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Gone Reading Sampler

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What Will You Read Next?

The PARIS COOKING SCHOOL

Life rarely serves up the perfect dish.

But second chances are always on the menu . . .

SOPHIE BEAUMONT

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CHAPTER ONE

A millisecond. That's all it took. One glance away, and the red leather case and everything it contained was gone. Gabi hadn't even caught a glimpse of the thief. Well, they'd be disappointed when they examined their booty. Sure, the case looked expensive—because it was, a gift from that heady period last year—but all it held was Gabi's battered work iPad, bereft of any thief-friendly information; a sketchbook with a couple of scribbled and crossed-out pages, but otherwise blank; and a new set of pencils her twin seven-year-old nieces had given her as a going-away present. The pencils were the only things she minded losing. Everything else was a reminder, a reproach, a refrain she could do without.

Draining the last of her strong coffee, Gabi hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders and stood up. The Gare du Nord heaved with people going in all directions and echoed with loud, confusing announcements. On the Eurostar from London earlier that morning, she'd been warned by her chatty seat neighbor that this busy station was Thief Central and to keep an eye out. She'd nodded politely, thinking she'd hardly present a tempting target. Her backpack was ancient, and her passport, cards and what cash she had were all stowed away in the

money belt she carried under her jumper. The red leather case had clearly figured so little in her thoughts that she'd not even factored it in. And now, as she strode away from the station and out into the busy street, she felt as though it was a sign. Just as the case had vanished, so would her burden . . .

Come *on.* Get real, Gabi. The case might be gone but the Thing didn't disappear so easily. At that moment, she caught the startled eye of a passer-by and realized that she'd spoken aloud. *Oh great. Talking aloud to yourself in public now.* And imagining that a station thief was an instrument of fate. She could add those things to her growing shame parade. Like telling her agent that she was "taking a stand on digital distraction" and would not only be turning off social media but that she would not be reachable. Like telling her family that her local mobile number was only to be used for emergencies and on no account given to anyone else. Like not telling anyone what this trip was really about or what was really going on. Hiding, ducking, dodging, deceiving, pretending. The old Gabi would never have done any of that stuff. *But I'm not that person anymore, and I don't know if I can ever be again,* Gabi thought, as the unspoken anxiety that had become all too familiar surged through her. What if it was all over and she—

Cut that out. Focus. You are in Paris now, she told herself, sternly, as she walked through the crowded streets. *And you really like this city, even though your father would scoff and say Paris is just that place you fly over on the way to his beloved Basque country.* The thought made her smile for the first time that day. Okay. For four weeks, she was going to forget everything else but being here, doing something that didn't make her feel anxious, something far away from expectations. It would be an escape. A real one.

She took a deep breath, and immediately sneezed. Then again. She stopped, pulling out a tissue, blowing her nose, before sneezing once more, the sneeze turning into a laugh. Hayfever now, for God's sake. And no wonder. Just look at those street trees, budding, no,

absolutely *bursting* into bloom. The pollen count must be off the charts. And it was warmer than you'd think, for Paris in April. London had been chilly, and she'd dressed accordingly. Now she was starting to sweat with the heavy pack against her padded jacket. She pulled the jacket off and stuffed it into her bag. Pushing stray strands of blunt-cut black hair away from her face, she consulted the map on her phone. Bugger, still a fair way to go before she reached the hotel. She should have caught the Metro, not stalked out of the Gare du Nord like some drama queen. Ah well. *Serves you right, grumpy guts,* she thought, adjusting the straps of her pack and walking on.

Kate's bag bumped against the steps as she climbed up. She'd decided to get off at the station before her destination, just so she could get a proper first look at the neighborhood as a whole. Plus the long flight and then the train and Metro ride from the airport had left her dazed and disorientated. She needed fresh air to reset her body clock. She needed to know she really was in Paris and not in interminable transit through drafty tunnels and platforms and airport halls that could have been pretty much anywhere in the world.

Emerging into the street from the dim underground, she felt the blissful shock of the colors, the smells, the sounds. It was the most beautiful afternoon, the sky was deep blue, and against it the lovely old pale stone buildings glowed, trees flung up armfuls of white and pink blossoms, the soft air was full of fragrance, there were people seated at the outside tables of cafés, chatting and laughing, and not one of them was wearing black. Imagine! Then she heard the melodious cooing of a wood pigeon from somewhere nearby, and she had a memory of her parents dancing to an old jazz song called "April in Paris," which was about the charm of spring in this city. *I understand it now,* she thought, her pulse quickening, barely even noticing when an impatient commuter surged past her, muttering about *les touristes.* Kate didn't care. Joy filled her from top to toe.

The hotel wasn't far away but she took her time getting there. There was so much to see and she kept stopping all the time, taking it all in, and taking photo after photo. Yes, she'd been to Paris before, once. But that had been sixteen years ago, when she was twenty-five. And she'd only been here three days, rushing around, taking in a dizzying number of classic sights, the tourist magnets such as the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame, the Opera and the Champs-Élysées . . . That hadn't been her choice, she'd wanted to take it more slowly, to see less and yet see more in a way, to take it in properly. But, of course, Josh had other ideas. He wanted to "do" Paris, to say he'd been there, to tick off all the sights in the three days he had planned so tightly, before they moved on to the next "iconic" European city. She hadn't had the heart to tell him that wasn't what she'd dreamed of when she'd mentioned wanting to go to Paris. *Oh well,* she'd thought, *we've had a little taster, and though I'm still hungry to see more, there'll be a next time, and it will be different, I'll make sure of it.* But years had passed, and there'd never been a next time . . .

Until now. And even though it was the beginning, already it felt different, like a real adventure starting in a place she was going to get to know well. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought. This would be her neighborhood, her actual home, for the next month—would you just look at it! Here was a café whose awning was covered in stunning waterfalls of silk cherry blossom, while across the street rakish rows of multicolored bikes looked as though they were about to take off by themselves. Over there a small greengrocery showed off its fruit and vegetables as though they were still-life paintings, while not far away oysters and scallops, still in their shells, ferried a heady smell of the sea. A little further on, a flower shop boasted bouquets of pale violet roses that looked unreal until you touched them, and another shop presented quirky gifts and attractively odd objects. In backstreets, there were quiet public gardens tucked away, and cobblestones, and more birds singing, and the massive, photogenic doors of old apartment

buildings. On the big street she'd also seen imposing churches, a strange medieval tower, the magnificent Hôtel de Ville . . . The backstreets were quiet but even on the big street there wasn't much traffic so it was easy to cross and recross streets, even dragging a bag behind you.

She stopped by a patisserie with an enticing display: cakes like fragile jewels perched on gilded stands, or lined up in mouthwatering single file, their names written in that curly handwriting that made everything look so deliciously, so perfectly, French. But "window-licking," as the French called it, wasn't enough and she couldn't resist going in to buy the most beautiful little strawberry tart that had surely ever existed. She ate it there and then out on the pavement, sheer bliss in the glorious mix of flavor, texture and aroma: meltingly sweet fruit, creamy vanilla-fragrant custard, buttery soft pastry. It was truly perfect and, when she finished, she couldn't help licking her fingers.

Through the window of the patisserie, she met the amused glance of a shop assistant. She just smiled back, green eyes alight with mischief. It didn't matter one bit that she'd been caught out acting like a kid. She hadn't done anything so spontaneous in years. She hadn't done much of anything except dance to someone else's tune. But now—well, she was where she was meant to be. No matter what happened, no one could take that feeling from her. Certainly not Josh, far away in Australia. In another world. Another life.

Not *her* life, now. And in this moment, blessedly, that thought held no pain at all.

Sylvie took another sip of her favorite Burgundy pinot noir and looked once more through the folder that her PA Yasmine had compiled. The fresh supplies had been ordered and would arrive first thing tomorrow morning, arrangements had been made with the guest presenters for the month, and the list of students was fully confirmed. *Ouf.* Phew. The last three weeks had been something of a nightmare, a couple of bookings falling through, and then someone emailed to say they'd been

about to book but had seen the bad review on Tripadvisor, and what could Sylvie tell him about that?

Sylvie couldn't tell him anything because she hadn't actually known the review existed. When she did click on to it, she was both angry and puzzled, because it was clear that whoever wrote it had never attended the Paris Cooking School. They mentioned things that never happened, and ways of working she never used. On her neighbor Serge's advice—one of his other friends had gone through the same thing—she'd got in touch with Tripadvisor and complained. The bad review would be removed, they assured her. And so it was. The person who'd hesitated about booking had signed up, and shortly after that the last vacant spot had also been filled. So it had all worked out in the end. But it had left a lingering unease.

It was very quiet in Sylvie's office, just off the big high-ceilinged kitchen and dining room where all the main action of the Paris Cooking School took place. Right now, those spaces were quiet too. But tomorrow morning it would all start up again, with a new class of eight students. Eight new faces; eight new ways of doing things, seeing things. Eight people who would present challenges but who, by the end of the four weeks, would hopefully work as colleagues, yet still keep their differences.

In the fifteen years since Sylvie had founded the Paris Cooking School, there had been nearly a hundred such classes, each with their eager batch of students. There had been dramas and personality clashes over the years, but also many friendships had been forged, and several romances had even sparked off across the workbenches. Most of the students simply wanted to learn how to cook the French way for their own sake, but a few had gone on to have successful foodie careers. The most prominent was now a famous food writer with her own spin-off TV show in the US, who'd dedicated her first cookbook to Sylvie and sent her a signed copy. She still kept in touch, as did a number of others, who wrote and emailed to say that the month they'd spent at the school

had been one of the great experiences of their lives. Sylvie's son, Julien, who had pretty much grown up in this environment—he was only seven when she'd started the school—had said it was not surprising they felt that way. "For you, Maman, it's your everyday life. For them, it's a magical holiday *away* from their everyday lives." And he was right, of course. But lately she'd found herself thinking that it might be time for things to run their course, as it were.

But right now wasn't the time for that, any more than it was the time to think properly about her troubled relationship with Claude and the ultimatum she really must give him, for her own self-respect. Finishing off her wine, she shuffled the student list and other papers back into the folder, stretched and got up. She caught her own glance in the mirror opposite. The woman in the mirror looked so sure of herself, and so effortlessly chic with her shining chestnut hair, slim dark pants and silky green shirt, but the woman looking into the reflection knew just how much the mirror could lie. Shrugging, amused at her own unexpected fancy, Sylvie turned away. Picking up her empty glass, she went into the kitchen, washed and dried the glass and put it away. She glanced around her. Everything was in its place. Everything ready. Everything waiting, in suspended animation, for the noise and bustle and questions and, yes, the *magic,* to start.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten years ago, when Gabi had first visited Paris, she'd stayed in Montmartre, in a converted attic room. Back then, she'd imagined it was still the haunt of bohemian artists and had been disappointed to find it so touristy, especially around the Sacré-Coeur. But she had discovered other, less hyped spots in Montmartre, and in particular the amazing fabric shops that rambled down both sides of one winding street. She'd spent many happy hours there sketching quick impressions in her visual diary, then painting them up later in her room. Another of her favorite sketching spots had been at her attic window, looking out over the pigeon-haunted roofs and down into the crowded street. She'd really felt a part of the Paris story then, finding her own small but inspirational cameo within it.

Ten years later, here she was standing at her present-day Parisian hotel window in the Quartier Saint-Paul. In the southern part of the famous Marais district of Paris, the quartier had a maze of cobbled backstreets, remnants of medieval walls and ancient mansions, known as *hôtels particuliers.* It preserved some of the old character of the city, prior to its nineteenth-century transformation by Baron Haussmann. But though the pace was relaxed, less consciously "buzzy" than other

areas of the Marais, the quartier didn't live in the past. It was a lively and animated scene she looked down on, full of color and movement. But this time there would be no inspirational cameo. No sketching herself into the story. She wasn't a part of it; she was *apart.*

Abruptly, she turned away. Enough. She'd overslept and had to get going right away, without breakfast. That was hardship enough, never mind getting into a funk over *if only*s. Gabi loved her food, and the thought of coffee and a croissant made her mouth water. This was Paris so there was sure to be a bakery on the way. And so there was—a lovely one with Art Nouveau rural scenes painted on glass panels at the entrance. A minute later, hurriedly brushing croissant crumbs from her mouth and her clothes, she was at the door of the school's apartment building. It was only then that she realized what she'd left behind. Her phone, where she'd noted the entry code for the school doors, still lay on the bedside table where she'd left it last night. Squinting at the entry pad, she tried to remember the code. Was it 445AS? Or 554SA? She tried both, to no avail. She couldn't even call anyone to let her in. Bugger. She'd have to go back for the phone.

"*Ça va?*" The voice behind her made her jump. Turning, she saw a man around her age, thirty or so, tall, with wavy light brown hair curling irrepressibly around his ears, and eyes so dark they were almost black. Dressed in a leather jacket over a T-shirt and jeans, he was carrying a large flattish wooden box. Before she could answer he added, in English, "You are for the Paris Cooking School?"

"Yes. *Oui.* But the code . . ."

His dark eyes twinkled. "Of course. Allow me." As he came closer, she caught a whiff of something strong. He saw her nose wrinkling and laughed. "Goat's cheese, Mademoiselle. For the school."

Of course. To cover her embarrassment, she retorted, in French, "Good. I love goat's cheese. Especially the strong, smelly ones."

His eyebrows rose fractionally, and she saw with some satisfaction that her perfect French had surprised him. But he said nothing, only

gave a darting smile and punched in the entry code. The door opened with a click and he held it open for her. He headed for the lift but she bypassed it. She wasn't keen on the narrow wooden lifts you found in old French apartment buildings. Instead, she took the stairs to the third floor two at a time, just for the heck of it, and got there hardly even panting. That had at least been a rare benefit of the last few months. She'd taken to running every morning as a respite from her oppressive thoughts and had become quite fit as a result.

At the entry door of the school, on the third floor, there was a buzzer. Its call was answered almost immediately by a brisk young brunette carrying an iPad. She introduced herself as *Yasmine Berada, personal assistant to Madame Sylvie Morel,* in excellent English, and looked only momentarily surprised when Gabi responded in fluent French, introducing herself in turn and apologizing for being late. "It is not a problem," Yasmine replied smoothly in French, ushering her in, "nothing has started yet. Now, if you would please leave your shoes here," she continued, "and put on a pair of these—" pointing to a rack of soft-soled black slip-on shoes—"that would be much appreciated."

"Of course." Gabi took off her boots and selected a pair of the slip-ons in her size. Glancing at the golden, creaking parquet floor, she could see why they wouldn't want people tramping around in street shoes. And though the slip-ons didn't look all that elegant paired with her dark red skirt, they would be much less tiring on the feet than her heeled boots, especially if she was standing around for hours in a kitchen.

As she slipped the shoes on, the man who'd let her in downstairs came down the hall, minus the box he'd been carrying. He nodded at Yasmine and gave Gabi another of those darting smiles. "I hope the cheese is up to your high standards, Mademoiselle," he said, in French. "And if you'd like more, come visit me at the Bastille markets—I'm there every Thursday and Sunday!"

"Perhaps I might do that," Gabi replied, "if the cheese is satisfactory. Or even perhaps if I need to complain about it!"

I'm flirting, she thought, *and I haven't done that for ages.* She'd forgotten how fun it was. Especially in Paris, where everybody understood how it worked. No strings attached, just a nice moment.

He laughed. "You do that, Mademoiselle." And then, with a cheerful goodbye to them both, he was gone, clanging the door shut behind him.

As if anticipating a question from Gabi, Yasmine said, "That's Max. He's a bit of an *original*." A character, that meant, in French: a word that could be used with approval or not. Yasmine's tone was neutral, so Gabi wasn't sure.

She took Gabi to a storage room lined with shelves on two sides and lockers on another side. On the shelves were all kinds of kitchen linen—aprons, tea towels, napkins, tablecloths—as well as large boxes of kitchen paper, aluminum foil and disposable gloves. "You can leave any belongings you won't need in a locker," Yasmine said, "the key always stays with you. And take an apron and gloves."

Obediently, Gabi divested herself of her chunky cardigan, and locked it and her money belt safely away. From the pile of aprons, she chose a cheerful flowery one, which was not only practical but looked good against her black top. The apron also had a front pocket where she stashed a pair of gloves. Then she followed Yasmine out of the storage room and down the hall.

Her first impression, as they entered the large kitchen, was of golden light. The sun poured in through the window, picking out the mellow tones inside: shades of wood and cork and tiles. She had half-expected impersonal pristine whites and gleaming steel, not this warm, intimate feel. It was almost as though you were stepping into someone's home kitchen, despite the size of the room, and the discreetly positioned twin glass-topped cookers and double sinks, the double fridges in a recess and the shelf holding professional-looking cooking

implements. A large walk-in pantry with double doors was on one side of the room and above its entrance hung a painting of a market scene: it was naïve but full of color and vigor. A feeling of both peace and cheerful busyness pervaded the kitchen, and it made Gabi say, "Oh, this is such a beautiful room!"

"Yes." Yasmine smiled. "It is inspired by the kitchen of Sylvie's grandparents, where she first learned to cook as a child. Updated equipment, of course, but otherwise with that same *ambiance.* And it's at the heart of everything we do here."

"I can see that," Gabi said, softly, a pang going through her as she thought of the kitchen back in her parents' house—of being enveloped in a warm bustle of practical beauty and homely pleasures. "Does Sylvie use the kitchen when there's no class on?"

"Oh yes. Sylvie lives on the premises. As does her son, Julien, when he's here. But come," Yasmine said, "let us find the others." She held open a door at one end of the kitchen, where a babble of voices was coming from. Taking a deep breath, Gabi followed her into another large, pleasant room, dominated by a long oak dining table and a dresser, above which hung a reproduction of a painting by Claude Monet, showing people seated around a dining table enjoying a meal. At the real table, people were also seated, not eating, but talking.

In the past, Gabi had a reputation for being extroverted, able to enter any room full of people with confidence. It had been a façade. Today, as she took the only vacant chair, with a "hello" all round, people nodded pleasantly, then the chatter started up again, and she relaxed and scanned the group discreetly. Eight people all up: four men and four women, including herself. A door at the end of the room opened and two other people came in.

It was clear who the newcomers were, for their names and faces, like Yasmine's, had been featured on the Paris Cooking School's website. In her simple white shirt, black pants and green and white stripy apron, chestnut-colored hair tied back in a thick plait, Sylvie Morel

managed to look both practical and stylish. Her assistant/sous-chef, Damien Arty, had a young face but prematurely thinning fair hair and was immaculately dressed in the traditional chef's attire of short-sleeved white tunic shirt worn over gray trousers, and a black apron tied at the waist.

"*Mesdames, messieurs, bienvenue*! Ladies and gentlemen, welcome!" Sylvie's voice was deep and clear, her English perfect, with a soft, attractive accent. The classes at the Paris Cooking School were always conducted in English, because students either came from English-speaking countries or from those where English was taught as a second language more often than French. "You have come to Paris from six different countries: Australia, Japan, Germany, Canada, the USA and Britain," she went on. "We thank you for joining us from so far away. And we hope that, after this month, you will all think of our city as your second home. Well, at least as your second kitchen," she added, earning smiles and a smattering of applause.

She spoke for a little while after that, about timetables and schedules, and after a moment Gabi's attention wandered. But she was jerked from her thoughts by Sylvie saying, "Well, enough from me. Let's hear from you now."

"From *me*?" Gabi blurted out.

Sylvie smiled. "I meant *you* in the plural, Ms. Picabea. But by all means, let us start with you."

CHAPTER THREE

Kate listened to the others' stories and thought she'd have nothing interesting to add. Everyone else's reasons for being at the school seemed to stretch back into fascinating pasts and enchanted, or sometimes haunting, memories. But her own suburban childhood had been ordinary, her family history unexotic and her adult life mostly contented, without real drama. Until Josh's bombshell. But even that wasn't something you could truthfully say was exceptional. It was probably the oldest story in the world, being dumped for a younger woman. And it wasn't something she wanted to talk about, anyway. So when it was her turn, she simply said, "I'm from Melbourne, Australia, where talking about food has become something of a religion. But I love cooking itself. And I really wanted to cook in Paris. That's all." She smiled. "I still can't believe I'm actually here though."

Lots of smiles and nods back. She had hit a chord without trying to. And as Yasmine came in with a tray of coffees and Sylvie invited them to take their cups with them into the kitchen, Kate fell into conversation with the friendly German couple in their sixties who told her they'd loved what she said. "It is so honest. And why we are all

here, really," the woman, Anja, said. She and her husband Stefan spoke excellent English, with a slight German accent.

"We try to be interesting and different," he added, "but really we are all alike inside, yes?"

"I suppose so," said Kate, politely.

"You know the other Australian person?" Anja asked.

Kate glanced across the room at the young woman who'd given her name as *Gabrielle, but everyone calls me Gabi.* Quite a complicated, exotic mix of family history there, plus something about an ancestral link to Paris and food, back in the 1900s? Lucky her. Plenty to draw on. No, Kate had never actually met her before. But she had a nagging feeling that she had seen the other woman's face somewhere. It was an unusual face, not traditionally pretty but certainly striking, with jet-black hair framing distinctive features, including an aquiline nose and long-lashed hazel eyes. Not a face you'd easily forget. *Unlike mine,* Kate thought, ruefully. Maybe they'd been on the same plane and she'd spotted her in transit. "Australia's a big country," she told the Germans. "And Gabi lives in Sydney. I live in Melbourne. And you know what they say: never the twain shall meet." She saw their expressions and added, "I mean, the cities are far apart, not only in distance but also because there's a rivalry between them."

"Oh, that is so interesting," Stefan remarked, and looked like he was about to say more, only just then Sylvie called for their attention and the class began in earnest.

Sylvie told them the Paris Cooking School was not about teaching *cordon bleu* cooking, but about helping people discover and apply the French way of home cooking to their own lives. "The French way of home cooking is not *fancy,* or difficult," she said, "or even necessarily time-consuming. In this school, you will find what may seem like an unusual way of learning, and which may not always seem serious. But it's designed to immerse you immediately, and help you understand

what underlies the French approach to food. Understanding needs to come not only through the mind, but also the heart and the imagination. And the hands, of course!"

Kate wasn't the only one smiling at that, as Sylvie went on, "I know you all already love to cook, and a couple of you—" nodding at Misaki, who was a retired chef from Japan, and Ethan, who ran a gastropub in England—"are actually professionals. You already have a good understanding of cooking. And you have your own ways of doing things. We don't ask you to forget any of those things. But we encourage you to go beyond. To start with an open mind and be willing to be surprised." She gestured to Damien, who disappeared into the pantry. "And that is why we're starting this first session with a bit of a game. Humble and simple this food item may be, but without it, French cooking could hardly exist. Can you guess what it is?"

Everyone stared at her, then a chorus of voices threw out ideas. "Garlic!" "Cream!" "Herbs!" "Wine!" "Butter!" "Bouillon!"

"Snails," said Ethan, in his posh drawl.

"Frogs' legs," put in Mike, the burly American who had introduced himself earlier with a twinkle in his eye as *Ethan's partner, or kept man—take your pick.*

Chuckling, Pete, the fiftyish Canadian who already reminded Kate irresistibly of Tigger from *Winnie the Pooh,* contributed, "*Je ne sais quoi,*" making everyone laugh.

"All right," Sylvie said, breaking into the hilarity, "then, as we say in French, will you give your tongue to the cat? It means to give up," she explained, smiling.

"But in English we say, if the cat's got your tongue that means you have to keep quiet," said Kate, cheekily.

Everyone laughed, including Sylvie. "Very true," she said, giving Kate an appreciative look. "Okay, Damien, show them." Her assistant came out from the pantry, arms full of egg cartons. The room erupted in exclamations and cheers.

"This is my contention: that the humble egg is a cornerstone of French cooking," Sylvie said, when the noise had died down. "Let's talk, then, about the egg and its many stories."

Pulling up a banner printed with a map of France, Sylvie produced four little paper flags, each labeled with the name of an egg dish. She pinned a flag on a place on the map, then recounted a lively story about that particular dish in local culture and folklore. Then Sylvie and Damien together made a couple of those stories come to delicious life, creating the stuffed eggs known as *oeufs mimosa,* first made in a modest 1950s Parisian café, "owned by a man from Provence homesick for the golden mimosa trees of his home village," and eggs *en cocotte,* baked eggs with tarragon and cream, "made in a Norman farmhouse kitchen, overlooking a busy barnyard and small herb garden, the lowing of dairy cows in the fields beyond." It was an unusual and imaginative way to demonstrate a recipe, and the class clustered enthusiastically around the stove, watching Sylvie and Damien work and occasionally asking questions. Some people made notes in small notepads or on their phones, others took pictures, but Kate simply looked and listened, trying to memorize it all. The heartfelt simplicity of it, yet also the imaginative, playful attention to detail—it was just brilliant!

Afterward, they all got to try samples of the *mimosa* and *en cocotte* eggs: they tasted every bit as good as they looked and smelled. Then Damien handed out some cards with recipes of each of the egg dishes and Sylvie set the class the task of choosing one, thinking about a place it might have come from and making it. "You can do this individually or as a pair," she added, when someone—Kate thought it might have been Gabi—sighed. "And you are welcome to try the same things we made, if you'd like. Don't overdo quantities; we're just looking for small portions. And don't worry about getting facts right in your stories, that's not what we're after. Damien and I will be here to help and advise. After we finish, your creations will be the centerpiece of our lunch."

It was quite a daunting task at first glance and Kate couldn't make

her mind up whether she wanted to go it alone to make her own mistakes or be with someone else for moral support. She saw Gabi gathering certain ingredients and realized she must be preparing to make a *piperade.* She remembered Gabi saying her father came from the French Basque country, so she probably already knew how to whip up the hearty, aromatic mix of eggs, air-dried ham, onions, tomatoes and long green peppers that was so characteristic of that region. She'd probably also have a good story to go with it, ready-made. So it might be easy to join in with her. On the other hand, she'd be riding on someone else's coat-tails and that was something she'd sworn never to do again. By then, everyone else had already started: Stefan and Anja, and Ethan and Mike, expectedly paired up, and Misaki, Pete and Gabi were each doing it on their lonesome. And it seemed she was too.

Scanning the recipe cards, she decided on a mushroom omelette, with the button mushrooms known as *champignons de Paris* cooked quickly in butter and garlic, and then tipped into the almost-cooked omelette, which would then be folded over. The result would be a luscious creamy egg top with the savory, garlicky mushrooms inside. Just the thought made her mouth water.

But what about the story to go with it? Mushrooms were normally found in the woods, but these little numbers were likely not called "Paris mushrooms" for nothing, so the story needed to be something set here. What about a young housemaid who dreams of being a cook and who, at night, sneaks into the kitchen of the grand Parisian house where she works to create this dish? And so delicious is the smell emanating from the kitchen that it wakes a guest in the house who happens to be a great chef. He comes down in search of the source of the smell and is so impressed that he offers the maid a place in his famous restaurant! Grinning to herself, Kate set to work. This was truly the most fun she'd had in years.

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of

THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE

AND SO I ROAR

A Novel

"An uplifting story of friendship and sisterhood amid seemingly insurmountable obstacles."
—CHARMAINE WILKERSON, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BLACK CAKE*

ABI DARÉ

THURSDAY
JANUARY 2015

TIA

PORT HARCOURT

I used to tell people my mother gave birth to a thousand books and one girl.

They would chuckle, believing I was attempting to be humorous. I wish I were. Now that she's dying, I find myself clinging to a particular childhood memory: I am six years old, and my scalp is pulsating from a headache triggered by taut cornrows. I am sitting on the cool floor tiles outside of my mother's home library and, desperate for comfort, I knock, pleading for her to let me in, but she is too engrossed in a one-sided, animated conversation with the author of the book she's reading to hear me. She has imagined this author, as she often does, and for the time being, he is her beloved child, my phantom sibling. I fall asleep waiting and dream of her pulling me into a deep hug and pressing my head into her bosom, into her scent of fresh basil, and together, we sway to the rhythm of her laughter until I startle awake and realize it's been hours. I knock again, and this time, there is a pause from inside, a brief consideration of my persistence, before the resumption of her

occupation. Eventually, our housemaid, Ada, discovers me huddled on the floor and sends me to my room.

It's been nearly thirty years, and I'm still haunted by this memory.

My mother was readmitted last week to a private ward in a hospital in Port Harcourt and has been sleeping since I arrived. I must admit that sitting this close feels unnatural, difficult. I can smell her breath, and every expulsion from her partly slackened mouth warms the air between us with the odor of antibiotics and sulfur. I used to take refuge in that green padded chair by the door of her hospital room, in filling the chasm between us with practiced smiles and delicately rehearsed responses. It was a pragmatic choice, easier than sitting close enough for her to see the pain of her childhood rejection still etched on my face.

But today is different.

Today I'd like for her to witness the scars stinging my face, to (and this seems unfair in the face of her distress) afflict her with some of the trauma I've recently suffered. I fear it's the only way she'll understand why I must pry the relics of my buried past out of her grip.

She stirs, and I pitch forward.

"Mum?" I whisper. "Are you awake?" Her bald scalp reminds me of the small retractable head of an aged tortoise. Her fists huddle the bedsheet at the sides, but she says nothing. I suspect she knows I am here; that she is, as usual, taking her time.

Her eyes snap open. "Your face," she says, her own gaunt, weathered face austere with the silent analysis of recollection as she considers the lines etched under my chin like a signature, the cruel Y-shaped welt crawling along my jaw. "Dad said you had an . . . accident," she says. "What happened?"

"I lied," I say. "It wasn't an accident." A pause. The lacerations are slowly disappearing, but the memory of being whipped in a fertility ritual my mother-in-law organized continues to torment me. I couldn't look in the mirror for days after. Sometimes I still can't. Sometimes, in

the night's stillness, when my husband, Ken, is asleep, I hear a whip, a vicious crack in the air, and I startle, catch myself.

I ball my fists to control the shaking in my hands. "I've been thinking," I say haltingly, "about—"

"That's a stack of bloody good books." She nods at the pile of novels on the wooden table beside me. "Pass that blue-covered one, will you? The one with the bookmark?"

She's expecting me to deflect, to bow under the weight of her gaze, but I hitch my chair nearer, back straight. "I realize it may be uncomfortable, me asking about a sixteen-year-old document, but I need it." I bring my hands together, a forced plea. "I wouldn't have flown over if you'd replied to my emails or texts."

She presses a finger to the control panel on the handle of her bed so that it tilts upward with a whirring sound, and when her face is level with mine, she licks her lips, the tip of her tongue tinged yellow and textured like aged cheddar.

"Tia," she says, voice soft. "Your dad is around. I can't talk about this now. Give me some time. I just recovered from another infection. My novel?"

"I need a moment," I say, rising and hurrying out of her room, past a woman retching in the next ward, past the line of nurses' stations. It's not until the elevator pings open that I realize I forgot my handbag. I dash back and halt at the cracked-open door. My mother is speaking to my aunty on the phone, on a video call, as they often do, and in a voice so serious and penetrating that I am compelled to eavesdrop.

"You are asking me not to tell her?" my mother is saying. "To carry this secret to my grave? No, Beatrice. Let me die in peace. Let me explain why she can't have the documentation she's—" My aunty interrupts, her voice high-pitched and garbled like a cassette tape on fast-forward.

I listen, eyes on my distorted silhouette reflected in the foil-tinted window of the opposite ward, a hot tingle filling every crevice of my body. I am struggling to grasp on to their fragmented conversation, to

slot piece after piece in to make an entire portrait of my past, but they carry on back and forth, piercing me afresh with the sharp edge of each discovery until my aunty's voice falls to a mumble that no longer rises and I can no longer wait in this excruciating anticipation for the glue that binds the fragments of the words—"it's too late" and "she will never forgive you"—together.

So I push the door open and walk in.

My mother immediately ends the call with a feeble jab of her finger, her face contorting into a strange, anguished expression. We stare at each other: both of us trapped on this island fenced with decades of bitterness and spite, with the thorns of this fresh revelation sprouting around its barbed edges.

"You lied to me." My mouth forms the words, but I am not sure I utter them or if I am merely thinking of speaking. "You told me—"

"Not here, Tia," she says. "Give me time to be ready."

"How could you?" I yell, feeling stuffed with shattered things.

"*How could I?* Tia, please." She has the audacity to blink back tears, to look away. "Everything was to protect you," she says. "Your future was—"

"Stop it!" The shattered things in me accumulate, filling me with a strident noise. It rides up my throat and into my mouth, and I am forced to stuff a fist in, to choke on it. In the silence, my breathing aligns.

My mother turns to look at me. "Sometimes, Tia," she says, "we toss ourselves the lifeboat of lies to save us from drowning. You were drowning. You're still struggling to keep your head above water after all these years. Does your husband know about your relationship with Boma?"

Silence. Cowering beneath the intermittent beeping of a machine and my thudding heart.

"Don't think I haven't noticed that you stop by to visit him before coming here."

"My marriage is none of your business," I say when I find my voice.

She closes her eyes, shutting me out. "Your father will be away at a business meeting next Wednesday. We can talk then."

My father materializes from the doorway as if summoned, a paper bag full of meds scrunched up in his grasp. He stops at the foot of my mother's bed, catching his breath. "Is everything all right with my girls?" He peers at the book my mother was reading as though we inscribed the condition of our collective state of mind on its fancy blue cover. "How are you both?"

"I need to get back to Lagos," I say, my pulse thumping in my ears.

"Now?" my father asks.

"She will be back on Wednesday," my mother says, her miserable smile an unstable curve digging into the gaunt hollowness of her cheek. She has arranged her face into a controlled recalcitrance because she knows I have no choice. That she's right makes me want to scream. Something acrid rises in me, and as I walk away, I decide to return one last time to hear what she has to say, and afterward, I will conduct a wretched funeral for her in the graveyard of my heart.

Wednesday will be the end of us.

TUESDAY

TIA

LAGOS

At eight o'clock, Adunni waltzes into my living room, drenched in morning sunlight and the scent of mint bodywash.

Adunni is a brilliant fourteen-year-old I met while she was working as a housemaid for a neighbor down our street in Lagos. The faded ankara dress she first wore from her village hangs loosely around her neck, and her calloused toes—the evidence of a year of punishing labor—protrude out of the worn shoes she inherited from the maid who served before her. Her matted, tangled hair is sleek with cheap grease, a pen sticking out of her month-old cornrow, but her eyes, like her smile, are liquid with the thrill of expectation, hope.

"Hey!" I tilt my laptop closed, averting my eyes so that the sun does not illuminate their swollen red state. "Did you sleep well?"

"I didn't able to sleep one eye," she says, squinting at the sunbeams lancing through the partially drawn blinds over our bifold doors. "Did you really text me this text message, or was I dreaming of it?"

She produces her phone from the pocket of her dress and holds it up for me to read my own words:

Adunni!! you got in!!
You won a place in the scheme!
I am not waiting ONE MORE DAY!
I will fight Florence if I have to.
I am coming to get you now!!
Pack your stuff.
xx

I sent the text and picked up Adunni yesterday, but it's been nearly a week since I was notified of Adunni's long-awaited scholarship offer, since I walked out on my mum in hospital and returned to a thankfully empty home (my husband is away at a conference).

The visit had left me feeling disintegrated, and I'd used the time alone to train my emotions into a semblance of normalcy. Then, finally, I'd felt ready to go and do what I'd been wanting to do for months: liberate Adunni from my neighbor Florence, who had used her as an unpaid servant.

"It's not a dream," I say. "You won a scholarship. You did that, Adunni. You wrote that essay and got yourself a place, and I am so proud of you."

She grins. "You know, I was looking at the long hand of the clock chasing the short one, ticking-tock-tick from yesternight till seven in the morning because I am too full of excitement! Ms. Tia, why is a clock so slow to run fast when you are in a hurry? What is the time now?"

"Five past eight?" I motion toward the dining chair opposite me, the plate of buttered toast and the steaming mug of chocolate next to it. "I made you some toast and hot chocolate."

She glances at the food and covers her mouth. "Ah! Sorry! I keep forgetting myself to greet you good morning! Good morning, Ms. Tia." She bends her knees in a curtsy, offering her greeting with a gesture of respect I can't get used to. "Is today or tomorrow the day I am going to school true-true?"

My mouth gives way into a lopsided smile. "Today we'll go pick up

your uniform, buy some more books, get your hair done. *Tomorrow* I'll drop you at school."

"What are you doing on the computer machine? Why didn't you drink your good-morning coffee?"

It surprised me when Florence agreed to release her. I had expected some resistance, but I sensed Florence was tired of combating our relentless fight for her freedom. Adunni spent last night in our guest room—and I can tell, from the energetic bounce in her step, that it's the best night she's had since she arrived in Lagos.

"I am trying to find a flight for Wednesday," I say. "I need to return to my mother."

"Tomorrow? But we are going to school?"

"She wants to talk to me tomorrow, but I'll leave after I drop you off at school. I can catch the last flight back."

Sleeping pills haven't stopped the cruel loop of that conversation replaying in my mind. I've been rolling off my bed, stuffing the edge of my pillow into my mouth, and screaming silently into it until my voice becomes hoarse.

Why this ache pulsating in my bones now, at the thought of returning to Port Harcourt? Why didn't I insist at the time on hearing what she had to say? Could I call Aunty Beatrice instead? I have a feeling she'd simply refer me back to Mum.

"Ms. Tia?"

"I am good, thanks," I say in response to a comment or question that has lost its precise form and shape. "Eat."

I am careful not to watch her eat, focusing instead on sorting out my flight timings, but she's gnashing her teeth, swallowing with rapid gulps, burping and offering apologies for disturbing me with the noise. It's as if there is a timer somewhere, ticking a warning toward some punishment should she eat any slower.

When last did she eat proper food?

"Don't rush," I say, glancing at her. "You'll choke. And then we can't go shopping."

She stops chewing abruptly, holding out a piece of her toast, staring at the teeth marks indented on the soggy edges as if transfixed by this very act of eating a piece of toast. Her eyes fill with tears, one sliding gracefully down each cheek, which she swipes away quickly with the back of her buttered hand, streaking grease across her cheek.

"Sorry, Ms. Tia," she says. "I am just too very hungry."

As I watch her, the ache in my heart expands with fresh guilt. I want to spend a lifetime making up for all she's suffered, as though I am personally responsible for her misfortunes. Perhaps I am. Partly. I could have done more for Adunni from the first day I saw Florence nearly dent her scalp with the heel of her left shoe, but I returned to this comfortable house instead, with my constant electricity and minimalist-by-choice furniture and organic diet. I closed my eyes and sobbed myself to sleep; not just because of how helpless I felt, but because I felt paralyzed by my helplessness, by the haunted, pleading look I saw in Adunni's eyes, by this child who had, unknown to me, lived down the road for months, slaving away from dawn till midnight.

Adunni opened my eyes to true compassion. She was there for me when my husband's mother took me for the baby-making ritual bath that left me with scars along my chin, arms, and shoulders.

"There's more bread," I add gently. "The butter is in the fridge. Adunni, there's a lot of food here."

She blows a path through the milk froth in her cup, watching me over the chocolate-tainted rim. "Who throw the flight away?"

"Sorry?"

"The flight you want to catch. Who throw it? How will you reach far up to catch it?"

"Oh, my love," I say. "It means you'll board, get on, a plane."

"Is there a mat on the plane?" A frown puzzles her face. "For people to sleep?"

"There are chairs. And windows. It's quite nice."

She is mute for a moment. Then: "I want to catch a plane one day. But not to see my mother, because she is in heaven. But maybe with you?"

"Maybe with me," I say, but she's already eating and talking about how excited she is to go shopping.

I jiggle my mouse to wake my computer, complete my flight booking, and slam the laptop shut. For now, I'll concentrate on getting Adunni to school. And when I finish with my mother, I'll find the strength to return home to tell my husband about Boma.

And that I'm not who he thinks I am.

We are in the school uniform shop behind Ocean Academy's admin block, and I cannot stop thinking of him. Boma. Or *Bow-Mar*, as I often used to say, with a false American drawl.

I have resisted the urge to say his name aloud until now, to sound it on my lips; the bubble of spit that forms on the first syllable, the release of breath on the last, like a tired sigh. I don't enjoy thinking about him when I am not alone, for fear that the heat flushing my face will warm the room, that my thumping heart will be visible underneath my t-shirt or blouse, that people will stop and stare in wonder.

The seamstress, a cherry-faced Ms. Somebody with a tapered gray afro, who has a safety pin tucked into the corner of her mouth and a yellow measuring tape hanging around her neck, is motioning to Adunni to pull up her school skirt. There is an electric Singer sewing machine on the wooden desk next to me; beside it, a used ice cream container filled with spools of red, blue, white, and green thread. On the floor, a mound of clothes: school skirts and blouses and berets, perhaps awaiting mending. There is a headless polystyrene mannequin on a wooden tripod projecting out of the mountain of clothes like a flag on a hill, cut pieces of the blue uniform fabric pinned to its foam breasts.

I've got my AirPods on so that I can pretend to listen to music. I want to be lost in my thoughts, but I can hear and feel everything around me: the throaty laughter from the seamstress, Adunni's chirpy voice riding high and low with tales of how her essay won her a place

in this school, the click from the button on Adunni's skirt as she fastens it, the flutter when she twirls around so that a mint-scented breeze caresses my knees.

"What you think, Ms. Tia? How I look?"

I turn, but I am distracted, briefly, by the framed photo of thirty-six girls in their uniforms on the wall, the edge of the folded ironing board covering half their faces. I noticed the same photo behind the principal in the admin office, but now I have an urge to inspect it.

"Ms. Tia?"

I fix my gaze on Adunni, nodding with what I hope is a keen smile. "Amazing!"

She laughs, clapping, saluting. She keeps doing that: saluting when she has the school beret on, perhaps because she thinks she looks like a soldier.

"Where next?" The seamstress's voice is kind and patient. "Busy day ahead?" She wedges herself between the desk and the wall to sit. Picks up a pen, scribbles into a booklet, and tears out a leaf for Adunni. "Please hand that over to your . . ." The seamstress trails off, giving me a hesitant smile. She's aware I am not Adunni's mother. This is a school for girls born into extreme poverty, girls whose mothers do not own iPhones or wear AirPods, girls whose only hope is what they are given on these grounds: a sound education and a solid mindset to prepare them for the future. But she's unsure of what to call me and I am not in a mood to clarify who I am to Adunni, so I smile back and take the paper out of Adunni's hands.

"It's the receipt for the uniforms," she adds. "More shopping?"

I wish she'd move that damn ironing board out of the way or shut up and tidy up. Her name comes to me then, Ms. Erinle. I wonder if she has children of her own. Why, of all things I could think about, is this what comes to mind?

"No more shopping," Adunni declares, shaking her head in an emphatic no. "Ms. Tia been so kind to me. She already take me to the ice

cream shop to lick ice cream and eat *choc-late* and cake, she buy me new school shoe and new schoolbag from Shoprite supermarket shop, then she buy me this new yellow dress, and after, she take me to a hair salon with mirror-mirror on all over the wall, where they plait my hair this fine all-back style. See it, Ms. Erinle. See the hair!" Adunni yanks off the beret and runs her fingers along each line of freshly braided hair on her scalp so that the seamstress is forced to admire the feed-in cornrows.

Adunni slaps the beret back on, salutes. "When we leave here, we go home, we sleep, we wake up early tomorrow and come back here to this fine-fine school." She's stepping out of her school skirt and folding it now, gingerly, as if it's baby skin she's careful not to bruise. "Me, I stay here and learn, and Ms. Tia will run to catch her flight. The end."

"We will see you tomorrow." Ms. Erinle nods. The safety pin is back in her mouth, and she talks through it. "I am certain Adunni will enjoy Ocean Academy."

I mumble an agreement, pick up the bag of uniforms, tell Adunni to change into her normal clothes and meet me outside. I step out into the faint chatter of schoolgirls and reprimanding teachers and ringing bells.

It's a nice school: a neat building within a large compound in Apapa; three blocks of residential flats converted by the owner, which sit behind a large garden bordered with pink and blue flowers.

There is a tree in the middle of the spacious garden, the top of which is a gargantuan crown of twigs and leaves, and I think of the tree in the garden of my childhood home; of how, before it became my meeting point with Boma, I would sit under it and watch the speckled darkness of the night sky through tiny slits in the canopy of its leaves, hoping my mother would feel the anguish of my absence at dinner and come out herself to invite me to eat with her.

The boardinghouse at the back of this red brick building is a tidy dorm of four rooms named and painted after precious gems: Amethyst,

Ruby, Sapphire, and Topaz. The rooms are furnished with metal bunk beds enough for thirty-six girls. Adunni will share Amethyst with two other girls. Her roommates were in an English lesson when we went round, and when I asked if we could peep into the lesson, the matron, a woman with thinning hair dyed blue-black, raised her eyebrows at me and asked if I understood that this was a "highly secure school environment," as if I'd asked permission to kidnap one girl.

I put the bag of uniforms down and lean against a red brick column.

My phone jiggles against the back pocket of my denims. Ken. I let it ring off. Later, I'll send him a text, and when he's home tonight, I'll be ready with a lie for why I must return to Port Harcourt.

Two girls walk past me, laughing at a shared private joke, gripping exercise books in their hands, and something about their uninhibited laughter, the carefree youthfulness of their chatter, sends a surge of tension through me. I try to parcel it, to look out for Adunni, who is taking longer than expected.

The smaller of the girls stops abruptly and turns to ask if I am lost, if I need directions back to the reception. She has a small hook nose and buckteeth, and her English is stilted, like Adunni's, and I am drawn to her in inexplicable ways so that my legs move of their own accord toward her, my arms contracting as the distance between us narrows. Before I can help myself, I am grabbing her by her shoulder, my fingers clawing into her flesh so that she drops her notebook and yells, "Excuse me, ma!" rubbing her shoulder, eyes wide with shock. "You pinch me!"

"I am sorry!" I crouch to pick up and shake the dust out of her notebook. Her name, Ebun Obuke, is scribbled across the top of the cover, her handwriting neat and spaced out.

"I am so sorry, Ebun," I say, rising, unable to stop trembling. "I was . . . I thought I saw something on your shoulder and I . . ." I trail off. My explanation is as useless as my understanding of what just happened. What is wrong with me?

Adunni appears, a ply of toilet paper stuck to her heel. She hurries to join us, glancing at me and the two girls. "Sorry, I keep you waiting! I was doing piss. You okay, Ms. Tia?" She waves at the girl, offering a huge smile. "Adunni is the name. Sorry for that!"

The upset girl curtsies and scuttles off with her friend.

I watch them run off, feeling lightheaded, unhinged. Is it me, or is the air in this school, this environment, toxic?

It's me.

The visit to my mother changed me.

It changed everything.

"Ms. Tia?" Adunni peers at me. "You okay?"

I force a laugh and joke that I am going mad, but I wonder if it's true, and if returning to Port Harcourt tomorrow would cure me of this aberrant lunacy.

My husband isn't due back home for another hour, and so after I tuck Adunni into bed and set the alarm in her room for seven a.m., I make my way to the storage shed behind our kitchen. I don't know what compels me to go there now.

It is more than the conversation I overheard: The familiar pulls me in to the one who understands me without words.

A rush of noise fills my head as I turn the key in the lock and flick the light on. A naked bulb buzzes from the ceiling, illuminating the room with the washed-out amber of a sullen sunset, and it stinks faintly of stale rodent urine, of cockroaches and mothballs, the tiles cold underfoot, the air humid and dense. I put my phone torch on, holding it up to the neat stack of wedding gifts that have remained untouched since we moved in: a box of stainless steel food flasks; a carton of an oversized facial steamer apparatus that came with a manual written in Chinese; two professional, standing hooded hair dryers that do not

belong in a home; ten sets of (ugly) patterned fish-shaped mugs with matching plates; twenty vacuum-sealed bags stuffed with bundles of Swiss lace fabrics and *geles*, which I might have worn if I knew how to tie the bloody things.

I shuffle in, a gentle wind rattling the glass louvers, rustling twigs and debris trapped between the partly open slats. The box I am looking for is behind the bag of fabrics, a solid wood chest with a flat lid swathed in thick cobwebs I am forced to ignore because I don't want to draw my husband's attention to this box, and to the padlock that keeps it secure. I buried the key under a heap of copper coins and rusty keys at the bottom of a clay pot behind the box. The key opens the padlock easily, expectantly—a homeowner returning to a not-quite-abandoned house—with barely a hiss and a click. The air fills with a ringing silence as I pick up the envelope stuffed fat with letters.

It's a haphazard pile, the letters flimsy, delicate. The most recent of the bunch is not what I am after, but I pull it out and unfold it under the torchlight. There is still the faint smell of the ink: fruity, like bubble gum, the words crammed together, the letter unfinished after Ken nearly caught me writing it.

I don't feel the tears forming, but I watch them drop on the paper, diluting the ink to a greenish blue. The words in this letter, like the others, are still vivid in my memory:

December 2014

Dear Boma,

I am sorry I left without saying goodbye: my husband called, and I didn't want to lie to him (again) about being with my mom. I know I promised not to do this anymore because the burden of deceit and guilt is heavy on me and unfair to you, but Bow, I've just found out my husband is infertile!!

I feel like I need to tell him about us.

"Ms. Tia?" I hear her stumbling in, knocking into a carton. "Why is the light not bright?"

I don't have time to hide the envelope and lock the box, so I tuck it underneath my armpit and find Adunni outside, with Ken standing behind her, his arms folded, their backs turned to a crepuscular spray of light across the sky.

He looks tired but pleased to see me.

"Oh . . . hey," I say to Ken, hoping my shock, the catch of my breath, isn't obvious. I close the storage shed door and turn the key in the lock, sweat soaking the edges of the envelope in my armpit.

"I tell the good doctor you are here," Adunni says. "He says you don't like coming to this place because it is smelling of rat piss inside."

"I've missed you." Ken gives me a tender but worried glance. "You were not picking up your phone. And now we find you here? What's up? Come here."

He holds his arms out for a hug, and I trudge into his embrace, my arms pressed to my sides like pins, the envelope trapped underneath.

"I bought dinner," Ken says. I sense him scrutinizing me as I wiggle out of his grip. "Sushi. Adunni says you ate out."

"We eat FKC and chickens!" Adunni proudly announces.

"Adunni had a chicken burger from KFC," I say. "I am not hungry, but thanks."

"What were you doing in there?"

"I was searching for old newspapers for research," I say, observing Adunni still wearing the school uniform. "I thought you'd changed?"

"I keep changing from my nightdress to my uniform to my nightdress," she says. "Sleep was running from me, so when I heard the good doctor calling your name in the parlor, I ran down to tell him you are in the outside. Want me to carry that envelope for you? You keep pinching it tight to yourself."

"I'm good, thanks," I say. "Let's go."

We begin the short walk to the kitchen.

"And your mum?" Ken says. "How is she?"

"Mum's . . ." My windpipe closes in on me, and I am grateful that he cannot see my face. "She's good."

I yank the screen door open, and we step into the warmth of the kitchen, the smell of rice wine, vinegar, and fresh salmon. Adunni does not linger. She darts through the kitchen and shoots up the stairs with a promise to get changed and "truly sleep a deep sleep."

I lean against the fridge door, the sharp edges of holiday magnets probing into the small of my back, my biceps aching from the strain of holding the envelope. "Are you not going up to shower or something?"

"Think you can put your . . . research down?" Ken goes to the sink, washes his hands, shakes them dry. He pulls out a bar stool and perches on the edge of its seat. "I'm going nowhere until I understand what's bugging you. So come sit." He pats the empty stool beside him. "There's scrumptious sushi in the fridge. Turn around and grab it, will you? We have some chilled wine in the wine cooler." He lowers his voice. "Is it Adunni? She is a bit much, isn't she? Is her school stuff stressing you out? It costs a fortune, doesn't it?"

I let out a slow breath and peel myself away from the fridge door. I'll wait until after midnight to hide the letters. Or write one more, or maybe destroy them all. I won't know until I am alone with him again, with Boma.

"Tia?" Ken's eyes follow me across the kitchen. "Can we at least talk?"

I reach the door. "I need to lie down," I say. "Maybe later?"

He nods. "Florence called to ask about Adunni's school."

"And?" I briefly wonder if I ought to be concerned by this, if, given Florence's erratic nature, I ought to panic, but my arm is throbbing and Adunni's admission is secure, and Florence was okay with me taking Adunni away yesterday. "What did she want?"

"Nothing really," Ken says, hopping off the stool and heading toward the fridge. He opens the door, ducks his head in, and rummages about. "She was brief: She asked, and I said Adunni starts school first thing in the morning, and she said she wishes her well." He emerges,

armed with his box of sushi and a bottle of soy sauce, and shuts the fridge door with his shoulder. "Where was I? Yeah. Florence. She said she hopes Adunni does well in school, and she said thanks and hung up. You appear exhausted. Go lie down."

"Good night," I say, letting the door slam shut behind me.

ADUNNI

The time is exactly ten minutes to twelve in the midnight and I cannot sleep.

I am lying down in Ms. Tia's chewing-gum-smelling guest room on a bed with a soft-breast mattress and wearing my school uniform on my body and my school shoe on my feet and my school cap on my head, and I don't know of anybody who ever been able to sleep comfortable like that.

But I am not just anybody.

I am Adunni, a person important enough, and tomorrow I will go to school.

I have been waiting for this moment since before I was winning a scholarship with my essay, since before Ms. Tia came and collected me from the hand of Big Madam and brought me here to her too-sparkling-clean and too-quiet house, so that I can go to learn all the schooling and books I didn't able to learn all my life and become a teacher and be helping the girls inside Ikati, my village.

I sit up. Swing my legs from the bed, put my feet down. The silver

shining buckle of my brand- new shoes makes a *jing* noise, like a tiny bell ringing. I stamp my feet again just to hear it— *jing!*—before I stand and go to the window.

Outside, the night is yawning, stretching itself to sleep, dripping moonlight from its tongue. Soon it will empty itself of darkness, and the sun will climb up on top of it and wave us all good morning from the balcony of the sky, and the tomorrow I have been waiting for since I was around five years of age, since before my mama was dead, since before I was working housemaid for Big Madam in this Lagos, who is having a brain sickness because of how she was always flogging me for no reason, *that tomorrow* will come.

It is very nearly here.

There is a pinch of green light blinking on the bedside table like half a dot of an eyeball in the chin area of the clock. Ms. Tia says this clock has a special name of Alarm Clock. Why a clock needs to be alarming people? Anyway, she set the time on the clock for seven in the morning. It will make a *shree-shree* noise and cause me to alarm myself and jump out of bed so that I don't sleep and forget myself. How can I forget myself and sleep when I have been waiting for this all my life?


SAME AS IT EVER WAS
a novel
CLAIRE LOMBARDO
New York Times bestselling author of The Most Fun We Ever Had

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First Edition

1

It happens in the way that most important things end up having happened for her: accidentally, and because she does something she is not supposed to do. And it happens in the fashion of many happenstantial occurrences, the result of completely plausible decision making, a little diversion from the norm that will, in hindsight, seem almost *too* coincidental: a slight veer and suddenly everything's free-falling, the universe gleefully seizing that seldom chosen Other Option, running, arms outstretched, like a deranged person trying to clear the aisles in a grocery store, which is, as a matter of fact, where she is, the gourmet place two towns over, picking up some last-minute items for a dinner party for her husband, who is turning sixty today.

This one is a small act of misbehavior by any standards, an innocuous Other Option as far as they go: choosing a grocery store that is not her usual grocery store because her usual grocery store is out of crabmeat.

Afterward she will remember having the thought—leaving the first grocery empty-handed—that such a benign change to her routine could lead to something disastrous, something that's not supposed to happen. This is how Mark—scientific, marvelously anxious—has always looked at the world, as a series of choices made or not and the intricate mathematical repercussions thereof. Julia's own brain didn't start working this way until she'd known him for a substantial period of time; prior to that she'd always been content with the notion that making one decision closed the door on another, that there was no grand order to the universe, that nothing *really* mattered that much one way or another; this glaring differ-

ence in character is perhaps what accounts for the fact that Mark dutifully pursued a graduate degree in engineering while Julia neglected to collect her English and Rhetoric diploma from Kansas State.

Now, though, they've been together for nearly three decades and so she did consider—just a fleeting thought—that so cavalierly altering routine could result in some kind of dark fallout, but at the time she'd been envisioning something cinematically terrible, something she wouldn't have encountered had she just forgone the crab instead of driving fifteen minutes west, a cruel run-in with a freight train or a land mine, not with an eighty-year-old woman assessing a tower of kumquats.

Julia doesn't recognize her at first. She doesn't consciously notice her, in fact, nor does she stop; she's headed industriously past the organic produce to seafood, contemplating a drive-by to dry goods to see if they have anything interesting in stock; sometimes the stores in the farther-out suburbs have a more robust inventory. She's considering taking a spin around the whole store, checking out what else they have that hasn't been subject to the frenzied consumption of the usual suspects at her usual grocery, when it hits her; the woman's face registers in her brain belatedly, clad in the convincing disguise—that invisible blanket—of age.

Hers has not been a life lived under the threat of too many ghosts; there's only a small handful of people whom she has truly hoped to never encounter again, and Helen Russo happens to be one of them. So why does she find herself taking a step closer to the endcap of the dry goods aisle, getting out of the flow of traffic so she can turn to look back? It's been over eighteen years, which is somewhat astonishing both given the fact that they used to see each other at least once a week *and* given the smallness of her world, a world in which something as small as altering one's grocery plans can be considered a major decision.

She is unsure, as well, what moves her back to where she came from, but Helen's not in produce anymore, has progressed to the bulk section, where she is weighing out a bag of pine nuts. According to their accompanying sign, they are $16.75 for a half pound, and she remembers becoming aware of such extravagances during

the afternoons she spent at the Russos' house, the heaviness of the cutlery, the paintings that looked suspiciously like originals, the bottles of wine she'd look up when she got home and find to have cost $58.

She is here procuring the ingredients for celebratory crab cakes, one of her husband's favorites. The thought of Mark sets off a momentary swirling of wooziness. She's carrying around an empty basket and, feeling somewhat ridiculous, she tosses in a purple orb of cabbage. In some ways Helen looks predictably much older than she remembers; in others—her optimistic ponytail, the glint of the big blue beads around her neck—she hasn't changed at all. Julia takes a few steps, then a few more. Normally she is the queen of evasion, treats her trips to the grocery like sniper missions, seeing how many faces she can avoid having to interact with; this does not mesh with whatever gregarious phantom has overtaken her body now, impelling her close enough to see the pair of drugstore cheaters propped on top of the woman's head.

"Helen?"

When Helen turns to face her, there's a curious vacancy in her gaze; her eyes trail slowly up and down. Julia thinks to consider how she looks; she runs a hand through her hair. She worries, momentarily, that she'll be mistaken for some kind of miscreant; she's wearing what Alma calls her *clown pants* and one of Mark's old button-downs; she likes to think the combination has miraculously resulted in something extemporaneously stylish, but it's likelier taken her in the opposite direction. It can be hard to tell, in the suburbs, whether an eccentrically clad woman carrying around a single organic cabbage is nomadic or expensively disheveled. She begins to consider how much she herself has changed since last they met, and the volume of those changes hits her forcefully and all at once; she is, upon reflection, more changed than not. She becomes nervily aware of her pulse pumping in her ears. It's entirely within the realm of possibility that Helen won't even *recognize* her—that old worry, so familiar to her, that you haven't meant to someone as much as they meant to you—but then Helen speaks.

"It couldn't be."

The heartbeat sound recedes, overwhelmed by the surrounding

bustle, a woman arguing with the butcher, a man talking into an invisible earpiece, a child in a down vest singing shrilly about a baby shark. Helen's voice is remarkably unchanged; Julia is transported, not unpleasantly, to afternoons in the Russos' backyard, Helen—older, then, still, than Julia is now—imparting her parental platitudes, her pithy one-liners, her candid confessions, all with the confidence and ease of a person who actually enjoyed her life, astonishing to Julia at the time because she herself did not.

"I—thought that was you," she says stupidly.

"Don't tell me I haven't aged a day," Helen says, "or I'll have you assassinated."

Nervous, she laughs. "No, you look—"

"Because I have to say, you look *quite* a bit older, so I must look aeons older."

It's more surprising than insulting—and, to be fair, she *is* quite a bit older—but still she feels herself flush. "I think *aeons* is pushing it."

Now Helen laughs. "Well, you recognized me. That's saying something."

"You look terrific," she says, almost shyly.

"I remember you being a bad liar," Helen says. "Even your *grocery* cart isn't entirely convincing."

They both look down to regard the cabbage. "Just getting started," she breathes.

"How are you?" Helen asks. "Give me the rundown. The bullet points."

"Oh, I—" She's not sure what to say. It occurs to her that the last time she saw Helen was before Alma was in the picture, but it seems a strange thing to announce to a near stranger: *I gave birth! Seventeen years ago!* In fact, the plot points of her life over the last two decades are myriad; so much *bloomed* from that time, toxic and otherwise, tiny green shoots sprouting from ravaged land. A new job, another baby, a doubled-down commitment to her marriage, and then, after that, the way things relaxed into routine: the accrual of acquaintances and the maturation of her children and the adoption of a tiny black terrier mix named Suzanne, the embroidery of daily existence, fabric softener and presidential elections, the dogged forward march of time. The brightly colored billiard

balls of her days—kinetic and pressing, constantly cracking against one another, rerouting and requiring her intervention—suddenly seem trivial. She hasn't seen Helen in eighteen years; it's difficult to account for anything.

"Same old," she says in lieu of all this. "Just—kids, work, et cetera." Her former self would be astonished to see her now, a woman with standing fellow-mom coffee dates and a special Nordstrom credit card and a relative sense of peace.

"*Kids*," Helen says. "Plural?" This was, she recalls, what being with Helen was like, constantly seeing your same old life from brand-new angles, finding dull spots that needed buffing or shiny ones you hadn't noticed: two children! A marvel! Helen lifts her eyebrows theatrically, and then her face opens in recognition. "That's right; the last time I saw you things were—percolating, were they not?"

She'd wondered if Helen would remember. Suddenly she's standing, once again, in the library on that horrible afternoon, seeing the woman for what she thought would be the last time.

"They were," she says. "They—did. A daughter."

"Goodness, I suppose that's what happens when you don't see someone for a hundred years, isn't it? And how's your son? He must be— He was—gosh, the tiniest little thing, wasn't he?"

"Less tiny," she says. "Twenty-four." Ben used to sit at their feet under the table, playing with the vintage trains Helen's husband, Pete, unearthed for him from the basement. She clears her throat. "And you? How are you? How's Pete?"

"Dead," Helen says easily, not missing a beat. "The latter, not the former, though I appear to be, as we have established, not far from it."

"Oh, God." Her sadness is immediate, and surprisingly close to the surface: Pete Russo waving down at her from the roof of their house, Pete Russo letting Ben make bongo drums out of his paint buckets. "Helen, I'm so—"

"I haven't seen you in ages," Helen says. "It's inevitable not everyone would survive."

"I'm sorry."

"I am too," Helen says, and for a second some of her hard-

edged jollity slips away, leaving in its wake something tender and abandoned.

"How are you doing?"

"Oh, fine," she says. "It's been a long time. It'll be—Lord, five years, come August."

"I don't . . ."

"Julia." Helen smiles at her. "It's fine. Let's move on. How about yours?"

"My—?"

"Husband?"

"Oh." The reason she's here, having this unbelievable conversation, instead of home already, awash in the safe boring miasma of party preparation, where the universe surely intended her to be. How is she supposed to account for Mark, Mark whose life was very nearly ruined because of her initial run-in with Helen Russo, Mark who has not, thank God, died in the last eighteen years? "He's—well. He's actually— It's his birthday; that's why I'm—here." She lifts her basket inanely.

"Of course," Helen says after a beat. "The anniversarial cabbage."

She laughs on a delay.

Helen is studying her again, a new expression on her face, equally unreadable. "I should let you get back to it. It really is lovely to see you, though. You look happy."

"Do I?" She doesn't mean to ask.

Helen smiles. "You do."

Now would be an opportune time to tell Helen that she too looks happy; now would also be a perfectly normal opportunity for either one of them to make some effortful remark about *getting together* or *catching up.*

"Enjoy," Julia says ludicrously, gesturing to Helen's cart, which features—she notices now—its own somewhat comical sparsity, four key limes and the little parcel of nuts.

"Uh-huh," Helen says. She touches Julia's arm, and Julia is glad for her long sleeves, covering her goose bumps. "You do the same."

She does not recall collecting her groceries, waiting in the express line, putting them on the conveyor belt.

"Did you remember your reusable bags?" the cashier asks her with accusation.

"I remembered them in spirit," she says, but the cashier doesn't laugh.

She doesn't feel herself fully exhale until she gets into the car. The crabmeat and the cabbage—she felt bad for it, couldn't bring herself to return it to its pyramid—cheerfully ride shotgun beside her. All of her most critical moments with Helen occurred over the course of a few months, but Julia's brain compresses them now, everything happening neatly in the span of a minute, crying in the car to languidly drinking wine on Helen's deck to the last time she saw her at the library, all of it in sixty seconds. She feels dizzy, opens her sunroof and inhales deeply.

On the drive here, she'd been responsibly—if not sort of wearyingly—listening to public radio, but when she gets out of the parking lot she turns on one of her daughter's playlists. Classic rock is back in, so every other song on the list is something she knows, Bowie and the Stones punctuated by bands with novelistic names, You Will See Our Smiling Faces on the Nine Train and Reckon with Your Racist Grandfather or Slight Right for the Sanitary Landfill; she always gets the names wrong and it drives her daughter crazy. She admits she doesn't *get* much of the contemporary music Alma favors, but she has taught herself—constantly, desperately scrambling for her daughter to love her—to appreciate it, and she turns it up even louder, pushes down the window button so she can get some air.

She used to consider herself something of an expert, somewhat *cool;* she and Mark used to go to shows almost every weekend and she could recite the entire Pavement discography in order either of release or personal preference and she'd inured Ben to the same, by osmosis, playing her CDs much louder than she is now while she was driving him to preschool or on one of their daily madcap ventures around town, and this, of course, makes her think of Helen again, and the ghost of Helen's touch on her arm, the unbelievability of the fact that she'd just approached the woman in the first

place, but also of Helen back then, in the succulents room at the botanic garden, Helen sensing her desperation—the hollow-eyed, socially inept young mom in a Jesus and Mary Chain T-shirt she'd been—and plucking her out of the crowd.

The playlist gives way to "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and she cranks it, too loud—the man beside her, stopped at the light, is staring openly—but she turns it up a couple of notches more, merging onto the Eisenhower, glad for the excuse to move fast.

Mark is nowhere to be found when she gets home, which is fortuitous because the second she enters the kitchen she experiences a strange, sudden shakiness, a wobble at the edges of her vision that forces her to sit down hard on one of the stools at the island. She feels Suzanne's small forepaws pressing against her shins, the dog straining up on her hind legs to inspect her, affronted that Julia has not engaged in the usual homecoming fanfare. Suzanne treats Julia's every reappearance—whether she has been gone five minutes or five hours—like a sweepstakes, eyes wild and body vibrating with excitement. Suzanne is the most obsessed with Julia that anyone has ever been, more obsessed with Julia than Julia has ever been with another living being, including her children. It is flattering—if at times unnerving—to be loved this much.

"It's okay, tiny lady," she says to the dog. "I'm just a little out of sorts."

"That is not remotely what happened, but fine," Alma is saying to someone when she comes into the room, then: "Mom?"

She opens her eyes, lifts her head. Her vision clears; her daughter is resplendent and terrifying, Amazonian, with her dark unruly hair and her discerning green eyes. She has an empty mixing bowl tucked against her rib cage and a crushed La Croix can in either hand.

"Hi, Ollie."

The dog whines, and Julia leans down and lifts her up.

"Don't cry," she says into Suzanne's fur.

"You shouldn't police her emotions," Alma says, but then, frowning, asks, "Are you okay?" It's a rare display of interpersonal con-

cern as far as Alma goes, and Julia wishes for a second that she *weren't* okay, that she could call upon her daughter for some kind of nontraumatic assistance, splinter removal or a dislocated shoulder, something that would require close bodily contact with this person she's borne, so long as Alma is—such a rarity from her narcissistic lioness—offering.

As it is, there isn't a way to navigate deftly. To allude to something physiological will make her daughter (who doesn't particularly enjoy her parents' live presence but also doesn't want them *dead*) suspicious and to tell the truth—that she'd been steeling herself for an encounter with her husband following an encounter with the woman who'd almost ended their marriage—is obviously out of the question.

"Fine," she says, and Suzanne wriggles, goes flying off Julia's lap: the dog, like a cat, like her daughter, has a specific set of boundaries, desires constant attention but on very rigid terms. "Fine, fine, fine."

She straightens her spine, rises from the stool and starts moving again; there are never not things that need doing in the kitchen, particularly when Alma has friends over, spills to be mopped or dishes dried or refuse—two denuded apple cores, the purple rind of an expensive wine-cured goat cheese—that will not make its own way to the trash can.

Mercifully, Alma accepts this, ready, with that unbridled teenage confidence, for the focus to return rightfully and exclusively to her.

"They called to reschedule my dentist appointment," she says. "Dr. Gallagher had a death in the family."

"Oh, that's—"

"Which is actually good because we're doing an AP Euro study group this week at the library—I mean good that it got canceled, not good that someone died—so I was wondering too if maybe I can use the car, so you won't have to come pick me up super late every night?"

Alma had been a wildly clingy kid, but now she is a mostly autonomous and wholly inscrutable seventeen-year-old; she is mean and gorgeous and breathtakingly good at math; she has inside jokes

with her friends about inexplicable things like Gary Shandling and avocado toast, paints microscopic cherries on her fingernails and endeavors highly involved baking ventures, filling their fridge with oblong bagels and six-layer cakes.

"I'm asking now because last time you told me I didn't give you enough notice," she says. She has recently begun speaking conversationally to Julia and Mark again after nearly two years of brooding silence, and now it's near impossible to get her to stop. She regales them with breathless incomprehensible stories at the dinner table; she delivers lengthy recaps of midseason episodes of television shows they have never seen; she mounts elaborate and convincing defenses of things she wants them to give her, or give her permission to do. Conversing with her is a mechanical act requiring the constant ability to shift gears, to backpedal or follow inane segues or catapult from the real world to a fictional one without stopping to refuel. There's not a snowball's chance in hell that she won't be accepted next month to several of the seventeen exalted and appallingly expensive colleges to which she has applied, and because Julia would like the remainder of her tenure at home to elapse free of trauma, she responds to her daughter as she did when she was a napping baby, tiptoeing around her to avoid awakening unrest. The power dynamic in their household is not unlike that of a years-long hostage crisis.

"We'll see," she says, and then, before Alma can protest: "You have company?" She hears at least two voices coming from the living room and is fairly certain that one of them belongs to Margo Singh.

Alma drops the cans into the recycling bin. "Yup." Her daughter has declined to provide any helpful insight with respect to Margo and, more specifically, the ties that bind them; any efforts Julia has made to garner details on their relationship have been met with derision, the silent suggestion that her views of relationships are far too rigid.

"She's not my girlfriend," Alma said recently. "But she's also—not *not* my girlfriend. Nobody calls it that anymore, Mom."

Julia had refrained, then, from asking *nobody calls it what?* Alma's Privacy, in an ever-shifting order of priority among Alma's Grades

and Alma's Burgeoning Political Opinions and Alma's Minute Existential Desires, is a popular topic of late. Plus Julia likes Margo; she wishes the girl made a little more noise when she walked—she has a tendency to appear mournfully from the shadows like a gravedigger—but she seems to have a good head on her shoulders, and she seems to be making Alma happy.

"Lovely," she says. "Where's Dad? Is your brother here yet?"

Alma makes a little how-should-I-know hum. She sets her bowl into the sink, then seems to sense Julia's gaze and reaches for the dish brush. "What are you cooking?"

"An assortment," she says absently, opening one cupboard and then the next, pulling out items at will and depositing them on the island. "Those little quiches. Cucumber salad. Crab cakes." She's assembling her tools, the celery, the bread crumbs; she had actually, prior to the afternoon's interruption, been looking forward to the preparation, labor-intensive enough to feel impressive but not so much as to preclude her also doing nineteen other things simultaneously. She knows better than to expect much help from her children.

Alma turns to face her, affronted. "God, Mom, really?" She's behaving as though she's just been shot, and Julia looks around, startled, for some newly introduced trauma, but everything seems the same, the bowl in her daughter's hands dripping dishwater onto the floor.

"What?" she asks, alarmed.

"I told you I'm off seafood," Alma says. "I told you that *weeks* ago."

She considers this. She wishes—horribly, a not uncommon desire when speaking to her daughter—that she could simply evaporate from this conversation. She feels, too, unbelievably tired, stymied by gravity; so much of motherhood has, for her, been this particular feeling, abject disbelief that she's not only expected but obligated to do *one more thing.*

"Did you forget?"

"*Forget* is a strong word," she says, and she extracts a bushel of cilantro from the door of the fridge. In fact she does remember; she'd just been hoping that the conversation on what Alma referred

to as *incremental veganism*, like many conversations with teens, could be swept under the rug within a few days, replaced by something uniquely, inexplicably pressing.

She inhales slowly, deeply, through her nose, until she feels the air expand at the base of her throat. She halfheartedly attended prenatal yoga classes before Ben was born, unaware at the time that the breathing exercises therein would aid her not during childbirth but instead, two decades later, in violence prevention against her teenage daughter.

"Why are you *breathing* like that?"

"Just—getting some oxygen," she says. "To my brain."

"You told me you'd think about our cutting out animal products as a family," Alma says, with an affected measure in her voice that makes Julia want to push her down a well.

"Honey, if you don't want to eat it, you don't have to. Plenty of other options."

"Are you *mocking* me?" Alma asks, and gestures to Julia's hands, in which she is holding—unthinkingly, like a volleyball or a severed head—her decoy cabbage.

She wants to laugh, fights the impulse to laugh, feels tears spring to her eyes instead.

"Why are you making that *face*?" Alma asks.

Mark's entrance is a merciful interruption. He's sweaty, back from a run, wearing his Lycra shorts and, strapped around his waist, the collapsible water bottle that she recently likened to a colostomy bag. He too bends to pet Suzanne, greeting her like he hasn't seen her in a decade; they have all, since her arrival into their family, rearranged themselves around Suzanne in this way, though it has been suggested that Julia has rearranged herself the most.

"What's that bracelet?" asks Alma. "You look extra weird today."

He lifts his wrist, encircled with a strip of molded purple plastic, the pedometer prototype they're testing at his work that Julia's been hearing about ad nauseam for months. "The commercial ones are historically inaccurate," he says.

"Maybe," Alma says, "but they don't look like *that*."

"Tough crowd in here," Mark says, putting his arm around his

daughter; she mewls some protest but lets him, even leans her head against him, sweat and all. Julia herself has not been in such close physical proximity to Alma in ages; she emits a powerful radiant energy that keeps her mother, though notably not her father, whom she likes a lot more, at bay.

Mark comes to kiss Julia, and Alma watches them, repulsed. They are a family whose clock is always slightly askew, affections misplaced and offenses outsized. But it's better, she thinks—please, God, it must be better—than the complete absence thereof.

"Is this what we're having for dinner?" Mark asks, palming the cabbage like a crystal ball, and Alma lets out a monstrous sigh before disappearing from the room. They both listen to the dull thump of her socked footsteps stalking into the den.

"Improv," she says. "For your birthday."

Mark puts his hands on her shoulders. "What are you making?"

"Animal products."

"Can I help?"

"Nope." She makes her voice bright, turns to face him. "My gift to you."

"Plus all this." He indicates the spread before them on the counter, the firing squad of Malbecs along the sink, the groceries. She wonders if anyone else at the store had noticed her trundling up to Helen Russo, brazen in her clown pants. Mark has a hand at the nape of her neck, kneading gently. There must be some marital sixth sense that induces one party—unknowingly wronged—to suddenly behave with excess integrity, effectively increasing the guilt of the wrongdoer. It makes her nervous.

"Go shower," she says, and swats him with a dish towel. "Make yourself presentable."

She watches him leave the room, rakes a hand through her hair, tries to channel the energy she had an hour ago, her pre-Helen energy, focused on the task at hand. She'll julienne the cabbage, turn it into a slaw. Sometimes she catches herself thinking thoughts like these—*I forgot to pay the lawn guy; Suzanne's dog food delivery comes on Wednesday*—and she's amazed by her own ridiculousness.

"Life is a struggle for us all," she intones sometimes, to make

Mark laugh, watching the asshole day trader next door yelling at his contractor, or a squirrel suspended upside down stealing seed from their cardinal feeder, but they're no different, really; she has grown comfortable dwelling in her own ludicrous minutiae.

Julienne the cabbage, for fuck's sake; it is a point of astonishment, really, how improbably lovely her life has become.

2

Things hadn't been lovely back then, far from it, those foggy, cotton-swaddled days before she'd met Helen Russo, days so interminably long and paralytically monotonous that she couldn't distinguish one from another. Twenty years ago, one house ago. They'd moved from the city to the middlebrow part of a highbrow suburb, enrolled Ben at Serenity Smiles, which, she thought, sounded like the name of a not particularly expensive stripper, or a high-end rehab facility, though it was in fact—or as well—one of the most exclusive preschools in the area. She refused to call their town by its given name, had begun, irritating Mark to no end, referring to it as *Pinecone Junction. The Suburbs*, mecca for successful adults with incomprehensible job titles and their disillusioned stay-at-home spouses, oak trees and opulence and artfully disguised despair. They stretched on for miles, the street signs and the artisanally preserved cobblestone roads, station wagons and all-terrain strollers, acres of dense manicured foliage, palatable lawn signs, self-conscious displays of affinity for particular tradesmen, self-conscious showings of tepid political affiliation, plaques commemorating nothing at all, and you weren't even allowed to *drive* normally; not infrequently she'd find herself on a street with a speed limit of 15 mph, like something out of olden times. Everyone liked to think their suburb was the best suburb, but really they were all the same, slight variations in proximity to the lake or degree of amorphous "diversity" or "historical significance" but ultimately a wash. Their street was called *Superior*, but her amusement about this, after a few months, had worn thin, along with almost everything else.

What had happened? Who knew. The world started falling apart, or she and Mark forgot how to talk to each other, or perhaps it was just her temperature dropping, settling back to where it was comfortable. They'd left the city around the time Ben started walking, and he was now fully and confidently mobile, if not especially graceful, and also miraculously fluent in both English and a bit of Spanish, which they taught on Wednesdays at Serenity Smiles; Julia, meanwhile, felt static, like she'd been embalmed. She wasn't sleeping; her internal monologue had taken on a caffeinated, nervy quality, the unpunctuated warbling of a crackpot, and she was aware—in her rare interactions with fellow adults—that her external monologue might be exhibiting some of the same mania.

She'd begun to notice that when she wasn't waiting for something to happen—something pedestrian, like Ben waking up from a nap, or sometimes something implausibly awful, like an asteroid falling from the sky—she felt entirely unmoored, brooding, usually while staring pensively into the middle distance like a disenfranchised Victorian nursemaid.

She didn't hear Mark enter the kitchen.

"Are you okay?" Like he'd found her tangled in barbed wire. It was his favorite question to ask her of late, always with an ingratiating softness to his voice.

She straightened. "I thought I saw something stuck in the garbage disposal."

Mark shuddered a little. He had a visceral antipathy for any kind of mysterious food product, things rotten or globular or simply unidentified. He touched her shoulder lightly as he passed en route to the coffeepot, did not ask any follow-up questions regarding the disposal, the potential for dark mystery therein.

"I wish this week could just skip right to Friday," he said, seemingly unaware of both the childishness and the banality of this statement, stirring sugar into his coffee. "I woke up already overwhelmed. Doesn't that seem like a bad sign?"

Julia, on the rare occasions she slept, frequently awakened preemptively dreading whatever was to come and retroactively dreading what had already elapsed, but because Mark was wearing a tie and had a master's degree, and because Julia's woes were

frequently foregrounded in dealings with Duplo architecture and coerced carrot consumption, Mark was more vocally allowed to rue his responsibilities; that was just the way the world worked. She had long since stopped trying to envision his days out of both boredom and jealousy.

How *dull* their life had become, zero to platitudes in ten seconds flat; surely this put them in the running for some kind of sleepy Olympic victory. *Remember our honeymoon in Greece*, she did not say. *Remember when we had sex standing up in an alley in Corfu while a rat watched; remember when we had sex in the bathroom of a Frank's Nursery & Crafts; remember when we had sex in a—*

"Jules?"

"Mm." She blinked, was met once again with his furrowed concern. "Yes, definitely a bad sign."

The furrow deepened; apparently she had missed some intervening remark. "I asked what you were doing today," he said.

"The same thing I do every day," she said. "Oh the wonders that await."

He looked at her over his shoulder. "I ran into Erica when I was cutting the grass the other day; she mentioned she'd like to get her son together with Ben. Why don't you call her?"

"Who's *Erica*?"

"The woman who lives a few blocks down, the one who goes jogging with the toddler in the little cart behind—"

She wrinkled her nose. "The one with the face?"

"Julia, come on."

She stared at him, this man who wanted to fix everything. The solutions to his own problems tended to be less complicated than hers; they always had been. She was so lonely it had started to feel like a corporeal affliction.

"What would I do with her?" she asked.

"I don't know," he mused, his back to her, poking around in the fridge. "Mom things."

It instantly enraged her. "What do you mean, *mom things*?"

"I just mean—you could go for a walk. Or maybe like a book club?"

"Ah, yes, *walking*. A storied *mom* tradition."

"You know what I—"

"I would rather die than join a book club."

It was boring to rue the suburbs; she was aware of this. She pictured the anthropology of her life like layers of shale, jagged and delicate, crumbling, but all, fundamentally, indistinguishable shades of gray. She lived elsewhere. Then she did not live elsewhere. It was all the same, really; everywhere, eventually, became elsewhere. It was a cliché to be this person; she got bored just thinking about it, the sadness over nothing, the fact that she was resentful of the easiest life in the world. And yet she couldn't help herself.

"Okay, Julia, forget I—"

"I just don't understand what you mean by *mom things.* That's like saying *oh you know, one of those things people who wear sweaters do. One of those things right-handed people do.* It's not like being a *mom* is a different—species or something."

"You know what I mean, Jules. It might be nice to—have some other people around."

"I have you," she said, and he softened.

"Of course you do," he said, and then he did come over and hug her, his chest solid against her cheek.

In fact, she'd been looking forward to today, Wednesday, a Serenity Smiles day for Ben and thus a potentially quiet day for herself; she would chain-smoke in the car and drive up to Forest Glen, stomp around in the woods, stretch out on a big warm rock like a sacrificial offering and just, for a little bit, not have anyone *staring* at her. But now she felt bad, bad for looking forward to being away from their child and bad for not being better at structuring her time, for not filling her free hours with cultural stimuli and age-appropriate acquaintances.

"Are you all right?" Mark asked, pulling back to look at her. "You look tired."

And though it was true, though she'd been awake since 3:10 and if she drank a fourth ineffectual cup of coffee she'd be jittery until sundown but still bone-deep exhausted, she felt slightly wounded.

"Had you wooed me with such agility in our nascent stages I might not have married you," she said, but she forgot to put the lightness in her voice and she heard how it sounded as it came out

of her mouth. Mark heard it too; his face—that sweet face!—fell not insignificantly. She wanted to punch him.

"Ouch," he said.

"Whoops," she said. It wasn't his fault; it really wasn't: her turn to touch him gently, barely, like he was coated in something sticky.

"Sorry," she said, just as he was saying, "I love you," and they sort of mashed their cheeks together in a goodbye, and she listened to the front door open and close as he left for work.

Ben's arrival was, as always, a balm; he appeared like a sunbeam in the kitchen doorway, cheek pillow-creased and big eyes still blinking away sleep, his stuffed giraffe dangling from a tiny hand. She felt her heart open, her face relax in a smile, her joy, in such short supply, reserved exclusively for him.

"There's my guy," she said, and his face opened too and she lifted him into her arms, kissing both her son and his giraffe good morning, breathing him in, the sun itself.

Oh God, oh, God, my best friend is three, she thought sometimes. She'd recently tried to explain this to Mark when he'd suggested—using slightly kinder verbiage—that perhaps it would do her some good to find some friends her own age. Of course she knew that Ben was not her friend but her *child*, but the realization somehow had not struck her until Mark pointed it out to her, and the loneliness that followed—loneliness on top of loneliness, loss from what was already such a sparsely populated space—was startlingly powerful; it was so easy lately to kick her when she was down, even unintentionally—and it was never intentional with Mark, the nicest man in the world—because she was always down, not even to be kicked, necessarily, but tripped over, a standing date—a stagnant entity—for emotional casualty.

"Are you sad?" Ben asked, surprising her, and she swallowed the impulse to cry, though surely he was used, by now, to the sight of her tears.

"Of course not," she said into his head. "Mama's so happy." She felt wisps of his hair between her lips. She had the urge sometimes, fierce and instinctual, to eat him. "Sweet, my sweet, you make Mama so, so happy."

. . .

Later they were in the car on the way to Serenity Smiles, Ben recounting a dream he'd had about something he called an "alone Beagle" playing on a playground; the protagonists of Ben's dreams rarely succumbed to anything but the passage of time, moving merrily from one location to another. Most of Ben's dreams were like this, highly imagistic, nontraumatic, things simply *happening*, time going by.

"Our son, Virginia Woolf," she'd joked to Mark not too long ago.

"And Mama?" Ben said. "We wanted to pet him but we did *not* pet him."

"No we didn't!" she agreed, false cheer bordering on mania. She had not been paying attention. She herself was dreaming of ten minutes from now, when she could hightail it onto the freeway, the Replacements so loud on her expensive sound system that it shook the steering wheel—even though she knew that she would miss Ben's presence in the backseat. Parenthood was a persistent cruelty, a constant, simultaneous desire to be together and apart. She dreamed sometimes of violent deaths, her Subaru crushed beneath a semi; a swim in Lake Michigan that ended in slow downward slippage, her feet dusting the cold silty grains of its deepest point. And it comforted her to think about it, about how nothing was forever, how even the monotonous vise grip of her existence could be obliterated by the intervention of nature or circumstance.

She realized, stopped at a light, that she was crying. And it was less the crying itself that scared her—she was crying as often as she wasn't lately, it seemed—than the fact that she hadn't even *noticed*, that she was able to persist, business as usual, this run-of-the-mill sadness just leaking out of her, subtle as breath.

"Are you okay," Ben said. Children confounded her, their baffling mix of acuity and guilelessness.

"Mama's fine, lovey," she said, taking refuge in the parentally sanctioned use of the third person. She'd never had a proper set of tools, but it had mattered less before; now there were others involved.

The loneliness of motherhood; the deadly ennui of the day-in-day-out. So much *life* around her, this electric little person cocreated by her warm industrious husband, a man more comfortably attuned than she to the mundane vagaries of normal life, and all she could think was that she wished she were alone. Life she'd created, living itself, and all she could conjure was how nice it would be if Ben wasn't here, if instead he was elsewhere, one of those few places you were allowed to send your kids, a playdate, perhaps, where he would be fed ants on a log by someone else's mother, a real mother who would flush instead of cringe at his shrieks of delight. The amount of *energy* it took—she thought of her insides sometimes as a slowly leaking battery, an acidic alkaline fizz eating away at her organs—the amount of *effort* it took to bring her voice to a register he'd recognize.

She turned up the stereo, "No Sleep Till Brooklyn," to which she'd taught Ben to head-bang, but he just regarded her gravely in the rearview, stable and still. Her son was not a typical child, not one of the corpulent cherubs she'd imagined during her pregnancy—they'd come to her in dreams, rosters of fat, buoyant children like so many amenable pastries, telling jokes, wearing dungarees, spreading joy. But Ben was tiny, a wisp, and serious, so much so that she worried, often, whether he was enjoying his life as he should be. His gazes were penetrative and mature, his silences meditative and monastic. He was making her nervous; she focused on the road.

When she pulled into the drop-off lane she felt her breathing slow in increments; she was in such proximity, now, to her aloneness, so very close. But when Megan the Serenity Smiles lackey opened the back door to extract Ben from his car seat, he yowled. Ben was not a yowler; Ben was easygoing and soft-spoken; Ben had a good sense, for better or worse, of when his mother needed her alone time, and he almost never put up a fight.

"Sweetheart," she said. His time at preschool tended to fly by for her. She could only be gone so long, only smoke so many cigarettes. She looked up at Megan, an apologetic young brunette in a Patagonia vest, and forced her best weary-mom smile. "Darling, it's time for school."

"No," said Ben.

"Honey, you have to let Megan undo your belt so you can go inside and have tons of fun." It was unbelievable that kids fell for shit like that. The items on Ben's agenda for the day were "TP ghost bowling" and "G is for Going on a Germ Hunt," his midday snack a single organic graham cracker. It would be hard for anyone to rally enthusiasm.

And yet he always did. He always willingly kissed her goodbye and returned to her in the afternoon drowsy and proud, proffering modified toilet paper rolls and unidentifiable creatures made from Q-tips.

"No," Ben said, and he sounded eerily like Mark in the moment, measured and no-nonsense. Julia looked beseechingly at Megan, who was not paid nearly enough to deal with the moneyed unpleasantness of the Serenity Smiles moms, let alone field the emotional unraveling of the school's most reclusive parent. *Please God help me.*

"Maybe you should walk him in today," Megan said, shrugging, and before Julia could reply she had closed the door and moved on to the next car.

Julia drove half a block up to the lot and parked, turned around to look at Ben.

"Do you want Mama to walk you inside today, squirrel?" she asked. It still baffled her that Ben ever fell for *that*, either, the false brightness of her voice, her arbitrary terms of endearment. *Shall we take our bath now, my Popsicle stick?* She never walked him in. She avoided, at all costs, breaching the actual façade of the Serenity Smiles building. She normally fought her way through the carpool lines like a salmon, fighting against the flow to pick up her child with little to no human interaction. She looked with longing at the imposing outline of the building, but she could not, she was certain, handle the inevitable car-accident glee of the other parents when she—the resident hermit mom—came skulking in with her wailing, protesting son. All bets were off when someone else's child was misbehaving or having a tantrum, everyone watching but avoiding eye contact, like when a stranger had a mental breakdown on the subway, a mix of superiority and voyeurism, *thank God that isn't me* plus *ooh, what'll she do next?*

In the rearview, he looked at her sternly. "No."

"Please, Benji," she said desperately. "Mama's got places to be."

Mama's got to be alone today or she might self-immolate.

"No," he said again, and she rested her forehead on the sun-warmed steering wheel.

"Please," she said. "I'm sorry, Ben, honey, please, I'm sorry I'm like this; I just need a little bit of alone time." She started to cry again, and then so did he, the more disturbing because it was such an anomaly, the crying of a very sad adult, not an overtired child.

"Sweetheart," she said. "My sweetheart." And it moved her all the way to the backseat, vaulting the console like a Clydesdale and unbuckling him from his car seat, pulling him into her lap. He wept a big navy blob onto her turquoise T-shirt. She stroked his fine dark hair, her tiny, tiny boy. And she was filled with guilt, base-level guilt over the fact that this impossibly small person was so attuned to her moods, conversant not only in English and beginner Spanish but also in the peaks and valleys of his mother's vacillating emotional state; she'd sworn since before he was born that she would never make him worry about her the way she always worried about her own parents, but it had happened anyway; she had let it happen anyway.

"I'm sorry, sweet," she said, and he tightened his arms around her. "Don't worry about Mama," she said, though she knew it wasn't that simple, and suspected, darkly, that the damage had already been done, that she'd failed at her one job. "Don't ever worry about Mama."

"Can I come with?" he asked, beginning to calm, eyes on the prize, looking up at her equably and blinking away tears from his long lashes.

And she laughed, felt the flat disk of his patella, small as a silver dollar, under the soft grain of his tiny corduroys.

"Should we play hooky, little moose?"

He nodded gravely.

"Let's go somewhere together," she said, and she felt a relief as she said it, because that was what you were supposed to do, wasn't it, put your kids first no matter what, no matter how much you wanted to go rogue? "Let's go on an adventure."

They drove again, slowly over the speed bumps down the alley

from Serenity Smiles. How could she ever not want him there behind her in his car seat, her boy with his tiny arms waving to the music? They liked *Summerteeth* and *London Calling* and anything by the Talking Heads. They liked "Debaser" and "Beercan" and "Oh! You Pretty Things." They liked the entirety of *Slanted and Enchanted* because of its alternation between gaiety and screaming. And Ben would lose his shit whenever "Blister in the Sun" came on, demanding she start it over the second it had finished, *again*, *Mama*, *again*, *again*, *ha ha ha ha ha*.

When she merged onto 290, she pressed the button to change the CD: *Pleased to Meet Me*, another shared favorite. She met his eyes in the rearview again, complicitous now, as "I Don't Know" started to play. It was post–morning rush hour; they zipped by the Medical District, through the Congress Tunnel, a little stop-and-go down Jackson, and then they were on LSD, the lake blurring by. How could she ever have not wanted him back there?

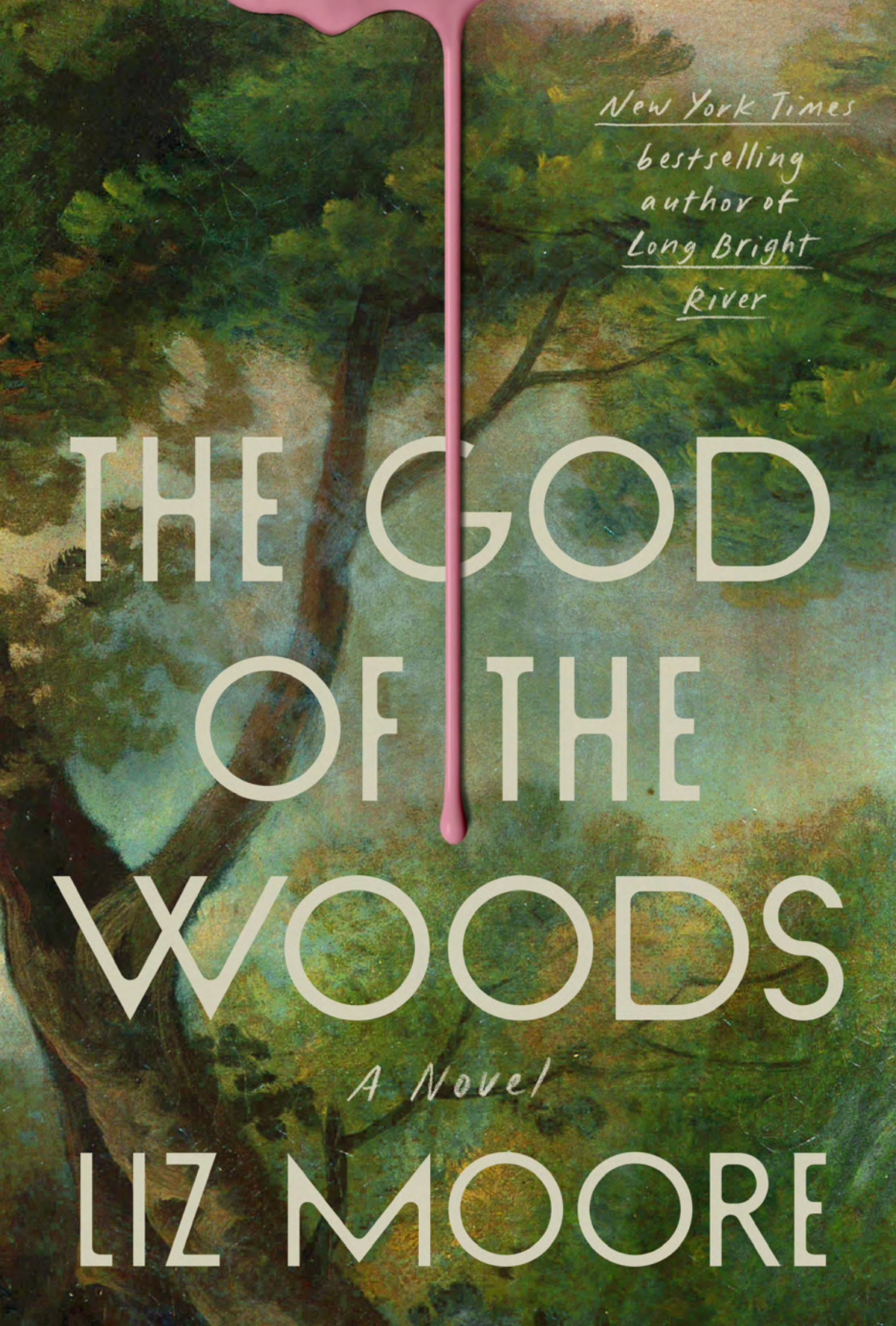
"*Are you guys still around?*" she sang when it was her turn.

"*I don't know!*" Ben sang back.

And she had the lurking impression of having spared them both from something—she was not sure what. She met his eyes again in the rearview. She knew how close she was to the edge but not that Helen Russo would appear, in just an hour's time, at the botanic garden, to walk her back from it.

"*Whatcha gonna do with your lives?*"

"*Nothin'!*"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Map on page xiii by the author.

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BOOK DESIGN BY MEIGHAN CAVANAUGH

Louise

August 1975

The bed is empty.

Louise, the counselor—twenty-three, short-limbed, rasp-voiced, jolly—stands barefoot on the warm rough planks of the cabin called Balsam and processes the absence of a body in the lower bunk by the door. Later on, the ten seconds that pass between sight and inference will serve to her as evidence that time is a human construct, that it can slow or accelerate in the presence of emotion, of chemicals in the blood.

The bed is empty.

The cabin's single flashlight—the absence of which is used, even in daylight, to indicate that campers have gone to the latrines—is in its home on a shelf by the door.

Louise turns slowly in a circle, naming the girls she can see.

Melissa. Melissa. Jennifer. Michelle. Amy. Caroline. Tracy. Kim.

Eight campers. Nine beds. She counts and counts again.

At last, when she can no longer defer it, she lets one name bob to the surface of her mind: *Barbara*.

The empty bed is Barbara's.

She closes her eyes. She imagines herself returning, for the rest of her life, to this place and this moment: a lonely time traveler, a ghost, haunting the cabin called Balsam, willing a body to appear where there is none. Willing the girl herself, Barbara, to walk through the door. To say she has

been in the washroom, to say she forgot the rule about taking the flashlight, to apologize disarmingly, as she has done before.

But Louise knows that Barbara won't do any of these things. She senses, for reasons she can't quite articulate, that Barbara is gone.

Of all the campers, Louise thinks. Of all the campers to go missing.

At 6:25 a.m., Louise walks back through a curtain into the space she shares with Annabel, the counselor-in-training. She's seventeen, a ballet dancer from Chevy Chase, Maryland. Annabel Southworth is closer in age to the campers than she is to Louise, but she stands upright and infuses her words with irony and in general works to ensure that everyone recognizes the firm line between thirteen and seventeen—a line made manifest by the plywood partition that separates the main part of the cabin from the counselors' corner.

Now, Louise shakes her awake. Now, Annabel squints. Crooks an elbow over her eyes dramatically. Sinks back into sleep.

Louise is becoming aware of something: the smell of metabolized beer. She had assumed it was coming from her own body—from her own skin and mouth. She certainly drank enough last night to feel the effects this morning. But standing over Annabel, she wonders whether the smell, in fact, has been coming from Annabel's side of the room.

Which concerns her.

"*Annabel*," Louise whispers. In her tone, she suddenly recognizes the sound of her own mother. And in some ways she feels like her mother—her bad mother, her irresponsible mother—in relation to this girl.

Annabel opens her eyes. She sits up and winces immediately. She meets Louise's gaze and her eyes widen, her face becomes pale.

"I'm gonna be sick," she says—too loudly. Louise shushes her, grabs at the first vessel she can reach—an empty bag of potato chips on the floor.

Annabel lunges for the bag. Retches. Then raises her head, panting, groaning lowly.

"Annabel," Louise says. "Are you hungover?"

Annabel shakes her head. Scared.

"I think I," she says—and again Louise shushes her, sitting down on the girl's bed this time, counting to five in her mind, the way she has done since she was a small child. Training herself not to react.

Annabel's chin is trembling. "I think I ate something bad," she whispers.

"Did you go out last night?" says Louise. "Annabel?"

Annabel watches her. Calculating.

"This is important," says Louise.

Normally she has patience for her CITs. She is practiced in guiding them through their first hangovers. Doesn't mind when they indulge a little on a night off. As head counselor this year, she generally turns a blind eye to behavior she deems harmless. Partakes in it herself, when the moment feels right. But she otherwise runs a tight ship; earlier this summer, the first counselor to fail to wake up on time after a night of carousing was banned from the next several parties, and that seemed to set enough of an example that no one has repeated the mistake.

Until now. Because last night, while Louise went out, it was Annabel's turn to be on duty. And Annabel, apparently, wasn't.

Louise closes her eyes. Runs through the events of last evening.

There was a dance in the community room: the end-of-session dance, which all campers, counselors, and CITs were required to attend. She recalls noticing, at a certain point, that Annabel seemed to be absent—she couldn't set eyes on her, anyway—but Louise is certain that she was back by the end of the dance.

Because at eleven p.m., when Louise did a quick head count, Annabel was there, along with nine campers—yes, nine—who waved to Louise sweetly as they said good night. She can still see the back of them, walking in little clusters toward Balsam.

This was the last time she saw them. Louise, assured that Annabel was in charge, went off on her own.

Next, she tries to picture the campers' beds as she tiptoed into the cabin at the end of the night, well after curfew. This would have been at—what—two in the morning? Three? Images return to her in fragments:

Melissa R's open mouth, Amy's arm hanging down toward the floor. But Barbara herself is nowhere among these memories. Nor is the absence of Barbara.

A different memory asserts itself instead: John Paul, in the Clearing, as he windmilled his arms, first in her direction and then in Lee Towson's. John Paul with his rich-kid approach to the fight, brandishing his fists as if he were entering a ring. Lee wild and scrappy, still in his apron from dinner service. He made short work of John Paul, left him on the ground, blinking absently up toward the branches overhead.

There will be trouble today. There always is when John Paul gets the notion that she's fooling around on him.

For the record: she isn't, this time.

Annabel comes up for air. Puts a hand over her eyes.

"Do you know where Barbara is?" asks Louise. Cutting to the chase. There's not much time: soon the girls in the other room will be waking.

Annabel looks confused.

"Van *Laar*," says Louise, and then she says it again, more quietly. "Our camper."

"No," says Annabel, and collapses backward on her bed.

It is then, of course, that reveille sounds over the speakers mounted on trees throughout the campground—meaning that on the other side of the plywood partition, eight twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls are reluctantly waking up, making their small noises, exhalations and sighs, propping themselves up on elbows.

Louise begins pacing.

Annabel, still horizontal, now watches her—beginning to understand the problem.

"Annabel," says Louise. "You need to be honest here. Did you go back out last night? After the campers were in bed?"

Annabel appears to hold her breath. Then she exhales. Nods. Her eyes, Louise notices, are filling with tears.

"Yes, I did," she says. There's a childish tremor in her voice. She has very rarely been in trouble in her life: of this Louise is certain. She is a

person who has been told, since birth, about her value in this world. The ways she makes others happy. She is crying openly now, and Louise struggles not to roll her eyes. What does Annabel have to be afraid of? There's nothing at stake for her. She's seventeen years old. The worst thing that could happen to Annabel is that she might be dismissed, sent up the hill to her rich parents—who are friends, in fact, with the owners of the camp. Who are, at this very moment, guests at their house on the grounds. Meanwhile, the worst thing that might happen to Louise—an *adult*, thinks Louise, castigating herself—the worst thing that might happen is—well. Don't make too many leaps, she tells herself. Just stay in the present.

Louise walks to the curtain. Pulls it back ever so slightly. In doing so, she catches the eye of Tracy, Barbara's bunkmate, a quiet girl who stands paused on the bunk's ladder in mid-descent, having noticed, apparently, the issue.

Louise drops the curtain.

"Is she missing?" Annabel says. Again, Louise shushes her.

"Don't say *missing*," says Louise. "Say she's not in her bunk."

Louise scans their little room, looking for evidence of their behavior last night. She gathers what she finds into a brown paper garbage bag: an empty bottle of beer that she drank on the walk back from the Clearing; the end of a joint that she smoked at some point; the vomit-filled potato chip bag, which she handles with two stiff fingers.

"Is there anything else you wouldn't want someone finding?" she asks Annabel, who shakes her head.

Louise closes the garbage bag, folds it, makes it compact.

"Listen to me," she says. "You might have to be in charge of the campers this morning. I'm not sure yet. If that happens, you need to get rid of this. Just put it in the garbage enclosure on the walk to breakfast. It needs to be gotten rid of. Can you do that?"

Annabel nods, still green.

"Right now," she says to Annabel, "just stay here. Don't come out for a while. And don't—" She hesitates, searching for words that sound serious but not self-incriminating. She's talking, after all, to a child. "Just don't say anything about last night to anyone, yet. Let me think a few things over."

Annabel goes quiet.

"Okay?" says Louise.

"Okay."

She'll fold immediately, Louise thinks. She will unswervingly tell every authority figure everything that happened and everything she knows. She'll cry on the shoulders of her mother and father, who probably didn't even understand the poem they named their daughter for, and she'll be comforted by them, and resume her ballet lessons, and next year she'll be pipelined into Vassar or Radcliffe or Wellesley by her prep school, and she'll marry the boy her parents have chosen for her—already, she has confessed to Louise, they have one in mind—and she will never, ever think of Louise Donnadieu again, or the fate that will befall Louise, or the trouble Louise will have, for the rest of her life, getting a job, getting housing, supporting her mother, who for seven years now has been unable or unwilling to work. Supporting her little brother, who at eleven has done nothing at all to deserve the life he has been given.

In front of her, Annabel gags. Recovers.

Louise puts her hands on her hips. Breathes. Slow down, she reminds herself.

She squares her shoulders. Pulls back the curtain. Begins the work of feigning ignorance and surprise for this small group of girls who—she swallows her shame like a pill—who look up to her, admire her, frequently come to her for advice and protection.

She steps into their room. Pantomimes scanning the beds. Furrows her brow in a show of confusion.

"Where's Barbara?" she says to them, brightly.

Tracy

Two Months Earlier
June 1975

Three rules were given to the campers upon their arrival.

The first concerned food in the cabins, and the way it was to be consumed and stored (neatly; tightly).

The second pertained to swimming: an activity that was not, under any circumstances, to be undertaken solo.

The third—the most important, as evidenced by its display, in capital letters, in several communal locations—was WHEN LOST SIT DOWN AND YELL.

At the time, this admonition struck Tracy as almost funny. It would be repeated later that night, at the opening campfire; its logic would be explained. But presented as it was in that moment, forthrightly, succinctly, by a tall male counselor who spoke the words without punctuation or emotion—the phrase made her look away, swallow a nervous laugh. WHEN LOST SIT DOWN AND YELL. She tried to imagine it: Sitting down right where she was. Opening her mouth. Yelling. What noise, she wondered, would escape her? What word, or words? *Help*? *Help me*? God forbid—*Please find me*? It was too embarrassing to consider.

Her father had paid her to attend.

This was what it took, after a week of negotiations that had concluded

with a weekend-long standoff in her room: cold hard cash, a hundred dollars of it—fifty percent of which would be waiting for her upon her return.

What she had wanted to do with her summer was simple: she wanted to spend all day in the living room of the Victorian in Saratoga Springs that her family had rented each racing season for a decade. She had wanted to lower the blinds halfway and open the windows halfway and point all the fans in the house in her direction and lie on the sofa, only rising to prepare herself elaborate snacks. And she wanted to read: reading was the main thing.

This had been her routine for five summers in a row. She had hoped that the summer of 1975 would be no different.

Instead, her father—divorced from her mother for less than a year—had, in quick succession, gotten a girlfriend, a fancier rental house, and the notion that Tracy shouldn't lie around all summer with nothing to do. This was what he said to her, anyway, on their ride up from Tracy's mother's house on Long Island in mid-June. (She couldn't help but notice that he'd waited to reveal the plan until they were more than halfway to Saratoga.) The real reason, she thought, was so that she would be out of his hair for two months. So that he and the aforementioned girlfriend could have the run of the place without a sulking twelve-year-old underfoot. Why had he fought to have custody of her all summer, Tracy asked herself, if he was only going to turn around and send her away?

He hadn't even bothered to drop her off at Camp Emerson himself. Instead he'd outsourced that task to Donna Romano, the girlfriend, still a first and last name to Tracy.

"It's a race day," her father said, when Tracy cornered him in the hallway, begged him to come. "Gotta drive down to Belmont. Second Thought's running at two."

Her father was a jockey's son who'd grown up too tall to follow in his footsteps. He'd become an exercise rider instead, and then a trainer, and then an owner, the circumstances of their lives changing with each job. When Tracy was born, the three of them lived in an RV in her mother's

mother's driveway. Now they lived in a new large house with a silver front gate in Hempstead, New York. Well, Tracy and her mother did, anyway.

"What will we even *talk* about," she demanded, but he only shook his head, put two imploring hands on her shoulders. She noticed suddenly that she was eye level with him: her own father. She'd recently gone through a growth spurt that put her in the vicinity of five-eleven and made her slouch vigorously whenever she wasn't in motion.

"This place is supposed to be top-notch. I mean really hoity-toity," said her father—the same two embarrassing descriptors he'd used when first breaking the news. "I bet you'll end up loving it."

She turned toward a window. Through it, she could see Donna Romano adjusting her bra, inspecting her reflection in the window of the car. It was a new Stutz Blackhawk with shag carpeting on the floor and an engine whose roar reminded Tracy of her father's voice. "Top of the line," he had said, when he picked her up in Hempstead. It seemed to Tracy that everything in her father's life was new. Rental house, girlfriend, Pekingese puppy, car. Tracy was the only old thing in his orbit; and even she was being cast out.

As it turned out, Donna Romano was a chain-smoker. In between drags she asked Tracy questions about her life that she'd clearly been stockpiling for the very purpose of this trip. When she was not busy answering them, Tracy snuck glances at Donna Romano. She was extremely pretty. Normally, this would have gone far with Tracy. She loved pretty women. She loved the most popular girls at her middle school—though *revered* might have been a better word, since a large part of her actually despised them. Still, she was fascinated by them, perhaps due to the fact that, physically, they were her opposite, and thus seemed somehow like specimens she wished to examine, at length, under a microscope. Where most of her classmates had long straight hair, parted in the middle, Tracy's hair was large, red, and indefatigable. Where some of her classmates' freckles were delicate, Tracy's were so pronounced that she had been nicknamed Connect the Dots, or CTD for short, by a group of sixth-grade boys. She was

supposed to wear glasses; she owned a pair that she never wore, which resulted in her squinting frequently. Her father once told her casually that she was built like a plum on toothpicks, and the phrase was at once so cruel and so poetic that it clicked into place around her like a harness.

The roads turned from asphalt to gravel to dirt. Ramshackle homes appeared every few minutes, their front lawns repurposed as graveyards for rusted-out vehicles. It was eerie, this contrast between natural beauty and man-made decay, and Tracy began to wonder if they were going the right way.

And then, at last, a sign came into view. *Van Laar Preserve*, it said. Their mailed instructions had indicated this was the sign to follow.

"I wonder why they don't put the name of the camp on the sign," mused Donna Romano.

Maybe it was so perverts couldn't find it, thought Tracy. This, she knew, was what her father would have said. Against her will, she often heard his voice as a sort of narrative presence that underscored her life. That year—the first of the divorce—was the longest they had ever been apart.

The truth was that as a younger child she had been his shadow, had loved him unreservedly, following him everywhere, raising carrots, flat-handed, to the velvety muzzles of his favorite horses. Although she would have died before admitting it, Tracy missed him profoundly, and had spent the better part of her last school year anticipating a summer of being at his side.

The dirt driveway forked. An arrow to the right directed them to *Camp Emerson: Where Lifelong Friendships Are Made*. And then the trees broke open onto a lawn with several rustic wooden buildings in a row. In front of them was a lone counselor standing behind a folding table, from which hung a damp posterboard sign that said, unconvincingly, *Welcome*.

The counselor approached the Blackhawk with a folder, handed it to

Donna through a window. Then he formally dispensed the Three Rules of Camp Emerson like a dutiful town crier—including the final one, the most important, a phrase that would echo in Tracy's head for days, for weeks. For the rest of her life.

When lost sit down and yell.

Tracy had difficulty imagining how lost she would have to be before the option felt correct. Her voice, it seemed, had been continuously decrescendoing since birth, so that by age twelve, she could scarcely be heard.

Very, she decided, at last. Profoundly, irreversibly, lost.

"You'll be in Balsam," said the boy, interrupting Tracy's thoughts. He extended a long arm to his right. Donna Romano tapped the gas, and the Blackhawk rolled forward.

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A Novel

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First Edition

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Claire

They kissed like they were talking about the weather. And not the tornados of the Midwest or the searing wildfires of California. Just a tepid peck on the lips, as exciting as a partially cloudy evening.

All around them, Manhattan heaved like an impatient dragon, its sidewalks shimmering like scales sweaty with humidity. Streetlamps blazed, and the horns of taxis wailed. Everything in the city was alive—feverish, irrepressible.

Everything except Claire and her date.

It was the third time she and Glenn had been out together, and now they stood outside the perfectly acceptable restaurant where they had both eaten perfectly acceptable chicken with a sautéed vegetable medley. The conversation had been perfectly acceptable, too—not bad but not great. Just . . . fine.

Glenn smiled at her. He was tall enough that she couldn't see the balding patch on the crown of his head, but she knew it was there. He had nice teeth—he was a dentist, so he'd better have—and he seemed to wear a uniform of standard-issue polo shirts in tame shades of blue, paired with tan chinos.

They were supposed to be heading to the opening of a new exhibit by a Spanish artist. Claire's best friend—one of the lawyers she worked with—was married to the gallery owner, and he

was throwing a swanky party with cocktails and a live band tonight.

"Should I get us a ride?" Claire asked.

Glenn kept smiling in that mild way of his.

"Um . . ." She looked around them to see if she'd missed a cue about what was going on, but no dice.

He took her hand. "I was wondering," Glenn said, shouting a little to be heard over the street noise. "Would you like to be exclusive?"

Claire blinked at him. "Exclusive?"

"You know, not seeing anyone else?"

She frowned, but just a tiny one—the kind that only the person frowning really knows is happening while the rest of the world goes on blissfully unaware. "Oh, I know what exclusive means, but . . . why?"

Glenn let out a short laugh. "Because I thought it might be nice if we didn't kiss anyone else."

She didn't think he *was* kissing anyone else. And Claire certainly wasn't seeing other men. She was a corporate attorney at one of Manhattan's top international firms, on the cusp of partnership, which meant nearly all her waking hours were spent at the office. It had taken her and Glenn weeks to find a compatible evening in their schedules for this third date.

"Also," Glenn was saying, "because we'd be good together. We're both smart and we have our lives figured out—which, to be frank, even though we're both thirty-one, is no longer a given for our generation. We're both practical and clearheaded. It's the foundation for long-lasting success."

Claire sighed. She'd grown up on epic love stories and movies, like the *Outlander* books and *Titanic*. So Claire wanted fire

and passion, a man who stayed with her not because it was sensible, but because he couldn't imagine a life without her. And Glenn's speech was nowhere near what she'd once dreamed of as a romantic declaration.

But she wasn't getting any younger, and he *was* the kind of man you wouldn't be embarrassed to bring home to the family—if Claire's parents were still alive or she had any siblings, which she didn't.

Yet if she and Glenn were this bland at the start, what kind of future would this relationship hold? Besides a high probability of predictable stability?

A taxi pulled up at the curb near them, vomiting out passengers onto the sidewalk. Immediately, two different couples—red-faced from the heat and humidity—lunged toward the open door, fighting to claim the car. Getting a ride on a Saturday night in Manhattan was no small feat.

Glenn stepped away but didn't do anything to help shield Claire from the melee. Not that she needed a man to save her, but she wouldn't have minded a little chivalry.

"So, what do you say?" Glenn asked once one of the couples had victoriously crammed themselves into the cab and left the other pair growling and punching at their phones, trying to find an available ride.

"Say to what?" Claire asked, her mind still on the minidrama over the taxi.

"Being exclusive. You and me, together."

"I think . . . Well, I like you, Glenn."

He grinned at her with his very straight teeth.

"But the thing is . . ." Claire took a deep breath. "Don't you think we deserve more? I mean that in the nicest way possible.

Maybe you're right and we would be a good team, but don't you deserve something more than just a well-functioning team member by your side? Don't you deserve someone where, when she's gone, you still think about her all the time? Someone you want to text whenever you have a break in your schedule? And after a long day, you want nothing more than to curl up next to her and hear all about *her* day? Because, if we're being honest, I doubt you feel that way about me. Right? And I . . . I respect you, Glenn, but I don't feel that spark with you, either."

Glenn crossed his arms across his polo shirt, which was now sweat-soaked at the pits. He closed his eyes briefly—had she gone too far? But he'd said he appreciated Claire's clearheadedness, right? Like the attorney she was, she'd laid out a well-thought-out argument for their respective happiness. It just didn't involve being together.

When he opened his eyes, he nodded calmly, as if he'd just considered a patient's description of a toothache. "What you described is, indeed, the fantasy. But that's all it is—a fantasy. And, Claire, come on, you care more about practicality than passion. Look at your life. You're a lawyer. And you chose to go out with *me,* a dentist. We are people of responsibility. A little boring, a little uninspired, perhaps, but steady. Fantasies are for dreamers, not for dentists and lawyers like us."

For the second time in just minutes, Claire found herself blinking at him. If Glenn had gotten angry or stomped off or something else dramatic, she could have taken it. But instead, he had returned her careful line of reasoning with a rational argument of his own—one that walloped her in the stomach far harder than if he'd told her to fuck off.

"Claire?"

She shook herself out of her thoughts.

"No," she said.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"No," Claire said, looking him in the eye. "You're really nice, Glenn. And maybe you're right, but I'm not ready to give up yet. I still want—"

"The impossible?"

She bit her lip, then nodded. "Yeah."

Glenn laughed without humor, but he was too placid a person to be angry. "All right, then. Best of luck to you, Claire. I hope you find the love of your life."

"You, too, Glenn."

He nodded once, then headed off toward the subway station.

Claire allowed herself one more long exhale. And then she turned in the other direction and began to walk toward the gallery where her friend Yolanda was waiting for her.

Claire trudged through Greenwich Village, mostly oblivious to the people and storefronts as what Glenn had said about her echoed in her head.

Boring.

Uninspired.

You care more about practicality than passion.

Was it true?

Claire's life *was* remarkably predictable. She woke every morning at 5:30 a.m., went for a run through Central Park, came home and showered, then made the same oatmeal with raisins, walnuts, and cinnamon for breakfast. She left her apartment at 7:25 to catch the train, which got her through the front

doors of the law firm at 7:47—enough time to grab a coffee from the break room and read through any emails that had come in overnight before hopping on client calls starting at 8:30. The only thing Claire couldn't predict was when each workday would end, because sometimes there were calls with clients on the West Coast or even in Asia.

But my reliability is why my clients love me, Claire thought, trying to reassure herself.

And being reliable wasn't mutually exclusive with wanting to hold out for a bigger love. Right?

Then again, if she thought about the epic love stories she'd grown up with, they always involved a large dose of spontaneity and upheaval—time travel, sinking ships, and giving up everything and everyone you'd ever known.

It was a lot to ask.

Oh god, what if Glenn had been right about her?

Claire wove around some of the stinking trash bags that had been left out to fester on the sidewalks. Deep in her thoughts, she almost walked right past the Rose Gallery and its exhibition *Surreal Delight*.

But the dead streetlamp above her suddenly flickered on and illuminated the plate glass window, and Claire drew in a breath in surprise.

There was a long oil painting of the Manhattan skyline on a rainy day. At first glance, it was just another realistic steel and gray view of the city. But then Claire's eyes traveled to the bottom half of the painting, where a small girl in a yellow rain jacket crouched next to an enormous puddle that spanned the length of Manhattan. And in its watery, upside-down reflection was a whole different world—one where the skyscrapers were

towering sunflowers, and the little girl was a euphoric bumblebee.

The next painting was also realistic on its face: a Spanish chef laboring over flames and a large pan of paella. The kitchen staff around him sweated and bustled, and the rich, deep colors of the painting reminded Claire of classical European art.

But the exhibit was called *Surreal Delight,* and on closer inspection, she noticed that the saltshaker in the chef's hand was scattering not salt, but tiny hearts, the little red confetti tumbling down onto the saffron rice in a shower of culinary love.

"I want *that,*" she said out loud. Not the literal painting—although she wouldn't mind having it on her wall—but that *feeling,* that twinkle of joy in her otherwise orderly world.

Behind her, the gallery door opened.

"Claire!" Yolanda Davis—her best friend, colleague, and the wife of the gallery owner—popped her head out. She was, as usual, impeccably put together, her dark skin contrasting beautifully with a pale pink silk blouse, her natural hair blown out. "I thought I saw you through the window. Come inside! And where's your date?"

"Glenn went home early."

"That bad, huh?"

"No, not really," Claire said. "Just . . . not enough."

She followed Yolanda inside and sighed gratefully as the icy blast of air-conditioning hit her skin. The melodies of a saxophone and flamenco guitarist echoed through the high rafters, and a ritzy Fifth Avenue crowd milled around the gallery, drinking sangria and rebujitos while occasionally looking at the paintings on the walls.

"Claire Walker, haven't seen you in ages." Jason—Yolanda's

husband—came up and greeted Claire with a hug. "What do you think of the exhibit?"

"I've only had a chance to see what was in the window, but . . . it's extraordinary."

"Can I get you a drink?" Yolanda asked. "The sangria is great, but the bartender's also making tinto de verano, which is kind of like sangria, but fizzy."

"Yes, please. I could definitely use a drink."

Yolanda darted off to the bar. Jason started to tell Claire about the nearest painting but then broke off and, looking over her shoulder, said, "Oh, there's the artist. Do you want to meet him? I'll introduce you. He's from Madrid, but he's going to be here in the States for a couple years as a visiting professor at the New York Academy of Art. He's a classical realist—with a touch of the imaginative. Monstrously talented and passionate, which is so refreshing in this age of soulless AI art, you know?"

Jason waved at someone. Claire turned around. She was only five-four, so she couldn't see over the heads of the people in front of her. But it didn't matter, because the crowd parted, and there he was.

"Matías de León," Jason said, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Claire Walker."

He was just like his paintings, viscerally real and rendered in warmth: Waves of black hair. Olive skin. Broad shoulders and muscled forearms that were proof of hours working with his hands.

But then, like the title of his exhibition, there was the glimmer of surreal delight—his eyes were like pools of honey in morning sunlight, rich and gold with promises of undivinable depths.

"*Un placer*. A pleasure," Matías said, his English gently accented with Spanish.

Claire's mouth opened, but no words came out.

Yolanda reappeared with drinks. But when she saw Claire speechless—and knowing how, as a lawyer, Claire was *never* without something to say—Yolanda winked at Jason and said, "Why doesn't Matías give Claire a personal tour of some of his paintings in the back of the gallery? You know, since she arrived late and missed the introductory speech?"

Without missing a beat, Jason said, "What a fantastic idea," and steered Claire and Matías away from the music and the bar and the majority of the guests. Jason and Yolanda then melted into the party without even a glance back.

Claire laughed nervously. Yolanda wasn't known for her subtlety, but what the heck was she thinking? There was no way a gorgeous Spanish artist was going to be into Claire. She dated balding dentists and the occasional accountant.

"I am so glad you could come tonight," Matías said as they made their way deeper into the Rose Gallery. Heads turned wherever he walked.

"You are? Why?" Claire didn't mean to blurt that last bit out, but her nerves had the reins right now.

"I was worried no one would attend my gallery opening," he said. "But Jason has done a wonderful job with it. Are you having a nice evening?"

"Not until now." Claire immediately felt her face flush the same red as her drink.

Matías grinned, and it was charmingly lopsided—nothing like Glenn's perfectly symmetrical smile.

What is going on? Claire never spoke before she thought; you learned that in the first year of law school.

They reached the back wall. There were only a couple of

other guests back here, so Claire and Matías had this part of the gallery pretty much to themselves. Matías was close enough to her that she could smell the pine and spice of his cologne, and her heart thrummed a little faster.

"Although Jason asked me to give a speech earlier tonight," Matías said, "I do not really like to talk about my work. I put everything I have to say into the art itself, you know? So, please." He waved toward the paintings that hung around them.

Claire's pulse sped up more, but for a different reason now. Publicly, she pretended to like paintings and sculptures and such because it was the kind of sophisticated thing that all the partners at the law firm seemed to enjoy. Being Yolanda's friend also meant she heard a fair bit about the art world.

Yet the truth was that Claire had never been the sort who was particularly moved by art—not like the people who had annual passes to MoMA who could stand in front of a canvas and talk for hours about its complexity. Paintings were just pictures to Claire. So she started psyching herself up to come up with some eloquent lies to tell Matías.

But then she was face-to-face with his work again, and it was like trying to walk during an earthquake while the ground was still shaking. Basic assumptions weren't straightforward anymore.

Each of his pieces was painted in a style reminiscent of classical European masters, done on wood panels rather than canvas, which seemed to give the colors a richer, almost glowing quality. Matías's style was very realistic, except that in each painting there was one incongruous, imaginative element.

There was a portrait of a man and a woman at home, him drab and slouched and slack-faced on the couch watching mind-

less TV, completely unaware that beside him, his wife was gleefully reading a book from which a cute, thimble-sized red alien had emerged and was waving from the pages. Claire laughed out loud, remembering her own amazement when, after moving to New York and having some subway commuting time to kill, she'd rediscovered the joy of reading.

Next, she stood for a long time in front of a painting of a little boy in a field blowing on a dandelion, but rather than seedlings, there were tiny drones, dutifully flying off into the blue sky with his wishes. A trill of happiness vibrated through Claire; this was a vision counter to all the doom-and-gloom headlines about how computers and robots were going to devour humanity. Instead, Matías had found a way to show a path forward where technology was infused with hope.

But it was a painting in the quiet corner of the gallery that knocked the breath out of Claire. In it, a gap-toothed, smiling monk held out a partially peeled orange to the person gazing at the painting. But it wasn't an orange peeking out from under the peel—it was the planet Earth.

Peace, cupped in his hands and offered to every single person who stopped to look.

"Oh my god, Matías," she whispered.

He'd stood quietly next to her as she walked through his work, understanding that sometimes the best tour is one the traveler leads herself on. Now he smiled, and those golden eyes glimmered under the gallery spotlights.

If it were possible to know someone's soul without knowing the person at all, this was how. Matías's art was his pureness, his sanguine exuberance, his belief in the promise of the world. And—just like when Claire first saw his painting of the Man-

hattan skyline reflected in a puddle as a forest of sunflowers—she thought,

I want *that.*

I want *him*.

But ordinary people only get to mingle with the extraordinary for brief interludes before they have to return to the normal world. Claire knew to savor these moments because she wouldn't get to have them again once she walked out of the Rose Gallery's doors.

Unfortunately, the adoring crowds soon found Matías again. A group of society matrons converged on him and swept him away before Claire could even thank him for sharing his work.

She stood there alone then, with his art, wondering if someone like her could ever inspire a similar passion in someone as vibrant and original as Matías.

But after a few seconds, Claire laughed at herself. She had had her brief interlude with the extraordinary, and now it was time to return to the norm.

He called her at her office the next day at 9 a.m.

"Hi, Claire? It's Matías. I asked Yolanda for your number. I hope that was okay. I'd like to take you to dinner."

Claire gawked at her phone for a moment. Was he really asking her out?

Her voice squeaked when she answered. "Um, dinner sounds good. What date were you thinking of?"

"Tonight, if you're available."

Tonight? Attorneys were never free on such short notice. Claire's calendar was often booked a month in advance.

"Unfortunately, I'm busy all this week," she said.

"Oh, okay. I understand. If you are not interested, I am sorry for bothering you—"

"No, wait! I am! Interested, I mean. But I have to work late."

Matías laughed softly. "All right. Well, what if it is a *late* dinner tonight? You have to eat, don't you?"

"I do," Claire said. "But I honestly don't know how long I'll be working. I have a call at seven that will last at least two hours, and I'll have some follow-up work I have to take care of afterward. I might be here until eleven or so. I was planning to just grab a salad from the cafeteria before they close and eat at my desk after my call."

Matías made a disapproving *tsk* with his tongue. "Claire, that is no way to live. In Spain, meals are more than just nourishment. However, I understand that you're busy, so I'll tell you what—I will bring food to you at the office after your call tonight. Give me thirty minutes for a break, and I will prove to you that dinner can be efficient *and* pleasurable."

The way he said *pleasurable* sent a warm rumble straight through her core.

Windsor & Black LLP was spread over twenty floors in a skyscraper in Midtown. Floor 1 was security; floor 2, a reception hall as elegant as a Four Seasons hotel; floor 3 was the copy center and gym; and floor 4 was the free employee cafeteria. Floors 5 through 7 were glass-walled conference rooms, and then the rest of the levels were attorneys' offices. Every lawyer at Windsor & Black LLP had their own office with a heavy oak

door, and their secretaries and paralegals sat outside their respective attorneys' offices in pods in the center.

Just after nine, Matías arrived, and Claire brought him upstairs. The usually bustling floors were empty now, other than a handful of attorneys still in offices here and there, their doors shut to avoid all distractions so they could finish their work and hopefully get home before midnight. Her own desk was so covered in binders and stacks of paper that there was nowhere to eat, so she led him to the law library.

It was a beautiful space, all soaring ceilings and marble columns, that sadly no one used anymore because research was all done digitally now. When Claire had first started working at Windsor & Black, she'd sworn to herself that she would visit the library every day to remind herself that law and justice were revered, noble concepts, not just a glowing computer screen and endless conference calls. But that promise had fallen by the wayside, long ago consumed by demanding partners and even more demanding clients.

She let out a contented sigh, though, as they stepped into the library now.

"Intimidating," Matías said as his gaze brushed across the towering shelves of leather-bound tomes.

Claire smiled. "Nah. It's all a facade. Attorneys are just nerds who like big words, and lots of them."

"You sell yourself short," Matías said. "But there *is* one thing I have in common with lawyers—we keep late hours." He held up the cooler and canvas bag he'd brought. "Spaniards eat dinner at nine or ten at night, too."

Claire laughed and led him deeper into the library, to a table in the back corner.

Matías pulled out a tablecloth. It was brightly colored, like blue and yellow ceramic tiles, and he lifted it into the air like the parachute game children play, tablecloth hovering for a long moment, before letting it settle gently onto the otherwise ordinary table.

He unpacked real plates—not paper—and weighty silverware and cloth napkins, too.

"Three courses in thirty minutes," Matías declared, and Claire laughed.

"Where did you order from?"

He furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"The food? Where did you get it?"

"Oh! Well, let's see. The Manchego, I purchased from Murray's Cheese. The olives and almonds, I bought from España in SoHo. The fruit and vegetables are from the farmer's market near my apartment, and the vinegar and olive oil I bought the first day I was in New York, from Mercado Little Spain."

Claire stared at him with her mouth open. "Wait. You mean you made me dinner from scratch?"

Matías made a face. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

She didn't want him to figure out that many New Yorkers never cooked. They just ordered delivery through apps, with the food arriving slightly soggy but still pretty warm at their door.

To begin, he artfully arranged a shaved-apple salad with arugula, Manchego cheese, Marcona almonds, and a tart cider vinaigrette. Claire gasped at the crisp sweetness of fruit contrasted with peppery greens and the richness of nuts and cheese.

"This puts my cafeteria salad to shame," she said.

"I hope so."

But it wasn't just that it was leagues more delicious than regular salads. It was that he'd made it *for her*.

Next, Matías presented her with empanadillas de atún—half-moon pastries filled with tuna and green olives—then spooned a sauce made of tomato, onions, garlic, and bell peppers, cooked until deeply caramelized.

"Should I use a knife and fork?" Claire asked, not wanting to commit a cultural faux pas on their first date.

"You can," Matías said. "Or you can just pick it up like this—"

He bit into an empanadilla and *oh god,* his mouth. The pastry crumbled in a shower of buttery decadence, and Claire wanted to crawl across the table and lick the stray smudge of sofrito sauce at the corner of his lips. But she restrained herself because (a) she was Claire Walker, who didn't do things like that, and (b) they were in a library, for goodness' sake. Even if it was a deserted one after office hours.

But then Matías brought out a small glass jar filled with what looked like speckled caramel.

"This is bienmesabe canario," he said. "An almond dessert from the Canary Islands, where my great-grandparents were from. This is an old family recipe and my favorite from childhood."

He dipped a spoon into the jar.

Leaned toward her. "Try it . . ."

Claire parted her lips.

The silver tip of the spoon touched her tongue. Sweetness hit her taste buds, and she moaned.

Every woman has her limits.

She pushed aside the remnants of the picnic, climbed across the table, and kissed him, their mouths like molten sugar.

Claire had never slept with anyone before the sixth date, but Matías was not made for rules.

He laid her down on the plush carpet of the library and disassembled her carefully pressed suit, piece by piece. She yanked his shirt over his head and fumbled at his fly.

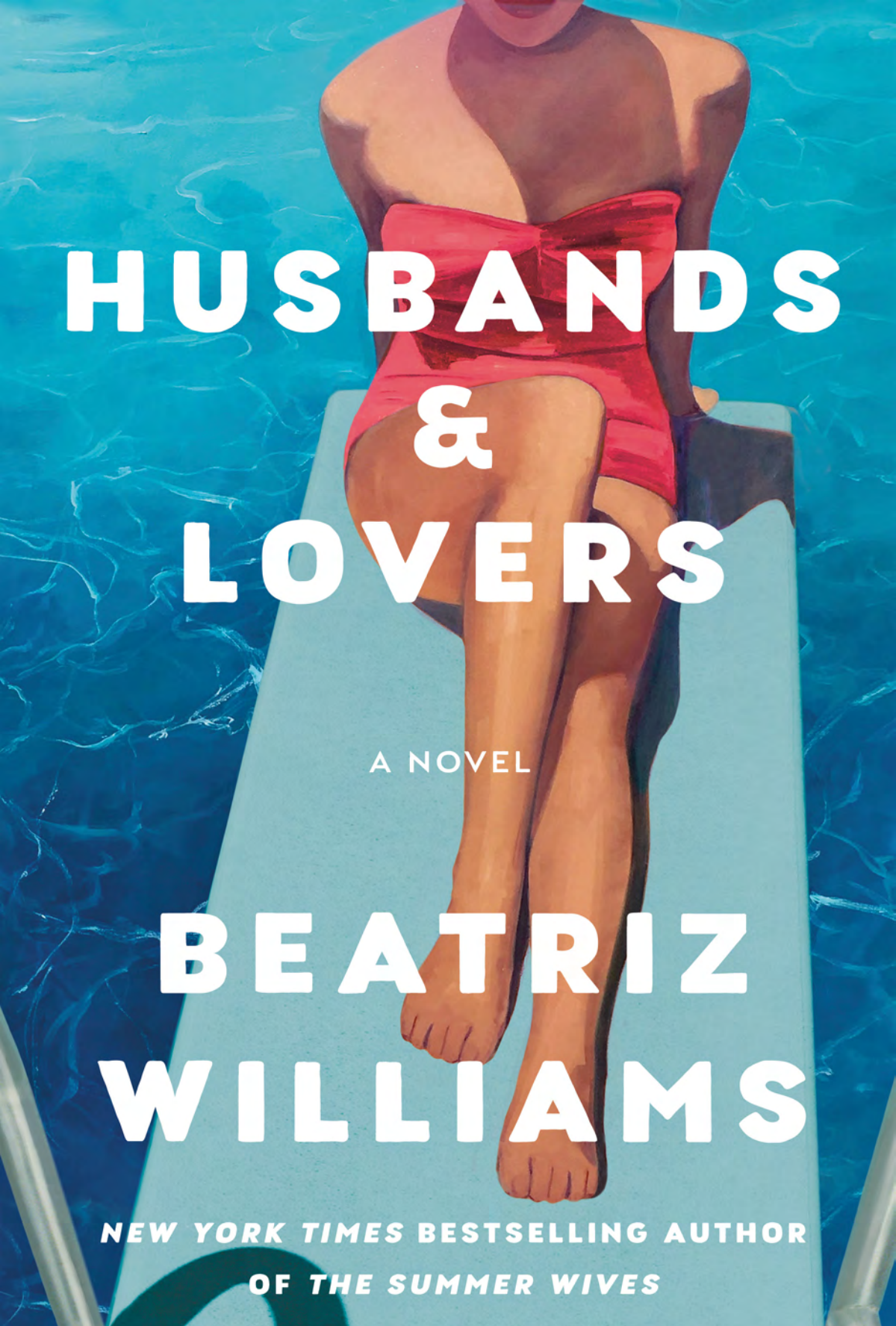
Despite the air-conditioning of the staid library, their bodies melted together like the heat that shimmers in the air in the middle of summer days.

When she came, she held in her scream, but the books shook on the shelves around her.

When it was his turn, he whispered her name.

The full, contented silence that followed said everything else they needed to know.

And that was how Claire Walker fell in love with Matías de León.


HUSBANDS
&
LOVERS
A NOVEL
BEATRIZ
WILLIAMS
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF THE SUMMER WIVES

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PROLOGUE

Mallory

June 2019
Mystic, Connecticut

I kissed Sam goodbye on a Saturday morning toward the end of June, and the call that changed my life came the following Friday afternoon.

Actually, the call came in twice. I'd stepped away from my desk to do some gardening. I remember the tomatoes were growing like crazy that summer, the roses exploding on their bushes. Everything so abundant. Sometimes, when I'm stuck on an idea, I find it helps to walk away for a bit and do something else, something with your hands, something useful, and that knot in your mind will loosen and unwind into the bread dough or the soapsuds or the stacks of folded clothes.

Or the soft, rich loam of a vegetable bed.

It still fills me with terror, to look at that patch of earth and remember how I knelt there, staking the rampant new vines, humming to myself while a new pattern took shape in my head—a trailing creeper in a pristine shade of spring green, not too dark or too light, the color of promise, delicate shoots and leaves curling from the parent vine.

At a few minutes to three, I stood up, dusted my jeans, shucked off my gloves, and went into the house for a glass of water and my sketch pad.

I remember my phone lay on the kitchen counter, because I hadn't carried it outdoors with me. You know how it is. I meant to

step out for a few minutes to pull some weeds, maybe water the tomatoes, breathe some fresh air, but one thing led to another, and it was a beautiful day, eighty degrees and not as humid as it gets later in the summer. A breeze came in from the Mystic River, tinged with brine. Tourists would be swarming the drawbridge for ice cream. Over at the aquarium, kids would be screaming with joy as the belugas hurtled past on the other side of the plexiglass. Anyway, my phone sat alone on the counter, so I picked it up to check for messages and startling news alerts, maybe a little light scrolling, and instead I saw that I'd missed two calls from Camp Winnipesaukee.

You know that feeling. Every parent knows that feeling.

Probably nothing, you think, *probably just some missed paperwork or an impulsive, inappropriate exclamation.* Maybe a fistfight, God forbid. Kids could get scrappy at that age.

But your body's not so logical, is it? Your body's evolved for catastrophe. Your body leaps straight to the worst scenario. Your stomach turns sick, your trembling hand picks up the phone. Your heart cracks against your breastbone.

You swipe the number to call back.

You say, in your voice of fake buoyance, *Hi! This is Mallory Dunne. Sam's mom? You were trying to reach me.*

And you hear the tiny silence, the fraction of a sigh as the person on the other end gathers courage for the task before her.

Then the dreaded words:

Mrs. Dunne, I'm afraid I have some difficult news.

I think I must have driven the entire three hours to New Hampshire in a state of shock. *Now, don't panic,* I told myself, over and over. *This is not really happening. This is just a movie you're watching, a script you're acting out. Kind of like the metaverse!* Whatever that was.

Not *real,* anyway.

Not your real son, the love of your life.

I remember how I rinsed out my coffee cup and put it in the dishwasher before I left. I mean, you can't just leave a cup of coffee on the kitchen counter when you lark off to New Hampshire for

God knows how long! I swiped on a little lipstick, even though my hand shook so badly I looked like one of those Instagram people who color over the edges of their lips to make them look bigger. I started to throw a few things in an overnight bag and then thought, *What if he dies and I'm not there in time to say goodbye?*

I dropped the overnight bag and ran out the door to the car. I made it all the way to Springfield before I realized I wasn't wearing any shoes, so I had to pull over at a gas station and buy flip-flops. And gas. And three Kind bars and a bottle of water, because I was about to pass out.

He's not going to die, I told myself. A perfectly healthy boy doesn't die from eating a bad mushroom.

Unless it's too late.

Unless said boy ate said mushroom on a dare the day before and didn't mention this fact because he didn't want his friends to get in trouble, so he spent the night and the morning in the infirmary with so-called stomach trouble because the nurse had no idea she was dealing with a case of mushroom poisoning.

Unless the damage was already done.

Unless they were keeping him alive only so I could say goodbye and give permission for organ donation.

Could you donate a kid's organs if he'd ingested a poisonous mushroom?

A Range Rover zoomed past, New York plates. I looked at the speedometer and saw I was going only sixty-four, like it was no hurry, no emergency, don't want to get a speeding ticket or anything.

I pressed the accelerator.

He's not going to die, I said aloud.

My shining, beautiful boy.

Who loved to play soccer in the fall and baseball in the spring.

Whose favorite food was s'mores.

Who went boogie-boarding last week with his cousins at his aunt's house on the Cape and pretended to get attacked by a shark. (*Not funny,* I told him, after I fished him out of the water.)

Who filled an old jam jar with fireflies the night before he left for camp and told me he figured the lights came from all your ancestors in heaven, keeping watch over you.

I pounded the steering wheel. So where were all the fucking fireflies yesterday?

Just as I reached White River Junction and turned off the interstate, it started to rain. A couple of fat drops, a couple more, and the next thing you know—monsoon. I turned on the windshield wipers. Three seconds later, I turned them on high. Wildly they pumped across the glass and still I couldn't see a thing. Sheets cascading before me. Like trying to look through a waterfall.

What happened next is a true story.

I'm tearing down this road through the New Hampshire woods toward the hospital, right? Every second counts. But I can't see ten feet in front of me. So I'm straining my eyes, not even blinking, and this dark shape flashes into view and *whoomph*! Smacks into the windshield and the jaws of the wipers.

Probably I scream, I don't know.

Just a few inches long, this poor creature, this bird. Whisking back and forth, back and forth, feathers everywhere, and I'm crying now, screaming and crying, begging God to free the bird because I can't pull over, I need to reach my son before he dies.

But the poor thing remains stuck in the wipers, smearing blood across my windshield that the rain washes away. I can't even tell what kind of bird it is. I just keep on driving, and praying, and crying.

The rain was thinning out as I swerved into the parking lot of the Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, where they'd airlifted Sam a little after noon today.

(Later, when I saw *that* line item on the explanation of benefits notice from Blue Cross, I would get up to pour myself a glass of bourbon.)

But at this point, I wasn't thinking about how much any of this would cost. Save my son, that was all I cared about. I found a miraculous space near the emergency room and slammed the brakes and got out. A man stood nearby smoking a cigarette. He stared at

the bird on the windshield of my old Volvo station wagon, handed down from my sister.

"Is it dead?" I demanded.

He looked at me. I still have the image of him in my head—this young, smart, hardscrabble kid in green scrubs. I remember thinking he might have been a resident or a medical student, by the look of him—a kid who got in the hard way, no fancy private schools, no tutors or pushy parents. Job after school bagging groceries to save up money. He just wanted to be a doctor.

"That's an owl," he said. "A baby owl."

"Is it dead? Just tell me, is it dead?"

"Of course it's dead," he said.

At the ER reception, I fumbled out some explanation about summer camp and mushrooms to the nurse on duty. He was used to hysterical parents and interrupted me to ask, in a voice that was neither kind nor unkind, for the patient's name.

I took a deep breath. "Sam Dunne."

"Date of birth?"

"May tenth, oh-nine."

"Relationship to patient?"

"I'm his mother, for God's sake!"

He tapped away on his computer keyboard, staring at the screen. "Name?"

"*My* name?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I stared at the part in his hair. Light brown waves. Pink scalp.

The nurse looked up. "Ma'am? Your name?"

Starts with an M, I thought. *You can do this.*

He waved his hand slowly in front of my face. "Ma'am? Do you need to sit down?"

"Mallory!" I sagged in relief. "Mallory Dunne."

The nurse turned back to his computer and resumed the tapping. "I'll need your ID and insurance card, please, Mrs. Dunne."

"My what?"

"ID and insurance, please."

I gripped the edge of the counter and leaned over. "My son is dying and you want to see my *identification*?"

"Mrs. Dunne, I need to ask you to calm down—"

"Calm *down*? I just drove three hours to get here! I don't even know if he's alive! He's ten years old! He's surrounded by strangers! He needs his mom!"

"Mrs. Dunne—"

"I want—to see—my *son*!"

The nurse closed his eyes, filled his lungs with patience, and said, in a nice slow kindergarten voice, "I understand. And I'm still going to have to ask for identification. For security reasons. If Sam's father—"

"Sam's father," I said, "is not in the picture."

"Irregardless—"

"That's not a word, damn it!"

The nurse picked up the phone. "I'm going to call security now."

"Call *security*? Are you kidding me? My *son* is in there! I need to see my son and you're going to call security?"

"Mrs. Dunne, you need to calm down—"

I pointed my finger at his chest. "Don't *ever* tell a woman to calm down! Especially a *mother* whose *child* is in the *emergency room*! And some *man* is trying to keep her from *seeing* him! And I am not a *miss-sus,* by the way!"

The nurse rose from his chair, telephone in one hand. "And I'm telling *you,* Ms. Dunne, you need to start practicing calm right now. For your son's sake. Because you're going to need it."

Half an hour later, my sister arrived at the waiting room they set aside for hysterical parents. I jumped from the chair.

"Paige? What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm the emergency contact, remember? I got here as fast as I could. Oh, Mallory." She stepped forward and pulled me into her arms. She smelled of gardenia soap and responsibility. "You're such a screwup, honey. Only *you* could end up in hospital jail."

"Have you seen him? Is he okay?"

"I talked to the doctor. He's stable. Critical but stable—"

"Critical? What does that mean?"

Paige pulled back and held me by the shoulders. "Let's go see the doctor together, okay?"

Dr. Stephens was a slight, intense, blond-ponytail woman of the type who runs eight miles at dawn before she goes to work. She looked up from her clipboard and delivered a searing gaze as I approached with Paige.

"Mrs. Dunne," she said.

I opened my mouth to correct her, then slammed it shut.

"Doctor?" I said meekly. "I'm Sam's mother."

"Yes. I'm very sorry about what's happened. We treat a certain number of mushroom cases each year, but it's rarely so serious as this."

"How serious?"

"The next forty-eight hours will be critical. Your son has ingested a basidiomycete fungus known as *Amanita phalloides*—"

"I'm sorry, what?"

Again, her eyes impaled me. "A death cap mushroom."

"Oh, shit," I said.

"I thought you were already informed."

"They said *mushroom.* Not fucking death cap."

You could almost hear her bristles arranging themselves. Her eyes weren't clear blue but opaque, like a cloudy sky at dawn, and I couldn't tell if she objected to my attitude or my language or both.

Paige gripped my elbow. "Excuse her, Doctor. It slips out when she's emotional."

"Of course," said Dr. Stephens. "The death cap contains two primary types of toxins—amatoxin and phallotoxin. In the initial period, which begins several hours after ingestion, the patient will experience the common symptoms of gastrointestinal distress—vomiting, diarrhea. So in these early stages, unless we know the patient consumed a mushroom, it's easily dismissed or misdiagnosed as a norovirus."

"Stomach flu," Paige said knowledgeably.

"Exactly. Especially in the case of children, and *especially* when they're reluctant to tell adults what they've been up to." Dr. Stephens clicked the end of her ballpoint pen. "However, during this time, the toxins have already begun to attack the patient's organs—"

"Oh, shit," I said. "Oh, shit."

"—principally the liver and kidneys, in the worst cases leading to organ failure and death."

I was acting in a movie, I reminded myself. This wasn't really happening.

"But you can treat it, right? This is modern medicine. You can give him something."

She looked at her clipboard. "The immediate concern is dehydration. He's been on an IV drip, replenishing fluids, electrolytes. There are a couple of different antibiotics that have shown efficacy in counteracting the toxin—"

"And you're giving him those?"

"Yes, along with intravenous silibinin—that's an extract of what's commonly known as the milk thistle—which helps the liver fight the damage caused by both toxins."

"What else?"

She shrugged. "We treat the symptoms. The rest is up to his body. How much he ingested, when exactly he ingested it."

"Is he in pain?"

"He's in a coma, Mrs. Dunne. That's common, in these cases."

"Can I see him?"

Her face softened. "Of course. Come with me."

She started past us. I touched the elbow of her white lab coat to stop her.

"Dr. Stephens? It's *Ms.* Dunne. Not Mrs."

The doctor made a note on her clipboard. "And his father?"

This time it was Paige who spoke up. "His father's not in the picture."

Against the white pillow, Sam's face was the color of a Dorito. I might have gasped.

"That's the jaundice," said the nurse.

I dropped into the chair next to the bed. Not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't hold myself up any longer. "Shit," I whispered.

"You can touch him. Talk to him. Let him know you're here."

Around him, the machines beeped and burped. Sam had always been big for his age, robust like his father. Radiant. Energy bursting from his skin. Too much, sometimes. So much that I would collapse in bed at night and cry because I was so exhausted, because there was nobody else to keep this ball of fire from hurtling into space, because Sam was all up to me.

The shrunken, yellowed body on the bed couldn't be Sam. It wasn't him. There was some mistake.

Then I looked at his face. A curl of damp gold hair on his forehead, the same color as his skin. I brushed it back. Behind me, Paige put her hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, buddy," I croaked. "It's Mom. Sorry it took me a while. Traffic."

The monitors beeped back.

"Anyway, I made it. I'm here. We'll get you all better in no time. And when you wake up, so help me—"

Paige snorted back a laugh.

"A mushroom, for God's sake. A goddamn mushroom."

"Mallory, don't swear in front of the kid."

"Sorry, buddy. *Darn* mushroom."

The nurse finished checking all the monitors and turned to us. Back and forth, me and Paige. "So . . . you're the parents?"

Paige snatched her hand from my shoulder. "Oh, Jesus, no. I'm her sister. She's the mother."

"Gotcha. Well, you've got one tough kid there, I'll say that much."

"You think so?" I said.

"For sure. Kinda cute under all that yellow, right? He looks like that singer."

"Oh?" Paige said innocently. "Which singer?"

"You know. Sits on a stool and plays his guitar? That new song about the birds flying south, not looking back." She hummed a few bars. "You know who I mean. He was on the cover of *People* a couple weeks ago. Dead ringer, this kid."

I turned back to Sam and sandwiched his limp hand between mine. I was so dizzy, I thought I might throw up.

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't heard that one."

Later, when I looked back on that first week in the hospital, I wouldn't be able to remember much. They say it's a blur, experiences like that, and maybe it's a cliché but it turned out to be true, the way clichés sometimes are. I would like to say there was a single moment of revelation, a turning point after which we knew Sam would survive, and we had joy and resolution and a happy ending in which we thanked all the doctors for saving his life and drove back home in that fragile moment of late afternoon when the air is washed with gold. Like in the movies.

But life isn't a movie, and that moment never came.

We kept time by the beep of the monitors and the rising and setting of the sun on the other side of the window, out there in that world where ordinary people got on with their lives, went on vacation, enjoyed the summer. Paige brought her kids and booked one of those extended stay hotels, and nobody complained about missing the summer on the ocean or the scarcity of fried clams in the New Hampshire hills. Her husband drove up on weekends to join us. Nice guy, Jake.

Paige delivered me coffee and sandwiches and made sure I brushed my teeth and changed clothes.

Day by day Sam went on living, breathing, existing, and the fear of his death was replaced by fear for the future ahead of us.

What was to come in this new world in which my ten-year-old son did not own a functioning pair of kidneys.

One discrete moment I do remember. I remember walking out of the hospital to drive to the hotel room Paige had booked for us, not because I wanted to leave but because she insisted. This would have been the second day, after I spent that first night sleeping—or not sleeping—on the chair in Sam's hospital room.

You need to sleep in a bed, Paige told me. *Sam needs you to sleep in a bed.*

So I trudged out to the parking lot and found my car. The hour was late, and because it was the end of June and this was New Hampshire, the sky had only begun to darken. The air was heavy with shadow. Would have been spooky if anything was left in this world to scare me.

I got to the car and stared at the lump of feathers stuck at the base of the windshield wipers.

I had forgotten about the bird.

A baby owl, said the man with the cigarette, and he was right. I didn't know much about woodland birds, but you could tell it was an owl by the shape of its head and its dead glass eyes. A small, juvenile owl. Probably just left its nest. Had flown out into the wide world and run smack into my panicked windshield and died, and the mother owl and the father owl never knew what happened to him.

In my ears, I still heard the relentless beep of the monitors. The tick of Sam's life.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the baby owl. "I'm so sorry."

I sat down on the curb and opened my palms.

On my right wrist, my mother's bracelet had slipped around the wrong way, so the ends pinched the tender skin on the inside of my arm. She'd left it to me when she died, and I still felt a shock to see it wrapped around my own wrist instead of my mother's—a golden cobra, its hood arched to strike, two tiny emerald eyes and a tiny ruby tongue reaching eternally for the tip of its tail. Her own mother had given this bracelet to her, she'd told us when we were little, and I had never seen Mom's arm without it.

Until her funeral, a year and a half ago.

The snake's eyes glittered at me, the same color as my mother's.

"I need her so much," I whispered. "Why did you take her?"

But the cobra didn't say a word.

CHAPTER ONE

Hannah

August 1951
Cairo, Egypt

The cobra probably took refuge in the pavilion when the sun fell behind the hotel roof. Now it flared its hood indignantly at Hannah. Its eyes were like beads of oil. It flicked its tongue to taste the air and struck.

Hannah couldn't blame the cobra. How do you condemn a snake for being a snake?

Alistair had warned her about the cobras when they first arrived in Cairo. He'd been posted there during the war, so he felt himself a real expert. *Your Egyptian cobra grows to about four or five feet in length*—in his voice of empire, holding two pompous arms apart—*and venomous as the devil. Bugger'll crawl directly into your house or tent or trouser leg, so you'd bloody well better watch your step.*

Hannah had listened attentively and watched her step. When she and Alistair had taken that trip to Luxor last week, she'd seen them among the rocks from time to time, scorpions too, but they always slithered away. Alistair was probably disappointed. All day he'd carried a machete at his belt and cherished the idea of lopping off some cobra's head at the vital instant. What a capital story *that* would be!

Hannah didn't have a machete now. She didn't have so much as a nail file—she'd simply picked up her pocketbook and left the table. An impulse, that was all. Alistair holding forth about Indian partition, the Beverleys nodding along numbly, Alistair's smothering re-

mark when she tried to interject a light observation—*Don't be silly, Hannah.*

She'd mumbled something about a cigarette and stalked through the packed, yammering dining room, through the Arab Hall to the gardens.

The air still hung thick and warm from the late-summer sun. The mosquitoes stirred. The smell of jasmine made her drunk. She'd heard some laughter near the loggia and crept into the shelter of the pavilion, surprising a cobra who was just settling down for a nice quiet nap.

Of all the places to die! When you thought about it, it was almost funny. All those ways she might have met her end—those accidents and objects that might have killed her, the waves of bombs, the German soldiers followed by the Soviet soldiers, to say nothing of weather and germs and a hundred other things—all those fatal moments she'd survived by miracle or force of will or some capricious God she no longer believed in—and now this?

The back garden of Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo. A dull, predictable evening in August.

What a joke, a colossal joke.

Who would have thought it would end like this, when she'd woken this morning in the plump, narrow bed in the bedroom she shared with her husband? When the soft-footed servant knocked on the door with Alistair's tea and the first of several cups of sweet, strong Turkish coffee that would punctuate Hannah's hours until lunch—why, who would have told Hannah to enjoy those coffees to the utmost, because they were her last on earth?

Who would have thought she would be dead by midnight, as she read aloud to Alistair from the newspaper while they ate the breakfast that was brought up on the tray?

When this morning, as usual, she'd straightened Alistair's necktie and pecked his dry cheek goodbye? When she'd taken the papers he had left on the corner of the desk the night before and typed them up on the typewriter, correcting the mistakes as she went along? (Alistair was a careless speller.) When, precisely as usual,

she'd allowed herself the cigarette during the drive to the club, followed by the lunch, followed by the tennis with the Foreign Office wives, followed by the gin and tonic, followed by the drive home and the long bath and the second cigarette?

Who would have thought she would never experience those things again?

And when Alistair had returned from the consulate and taken up his books and his pen, as he always did, while she settled on the sofa to read the English novel and stopped to watch a lizard scurry this way and that across the floor and up the wall to disappear into the crack near the ceiling? Who would imagine she would never learn what happened to the man who loved the woman who was married to the other man?

When six o'clock struck and she rose from the sofa and poured her husband the Scotch and soda and helped him dress for dinner?

When she put on the long black dress that suited her figure and the pearls and the elbow gloves?

When she drank the second gin and tonic with lime?

Then the silent drive across the river to the hotel. The champagne cocktail. The second champagne cocktail. The prawn cocktail followed by the chilled tomato soup.

The conversation about the king—that ass Farouk, Alistair had called him.

The orchestra that had slid into the waltz as the waiters whisked away the soup and served the fish. Then the meat and vegetables. Then the salad. Then the dessert and the cheese and the nice Yquem and Indian partition and *Don't be silly, Hannah.*

Who would have whispered in her ear—when she leaned back in her seat and finished the Yquem and thought, *I shall scream—Well, don't worry, old Hannah, you've only got fifteen minutes left to live*?

That her final seconds were ticking down as Hannah rose from her chair, mumbled about the cigarette, and stumbled her way from the dining room through the Arab Hall to the doors that opened to the gardens, where Mr. Beck, the assistant hotel manager, appeared out of thin air and asked her if she required anything.

* * *

Oh, Mr. Beck. What a shame about him! Now she'd never see Mr. Beck again.

He was Swiss, according to one of the other Foreign Office wives. All the hoteliers abroad were Swiss. Somehow the profession was bred into them, the woman didn't understand how. Maybe it was something to do with neutrality. Or a tradition of mountain hospitality. To Hannah, though, the only thing Swiss about Mr. Beck was his surname. He had large, cool green eyes below straight black eyebrows, and long black eyelashes for good measure. His features were almost delicate, except for the strong jaw anchoring the bottom of his face. Like any good hotel manager, he was invisible, voiceless, except when you needed him.

Then he appeared like a djinn.

Is there anything you require, Mrs. Ainsworth? he'd asked her, not five minutes ago, and stupidly she had said *No, thank you* and continued on her way.

Haughty, they called her. She'd overheard that once. *Haughty bitch, that wife of Ainsie's. You know how he found her. God knows where she came from. Who her people are. Damned lucky old Ainsie took a fancy to her.*

Oh, she'd overheard them, all right. As they intended. The English were so polite—they'd never say these things to her face.

No, thank you, she'd said to Mr. Beck, the hotel manager with the green eyes, and continued into the gardens, alone, a little drunk, but then she was always a little drunk by evening—that was the only way you got through the day without picking up one of those slim, elegant silver knives they laid out in the dining room and murdering somebody.

Or yourself.

Now this damn cobra.

In Egypt, the cobra was sometimes called an asp, which made you think of Cleopatra. According to legend, she had her servants smuggle an asp inside a basket to her private chambers, where she was confined by Caesar or somebody.

Hannah doubted this story. An Egyptian cobra was a large snake and would almost certainly object to being stuffed inside a basket—

especially a basket small enough to smuggle into Cleopatra's chambers without raising anyone's suspicions. But Ptolemy said so; therefore, it must be true. Anyway, did it really matter how Cleopatra got the snake into her bedchamber? The point was, she died of snakebite. Unless the whole incident was a metaphor—the snake in the lady's bedchamber administering the lethal dose of venom. You get the idea.

Hannah's snake—cobra, asp, whatever you wanted to call it—was certainly real. Its tiny scales were speckled brown and its hood made a perfect arc. It lay along the railing so that when she'd sat down, a second ago, her face was only a yard away from the cobra's face—close enough, anyway, so that in the light that spilled from the hotel windows behind her, every detail was sharp.

They say time slows down at the moment of danger, and Hannah would have agreed. She'd had all the time in the world to admire the snake's beauty, the perfect hood, the infinite brown-speckled scales. All the time in the world to smell the jasmine, to hear the faint lilt of the orchestra that would sing her to sleep.

She noticed the exquisite pattern of mosaic tiles in the pavilion.

She imagined Alistair's red face, pinched in horror—what a shock this would be, who on earth would pour his Scotch and soda the way he liked it. But this lasted only an instant. Another face replaced Alistair's red, pinched one; then more faces, each one by itself yet all at once, hitting her in the gut so she couldn't breathe.

Rage.

Grief.

All this commotion she hadn't been able to feel in years. All this in the oil-drop eyes of the cobra that lunged for her neck. How stupid.

Hannah flung up her arm. The fangs sank into the back of her hand. As she fell, the world turned white, too bright to bear. The pair of arms that caught her was part of the dream.

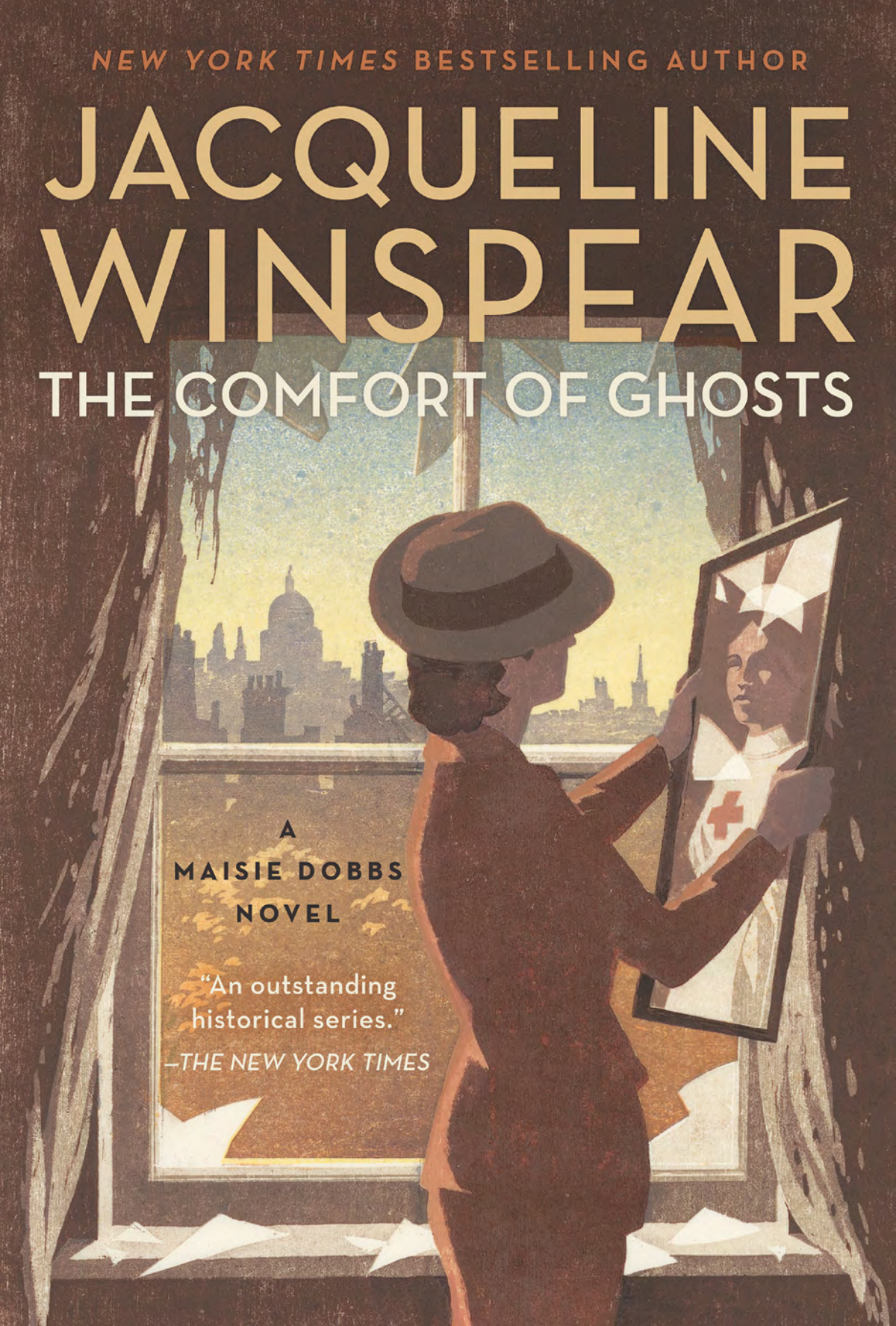
Is there anything you require, Mrs. Ainsworth?

Yes, Mr. Beck. I require everything. I require you.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JACQUELINE WINSPEAR

THE COMFORT OF GHOSTS



A MAISIE DOBBS NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1

Maisie Dobbs glanced around, taking account of the congregation gathered in Chelstone's ancient parish church. She was sure not one more person could be squeezed into the edifice. Every single pew was packed with villagers and visitors who had traveled from far and wide to pay their respects to the deceased. She sighed, drawing her gaze beyond those gathered to the rounded entrance, a hallmark of the church's early Norman architecture, and then up toward the wooden buttresses holding the roof fast, as if to catch the prayers of those below. She had met a woman, once, who told her she could see the prayers from distressed souls littering the ceiling of every church she had ever entered, as if those heartfelt messages had been inscribed on fine tissue paper and cast up so God could reach down to collect each one.

Maisie had always been intrigued by the names bestowed upon the different parts of a church: the nave, the chancel, the transept, altar and apse. The sanctuary. *Sanctuary.* The word echoed in her soul. The church's vintage attested to the hundreds of years local folk had come to mark baptisms, marriages and the burials of loved ones; to celebrate Christmas, Easter and her favorite, the Harvest Festival. Today marked the laying to rest of Lord Julian Compton.

For a moment Maisie stared at plaques dedicated to "The Glorious Dead" of two world wars, then cast her eyes toward the carpenter's tools left on a bench set against the cold stone walls. She was wondering how many more names would be added, when she felt a light squeeze against her fingers as Lady Rowan Compton took her hand. She pressed the liver-marked hand in return, and Lady Rowan leaned into her, a gesture revealing the older woman's need to be grounded in her presence, for though Maisie had remarried, she was still the widow of Rowan's only son. In her much shorter life, Maisie had worn the black of mourning twice to mark the loss of a man she adored, and during that time, Rowan had come to appreciate her daughter-in-law's strength even more, grateful for her fortitude at the worst of times. Maisie knew all this, not least because the motherly love bestowed upon her was returned.

Seated in the square, paneled section of the church designated for generations of the Compton family, who had once owned the entire village and still presided over some four thousand acres of the surrounding land, Maisie whispered to the matriarch.

"Rowan—"

"Don't worry—I'm bearing up, Maisie." She squeezed Maisie's hand again. "I won't let down my wonderful Julian with tears."

"I'm here, Rowan."

"I know."

The vicar gave an almost imperceptible nod in their direction, and as Rowan released her grasp, Maisie came to her feet, walked toward the grand brass lectern and stepped up to the Bible, already open to the page from which she would read. It was a tome so heavy, only the pages were ever moved. She felt the urge to cough mounting, and cleared her throat.

"Our first lesson is from Matthew Five . . ." She began to read,

her eyes meeting those of Lady Rowan as she reached the words "'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'"

Maisie felt her voice catch. *There has been too much mourning. Too great a need for comfort.* Stepping down from the lectern after speaking the words "Here endeth the lesson," she saw her husband of almost four years give a half-smile and nod. Mark Scott was seated on the other side of Lady Rowan, holding her right hand as the funeral service for Lord Julian continued. Maisie knew that if asked later, she might not be able to remember anything but approaching and leaving the lectern. Her heart was filled with missing the man who had assisted her so many times in her work, who had once been her father-in-law and, as age had softened his demeanor, had become a much-loved friend.

Later, the service over, Maisie stood alongside Lady Rowan, who insisted upon acknowledging each parishioner as they left the church.

"So kind of you to come . . ."

"Yes, he will indeed be missed."

"Do join us at the manor for a cup of tea . . ."

"You were so kind—His Lordship would have been delighted."

"Ah, Mr. Jones, every year he maintained your hot cross buns were the very best!"

And so it went on; the mourners, wrapped in heavy coats and woolen scarves, were now waiting to pay their respects in the low sunlight of a chilly autumn morning. As the crowd thinned, Maisie noticed one man who had waited until all had left the church, and stepped away toward him.

"Edwin, I take it you've come in place of your father today, and are here to read the will."

"Yes, I'm afraid he's not been at all well, Miss Dobbs—oh dear, sorry, I should have said 'Mrs. Scott.'"

"Please, do not apologize—I still use my maiden name for any assignments I choose to undertake. It makes things easier, though perhaps more difficult for some." She smiled to put the young man at ease. "Your father has been our trusted solicitor for many a year, and I am sure as his son you are more than up to the task."

Edwin Klein, who was some six feet and four inches tall, appeared to have become used to leaning down to speak sotto voce in situations where he had no desire to reveal his words to anyone but the person with whom he was in conversation. His shoulders became rounded as he bent forward, his voice low.

"Indeed, we should of course gather to discuss the last will and testament and aspects of the Trust, but I have been observing Lady Rowan and I would suggest we wait—after all, as an executor, you know the details, as does Lady Rowan, so no surprises there. However, there are a couple of somewhat urgent issues of some concern."

"Oh dear—I don't like the sound of that."

"We have discovered that there are squatters at the Ebury Place mansion. As you know, last week I sent a clerk over to take a complete inventory of everything in the house, yet he was unable to gain entry due to interior bolts being drawn across. There were no signs of forced ingress, so the interlopers must have found a window open—and I'm afraid due to laws protecting squatters in such circumstances, there's nothing much that can be done. Of course, the police have been alerted, but their hands are full. If it's any consolation, I've spoken to one of our land lawyers, and he predicts the problem will only escalate across the country, and that by next year, given the sheer numbers of homeless left by six years of bombing, the Ebury Place mansion will be regarded as just the first of many vacant properties to be inhabited by goodness knows who!"

Maisie nodded. "Perhaps there's something I can do, but I really don't want to concern Lady Rowan with the problem, not at the moment—you're right, she's very tired."

"Granted, but Mrs. Scott, she has to be informed soonest. Our firm will take your instructions, though at the moment our hands are rather tied."

"Was your clerk able to see inside? Is there damage?"

Klein shook his head. "All appears to be in order inside, though there's a broken window or two on the second floor—likely caused by land vibration from a bombing at some point. Minor issue. I would imagine the squatters are using only the smaller upper rooms and the kitchen—it's easier to heat, and of course there was a goodly amount of fuel left in the coal bunker adjacent to the scullery."

"Well, at least they won't go cold."

"I beg your pardon?" Edwin Klein registered alarm. "Mrs. Scott, squatting is an offence, albeit a protected one in certain circumstances. Lord Julian gave instructions for the property to be made available for sale, and we would like to proceed as we understand there are interested parties, with at least one inquiry from an overseas government seeking suitable accommodation in London for a consular official of high standing. As you know, we were able to construct robust plans to limit death duties, but certain monies will remain due to the government, and a sale of the Ebury Place mansion could well solve the problem."

Maisie reached forward and touched the younger Klein's arm. "Mr. Klein—Edwin—Lord Julian was very particular about the order of service for his funeral, and he personally chose Matthew Twenty-Two for one of the readings. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'" She held his gaze. "We have all had rather a lot of

the opposite, haven't we? Let me see if I can solve this problem without much ado, while at the same time respecting poorer souls who have been made homeless during this terrible war."

The solicitor tilted his head and stood to his full height. "Right you are. I'll let my father know where we stand, and I will wait to hear the outcome of your efforts, along with your instructions." He paused. "In the meantime, are arrangements in hand for Lady Rowan's removal from Chelstone Manor, or has she decided to remain in the older garden wing while the rest of the property is made ready for transfer?"

Maisie sighed, brushed lint from the sleeve of her black velvet coat and shook her head. "Edwin, the war has barely ended. We have recently offered rooms to young refugees from a German concentration camp, and they are expected to join us within weeks, plus everyone in that church is mourning the loss of a much-loved, deeply respected man, a hero held in high esteem within the village and—indeed—across an ocean. Let us rest for a little while—as you kindly suggested. I will deal with the squatters and I will let you know the situation regarding Lady Rowan's choice of residence." She placed a hand on his arm. "If you will excuse me, Mr. Klein, my place is with her, at her side, but know we are most grateful for your assistance and will be in touch."

She turned away just as Mark Scott approached.

"Everything okay, honey? From a distance that seemed a bit tense."

"Well, all I can say is, he's not his father!"

"Poor Rowan is all in, so George has taken her home—where there's a whole mass of people waiting to talk to her," said Mark. "I think you should take over as soon as we get there so she can go upstairs to rest. She's a determined lady, but this has been

a long haul for her. Your dad and Brenda are helping out, and as always, Priscilla is doing her bit—as you might say. She can hold a conversation with ten people at once and still have room for more."

"You're right, we should be on our way now. I hope Anna and Margaret Rose have minded their p's and q's at home."

Maisie's adopted daughter, Anna, was now ten years of age and had become close to Margaret Rose, the daughter of her business partner, Billy Beale, and his wife, Doreen, after the family moved into the bungalow owned by Maisie's father and stepmother. It had been a temporary tenancy engineered by Maisie after the area around Billy and Doreen's home in the London suburb of Eltham was bombed. For their part, Maisie's father and stepmother came to live with her at the Dower House, a large property situated just within the boundary of the Chelstone Manor estate.

"Don't worry, hon," said Mark. "I predict those girls have their heads in books while snuggled up to Little Em. Our daughter is way more sensible than I was at that age. Anyway, Billy told me that they'll go straight over to the house and wait until we're back before they head on home with Margaret Rose."

Maisie rested her hand on his arm as they walked toward a waiting motor car. "Mark, I'll be coming into London with you on Monday after all. I'll stay for a couple of nights at the flat—I know you'll be busy at the embassy preparing to leave for Washington, but we'll have some time together until you leave. I daresay Lady Rowan will be resting for most of my absence anyway. It appears there are squatters at the Ebury Place house, so I'm going to try to sort it all out."

"Squatters? Can't you just send in a few hefty young men—Priscilla's three boys look like they would be up for the job."

"Mark, over here squatter's rights go back to the Middle Ages, so it's not quite that straightforward."

"I would rather have your problem than the one I've got on my hands."

"I can't believe you're flying off again so soon," said Maisie. "I wish you could stay."

"I wish I could too, but there's work to be done and I'm one of the poor diplomatic souls lined up to do it. Ambassador Winant thinks that because I'm married to a lovely English woman, I know more about your people than the rest of the department, so my title 'political attaché' now encompasses getting my fingers in more pies than I would like." He smiled. "Anyway, I shouldn't be more than a week or so this time, and at least we don't have to worry about the Luftwaffe anymore. Just all those stops in a shaky Douglas DC-4—Bournemouth to Shannon, Shannon to Lisbon, Lisbon to Gander, then Gander to Washington."

Maisie nudged her husband. "And at the end of it all, Britain will be in even more debt to you lot."

"My lot? If it all works out, at least America will be giving you guys a big old wad of money in the new year, a loan to get you over the hump."

"Ah, but think of how that wad will help us—we'll be able to put a roof over the head of every homeless family."

Maisie looked up at the grand Belgravia mansion she had first entered as a thirteen-year-old girl in 1910, when she reported for work at the kitchen entrance of the Compton family's London home, where she was to take up the post of under-parlor maid. Some nineteen years later, having set up

her own business, Maisie was asked by Lady Rowan to accept the offer of rooms at the mansion, as she and Lord Julian were spending more time at Chelstone Manor, the family seat in Kent. Though the request was put to Maisie as the necessary task of keeping an eye on the property and its London staff during the Comptons' absence, Maisie knew very well that Rowan wanted her to live in more comfortable surroundings than the rented bedsit situated next to her office in a less than salubrious area.

Later still, following Maisie's marriage to James Compton, the couple lived at the Belgravia property together, becoming master and mistress of the home where on hands and knees she had once scrubbed floors; where she had fluffed cushions, washed skirting boards, dusted even the tops of door frames and where, in time, she enjoyed one half-day off every fortnight. In girlhood Maisie's working day had started at five in the morning and did not end until after eleven at night. And it was the house where she had been discovered studying in the library at two in the morning by Lady Rowan, an event destined to change the trajectory of her future, though at the time she believed she had forfeited her job in a secret quest to further her education. Rowan enlisted the help of her friend Dr. Maurice Blanche—a forensic scientist, psychologist and something of a philosopher—to advise on how best to help a young working-class girl who showed such intellectual promise. Maurice became Maisie's mentor, and in time she would learn the craft of forensic investigation when she accepted the offer to become his assistant, joining him in his work as an investigator.

Maisie thought of all these things as she stared at the house, wondering how she could find a way to gain entry, a means to talk to whoever had claimed shelter in one of the finest mansions

in the most elite part of London. She set off across the street and made her way up the steps to the front entrance. Taking hold of the heavy door knocker, she rapped it against the small protruding brass plate a jaunty seven times, as if she were beating out a tune. It wasn't a rhythm the police would have used.

There was no answer.

She bent forward, lifted the letter box flap and called inside. "Hello! Anyone at home? I know you're there, so may I have a quick word?" She paused. "You're not in trouble—I believe I can help you. Hello!"

Leaving the flap open, she listened. There was no sound, so she tried again.

"You won't be reported. Come to the door—you don't have to open it. Just come here and talk to me."

Maisie moved the side of her head to the open letter box and strained to hear. Yes, there was whispering—she was sure she could hear voices. She called out again.

"Look, I know you're there. I'm not with the police. I'm not with any government authority. And I'm not trying to kick you out—I know you need a roof over your head, and I know you're probably frightened." She took a deep breath. "I promise I can help you." She waited another second. "You can trust me. I know . . . I know this is your . . . your sanctuary, the only place you could find. Trust me."

A few seconds passed, and as Maisie leaned forward to have one final try, she heard someone walking toward the door, light of step as if on tiptoe. She held the letter box flap open.

"Who are you?" It was the voice of a girl. From her tone, Maisie estimated her to be fifteen or sixteen years of age, but it was difficult to tell. Even younger children sounded older having endured a war.

"My name is Mrs. Scott. I used to live here—upstairs, where I think you must be bedding down. It's a cold house, isn't it? But the servants' quarters are smaller, so you can keep the rooms warm. Did you find the coal cellar?"

"We're alright. And warm enough."

"Are you getting enough to eat?"

"None of us is going hungry."

"How many of you are there? I just need to know, for . . . for insurance purposes. Are you with your family?"

The girl seemed to falter.

"Hello—did you hear me?" Maisie paused, then added, "I promise it's alright to tell me."

"There was four. But now . . . but now there's five. And we're not related, but I suppose the four of us are sort of family."

"You don't sound quite sure, my dear. Do you need help?"

No answer.

"Are you there?"

Maisie heard the girl sniff.

"Oh, sweetheart, are you sure you're alright? Do let me help you."

"Yes, we're managing, but . . . but there's a man here and he's very ill. Every day I think he'll be dead by morning. He's everso poorly."

"What man? Do you know him?"

At once a pair of eyes appeared on the other side of the letter box, as the girl bent down to look at Maisie.

"What's your name, my dear?"

"Mary. Just Mary."

"Mary, tell me about the man. Has he given you reason to fear him?"

Mary shook her head. "No. Poor sod can hardly stand, let

alone hurt anyone. I reckon he's the one who's in pain and I'm not much of a nurse. He turned up about six days ago, and us lot had already been here a couple of weeks. Never seen him before. He came in the back way."

The girl sniffed again. Maisie reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a fresh linen handkerchief.

"There you are." She pushed the handkerchief through the letter box. "Take this, wipe your eyes and have a good blow. You'll feel better."

Mary took the handkerchief, turned away to blow her nose, then came back to peer at Maisie.

"Thank you."

"Now tell me about the man—it sounds as if he's suffering."

"Every day I wonder whether he'll be dead when we go in there, and what we'll do with him when he's gone. And he's wearing one of them demob suits—he said he'd been in the army. He scares me—he screams when he sleeps, and he sleeps a lot. We've brought him some soup every day, but we've almost run out of the tins in the pantry."

"How are you all feeling? Do you think he's had something that's catching? An illness?"

"No, but we're . . . we're all scared, and . . . and we've got to stay here so we can work out what to do next." She turned away.

"Mary! Mary—are you still there?"

There was a hiatus, as if the girl were indeed wondering what to do next.

"I'm here."

"Mary, is there something else you're afraid of?"

"No. No, but . . . Nothing."

Maisie was silent, concentrating on the young person on the other side of the door. *Please don't close down, stay with me.*

"Mary, listen to me. I'm going to leave now—and don't worry, as I said, I'm not with the police or the council or the bailiffs. But I will come back with some supplies for you and your friends, and I'll make some nice broth for the man. I've some tinned food at home, so I'll bring it in for you. I'll leave a box by the back door, the one leading into the kitchen."

"That's how the man got in."

"Through the kitchen?"

"Yes. He knew how to unlock the door, you know, without a key."

"And you found him upstairs?"

"Like Goldilocks, he was, falling asleep in someone else's bed. But I suppose that's what we've all done, though none of us can sleep properly, in case they come for us."

"In case who comes for you?"

Another pause.

"Mary? In case who comes for you?"

"Doesn't matter. Anyway, I'll look out for the things you said you'd leave for us. But don't try to trick us."

"No, no tricks."

The girl began to move, but Maisie called after her.

"Has he said anything, this man?"

"Mumbles most of the time."

"Has he made any sense?"

"Doesn't say much. But like I said, he screams in his sleep. Tenko—tenko—tenko. Like that, only louder."

"Tenko?"

"He doesn't make sense."

"Hmmm, no, he doesn't."

"And I reckon he's got a wife somewhere, or a girl, because he calls out for her."

"That could be a start."

"I doubt it—there's a lot of women called Lily, aren't there?"

"Lily?"

"Well, it could be something else, though it's definitely an *L* name—you know, Letty, or Lizzie. We can hardly understand him. He gets all white and frothy around his mouth when he's asleep and mumbling. Rotten sad, it is. Anyway, thank you for trying to help. When do you think you can fetch some food for us? One of my mates here is bound to get caught if he keeps going out trying to get more."

"Tell him to stay here. And . . . and keep yourselves occupied. If you go into the library, the big room with the books next to the drawing room, you'll see a cupboard in there with all sorts of games and puzzles. And you can read the books. Don't let yourselves get bored."

"Oh that's alright. We practice what we was taught."

"Practice? What do you mean?"

"Mary! Don't say any more." The voice came from behind the girl.

"Nothing. Sorry. Got to go. Bye. Thank you, Mrs. Scott."

Maisie continued to watch as the girl named Mary walked away, stopping once to reach down and pull up long grey socks that had slipped down to her ankles. A boy of about the same age stepped into her line of vision. Now she could see that Mary was tall for her age and slender, with long legs that reminded Maisie of a young racehorse. She wore a pleated schoolgirl skirt, two cardigans and a blue blouse, and her shoes were ill-fitting.

"You couldn't keep your mouth buttoned, could you?" said the boy, who was the same height as the girl, though his clothing would have been better suited to a shorter lad, and it appeared

the most recent cutting of his ragged brown hair had not been executed by a barber.

"She was trying to help us—I could see that."

"See it could you?" said the boy. "Just with them eyes of yours."

"Give it a rest, Jim."

"I'll give you this."

The boy raised his hand, yet as Maisie continued to watch, in an instant the girl had swept him off his feet with a swift move, her leg shoved forward to hook around his right ankle as she pushed up his chin with the heel of her right hand, then brought her other hand down on his neck.

"Don't ever do that again, Jim. What's the matter with you? You losing whatever's left in that brain on top of your shoulders? We've got to stick together, us lot, so just you get a grip of yourself. And if it crosses your mind to swing for me ever again, remember, I was always faster than you. I'll kill you, truly I will."

Maisie let the letterbox flap close without a sound, as the girl who called herself Mary approached the staircase. Turning away toward the square, she lifted her collar against a sharp breeze and looked up at cobalt clouds merging overhead as if to reflect her quandary. She walked on, determined to busy herself gathering a collection of foodstuffs, a task made more difficult by the limitations of her ration book. Mark would help—courtesy of the American embassy, he was able to obtain foods that were otherwise unavailable to the British people. The youngsters would be very grateful for a bar or two of American chocolate tucked inside a box of comestibles. And she needed to think, needed to consider her next move, because she had to cradle the information revealed by Mary with a light hand. For if she were not mistaken, the unknown

man was calling out for a girl named Lizzie—and Lizzie died a long time ago. Then there was the other matter—it was clear a girl in her teens had been trained in unarmed combat. Therefore it would be fair to assume her friends were equally adept at taking care of themselves.

ONE OF OUR KIND

A NOVEL

NICOLA YOON

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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PART ONE

It really is beautiful here," Jasmyn says, looking out of the passenger-side window. Here is the Black history museum with its massive roman columns and grand staircase. Next door, the manicured sculpture garden is populated with statues of W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and, of course, Martin Luther King Jr. A block later the Liberty Theater, with its ornate rococo stylings, comes into view. Enormous posters announce the dates for December's *Nutcracker* performance. Beautiful Black ballerinas star in every role from the Rat King to the Sugar Plum fairy.

Her husband, Kingston—everyone calls him King—takes a hand off the steering wheel and squeezes her knee. "Been a long time coming," he says.

Jasmyn smiles at his profile and rests her hand atop his. God knows he'd worked hard enough to get them to here. Here being Liberty, California, a small suburb on the outskirts of Los Angeles.

She turns her eager gaze back to the sights of the downtown district. They pass Liberty Gardens with its bountiful variety of cacti and

succulents. On a previous visit, she'd learned from the entrance plaque that desert flowers have unique adaptations that allow them to extract the maximum amount of moisture possible from their parched environment. Jasmyn told King she felt a kinship with them because of the way they found a way to thrive despite hardship.

"Bet they'd prefer if it just rained a little more," he teased.

"Probably," Jasmyn said, and laughed along with him.

They drive by the aquatic complex, and then the equestrian center, where she sees two young Black girls, twelve or thirteen years old, looking sharp in their riding jackets, breeches, and boots.

Finally, they begin the drive up Liberty Hill to the residential section. They'd visited Liberty three times before, but Jasmyn is still awestruck and, if she's being honest, a little discomfited at the sheer size of the houses. Why call them houses at all? Modern-day castles are what they are. Expansive lawns and landscaped hedges. Wide circular driveways, most with fountains or some other architectural water feature. Multiple cars that start at six figures. They pass two parked pool service vans and another for tennis court maintenance.

It's hard for Jasmyn to believe that everyone who lives here is Black. Harder to believe that, in just one month, she's going to be one of the Black people who lives here. The Jasmyn that grew up fighting for space in a cramped, one-bedroom apartment with her mother, grandmother, and older sister couldn't have imagined she'd end up in a place like this. That Jasmyn would've thought this kind of living was only possible for the rich white people she saw in TV shows.

But here she is, driving by these outrageously colossal homes, on her way to her *own* outrageously colossal home.

King turns down their soon-to-be street. It's a week before Thanksgiving, but a handful of the houses already have Christmas decorations up. The first has not one, but two enormous Christmas trees on either side of the lawn. Both are flocked and decorated with crystal snowflakes. Closer to the house itself, spiral-strung lights ascend to the top of their fifty-foot-tall palm trees. There are wreaths in every window and a more elaborate one hanging from the front door.

But it's the house half a block later that makes Jasmyn ask King to slow down and pull over.

"These people aren't playing," King says.

The house has three separate displays, all of them animatronic and so realistic Jasmyn does a triple take. On the left side of the driveway there's a nativity display complete with bowing Wise Men, baby Jesus in a manger, and two angels with wings beating lightly. On the right, there's an elaborate Santa's workshop display featuring Mrs. Claus and her helper elves wrapping a tower of presents. The final display is on the roof. Santa, resplendent and jolly, is poised for takeoff in a life-sized sleigh, complete with rearing reindeer led by Rudolph.

But the most incredible part to Jasmyn, the part that makes her smile wide, is that all the figures are Black. Santa and Mrs. Claus. The angels and the elves. Baby Jesus and the Three Wise Men. Every one of them, a shade of brown.

"Just beautiful," she says.

She's seen Black Santas before, of course. For the last two years, she's made a special effort to seek one out for their six-year-old son, Kamau. And to this day, she still remembers the first time she ever saw one. She'd been nine and overheard their neighbor telling her mother about it.

"I hear they got themselves a Black Santa down at the mall," the woman had said.

Jasmyn begged her mother to go and meet him. The following weekend, along with every Black family in the neighborhood, they went. The line was long and her mother was mad by the time they got to the front. But Jasmyn sat on Santa's lap and asked him for the thing she thought a Black Santa would understand: money. Money so her mother didn't have to work two jobs. Money so she could have her own room and not have to share the living room with her sister, Ivy. Money so they could afford a house in a neighborhood that was less dangerous. It didn't occur to her to ask for one in a neighborhood that wasn't dangerous at all.

Six weeks later her grandmother died and left Jasmyn's mother enough money to quit one of her jobs for a few months. Her sister dropped out of high school and moved in with her older boyfriend. "God

works in mysterious ways," her grandmother always said. It seemed to Jasmyn that Santa did, too.

King leans closer to her so he can get a better view of the display. "We definitely making the right move, baby," he says.

He says it because at first, Jasmyn had taken some convincing.

Liberty is something more than a neighborhood and less than a township. According to the brochure, it's a community. A gated, outrageously wealthy, and Black community.

"A Black utopia," King had said when he first told her about it. "Everyone from the mayor to the police chief to the beat cops to the janitors, all Black."

"How can they keep it all Black legally?" she asked.

Kingston eyed her like she was naive. "How many white folks you know want to move into a predominantly Black neighborhood?"

She conceded the point.

"It's a place where we can be free to relax and be ourselves," Kingston said.

She was skeptical still.

"There are no utopias," she told him. Certainly not for Black people and certainly not in America. Not anywhere in the world, if she was being real. She reminded him that Black utopias had been tried with little success before: Allensworth and Soul City, for example.

"This one will last," he'd insisted.

And she'd wanted him to be right. Wanted to live in a place surrounded by like-minded, thriving Black people. A place with wide, quiet streets where their son could ride his bike, carefree, with other little Black boys. A place where both King and Kamau would be safe walking around at night. She imagined them going for a stroll on some cold evening, both of them wearing hoodies. She imagined a cop car pulling alongside them. But this cop car had Black cops, and they were slowing down just to wish them a good evening.

But Liberty's wealth got under her skin. Would she fit in with rich people, even if they were Black? Would she ever get used to being wealthy herself? And worse than that insecurity was this: she didn't

want to turn into one of those bougie Black people who forgot where they were from—and the people they came from—as soon as they got a little walking-around money.

"Baby, what are you talking about?" King had asked. "We haven't lived in the hood for a minute now," he said.

They'd argued in the kitchen of their two-bedroom apartment in the mid-city district. The neighborhood was working class, with quite a few older immigrants, their first-generation kids, and, of course, Black people. It wasn't rundown by any means and it certainly was better than Compton, where Jasmyn and King had both grown up. Still, there were homeless tents every few blocks or so. Some stores were still boarded up from the protests against police brutality a few summers before. The public school they sent Kamau to was decent but didn't have nearly enough Black teachers. Living there made Jasmyn feel like she'd come far from where she started out, but not *too* far. She still felt a part of the pulse of the Black community in LA.

King had been more upset by her resistance than she'd expected. "You're a public defender. You do more for our folks and our community than most people, for God's sake," he'd said.

"That doesn't mean I can just up and abandon them," she said.

He stared at her, mouth hanging open for a few seconds, before saying anything. "How is it abandoning? It's not like you're leaving your job. I'm talking about moving to a place with *only* Black people."

Jasmyn knew her resistance was more emotional than logical, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd be losing some part of herself if she moved.

It'd taken an incident with a white cop later in the spring to finally convince her to move.

"We should get going or we'll be late," King says now, and starts the car up. "We got the interior designer at ten and the landscape architect at eleven a.m."

Jasmyn nods. "Maybe we should come back tonight with Kamau so he can see those animatronics lit up and moving," she says as they pull away.

King squeezes her hand. "Good idea."

"Can you imagine his little face when he sees all this?"

King bulges his eyes out, imitating the funny face that Kamau makes when he's amazed by something. They both laugh.

Jasmyn rolls down her window and sticks her arm outside, letting her hand ride the air currents the way she used to as a child. She takes a long breath. Even the air in Liberty smells different, crisp and new. They pass two more Black Santas. A young couple walking with their toddler son and a dog waves to them as they drive by. Jasmyn smiles wide and waves back. In a couple of months she and King and Kamau will be the ones waving to someone new in the neighborhood. Maybe they'd get a dog, too, once they were settled.

She rests her hand on her stomach. It'd taken them years longer than they'd planned to get pregnant again, but their second son is just seven months away. That Liberty, this place of Black splendor, will be all he knows fills her with pride. She imagines that growing up, surrounded on all sides by Black excellence, will plant a seed in both his and Kamau's hearts. It will help them both flourish, secure in the knowledge of their own beauty and self-worth.

Jasmyn reaches across the console and squeezes King's thigh. "You were right, baby," she says. "This is the right move."

COMMENTS 1378

In response to our article "Liberty: The Creation of a Modern Black Utopia"

The Los Angeles New Republic *is committed to publishing a diversity of voices. We welcome your on-topic commentary, criticism and expertise. This conversation is moderated according to the* Republic*'s community rules. Please read the rules before joining the discussion.*

- **WHITE LIBERAL IN NYC**

  I am an older White liberal living in NYC and I have been a steadfast champion of civil rights practically my entire life. It never fails to surprise me how short-sighted Blacks can be, even a high achieving one such as Mr. Carlton Way undoubtedly is. Would the great Martin Luther King Jr. approve of this so-called utopia? I daresay he would not. He would call it what it is, a dystopia. Mr. King wanted us to unite! White, Black, Brown, Yellow, Red, Purple, Whatever! All peoples together. A community like Liberty is taking us backwards not forwards.

- **DMN666**

  LMFAO. Why stop there? Why not go all the way back to Africa? Good riddance is what I say.

- **BLACK AND CURIOUS IN SF**

  How do they decide who is Black? Does Mr. Way do it himself? Is there genetic testing? Is it the one-drop rule or the paper bag test?

- **ARTHUR BANE**

  I am well aware that this will be a minority opinion in this "news"paper, but Liberty sounds idyllic. Maslow's hierarchy of needs includes (among others) safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization. America

has a long and atrocious history of denying these basic needs to its Black citizens. Why shouldn't they carve out a place for themselves?

- **FED UP IN MISSISSIPPI**
  Another day, another article about the Blacks and their discontents. Don't you people have more important things to write about?

- **PROFESSORGAYLE**
  Historically, all utopias have failed.

PART TWO

The first thing Jasmyn notices about the older Black woman on her front doorstep is that her hair is *relaxed*. Not *natural*. Meaning that every six to eight weeks or so the older woman goes to a hair care salon and sits in a chair while a hairdresser applies a chemical that some people—Jasmyn among them—call "creamy crack" to her hair. The chemical transforms her natural, kinky, and beautiful hair into bone-straight locks.

Jasmyn studies the woman's hairline. It's funny how much hair can tell you about the kind of person you're dealing with. To Jasmyn's mind, using creamy crack is a sure sign of being an unenlightened Black woman. She finds that the practice is more common among the older generation. They steadfastly believe that taming their supposedly wild hair will make them more respectable.

Even her own mother hadn't been immune. Right after Jasmyn graduated from college, when she decided she didn't want her hair relaxed anymore, her mother warned her off.

"Let me tell you something," she'd said. "Nowadays, you young ones

think times have changed. You think you can be Black as you want, but I'm telling you, your *white* bosses will judge you behind your back. To your face, they'll say how nice your hair is. Meanwhile it's the girl with straight hair or the weave getting promoted. You mark my words," she said.

That had been one of the last conversations they had. Her mother had a heart attack and died a few months later.

Jasmyn feels the familiar grief as an expanding thickness in her throat like she'd never again take a full breath. Even then she'd known that her mother was trying to protect her, trying to make life easier for Jasmyn than it had been for her. But she also knew that nothing changed if someone didn't change it. She'd stopped relaxing her hair and grown out her Afro.

And those bosses her mother had talked about? They had no choice but to promote Jasmyn. She was excellent at her job.

Jasmyn touches her short Afro and pulls her eyes away from the woman's hairline. She reminds herself not to judge the older woman too harshly. She came up at a different time.

"I'm Sherril," the woman says. "Think of me as your one-woman welcome committee." Her smile is innocent and broad. Jasmyn can see all there is to see of her elaborately white teeth.

"Well, thank you," says Jasmyn. "I don't think I've ever been personally welcomed into a neighborhood before."

Sherril waves her off. "I'm sorry I took so long to stop by. I know you all have been here for at least a couple of weeks now." Her accent is southern, Mississippi maybe. "We like to let folks know they're right where they belong."

There's no denying the kindness of the gesture. Jasmyn feels a slight wash of shame over the way she'd judged the other woman. Not for the first time, she reminds herself that Black people exist on a continuum from Uncle Tom to Black Panther. Some folks come to enlightenment later—sometimes much later—than others. Some folks never get there at all.

"Would you like to come in?" Jasmyn asks.

The woman shakes her head and Jasmyn watches her hair pendulum around her face. Not a curl or a coil or a kink is anywhere in sight.

"Maybe another time," Sherril says. "Besides, I'm sure you have a world of unpacking to do."

She doesn't correct Sherril's assumption. Despite the fact that they've been here for only two weeks, they're already settled in. King had hired a moving company that did it all: packed up their old apartment and unpacked and moved them into their new house.

"I stopped by to give you some welcome to Liberty treats," Sherril continues.

She hands Jasmyn two boxes. The first is a simple cardboard one with what looks like shortbread cookies.

"I made them myself," Sherril says.

"Thank you. This is very nice of you," says Jasmyn with a smile. "Funny enough, these are my son's favorite. He'll devour these in one swoop if I let him."

The second box is larger than the first and tied with fine gold ribbon. *Liberty Wellness Center* is embossed in cursive across the lid.

"Oh, you didn't have to do this," Jasmyn says.

"Of course I did, sugar," Sherril says and smiles. "Go ahead and open it up."

The box itself is exquisite: teal blue, velvet soft, and shimmering. Aspirational packaging, the advertisers call it. It smells faintly herbal. Jasmyn tugs at the silky ribbon. Inside, she finds a small bouquet of sage and lavender twigs tied together with gold thread nestled against white satin. Below the bouquet, there's a dark blue silk sleep mask and a heavy black card with gold printing. At first Jasmyn thinks maybe Liberty has its own credit card, but when she turns it over, she sees it's a membership card to the Wellness Center. Next to the card are delicate glass bottles with facial cleansers, toners, and moisturizers. All the product names are French and written in cursive so ornate, they're barely legible. Combined with the sumptuous blue and gold of the box and ribbon, the whole package is definitely reminiscent of eighteenth-century European royalty. Jasmyn traces a finger over the looping letters, slightly frustrated

that, even here in Liberty, Eurocentric standards of beauty and luxury reign.

Still, it is a beautiful package and so thoughtful of the other woman to bring it to her. Jasmyn says as much.

"Self-care is important," says Sherril. "Everybody needs an escape from the world every once in a while."

Jasmyn nods, though she doesn't much agree. There's always so much work to be done, especially for their community. Community care *is* self-care.

Pregnancy heartburn kicks in and Jasmyn rubs at her stomach. "Take it easy in there, sweetie." She smiles up at Sherril. "This one got me burping."

"You're pregnant," Sherril says. She takes one step back, and then another, as if this discovery is unexpected and, somehow, alarming.

"Fourteen weeks along." Jasmyn waits for the woman to ask the usual questions: *Is it a boy or a girl? Have you already chosen a name?*

But the questions don't come. Sherril looks at her stomach for so long it makes Jasmyn think maybe she has some tragic maternal history. Maybe she hadn't been able to have children of her own. Or maybe she lost one to gangs or to police violence. Or maybe she was simply lamenting the passing of her childbearing years.

Sherril's eyes drift up from Jasmyn's stomach to her breasts and up to her trim Afro. "That's quite a shirt," she says.

Jasmyn checks to see what she's wearing: a T-shirt with a raised fist and the words *Black Power* in cursive below.

"I didn't know they still made those," Sherril says.

Jasmyn frowns her confusion. Of course they do. Why wouldn't they?

"Well," Jasmyn says. "Thank you so much for these. I can't wait to eat the cookies." She stacks the gifts against her stomach.

"Yes, it sure was nice to meet you. Welcome to the neighborhood again and be sure to visit us up at the Wellness Center." Her eyes drop to Jasmyn's stomach again. "It'll do you a world of good, especially in your condition."

Jasmyn smiles and promises she'll visit just as soon as she finds the time. Which will be never. She'll never have the time for something so extravagant and so fundamentally unnecessary. Not when she could be using all that time and money helping people less fortunate than herself.

Jasmyn walks them out to the driveway and watches as Sherril makes her way to her car. As she opens the door, sunlight flares in the side-view mirror, haloing her hair, her face. It has the effect of making her look paler than she had before. Jasmyn squints, trying to see through the light to what's really there, but Sherril closes the door. The side mirror shifts and the illusion is lost.

Jasmyn walks slowly back to the house. A fine shiver feathers its way across her skin. She frowns up at the sky, searching for something to explain her sudden chill, but the spring sky is a wide-open expanse of cloudless blue. Still, the air feels charged and full somehow, as if it's readying itself for a release.

Back inside, she rubs her hands up and down her forearms to warm them. What was the silly thing her grandmother used to say about goosebumps? That it meant someone had just walked over your grave. The first time she'd said it, Jasmyn was just a little girl and she'd cried, inconsolable. She remembers Ivy making fun of her tears and her mother scolding her grandmother for "putting morbid nonsense into the child's head."

Jasmyn huffs a laugh at the memory and shakes off the odd feeling of foreboding. She replaces the lid and reties the bow on the Wellness Center package. It really was thoughtful of Sherril to bake cookies and bring welcome gifts. No one had ever stopped by with presents in her old neighborhood. Truth is, she didn't even know the names of any of her old neighbors.

She texts King and tells him about Sherril's visit.

They really do believe in community here, she types.

Just make sure you save me some of those cookies, he texts back.

2

"You better not be tracking mud all over my brand-new floors," Jasmyn says to Kamau when he comes into the kitchen from the backyard.

He gives her a sheepish look with those big brown eyes of his and then turns right around to go take off his Nikes outside on the deck.

"That's more like it," Jasmyn says when he's back.

"Sorry, Moms."

"It's all right," she says, and opens her arms. He dives into them for a hug. "Which freckles should I kiss today?" she asks.

Kamau grins and makes a big show of thinking hard about the decision by stroking his chin in the same way King does.

Jasmyn laughs. They play this kiss-the-freckle game at some point every day. Sometimes he chooses the delicate spray across the bridge of his nose. Other days, he picks the constellation on his left cheek or the small sprinkling just under his right temple.

Today he picks his cheek. Jasmyn gives him three nuzzling kisses before hugging him close and holding on to him a little tighter than she normally does. She knows she needs to go easier on him. It's hard to be in a new neighborhood and at a new school trying to make friends when you're six years old. Hell, making new friends is hard for her, too, and she's thirty-six.

He slips out of her arms. "Can I get a snack?" he asks and runs over to the pantry.

He's small for his age, short, and a little too thin. King worries about him being tiny, doesn't want him to get bullied. But Jasmyn thinks he'll hit a growth spurt soon enough. He and King are so much alike physically, same slightly too-big ears and perfect eyebrows. She has no doubt Kamau will end up being over six feet tall just like his father.

Jasmyn watches Kamau grab a bag of chips and sighs. No matter how small he is now, she knows it won't be long before he's *perceived* as being grown. She'd read more than one study that said cops overestimate the age—and, therefore, underestimate the innocence—of Black children by about four years. Instead of Kamau's height, what King really needs to be worrying about is giving Kamau the Talk. He needs to talk to him about how to deal with the police harassment that will inevitably come his way. If he'd already given it to him, Kamau would've known not to say anything to the cop who pulled them over last spring.

It's not often that you recognize the moment propelling you from one kind of life into another while the moment is still happening. But for Jasmyn, the traffic stop was one such instance, and she'd felt her path shift.

It was late afternoon on an unexpectedly cool spring day. The three of them—Jasmyn, King, and Kamau—were driving home from the annual children's Easter party that King's new job put on. Even though he'd been working as a venture capitalist at Argent Financial for about three years, Jasmyn still thought of his job as new.

Every year, the company hosted a catered family brunch, complete with the Easter bunny, multiple chocolate fountains, egg decorating and

story-time stations, and a massive Easter egg hunt. It was over-the-top and, Jasmyn was sure, far too expensive. Still, Kamau loved it, which meant she loved it, too.

She'd been leaning back against the headrest with her eyes closed when King said, "Oh shit." The note of suppressed terror in his voice bolted Jasmyn upright. A siren sounded. In her side-view mirror, she saw the reds and blues flashing.

"Ohhh, Daddy said a bad word," Kamau said in the delighted and superior way children use when they catch their adults doing something wrong.

"Hush up, baby," Jasmyn said. She used her gentlest voice.

This wasn't their first time being stopped by a cop, but it was their first time with Kamau in the car.

King turned to look at Kamau in the back seat. Then he looked at Jasmyn for a long second.

She read his fear, reached for his hand, and squeezed. "You got this," she said.

"Maybe he'll be Black," King said.

They watched and waited, but the cop who emerged from the car was white.

King rolled down his window and put his hands on the steering wheel, in plain sight. His grip was so tight that his knuckles blanched. Jasmyn wanted to reach out and touch his hand or hold it—something, *anything*—to relieve the clawing fear invading her throat. But what if the cop deemed her movement suspicious? She could picture the incident report. *Suspect moved in a threatening manner.*

She wondered if she should record. Sometimes, video was the only way to get justice. On the one hand, she knew the law, knew she had the right to do so. On the other hand, recording the cop might antagonize him and lead to an escalation. In the end, she kept the phone in her lap and recorded voice only.

The cop arrived at the window. His eyes ransacked the car's interior before resting, finally, on King.

He asked for license and registration. He asked if King had had anything to drink and where they were coming from and headed to. King answered the questions as if they weren't presumptuous, rude, and completely out of line. *A kids' Easter party, Officer. Home, Officer. Nothing to drink, Officer.*

The cop explained that the car's registration sticker had expired. He went back to the patrol car to run their plates.

How many times had Jasmyn reminded King to replace the registration sticker? Three times? Four? And now look. Still, she didn't bring it up. He was surely feeling bad enough.

"How you doing back there, baby?" she asked Kamau.

"I need to go pee," he said.

"Can you hold it for Mommy?"

"OK," he said. "But I really need to go."

It took ten minutes for the cop to come back. Before he could say anything, Kamau blurted: "My daddy said a bad word."

The cop's head swiveled to Kamau. "Oh, he did, did he?" His voice had a drawl in it.

Jasmyn froze. In her mind, she saw all the possible paths leading out from this one. The one where her husband's and child's bodies lay riddled and ruined on asphalt. Down another path, her body joined theirs. Down another, only Kamau is murdered. Down another still, he is orphaned.

She felt, in that moment, a profound powerlessness, the certainty that the trajectory of her life was not up to her, not really.

Jasmyn studied the cop's face, watched him decide what path her life would take.

He smiled. "Sometimes daddies say the wrong thing. You have to forgive us," he said. He looked back at King. "I have a little boy, too." Then he straightened, handed King his license and registration. He rapped the roof of the car. "Get that sticker updated," he said, and walked away.

That night she and King fought. "When are you going to talk to him about cops?" Jasmyn asked. She was upset that Kamau didn't already

know not to say anything to a cop unless he absolutely had to. It didn't matter that he was only six.

"Why can't we just let him stay young and innocent for a while longer?" King wanted to know.

She'd jabbed a finger at him then. "You saw how close we came today. You know how that could've ended. You can keep him innocent *or* you can keep him alive. Those are the choices. *You,* more than anybody, should know that."

She knew she was wrong to say it even as she said it.

King's older brother Tommy had been killed by a white cop when he was just thirteen. Talking about what happened to Tommy wasn't something they did. His death was a wound in King that had never scabbed over, much less healed.

Jasmyn apologized. She blamed her insensitivity on how afraid she'd been during the stop. She'd kept apologizing until the hardness in King's eyes softened. After a while, he forgave her.

A couple of weeks after the traffic stop, King had come to her again about moving to Liberty.

It was the fourth time he'd asked in six months. Each time Jasmyn had put him off, saying that she was happy where they were and that she didn't want to upend Kamau's schooling. King pointed out that she didn't particularly like Kamau's school. Still, she'd said, stability was important. The third time he asked, she used all the same excuses and added that it was much too rich and bougie.

"Rich, bougie, and Black," King counterargued with a smile.

After the incident with the cop, he asked again for the last time. "All the cops there are Black," he'd said.

"Not all Black cops are good cops, baby," she said.

"Yeah, but they're less likely to harass you just for being Black, right?" he said, and she'd had to agree with that.

She'd been about to launch into her usual counterarguments when he pulled her into his arms and rested his forehead against hers. "Baby, I couldn't live if something happened to you or Kamau. Not after Tommy." His voice was small and so young, as if time had collapsed and

he was still trapped in the immediate aftermath of Tommy's death. "It's my job to keep you safe. To keep both of you safe," he said. "Let me do my job."

Jasmyn hadn't realized he was crying until she felt his tears against her cheek. In that moment she decided. She loved him too much to deny him something that meant so much. Maybe being in Liberty would help soothe the part of King where Tommy's loss remained fresh.

"OK, baby, we'll move," she'd said. "OK."

≈

Now Jasmyn presses a hand over her heart and does a slow turn around her brand-new kitchen. The linoleum gleams. The white marble countertops are cool beneath her hand. She has one of those moments where the life you imagine for yourself and the life you actually live crash into each other. What to make of the bright line connecting the moment with the cop to this moment right now?

"Moms, can I please watch TV?" Kamau asks.

"Yes," she says, "but only for half an hour and then—"

"You have to go and do something else," he says, singsonging the end of her sentence with a wide smile.

Jasmyn laughs. "Get gone before I change my mind about how much time you have," she says.

She watches as his skinny little legs propel him down the hallway. He holds his bag of chips high in the air, like it's a prize. A small laugh bubbles up and out of her and she presses a hand to her lips. Sometimes it feels as if her love for him is too big for her body to hold. She almost calls out to tell him not to run, but she stops herself. In her head she can hear King telling her to just let him be a little boy. Maybe King is right. At least here in Liberty he has more of a chance to be just that.

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