreciate your coming to interview. But you know, we have a lot of interviews to do, so . . .” He shook his head and then rummaged through his desk drawer for a moment, eventually pulling out a business card. “If you . . . well, if you need to talk to someone, this is my psychiatrist. She’s really good.”

★ ★ ★

Out in the hallway, I leaned against the wall for a minute, trying to compose myself. It was still and quiet, apart from the murmur of voices and clicks from keyboards behind the cubicle walls. A woman in a freshly pressed suit strolled by and did a double take at my damp, disheveled, anachronistic appearance.

“I think I nailed it.” I laughed louder than I had intended. The woman nodded her head quickly and hurried away.

This wasn’t the first time I’d let my brain vomit all over someone I’d just met, though it was the first time I’d done it during a formal job interview. It was all the pent-up angst and neurosis that had been collecting over the last year. Poor Mr. Wombat—or whatever his name was—just happened to be the unlucky one that unplugged it.

I cringed, wishing I could sink into the floor and disappear.

Dorothy wouldn't have botched the interview. She was the better twin, always had been. She'd never admit that, of course. When I was thirteen, I told my parents they'd named the wrong kid Glinda, because Dorothy's middle name might as well have been "the good." She was prettier, smarter, and far less abrasive. She'd have sat there, perfect and pristine, and would probably have been hired on the spot.

What would Dorothy have said was my greatest weakness? I shuddered to think. My ego? My selfishness? My inability to trust anyone? Well, what did she know, anyway?

I checked my phone. Twelve missed calls and one unread text.

It said: *Can you stop and get butter? Sincerely, Mom!*

I waited until I was walking through the parking garage before calling her back. "Hey, Mom, you called twelve times?"

"Oh, sorry—I needed butter for the cookies I'm baking, but since you didn't answer, I sent West to get some."

"I didn't answer because I was in an interview."

"Yes, I sent you a text when you didn't pick up your phone."

"Right . . . but if you'd texted me to begin with . . . never mind." I got in my car and let my head fall to the steering wheel as the car's stereo picked up the call, blasting my mom's voice around me in surround sound.

"You know I prefer calling to texting," she said.

"Yes, Mom. But the thing is, I'm not going to answer a call during an interview. Also, we've talked about this—you don't have to sign your name to every text. I know it's from you. The phone tells me it's from you."

"I just don't want any miscommunication."

"So . . ." I rolled my eyes. "Are you even going to ask how the interview went?"

There was a brief moment of silence before she sighed, causing a horrible rushing sound in my speakers. "I still don't understand why you need to go out and get tangled up in the corrupt web of the working world, my radiant sunbeam. Your inner light is just waiting to come forth, to experience a simpler life."

I slowly backed out of the space, silently mouthing all the terrible, ungrateful, unforgivable things I wanted to say to my

mother at that moment. It was one of my many unhealthy strategies for dealing with her over the last year.

I gritted my teeth and took a breath. “Well, my inner light would like to make loan payments and eventually move out of her mother’s house, no offense.”

“My darling, Light and Wisdom, this is your home.” She’d started this new thing where she replaced my name with positive attributes in some attempt to influence my subconscious, but it was starting to really piss off my outer conscious. She paused a beat and then spoke with a tone of obligation. “How was the interview?”

“It went great.” I rolled my eyes again and pulled out onto the street.

“I’m sensing sarcasm. Sarcasm is a defense.”

Yep, my favorite defense. I turned onto the access road.

“Well, you don’t have to worry, Mom. I’m not getting the job.”

“Glinda, you sound disappointed.” For a moment she seemed concerned, surprised even.

I threw my hands in the air and mouthed a “what the hell?” before forcing a smile and hoping my tone matched.

“I am, Mom. This job paid pretty well, and I haven’t been getting a lot of calls for interviews.”

“I know, dear, but you’re my little bird, and I just don’t want to see your wings clipped by something that won’t bring you self-satisfaction. You’ve just got to spread your wings and see all those other fish in the sea.”

Her metaphors made about as much sense as her recent life choices. And now I was imagining a bird of prey swooping down to impale a poor, innocent fish on its talons. Lots of blood.

“Look, I’m pretty exhausted right now. Can we talk about it later?”

“What is ‘later,’ Glinda? ‘Later’ is a phantom.”

“No, later is just not right now.” I sighed. Getting off the phone with my mom was like negotiating a hostage situation.

“Glinda, the present is all there is. The past is an illusion.”

“I thought we were talking about the future, Mom?”

“We are. Your inner light is traveling backward from the future to the past. You have to learn to meet it at that moment of intersection with your consciousness and then harness it to guide you back up toward the future.”

“Hey, Mom, I think . . . I think I’m getting another call,” I lied.

“Oh! Maybe they’re calling you to tell you that you got the job!”

“Maybe so—gotta go!”

“Glinda, I love—” I hit the hang-up button before she finished. Not intentionally.

I found myself alone, at a traffic standstill on a five-lane highway in the middle of rush hour. There was this tiny, annoying, gnawing feeling just on the edge of my mind that told me to call her back, to tell her what had happened, to ask how she was doing. But I was tired, and I was over hearing about my inner light.

I put my AC on full blast, untied the top of my chemise, and took a long sip from the massive Big Gulp soda I’d let melt in the car during my interview. It tasted like lukewarm tears and corn syrup.

I didn’t want that job anyway, I told myself. I’d spent my life dreaming of traveling, writing, reading, basically existing in some kind of *Eat, Pray, Love* state of perpetual self-discovery, financed by a ceaseless (and unexplained) cash flow. Instead, I was broke and aimless, watching my friends from school get married, have kids, get promoted. I mean, I watched them from the comfort of my phone on social media. I hadn’t talked to anybody from school in months.

And now I had to pee. Traffic was at a dead stop, and I was a quarter mile from the next exit. I took a long draw from the straw of my tepid soda and then shook my head. *Stop it, you idiot!*

I turned on my stereo. “Don’t Go Chasing Waterfalls” came blasting out. Hell no. I tapped another app on my phone and settled into a true crime podcast.

Miranda was last seen leaving her boyfriend’s house around 2 AM Sunday night.

“The boyfriend did it,” I said aloud.

Once she left, he says he tried calling her several times, but she never picked up—

“Because he murdered her.”

A lot of people described Miranda as stubborn and overconfident of her own abilities. That might be why she decided she should cut through the woods that fateful night.

“Okay, so we’re blaming the victim?” I shut the stereo off and tapped the wheel impatiently. In what felt like thirty years, I had crept forward five inches.

It was bad enough I was still in my Renaissance costume, which was finally somewhat dry—I wasn’t about to pee on myself. I flipped on my hazards and started blasting my horn like a crazy person. The sedan to the right of me stopped in confusion and I slid into the shoulder and pressed on the gas, much to the shock and anger of all the law-abiding citizens I left in my dust.

I made it to the exit ramp and then swerved into a gas station, parking diagonally across two disabled parking spaces. I know, I know . . . but if I held it one more minute, I was going to develop a kidney infection, end up on a transplant list, and probably qualify for a disability tag anyway.

I ran into the store and immediately knocked right into a display of sunglasses. The thin wire rack spilled its contents onto the floor.

“Shit! Sorry!” I called out, jumping over the scattered assortment of glasses toward the bathroom. The guy behind the counter raised his head in confusion. “Bathroom emergency!”

The women’s restroom was in use. I stood there, dancing like a five-year-old and looking around desperately for a solution. The door to the men’s room was wide open and empty as could be. I closed my eyes, steadied myself, and stepped in.

As I sat on a toilet that appeared to have been last cleaned sometime in the ’90s, I stared up at the fluorescent light and counted the corpses of flies who had died trapped in the dirty plastic cover. Fourteen. *How do those little guys even get in there in the first place?*

My phone dinged and I saw I had a text from Dorothy. This was highly unusual because, well, Dorothy didn’t text me . . .

or call me . . . or pretty much have anything to do with me anymore.

Her text said: *We need to talk.*

I shook my head and typed back: *Can I call you when I get home? Probably 30 minutes.*

I waited for what seemed like an eternity, but she didn't reply. I realized I'd spaced out when the knob started jiggling.

"Yeah, yeah!" I shouted.

Finally, a message lit up my screen.

Dorothy: *I will call you in one hour.*

I chewed my thumbnail. She wouldn't be texting me out of the blue just to chat, to tell me how she'd found a good sale on art supplies or how the guy at the library looked just like Santa Claus. We weren't like that anymore. Not since the thing.

I pulled my skirt back up, readjusted my corset, and opened the door to the StopNGo cashier in his stupid red vest, with his hands on his hips.

"Did you just use the men's room?"

"It was an emergency. Also, gender is a construct."

His eyes narrowed.

"All yours." I stepped past him and hurried out of the corridor.

I stopped in the middle of the store, rummaging through my purse for a bottle of hand sanitizer. What could Dorothy possibly have to say to me after not speaking to me for a year and a half?

I was still lost in my thoughts when I perceived a man stepping in front of me, blocking my exit to the parking lot.

I looked up and there was that same annoying cashier. I glanced at his name tag.

"Hey, *Robert*. There's a sign in the restroom that says to see an attendant if the bathroom needs cleaning." I made a grand, sweeping gesture back toward the restrooms and started to step forward, but Robert wasn't moving.

"You knocked down my display."

I tightened the grip on my purse and held my nose a little higher. "I do apologize. However, to be fair, it was an ill-placed display, right there in the doorway for people to trip over."

He glanced behind him at the door and then back at me. “And is that your car taking up two disabled spaces?”

“Yes, and I feel badly about that, so if you’ll kindly step aside, I will move my car.”

“Bathroom’s for paying customers,” he said, folding his arms across his chest.

“Well, this customer has had a less than stellar experience in your establishment.”

He just stared at me. I didn’t say another word. I stooped down and gathered up the sunglasses, stuffing them haphazardly onto the rack. One little bastard slipped back down and onto my foot. I picked it up and pushed past him to the counter. I slammed down the glasses and my phone while I dug through my purse for my wallet.

Robert came around to the register, adjusted his vest, and then smiled at me like nothing had happened. “So, you doing some kind of cosplay thing or something?” he asked, as though I’d come in here just to shoot the breeze.

“No, Robert, I traveled through time to save my long-lost Scottish lover.” I feigned a look of distress. “Oh God! What year is it?!”

“That’ll be three dollars and fifty cents,” he said, completely ignoring my theatrics, and then proceeded to straighten a row of cellophane-wrapped pecan pralines lined up next to the register. I pulled out a credit card and tried to hand it to him. He pointed to a little index card taped to the card reader that said in red pen: “No credit charges under \$5.”

“Are you freaking kidding me right now?”

He raised an eyebrow and smirked.

I stood there, the veins in my head pulsing. Now, in general, I consider myself a good person. I tip waiters, I hold doors for old people, I release spiders back into the wild. But this guy was messing with the wrong woman on the wrong day. I pursed my lips, looked long and hard at Robert, and then, as my brain screamed *No, don’t!*, I grabbed the glasses and my purse and ran out the door before Robert could say another word.

I slammed the car door closed and started the engine. The podcast came blasting out of my speakers:

Had Miranda double-crossed the wrong person this time? Had her past crimes finally caught up to her? There was blood, everywhere—

“Shut up!” I slammed my hand against the dial. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” I hit the gas and peeled out onto the access road. Not only was I unemployed, but now I was a criminal. I dared to glance in my rearview mirror, assuming I’d see the guy in the red vest chasing me on foot. He hadn’t even come outside.

I seized my Big Gulp and took another swig of the melted Coke water.

“Dammit!” I screamed at no one and threw the Big Gulp out the window as I entered the freeway.

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A NOVEL

AND
THEN

SHE

FELL

ALICIA
ELLIOTT



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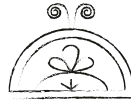
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CHAPTER 1



The Last Exit Out of Alice

Yes, this is technically called “The Creation Story,” but it’s not the beginning, so let’s get that little misconception out of the way right now.

There never was a beginning. There was a before, and before that was another before, and another before before that. I know that’s probably confusing to a modern mind like yours.

Colonialism and so-called linear time have ruined us. We can’t even wrap our heads around our own stories because we’ve been trained to think in good, straight, Christian lines.

But the world doesn’t work like that. It never has.

Anyway, before before, this world was covered in water. A deep ocean that held water creatures like pearls. An endless sky that bore witness to the brilliance of the birds. Now, when I say “sky,” some outer space is included in there, too. A lot of outer space, actually. Pretty much anything that can be seen from earth counts as “sky”—but that’s not to be confused with Sky World, which is even

higher than the sky. It's its own world with its own problems, as you'll see pretty clearly once we get into Sky Woman and her life. Though when you really stop and think about it, Sky World and its problems aren't that different from our world or our problems, so it might as well be just plain old "the World."

Aaaand there I go, getting ahead of myself again. Sorry. Bad storyteller! (Let me ask you a quick question: When I say that—"Bad storyteller!"—do you imagine a white lady with a pursed butthole of a mouth wagging her finger in your face, too? Maybe like a nun? "Bad storyteller!" Wag. "Bad Indian!" Wag wag. "Bad woman bad human bad subhuman bad unreal unholy object bad possession my possession his possession everyone's possession but your own bad bad bad bad badddd!" Wag wag wag wag wag. No? Just me? All right, I'll remember that for later. See? Not *that* bad a storyteller.)

So. Basically. The order of things went, from top down:

Sky World



Sky



Ocean

And at the very, very bottom of the ocean, the animals heard, there was something called clay.

They weren't sure, mind you, but they most certainly suspected. Heard from a friend's sister's boyfriend's cousin, and they all but confirmed it. The animals have always been a gossipy bunch.

No one had ever seen this "clay" or felt this "clay" or taken grainy, possibly doctored photos of this "clay" to pass around and praise or debunk, however—so most of the animals laughed the whole thing off. Everyone knew there was only sea and sky. Sink or swim.

Or fly, I guess.

"Somebody's hungry . . ."

I jump in my seat, nearly choking on a gasp. My hand automatically flies to my chest, as if to hold in my thundering heart, and I whip around.

Steve stands there, Dawn wriggling uneasily in his arms.

"Oh. It's you," I say, exhaling with a little laugh.

"Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay. I was . . . in the zone, I guess," I say, turning back to look at the computer screen, at the pitiful number of words I've managed to squeeze out. I've been writing and rewriting and erasing and editing this opening section for weeks and nothing seems right. I want to get it perfect, to capture the way my dad used to tell our traditional stories when I was a kid. It's only now, as I labor over even the smallest word, wondering if it's the right kindling to stoke the fire of the reader's mind, that I understand how much talent and effort it took him to make our stories seem so urgent and relevant, even hundreds, thousands of years later. I doubt I'll ever come close to the bar he set. I mindlessly tap the space bar on my laptop, as if that will add anything substantial to the story.

I have no idea how the hell Steve and Dawn snuck up on me. For one thing, I can usually smell his cologne from ten feet away. His mother, Joan, bought it for him. She thinks because she spent more than five hundred dollars on it and its heavy bottle is bedazzled with enough Swarovski crystals to make a drag queen feel faint, that it must smell good. It doesn't. It smells like an unwashed-for-a-couple-days-patchouli-loving douchebag. Like what I imagine Jared Leto smells like. Plus, I'm pretty sure I'm allergic to it because my nose starts to run whenever he sprays, delays, and walks away. ("Learned that one from *Queer Eye*," he told me once, smiling with characteristic earnestness.)

I know he's wearing it as a tribute to his dotting mother, an act of olfactory love, and that if I even suggest I don't like it he'll stop immediately. But I also know Joan has been passive-aggressively planting the idea that I unfairly hate her ever since she and I first met, seeds of doubt that were no doubt fertilized and watered by my insistence on having a wedding that centered around my rez, family, and friends. Even saying that I hate the cologne she bought him could subconsciously confirm these suspicions. They're accurate—I absolutely hate her. But I don't want him to know that, so I suffer both the smell and the snot, smiling like a good little wife.

The other thing: I *definitely* should have heard Dawn. She's not quite crying but making an agitated sort of mewling sound I'm all too familiar with. It usually signals that she's about to start another hours-long crying spree. I'm so attuned to that sound I can already feel my breasts leaking. They clearly heard her long before I did. But, if I feed her fast enough, before she starts really getting her little lungs going, maybe we'll avoid a fit this time.

I turn back to the two of them and hold my hands out for Dawn. "Give her here."

Steve plops her into my arms. I pull up my shirt, pull down the

flap on my breastfeeding bra, and pray that Dawn will latch on this time. Miraculously, she does, her little cheeks moving in and out like a goldfish. Her face fades from burgundy to a calm light brown as I rub her velvet cheek, soft the way only brand-new baby skin is. Relief floods my muscles, and I close my eyes, letting this small victory loosen my too-tense body. We sit like this for some time, our shared exhaustion making us unlikely allies.

“I like how the animals are all conspiracy theorists.”

Shit. He’s talking about my writing. I left it up. Stupid mistake. I immediately open my eyes, see Steve leaning over me, and cringe. Not because I don’t want him near me. I do. There’s this amazing warmth he emits, which makes any room he’s in feel like the temperature has risen a few degrees from his mere presence, the exact opposite of the way demons and ghosts are said to make rooms colder.

No, I cringe because his seeing my writing at this stage feels too revealing. Like a stranger walking in on me half naked in a fitting room. Even his praise prickles. The writing is too fresh, too close, my meandering through it too sensitive for scrutiny.

“Thanks, babe. That’s sweet of you to say. But it’s not good. And it’s definitely not ready to be read yet.”

I slam my laptop shut, and he stands up quick.

“Oh. Sorry. Didn’t realize you were keeping it secret.”

Steve moves away from me, hurt, and my once warm neck becomes cold again. I feel a pang of shame—so deep and sharp and fleeting I can’t possibly follow it back to its roots—quickly swallowed up by regret. I’m doing it again. Pushing Steve away. He’s excited about my writing. He *wants* to encourage me, he *wants* me to succeed, he’s told me as much, said we need to set goals for ourselves as individuals and as a family so we maintain our autonomy. He doesn’t deserve this.

“It’s not that it’s a secret. It’s just . . .,” I start, searching for a way to invite him back in again. “I’m worried about the tone,” I finally say, looking up at him through lowered eyelashes, hoping my face is soft and feminine instead of hard and masculine. It takes conscious effort for me to do that—look helpless, vulnerable, innocent—in a way I’m sure would come naturally to so many white women.

“Maybe it’s too flippant?” I add for emphasis.

Steve smiles very slightly, almost imperceptibly. “I like the tone,” he says, his voice tentative. “It’s ballsy,” he continues. “Totally different from the old sage Indian everyone thinks of whenever anybody says the words ‘creation story.’”

Not everyone thinks of that, I want to say. White people think of that.

I look down at Dawn, trying to see parts of my family members’ faces in her tiny features, but I fail. She’s asleep now. Fighting naps all day has finally caught up with her. I pull myself out of her mouth and fix my bra and shirt.

“I don’t know if Ma would like it,” I confess quietly. “Or Dad.”

“What are you talking about? They’d both love it,” Steve says as he bends down and kisses my hairline. He gently pulls Dawn away from me and sets her into her car seat in the corner of the office. I’m not sure when I put it there.

I get up, move over to the window. Glance out through the blinds to see the driveway and cream siding of our neighbor’s house. People don’t exactly live here for the views, I have to remind myself.

“Anyway, don’t worry about anyone else’s opinion. Only Shonkwaia’tison can judge you,” he says, grinning with obvious pride.

I pause.

Shonkwaia’tison.

Today was Steve's first language class, I remember. He was there, in some yellow-tinged classroom reading handouts and forcing his hard English tongue to make soft Mohawk sounds, while I was here, pretending I know how to write Mohawk stories in English words. It's difficult not to be jealous of him, embarrassed of myself. He slid the Mohawk in so seamlessly, so confidently. The same way he approaches everything, including me, as he slips behind me once more, his hot hands skating over my hips, my abdomen.

And suddenly I'm in the upper corner of the room, looking down at Steve and me, as the empty shell of myself leans into the delicious heat of his body. I try not to panic. This isn't exactly new: my consciousness peeling away from the inconvenient reality of my body and floating into the strange, almost liquid-feeling air nearby. But I'm more determined now than ever before: I can't let old demons ruin my new life. They're trying, the demons. Pushing against the mental membrane I've been fortifying since I was a teenager.

Just last week I was making dinner, standing in the kitchen in the sleek little dress I'd grabbed from the closet and shimmied into so Steve would see how well I was handling everything. I'd thrown my hair into an updo I learned from Instagram but decided against makeup. That seemed too try-hard. I had just placed some hand-breaded chicken cutlets into the oven when my eyes caught on the terra-cotta-colored walls. I started thinking about how much I hated them. Steve had chosen the paint. Steve had chosen everything. He'd asked for my input when we first moved in, but I'd shrugged. I couldn't consider the world outside my grief. Ma was newly dead, and I was spending most of my time back at my childhood home on the rez, preparing for her funeral. I'd passed a few

sleepless nights in her bed, her sheets pressed to my nose as I breathed in her scent of menthol cigarettes and Chanel N°5, sobbing. In the mornings, I'd wandered through the trailer, covering the mirrors and reluctantly bagging her belongings to give away after the burial. I'd originally wanted a house with a granny suite so I could look after Ma, make sure she wasn't pushing herself too hard. She'd been struggling with the long-term effects of an injury then, and I wasn't sure how well she'd adjust to living without me for the first time. Once I found out Joan was paying for the house, though, I didn't feel comfortable mentioning it, or any of my preferences. She made it clear the only opinion that mattered was her own. I couldn't help but focus on this fact after Ma died—*she could have been living with us, we could have saved her*—letting it curdle into resentment for both my mother-in-law and the house she'd gifted us. Devoting any thought to decorating it in the weeks and months that followed seemed impossible, even cruel.

And now, thanks to Steve, our entire house looks like it was ripped from an IKEA catalog—all clean lines and no character. White cupboards and chrome pendant lamps and black cube couches. I'm scared to move inside it, scared to dirty it, to disrupt its sanitary perfection. My stylish yet affordable Swedish-designed prison. My first place off the rez, and yet not mine at all.

I don't belong here. Even though it was just a thought, it boomed loud in my mind as I watched the water in the pasta pot come to a boil. I trembled at the truth of it. *I don't belong anywhere. Not anymore.*

Then another voice, not my own: *It's all burning.*

It startled me, this voice, and for a moment I was so scared I couldn't move. I saw it first: dark smoke reaching from the oven door and up toward the ceiling like an angry, vengeful hand. *Holy*

shit, I thought. *Something really is on fire*. As soon as the thought popped in my head, the sound of the fire alarm echoed in my ears, then the sound of Dawn's confused yelps started in the living room like high-pitched harmonies. I knew logically those sounds must have been going on for a while by that time, but for some reason I hadn't heard them.

It was like my body suddenly went on autopilot. I grabbed oven mitts, opened the oven door, snatched the baking sheet, slammed the door shut, and dropped the baking sheet into the sink with a clatter. I turned on the taps, anxiety sharp in my chest as I watched the steady stream of water rush over the charred remains. As I ran to grab a broom so I could turn off the smoke alarm with the end of its handle, it occurred to me that Steve was due back any minute. He couldn't see this. He couldn't see any of it.

Once I'd stopped the alarm, I unclipped Dawn from her car seat and held her to my chest, shushing her as I plotted. If I called Steve and told him we were out of diapers but insisted he had to buy a specific brand that he would have to drive across town for, that could buy me another half hour. I could order some chicken on a delivery app, set it out on our plates at the dinner table, then tie up the garbage with the burned chicken and run the dishes through the dishwasher. No evidence. It'd be like it never even happened.

Everything went according to plan. I thought I was in the clear. But then, while we were eating dinner, the demons came back for more. At first, everything seemed normal. Steve had launched into the minutiae of his day—how the head of the department invited him out for lunch, which he thought would help with his tenure. Then he went on about the progress of his colleague Scott's home reno, then his department head Lou's wife Sheila's latest publication. He didn't ask me how my day was in all that time. Part of me

was relieved since I didn't have to lie. The other part of me was nearly vibrating with so much swallowed rage. If Sheila's day mattered, and Scott's day mattered, why the fuck didn't mine?

"Well, Steve," I might have said if I had any spine, "I nearly burned down the house while you were gone. This dress I threw on just for you now stinks like baby puke and sweat. Your daughter doesn't want the milk from my tits, so I'm always sore and she's always crying. I can't sleep at all. And I never want to fuck you or anyone again."

He'd probably still find a way to excuse my rudeness, to paint it as some endearing joke. He's that type of person. Endlessly optimistic, incredibly loving. The type of person who genuinely tries to get to know people, and once he does, focuses almost exclusively on the good in them, using their past circumstances to explain away what others might refer to as shitty behavior. The type of person who listens deeply to everything everyone says to him, remembers the tiniest, most otherwise inconsequential details of each conversation, then asks about them whenever he sees you next, whether that's in a week or six months. His attitude toward others made everything infinitely more interesting, like each interaction had the possibility to unfold into a fascinating short story, complete with rich characters and unearthed complexities. By the time I was getting ready to move off the rez, my cousin Tanya joked people were going to miss Steve's visits more than they were gonna miss me. I admired that he was so likable, with his constant kindness and focused interest. I still do.

But that night, after the fire scare and the rush to figure out dinner and the droning conversation, I couldn't think about any of that. I was silently simmering, unsure how to put out the blaze inside me. Maybe that played a role, like a key unlocking a door.

Steve finished his meal and shouted, "Nya:wen!" Exaggerating

the last syllable the way he always does because he knows it makes me laugh. Or it did. Before Ma died and Dawn was born and I disappeared.

“Nyoh,” I replied quietly, shoveling a forkful of salad into my mouth.

“Oh, guess what?” he asked as he swept my plate into the dishwasher. “U of T is offering a beginner Mohawk class this year. I talked to Lou and the department is going to pay for me to enroll. I managed to convince him it’ll benefit the department to have staff who speak Mohawk. Isn’t that great?”

It was as if everything paused for a second. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. When the pause was over, it wasn’t just my insides that shook with fury. It was my outsides, too. I reflexively grabbed my fork. It came from a silverware set Steve’s great-uncle Bob had given us as a wedding gift. His wife had gone on and on about the proper way to polish it before we’d even opened their gift. I stared down at that fork, thinking about how beautiful and shiny it would be if not for my oily fingers. I focused on the smudges, the way they blurred at some edges but stayed sharp in others, and I willed myself to stop shaking like an idiot. But just as the thought came to me, it was like my consciousness slingshotted outside of my body and into the air over my head. I could see the dining room from above and from my eyes at the same time—one vision layered on top of the other like overlapping transparencies on an overhead projector. What was happening to me? Why was I so mad? And why was I falling out of my body again, the way I used to before I met Steve?

I sat at the white table and curled and uncurled my toes, trying to pull myself back into my skin as Steve told me what he knows about his new language teacher. Once I did, I encouraged. I carefully wiped the fingerprints from my fork, placed it back down, and I smiled. Steve was none the wiser.

That's what I need to do now, as I float above my office, *Shonkwaia'tison* echoing in my head, my bitterness as conspicuous as each Mohawk syllable Steve uttered. I need to ground myself in my body.

I start by zeroing in on Steve, his dampening hands running all over my skin, his mouth on my neck, kissing me. I never used to mind how sweaty his hands would get. In fact, I used to like it. I had convinced myself his hand sweat was evidence of his fragility, his anxiety, his need for me. Right now his hands remind me of a catfish freshly yanked from the creek. I focus on them, feel saliva well up in my mouth, the sour before the puke, at the exact moment his hands brush the outside of the giant maxi pad shoved between my legs. We both jerk and pull away from each other, embarrassed by my post-childbirth body.

"Sorry," I say before I can really consider what I'm apologizing for.

"It's fine," he says before he can really consider that this interaction is all wrong.

Well, I'm certainly back in my body now: the unwashed, still-bleeding heft of it. I pull away from him and lengthen my spine.

"It's only been six weeks," I say, avoiding his eyes.

"I know. You're right. I forgot. I'm sorry." His words fast as he backs away from me, hands up, like he's a little kid who's been caught stealing candy at the corner store.

"You look ridiculous," I manage, genuinely laughing this time. He laughs, too.

I love Steve more than I knew it was even possible to love another person. I can tell by the way I always turn toward him

whenever he's in a room—still—as if he's the sun and I'm a sunflower starving for his light.

But I can't help but notice: he hasn't suffered at all since we've gotten married. If anything, he's excelled. Now that he's married with a baby, he can better relate to the older, tenured faculty in his anthropology department. He can bring me along to dinner parties, where I feel like an exhibit on display, and dress up our daughter in cute baby drag so that strange white women are more enticed to scoop her out of her stroller or car seat without my permission. Every action we take is purposeful and imbued with meaning for him, because it makes him more “relatable,” more “feminist.” And through it all, he has the luxury of forgetting about not only the pain and violence of the actual act of childbirth but also the ongoing trauma it's stamped on my body.

Me, though? I'm consumed by this inescapable feeling of hopelessness. Every day is the same. Same exhaustion. Same humiliation. Same loneliness. I look out at the young women who walk past the house and fantasize about where they're going, who they're gonna hang out with, what drugs they're gonna do when they get there, who they're gonna fuck when they start to come down and everything else has lost its glitter. Fantasizing is all I can do. I'm stuck here.

Steve doesn't notice. He wouldn't, though. He's too blinded by the picture of us he's fixed in his mind. That's partially my fault—Steve's not knowing. I've perfected the art of looking like I'm okay—more than okay, even, *great*—since back when I was working at the racetrack as a kid. You could never let men at the track see you flinch, because then they'd know the way in. They'd know how to make you uncomfortable. How to make you hurt. Better to keep that hidden. Better to keep yourself hidden.

Still, that word comes back again, nagging at me.

Shonkwaia'tison.

Mohawk feels like a weapon coming from Steve's lips—not because he's necessarily wielding it that way but because history is. Here was the language I had lost, the language my parents and aunts and half my grandparents had lost, which was so different from the English that'd been forced on us that I secretly worried my tongue would never be able to make those sounds. And here was Steve, rattling it off easily, as if it weren't an endangered language, my endangered language; as if those words, which held my culture, were simply . . . *words* to him.

The thing is, though, they *were*. And why wouldn't they be? He didn't need to question his identity and worth every time he said a Mohawk word. His voice didn't shake when he spoke, scared any mispronunciation would signal to everyone he didn't really belong. That he never did and never would.

That wasn't his legacy.

It was mine.

When you both die, Steve will have to translate your ancestors' words to you.

As soon as the words enter my head, I see my ancestors staring at me, disappointed, their foreheads crinkled like tissue paper, as they slowly push out syllables for Steve to catch and pass to me. I shake my head slightly to chase the words—the vision—out.

No. Not now. I'm the one in control.

“Did you learn that word in class?” I manage to say without my voice cracking.

“Learn what?” he asks, distracted. “Shonkwaia'tison?”

I nod, afraid that if I say anything, I'll scream or cry.

“Yeah, mostly.” He's grinning like a schoolboy getting praised by

his favorite teacher. “I mean, I’d hear your ma say it all the time before, but I wasn’t sure of the syllables. Was it okay?”

Hearing him mention Ma feels like a tiny dagger in my gut. I swallow—quietly—then force my voice to mimic excitement. “Yup. Good job, babe!”

“Thanks.”

He nuzzles into my neck and I know I’m being unfair. An asshole. He’s learning Mohawk, for fuck’s sake! It’s one of the hardest languages in the world to learn, and he’s learning it. He’s learning it for me and he’s learning it for our daughter. Yes, he’s also going to be able to use this to better position his career, but that doesn’t negate the good. He talked to Melita about her experience learning it, and he knows it’ll be easier for Dawn to retain Mohawk if it’s spoken at home, too. I know he cares, that he would never intentionally make me feel bad for not knowing my language. I know that he would willingly act as translator for my ancestors and me—gladly, even.

Just as I know there is a disconcerting plea in his voice, barely perceptible. I’m not sure what it’s a plea for, but it immediately strikes me as everything that’s wrong with him, with us. We’ve been married nine months but it already feels like decades of unsaid words have settled between us.

A lattice pattern of silence and secrets to match the sofa set.

That night I have one of my recurring nightmares. They started during the pregnancy: terrible dreams so thick I had to be shaken from them violently. There was blood, always. So much blood. In this one, which started shortly after my mother’s funeral, Ma was alive again. She pulled up in her car to the front of our new house, smiling and happy to see us. Steve and I were waving from behind the screen door, Dawn content in my arms. But when Ma began to walk up the sidewalk toward us, the squares of cement started

to simmer beneath her. Each step she took melted her body from the bottom up. Still, despite my screams for her to turn around and go back, she wouldn't stop. She kept coming, her skin, muscles, bones, and blood puddling behind her.

It was so real I could smell her sizzling flesh long after I'd screamed myself awake.

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THE CHRISTMAS ORPHANS CLUB

a novel

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PROLOGUE

Hannah

This year, December 24

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through Manhattan, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

Scratch that. Manhattan at six o'clock on Christmas Eve is a complete and utter shitshow.

The mice—fine, rats—are frolicking through mountains of day-old garbage bags heaped on the curb. It's pornographic, really. "Stirring" would be putting it mildly.

As for the people, Grand Central is a pulsing sea of bodies rushing to catch a train to whichever tristate suburb they hail from. At Citarella, the fancy West Village grocery store where a pint of berries starts at \$10, the fourth verbal altercation of the day has broken out in front of the prepared-food case as two women spar over the last container of scalloped potatoes. Those who opted

to order in aren't faring any better. Han Dynasty's delivery estimate is creeping toward three hours.

So I shouldn't be surprised to be stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, stop-starting my way up the West Side Highway in the back seat of a yellow cab. I've given up hopes of doing my makeup on the drive. Winged eyeliner was too optimistic; anything short of puking from motion sickness will be a victory.

"You a city kid?" my sixtysomething cab driver asks in a thick New York accent.

"Nope, Jersey girl," I tell him, trying to strike the right balance between politeness and making it clear I don't want to talk.

"You got family in the city, though, right? Aunts? Cousins?" he asks. "Bet you're heading to spend Christmas Eve with them."

"Nope. No family, just me."

He looks at me through the rearview mirror and I see pity in his crinkly gray-blue eyes.

He feels sorry for me, but I feel sorry for everyone else with their boring, conventional Christmases. Some people think it's sad to be without family at the holidays, but Christmas is my favorite day of the year. And this is poised to be our best one yet. It has to be, after the twin disasters of the last two years' celebrations. Tonight is only the appetizer.

I consider correcting the driver's assumptions, but I feel the burrito I had for lunch roiling in my stomach as he taps the brakes for the three hundredth time, and I decide to shut my eyes and fake sleep instead. Let him think whatever he wants.

When I race into Theo's apartment, barefaced and vaguely nauseous, Finn yells, "Hannah, is that you? *Finally!*"

"Come on, then," Theo hollers. "If the food gets cold it's all going to be shite."

"Cute scarf!" Priya remarks as I make my entrance into the dining room, where three of my four favorite people are seated around a long table.

"I know Hannah didn't pick it out because it's not neutral or the color blue," Finn jokes. "So who's it from?"

"Hey!" I retort. "But also . . . fair. It was a gift from David," I say as I finger the bright red cashmere scarf wrapped around my neck.

"For Christmas?" Finn prods.

"No, we're doing gifts tomorrow morning. It was a 'just because' present. He saw it in a store window and thought it would look nice with my hair."

"I think he liiiikes you," Finn sings, stretching out the word like Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality*. "He wants to kiiiiissss you."

My cheeks flame at his teasing, but I'm also grinning. David is always bringing home little gifts. I know he likes me—loves me, actually. I've never doubted how he felt about me, not even in our earliest days of dating. But the warm thoughts about my boyfriend are chased by a trickle of guilt. For a minute, I think about

spilling everything: how off we've been, what I found a few weeks ago. But tonight, as an extension of Christmas, is sacred. A time-out from real life. No work, no family, just us. I don't want to mar it with my relationship woes.

After I strip off my winter layers, gently arranging the scarf on the back of my chair so it doesn't drag on the ground, I notice the tablescape I missed in my haste. The table is laden with silver trays piled with burgers in paper wrappers. There are crystal bowls with fries of every variety—thin, curly, crinkle-cut, sweet potato, and steak fries. There's even a bowl of onion rings and another of tots. Each place setting has ramekins of what looks like ketchup, mayo, and special sauce.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Did I miss the part of the evening where you all got stoned out of your goddamn minds?"

"You've heard of the feast of the seven fishes, right?" Theo asks. "This is the feast of the seven fast-food burgers."

"We're going to taste them all and pick a winner. He had scorecards made." Finn points to a piece of cream cardstock beside his plate with *Christmas Eve Burger Brawl* written across the top in swirly red calligraphy.

With these people I could have fun in an empty room; just being with them is special. But this is delightfully ridiculous. I can't help but laugh at the spectacle.

"First of all, this is absurd because Shake Shack is definitely going to win, but also, what are you going to do?" I ask Priya, who is vegetarian.

“I’m judging sides,” she chirps. “But you should know, Theo has his money on In-N-Out.”

“There’s not even an In-N-Out in New York,” I begin. But sure enough, one of the platters is stacked with burgers with their signature red-and-white wrappers. “How?”

“He had them flown in from California,” Finn says with an eye roll. I don’t want to know how he did it or how much it cost, but I’m still positive there’s no way they’ll win, especially reheated.

“Shall we?” Theo asks.

I take a seat next to Finn and shake out my napkin. Everyone begins serving themselves, except me. Instead, I click the shutter button on my mental camera. I want to remember everything, sear this night into my mind as a core memory. Because in addition to being our best, it may also be our last Christmas together.

Finn reaches over to squeeze my hand, silently asking if I’m alright. The truth is, I’m anything but alright. I’m devastated he’s leaving, taking half my heart with him, like one of those plastic best-friend necklaces fourth-grade girls trade as social currency. It feels doubly unfair because I only just got him back. A whole year lost to our fight. I’m not ready for whatever comes next. But I paste on a smile and look back at him, pretending to be happy. And I am, for him, but I’m also sad for me. Sad that everything is ending.

Everyone else has something new on the horizon—Priya is still giddy over her new job, Finn has his move to LA, and Theo’s

whole life is plane tickets and parties. But all I have to look forward to is less. A Finn-sized hole in my day-to-day life.

“What?” Finn asks, giving me the side-eye, not buying the smile I’ve plastered on.

“Nothing,” I say. “I’m just happy being here with all of you.”

I swallow the next thought that pops into my mind: *I don’t know how I could ever be happier than this.* These people are all the family I need.

ONE

Hannah

Christmas #1, 2008

I, Hannah Gallagher, am kind of an expert on depressing playlists.

Sure, it's a dumb superpower. I'd much rather be able to fly or read minds or turn into a puddle of metallic goo like Alex Mack, but we don't get to pick the hand we're dealt. Don't I know it.

I add "Brick" by Ben Folds Five to the playlist I'm working on and follow it up with "Skinny Love" by Bon Iver. I throw in "Vindicated" by Dashboard Confessional for good measure. If you ask me, the problem with music today is there are too many songs about being dumped or someone you love not loving you back, and not enough about the disappointing state of the whole damn world.

I've spent the past four years honing my craft, and tonight's playlist is going to be my opus.

I minimize a browser tab to check my LimeWire downloads.

Damnit! The progress bar has barely moved, and my laptop's fan is whirring like it's about to blast off my lap.

If I really want "Hide and Seek," I could buy it. But ninety-nine cents is a lot of money for a song, and I'm still mad Marissa Cooper got her pretty, popular stink all over that one. On the other hand, my playlist is a little dude-heavy, and why should men have a monopoly on angst?

Oh, screw it! It's Christmas. I deserve this, at least.

I hop down from my lofted bed and make the arduous journey—all three steps—to the desk where my backpack is slung over the back of the chair. My wallet is somewhere in the bottom, along with a semester's worth of dried-up pens and half-finished Spanish worksheets.

Aha!

As I close my fingers around the wallet, there's a knock at the door.

That's odd.

It's not one of my friends, because I don't have any friends here. And even if I did, they'd be home for winter break, eating ham with their happy, whole families.

When I open the door, I'm face-to-face with a willowy boy with light brown skin, who's dressed like he escaped a Ren faire. He's wearing a ruffled tuxedo shirt tucked into slim-tailored trousers, so slim they might actually be girls' pants. The look—and that's what this is, *a look*—is finished off with a green paisley ascot and black velvet cape. I'm pretty sure he's wearing eyeliner, which, to be fair, he is definitely pulling off.

“Who are you?” I don’t bother being polite because I’m positive he has the wrong room.

“I’m Finn Everett,” he announces like it’s obvious, even though I know I’ve never seen him before in my life. I would remember him.

To punctuate his statement, he throws the cape over one shoulder, revealing a flash of crimson silk lining, and plants a hand on his hip. He stares down at me like he’s waiting for an answer, even though *he’s* the one who knocked on *my* door.

“Okay, Finn Everett, what do you want?”

“What are you doing on campus on Christmas? You know you’re not allowed to be here, right?”

I’ve known him for thirty seconds and I’m already exasperated. But I know how to get rid of him: “I’m an orphan.”

I’m gratified to see him flinch at the word. I wouldn’t usually describe myself this way, but I’m keen to get back to my night, and over the past few years I’ve learned nothing kills a conversation faster than the *o*-word. It sure sent me running for the door when a middle-aged social worker in a lumpy brown blazer sat across from me and my sister and opened with, “Now that Hannah’s an orphan, we’ll have to figure out what to do about her guardianship.”

Finn Everett looks me up and down, taking in my plaid pajama pants, oversized Boston College sweatshirt, and greasy hair that’s been in the same messy bun for the last three days. “No,” he says, shaking his head like I’m a math problem he can’t solve. “You’re too pretty to be an orphan.”

“Excuse me?”

“All those white ladies would have been fighting to bring you home from the orphanage. You’re cute. Underdressed, but cute.” When I don’t respond, he adds, “That was a compliment, by the way!”

Well, shit. He’s not one of the people who clam up when they hear about my parents; he has questions. There’s nothing worse than the question people. *How? At the same time? How old were you? How do you feel about it?*

“Not that kind of orphan. I’m not some Cabbage Patch doll, or whatever you’re thinking. My parents died when I was fifteen.”

“Oh, okay. Well, we’re going on an adventure.” My whole body unclenches when I realize he’s on to the next topic.

“We are?” I haven’t left my dorm in two days because the entire campus is closed, even the dining halls. I’ve been subsisting on boxes of Special K with Red Berries and microwaved bean and cheese burritos from the convenience store down the hill. What kind of adventure could we possibly have?

“Did you have something better planned?”

I do not. I’m going to listen to my playlist while I eat an entire pint of Ben & Jerry’s Milk & Cookies ice cream, and then maybe I’ll watch *Die Hard*, the least sappy Christmas movie, so I can tell myself I’m in the holiday spirit. But I don’t want to tell him this, because I get how it sounds.

But Finn Everett doesn’t need confirmation. He nudges past me and looks back and forth at both sides of the room, each equipped with a bed, a desk, and a dresser. “Which closet is yours?”

One side has a generic navy blue comforter. Every square inch of cinder block wall is plastered with band posters. Guster, O.A.R., Weezer, Wilco, the Postal Service. The other side is decorated with a Lilly Pulitzer bedspread and a single poster of Jessica Simpson vacuuming in her underwear. I think it's obvious which side is mine, but I point to the closet on the right side of the room anyway. He starts flipping through hangers. I'm not sure what he's looking for, but I'm positive he won't find it. I live in a rotation of concert tees bought off merch tables at Paradise Rock Club and the Orpheum.

"That's it?!" He sighs so dramatically I swallow an apology for my lack of evening gowns.

"What were you looking for?"

"Something better than"—he motions at my pajamas and pulls a face like he smelled spoiled milk—"this."

"And where are we going that has such a strict dress code?"

"Now we're going to have to make a pit stop. Grab your coat. Let's go." He snaps his fingers twice to punctuate his demand.

I must be stunned into compliance, because I find myself grabbing my puffer coat and sliding on a pair of salt-stained Ugg boots. I guess we're going on an adventure.

.

We spill out of Welch Hall into the brisk night air. Snow flurries dance in the wind. What's most striking isn't the snow, it's the silence. Usually there are ten thousand students rushing to a Perspectives on Western Culture seminar or a spin class at the Plex,

or at night—let’s be honest, sometimes during the day, too—ambuling to off-campus parties in Cleveland Circle to play flip cup. But tonight it’s just us.

We cross into the unfortunately named Dustbowl, which isn’t dusty at all. Most of the year it’s a grassy quad ringed by stately stone buildings, but now it’s covered in two inches of hardened snow. When I toured the campus, it was spring, and the lawn was dotted with pairs of girls tanning on beach towels while groups of boys playing Frisbee maneuvered around them. It was exactly how I thought college should look from episodes of *Dawson’s Creek*. *This* was the slice of normal I was craving.

“How’d you find me?” I wonder aloud. Maybe I should have asked more questions before agreeing to this outing. Not that I ever technically agreed.

“Your music,” Finn answers. “But this was the sixth dorm I tried! Trust me, you were not easy to find. I’ve been *barely* entertaining myself for a week.” He gestures at his ridiculous outfit. “I was beginning to think I was the only person on campus.”

Finn and I cross into O’Neill Plaza and make our way toward the sad, unlit Christmas tree at its center. Is this where we’re going? Some adventure this is. With students home for break, the facilities staff must have decided it wasn’t worth the cost of electricity to keep the tree lit, even on Christmas.

“Wait here,” Finn instructs.

He leaves me standing under the tree and heads toward the library on the east side of the plaza. I’m not close enough to see

what he's doing, but I hear the jingle of keys he produces from underneath his cape and watch him slip inside the building.

I jump from foot to foot to stay warm as minutes pass and he doesn't reappear. For a second, I wonder if I'm being abandoned—again—and he has a getaway horse-drawn carriage waiting on the other side of the building.

I'll give him five more minutes before I head back to the warmth of my dorm and queue up *Die Hard*. As I look down at my watch to start timing him, the tree in front of me flickers on. I crane my neck to gawk at thousands of rainbow twinkle lights. I can feel myself grinning like an idiot. *Okay, Finn Everett, not a bad start.*

I don't hear him approach over the wind whipping through the plaza, but when I look over, he's standing next to me with a smug grin on his face, watching me take in his handiwork. "How'd you know how to do that?" I ask.

He gives a faux-innocent shrug and ignores my question. "We can't have an adventure without ambience, can we?" He winks at me. "Onward!"

"Where are we going?" I trail him down more stairs.

"You'll see. Patience, darling," he calls over his shoulder.

"Hannah," I correct him, realizing he never asked my name. Apparently, the *who* was not critical criteria in an adventure companion. Now I feel even sillier traipsing through campus, probably about to break my neck on these icy stairs, with this weirdo in a cape who doesn't care to know my name.

He pulls to a stop on the landing, and I almost crash into his

back. “Hannah,” he parrots back at me, rolling the name over in his mouth. “A pleasure,” he says with a small bow.

A nervous giggle escapes my throat. I’ve never been bowed to before. He’s so strange, but also maybe kind of endearing? Plus, he was right, what else do I have to do tonight?

“Well, c’mon, before I freeze my ass off!”

.

After a stop at Robsham Hall to raid the theater department’s wardrobe closet and some heated negotiations about my outfit for the evening (he pressed for a corseted Victorian gown, but I bargained him down to a red, fifties-style dress with an itchy petticoat underneath), we’re standing outside Lower Dining Hall, which is closed. Except nothing is closed to us tonight with Finn’s magic key ring. I’m beginning to wonder if there’s a janitor duct-taped to a chair in a maintenance closet, missing one set of keys.

The tea-length dress Finn talked me into wearing swishes around my knees as we make our way into the cafeteria portion of the dining hall.

“And what will the lady be having this evening?” Finn asks.

The options are limited since the dining hall is closed. Without the hot food stations or the salad bar, our options are chips, granola bars, or cereal. “The lady will have your finest Honey Nut Cheerios, my kind sir.”

“We can do better than that,” Finn says as he ducks behind the service station.

“If you could have anything to eat in the whole world—well,

maybe not the whole world, but that would normally be available at Lower—what would it be?”

We seem to be gearing up for a make-believe tea party situation, but I’m willing to play along.

“So?” he presses.

“Pancakes!”

“That’s so boring. Try again, but do better this time.”

“Chocolate chip pancakes?”

“Better, but barely.”

He bends to open a stainless-steel fridge below the service station and resurfaces with a carton of milk and a stick of butter.

“Back in a flash.” He disappears into the kitchen, which I’m positive is off-limits to students. He returns, hugging a mixing bowl filled with dry ingredients to his chest with one hand and dangling an unopened bag of chocolate chips from the other.

“Hop right up.” He points to an empty counter.

“You have the most important job of all. You will hold my cape. Guard her with your life,” he says, before adding, “No, seriously, I’m dead if I get this dirty. We’re doing *Phantom* next semester.”

Finn rolls up his sleeves and gets to work measuring milk and cracking eggs into the bowl of dry ingredients. After mixing, he dumps in the entire bag of chocolate chips and flashes me a wink.

“So, how’d you know where all that stuff was?” I ask. I’m surprised at his confidence in the kitchen, especially *this* kitchen, which he appears to know his way around.

He crosses to a different station and turns on a flat-top grill,

hovering his hand over it to see if it's getting hot. Satisfied with what he feels, he nods to himself and pulls a ladle from a bin of utensils beneath the countertop. "I work here. It's my work-study job."

"Oh, so that's why you have all the keys."

"No, that's because of my other job. I also work in the provost's office. I'm the errand boy. I have to make a lot of deliveries, hence the keys."

Two jobs. Wow! I managed a straight-B average last semester and I have zero jobs. The upside to dead parents, if you're a silver linings person—which, let's be clear, I am not—is that I have money from the sale of my childhood home to pay for college and should graduate debt-free. The downside, of course, is no parents.

"Is that why you didn't go home for Christmas? Because it was too expensive?"

Finn gives a heavy sigh as he ladles globs of batter onto the grill. "Not exactly."

I decide to shut up. I've become the question person I hate so much. For a minute, we watch the pancakes bubble in silence.

"My dad's an asshole. He cut me off after I came out last summer. It's like marrying a Black woman was his one progressive deed for his whole, dumb life, and now he's done. He didn't even try to understand." His words spill out in a breathless run-on like he can't stop himself from telling me.

"Oh, Finn." My response is inadequate, but I don't know how to comfort him. Hell, I only met him an hour ago.

“I didn’t want to transfer schools, so I loaded up on jobs to pay for tuition. But now I’m failing all my classes because I have to work so much. So I guess it wasn’t a flawless plan.”

He flips the pancakes. The smell is pure heaven. At least there’s that.

“What did your mom say?” I ask.

“Not much. Which is a bummer. She doesn’t hate my guts like my dad does, but she also won’t stand up to him. So fuck them, I guess.”

I nod vigorously. It feels rude to say *fuck them*, since they’re adults I don’t know. Instead, I find myself saying, “My mom died of cancer the spring of my sophomore year of high school and then my dad died in a car accident three months later. Now my sister’s off on some round-the-world vacation and didn’t even call to wish me a merry Christmas.” I have no idea why I’m telling him this. Maybe confessions are contagious.

“Now you went and made my thing look stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid. I think it sucks.”

“Yours, too.”

Finn pulls out two plates and serves up the pancakes, five for each of us, in heaping stacks. He ducks into the refrigerator and holds up a can of whipped cream, giving me a questioning look.

“Obviously!” I’m offended he has to ask. He doesn’t know me very well. *Yet*, I think.

On the way to the dining room, we swipe silverware and load our pockets with syrup packets. “Where would you like to sit?”

he asks. We stand at the head of the dining room surveying rows and rows of empty tables.

“Over there.” I point to a round booth in the far back corner that’s occupied at all hours, crowded with groups of friends studying over coffee or hanging out for long stretches. For once, I want to feel like I belong. Even if no one else is here to see it.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

"Fresh, witty, and utterly romantic." —Ali Hazelwood



You, Again

A Novel

KATE GOLDBECK

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

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1

“EXCUSE ME, SIR?” ARI STANDS HER GROUND, FEET SHOULDER-WIDTH apart, on the sidewalk in front of the Brooklyn Museum. “I know that someone who waited ten minutes for a six-dollar cold brew has the time to stop and talk to me about protecting the second-largest bobcat habitat in New Jersey.”

Always best to start with a provocation. None of that “do you have a moment?” crap. No pedestrian in this city has “a moment” for a canvasser.

The tall man in sunglasses, expensive jeans, and a dark sweater—slightly hunched from the weight of a large backpack—slows down, not quite to a full stop. He glances at her neon vest and binder, realizing his mistake a half-second too late.

“I’m on a fucking call!” he snaps, angling his body to route around her.

It’s fine. Ari is used to people faking calls to avoid engaging with her. She takes a step to the right, blocking his path again. She needs one more donation to make quota, so Tall Sweater

Nightmare Man can give her twenty seconds to make the case for the bobcats.

“Can I have a sip?” She reaches toward his cold brew cup with a minimalist Blue Bottle logo. “I’ve had a super long day out here.” This trick—passed down from Gabe, her coworker-with-benefits—works about twenty percent of the time, which is a phenomenal success rate in the business of pestering strangers for (no) fun and (little) profit.

“Un-*fucking*-believable!” He lifts the cup out of her reach and jaywalks across Eastern Parkway, turning his head to look back at her and scowl.

Or maybe to ensure she’s not following him.

When Gabe told their improv class about the “lucrative opportunities” with ProActivate, he’d assured them that they’d become accustomed to constant brush-offs, the lack of eye contact, the utter rejection. “It’s good practice for comedy,” he’d said. “And it pays better.”

Everything pays better than comedy.

But at least onstage you can flop in front of dozens of people at once. Ten efficient minutes of agony. On the street, it’s like extending your hand every thirty seconds and getting one of those extra-painful envelope paper cuts in return.

Something, something . . . the definition of insanity.

Ostensibly, Ari moved to New York to pursue comedy. When she met Gabe, one of the charismatic leaders of the sketch comedy theater where Ari had planted her flag four months ago, he’d spun tales of casting agents frequenting open mics and late-night encounters with *Daily Show* writers. He’d become a hero and a crush.

What Gabe neglected to mention is that most of those encounters occurred while he worked the register at the noodle

place down the block from the studio.

On the drizzly walk home, she keeps an eye out for one last chance to make her donation quota. The woman with the promotional umbrella, letting her Yorkie pee on a flower bed? The stocky man with a gingery beard and thick-frame glasses, waiting in the doorway of a bar on Washington Avenue? But neither feels likely. Resigned, Ari turns to head toward home.

When she responded to Nat's posting on Craigslist, looking for someone to sublet the "cozy" second bedroom in her "Prospect Heights-adjacent" apartment, Ari quickly discovered it was actually a twenty-five-minute walk from Prospect Heights. "The room is technically considered a closet," Nat had explained when Ari came to look at it, "but there's already a lofted twin bed in there and a desk would totally fit."

The desk didn't fit. But living with Natalie was definitely preferable to Ari's last living situation, which was a futon in a friend's cousin's living room.

Especially tonight. Natalie spent the weekend in the Hamptons and she won't be back until late. The apartment will be luxuriously empty: the perfect opportunity to use her noisiest vibrator.

That was the plan, anyway.

"Guess who met quota standing outside Whole Paycheck?" Gabe is leaning against the front door to her building, under the awning, just out of the rain. He has the classic good looks of an Eddie Bauer catalog model or someone who poses for stock photos, with his wavy-but-coiffed hair and twinkling brown eyes. "Like shooting fish in a barrel. How'd you do?"

Gabe pushes off the brick wall, his neon ProActivate vest tucked into the back pocket of his jeans. He's always a big hit with the leashes-and-strollers crowd.

“One short,” Ari replies, fishing her keys out of her pocket.

“Bummer.” He holds up a Blu-ray of *Inception*. “Wanna finish it?”

It’s a flimsy pretense. They’ve been “watching” *Inception* for the last three weeks, in fourteen-minute increments. Last time, they’d paused after a particularly horny round of “Fuck, Marry, Kill.” (Ari: Hardy, Watanabe, Gordon-Levitt. Gabe: Cotillard, Murphy, DiCaprio.)

“Natalie’s out,” Ari says, forcing her key into the lock. “I was planning on—”

“Perfect.” He holds the door open. “I have a date in Boerum Hill later.”

When they get in the apartment, Gabe pulls off his shirt before Ari gets the disc in Natalie’s Blu-ray player.

It’s convenient, this thing with Gabe. He’s easygoing, open to trying new stuff. Proficient at undoing her bra with one hand. They both want sex and to *not* be boyfriend-girlfriend in equal amounts. He’s the first man Ari’s been with who doesn’t take it as a huge personal failing if she introduces a vibrator into the equation.

And after dealing with face-to-face rejection all day, it’s nice to be *wanted*.

At 1:06:47 into the movie and two pairs of underwear on the floor, the intercom buzzes in three shrill bursts.

“Did you order takeout?” Gabe asks, breathing hard. He flops back onto the sofa. “A sandwich sounds amazing right now.”

“How would I have done that?” Ari sits up. “With my third hand?” Two more buzzes trill through the apartment, followed by one long, never-ending buzz.

Ari rolls off the sagging couch and stumbles to the inter-

com. She punches the TALK button: “Yeah?”

The response is a garbled mix of static, a low voice, “food,” and “Natalie.”

“Buzzer’s broken,” she says. “I’ll come down.” Ari tugs her tank top over her head. “Natalie orders these macrobiotic meals,” she tells Gabe, who’s already back on his phone. “Must be the delivery guy.” She picks his boxers up off the rug, scanning the floor. “Crap. Where did my underwear go?”

“Underwear is overrated.” Gabe heaves himself off the couch. “I’m gonna jump in the shower.”

Ari pulls on his boxers, shoves her feet into her sneakers, and jogs down the stairs to grab the meals from the delivery guy.

When she reaches the ground floor, she sees a hulking shadow through the window at the top of the heavy door at the entryway. But as she begins to open the door, the shadow takes on a familiar shape.

Tall Sweater Nightmare Man is standing under her awning, holding a reusable shopping bag of produce that looks like an eighteenth-century Dutch still life.

He’s pale and lanky—mid-twenties?—with dark hair and a longish face that’s oddly proportioned.

But not in a bad way.

His eyes move back and forth across the slice of her face that’s visible between the frame and the door.

Ari clears her throat. “Can I help you?”

He looks confused, but doesn’t answer.

“Are you here to tell me about your Lord and savior Jesus Christ?”

“I’m Jewish.” He peeks over her shoulder. “Are you Natalie’s roommate?”

He smells like expensive botanical aftershave.

“Maybe,” she says, raising an eyebrow. “Are these her gluten-free paleo meals?”

“This is olive oil poached cod with mussels, orange, and chorizo,” he says, shifting his weight impatiently. “Did Natalie not mention I was coming?”

As if on cue, Ari’s phone chirps multiple times.

Nat 📱 : need huuuuge favor.

I got my days mixed up.

Josh is supposed to make me dinner tonight

NAT 📱 : the chef.

he’s already on his way with all these groceries.

I’m on the earlier Jitney but still running so late

could you let him in? 😞 😞

Shit.

This is typical Natalie bullshit, and she gets away with it because she has luminous skin and this amazing laugh and Ari has a crush on her in a way that’s completely different from her occasional horny Gabe feelings. Namely, an inability to say “no.”

“Wait, who are you?” Ari holds the phone screen to her chest, shielding it from his view.

“I’m Josh. Natalie’s boyfriend.” He doesn’t phrase it in the form of a question. It’s just a statement. A fact.

Ari spits back a fact of her own: “Nat doesn’t have a boyfriend.”



“YES, SHE *DOES*,” HE SAYS WITH THE CONFIDENCE OF SOMEONE WHO BELIEVES it to be true. Basically. “Me.”

It’s nearly imperceptible, but the roommate’s brow wrinkles

at the word *boyfriend*. Josh prides himself on noticing the details other people miss.

According to his schedule, in eight minutes Natalie should be sipping a glass of Sancerre, watching him supreme oranges with his Shun Dual Core Kiritsuke knife.

Instead, he's staring at a pink-haired stranger in men's underwear and a faded Obama HOPE T-shirt with the sleeves cut off.

"Nat's not here. She's running late," she says, not opening the door any farther. "I can put the food in the fridge. There's a bar down the block where you could hang out till she gets home."

Seconds of wasted time tick away in his brain, growing louder. Standing in the hallway, holding one hundred and seventy dollars' worth of high-end perishable groceries, he considers abandoning the plan. Calling an Uber. Rescheduling for another evening when all the elements of the concept can come together seamlessly.

But that would be failure.

"Absolutely not," he says. "This requires thirty minutes of prep plus fifty minutes cooking time. I need to get started now. And it's raining."

Tonight, after the mousse au citron, Josh Kestenberg and Natalie Ferrer-Hodges will transition from the confusing messiness of *casually dating-question mark* to *full-fledged relationship-period*.

Exclamation point.

No, *period*. More tasteful.

"If I do you this favor and let you in—"

"'Favor'?"

"—then you're going to atone for your rudeness earlier

today and help me make my quota.” The corner of her mouth tugs into the tiniest possible grin but her eyes are not smiling. A little dimple forms on the left side of her cheek. “I’ll need a forty-dollar donation. I take credit cards.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” It’s not often that Josh feels three steps behind.

“Glad you finally asked! With the support of wildlife lovers like you, the Nature Conservancy is establishing ‘Bobcat Alley,’ a protected greenbelt where native wild felines can roam and—”

“That was *you*?” Josh sets the grocery bag down on the stoop.

“Un-*fucking*-believable, right?” There’s a full Cheshire cat grin on her face now. Nothing coy about it.

“You’re extorting me?” He steps forward, towering over her. “Is this some kind of scam you pull?”

“Yes, I pretend to live in apartments all over Brooklyn in order to guilt my roommate’s angry trust-fund dates into making recurring charitable donations.” *Recurring?* Fantastic, he’ll be on a mailing list for the rest of his life. “Do you want to hear the talking points about the bobcats?”

“No.”

“Thank you for helping to build a future where bobcats thrive,” she recites by rote. She opens the door wider, letting him follow her into the building’s vestibule. “This is like the cold open of a *Law & Order* episode, letting a strange man into my apartment. You could tie me up with an extension cord and steal our laptops or something. But now you’ll be the last name on my donor log, so if I go missing, you’ll be the first suspect.” She stops for a breath at the foot of the stairs. “I’m Ari.”

“Josh Kestenberg.” His hand twitches in an automatic handshake response but he curbs the instinct. “I have a lot of prep to

do, so you'll have to tie yourself up with the extension cord."

"Arianna Sloane," she adds, like she gets extra credit for also having a surname. "And don't threaten me with a good time." She gestures at the stairs. "You first. I don't want you staring at my ass the entire way up to the third floor."

Josh rolls his eyes and starts to haul the bags up the first flight. As he passes her, he smells cheap weed that reminds him of his whiny vegan classmates in his anthropology seminars at Stanford. Josh takes the stairs two at a time, hoping to get far enough ahead of her to make further interaction impossible but she's right behind him.

"If you're a cook," she says, "shouldn't you be at work right now?"

"I'm a *chef*. I spent the last two years in Europe. I develop recipes." He'd freelanced at *Bon Appétit* on two occasions, thank you very much. "I just got back to New York."

"I don't know if I've seen Nat consume anything other than paleo bowls and Huel shakes," Ari says.

"She hasn't tried my food yet."

"How long have you two been 'together'? I mean, you're a cook—"

"Chef."

"—and you've never made her a meal; don't you think that's a little weird?"

"No." He picks up the pace, like he's trying to out-climb the accusation. *Is it weird?* "We've been seeing each other for six weeks."

"Does six weeks of dating mean a relationship? I hooked up with this guy, Nico, for three semesters and he was *not* my boyfriend. His name is still in my phone with three eggplant emojis, though."

Josh doesn't reply. She seems to be feeding off his answers, so it's best to cut off her supply. He's also feeling slightly winded.

"How is she labeled in your contacts?" she continues. "As 'girlfriend'? Is there a heart emoji next to her name?"

"No." Good fucking grief, this woman probably makes conversation with cab drivers and cashiers. "I don't need cartoon symbols to jog my memory about our relationship."

Why is it nearly impossible to meet interesting single women but so easy to attract people who have the uncanny ability to point out the small details that he's been consciously burying in his own mind?

When they reach the third floor, Josh turns to face her.

"Natalie never mentioned me?" he asks. It slips out, needy. Embarrassing.

"Let me think." Ari fumbles with her keys. "Are you the guy with the really nice bathroom with the dual shower heads?"

"No?" *What guy with the—*

"Oh! Were you Mr. September in last year's Babes of Bushwick calendar?" She looks him up and down.

"I don't know what—"

Ari forces the apartment door open with her hip.

Josh shakes off her disorienting questions; she's clearly just trying to fuck with him. He takes a cautious step into the living room, avoiding a pile of shoes by the door. He's always hosted Natalie at his apartment, where he doesn't have to account for unknown variables: surfaces that haven't been properly wiped or hostile-yet-chatty roommates.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a scrap of lacy trim peeking out from under the couch.

Ari seems to follow his gaze. "*There they are.*"

Before she can retrieve them, an interior door swings open.

A shirtless man bursts out, surrounded by a cloud of steam, belting a show tune. “Bring *him hoooooome! Briiing* him home!” He pauses his overwrought serenade and nods at Josh, friendly and completely unbothered by his presence. “Hey, man.”

Ari makes no attempt to introduce them.

“Do I get my boxers back?” the guy asks her. “Actually, never mind, I gotta run.” Humming the tune with heavy vibrato, he pulls a T-shirt over his head. “Call me in an hour in case I need a rescue?”

“Kay,” she responds, barely looking up. She’s riffing through her Nature Conservancy binder. “Enjoy.”

Josh watches him leave without kissing Ari goodbye.

As soon as the door slams shut, Ari appears at Josh’s left side, holding out her donation binder and a ballpoint pen.

After he sets down his bags and prints his credit card number in neat block letters, Ari gestures grandly and announces, “This is the kitchen. Don’t burn the apartment down.”

Josh tilts his head, looking past her. “A fucking electric stove?”

Ari glances at the aging unit that doesn’t even have a vent hood. “What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s no heat control, no subtlety, no flame. It’s either scalding or lukewarm.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” She shrugs. “Pretend you’re on one of those cooking competition shows where you have to start your own fire.”

He narrows his eyes at her and begins digging in his backpack, removing his supplies. There’s barely enough room on the granite-patterned vinyl counter to organize the ingredients and the equipment he’s brought. When he looks up, he’s surprised to see Natalie’s roommate opening the magnet-covered refrig-

erator door. He'd assumed she would make herself scarce.

"I'm also making dinner," Ari explains, bending at the waist to grab a box of MorningStar Farms veggie corn dogs out of the freezer drawer below.

"You have a little bit of an accent when you're ranting about appliances," she says, setting two corn dogs on a plate. "Did you grow up here?"

"Upper West Side."

She looks thoughtful as she shuts the microwave door. "Maybe it's the transplant in me, but I've always been jealous of the weird accent. I like it."

He blinks, unsure how to take the—well, it's not technically a compliment is it?

He removes a crisply folded list of timings from his bag and centers his maple cutting board over a clean white dish towel. With the space back under his control, he can channel his energy into transforming organic carrots into identical batonnets.

For a few minutes, they manage to ignore each other despite the tight confines. Once the carrots look as if they've been processed at a tiny lumber mill, Josh places a small kabocha squash on his cutting board and retrieves his cleaver. Overkill, perhaps, but the kabocha has extremely firm skin and he hadn't wanted to risk struggling with it in front of Natalie. Plus, cleaving anything provides a nice amount of drama. He gives the squash a small *thwack* next to the vine, covers the spine of the cleaver with a towel, and forces it down through the flesh.

"You didn't mention you were wielding a cleaver when you asked to enter my apartment," Ari says, removing her dinner from the microwave and setting it on the counter. "Can I try it?"

He takes a breath, but not so deep as to inhale the aroma of corn dogs.

The automatic response is obviously *no*. He hadn't planned on audience participation. But if he did hand her the cleaver, what could happen?

She could drop it. Dull the blade. Waste the squash by incompetently hacking away at it. He might need to demonstrate using a rocking motion. She would have to get close to him.

It's a terrible idea.

To his own surprise Josh nods at the space in front of him. "Stand here. Grip the handle like—*no*, like this," he says, moving her fingers.

"Are you always this bossy?" she mutters, setting the cleaver through the skin and pushing the blade down, leaning all her weight on it. "I mean, I'm not *not* into that."

As a rule, Josh doesn't let other cooks—let alone amateurs—touch his knives. He doesn't want their grubby fingerprints on his equipment, selecting the tongs when a spoon is needed, sprinkling an unnecessary pinch of salt over his perfectly seasoned protein.

And yet . . . the way she's touching something that belongs to him creates this strange, buzzy sensation on the back of his neck.

"I never learned to cook," she says. She cuts the squash into an array of sizes and wedge shapes that Josh will have to trim in a few minutes. At least she manages not to chop off a fingertip. "I lived with my grandma, and her culinary skills began and ended with the microwave." Ari rocks forward each time she presses the blade down and Josh is eighty percent certain that she's not wearing a bra.

He clears his throat. "So you came to New York to work for a pyramid scheme that tricks college students into marketing scams disguised as do-gooder bullshit?"

“I came here to do comedy.” Josh makes a mental note not to ask a follow-up and risk being invited to a terrible open mic. “But I actually *am* an excellent canvasser. I’m very good at finding common ground with strangers.” She looks up from the cutting board. “Except for right now.”

He finds himself analyzing the details of her features. Round, flushed cheeks and a sharp chin, with a lower lip that’s significantly fuller than the upper. There’s some expression spreading over her face—confusion, if he’s being optimistic; kindling annoyance, if he’s honest. But he’s always been better at arguing than flirting.

Not that he wants to flirt with her.

After a beat, Ari sets down the cleaver and pushes the cutting board toward him. He feels himself exhale.

“Thanks for the lesson.” She wipes her hands on a towel and fills a water glass directly from the faucet. Josh makes a mental note to buy Natalie a filter pitcher. “But I guess it’s the least you could do after interrupting my evening.”

“I interrupted *your* evening?”

“Yes.” Ari tucks a bottle of yellow mustard under her arm and returns to the living room, plopping down on the couch. “I had big plans for my night alone.”

“But you weren’t really by yourself, were you?” He pauses. “If you want privacy you could . . . go to your room?”

“It’s sweltering in there. The window in my room is too small for an air conditioner.” She reaches for the remote. “Why should I have to go anywhere? This is *my* apartment.”



“ISN’T IT NATALIE’S APARTMENT?” JOSH GRABS THE HANDLE OF THE saucepan and shakes it around. “Technically?”

“I pay half the rent,” Ari says, seething at the TV, unp pausing the movie from where she and Gabe left off, dipping a corn dog into a giant puddle of mustard.

A couple weeks ago, she had just started *The Grand Budapest Hotel* when Natalie got home from some underground supper club, wine-drunk but not quite sleepy. Ari pretended to pay attention to the art direction, while breathing in the subtle scent of the mysterious product that makes Natalie’s hair shiny and soft. She touched Ari’s thigh every time she laughed. If making someone laugh is the best feeling in the world, making someone laugh *while they’re touching your thigh* is like . . . the best feeling in the world plus a tiny hit of ecstasy. The arm touch was almost better than the orgasm Nat gave her ten minutes later.

Almost.

There have been two-and-a-half repeat performances of “movie night,” after which they each retreated to their separate rooms to sleep. Or, in Ari’s case, lie in her rickety lofted twin bed with a goofy smile on her face, staring at the remnants of some previous tenant’s glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. Perhaps she’d stumbled on the perfect sexual relationship: reasonably satisfying and free of emotional turmoil.

But she hadn’t met any of Natalie’s dates until now. Why has Nat automatically granted this guy “boyfriend” status, while Ari is an uncredited cameo? What makes him lovable (seriously, *how?*) and Ari merely fuckable?

The sound of a sharp blade against the wooden cutting board resumes behind her, in steady, exacting strikes, like a constant audio reminder of his presence in her space. His assumptions. His opinions.

“So you’ve never even cooked Natalie breakfast?”

“We go out,” he replies, over the chopping. “Why? Do you

usually treat your dates to Red Bull and Pop-Tarts when they finally roll out of bed?”

She lets out something between a laugh and a snort. “I’m long gone by the time they wake up.”

There’s a slight hiccup to the rhythm of his knife strokes. “What do you mean? You just get up and leave?”

“I like to wake up in my own bed,” she explains, polishing off the second corn dog. “It’s simpler.”

“Ah.” He resumes his knife work with a dramatic eye roll. “A true romantic.”

“You think it’s romantic sharing a bed with a stranger?” Ari stands up and walks her plate to the sink. “Either you wake up in a weird place in the morning or you have to kick someone out of your apartment. Anyway, I don’t participate in the romance industrial complex.” She scrubs the dish with enough vigor to leave scratches. “It’s a distraction that keeps women dependent on men for validation.” Maybe that statement is troublingly heteronormative but Josh is probably troublingly heteronormative, too.

She watches Josh place a pat of butter in a large pot on the stove. Upon closer inspection, he has the type of face that photos get wrong: a prominent brow, weak chin, serious dark eyes, and a long nose. His profile could’ve been chiseled into marble twenty-five hundred years ago. Handsome from some angles, harsh from others. The sort of person you meet once in passing but remember five years later.

Ari doesn’t have that *thing*—that distinctive quality. People glance at her and decide there’s someone more interesting to her left. Even dying her hair an outrageous shade of pink didn’t help her stand out in this city. After attending just one festival in McCarren Park, she concluded that at least one fifth of all women

in Brooklyn also have pink hair.

“Did you form these opinions based on life experience?” He fiddles with the knob on the dreaded electric stove, lowering the heat. “Or a handful of readings from Intro to Women’s Studies?”

“Are you always this condescending?”

“Are you always this naïve?” He’s still crouched down, at eye level with the stove top.

She reaches across him for a dish towel, blocking his access to the stove. “It’s ‘naïve’ to buy into the patriarchal myth of monogamy.”

“The patriarchal *myth*?” He grabs the towel from the hook on the lower cabinet door and thrusts it in her direction. “Move so I don’t scorch my Le Creuset on this fucking Maytag coil.”

“You genuinely believe the soulmate narrative peddled by Hallmark and those tacky Kay Jewelers commercials? Where a man surprises a woman with a little black ring box and it’s supposed to be some kind of huge life achievement?”

“Hallmark didn’t invent soulmates,” he says. “They just made it more marketable.” Josh places a cover on the pot of simmering water and turns to face her. “If you want to assign blame, take it up with Plato.”

Ari dries her hands on the towel, debating whether to take the bait. “Plato?”

“*The Symposium*? Aristophanes’s speech?”

“You’ll have to refresh my memory. I went to public school in Arizona.”

Josh reaches toward the counter and turns his neatly printed list to the blank side. “Plato says that the original humans were round creatures with four arms, four legs, and a head with a face on each side.” Ari watches his pen glide over the surface of the

paper, producing a sketch resembling Violet Beauregarde turning into a blueberry in Willy Wonka's factory. But this drawing has two heads, eight limbs, and a couple little scribbles above the legs.

"What's that?" she asks, pointing at the scribble on the left.

He glances down at the paper. "Genitalia."

"Oh." She squints at the drawing. "Yikes."



"IT'S AN ABSTRACT REPRESENTATION," JOSH INSISTS, DARKENING A FEW of the lines with his pen. "They could have any combination of . . . parts."

"How progressive. This is not where I envisioned this story going."

"You really haven't heard this before? My dad always told me it was the inspiration for the black-and-white cookie."

"Those shrink-wrapped things they sell at bodegas?" She shrugs. "Never had one."

Josh jerks his head up. "But you live in New York. It's basic cultural literacy."

"I moved here four months ago!"

He takes a clearing breath. "One of my jobs at my dad's deli was to ice the black-and-white cookies. No one else would make sure the lines were straight. It relaxed me."

"Did you at least get to eat the imperfect ones?"

"God, no. They're too sweet. Like spooning sugar directly into your mouth." He grimaces, remembering the sickly sweet smell of fondant and royal icing.

"Your dad owned a deli?" Ari glances at his perfect *mise en place*. "Did he teach you to cook?"

"My dad taught me the fine art of assembling corned beef

sandwiches and scooping cole slaw.” The sum total of his father’s culinary training had taken place at the deli, working his way from busboy, to prep cook, to grill man, to cutter. His father had never cooked in another restaurant. He’d barely cooked in his own apartment, aside from opening cans of soup. “He’s not a chef. That’s a title you earn in a real kitchen. Not Brodsky’s.”

There’s a glint of recognition in her eye. “Wait, your dad owns Brodsky’s?”

“*That* you’ve heard of?”

“I mean, it’s famous, right? It has a blue neon sign?”

Josh’s dad, Danny, inherited Brodsky’s deli in 1977 from his uncle with the tacit understanding that Danny was to be a custodian of a forty-year tradition. The name “Brodsky’s” doesn’t get mentioned without modifiers like “an institution,” “a classic,” “seen in such films as . . .” There’s not a single person in the East Village, downtown Manhattan, or possibly the tri-state area who wants a thing about Brodsky’s to change.

Except Josh.

He and his dad had butted heads since Josh was tall enough to use the stove.

As a child, Josh would spend hours in Brodsky’s, begging to do odd jobs, while his father grilled frankfurters or mixed up enormous batches of pickling solution. He soaked up every bit of his dad’s arcane knowledge—“moisture is the enemy of a good latke”—and studied the correct ratio of yolks to whites in a good egg salad. Then, one day, Danny decided Josh was old enough for the most important kitchen tools: knives and heat.

The element of danger unlocked something. Josh began cooking for himself—experimenting with new techniques, mastering challenging recipes, asking for *Modernist Cuisine* for his sixteenth birthday. When his little sister, Briar, refused to eat

chopped liver, Josh made vegetable spring rolls for her school lunches. (It was a great way to practice his knife work.)

He was bursting with ideas—specifically, ideas for “improving” classic Brodsky’s dishes. Couldn’t they add caramelized leeks to the potato kugel? Some paprika in the egg salad?

His father’s response was the same every time: He’d point at the weathered, hand-painted sign that had served as Brodsky’s slogan since the 1950s: *The Food You Remember*.

“Food you wish you could *forget*,” teenage Josh had muttered.

And for several years, he tried to do just that. Instead of afternoons spent at the deli, Josh doubled down on academic extracurriculars. He became a star athlete, joined Model U.N. and the debate team. There was little reason for father and son to have more than a passing conversation on the rare occasions that they found each other in the same place at the same time.

But three years into his economics degree at Stanford, Josh splurged on a meal at the French Laundry. Some dormant passion reignited that evening when he dipped his spoon into an impossibly silky egg custard. The subtle elegance of the presentation in a precisely cut eggshell, with one pin-straight chive blade providing a burst of sharp flavor. It wasn’t just food; it was a sensory experience, offering a completely different set of possibilities than his dad’s salty corned beef hash.

When Josh announced his plan to drop out of Stanford to attend the Culinary Institute of America, Danny shook his head in that specific disappointed way that only fathers can. “You want to pay thousands of dollars so someone else can teach you how to dice an onion?” he’d muttered.

Josh’s mother, Abby, agreed to foot the bill, with the tacit understanding that Josh would one day apply his knowledge by

taking over the deli. But Josh had no desire to be the heir to a fading pastrami empire: He had much more ambitious plans. After completing the program, he left for Europe to work in some of the world's greatest kitchens.

Josh and his dad haven't spoken since his return to the city. Abby acts as their go-between.

"The two-sided humans were so physically powerful," he continues, "that they became a threat to the gods. So Zeus sliced them down the middle." He draws a violent slash through the center of the circular body. "Now they're all running around on two legs, confused and distraught, trying to reconnect with their other half."

Ari leans forward, dropping her elbow onto a few square inches of empty real estate on the counter. "The soulmate?"

"Exactly." He nods once, throwing the towel over his shoulder.



FOR ONE SECOND, IN THE EXCITEMENT ABOUT AGREEING ON SOMETHING, Ari sees a glimmer of why Natalie finds him attractive. His voice is so much more pleasant when he's telling a story instead of arguing. And there's something annoyingly hot about men with towels on their shoulders and rolled up sleeves.

"That's pretty dark," she says, staring at the ink slash. "No wonder Hallmark rebooted this concept as a Candace Cameron Bure rom-com."

Josh's expression darkens. He stands up straighter, making her feel shorter than five feet five. "Your soulmate gives you the greatest possible sense of belonging," he says with genuine conviction. "They heal your existential wound. It's the basis of modern love."

Her brief flicker of interest in him must have been ninety percent towel-on-shoulder related. “You honestly think there’s *one* person somewhere on this planet who can fulfill every single need you’ll ever have?”

“Yes. And eventually you’ll get sick of searching for your underwear at two in the morning!” His accent is poking through again. “You’ll start looking for the person who won’t bore you. Who makes sacrifices for you even when you don’t deserve it. Who you want to hold all night until your arm falls asleep. Who’s required by law to bring you matzo ball soup when you get a cold. No one with an eggplant emoji next to their name is ever going to care about you that way.” Ari stares at him, mouth open, slightly alarmed by the volume of his impromptu monologue. He focuses his gaze on a chip in the laminate countertop and clears his throat softly. “What?”

“You’re completely delusional.”

Josh’s phone vibrates across the kitchen counter.



NATALIE: hey! So sorry.

Gonna be later than i thought

Just getting to manhattan



The voice in Josh’s head unleashes a burst of creative expletives. The cod is already poaching. The orange *sauce vierge* will be gelatinous in thirty minutes. By the time Natalie arrives, he’ll be a sweaty mess.

Sometimes in his therapy sessions, Josh’s emotions overtake his ability to answer questions like “what are you experiencing right now?” He can’t take a clearing breath or do a fucking

leaves-on-the-stream exercise. At this point, his therapist will inevitably advise him to “anchor.” The idea is to focus on your physical surroundings: things you can touch, hear, smell. Forcing himself to be still and concentrate on the minutiae around him doesn’t exactly come easily.

Except in the kitchen.

In no other place are all the senses so tightly interwoven. There’s nothing *but* the present in the overpowering scent of rosemary or the gentle gurgle of water coming to a slow boil. The knife sliding easily through the flesh of a perfectly ripe pear.

So it’s lucky that he finds himself in front of a cutting board, holding a plump heirloom tomato for the *panzanella* when Natalie’s text comes through.

What’s the alternative? Packing up his two hundred dollars’ worth of half-prepped produce, his cutting board and Le Creuset and leaving the apartment in huff?

He’s fucking trapped in this sweltering apartment.

“Something wrong?” Ari asks.

“No.” He rubs his forehead. *Anchor*. “She’s running late.”

Ari raises her eyebrows and nods slowly. “This is exactly the scenario I never have to deal with.” She turns away from him and opens the freezer, grabbing an ice cube tray. “If you weren’t so preoccupied with locking down a relationship you could just shrug it off and do something else with your evening instead of spiraling about it.”

“I’m not spiraling,” he insists, even as he feels his pulse quicken.

Ari grabs each end of the tray and violently twists until the cubes detach from their molds. “Sure, you’re not.”

Quit talking to her. Let it go. Don’t let her bait you. Anchor.

“How would you understand anything about a real relation-

ship when you're obviously incapable of forming a connection with someone other than the briefest possible sexual encounter?" he utters in one unbroken, comma-less string of words.

Ari narrows her eyes—almost pleased to have set him off.

"I'm not 'incapable' of anything," she says, dropping the ice in her water glass. "I'm *honest* with people about what I expect. They can't hurt me and I can't disappoint them. We both get what we want."

"If what you want is to fuck someone you don't care about, roll over, put your clothes on, and see yourself out, you're set for life."

"Usually, we pretend to watch a movie first, but what difference does it make if I put my clothes back on ten minutes later or eight hours later?" She tilts her head back and takes four enormous gulps of water, as if the effort of the argument requires rehydration. The glass lands on the counter with a *thunk*. "We could have the hottest, most inconsequential hypothetical sex of your life and then—"

"*We* could?"

"*Hypothetically*." She huffs out an exhale. "I'd quietly collect my panties and steal away into the night without waking you up."

"Assuming you can locate them." He notices a spot of mustard on the side of her mouth. It gives him a zing of schadenfreude.

"I always send a *thank you* text the next day." She pauses. "Unless you went down on me for three minutes with zero enthusiasm but also expected a messy blow job thirty seconds later."

It's not often that Josh is rendered speechless. Which is to say that his train of thought shifts to the length of Ari's shorts.

Their intense little sparring contest. Handing her his knife.

There's something there—a frisson of excitement. Somewhere in between extorting him for charity and her description of their hypothetical one-night stand, Josh must have decided—begrudgingly—that she's pretty. Even if she does have pink hair that's starting to wash out. She's obnoxious and wrong about everything, but this is the most invigorating encounter he's had with anyone in—well, his social life hasn't been very robust lately.

“You're missing out on the exciting part.” He sets down his knife. “Don't you ever have those conversations with people, when you're lying in bed after the first time you . . .” He trails off, like it's risky to use certain words in front of her. “And you're both vulnerable and nervous and hopeful because this could be a night you'll reminisce about years later? They tell you things you couldn't have known about them? The walls come down, and you start to understand who they really are?”

Ari squints at him, as if she's trying to see a color that doesn't exist yet.

“Have you spent ten minutes on a dating app?” Her voice is distinctive—maybe a hint of a rasp from shouting at strangers all day. “I don't want to see who these people really are.”

Josh exhales a breath that clears nothing. He angles the cutting board over a salad bowl, watching the chunks of heirloom tomato slide slowly into the bowl.

Ari leans forward over the corner of the counter in a way that's both confrontational and an unexpected turn-on. “You just happen to be the only man on Earth who's not interested in completely meaningless, consequence-free sex?”

He isn't totally sure whether that's an accusation or an invitation.

“There’s no such thing,” Josh says finally. “You’re leaving before the other person has a chance to point out the consequences.” Ari raises an eyebrow, turns, and walks back into the living room. “At the very least, you’re missing out on morning sex,” he says, following her. “And still-awake-at-three-A.M. sex. And learning what someone’s brunch order is—”

“You mean the awkward get-to-know-you breakfast?”

“If you knew me before we slept together, breakfast wouldn’t be awkward!”

“Please.” She positions herself in front of the air conditioner and lets the cool air from the A/C blow up under the hem of her tank top. “It’s nothing but obligation and weak mimosas.”

“Congratulations. You’ve figured out how to avoid any shred of intimacy that you could possibly share with another human being.” The shallots and fennel on the stove sizzle too loudly, just on the edge of burning, but he can’t force himself to drop the argument. “I guarantee you that the best sexual experience of your life won’t be with a stranger.”

“You’re right!” she says, taking a step toward him. “It’ll probably be hate sex with someone I despise.”

It’s Josh’s turn to say something—hurl an insult or a self-righteous declaration. But instead, his mind replays that last sentence, the exchange hanging dangerously in the air between them.

“Or maybe not.” Ari shrugs. “You know who *is* pretty high up there?”

“Who?” He tries to sound nonchalant, but fears it comes off pathetically earnest.

Ari doesn’t blink. “Your girlfriend.”

The high decibel scream of the fire alarm on the ceiling drowns out Josh’s response.



HE LOOKS LIKE HE'S TRYING TO KEEP HIS BALANCE DURING AN EARTHQUAKE.

Ari grabs the broom from against the wall, stands on a rickety folding chair, and pokes at the screaming alarm until it stops assaulting their ears.

“Natalie?” Josh looks simultaneously appalled and confused. “What about your—your boyfriend?”

“My what?”

“You’re wearing his underwear.” He glances down at Gabe’s boxers before averting his eyes again.

“Gabe?” Ari drops the broom against the wall. “He’s just a friend.”

Josh looks simultaneously appalled and confused. His device buzzes.

“Natalie’s in a cab,” he reads. “She’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

Maybe it’s the mention of a ticking clock that triggers the panic. The search for the exit. For the first time all evening, it occurs to Ari what might happen if she’s still in the apartment when Natalie returns.

She would have to watch them greet each other with a kiss—the start of a romantic (albeit slightly burnt) dinner. Josh would smugly observe Natalie asking Ari if she could leave the apartment.

Better to get out of here while it’s still a *choice* and not a humiliation.

Ari rushes into her room and pulls on a pair of jeans she’d left on the floor. She gathers her earbuds, phone charger, and

water bottle and drops them in her tote bag.

“You’re leaving?” Josh asks when she brushes past him, heading for the door.

“Yeah.” She pauses in front of the door. “Why? Were you hoping for a threesome?”

He looks bewildered for a moment and then his eyes sweep over her face, giving Ari that weird tingly sensation down her scalp—like he’s invading her personal space with his gaze. “Were *you*? Because two minutes ago, you were describing our hypothetical sex life.”

“And forty minutes ago, you were staring at my ass.”

“I wasn’t,” he insists, more indignantly than Ari would like. He tilts his head down, making his height advantage more obvious. “I know why you’re like this.”

It’s like he can see through things: Intro to Women’s Studies talking points, her anxious adjustments of Gabe’s boxer shorts on her hips, the false bravado of someone feeling the sting of yet another potential rejection after a day full of them.

“You don’t know anything about me,” she insists, feeling behind her back for the door handle.

“You’re so afraid of rejection, you have to latch on to some cultural studies bullshit to support your behavior.” His accent is poking through. “It doesn’t make you some brave badass. If you had any confidence in your . . . *connection* with Natalie, you’d wait for her to show up and let her decide who’s more important to her.”

“If Natalie wants to be your ‘girlfriend,’” she says, letting the frustration and anger she’s been pushing down all day rise up to the surface, “then why does she ask me to go down on her after she’s been out to dinner with you?”

Josh stares at her, twisting his mouth. “If I had to guess?” Ari

has enough experience with volcanic men to know that he's churning up a response designed to inflict damage. "She likes the convenience."

Ari wills herself not to show any trace of hurt. "I can hear everything she likes," she says slowly—really twisting the knife. "Even with her thighs covering my ears."

Josh's face is red. There's a blood vessel bulging from his temple.

Ari pulls at the door handle, hoping for a quick exit before he can muster a response. She has no idea where she's going, just the unstoppable desire to flee. Better to be the one who walks away than the person who gets left behind.

As she throws the door open, he adds, "You forgot your panties."

"Sorry, I can't hear you." Ari holds her phone up to her ear. "I'm on a *fucking call*."

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).



THE

STRANGER
UPSTAIRS

A
NOVEL

LISA M. MATLIN

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

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First Edition

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Want a great deal on a house?

BUY ONE WHERE SOMEONE WAS MURDERED!

Here's the killer truth: A brutal murder can slash the price by as much as 50%. But would YOU do it? Bestselling author Sarah Slade would!

By Whitney Roach [[@KeepingItWeirdWithWhitney](#)]

Welcome to Black Wood House! The stunning Victorian Gothic, built in 1889, lies right next door to a 400-acre bushland reserve. The two-story house comes with four generous bedrooms and a library and sits on two lush acres in a quiet wooded estate in Beacon, southeast of Melbourne.

And on the morning of February 4, 1980, Bill Campbell walked into the upstairs bedroom where his wife, Susan, lay sleeping and bashed her skull in with a hammer. After murdering her, Bill drifted down the hall into his seventeen-year-old daughter's bedroom. Janet Campbell was getting dressed for school when her father walked calmly into her room and beat her with the bloodied hammer. She fled out the front door. Neighbors heard her screaming all the way up the road, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

When she was gone, Bill locked himself in the bathroom and took a fatal dose of acid and tranquilizers.

For 40 years, Black Wood House stood empty and silent. But on a quiet night, some people say they still hear the cries of Janet Campbell ringing out through the neighborhood.

Don't kill me. Don't kill me. Don't kill me.

But new owner, Sarah Slade, doesn't believe it.

"Oh, we're not superstitious!" Sarah laughs, leaning against her husband of three years, bartender Joe Cosgrove. "I see it as a business opportunity. Black Wood House has great bones, and we're confident we can restore it and make a tidy profit."

And she might be right! A murder house can be good business—if you have the stomach for it. After all, *the infamous Boyle Murder House in New South Wales just sold for \$2.2 million. Two hundred thousand dollars over the asking price!* Slade and her husband were able to nab Black Wood House at a probate auction last month for \$525,000—half the price of nearby properties.

“I know it has a dark past, but I want to fix that,” Sarah insists, squeezing her husband’s hand. “You shouldn’t judge anything or anyone on their past.”

And Sarah should know—she’s a therapist with a bestselling self-help book: *Clear, Calm, and in Control*.

I have to ask: What on earth does a therapist want with a murder house?

Sarah smiles. “I’m a fixer,” she admits. “I don’t like broken things.”

Joe (who is notoriously more camera shy than his wife and freely admits to avoiding all social media) says that he wasn’t as convinced as Sarah. “To be honest, the place gives me the creeps. I’m not thrilled about living there at all. But”—he grins at his tenacious wife, who he lovingly refers to as “Lamb”—“there’s no stopping my Lamb when she gets an idea in her head.”

Sarah pauses before playfully slapping her husband’s arm. “What my husband *really* means to say”—she grins and rolls her eyes in mock frustration—“is that we are *thrilled* to be moving to Beacon! We can’t wait to meet our new neighbors and start renovating Black Wood House. You can follow the renovations on my website: SarahSlays.com.”

And, fans, take heart! She’s hard at work on her next book, a follow-up to the wildly successful *Clear, Calm, and in Control*.

With plenty of gruesome inspiration at her fingertips, her next book is sure to be a killer!

Keeping It Weird with Whitney—voted Top 5 Melbourne Blogger. Covering everything creepy and weird in Melbourne! If you’ve got a cool story to share, I’d love to interview you! DM your pitch @KeepingItWeirdWithWhitney.

Chapter 1

April 26

Welcome to Black Wood House.

This is the front door Janet Campbell burst out of. This is the barren yard she ran across, fleeing for her life. Those are her cries echoing down the lonely street for forty years now.

Don't kill me. Don't kill me. Don't kill me.

Upstairs is a bedroom with bloodstained floorboards. This is where Susan Campbell bled to death, and this is where I'll sleep. Some people think that's messed up.

I am not some people.

I carry a stack of moving boxes up the long stretch of dirt driveway snaking through the yard like a scar. It's silent except for the musical warble of a lone magpie and the half-hearted squabble of the cockatoos in the blackwood tree.

My eyes drift past it to the house. Not for the first time I wonder, Why the hell did someone build a Victorian Gothic in a stuffy country town like Beacon?

Black Wood House is sharp and strange and utterly silent. Its flaking paint reminds me of peeling skin, and the steeply pitched spire looks like a towering black sword. There's only one window on the front of the house: a pointed arch overlooking the lounge room and matching

the front door. Whoever built Black Wood clearly did not want anybody pecking in.

A private, sprawling estate. That's how the probate realtor described it. It sounds beautiful, and it would have been. Back then. I can imagine it—pea-green lawns large enough for a dozen families to picnic on.

But after forty years of neglect, all that's left are stark, flat grounds ravaged by kangaroo shit and echidna burrows and choked with knee-high weeds. The property has a barren feel to it, like the very ground is grieving. Like it's stuck in the memory of that day.

And yet the house itself seems detached from the misery. Like it doesn't give a shit what happened here all those years ago. Like it wouldn't care if it happened again.

I haul the boxes inside, up the stairs, to my new bedroom. The *murder* room.

I don't know what's more sinister about this room, the faded bloodstain by my bed or the concrete-gray wallpaper. Corpse skin—that's what it reminds me of. And worse.

Etched into the wallpaper is a massive forest. The black trunks are taller than me, and high above the canopy is a sky dotted with stars. Back in the day, I bet it was a peaceful scene. I imagine Susan propped up in her bed, sipping a hot cup of tea and staring at the forest after a long day of cooking, cleaning, and whatever the hell women did back in the seventies.

Maybe she even felt like she was *inside* it, breathing in the clean air, far away from the pressures of motherhood and her soon-to-be homicidal husband. It would have been dove gray then. Pretty.

I dump the boxes on the floor and reach up on tiptoe to trace my index finger over a diamond-shaped leaf. It instantly flakes off and death spirals to the floor.

Nestled in the crook of a low branch is a family of blackbirds, staring at me with dead eyes. The baby birds look underfed and frightened; their rib cages seem to poke through their papery skin. The mother bird

hovers over her children, her eyes sad and desperate. But she can't help them, because both her wings are missing.

My husband heaves our marriage bed against the back wall, then straightens up and wipes his hands like he's touched something filthy. He stopped sleeping with me months ago, and our queen-sized velvet bed stares at him reproachfully. Instead, he sleeps quite happily on our couch, though I never once asked him to. He plays the Xbox until the early hours, while I lie awake at 3 A.M., reflecting anxiously on all the things I need to fix. Like my marriage.

I don't like sleeping alone, but God, it's better than the crushing loneliness of sleeping next to someone who doesn't want you night after night.

"Thank you," I tell him awkwardly. "For bringing it up here."

My husband's eyes drift to the pillow-sized bloodstain on the floor. It's impossible not to stare at it. I wonder if he's imagining it—the morning after the murder, the blood all glossy red like lipstick.

Maybe it's Maybelline.

Or maybe it's murder.

"We'll need to replace these floorboards." He steps back, grimacing. "For now, just buy a rug to cover it with."

I nearly snort my laughter. That's him. Let's throw a rug over the issue. If you can't see it, then maybe all that ugliness isn't even there.

Maybe it's why he can't stand looking at me.

I follow him toward the door, thinking of the moving truck waiting outside, jammed full of our five-year life together. We've spent nearly everything buying this house, and the renovations will have to be spread out over the next year. And even though we've lived in Melbourne for two years, we don't exactly have any close friends we can stay with while we renovate. . . . Well, maybe Joe does, but I certainly don't. The fact that he was willing to make this move with me meant a lot. He's still here. Still willing to invest in this house and, more importantly, *us*. I haven't lost him yet.

I pass by the only window in the room, about the size of my laptop

screen. It's a fixed window, so there's no way to open it unless I smash my fist through it. And I'm sure I'll be tempted after breathing in this stale air every night.

I stop and squint through the grime, looking out to my backyard, and the first thing I see are the graves. They're draped in ivy, stained sickly green, and covered with little scabs of moss and mold. Susan. Bill. Twin headstones for the former owners of Black Wood House. I don't know who thought it would be a good idea to bury Susan Campbell next to her husband. Her killer. But there they are, out my bedroom window, side by side for eternity.

I asked the realtor about it, but he didn't know who buried them. No one knows what happened to poor Janet Campbell after she fled the town. She could be dead. All she is now is a piece of folklore. A ghost story before she even died. Poor girl.

"Are you sure you want *this* room?" Joe asks. "What about the others?" He nods in the direction of the hallway, where three other garage-sized bedrooms lie dormant.

I shake my head and move to brush past him. He stopped kissing me this year, but he still lets me hug him sometimes. I have to time those coveted hugs correctly, or he'll rear back like a pissed-off horse.

A year ago, I would've tackled him to the bed. Or maybe I would've just thrown my arms around his neck, looked him full in the face, and said, "I'm so proud of us, Joe. Look how far we've come."

Now I slink sadly past him, a goddamn ghost of a wife.

I pad down the staircase, a spiraling black masterpiece that made me gasp the first time I saw it, and made Joe wince and murmur, "Bloody hell, what a nightmare." It's wrought iron, cool to the touch, and every time I descend, I feel like a Disney villain.

I *adore* it.

Joe calls down, "Don't you want a bedroom a bit less . . . I dunno, murder?"

I reach the second-to-last step, breathing through my mouth. The

house has been shut up for decades, and it smells like a sweaty sheet. “I’m good, thanks.” I don’t know how to tell him the truth, because it’s strange even to me.

I didn’t choose that room. It chose me.

Just like the house.

I pull open the front door, grunting from the weight of it. It’s heavy oak, and once we get some linseed oil into it, it’ll look like a flame-red candle in the dark. My flat-faced cat, Reaper, bolts out before I can stop him. He screamed the whole forty-minute car ride here while Joe turned up the radio and yelled, “Do we have to bring him with us?”

I ignored them both. Joe’s been trying to get rid of Reaper ever since I stubbornly brought him home five years ago. I wandered around an adoption center, staring at wire cages and reading cutesy taglines: MEET LYNNY, A QUIET AND SWEET CAT! JACK IS THE LOVELIEST BOY!

I stopped in front of the last cage, and the tagline simply read, FREE. Underneath that in apologetic text, it said, THIS CAT DOESN’T LIKE KIDS, DOGS, LOUD NOISES, BEING PICKED UP, AND HE’S BEEN KNOWN TO GET INTO FIGHTS WITH OTHER CATS. HE’S VERY POSSESSIVE OF HIS BLANKET AND HIS FOOD.

I smiled and peered through the cage bars. And there he was—a silver-haired Angora cat wrapped in a filthy blanket, staring at me with angry blue eyes. I loved him instantly.

I step onto the porch and watch as Reaper climbs the blackwood tree in our yard. He’s six now and still hates everything with an inexhaustible passion, and I really admire him for that. My boy.

I wrap my arms around myself, cold in the morning sun. You can’t even see the road from here, and it’s quiet now except for a lone cockatoo chattering in the tree. Reaper glares at the cockatoo murderously but makes no attempt to climb higher up the deeply fissured bark. I reach into my pocket for my phone and snap a picture of Reaper and the bird nestled in the bony branches. I quickly tap in a caption:

Moving Day at Black Wood House! These gorgeous guys approve! Head to my website for all the renovation updates! #BlackWoodHouse #cockatoo #Melbourne #reaper #murderhouse

I hesitate, wondering if I should use that last hashtag. It's a bit much, I suppose. But it would definitely drive in some much-needed traffic and maybe a sponsor or two. There's already interest in my website again, now that I've promised to document the renovations.

I hit the post button and automatically scroll through my feed, full of painful-looking yoga poses, watermelon salads, and a tutorial on how to fake a lip job with one million likes. My thumb hovers over the screen, and I surprise myself by clicking off my phone and tucking it into my pocket. There's something incongruous about standing on this hundred-year-old porch and scrolling through the atrocities of social media. It doesn't feel right. It's like the house disapproves. Like it wants me back inside, cutting apple slices and smiling adoringly at my shiny-haired children. Or maybe it wants me asleep in my bed so my husband can murder me.

Finally I step off the porch, head to the truck, and busy myself with the moving boxes. We have a surprising amount of crap, and most of it's mine. I have a shopping problem. And a bit of an alcohol issue. And oh, everything else. Doesn't take a therapist to realize I'm filling up the voids in my life with a whole lot of shit.

For the next few hours, my husband and I work together, unloading and unpacking. Reaper sneaks inside the house as soon as we unload the couch and spends the rest of the afternoon propped on a cushion, watching us lug the rest of our furniture in.

When the truck's empty, I pull out a six-pack from under the driver's seat. I really shouldn't be drinking on anti-depressants, but there are a lot of things I shouldn't be doing. Last week, I went up to a double dose, but Joe doesn't know this. There's a lot of things he doesn't know. Doesn't even care to.

He thanks me, reaches for the beer, and we walk in ear-splitting silence to our front porch as I chug mine. My doctor's voice rings in my

head. He was scribbling out my prescription, raising an eyebrow. “You know not to mix these with alcohol, right?”

“Of course!” I scoffed.

Tentatively, Joe taps his beer against mine with a reserved little clink. “Well . . .” he begins awkwardly, looking out to our gloomy front yard. “We did it.”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “We certainly did.”

Silence. We’re not used to communicating anymore. If we could still speak, what would we say? Perhaps I would finally admit the truth: Buying this house wasn’t just about building my brand and making a huge profit. I thought that renovating this house might help repair us too. I saw us working side by side, painting walls in amiable silence or sharing a beer as we pored over color charts.

After a while, Joe strolls off the creaking porch and disappears inside. I watch him go, wondering if I’m allowed to follow.

I lean over the porch railing instead, all bone dry and bleached from the sun. A bloated magpie lands with a squawk to my right, peering at me with dull red eyes. He tilts his head, waiting for food. I narrow my eyes at him. Nobody’s occupied this house for forty years. Who’s been feeding him?

“Sorry, mate. I got nothing for ya,” I tell him.

I step off the porch and head inside. The magpie watches, still and disapproving. I’m close enough to touch him, and he doesn’t even flinch. The neighbors must feed him.

Reaper perches on the back of the couch, watching Joe fiddle with the cords of his Xbox. It’s the first thing he insisted on before he agreed to move in: Get the electricity and Wi-Fi going for the bloody Xbox. It delayed our move-in day for two weeks, but hell, at least he’s here.

He switches the TV on, and the gigantic piece of modern technology clashes violently with the *Brady Bunch* kitchen and linoleum floor. The last time anyone lived here was the early eighties. It’s been frozen in time ever since. All our sleek, contemporary furniture is laughably out of place, and even Joe notices.

He smiles a bit guiltily. “I s’pose the house has never seen an Xbox before.”

I take a sip, swallow it down. “Shit, did they even have TV then?”

Joe reaches for the remote, adjusts the volume, and frowns. “Yeah, but only a few channels, I think.”

“Maybe that’s why he killed her.”

He snaps his eyes shut like he can’t believe I just said that, but his shoulders shake with guilty laughter. My heart glows. I haven’t made him laugh in a long time. I study him quietly, looking at him properly for the first time in ages. My husband’s handsome in a bland way. Average height, slim build—*too* slim, I think. I always have to remind him to eat, and if I don’t cook for him, he either makes two-minute noodles or simply goes hungry. He has phobias of flying, large crowds, talking on the phone, and any TV show with a laugh track. I suspect he has generalized anxiety disorder, but he’ll never get diagnosed, because the idea of picking up the phone and making an appointment terrifies him. Which is why I make all the phone calls. Which is why he needs someone like me: I get shit done while he wrings his pale hands and panics.

His eyes are watery blue, and his hair is thick and shiny black. We dyed it in a truck-stop bathroom when we fled Queensland, and we re-dye it every six weeks to cover up the roots. He’s fair-haired naturally, with pale lashes that blinked a lot and hair so blond it was almost silver. Black hair is too heavy for him. Everything is too heavy for him these days.

People wonder why we’re together. Joe, the nervy bartender. And me, the Instagram whore. But the truth is that underneath all Joe’s beauty, he’s every bit as ugly as me. I *love* him for that. Trust me, my husband is not so perfect. He has more secrets to hide than I do.

I drain the last drops of my beer, and Joe surprises me by asking, “Do you think the house wants us here?”

“The house?”

“Yeah,” he says, half-joking, half-serious, gripping the controller like it’ll give him strength. “I don’t think it likes us.”

“This house is gonna make us a fortune,” I tell him gently before adding, “One point three million, Joe. That’s the median house price in Beacon. Up 35 percent annually.”

I can never say that last part without hugging myself gleefully. *Up 35 percent annually.* I’ve done the figures an unhealthy number of times. Once these renovations are done, I’m looking at a profit of at least 600,000 dollars. We are, I mean. Joe and I.

“Someone had to have the guts to do it,” I say resolutely, “and *we* did.”

Wasn’t that what Rodney Peake, the real estate agent, said when all the formalities were over and we were signing the deed? “It takes a certain kind of someone to buy a murder house,” he said grimly, sliding it over like he was disappointed in us. Joe paused for a fraction before scribbling his name on the paper. “Not really my idea,” he mumbled. It might not have been his idea, but he’s certainly keen as hell on raking in the profits. Like I said, my husband’s ugly, too—only nobody knows that but me.

The realtor eyed me disapprovingly, and I don’t know why I smiled, but I did. I signed the deed with two jaunty S’s and a big, looping L.

“I guess you won’t be coming over for a cup of tea, then?” I asked, handing it back to him.

Quickly he signed his own name, and I noticed how he never quite touched the paper. The way he was acting, you’d think it was soaked in urine.

Or blood.

“No,” he said curtly, “I don’t think I could.”

I say good night to my husband. He looks so lost sitting there on our couch that I can’t help myself. I bend down, kiss him softly on the lips, and he actually lets me. God, I’ve missed this. But I don’t push it further. Not yet.

I reluctantly pull back and head for my room. I hear Reaper jump from the couch to follow me, and Joe calls out softly, “Good night.”

I smile up the creaky stairs, thinking about the kiss and the realtor’s

words. You're damn right it takes a certain kind of person to buy a murder house. You have to be familiar with the very ugly side of human nature. And who better than a therapist? Haven't I heard it all? Haven't I encouraged, even *prompted*, my clients to talk about the big, bad things?

Most people sweep monsters under the bed. I pull the covers back and let them crawl in.

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Chapter 2

My last clients of the day are the Millers. Their ten-year marriage is falling apart, and thank fuck for that. Nice to know I'm not the only one failing. When their last tear-filled session was over, I drove home whistling.

I hesitate before opening the door and ushering them inside my office, which is light pink and gray and perfectly matches the carpet, the couch, and, most importantly, my book cover.

If I'm being honest, my last clients, the Vickers, really rattled me. Our session finished ten minutes ago, and I can't stop shaking.

The Vickers. Young couple. Newly married and marinating in that "we're having great sex" smell. We're two sessions in. There's nothing much wrong with them, and they were a bit too smug when I told them that. Last week, I wished them goodbye with a beaming smile, which curdled the second they left the office pawing at each other. Then I trudged home and watched TV in bed with the cat. Joe's been working late shifts at the bar for extra cash, and maybe that's a good thing for now.

I can fix this, I tell myself again.

I can fix us. I will. I will.

I hyperventilate at my office door, breathing in the faint antiseptic smell of Amy Miller, who is standing on the other side, knocking. I can do this. I just need a smoke. A drink. And the delightfully fucked-up

Millers with their infidelities, credit card debt, and mutual simmering rage to make me happy again.

I throw the door open, my smile huge, my yellow diamond wedding ring sparkling, my bestselling book shining on the windowsill as the afternoon sun washes it in soft golden light as warm as a bath.

It's so perfect. All of it.

When I stand at that door, it's like I'm presenting myself: You can *feel* the Pinterest boards dedicated to excerpts of my book. I have a handsome husband, beachy waves, and teeth so white you could read by them in the dark. My baby-pink cardigan brings out the warm caramel of my hair and the forty-three-dollar Nars blush on my cheeks. I'm the human equivalent of Instagram. Sarah Slade. At your fucking service.

"Hi, folks!" I beam, waving them inside. "Come in, come in."

Folks. I stole it from the celebrity therapist on *Teen Mom*. He calls all his patients "folks," and the dim-witted, slack-jawed yokels seem to like it. He's speaking *their* language; he's *trustworthy*; he's *stern but relatable*.

Richard shuffles past me, mute and solemn as a wounded bird. Amy smiles tightly, clutching her python-print handbag and smelling of total despair. I eat their sorrow, swallowing it down like it's hearty chicken soup, and by the time I close the door, I'm feeling *so* much better. My clients look at me like I have the answers. Like I can help. It's healing, to be honest, at least for a little while. I am a giant goddamn wound. My clients are soothing little Band-Aids. But then I go home to my emotionally distant husband, lie awake in my bed, and scratch at all my sores until I'm breathless and frantic in the dark. Then I post some trite bullshit on Instagram about health and healing, and I hold my breath and bleed until the likes come flooding in.

Instagram is my other Band-Aid. It's toxic, I know. But the more likes I get, the less I bleed.

Nobody is speaking, so we all do that awkward silent walk from the door to the chairs. I peek behind me, hoping they glance up at the dove-gray wall where my book cover hangs in the exact center, blown up to

five times its size. Look up, dammit. Give me validation. Give me praise. I'm empty. Fill me up.

Amy's matching sterling silver bracelets chime pleasantly, and by the time she's sat down, I've decided I want a pair for myself. It's a shame she doesn't take them off. Shame she hasn't unclipped them from her perfumed wrists and slid them deep into that Balenciaga handbag she always carries. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd steal them both.

She wouldn't be the first client I've stolen from.

I slip into my chair, a Gatsby velvet I wanted the second I saw it on some bony influencer's feed. On a good day, I kick the last client out at 5 P.M., wheel it backward, swing my legs like a child, and gleefully chain-smoke out my window. On a bad day, I gulp peppery Shiraz in the darkness until I can stomach the thought of going home.

And on my *really* bad days, I get sloppy drunk and wait until the building's empty. Then I throw the window open and yell "Fuck you" until it burns.

I can't tell yet whether today is a good or bad day.

Amy shifts miserably on the couch, casts an accusing glare at Richard that I nearly miss because my eyes are so fixed on her handbag. Nestled on her knees is that sexy Balenciaga, black and blood red. Her bracelets drape over it, adding a sparkle of silver. God, I want it. I want the bag. I want the bracelets. I want it all with an almost physical hunger.

I tear my eyes from it, cross my legs at the ankles. Smile.

"How's your week been, folks?"

I nearly cringe at the word, but I can't stop using it. When my clients are sitting silent on my white leather couch, I am Sympathetic and Relatable Therapist Who Is Totally Not Judging You. Sarah has her shit together. Sarah has a strong marriage. Sarah says things like "folks" and "How did that make you feel?" and "That must have been hard for you." Sarah is a *bullshit artist* who charges \$120 an hour.

"Not very good, I'm afraid," Amy begins, darting a glance at her morose husband. "We're not in a good place at the moment."

Good, because if you were, I'd be broke.

But I nod sympathetically and wait. Truthfully, I don't judge my clients no matter how scandalous their sins. Believe me, I've done much worse.

For the next hour, I listen. I encourage. I ask open-ended questions. Standard stuff from the online diploma I didn't finish. Funny how I have all the answers without it. Even funnier that people listen when I speak.

As a child, people really confused me. Everyday conversations were like streets with no signs. I was always saying the wrong thing or nothing at all. Soon enough I noticed that people who said all the right things were adored, even if they didn't mean what they said. My sister was like that. She was the one slinking over an armchair at sleepovers, butting in with brilliant one-liners. I was the one listening behind the lounge room door, mouthing her clever words as if they were my own. God, I was a weird child. If it weren't for her insistence, none of the neighborhood kids would have spoken to me at all.

I knew even then that I wasn't who people wanted me to be, because I felt their judgment and disapproval right down to my DNA. So, I began a slow self-eviction, contributing nothing to my classmates or schoolwork. But inside, I was *starving*.

Then I met Joe. Lovely Joe, who didn't care when I said very strange things. On our first date, I was so nervous that I over-explained my favorite episodes of *Forensic Files*. But he listened. When I was finished, he gently pushed his phone into my hand.

"Watch these. You might like them," he said shyly. "Though not many people do."

They were YouTube videos. At first I couldn't figure out what I was looking at. Then I realized: uncensored shark attack videos.

I was fascinated, to be honest. By the videos. And by the beautiful pale boy who showed them to me. He was like a *meal* made only for me.

Joe. God, I fucking *devoured* that boy. Our strangeness was like a secret we shared: We must keep our madness to ourselves. Me and Joe. Just two weirdos.

But now I get to watch as my darling husband begins his own self-

eviction from *me*. I shake my head almost violently and clutch the armrests until my knuckles turn white. It's not over between Joe and me. I won't let go of him—us—that easily.

4:58 P.M. Perfect. Show's over, *folks*. Time for me to deliver a parting line of wisdom. And since my book is full of them, I reach into my frontal lobe and try to pull one out. And of course, I can't remember. I open my mouth, then close it. Shit. Hang on.

What was it again? That great line from the marriage chapter. The one so popular that someone actually made it into a viral Twitter post. Something about not giving up, yada yada.

I smile toothily at the Millers and whip out my phone, pretending to check the time. But I'm really typing Sarah Slade+book+giving up into Bing, Google's crackhead brother.

Ah, there it is.

"If you give up every time it's hard," I say softly, leaning back to really nail the next line, "you're going to have a very short marriage."

It doesn't land well, and we all feel it. I'm an actor who just flubbed their line. But I'm too emotionally strung out to smooth shit over. In the excruciating silence that follows, Richard does the strangest thing. He clears his throat and looks right in my eyes. Really looks. Examines my face like a doctor looking for disease. I feel caught out, exposed. And for just a moment, I think he sees right through me. He's seeing the Shiraz I'll down in half an hour. The shit I'll impulse buy tonight.

I bolt up and practically shove the Millers out the door.

"Take it easy, folks," I babble, waving them off. I'm losing it. I'm slithering out of my Sarah Slade skin. I'm done with the show. Amy gives me an odd look before disappearing around the corner with her husband. I watch them go and remain in the doorway, exhausted and staring at nothing.

"Sarah?"

Oh, shit. I straighten up and smile automatically at Emily. Her office is directly opposite mine. Now we stand feet apart as she locks her office door with a soft *click* and peers at me with worried eyes.

“Are you okay, lovie?”

I imagine she asks that a lot as the grief and loss therapist. But oddly enough, she sounds genuine.

“I’m okay!” I call out far too brightly. Emily smells of lavender, and she has a thing for ankle-length paisley skirts and slide-on sandals. Motherly, you’d call her. She has a square, thickset body and a long blond plait as thick as a horse tail. There’s something calming about the way she moves and talks. She has a liquid voice and languid eyes. It’s no wonder there’s a waiting list to see her.

“You have a good night!” I tell her.

“You too.” She smiles warmly. Her hand slides off the doorknob, and she surprises me by reaching for my shoulder and patting it softly. “If you ever need anything, just sing out, okay, lovie?”

My eyes fill with tears, and I turn my head so she won’t see. I thank her and dart back inside my office. The second her Nissan leaves the parking lot, I race to the bottle shop. And I’m pretty sure that by midnight tonight I’ll be wasted and screaming out the office window again.

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Chapter 3

I bolt awake and think, *Someone's in my office*. My heart thumps so hard it makes me cough in the dark. My office door is wide open, the hallway rolling out behind it like the back of a crocodile's throat. I can't see shit. But I hear something.

I squint in the dark, hold my breath. And I hear it again: footsteps creeping up the hallway. I freeze in my chair, facing the open door like a bird fallen out of its nest and waiting for the hungry cat to arrive.

I bolt up, and my chair gives a traitorous *squeak*. Shit. The footsteps come to a dead stop. They've heard me. I know it. I stand frozen at the window, and the moonlight casts a vague milky glow around the room. How long have I been asleep? Two bottles of Shiraz wait silently at my feet like good little soldiers, and I snatch the half-empty one in my fist. I wait there so long my head starts to throb with the birth pangs of a massive hangover.

I eye the other bottle, the empty one, and it eyes me back, all critical and accusatory: *Are you sure you're not imagining this, Sarah? You drank the shit out of me tonight and passed out in your office. And you really shouldn't be drinking on your meds, remember?*

I count to ten in the dark. And then I hear it: a foot stepping over the threshold of my office. My fingers go numb with terror, and my heart gives one giant thump. There's someone *right there*.

I scramble to my desk and fumble for the lamp, when out of the dark-

ness steps a man. I scream, staggering back into my bookshelf, thrusting the heavy end of the bottle out to defend myself. Red wine sloshes out from the loose cap and trickles down my chin and collar like blood spatter.

“Get *out!* Get outta here!”

The man steps in, flicking the office light on. “Mrs. Slade?”

He’s surprisingly young. Mid-twenties, hard eyes, ridiculously tall, stooped a little at the shoulders. His hair’s combed forward and falling over his left eye. It’s brassy blond, unnatural, the black roots poking through. Looks like shit. I’ve never seen him before, but I recognize the shirt he’s wearing. It’s slate gray with a logo on the left pocket: Quality Office Cleaning. The long-sleeved shirt is far too small for him, the cuffs ending halfway up his forearms.

I drop the bottle and exhale shakily. The office cleaners get here at five every Saturday and Wednesday morning and finish before I get here at eight. Shit, is it five already? I know I set my alarm to go off before the cleaners got here. I always do. Black Wood House is only a ten-minute drive from my office.

He gives me a quizzical half smile, and I take a small step back. What if he stole that uniform to trick me? What if he’s snooping on me? He wouldn’t be the first person hired to track me down.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I say automatically. Actually, my fingers are trembling so bad I thrust them into my pockets.

“You’re Sarah, yeah?” he asks patiently. “I just started here last week. Haven’t met most of the shrinks yet.”

There’s an *entire chapter* in my book dedicated to mastering the easy art of small talk! And yet I don’t know what the hell to say. It’s too early for this shit.

“Me missus read your book.” He grins. “She was pretty chuffed when I told her I’d be working here.”

My face feels itchy, like I’ve stepped into a spiderweb, and my heart won’t stop pounding. I manage a weak “Thank you” and wish to God

he'd leave. I wonder how he got this job. He doesn't have the upper-middle-class Beacon feel about him. And he definitely doesn't have the vaguely expensive Australian accent so typical of these areas where Dad's a construction manager and Mum doesn't need to work since Dad pulls in a shitload. If you could call an Australian accent expensive, anyway. It's more like the discount version of our English cousins'.

But this guy, he's got the true-blue Aussie accent going—a vernacular that couldn't be lazier if it tried. Everything is *darl, love, mate, bloke, fair dinkum, g'day, 'ow ya goin'?*

My accent, if I'm being honest. Dad was a mechanic, Mum a house cleaner. But the old man could never keep a job and was always storming home in his cloud of righteous anger. He crapped out on everything in the end, including us. Took the car and all my self-worth with him. Left Mum bewildered and broke and holding her breath when the cashier tallied up our weekly grocery shop.

I didn't need another reason for Beacon residents to look down on me. So I stole Nicole Kidman's accent. I liked that vaguely upper-class cadence, so pleasant to the ear. I watched, then re-watched her interviews on YouTube, until it felt like I had two accents fighting in my mouth. But I'm a very good mimic. The best. And that working-class accent? I finally bled that shit out of me. It slips out only when I'm angry. Like now.

"Whaddya doin' here?" I ask, face hot with indignation.

"Sarah Slade." He rolls it around his tongue like he's at a wine tasting. I wonder if he can detect hints of my deceit. Wonder if he can taste smoky blackberries and terrible lies.

Obviously not, because he nods approvingly. "Nice name."

We wait in a silence that's rapidly turning awkward. And dangerous. For me.

"Couldn't stand to be a shrink meself." He sniffs. "Don't see why *anyone* would want to."

I must've zoned out, because he snaps his fingers to get my attention. He's crossed the line now, if he hadn't already. There's something nasty

about the way he does it. Slimy. Like I'm a dim-witted student and he's the smart-ass principal.

I close my eyes, cool my blood. I've got to be nice to this asshole in case he tells someone about this. Do he and the other cleaners have a friendly smoke in the car park after work and bitch about us, like we do about them?

I caught Mrs. Slade asleep in her office, he would say, puffing on a cigarette. Pretty sure she'd been drinkin' all night.

His cleaning friends scurry closer like a pack of insects. *Husband problems, I betcha. Not to mention that murder house she just bought.*

I heard she's gotta come up with another book, another says, taking a gleeful drag. Pressure must be getting to 'er.

This is bad. This is really bad. Terrified, I slip my skin on, brush the droplets of wine from my chin, and stretch.

“Goodness me, I must have dozed off.” I even go for a playful half smile that says, *This is all so silly, isn't it? You, busting in like this. Me, shit-faced in my chair and ready to club you to death.*

He looks pointedly at the empty bottle sitting at my feet, raises an eyebrow. My heart squeezes tight, and for one hot second I wish I *had* smashed him over the head.

I *need* this job. The royalties from my book are falling alarmingly. The next book is proving a bitch to write. And all that's paying my eye-watering mortgage is Joe's paltry bartender wage, a few Instagram sponsorships I'm desperately grateful for, and my work here at Mercy Community.

I've been working for them nine months now. I knew I'd gotten the job the second Adria, the manager, shook my hand a fraction too long before blurting, “I've read your book!”

According to their website, Mercy Community “maintains the highest professional standards,” which is absolute bullshit. Because if they'd done their research, I'd never have gotten the job. And they would've realized the two references I gave were paid actors on Gumtree. Cost me fifty bucks each. They rang only one.

He shuffles his feet at my door. “It’s getting on anyway,” he says dismissively. “Your husband’s probably worried . . .”

I doubt that.

I haven’t thought about Joe in hours, and now here he is again, sinking into my frontal lobe because he’s just another problem I have to solve. I ignore Joe and focus on the more pressing problem of Chatty Cleaning Guy and how I can get out of this without looking so guilty.

And then it hits me. I reach for my phone lying facedown on my desk like it’s ashamed of itself.

JOE: R u coming home or not

JOE: ???

JOE: Whateva im goin to Andy’s

Wincing, I close the texts. Right there on the home screen, along with a picture of Joe and I when he could stand me, is the time: 3:07 A.M.

I turn the phone off with a soft click. “It’s three in the morning,” I tell him. “The cleaners usually get here at five.”

Am I seeing things, or did he flinch? I see a way out of my mess and try to take back control. “You’re here a bit early today.”

It’s a statement, not an accusation. But it sure feels like one. Maybe that’s why his eyes narrow, why his back stiffens. He shrugs, sticks his hands in his pockets. “Had a few things to take care of.”

His words hang there like a little rain cloud, and I want to reach forward and wring the truth out. But he’s already turning away, and that little creak at the threshold makes my skin itch.

Had a few things to take care of.

“Hey?” I call out, and he stops stiffly. “You never told me your name.” When he turns around, I’m surprised how cold his eyes are. A chill settles over my scalp as I wait for him to answer.

He slides his hands into his jean pockets. “Watta’s it matter what me name is?”

Okay, I'm nervous now. I take a half step back. "Did you open my door when you got here?" My voice is harsh, accusing.

"No," he says firmly. "Was already open."

But I locked it. *I remember.* I rushed to the bottle shop after Emily left, and I remember sneaking back into my office with the booze. I locked my door and plonked myself at the window.

He's been in here. I can feel it. He was snooping around in here *while I slept.*

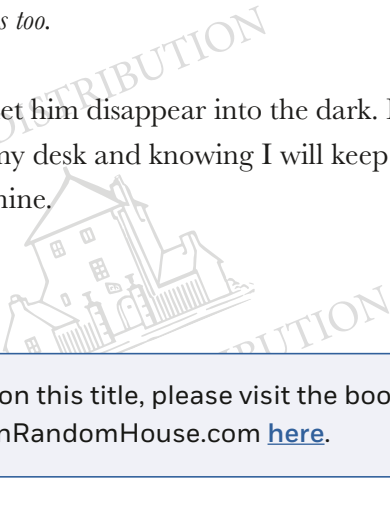
Had a few things to take care of.

Like what, exactly? Like sneaking into my office and lying about it? Before he slinks away, his cold gaze lingers on the wine bottles. *Careful,* his eyes warn. *You've got secrets too.*

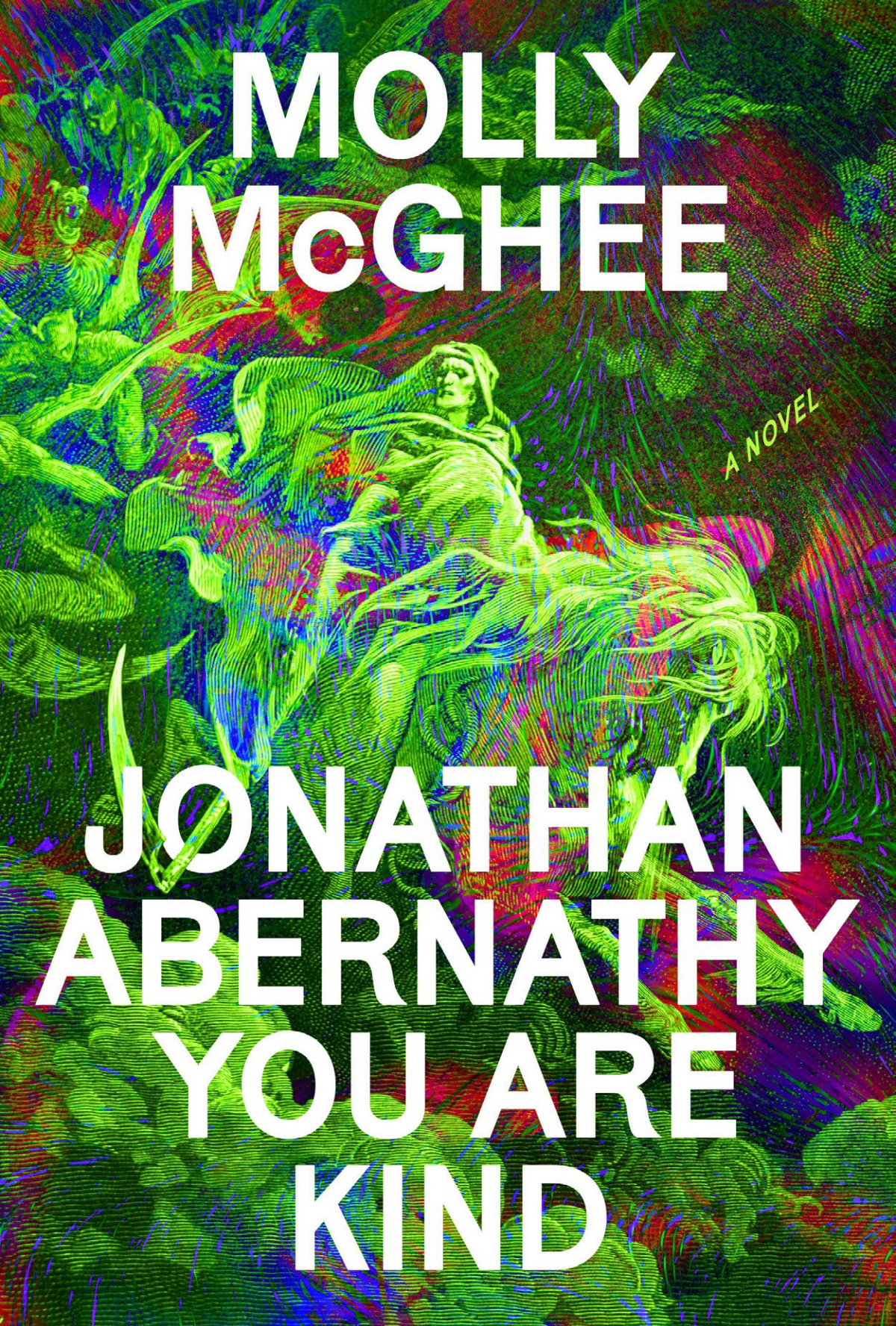
If I lost this job . . .

So I shut my mouth and let him disappear into the dark. I wait there in the moonlight, gripping my desk and knowing I will keep his secret.

And I pray he will keep mine.



For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).



**MOLLY
McGHEE**

A NOVEL

**JONATHAN
ABERNATHY
YOU ARE
KIND**

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/// **1** ///

JONATHAN ABERNATHY STEPS INTO THE office and death is there. Death is not alone. A redheaded attendant named Kai looks up from her paperwork as Jonathan Abernathy walks through the automatic doors. Neither Abernathy nor the attendant feels death, sees death, hears or touches death, but death is there. Death is watching them both. Though it will take three years, from this moment, for death to act, Jonathan Abernathy will never live a life unmarked again. Death will be tethered to him as a shadow.

His will not be a good death. When he dies, it will be slow.

The poor dumb son of a bitch is, of course, oblivious to this. His oblivion makes him human. He is sweeter for it.

Except for Jonathan Abernathy and Kai, the attendant, the empty office is located in a strip mall just off the highway. The only signage is a weather-beaten brass plaque that reads—

**THE 508TH
ARCHIVAL OFFICE
FULL SERVICE & RECORDS**

A piece of white printer paper is taped to the bottom of the plaque—

INQUIRE FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN

The interior of Archival Office 508 is no more specific than the exterior. The waiting room is Abernathy's spiritual cousin: chairs of vinyl, cluttered secretarial

space, carpet that's almost as downtrodden as he. There is a damp aura. It is the type of room a government official leads you into to execute you, financially. In such rooms, there are always contracts to sign. Ballpoint pens. With the tips of his fingers, Abernathy can reach above him and pop any of the Styrofoam ceiling tiles out of place. As if the visual similarities between Archival Office 508 and the purgatories of our modern world (IRS rooms, liminal spaces, notary offices at large) are not glaring enough, the waiting room even has a jingle that loops.

Last night two people visited Jonathan Abernathy in his dreams and told him to come here. In this place he could find forgiveness: of his loans, they said, yes, but also of other things.

Though Jonathan Abernathy is not usually the type of person to listen to dreams, voices, or "signs from God," today he is desperate. Today he has defaulted on his debt.

The debt of Jonathan Abernathy is large. Myriad. His loans, IOUs, and bills so diverse ecologists would be within their jurisdiction to classify the collection as "an ecosystem." Despite the diversity, the two main life forms are fairly simple: (1) a series of unpaid credit cards inherited after the death of his parents, and (2) the legal culminations of the decisions he made as a seventeen-year-old kid, also known as private, American unsubsidized student loans with an APR so lethal it can kill in a week. Jonathan Abernathy has student loan debt in the quarter million. His inherited debt is in the low six figures. Even though it is illegal to inherit debt from your deceased family members, this will not stop debtors from attempting to collect. Combined, Abernathy's debt is one of the most prosperous ecosystems in the world.

Jonathan Abernathy does not make good money. What is illegal when done to some people is not illegal when done to him. He does not have the money to prove the illegality of other people's actions in the court of law.

So, yes.

A voice in Abernathy's dream told him to visit this tiny, miserable office, at the outskirts of the city, and he went.

Crazier things have happened.

In time Jonathan Abernathy will believe himself to be in love. There's nothing crazier than that.

Kai, the redheaded attendant, sits at the far side of the room, at a reception desk separated from the waiting area by a plexiglass partition. To get her attention, Abernathy walks up to the partition and taps on the scratched screen.

“Hello,” Abernathy says.

He looms above the sitting woman. He avoids eye contact with both her and his reflection. His shirt is depression-wrinkled. His hair sheening with sweat. He will never have a deathless moment again, yet all Jonathan Abernathy can think of is his appearance: the dampness of himself, the slouch.

“I think I am here about loan forbearance?” The word “forbearance” feels strange in his mouth. “I received . . .” Jonathan Abernathy hesitates. “I received a call from your office . . . just yesterday, about a government . . . ah, forgiveness program? Does that sound right?”

The attendant looks him up and down. Her bottle-red hair and green eyeglasses contrast with her skin and make her look like a beetle. Her name tag reads: KAI, DREAM COLLECTOR 265.

Kai rolls her eyes. Without verbally acknowledging his presence, she points behind him with her ballpoint pen.

Abernathy turns away from the attendant and his reflection in the plexiglass. If the walk here had not ruined it (his outfit), he might have looked nice. In his dream he was told to look nice, otherwise resign himself to suffering.

Jonathan Abernathy does not wish to suffer.

He takes a clipboard from the caddy labeled APPLICATION: DREAM AUDITOR. At the far wall, against a window, he settles into one of the polymer seats.

He’s never liked his looks, despite how charming others perceive his appearance to be. He has to live in his body. Others don’t. Perhaps if Abernathy knew people found him charming, he would like himself more. As it is, he knows nothing about the perceptions of others. He has wavy hair. A roundish face. Nice shoulders. Kind eyes. This morning he tried to look storkish: stately, regal, destined for greater things but currently resigned to standing in wait for his proverbial big catch. Instead, he looks like a pigeon. Dirty. Beaky. Wide. Behind him, on the sill, there it is—a dying plant standing in as a metaphor for his life.

- ✓ Yes, Jonathan Abernathy is in financial peril.
- ✓ Yes, he is a former student of the public education system of the State.
- ✓ Yes, he feels like a failure in all things, but still somehow wakes up each morning feeling hope.

Does he sleep at least eight hours a night? As unbelievable as it is—

- ✓ Yes, he does.

Returning to the window, he slides the clipboard beneath the barrier. The attendant ignores him. She clacks away at a keyboard, huffing and sighing, before finally, in her own good time, turning to his application.

In silence, Kai's buggy eyes quickly sweep down his writing. Abernathy bounces on his heels with anticipation. She hits a red buzzer on her right. A chute opens in the floor. She drops his paperwork in.

As if nothing out of the ordinary has happened, Kai does not acknowledge Abernathy, though he is right in front of her, separated by only the thinnest, most scratched layer of plastic imaginable.

Kai pulls an orange from a desk drawer. The chute seals. The carpet is intact again. Still ungreetered, Abernathy stands in front of the barrier now at a loss for words.

On the other side of the plexiglass, Kai presses a long nail into the crown of the orange and begins to pull down the skin.

The room is flooded with the asynchronous smell of citrus.

Abernathy raises a finger. Goes to say, "Excuse me, Kai, the two-hundred-and-sixty-fifth collector of dreams, hello," but he is too nervous. Instead, he says nothing. He tells himself lies.

- ✓ Jonathan Abernathy you are kind.
- ✓ You are competent.
- ✓ You are well respected and valued by your community.
- ✓ People, including your family, love you.

Abernathy clears his throat. What did the recruitment voice in his dreams say? He can't remember. Something about appearance being the end-all-be-all of both this life and the next.

As far as Jonathan Abernathy is concerned, he always says the wrong thing. So Jonathan Abernathy says nothing.

Instead, he turns. Walks away. Gets to the automatic doors. Is proud of himself. Only then he remembers: he is no coward.

Or, at least, he does not wish to appear cowardly.

On this updraft of consciousness, Abernathy turns from the exit and dashes back to the counter. He exhales a rush of words in the dream collector's direction. His sentence follows an emotional trajectory that goes something like, "What the fuck?"

Kai stops. Mid-peel, she leans forward. Onto her elbows.

"Yell at me again," she says.

Abernathy had thought her to be, like him, the type to take shit.

He sees his mistake.

Abernathy blushes. Steps back.

"Ah," he says.

Kai looks at him.

He repeats, this time with words, instead of feelings, his inquiry. "You, uh, threw my application away. Just there."

He points.

Kai sets the orange down. She says, "Right there?"

"Yeah," he says, then corrects himself, remembering his manners. "Yes."

"Uh-huh. And this gives you the excuse to talk to me that way because . . . ?"

Abernathy mumbles an apology.

"What was that?" Kai leans forward. She cups a hand around her ear.

Abernathy starts again. "I haven't been able to pay back . . ."

"No, please. You clearly have a good reason. Keep going. Go ahead."

He falters.

Jonathan Abernathy wants to say that he is desperate for forgiveness. From the government or otherwise. He hasn't been able to pay back his loans. He's looking for an end to—or at least a break from—his suffering. He would like to

one day have a life. Live with another person. Be successful. Now, as he defaults on his education, a great machine he could never get to work for him, those loans are actively ruining his one shot at life.

He needed—he needs—help.

He says, instead, “I just really need this job, man.”

Kai stares at him.

“I, like, really need it.”

More staring.

“You know?”

“Look,” Kai says, not without patience. She has a deep southern accent and a stone face. She wears a hoodie and a pair of slacks, which contrast with the richness of her makeup and hair. She points at the place in the floor where the chute in the carpet opened. “That’s the file drawer.”

“Oh,” says Abernathy.

“It takes your application and digitizes it, so that our somnambulatory officerial force can review and assess your capabilities.”

“Ah.” Abernathy does not understand any of this, but he wants to sound smart, and competent, and all the other things employers look for in new hires. He repeats the biggest word, “So-nah-em-bew-la-tory?”

“Somnambulatory.”

“Doesn’t that mean . . .” —he tries to remember— “something about sleep walking? Like when you’re sleeping but walk around?”

Kai rolls her eyes again. “Yeah,” she says.

Abernathy is starting to think he did not hallucinate the men in his dreams who told him to come here.

Still, this place is not what he expected.

He leans into the partition separating him and Kai. His nose just touches the surface which is, like him, weirdly damp. He looks into her tiny reception office. The chute in the floor has closed. The floor is beige carpet patterned with feeble green infinity signs. “So in the dreams . . .”

“Yes,” says Kai, patience wearing out. “We come to you in dreams. That was us. Is there anything else, Mr. . . . ?”

“Abernathy,” he says, realizing too late that an office that recruits their workforce through dreams may have an architecturally unconventional

infrastructure. Their workflows might not align with the workflows of, say, other, more traditional workplaces.

Not that Abernathy has ever worked in a traditional work space.

“Jonathan Abernathy,” he says. “But only my parents called me Jonathan. Nobody calls me Jonny, or Jon. Everyone just calls me Abernathy.”

“Is there anything else, Mr. Abernathy?”

“Just Abernathy is fine.”

Kai looks at him.

“How does the dreaming stuff . . . how does it . . .”

“Work?”

“Yeah. Sorry, yes. That.”

Very slowly, with exaggerated, buggy blinks, Collector Kai the Two-Hundred-and-Sixty-Fifth begins to speak to Abernathy as if she is speaking to a child. Abernathy is a child, though he won’t admit it. Just a really tall child masquerading as an adult. To his credit, he tries hard not to be. Jonathan Abernathy wants to be self-sufficient. He wants to grow up. One day, he wants to have children of his own. In short: he wants to enter the great American employment and leave behind his vast forest of debt. This is his dream.

“Have you heard of the Archive of Dreaming Act, Mr. Abernathy?”

Abernathy stares blankly at her.

“Several years ago,” the attendant sighs, “the founder of the Archive discovered that humanity shares a consciousness while it sleeps.” She sounds very bored, as if she has said this a million times.

“There are ways,” Kai continues, ignoring Abernathy’s disbelieving stare, “of tending to this . . . shared consciousness . . .” She pauses. Abernathy thinks it is because she cannot find the right word, but he is wrong. Kai is actually pausing in disgust. “We partner with the government, who then sell our services to employers whose workforces seem”—she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath—“depleted.”

Abernathy has a hard time following this. “Wait, so, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that in this job—if you get this job, and I’m not sure you will get it—you’ll be going into the dreams of American workers and cleaning them up.”

“Cleaning?”

“Cleaning. Them. Up.”

“What does that . . . I mean . . . how do you even . . . ?”

“We will review your plea,” Kai says, interrupting him. Abernathy realizes he has unconsciously crossed his arms across his chest, as if hugging himself. He unfolds. “If we feel like you’re the right candidate for the program, we will get back to you.”

“But,” says Abernathy, lips dry, “what about—”

“Hey,” says Kai. She taps on the smudged barrier, where Abernathy’s nose once was. “I’m only here filling in. My actual pay grade? Not enough to put up with this shit. OK? So, please, if you’ll just—” She waves at the door. Her nails, a rhinestone set in the center of each, are painted an immaculate emerald.

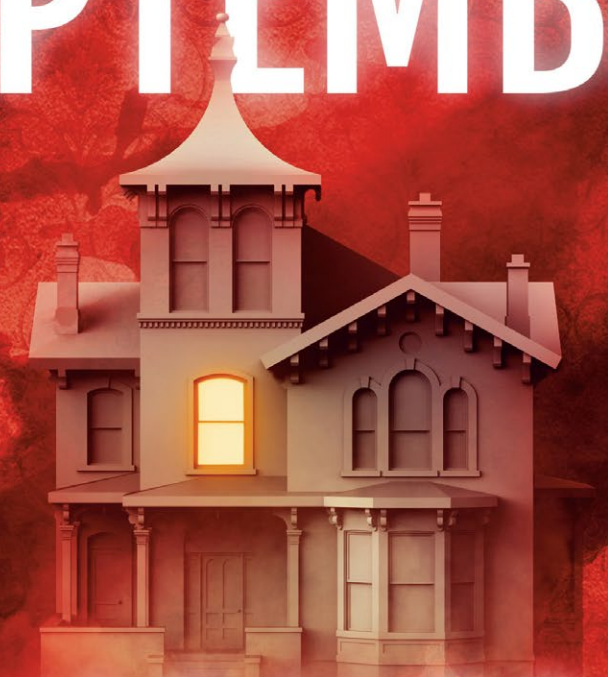
This must be what the recruiters meant when they spoke in his dream of appearance. Be like Kai. Appear to be confident. Appear to be competent. Appear to be good. Abernathy takes a mental note: develop appearances and, in the process, solve your life.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

"Just when you thought you'd seen everything a haunted house novel could do, this book comes along."—GRADY HENDRIX

THE SEPTEMBER

YOU CAN
SURVIVE
ANYTHING.



HOUSE

A NOVEL

CARISSA ORLANDO

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PROLOGUE

It was our dream house.

I knew it from the moment I stepped onto the property for the real estate tour. I knew it from the moment I saw the listing in the newspaper, if I'm being honest. The tour was a formality. I would have bought the place sight unseen.

The house, however, was truly something to see. It was a Victorian, with cobalt paint and neat white trim and an envy-inspiring porch that wrapped around the whole house. The driveway was long and the yard was sprawling and the place was blissfully isolated, hidden by trees on all sides. And there was a turret—an actual *turret*—that made the house look just a step behind in time, but purposefully so. My feet had barely even touched a pebble in the driveway before I knew that this place was my—*our*—home.

I had never really had a real home before, even as a child. My family had moved around quite a bit, bouncing from house to apartment back to a house and once even to a little trailer for a while—it all depended on how things were going and whether or

not my father was taking his medication. The older I got, the more I found myself wishing for something permanent, a house with heavy bones, a place where I could sink my roots into the ground and become an immovable object. Leaving the chaos of my family seemed to be a step towards this dream, although in retrospect it might have been a touch naive to expect any level of stability in my twenties. I didn't exactly find my house and my roots, but I found a husband, which seemed to be close enough.

Hal understood the draw of a house, of a home. His family had also been transient to an extent, and from the time we were newlyweds, Hal and I shared fantasies of owning a gorgeous old house, preferably Victorian. We waxed poetic about him tapping away at novels in an office filled with rich wood, me creating masterpieces in a sun-drenched studio, our child playing delicately in a lush backyard. We would fill the home with antique furniture and throw lavish parties, casually reciting the history of each corner of the house to our admiring guests. We would maybe even be included in one of those magazines that featured historic homes, photographed as we posed in our luxurious sitting room, then again in the master bedroom, then again in the greenhouse (of course we would have a greenhouse), a centerfold for a different type of fantasy. More than that, we wanted a house—a home—that was nothing but ours. A place where we could live and grow old and die.

Of course, married life never quite proceeds in the direction you imagine. Hal had difficulty getting his writing published and had to cobble together employment through freelance-writing gigs, crafting little fluff articles for the local paper, and teaching a few classes at a community college. I balanced raising our daughter, Katherine, with odd jobs—retail, administrative assistant, substitute teacher. I painted when we could afford art supplies.

We were transient like our families before us, bouncing from house to apartment to house to different apartment as circumstances dictated—always renting, never owning.

But after some struggles (and what family doesn't have struggles?), it all started coming together as Katherine approached her late-teenage years. Hal sold a few of his books and received modest but steady royalties from them. I was painting with more frequency and had some pieces displayed in a local gallery. We found a little house to rent that was in a decent state of repair, with a landlord who didn't jack up the rate too terribly over the years. We settled in, decorated the place to our liking, and for a while it almost felt like ours. Almost. By the time Katherine left for college (full scholarship, my smart girl), we had found stability, but had put aside our dreams of getting a place of our own, old Victorian or not. It was no matter—we were one another's home, and that was more than enough at times. Harold, Margaret, and Katherine Hartman—a transient family of three.

We weren't really even looking to buy anymore. Who knows what compelled me to flip to the real estate section of a newspaper I rarely read, but there the house stood in all its beauty. Victorian, just like we had wanted. Impossibly old. Impossibly beautiful. And for a price so low that Hal triple-checked it with the real estate agent before we even scheduled a tour.

The house would need minor restorations; that was certain. Still, for a place that hadn't been occupied since the nineties, when its possession was unceremoniously turned over from the last owner back to the bank, it was in surprisingly good repair. The house was nearly a hundred fifty years old but had aged gracefully, appearing composed and wise instead of decaying and haggard. A paint touch-up here, some wood refinishing there, and the place would be as good as new.

As the real estate agent guided us through the house, Hal and I gawked like children, pointing out where furniture would be placed, claiming rooms for our own. Hal picked a grand room on the second floor as his office and decided where in the room his desk would sit before the real estate agent even made it up the stairs after us. I had claimed the sunroom as my studio from just a photo in the listing, and was already imagining myself painting away through sunny afternoons. And of course, we both agreed that our master bedroom would be at the top of the stairs, where we would wake and stare out the gorgeous picture window.

“I am legally obligated to disclose to you that there was a death in this house,” the agent said, still catching her breath as she caught up to us on the third floor but not so out of sorts as to accidentally use the word “murder.” “Well, two deaths. The lady of the house and a housekeeper. But it was over a hundred years ago.”

We were barely listening, busy picturing ourselves sipping morning tea in bed, looking out that window.

“That was a long time ago,” Hal said dreamily.

“Yes, it was,” the agent said. “And the homeowner at the time, the man who . . . you know. Well, it seemed as if he had been suffering from some sort of psychosis. He later took his own life. A real one-off sort of situation.”

“A house this old, you would almost expect something like that,” I said, not even listening to my own words as I peered inside the closet. The *closet!*

“And the other deaths in the house,” the agent said, her voice so quiet as to be barely a sound, “seemed to be natural in nature.”

I didn’t hear her because Hal had just called me into the bathroom, and I was nearly moved to tears by the claw-foot tub. The agent seemed relieved by our lack of follow-up questions and the tour continued.

I didn't care much for the basement—unfinished and windowless, with dirt floors and a dank smell. It had a bit of a *wrong* sense to it, and I felt goose bumps break out, but I figured that it was just the cold air and dim lighting. We commented to each other that we would have to finish it after we moved in, install flooring and do something about the light and the smell. There was a half-hearted tone to our plans for the basement even then, and I was relieved to notice that we wouldn't have much reason to go down there—the water heater and the boiler were in a utility closet towards the back of the house; the breaker box was in the kitchen. We didn't spend too much time down there and didn't notice that the agent remained at the top of the stairs, peering down at us from the well-lit hallway.

Then we got a look at the backyard and forgot about the basement entirely.

Maybe if the two of us had paid more attention to any of the horror movies we'd seen over the years, we would've been aware of how thick we were being, but we hadn't and we weren't. Instead, we bought the house and celebrated with champagne (for me) and sparkling cider (for Hal). We finally had a house that was ours, just *ours*. To live and grow old and die in. Katherine was surprised but happy when we broke the news to her, and she promised she would visit once she could take time away from her new, high-paying job and her new, high-achieving girlfriend.

This is all to say, we were home. This is all to say, you would have had to pry us out of this house with a goddamn crowbar. Me, anyway. As it turned out, Hal could be dislodged a little more easily.

The first few weeks we lived in the house were blissful. But then, of course, it was only May.



The walls of the house were bleeding again.

This sort of thing could be expected; it was, after all, September.

The bleeding wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been accompanied by nightly moaning that escalated into screaming by the end of the month like clockwork. The moaning started around midnight and didn't let up until nearly six in the morning, which made it challenging to get a good night's sleep. Since it was early in the month, I could still sleep through the racket, but the sleep was disjointed and not particularly restful.

Before Hal absconded to wherever it was he went, he used to stretch and crack what sounded like the entirety of his skeleton. *Margaret*, he would say, *we're getting old*.

Speak for yourself, I would reply, but he was right. I was starting to feel a bit like the house itself sometimes—grand but withering, shifting in the wind and making questionable noises when the

foundation settled. All the moaning-and-screaming business in September certainly didn't help me feel any younger.

That is to say, I was not looking forward to late September and the nightly screaming. It was going to be a long month. But that's just the way of things.

As for the bleeding, it always started at the top floor of the house—the master bedroom. If I wasn't mistaken, it started above our very bed itself. There was something disconcerting about opening your eyes first thing in the morning and seeing a thick trail of red oozing down your nice wallpaper, pointing straight at your head. It really set a mood for the remainder of the day. Then you walked out into the hallway and there was more of it dripping from in between the cracks in the wallpaper, leaking honey-slow to the floor. It was a lot to take in before breakfast.

As early as it was in September, the blood hadn't yet made it to the baseboards. Give it a week, however, and it would start pooling on the floor, cascading down the stairs in clotting red waterfalls. By the end of the month, deft footwork would be required to walk down the hallway or descend the stairs without leaving a trail of prints throughout the house. I had grown practiced in dodging blood over the past few years, but even I had slipped up on occasion, especially once the screaming was in full effect. Sleep deprivation really takes a toll on your motor functioning.

I used to worry over the walls, getting a bucket and soap and scrubbing until my arms were sore, only to see my work undone the very next day. By the end of the month, it got so bad that I could rub the sponge over a crack in the wallpaper and watch a fresh blob of red leak out of the open wound that was the wall over and over again. *The wallpaper is ruined*, I fretted, but it never was. It all went away in October. So now I just allowed the walls to bleed and waited patiently.

The first year we were in the house, Hal tried to convince me that the bleeding was just a leak. An oozing red leak. He carried on with that line of reasoning much longer than was logical. By the time the blood had poured down the stairs and Hal was almost ready to admit that maybe it wasn't a simple leak, October hit and the blood vanished. Hal considered it a problem solved. I suppose he thought it was an isolated event and never considered that these things might be cyclical. He seemed surprised when the blood returned that second September. *There's that leak again*, he mused, fooling nobody. Everything, of course, changed after the third September, and Hal's opinions about the bleeding during this fourth September could be best summed up by his abrupt absence. I supposed I ought to feel trepidatious about facing September alone. However, I was never quite alone in this house, now, was I?

I COULDN'T TELL YOU WHY THE WALLS BLED. I COULDN'T TELL YOU WHY THERE WAS screaming at night. I couldn't tell you why a lot of things happened in this house. Over the years, I had developed a few working theories about the goings-on and why September made everything so much more difficult, but each was half-formed at best. Eventually, one has to give up asking questions, just accept that things are the way they are, and act accordingly. So when I woke up to a wall dripping with blood and to a foggy head from not-quite sleeping through hours of moaning, I simply nodded and got on with my morning.

My only plan for the day was to try to get some painting done. I had learned from past experience that it became difficult to focus on painting or really much of anything as the month progressed, what with the sleep deprivation and the blood and the

loud noises and the wounded children running everywhere. As such, I wanted to front-load my pleasures in the hopes that they could carry me through the remainder of the month. Planning is important. So I set myself up in my sunroom studio with a blank canvas, hoping for inspiration. However, I soon found myself staring at a canvas painted entirely in red, which seemed a bit derivative, given the circumstances.

I tapped my paintbrush against my lips and stared at the red canvas, plotting out what to paint. It might have been nice to do a nature scene—some peaceful flowers, waving trees—but all I saw in my mind’s eye was a child’s face, mutilated and screaming. Perhaps painting was not in the cards for today.

A dull headache poked its way behind my eyes—a foreshadowing of the near-incessant headache I would have by the end of the month—and I sighed, giving up. I plopped my paintbrush, dry and useless, down on my easel and stood. Tea. It was time for tea.

As I walked from my studio into the living room, I could hear Fredricka moving around upstairs, doing something or other in the second-floor bedrooms. I knew all the doors were closed along that hallway (*What will we ever do with a five-bedroom house, Margaret?* Hal had asked me when we reviewed the listing. *We’ll have guests*, I had responded, a rare moment of prescience for me), but I could still hear noises from within, different from the usual disturbances that arose from behind those closed doors. Jostling and rustling, the changing of linens. The scraping of furniture across the floor in one room, then a light crash coming from another. Fredricka was lively today.

September had an effect on Fredricka. She became busier, more chaotic. She was nervous. She didn’t like September, she told me once. She had seen more than a hundred Septembers, so she ought to know.

For her part, Fredricka expelled her September energy through cleaning, stacking things, and rearranging furniture in nonsensical ways. None of these chores were necessary, but I understood her intentions. One has to control something in the face of the great uncontrollable. I left her alone.

Fredricka usually made the tea, but it seemed like it would be my responsibility today. A frown crept onto my face, and I reminded myself a bit of a spoiled child. I chastised myself for my entitlement. Making tea, after all, wasn't particularly burdensome, and it was a bit of good fortune to have Fredricka around at all, considering we hadn't hired her. She had come with the house, in a manner of speaking. Still, one gets used to routines. As I rounded the corner out of the living room and into the foyer, I tried to remember where we kept the tea bags. Fredricka might have moved them. She liked to move things in September, and not because she wanted to be helpful. For all I knew, they had been shoved behind the toilet.

Lost in my thoughts, I was startled to hear a voice behind me.

"Tea, ma'am?" Fredricka asked. Apparently, she hadn't been too distracted to make it, after all.

Despite my surprise upon learning that Fredricka was a non-negotiable fixture of the house, I had come to realize that I enjoyed her presence. She was reasonably benevolent, or at least as benevolent as anything in the house could be. Still, the sight of her was always a shock to the system. Fredricka was a tall woman, and grand, in a way, as the house itself, with so much of her walled off and expressionless, unwilling to open and allow a peek of what lay inside. And of course, there was that gash on her head, gaping open like a split pumpkin, where the axe had sunk in over a hundred years ago. The wound began at the top of her forehead and stretched down through her right eyebrow. Her eye was sunken in

as a result, pupil drifting, not quite right anymore. That took a while to get used to looking at.

I smiled at her. “I can handle it if you’re busy.”

“No trouble at all, ma’am.” Fredricka drifted down the hallway that ran parallel to the stairs and led into the kitchen, her long smock fluttering behind her. I followed.

The kitchen was the brightest room in the house, surrounded with windows displaying the greenery outside, which was just now yielding leaves tinged with yellows and reds. It had been one of the biggest draws of the house for me, with two large ovens, a glimmering white sink, and rows of ornate cabinetry (original wood, mind you). It turned out to be comparatively peaceful in here, and I usually ate my meals at the kitchen table instead of in the grand dining room just a few feet away. For some reason, the blood never made it into the kitchen, so this room would be a particular haven as September raged on. A true blessing, that was; seeing blood staining those pristine surfaces, however temporarily, would have broken my heart. I’d grown used to seeing carnage inches from my food (Fredricka prepared most of the meals, after all), but one must draw a line somewhere.

Fredricka busied herself with the kettle, filling it with water and placing it on the stove. Not wanting to stand like a statue waiting for Fredricka to serve me, I walked over to the basement door just off the kitchen to check the wooden boards nailed into the doorframe. I had replaced them recently, but I tugged on each beam all the same, testing the strength. Four of them were firm, but one wiggled a little. I inspected the nails—just as I thought, coming loose. In the year since the boards had gone up, I found that the nails did that from time to time. Checking the boards was essential. I made a mental note that the beam would need to be replaced soon. Not urgent, but best to act on these things sooner

rather than later. I gripped the doorknob and gave it a tug. The door remained closed, held tight by the boards. I traced my finger over the small crack—a recent addition—that snaked down from the top of the door nearly midway to the doorknob, sharp but not large enough to threaten the integrity of the wood. Everything, for the most part, was as it should have been.

Turning back into the kitchen, I noticed that Elias had materialized next to the stove. I sighed. Elias could be a bit of a bother.

Elias was nine or ten. I could never remember. Whatever his age was, he was scrawny, with a smattering of unruly dark hair on his head. He always looked the same—gaunt and empty, his dirty white cotton shirt draping over dark shorts, and one sad knee sock dangling by his ankle. He stared at me with milky eyes and a sullen face. He didn't have any visible wounds like Fredricka, but could somehow be just as eerie, if not more. I couldn't interact with Elias the way I could with Fredricka, although God knows I'd tried: I tried asking him questions, telling him to tap his foot once for yes and twice for no; I tried asking him to move the planchette on a Ouija board; I even tried making outlandish statements about World War II just to get a rise out of him. Nothing. So I hate to say it, but I started treating him like a plant, narrating my life out loud to him with no expectation of him responding or even hearing. *It looks like rain today, Elias. Oh, Elias, seems like the mail is running late. Not that we're expecting anything but bills, anyway.* For his part, Elias just stared.

“Can I make you something to eat, ma'am?” Fredricka asked, busying herself around Elias as if he were not there. Elias and Fredricka had nothing to do with each other and I had never seen them interact. I had started to assume Fredricka didn't even see Elias until one day she referred to him as “that boy.” No clues

regarding Elias' perceptions of Fredricka were ever available, seeing as he never spoke, only howled periodically.

"Some toast, perhaps?" I responded. I moved to the pantry to retrieve the bread before Fredricka could get to it. We had an electric toaster, but Fredricka's ability to use technology popularized after her death was sporadic at best. I tried to teach her about the toaster and even had her successfully use it once, but her preference was to roast the bread on a toasting fork over a fire, like she used to do. It was muscle memory for her; she just did what she was always used to doing. I understood and even empathized (aren't we all creatures of habit in the end?) but the process took forever and I was hungry.

"I think we still have some strawberry jam." I motioned to the fridge. This would give Fredricka something to do. After months and months of trying to convince Fredricka that she had no obligation to be our housekeeper and was free to do whatever she wanted on this earth, I learned that all Fredricka seemed to be capable of doing was work, and all she wanted from me was to be given things to do. All right, then.

Elias watched me with those unblinking eyes as I retrieved the bread from the pantry and a plate from the cupboard. He was like the *Mona Lisa*, eyes following me about the room, expression unreadable. It had initially been unsettling, but one grows used to unsettling things.

Fredricka rummaged around in the fridge. "We do have strawberry jam, ma'am," Fredricka said. "Or, if ma'am prefers, we also have blackberry."

"Blackberry sounds good, actually." I turned with my bread and walked towards the toaster. Elias was standing directly in front of it, empty eyes leering into mine. This was going to be a problem.

"Excuse me, Elias," I said. Elias didn't reply or move, but I

wasn't expecting him to. I reached past him towards the toaster. As my arm drew near, the white of Elias' face turned black, as if it had been on fire for a long, long time. His milky eyes boiled into embers and his mouth stretched into a gaping maw, fangs gleaming as he shrieked, diving for the flesh of my arm. Elias did *not* like his personal space invaded. However, I was practiced in this game, deftly dropping my bread in the toaster, pushing the lever, and retracting my arm in a matter of seconds, receiving only the lightest of grazes from Elias' fangs. Just a scratch, not even bleeding. No need to even apply hydrogen peroxide. This wasn't my first time trying to prepare a meal while dodging the fangs of a dead child who wished me bodily harm.

Upon being denied the chance to remove a section of my flesh with his teeth, Elias let out another shriek, which sounded like a dying jet engine. He vanished inside of himself, and the kitchen was again quiet, save for the sounds of Fredricka arranging jams on the counter behind me.

Most of the things in this house had left Hal alone, choosing to bother me instead of him for reasons I never quite understood or found fair. Elias had been the lone exception, taking his own version of a liking to Hal, which was a bit more violent than most people's version of a liking. I wasn't sure what the connection was, but Elias certainly enjoyed frequenting the room Hal had claimed as his office. I wondered if that room used to be Elias' playroom, or possibly the room in which he died. Regardless, Hal had not cared for Elias. I certainly understood his perspective, but I couldn't see the point of expending all that energy on hating something that, in the grand scheme of things, mostly just stared and occasionally tried to bite. Just stay out of range of his teeth—a fairly easy solution, all things considered.

Fredricka retrieved my toast from the toaster and spread the

blackberry jam liberally. She handed me the plate and tended to the tea while I sat at the kitchen table, chewing pensively. When Hal and I had first moved here, the sight of Fredricka's wound was a bit challenging around mealtimes, and I found myself needing to look away from her while I ate. However, one gets used to horrible things, and today I could watch her with ease while I ate, licking jam off my fingers and thinking about the remainder of the day. Despite how little I had to do, I liked mentally arranging my schedule. The days had a habit of blurring together, especially now that Hal was gone. It was helpful to plan tasks, to accomplish things.

"I was hoping to go for a walk later today," I said to Fredricka in between bites of toast, "but it looks like it might rain. Disappointing. I don't want to sit like a lump in here all day."

"Needs must when the devil drives," said Fredricka.

"Indeed," I said. "Maybe I'll do some yoga." I was unlikely to do yoga, but saying it out loud made me feel productive, and Fredricka wasn't going to argue with me. "I don't think I'll get much painting done for the rest of the month. All I can think of is children's faces and the color red. I've done that a hundred times over." I was also thinking of Hal, but I didn't say so out loud. There didn't seem to be very much of a point to thinking about Hal with any sort of frequency.

Fredricka made no comment about my questionable inspiration. She set a cup of tea in front of me. "That sounds excellent, ma'am."

I thanked her and sipped at my tea, trying to think of other activities for the day. The days had been growing dull. Fuzzy.

Fredricka shifted, antsy. "If it is acceptable to ma'am, I would like to get back to my work upstairs. I have many beds to freshen."

"You know you don't have to change out those linens," I said,

fully aware of the futility of my argument. Fredricka didn't *have* to change out the linens, but in some ways she *did*. She was driven to by a force I likely wouldn't understand until after I died myself. Muscle memory, and all that. "Nobody is using those beds."

"One must change out the bedclothes, lest they start smelling stale."

No use in arguing. I waved her away. "Go right ahead, then," I said. "Thank you for the tea."

"You're welcome, ma'am." Fredricka turned and began drifting out of the kitchen. On her way out, she paused as she passed my phone, which was charging quietly on the counter. She turned her head to look back at me. "I believe ma'am will find"—she nodded in the direction of the phone—"she has received a message from her daughter."

If Fredricka had difficulties using a toaster, you had better believe she had no concept of how to use a smartphone. She never touched the thing, even when rearranging everything in September. It was completely outside of her realm of technological mastery, and she spent most of the time acting as if it didn't exist, much like she did with Elias. Still, she possessed an understanding of the ways in which my phone connected me to the world, and she had an uncanny ability to sense when I missed a communication, clueing me in to messages and voicemails of which I was unaware.

Shit. "Thanks, Fredricka," I said, moving to the counter to get my phone. I glanced at the screen. One missed call, one voicemail, and a series of text messages, all from Katherine.

Call me back, she texted. Then, *As soon as you can.* Then, *I really need to talk to you about Dad.*

Shit shit *shit.* She was getting more and more insistent. She used to just text, which was so much easier to ignore. Then she

started calling, which was harder to avoid. She was calling almost daily now, and the text message follow-up pointed only at an increase in urgency. *I'm not giving up*, it said. *I can outlast you*. I would have to call her back, appease her.

The phone chimed in my hand. Another text message from Katherine, whose ears must have been burning. *You're ignoring me*.

I sighed.

My finger was hovering over the screen, about to press CALL, when I looked up and caught sight of a small, slim figure hovering wordlessly near the basement door, not really there but not *not* there either. A little girl, sallow skin, chunks of dirty hair hanging over her face. She wore a dress that might've once been blue, with little white flowers dotting the fabric, but was now more of a slate, approaching black. At one point, something terrible had happened to her skull. One of her eyeballs, not quite solid anymore, drooped from its socket as she stared at me.

Everything in this house stared at me. Little pranksters playing a staring contest, seeing who would be the first to blink.

Angelica. This one was Angelica. She was the first of many who would arrive, a Paul Revere of sorts. *They are coming*. I didn't know all their names, but I knew Angelica.

"Hi, Angelica," I said, resting my phone back on the counter. It was September all right. The children arrived, one by one, in September.

Angelica didn't say anything. She never did. She lifted an arm, as thin and knotted as a tree branch, and pointed a grimy finger at the basement door.

Oh, I had fallen for that one before. That first September, when I thought all these apparitions were problems for me to solve, I had fancied myself a regular Nancy Drew and thrown myself into whatever wild-goose chase these pranksters wanted to

send me on. I'd since learned better. Some mysteries don't need to be solved, only coped with. That was one of the reasons for the boards nailed over the basement door. One of the many reasons, that is.

"You know I'm not doing that, Angelica," I said.

Angelica, of course, said nothing. Her pointing finger never wavered.

"It's nice to see you again," I said, changing the subject. I didn't expect a response but wanted to be polite nonetheless.

Nothing. Pointing.

"Well"—I lifted my phone off the counter, making plans to call Katherine from my studio—"I had better get going. Things to do today."

I had turned and was nearly out of the kitchen when I heard a tiny voice behind me. "He's down there."

Well. That was new.

I pivoted and looked at Angelica. "Oh?" I asked.

"He's down there," she repeated, her voice like rusty wind chimes.

Angelica usually didn't speak—none of the pranksters did, aside from Fredricka. Sure, they made little sounds—like sobbing or wailing or howling or shrieking or that dying-jet-engine noise like Elias—but never words, never full sentences. I wondered what had brought this about. Very probably, this was due to me ignoring her pointing finger, walking away from the basement instead of down into it, like the travesty that had been last September. When Katherine was little and I told her she couldn't have a cookie before dinner, she would whine and cry and stomp her feet, knowing that sometimes, if I was tired, I would give in. She could outlast me even then. If this was Angelica's version of a temper tantrum, I would take it. She couldn't outlast me like Katherine. I had grown stronger, and the stakes were higher.

But of course, Angelica was right. He *was* down there, in the basement. He had been down there since Hal and I moved in. The basement, it seemed, was where he lived. Hence the boards.

I wondered if the others would also talk when they arrived. A part of me was interested in having someone else to talk to, but it was unlikely they would be good conversationalists.

“I know, Angelica,” I said. “Thanks.” I turned and walked towards my studio. Behind me, I heard a sound like gasping for air that grew into a high-pitched scream before an abrupt silence. Angelica was gone, at least for the moment.

KATHERINE ANSWERED THE PHONE ON THE FIRST RING.

“What the hell?” she said instead of *Hello*. “I’ve been trying to call you for *weeks*.”

“Hello,” I said. “How have you been, dear?”

“Fucking *worried*,” she spat. “Mom, I can’t get ahold of Dad.”

“Language,” I said. *Shit*.

I lowered myself into an old chair in the far corner of my studio. Aside from the kitchen, this was my favorite part of the house, and I figured it was a decent place for what was likely to be an unpleasant conversation. I had painted these walls yellow, a happy color that shone when the sunlight hit it. However, today the sky was a wall of gray and the yellow seemed out of place, mocking me with its cheer when everything else was dark. Insult to injury, really.

“Mom, I’m serious,” Katherine said. “I’ve been calling him for weeks now and his phone just goes to voicemail. And now I can’t even record a message because his voicemail is full. I know he doesn’t like talking on the phone, but this seems wrong. What’s going on?”

I had been putting this conversation off as long as I could. I had hoped, fruitlessly, that I could put it off until October, but I knew that was a long shot. It was difficult. Prior to Hal's being gone, Katherine called at least weekly, and even though it was typically only she and I who conversed, she usually asked to say a quick hello to her father. Katherine and Hal had never been particularly close, but Katherine maintained a begrudging obligation to attempt at least a superficial relationship with her father. Hellos when she called, vague assurances that her career was going well, general inquiries about Hal's opinions of the weather. Enough conversation to last at least three minutes and preferably no longer. It had a checklist sort of feel to it: *spoke to my father, chuckled at his jokes, didn't mention any lingering grudges*. Minimum due diligence as a daughter. The trouble was, now I couldn't give her even those three minutes with Hal, and it seemed unlikely that Hal would reach out on his own.

"Mom." Her voice was insistent. "You need to tell me what's going on."

Maintaining the facade these past few weeks had grown increasingly difficult. For the first couple of weeks after Hal vanished, I had been able to dodge her requests to speak to her father by claiming he wasn't at home or was busy working on his new novel and couldn't be disturbed. Once I even pretended to go get him for her and *walked up to his office*, phone in hand.

"Hal," I had chirped at no one, "Katherine wants to say hi." I clutched the phone to my stomach, hoping it would muffle my voice enough for Katherine not to expect to hear Hal's reply.

I had stood in silence, staring into his empty office, estimating how long his response—were there one—would have taken, before putting the phone back to my ear. "Oh, I'm sorry, dear. He can't talk right now. But he says hello and that he loves you."

After Katherine and I had said our goodbyes that day, I lingered in Hal's office, as if he had been there the whole time. I saw a thin film of dust on his desk. Fredricka usually avoided this room—she preferred to stay out of Hal's sight, as did most of the pranksters—but I could tell her that she could tend to it now if she wished. I turned to leave and there was Elias, standing directly in front of me and staring with those milky eyes, his face starting to blacken with my nearness.

"Don't judge me," I'd said.

He gnashed his teeth in reply.

There was only so much dodging I could do before Katherine became concerned. During our last phone call, she had commented that she hadn't spoken to Hal in a little while. "I know he's busy," she had said, "but maybe you could put him on for a second just to say hello?"

"He's away," I said quickly. "I would love to, but—"

"I thought you said he was working on his novel," Katherine said.

Shit. I had. "Did I? Oh. I thought he was," I said, "but it turns out, he's away. My mistake."

Katherine sounded suspicious, but not enough to cause a scene, not yet. "Well, can you have him call me when he gets in? I'd love to hear his voice." That last bit was a lie, and an obvious one.

"Oh, sure, dear. I will do just that."

I didn't. I could lie too.

That had been over a week ago, and Katherine's level of suspicion had officially risen to scene-causing levels.

"*Mom.*" Her voice was shrill. "*Where is Dad?*"

I took a deep breath and let myself sink into the chair, as if this

could prepare me for the onslaught that was a few seconds away. “He’s gone, dear.”

“Gone? What do you mean—*gone*?” The honesty that Katherine had insisted upon had not, in fact, made her feel any better. I could have told her it wouldn’t, but she wouldn’t have listened.

“I mean, he’s not here anymore.”

A large bird flew past the windows, so close that its feathers nearly grazed the glass. Another sign that it was September. Hal and I had hung bird feeders when we first moved here, only to find our yard littered with avian corpses, their necks broken from crashing into our windows. We tried moving the feeders and applying painter’s tape to the windows to keep them away, but soon learned that they weren’t mistaking windows for open space but instead were intentionally careening into the hard outer walls of the house. Suicidal. Hal tried to tell me that it was normal, that birds just sort of did that sometimes, but even he had to admit that the frequency of the suicides was a bit much. So we took the feeders down. We still had our share of dead birds in September, but having fewer birds around during the year meant fewer corpses to clean up overall, which wasn’t nothing.

“Did he leave?”

“I’m afraid he did, dear,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm for both of us.

“Jesus Christ, Mom, why didn’t you tell me? How long ago did he leave?”

An interesting question, one whose answer depended on one’s definition of “leave.” One might think that leaving is an all-or-nothing activity: one is here; then one is not here. However, experience would suggest that leaving occurs on a continuum, happening in stages. Had Hal left when he stopped sleeping in the master

bedroom with me, choosing to sleep slumped over his desk instead? Had he left when he told me that he didn't want to live in this house anymore, that he didn't care if we took a huge loss in selling it or even if we didn't sell it at all, that he just needed to *get out*? Had he left when I put my foot down for once and told him that, no, we weren't selling, that I wasn't going anywhere, that this was our home? Had he left on one of those days when we didn't say a word to each other, just floated through the house on our own paths, apparitions following our own muscle memory? Or had he left the day he was gone, the day he decided he couldn't take it anymore, the door closing slowly after him but the tires of the taxi speeding quickly over the gravel in the driveway? (*Drive*, he must have commanded.)

Another deep breath. Katherine was not going to like this. "About a month ago."

"A *month*?" Katherine was yelling now. I moved the phone away from my ear. "He's been gone a whole *month*? And you didn't tell me? What the *fuck*, Mom?"

"Language."

"Where did he *go*? Where *is* he?"

"I'm not sure exactly." Hal didn't have any family left, and he had no friends in the area. He hadn't even seemed to have a fully formed plan when he walked out the door. He might as well be in the same space that Elias occupied after he vanished inside himself. He was simply gone. "He might have gone to a hotel, I think."

"You *think*? For a whole *month*?"

"I'm not sure, dear."

"This doesn't explain why he isn't answering *my* phone calls. Why is he ignoring *me*?" For a second, Katherine sounded like a child again, asking why she couldn't have a cookie before dinner. "I'm his fucking *daughter*, for Christ's sake."

“Language.”

“Has he been in touch with you? Have you heard from him at all?”

“No,” I said. “Not a peep.” This was the truth. He went silent. I let him.

“So it doesn’t sound like he just *left*,” Katherine said, her voice high and panicked. “It sounds like he’s *missing*.”

I made a little hum of mild agreement. I supposed that was one way of looking at it.

“Do you think something happened to him, Mom?”

Semantics again. This depended on one’s definition of “happened.” Certainly, things happened to him—to both of us—all the time while we lived here. Terrible things, in fact. Especially last September. However, it was likely that fewer things were happening to Hal now that he was gone. I certainly couldn’t imagine that there could be *more*. “What do you mean?”

“Like”—Katherine was choosing her words carefully—“do you think he got himself in some sort of trouble? You know, like . . . before?” She didn’t elaborate. She didn’t appreciate my disinclination to discuss the past but abided by it nonetheless, albeit reluctantly.

“Oh. No, I don’t think so,” I said. “But it’s not impossible.”

“And you haven’t heard from him at *all*.”

This wasn’t a question, but I answered it anyway. “No, dear.” I lifted a paintbrush out of an old cup and started chipping away at the dry paint on the handle with my fingernail. I wondered how much of this conversation would be circular.

“Jesus, Mom, you sound like you don’t even *care*,” Katherine said. “Doesn’t this bother you at all? He’s *missing*.”

“Of course it bothers me.” I watched a large chunk of paint fly off the brush after a satisfying flick of my fingernail. “I suppose

I've had some time to adjust." This was also true to an extent. With Hal so withdrawn in the months before he left, it was hard to even notice a difference in the house without him. It was as if he had always been gone. Besides, there was little point in concerning myself with an individual who was no longer in the house when there were many more concerning individuals who *were* actually in the house. And with September ramping up, the number of individuals in the house who warranted concern was about to increase.

But Katherine—who had never put up much of a fight about our various half-formed excuses regarding our being unable to host her for a visit over the years—didn't know anything about the number of concerning individuals in the house, so I wasn't going to tell her about any of *that*. There would be questions raised. Worries. Demands that I leave the house. Or, worse, demands that Katherine travel down here to view the horrors herself. No, none of that would do.

Katherine sighed. There was a silence, and for a pleasant second I thought I could end the conversation. "Why did he leave in the first place?" she asked.

He couldn't go through another September. "Oh, we don't really need to get into that, dear. He had his reasons. You know how he could get." I heard the dismissiveness in my voice and knew how ineffective this response would be even as I spoke.

"Yeah, I *do* know how he could get," Katherine snapped. "Which is exactly why you should be more freaked out than you are. Which is exactly why *I* am as freaked out as *I* am. Seriously, a whole month with no contact? With you *or* me? Something is fucking wrong."

I opened my mouth to admonish Katherine for her language yet again, but before my thoughts became sound, Katherine blurted, "I'm coming down there."

No no no.

“No no no,” I said, a little too quickly. “You really don’t need to worry about this. I’m sure he is just blowing off some steam. And before we both know it, he’ll be back. And when he comes back, I promise you that you’ll be the first—”

“I’m coming,” Katherine said. “Someone needs to figure out what’s going on, figure out where he *is*, and clearly you don’t give a shit, so that leaves me. And I’ve got plenty of vacation time to burn.”

I shook my head, not that Katherine could see me doing it. Katherine coming for an extended stay at the house—coming to stay at the house for the *first* time, in fact—in September, of all months, was a real worst-case scenario. I knew how to navigate Septembers. I knew who to avoid and how to avoid them. Katherine didn’t. And for a novice, September would be a nightmare. So much of a nightmare that Hal—who had lived through two successful Septembers and a third, less successful September—had fled rather than face a fourth.

“Katherine, I . . . I can call the police about it. File a missing person report.” I heard the desperation in my voice and hoped that she couldn’t. “Let the police handle it. They’ll do a much better job than you or I ever could.”

“And the fact that you *didn’t* file a missing person report *weeks* ago is exactly why I’m coming down.” I heard a clicking sound in the background. Typing. Katherine was on a computer, likely on a travel website. The train was leaving the station. *Shit.*

When Katherine learned about the pranksters—or, worse, witnessed them firsthand—she would have opinions. She wouldn’t be happy. She would want me to leave. And Katherine’s insistence was just the kind of crowbar that might actually prove successful in that endeavor, which was exactly the kind of thing I didn’t want. This was my home.

“Katherine, right now isn’t a very good time for visitors around here,” I said, grasping for any rationale more credible than the truth. Would sympathy work? “The house is in utter disarray. I haven’t done much cleaning since your father left.” Would logistics work? “None of the guest rooms are in any order and there is no food in the house.” Would inconvenience work? “We have a leak in the roof that I’ve been meaning to get fixed for a while now.”

None of it worked. “I’m coming.” More typing in the background. “There is a flight out on the tenth. I’m booking it.”

I was at a loss. Events would be noticeably increasing in severity by the tenth and only getting worse with each passing day. Angelica would have at least one friend (maybe more), Fredricka would be moving things about constantly, the blood would be everywhere, and the screaming—oh, the screaming. Elias would be pretty much the same, though. An upside.

“If you’ll just give me until October”—I was nearly pleading now—“I think I could get the house in order.” In October, everything would be calmer. There wouldn’t be blood everywhere. Fredricka would be still. Angelica and all her little friends would be gone. The nights would be silent again. Sure, there would still be pranksters running around here and there, but it would be much easier to keep Katherine safely oblivious by then.

“Mom, I don’t give a shit about the house,” Katherine said, although she really, really should have.

“Katherine . . .”

More typing. “It’s booked,” she said. “I get in pretty late on the tenth, so I’ll just stay in a hotel by the airport that night. I’ll be heading your way on the eleventh.”

So that was that. The one outcome of this conversation I wanted desperately to avoid. I pressed my eyes closed, searching for something to say. My mouth accomplished little aside from hanging open.

“I’ll keep in touch,” Katherine said. Now that she had gotten what she wanted, she no longer needed to keep talking. “Don’t worry, Mom—we’ll find him.” She added this as an afterthought, as if to convince both of us that she was doing this for me instead of for herself.

I didn’t even listen to the words I said in response, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting with my silent phone in my lap, dead eyes staring at nothing in particular. I couldn’t be sure, but I had the sense that Angelica was in front of the basement door again, pointing. I gazed listlessly out the window, barely registering the large bird that slammed into the glass, snapping its neck and falling into the grass, a cloud of blood and feathers.

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Everyone in this family has a secret.
But is one of them a killer?

THE NIGHT OF THE STORM

A NOVEL



NISHITA PAREKH



DUTTON

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ONE

FRIDAY, AUGUST 25, 2017, 1:30 P.M.

The world was ending. The instant meteorologists upgraded Harvey to a Category 2 hurricane, Houston residents stopped dismissing weather advisories and promptly dialed their fears up to apocalyptic levels. Rows of barren shelves gaped in supermarket aisles, muddy footprints streaked the floor, and cash registers beeped like heart rate monitors.

“Honestly, ma’am,” the young cashier said, “you will not find drinking water anywhere in the city today.”

Jia Shah’s shoulders slumped. “Can you please check again?” Her damp hands were clamped around the handle of a steel cart, empty but for a soaked umbrella. While the HEB store clerk clacked away on his keyboard, Jia held her breath, waiting for the *tap-tap* of his fingers to conjure an aisle number with the last case of bottled water.

When he shook his head without looking up, she sighed. “Do you know when you’ll get restocked?”

He shrugged and looked past her, exhaustion etched on his boyish face.

“Lady, if you ain’t buying, move!” someone chided from the rear of the line.

“Ma’am, please,” the cashier implored, his expression equal parts exasperation and pity.

“Yes, yes, I’ll get out of the way,” Jia said, cheeks warming.

Jia did not blame the cashier. She must cut a pathetic figure—a frazzled Indian woman dressed in a sweat-stained flannel shirt and mom jeans. Her curly hair, grayer than warranted by her thirty-six years of age, was tied in a frayed scrunchie. Six months postdivorce, her signature look was of a woman barely holding it together.

She jostled her way to the back of the store, the cart’s rusty wheels squeaking like a faulty air conditioner. She *needed* that case of water.

Spotting a mis-shelved bottled water pack tucked behind canned beans, she felt elated, and pushed past another shopper to grab the case. The woman glowered, and Jia was about to issue a hurried apology when a solitaire diamond snug on the woman’s ring finger caught her eye.

Jia’s remorse evaporated.

This irate shopper had a partner to commiserate with over her encounter with the rude woman at the store, someone who would *tsk-tsk* at all the right moments in her story. All Jia had was an ex-husband hovering like a vulture over the carcass of her deteriorating relationship with her preteen son.

Earlier that day, Jia had been sitting at her desk, busy copying numbers into a spreadsheet, when she noticed the new email waiting in her inbox like a stealth bomb, ready to detonate her life with one mouse click.

Subject: Re: Case #9950 Custody evaluation.

Dear Ms. Jia Shah,

Based on the recent events at his son's school, my client Dev Banerjee has no choice but to revisit your custody arrangement. It is evident that my client's son is not being provided the best care by his mother. Given the circumstances, it is in the child's best interests to request a thorough custody evaluation.

Custody evaluation. A bolt of anxiety shot through Jia thinking about these two words. It was just like her ex-husband to use her son's suspension as leverage to take him away from her.

The move to Houston was supposed to be a fresh start for her and Ishaan. Jia had wanted to divorce Dev in order to keep Ishaan away from his father's malignant influence, so Ishaan's suspension, after less than a year in her sole care, felt like a slap in the face.

Her ex's name, "Dev," was aspirational. His parents, zealous believers of Hindu astrology, who would refrain from emptying their bowels at inauspicious times were it possible, had consulted a Brahmin priest to find out the Sanskrit characters associated with their baby's moon sign before choosing the name "Dev," a Hindu synonym for "god." Yet for all their efforts, their choice was anything but felicitous. For much of his adult life, Dev had acted in decidedly ungodly ways.

He'd spied on her in the past when they'd both still lived in Chicago, using ostensibly friendly drop-in visits from their common friends to keep tabs on her, but how, Jia wondered, had he found out about the suspension from all the way across the country?

Her phone buzzed. “Seema” flashed on the cracked screen. Jia’s chest constricted. She swiped left, shoving her sister’s call to voice-mail.

Seema, a Houstonian for over a decade, likely had crates of water stowed away in her kitchen pantry. Normally, in a situation like this, Jia would be camped in her sister’s well-lit, well-stocked house in the Sugar Land suburb, lounging on a handcrafted wood swing, royal-red cushions soft on her back, warm hands cupped around a steaming mug of chai. Instead, she was canvassing every grocery store within a ten-mile radius and ignoring her sister’s calls.

But the specter of facing her brother-in-law, Vipul, chilled her. Regret curdled in her stomach. The cover-up was worse than the crime, and even worse were *multiple* cover-ups, every missed opportunity to come clean to Seema another brick of guilt erecting a wall between them. Now, given the choice, hunkering down on Galveston Beach, staring into the eye of the storm, was a more appealing option than a night under Vipul’s roof.

She was crossing the dairy aisle, nose scrunched at the funk of sulfury stress sweat mixed with rainwater dripping from the shoppers’ clothes, when her phone vibrated again with another call from Seema. Seema Joshi was nothing if not persistent. She would keep calling till Jia picked up. On the fourth ring, Jia answered.

“Where are you? I’ve been calling you since *forever*,” Seema intoned. Her sister often had a teenager’s grasp of time.

“Sorry, my phone was on silent,” Jia said, surprised by the way the lie slipped out easily, plucked from a panoply of her usual excuses: busy at work, lost track of time, poor network at the apartment. She lied on autopilot, but there was no getting used to the uneasy feeling that rose in her throat on deceiving her sister.

“You must come stay with us tonight, okay?” Seema’s orders often masqueraded as questions.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Jia fidgeted with the sleeve of her rumpled shirt.

Seema was only a year older than Jia, yet Jia was used to playing the role of a dutiful soldier. Even now that they were both adults, Jia had to fight the instinct to comply with Seema.

“You’re all aloooooone.” Seema’s inflection turned ghoulish on the last word.

For Seema, married for over a decade, the lives of single mothers were filled with unfathomable horrors. Like first world residents rage-tweeting about the plight of refugees, she had plenty of sympathy to dispense but not an ounce of empathy, because Seema sure as hell was not walking in a single mother’s shoes.

“I’m not alone, I have Ishaan,” Jia said, checking her watch. She had to get home fast to pick him up from Ms. Nikki’s house.

“Okay, fine, I mean you and my dear nephew are both alone.”

Isn’t everyone alone by that logic? Jia pursed her lips. She stepped aside as a child zoomed past her, knocking down boxes of Froot Loops.

Seema continued, “Vipul says it’s the storm of the century. He suggested I call you immediately.”

“Did he now? That’s very kind of him.” Jia said, keeping her tone measured, even as her mind churned, scrambling to decipher the subtext of his words. “Thanks for the offer, but we’ll be all right.”

“Okay, fine,” Seema said, her gruff tone suggesting the opposite.

Acquiescing to Seema was a dynamic easy to fall back on, like slipping into a pair of old, well-worn yet comfortable jeans.

But this time Jia had good reasons to stand her ground.

“Did you fill your bathtub?” Seema asked.

“What? Why?”

“You’ll need water to flush the toilet if you’re stranded in your apartment without running water.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.” Jia pinched her nose. The exigencies of a hurricane baffled her. The clamor for stocking up on water with the entire city under the threat of submersion seemed counter-intuitive.

“You’re not taking this seriously enough. You will be safe in our house. It’s dangerous out there.”

“Umm, yeah, I’ll definitely think about it.”

“So basically, you’ll come up with a last-minute excuse.” A loud exhale on the other end. “Listen, if you decide to come, have dinner with us.”

Ending the call, Jia exited the store and stopped mid-stride, sucking in her breath. Although it was only five in the evening, complete darkness greeted her. Thick billowing clouds eclipsed the sun. The last vestiges of daylight had dispelled hours earlier than usual for August. The air was thick with dewy petrichor. The light drizzle of the morning had progressed to steady rain, fat waterdrops falling en masse to the ground, bursting into diamonds.

As she dashed toward her parked car, a violent gust whipped her curls and turned her umbrella inside out.

She plugged her key into the ignition, bringing the car’s radio to life: “Folks, we have an important update. Hurricane Harvey has now strengthened to a Category 3 hurricane, with winds up to one hundred twenty miles per hour. Oil refineries have been shut down. It is anticipated that schools will stay closed for weeks. Stay tuned for more details . . .”

A slew of incoming messages from Seema buzzed her phone like a vibrating restaurant beeper.

It’s a Cat 3 hurricane now! They’ve started canceling flights from Corpus Christi. Come here ASAP.

And in perfect Seema fashion, she followed the alarming warnings with a sanguine Boomerang clip: Seema in her living room, two fingers V-shaped, expansive glass windows behind her reflecting a silver blur of rain, a single tree rocking sideways in the wind. The video's caption: "#glamping."

Jia swallowed, tossed the phone on the passenger seat, and tuned in to Radio Mirchi station. An upbeat RJ ran through a playlist of rainfall-themed Bollywood songs. Jia increased the volume as the singer crooned, earnestly thanking God for blessing the barren lands with rain.

But the throbbing beats were not enough to distract her from Seema's warning.

It's dangerous out there.

Her phone pinged with an email notification.

Her throat turned dry.

Mandatory Evacuation

Per the latest guidance issued by the governor of Texas, we hereby require all residents of Shadowland Apartments to evacuate the premises immediately. Gather your loved ones, pets, and emergency necessities and leave the evacuation zone as soon as possible. Please note that Shadowland Apartments will not be liable for trapped tenants who choose to ignore this order.

Heat crawled up her neck like a bout of fever. Scrolling through her contacts list, she reached the end in two pathetic thumb strokes. Then again, she had never needed to go past her sister's name in the favorites tab. Seema was truly her emergency contact, her first call when a driver scratched her car in the parking lot of Patel Brothers

store or when she and Ishaan needed a place to crash after Texas's electric grid failures stripped their apartment of power.

Seema's offer bubbled to the surface like suppressed vomit.

Like a radio station tuned to the frequency of Jia's lowest vulnerability, her ex-husband's words broadcast in her mind.

You cannot raise Ishaan by yourself. When you screw up, I'll be there to take him away.

He had said "when," not "if," as though her failure was an inevitability. Jia's body tensed. The custody evaluation was a storm cloud hovering above her. Every decision she made tonight was crucial. A single mistake could lead to the worst outcome, she and Ishaan trapped alone in darkness, the stench of rotting vegetables filling the air, rationing water while they waited for rescue.

She could imagine the follow-up email from Dev's attorney.

It is evident that the mother's poor judgment led to her son being trapped in a flooded apartment for days.

Jia straightened her spine. If Dev wanted to take Ishaan away, she was not going to make it easy for him.

Her options whittled down; a decision was made.

She would pick up her son from Ms. Nikki's house and go to stay with Seema.

Even if that meant coming face-to-face with Vipul.

TWO

Her nose inches from the steering wheel, Jia squinted at the windshield that remained stubbornly blurry despite the urgent *swish-swish* of the wipers set at full speed. Blinking red sockets of malfunctioning traffic signals seesawed under the pressure of fierce winds. Jia's sedan trundled along Highway 6, in her best estimation of the middle lane, cutting a path through floodwater. The car jerked as if a malevolent spirit were pushing it into a ditch. Currents of churning waves swelled from all directions.

Incessant flash flood warnings made her phone jump in the cup-holder like a frog in boiling water.

DON'T DROWN, TURN AROUND.

A glance at her son in the passenger seat instantly calmed her nerves. His lanky frame angled sideways, he peered out the window, shoulders slouched under phantom backpack handles.

Loving Ishaan was a lesson in perception. He bore a striking resemblance to Dev, with his sharp aquiline nose and messy hair,

but the same features she had come to revile in her ex, she adored in her son.

When Jia gently nudged the accelerator, a tidal wave of water splashed against the bonnet. The car sputtered for a second. She licked her dry lips. *Damn it.* If the engine flooded and stalled, she and Ishaan would be stranded on this dark street as the car slowly filled up with water. That is, if the rising waves did not sweep them away first. Thanks to his Sunday lessons at the YMCA, Ishaan was a good swimmer, but Jia's mom, in a misguided attempt to keep her daughters away from water, had never taught Seema and Jia how to swim.

Jia pictured herself flailing in the murky depths of the flooding road, silt entering her lungs, desperately trying to come up for air, trying to get Ishaan to safety as all remnants of life deserted her body. He would claim not only the last minutes of her life but also her death, for a young mother's obituary elicited sympathy in readers for a life cut short, but the real sadness, that pang in the heart, was reserved for the children left motherless.

Get a grip on yourself. Jia herded in her spiraling thoughts.

Suddenly, Ishaan yelled, "Mom, watch out!"

Jia gasped. Farther ahead was a street she had taken countless times, but now there was no road.

The street was a river.

Her jaw dropped.

A sliver of a car's roof bobbed in the water. Angry waves splashed against a half-submerged stop sign. A downed tree connected the opposite footpaths.

Her knuckles ghost white, Jia swerved the car in a sharp U-turn and scrambled to find alternate directions on her phone.

Ishaan said, "Mom, listen, let me help you. If you take a left on the next light, it connects to the same street."

He pushed his red-framed glasses up his nose, eyes wide and

alert as he scanned the dark roads, his determined and anxious expression alien on a young boy. He guided her through two more turns, and when they entered Seema's community, he pumped his fists in the air. "I told you I'd get us here, we did it, Mom!"

Jia felt a twinge of guilt.

Were they tripping into each other trying to fill Dev's shoes? She'd informed him that they were going to Seema Auntie's house for a sleepover, bracing herself for an argument—*I want to finish the TV show, why do I need to pack for just one night*—but instead, Ishaan jumped to his feet and said, "We shouldn't have waited this long. It's getting dark, and Mom, I've seen how you drive when it's raining."

Lately, with Ishaan teetering on the precipice of teenage life, she'd noticed a subtle change in their dynamic. She no longer had to nag him to finish his school assignments, and if she had pronounced under-eye circles, he asked whether her boss was giving her a hard time at work. Jia blamed his hormones for random growth spurts and a burgeoning field of acne on his cheeks, but when it came to an increase in his emotional maturity, she had only herself to blame.

During the darkest times of the divorce proceedings, Jia had been parked on the couch all day, skipping showers and lunches, crying so hard and so often, her eyes puffed up and her cheeks burned from the salt in her tears. One evening Ishaan placed a bowl of soggy, lumpy Maggi noodles on the table, begging her to eat something. It was only when she touched his arm and felt the burning fever raging through his body that she snapped out of her fugue state. She was a mother first, and it was her job to take care of Ishaan, not the other way around.

But now she feared it was too late. After all the times Jia had sobbed into his arms, he had internalized this feeling: It was the two of them together against the world.

After a left on Lolarie Street, she drove past a sign:

HERITAGE WOODS. WONDERFUL LAKEFRONT COMMUNITY!
GRAND NEW HOMES STARTING FROM LOW \$700K.

A massive iron gate slid sideways, opening the entrance to a fortress.

Jia drove along a winding trail parallel to a row of small artificial ponds on either side. Jia's trepidation increased with each passing body of water, swelling with rainfall every second, windy rain thrashing the lake upward into an erratic aquatic show.

Even though she had been here many times, Jia's breath still caught a little as she came closer to the house.

Seema's two-story house loomed large on the cul-de-sac. The biggest model in the community, it sat at a higher elevation, as if looking down on all the other houses. The front stucco elevation had a facade of pale brown and cream stones reminiscent of a giraffe's coat.

In the center of the sloping roof, a set of rectangular skylights sat flush with the roofline, meant to stream natural daylight into the house, but tonight, the only light the sky had to spare were the flashes of lightning, and the glass panes were yet another reflection of the storm.

Palm trees, imported from Florida for Seema's "tropical" vibe, struggled to stay upright against the strength of the violent gale-force winds, leaves and branches swaying like a woman's unruly tresses on a beach.

Jia revved the engine to climb the steep European-style cobblestone driveway, coming to a halt outside an expansive four-car garage, a security camera mounted at the top of each corner. A huge wrought iron door towered in the center of the house, and adjoining

it, to the far right, sat the study, shuttered blinds bathed in fluorescent yellow. Was Vipul at his desk at this very moment? Pretending to work, but secretly waiting for the sound of Jia's car? If he flipped the blinds, he would have a clear view of her Toyota.

Ishaan exclaimed, "Mom, look, this is almost like going up the Batman roller coaster."

Jia put the car in park and glanced over at him. He flashed a grin. She smiled. "It's like we're up one of those mountains in Big Bend Park, isn't it?" she said. When he lifted his palms in the air, the way he did on his favorite ride at Six Flags, a different image intruded unbidden into her mind. The same hands pushing another kid. His classmate upright one second, knocked down the next, blood congealing on the cafeteria floor.

Jia's breathing hitched, and she shook her head. She could not let the school's sinister portrait of her son pollute her mind. Ishaan was a normal kid who loved playing *Fortnite* with his friends and begged her to get a puppy. He was not a nascent bully. But in the absence of a partner who knew Ishaan as well as she did, her fears festered in the dark corners of her brain.

Single parent. Pair-ent. It was the cruelest oxymoron in the English language. How unfair it was, traveling the path of parenthood alone, a journey impossible to embark upon without the participation of *two* people.

Jia squashed the worrying knot in her chest and let her gaze travel over the massive structure of Seema's house to boost her confidence. Ishaan would be safe here, and that was what was most important.

There was no room for mistakes.

Within an hour of getting the custody evaluation notice, Jia had met with her attorney, an appointment for thirty minutes that lasted well over an hour as Hanna, a divorcée herself, paused several times

to press a glass of chilled water in Jia's hands, asking her to stop panicking and take a sip. Although both parents had equal rights under the law, courts tended to favor mothers as primary caregivers to protect the best interests of the child. Hanna covered the basics of a custody evaluation: The court would appoint a licensed social worker to conduct home visits, review Ishaan's school and medical records, and interview her, Dev, and Ishaan separately before compiling a report with recommendations on the best parenting arrangement.

Hanna's directive was clear: "There is no margin for error." In order to bolster his case, Dev had already started looking for apartments in Houston, demonstrating how far he was willing to go to stay in Ishaan's life. The best course of action, Hanna advised, was to counter with compelling documentation of Ishaan's well-being.

Being legally mandated to prove her worth as a mother was a fitting coda to her downward trajectory since the divorce, but she was willing to do whatever it took to keep Ishaan in her life. A paper was folded in the bowels of her purse, a draft written in the feeble light of her bedside lamp once Ishaan drifted off to sleep in his bedroom, gently snoring, his mouth partly open.

It is my pleasure to write a statement on behalf of Jia for her child custody request. As her sister, I have known her and Ishaan for all their lives, and from the day of his birth, when I saw my sister swaddling my nephew, I knew she'd be a dedicated mother who always puts Ishaan first. I strongly support Jia's request for primary child custody because Ishaan is adjusting well to his new school, and he loves spending time with my daughter, Asha . . .

Some of it was fiction because Ishaan had little in common with Seema's nineteen-month-old toddler. The document went on for two pages, a blank space at the end for Seema's initials, a thousand-word draft that fell far short of conveying the love Jia felt for Ishaan with every fiber of her being, their unbreakable bond. When she was more than forty weeks pregnant and had never felt any contractions, the doctor tried to induce labor, and when that failed, he cut her open with a scalpel to pull out Ishaan, an organ capable of living outside her body. How could a judge be the arbiter of her creation? The flesh on his bones was stitched with her body's sacrifices, but somehow, she wasn't worthy of raising him.

Hanna said, not unkindly, "We cannot have any more missteps. Especially given . . ." She was referring to the suspension of course. She did not know about the incident at the store. Not only did Jia have to be on her best behavior, but Ishaan did too, because behind every misbehaving child was a negligent mother.

They agreed to meet the following week, once the hurricane had passed, to review the documentation and discuss next steps. But in many ways, the damage was already done.

In a country where the government had unchecked powers to separate children from their biological parents without notice, a lot of Jia's mothering was performative, whether refraining from yelling at Ishaan in the supermarket, or arriving extra early to his pediatrician appointments, but the threat of an invisible evaluator watching over her shoulder had especially curdled her relationship with her son.

After taking him to volunteer at a local food bank, Jia wondered on the drive back, did she do it because she wanted him to care about the less privileged or because she hoped it would slip into his interview with the social worker?

A gust of wind slammed into the car, breaking her reverie.

The car shook. Ishaan's hand pressed against the dashboard.

A broken tree branch went flying past the windshield. Jia gasped. Ferocious winds decapitated the security camera mounted above the garage. The frayed end of a white cable dangled in the air.

Dread roiled in her stomach. She swiveled in her seat and craned her neck, frowned at the empty streets.

At first glance, she spotted not a single car.

An eerie feeling slithered up her spine.

Then she noticed that in the house facing Seema's home, a Jeep was parked in the driveway. Where was Mr. Sharma's Tesla? Usually his zero-emission car sat in the driveway, both it and the solar-paneled roof were paid for by his six-figure salary as a tech consultant for the oil and gas industry. He had moved from California with his wife and four children, magnetically drawn to the affordable real estate and absence of state income tax in Texas. Sugar Land was the mecca for Indian immigrants fleeing New York and California. The last time it had rained, Mr. Sharma was out on the streets, teaching his boys how to make paper boats float on water, a feeble attempt to re-create the India he'd left behind.

But tonight, the house was cloaked in darkness.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. The deserted streets struck her as odd. Seema had said her neighborhood was supposed to be a safe refuge from the floodwaters. Why had everyone left?

Jia tried to reason away the spooky feeling in her belly.

As she stared, a light turned on in one of the rooms. A gap in the blinds emerged. A shape formed in the window. A dark silhouette.

Jia sucked in a breath.

What kind of a person felt comfortable sitting in the dark in this situation?

She flinched—the presence of another human should have assuaged her fears, but something about the person made her nerve endings feel raw.

It was the utter stillness of the figure.

The rain blurred her vision, but Jia knew this in her gut.

The person in the house was watching her intently.

Ishaan pressed on the button to release the seat belt, and as the belt snapped back into place, so did Jia's focus. She groped the back-seat for an umbrella and sneezed three times in a row.

“Grandma says sneezing is an evil omen,” piped in Ishaan.

“Not everything Grandma says is true.”

“It is true!” said Ishaan. “This one time a crow pooped on my scalp, and she said it would bring me good luck and she was right. I aced my math test that day.”

Jia pressed her fingers to her temples. Trust Mom to convince a child that getting crapped upon was a good thing.

Mom flung her superstitions at people with the enthusiasm of a saleswoman failing to meet her quotas. *Hanging lemon and green chilies on a thread outside a home's front door wards off evil eye. Eating a spoonful of curd before starting a trip ensures a safe and sound journey. Wearing a black dress to a wedding henna ceremony? Tsk-tsk. Do you want the couple to get divorced?*

According to her, the universe constantly sent signals; people merely had to pay attention to the signs. Jia made a mental note to have a word with Mom before Ishaan's next summer trip to India. She had to limit her son's dips in the pool of Mom's infinite wisdom. “Coincidences don't make luck. Also, doesn't Grandma say rainfall is a positive omen?” Jia motioned to the windows. “It's pouring right now. Shouldn't the good and bad omens cancel each other out?” She smiled.

Ishaan frowned and stared out the window, and she could only

assume he was mulling over the lapses in Grandma's logic, of which there were many.

Caw. Caw. Jia jerked. A crow was perched on the rocking chair on the porch of Seema's house, claws digging into the wood, its harsh strident note an unsettling accompaniment to the rain.

The sight filled her with anxiety, and she shut her eyes.

Because though she was loath to admit it, Mom's proclamations sometimes came true.

A crow was an omen of death. Was someone in the house going to die?

The next instant, staccato-sharp knocks burst on her car window.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

YOU KNOW
HOW THEY LIVE.

THIS IS
HOW THEY DIE.

The Other Half

A Novel

Charlotte
Vassell



A N A N C H O R B O O K S O R I G I N A L 2 0 2 3

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First Edition

1

A girl is dying. A girl who wears bespoke perfume. She wants you to inhale her deliciousness; to know that she is untouched by the dirt, the smog, the filth of your London. Pathetic men rub their underdeveloped legs against her arse as they commute to their piteous 'careers' on the hamster-cage tube. She wants other women to covet her manicure as she types an 'empowering' Instagram post about her 'inner glow'. People follow her. A be-leggined messiah to the inflexible, undesirable, slovenly masses. She drinks spirulina, kombucha and matcha, but she doesn't eat wheat or dairy. She's faking an allergy to mask her disordered eating, which she won't seek help for because it feels so very normal nowadays. It's a shame, she used to like eating bread. She waxes everything. Everything. She is filthy. Filthy. Used to do anything, absolutely anything, if it meant he'd stay with her.

A girl is dying. She is savvy. Astute. Commercially minded. Clever. She's clever. She knows that all she really has to sell is the idea of her beauty, her youth, her long rolling vowels, and she does. In the old stories Pygmalion made Galatea, but this new Galatea made herself and streamed it live. She put it on a T-shirt, on a tote bag. Got paid for sharing a link to organic date and cashew nut energy balls (£6.50 for four, not including postage). She believes in self-improvement. She practises her poses and reads her prose. She believes in love and practises that too. She has put so many hours into practising, hours and hours, tears and tears, and yet . . . She can be droll. She'd buy you a

drink if you made her laugh. More than once had she bought a *Big Issue*. She'd gone to charity fundraising galas, because it would get her into the society pages of *Tatler*, but still she went and clapped loudly and exclaimed 'how brave' at the survivors of whatever hideous disease the whole thing was in honour of and handed over a cheque. She is vain, and angry, and sad, so very sad. Of course she is sad. Miserable. Wretched. Plain old unhappy. How could she not be? The poor thing.

A girl is dead. A girl who was flawed. No, not the pores on the nose, those were perfect. Resolutely perfect. Her head had spun but the world hadn't noticed; it callously carried on spinning as she suffocated on her own bile, writhing there amongst rotting leaves, her hair infused with the stench of mulch and stomach acid. She deserved better than to die there. To die because of him.

2

Midsummer Night, North London

The McDonald's in Kentish Town had seen some sights, but this was something different. At 6 p.m. an elegant man strode through the automatic doors. Wing-collar shirt, cummerbund and silk bow tie. Expensive shoes: Italian. They made a clipped noise when he walked, much like his vowels when he spoke. He strolled up to the counter and asked to speak to the manager. The server peered around him nervously, looking for a non-existent camera. The manager was dutifully found and propositioned like a comely whore. The gentleman, and there really couldn't be another word for a man dressed in such a manner, was going to use the upstairs area – usually reserved for children's parties on Saturday mornings – for a private gathering that evening. His guests were arriving at 7.30 p.m. and the staff were to bring food upstairs (the order had already been courteously written out in fastidious copperplate) at 8 p.m. for them. They were not to be disturbed after that. The gentleman made it very clear that they were to be handsomely recompensed for their efforts, and their silence. No one who worked there was to mention it again and CCTV was to be turned off. The gentleman paid in cash – crisp £50 notes – and gave all the staff, including the poor, poor cleaner, who would have to deal with true horrors tomorrow morning, a nice little tip for all the trouble he was about to cause. A young woman with rippling, flame-coloured hair brought in vase upon vase of flowers. The smell was divine. Not enough to cover the smell of chip fat, burger grease and blocked coronary arteries, but heavenly nonetheless. A butler took case after case

of champagne upstairs. And it was champagne, direct from a vineyard in Champagne, not from Tesco. Only plebeians drink supermarket plonk, let alone prosecco. The formal invitation stipulated that the dress code was black tie, photography was strictly prohibited, and it was BYOC (Bring Your Own Coke).

★ ★ ★

For once Nell wasn't overdressed; she was, however, uncomfortable. Her feet already hurt from a pair of architecturally complex shoes that she had bought from a pompous boutique in Spitalfields Market. She'd spent a whole month's food budget on them, but she considered that a win-win. Nell's dress was an artful creation of pale lilac gauze and twisted embroidery that she had made herself, the effect of which was somewhere between a drowned innocent from a Millais painting and wrath personified. She was a diaphanous, tortured cobweb. In the soft June breeze, Nell delicately floated like a resplendent vision of Hell. She was waiting outside Kentish Town tube station for Alex – nothing earthly could have persuaded her to go to Rupert's birthday party on her own, and indeed it had taken much poking and prodding, cajoling and coaxing from silver-tongued Alex to induce her to go with him. They were going to go for something strong beforehand, a nip of liquid bravery. The flower seller on the corner of Leighton Road was packing up for the day. Five minutes earlier Nell had enjoyed spectating as a panic-stricken man sprinted from the tube and bought a large bouquet in a frenzy.

'Anniversary or birthday?' Nell asked the florist, as she sauntered over and mused over a few bedraggled hydrangeas.

'Sorry?' she replied.

'The bald man just then, he looked like he'd forgotten an important date.'

'Oh yeah, he said his missus just had a baby at the Royal Free. Wanted some pink flowers.'

'Ah, how sweet, a gender-conforming baby girl. Did he realise that he'd caught the wrong branch of the Northern Line?'

'I didn't have the chance to tell him.'

Nell looked at the leftovers of the florist's day. The severed head of a luckless ranunculus the colour of a good claret floated in a bucket of water.

'How much for that one?'

'You take it, love.'

'Thank you,' Nell said, shaking the water from the flower and tucking it into a roll of her hair.

'Big night?' the flower seller asked, tacitly acknowledging Nell's remarkable appearance.

'I'm going to Satan's birthday party.'

'A normal Saturday evening then.'

'Pretty much. Thank you for the flower,' said Nell as she turned back to face the tube. She was just in time to see Alex rise from the gaping mouth of the station. He was tall, which she thought was the only important quality a man should possess, but clearly feeling uncomfortable in his penguin get-up. Nell thought it suited him. A shapely young woman gave him a second glance before she unceremoniously tumbled through the barriers.

'Thou art a sight for mine poor wretch'd eyes,' he said, kissing Nell on her rosy cheek. They turned up the road and towards the pub.

'You should dress like this more often, you'd get laid all the time,' she said, holding on to the crook of his arm to steady herself. Her pinkie toes hurt.

'I have a lot of sex. Specialist stuff too. Deviant things that you don't casually mention at dinner parties.'

'Corpses? You need to stop reading *Vice*. It's bad for your soul, Alex.' They stopped at the crossing as a police car hurtled past, siren blaring.

'Is this pub all right?'

'As long as they serve spirits.'

'The spirits of thy vanquished enemies? The damned party starts at 7.30 p.m. I say we should aim for after 8 p.m.,' Alex said, holding the old saloon door open for her. The pub was a Victorian temple to the English drinking problem, with high ceilings and floral plasterwork. Mismatched chairs and ironic posters. Creaky floorboards and media luvvie clientele.

'I'm amazed that we're going at all.' Nell peered round a column before spotting an empty table near the back and pouncing on it like a lioness after a lame gazelle at a watering hole. 'I'm not sure how you convinced me.'

'You share my morbid curiosity,' Alex said, taking his jacket off. That wasn't why he was going. It was a test, a field exercise to calculate his chances with Nell now that she was single.

'What do you think Phlegm will be wearing? I shouldn't call her that. I'll say it to her face accidentally-on-purpose.'

'Clem? Pelts made from the supple skin of tuberculosis-riddled, cockney orphans? Silk woven from the purest evil thoughts of neo-Nazis? Nothing, absolutely nothing, like a witch on her Sabbath? You have to feel sorry for Clemmie though. Imagine dating bloody Rupert for ten years.'

'I couldn't imagine it.'

'The crap he must pull . . . I'm sure he cheats on her.'

'I'm sure he does too.'

'What do you want to drink?'

‘Anything that burns,’ Nell said, watching him try to elbow his way to the bar through a throng of unique individuals all wearing Uniqlo and unanimous disdain for everyone else’s uniformity.

‘Tequila it is,’ Alex yelled, turning back to look at her as he dodged a woman in a stripy turtleneck and a pair of utilitarian shoes. He stopped still for a short moment as he evaded the woman’s flailing arms. To Nell those seconds were an age, as through the window the low-slung sun hovered above his head like a lazy halo. He turned and looked at her in all her glory. ‘You look rather lovely tonight,’ he shouted over the crowd.

Nell didn’t acknowledge the compliment and instead stared at the patterned ceiling, trying to divine some order out of its chaotic design. She felt a buzzing. She opened her bag – a quirky Kate Spade that she’d pillaged from eBay for a song – and took out her phone:

Rupert: 18:34

I hope you’re nearby. I am so looking forward to seeing you. Let’s go for brunch tomorrow. Just me and you. I miss us and our little jaunts x

Alex returned with two tequilas and two vodka and lime sodas. ‘A shot each, and then something to take the edge off before we go over the top.’

‘How’s work?’

‘Dull. Lots of spreadsheets.’

‘At least you got seconded somewhere warm. Imagine doing taxes for billionaires somewhere miserable, like London.’ Nell smiled to herself as she flicked her despicable shoes out to the side and admired them. ‘Why *are* we going tonight?’

‘I’m going for the story. Something hideous will happen. I could write a bestselling novel off the back of it and never have to work again.’

‘They’re both monsters.’

‘And monsters should be slain by heroes. I’ll be your knight errant.’ Alex looked at Nell and began pressing the supposed rationale of his experiment again. ‘This is our old college gang’s last hurrah. Of course, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to, but I would appreciate your company.’

‘The last hurrah. Goodbye Rupert, and goodbye to all of Rupert’s nonsense.’ Nell toasted the thought, and they downed their tequila in remembrance of the friendship that had once been. There wasn’t any salt or lime to distract from the taste, from the bitterness.

‘Last hurrah.’ Alex leaned back in his chair and fiddled with his phone as Nell stared intensely at a knock-off Belle Époque absinthe poster. ‘What did happen in Greece?’ he tentatively enquired. He could guess, but he wanted to hear the sordid tale from her own mouth, and such a pretty mouth it was. Perfectly full.

‘What?’ she asked, feigning absentmindedness as she stared at a flirty green fairy with prominent nipples and an impossibly small waist.

‘What happened between you, Rupert and Clemmie, when the three of you came to visit me in Greece last month?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I go to the office in Athens for a couple of days, I come back to the villa, and then that evening Clem swings for you over dinner.’

‘Bad spanakopita?’

‘Don’t insult my people like that.’

‘Clem was just high. She’d taken a load of MDMA or whatever.’
‘And?’

‘And they had a fight the morning before about something, something really stupid, and she took it out on me.’

‘Like what?’

‘I think it was about that temple we’d visited.’

‘They had a fight about a ruin?’

‘It was bizarre, I didn’t get what the fight was about. I don’t think the ruins were the problem,’ Nell said, hoping that this was the end of the discussion, but then failing to stop herself from talking. ‘Clem refused to go after breakfast, so me and Rupert went on our own and it was just weird. She spent the evening in a foul mood.’

‘Weird? What did he do?’ Alex asked, eyebrow arched.

‘Rupert did that self-satisfied, smug thing he does. He drove us there in that little toot-toot convertible he’d rented. The sky was blue and the light just . . . everything felt golden, and the temple was appropriately numinous. And Rupert, well, he was Rupert. When we got back, Clem was high and he tried to kiss me, which set her off even more. I . . . He . . . And I . . . And I don’t want to talk about it. Please. I don’t need to talk about it. It was nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just the flicker of a kiss.’

‘All right.’ Alex was desperately relieved that was all it was.

Nell swilled her vodka around the glass and then drank it in one gulp.

Alex fiddled with his phone. ‘Rupert is a . . . You shouldn’t let him take advantage of you. It’s not fair. He treats you like a second girlfriend, but all you get is the crap, the meltdowns and the 3 a.m. drunken rants. You deserve more than that.’ Silently he added, ‘You deserve me.’

‘I’m sure that’s the advice I’d be giving myself too. I haven’t

spoken to him since the plane landed back at Heathrow. He's taken it better than I thought he would. I need to kill our friendship properly. Stab it in the heart with a wooden stake and bury it under a crossroads.'

'Do you want another?' Alex asked. He was liking his odds of romping home considerably more than he had on the tube journey over. This might be it. He'd played a long game and was about to win.

'Another vodka please, mister consultant.'

'You make me sound so dull,' Alex said, smiling as he got up to go to the bar.

'I don't think you're dull at all,' Nell yelled after him.

Alex laughed exaggeratedly for Nell's benefit as he strode across the pub. Looking back at her from the bar, he saw the most magnificent and the most melancholic face in all of London. Nell felt his gaze upon her and looked up as Alex gave her a smirk. He bought two drinks from the bearded barman with the painfully obscure eighties cartoon character on his T-shirt.

★ ★ ★

Alex and Nell stood on the pavement across from McDonald's as they watched Rupert prowl up and down the street outside like an impotent tiger in an especially sad, underfunded zoo that you might sign a petition online against and then forget about moments later.

'Clemency really, it started thirty minutes ago and I'm getting annoyed. It's terribly rude. It would've been nice if you'd have bothered to come early to help with the set-up. Poor Minty has been run ragged and looks terribly pitiable for it. If you're not here by 9 p.m., then you can move your shit

out of my house.’ Rupert was trying to control himself, but he was making enough commotion that two girls in a Fiat 500 beeped their horn and cackled wide-mouthed and toothily at him through the open window as they trundled past. It isn’t every day that a man who looks like the suave villain from an Oscar Wilde comedy crunches the bones of discarded chicken wings into a North London pavement. Rupert was handsome in that dashing-white-knight sort of way that often proves fatal to any damsel moronic enough to fall for it. To let their hair down for him to latch on to. To have slumbering lips, soft and tempting.

‘He just can’t help himself,’ Alex said, smirking at Rupert in all his glorious ridiculousness.

‘The thing about Rupert, the thing that people find attractive, is his obliviousness to the age in which we live. He revels in a nostalgic world of his own making, like he’s some bastardised character from *Brideshead Revisited*. He just doesn’t care for our time, not a jot.’

‘No, not at all.’

‘He’s a dangerously charming oddball. A patrician weirdo. Does he unironically have a teddy called Aloysius? How do you become like that?’

‘A noxious concoction of boarding school from six, reading Byron at too early an age, and rapacious genes. Do you know how his family first came into money?’

‘Slavery?’ Nell asked, her nose wrinkling.

‘No, but that’s how they bought that absurd house in the Chilterns.’

‘Remember his twenty-fifth birthday?’

‘I can’t remember much of it at all. No, the illustrious first baronet was a nabob. “Found” a diamond the size of a household

tabby in the Punjab,' Alex said, as Rupert's ancestral crimes lingered among the toxic fumes from an articulated lorry that had just crawled past.

'Have you pressed the button for the green man?' Nell asked, looking at the traffic light.

'No. I'd rather stay out here with you.' Alex went to hold her hand but panicked, and instead crossed his arms and tucked his hands under his armpits like a four-year-old whose mummy had told him not to touch.

Nell leaned over him to press the button and Alex smelled her hair – vanilla. 'He still hasn't noticed us, has he? This is it, the last hurrah. Look him dead in the eye, spit, turn and flee.'

'Beauchamp! Rupert. Rupert, you bellend,' Alex yelled across the road with considerable bravado, choking with shock an old lady who had joined them at the crossing with her shopping trolley. 'Apologies for my language, madam, but in this case it is accurate. He's a paying member of the Conservative Party, and I once saw him kick a dog. The dog only had two front legs, it had little wheels at the back. And it was blind.'

The green man flashed and the three of them crossed the road.

'*Salvete!* Don't you smarten up well? Where's your suit from? Moss Bros.?' Rupert asked Alex with his arms outstretched, awaiting an embarrassed embrace that turned into mutual back slapping.

'It's from Favourbrook. I'm not a pleb,' Alex said, turning to face Nell, his eyes wide as Rupert surveyed his shoes and estimated how much they'd cost him.

'Prick,' muttered the old lady at Rupert as she shuffled past. He didn't notice, of course, he never noticed, although Nell did. As she tried to swallow a howl, Rupert turned his attention to her.

'Well, don't you look charming,' Rupert said in a softer, more hushed tone, trying to cosset her.

‘Thank you,’ Nell said coolly.

And then no one said anything for twenty seconds. The triumvirate looked at each other expectantly. A double cheeseburger wrapper whistled silently through the middle of them like an unhealthy tumbleweed.

Alex broke the silence. ‘Would a strawberry milkshake make a good mixer for vodka?’ He pulled a hip flask out of his pocket and gave it a little shake. Alex started as if to move inside when he realised that Rupert’s feet were planted firm, and Rupert expected Nell to stay too. Nell was stuck, unsure, as if she’d forgotten how her legs worked. Nell: deer. Rupert: headlights of an especially obnoxious 4x4 driving down a narrow country lane.

‘That sounds disgusting, but I’d like to try yours,’ Nell said, staring at a fifty-pence piece on the floor. She nudged it with her foot. Some trickster had glued it to the pavement in gleeful anticipation of frustrating the good citizens of Camden Borough who might be sufficiently desperate to try and pocket it.

‘Vanilla would probably be better. A McRussian, like half the US establishment,’ Alex said, going through the automatic doors. The sickening smell of junk engulfed him, that peculiar smell that every McDonald’s has. A butler in full tails greeted him and directed him to the next floor, but before Alex turned upstairs, he stopped and watched Rupert touching Nell on the cheek and playing with the flower she’d put in her hair. Too intimate a gesture for him to continue watching, too much frisson, too much tension for his flimsy heart to withstand. The experiment had failed. Nothing had changed except for him, and evidently that wasn’t enough.

★ ★ ★

Rupert brushed Nell's cheek in a gesture that he hoped was paternalistic enough to justify standing too close. 'I texted you earlier, I don't know whether you've seen it yet? Have you? I think it would be nice for us to go for brunch tomorrow. I booked us a table at this lovely place in Chiswick. It's on the river.'

'I can't.' Rigid, she stood. Eyes cast down. *Spit at him, Nell told herself. Look him in the eye and turn him to stone, buy cement, be your own Medusa.*

'Why not?' he asked, assuming she was playing hard to get as always.

'Yoga. I'm going to a yoga class with my cousin,' she lied. Tell him the truth, she told herself, don't spare his poxy feelings. Tell him you don't want to see him ever again after tonight.

Rupert rolled his eyes at the mention of yoga. 'Clem's started an Insta for yoga. Apparently, she's popular.'

'Of course she is. Where is Clemmie?'

'Running late, of course. Always has to make an entrance, does Clemency. Although this is really her grand exit.'

'We should go inside. It is your birthday party after all.' Nell started for the automatic doors. 'Trust you to do black tie in a McDonald's.'

'It's amusing, isn't it.'

'It's cruel,' Nell said, acknowledging the butler with a slight nod. The poor staff behind the tills looked utterly bewildered. She hoped Rupert was tipping them and generously at that.

'What, McDonald's? Their eggs are free range, look at the posters,' Rupert said, following Nell's wiggle as it climbed up the stairs and past a picture of a 'happy' chicken.

'Yes, McDonald's,' Nell said, stopping on the mezzanine. She looked at Rupert and smiled her best happy-fake teeth-baring grin, like a delirious young mother in a toothpaste commercial.

'White Russian vanilla milkshake?' She always knew that she was a coward deep down. She liked to think she was brave, but here was the moment, the moment to prove her mettle, and she had failed.

'That would be delightful.' Rupert beamed. He could always count on his Nell.

★ ★ ★

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