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Debut Fiction Sampler

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Spring 2025 Debut Fiction Sampler

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Deep Cuts

HOLLY BRICKLEY

A NOVEL

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First Edition

Sara Smile

He caught me singing along to some garbage song. It was the year 2000 so you can take your pick of soulless hits—probably a boy band, or a teenage girl in a crop top, or a muscular man with restricted nasal airflow. I was waiting for a drink at a bar, spaced out; I didn't realize I'd been singing until his smile floated into the periphery of my vision and I felt impaled by humiliation.

"Terrible song," I said, forcing a casual tone. "But it's an earworm."

We knew each other in that vague way you can know people in college, without ever having been introduced or had a conversation. Joey, they called him, though I decided in that moment the diminutive did not suit him; he was too tall, for one. He put an elbow on the bar and said, "Is an earworm ever terrible, though, if it's truly an earworm?"

"Yes."

"But it's doing what it set out to do," he said. "It's effective. It's catchy."

"Dick Cheney is effective," I said. "Nazis were catchy."

The grin spread again.

The bartender slid me a beer and I took it gratefully, holding the cold pint glass against my cheekbone. The song ended and a clash of bar sounds filled its void: ice shaking in tin, shuffleboard pucks clacking, a couple seated at the bar hollering in dismay at a TV

suspended above the bartender's head. Joe ordered a drink and began pulling crumpled bills from his jeans pocket. I was about to walk back to my booth when "Sara Smile" by Hall and Oates began to play, and he let out a moan.

"What a perfect song." His hand shot into the tall dark pile of curls atop his head, then clawed its way down his cheek as he listened.

Hall and Oates! I loved Hall and Oates! They were a rare jukebox selection for the time—a band whose '80s sound was seen as cheesy by most people I knew, too recent to be recycled, though that wouldn't last much longer. I leaned against the bar next to him and listened to the gorgeous, sultry first verse.

"Actually," I said, unable to stop myself, "I would call this a perfect track, a perfect recording. Not a perfect song." I could tell he already halfway understood but I explained anyway, with a level of detail befitting an idea of far greater complexity: "A perfect song has stronger bones. Lyrics, chords, melody. It can be played differently, produced differently, and it will almost always be great. Take 'Both Sides, Now,' if you'll excuse me being that girl in a bar talking about Joni Mitchell—any singer who doesn't completely suck can cover that song and you'll be drowning in goosebumps, right?"

It was a leap of faith that he'd even know the song, but he gave a swift nod. "Totally."

I ducked to avoid being swallowed by the armpit of a tall guy receiving a drink from the bartender. Joe's eyes stayed on me, focused like spotlights, so I kept going. "Now, 'Sara Smile'—can you imagine anyone besides Daryl Hall singing this, exactly as he sang it on this particular day?"

Joe cocked his ear. Daryl Hall responded with a long, elegant riff.

I jabbed my finger in the air, tracing the melody. "See? The most beautiful part of the verse is just him riffing. A great song—and I'm talking about the pop-rock world here, obviously—can be improved by riffing, or ruined by riffing. But it cannot *rely* on riffing."

Joe didn't look smug or bored, which were the reactions these

kinds of tangents had historically won me. He didn't give me a lecture about relativism while air-quoting the phrase "good music." He just lifted his bottle of Budweiser, paused it at his lips, and took a drink.

The tall guy beside us smacked his shoulder and Joe's eyes lit up with recognition, so it seemed we were done. But before I could leave, he turned back. "What's your name again?" He squinted at me rather severely, like I was a splinter he was trying to tweeze.

"Percy," I said. "Bye."

I walked back to the booth where my roommate and her boyfriend were planning a party I didn't want to have. "Finally," Megan said as I scooted in across from them on the honeywood bench. "Do you think one of those jugs of SKYY is enough? Plus mixers and a keg?" She showed me a Post-it inserted into her day planner. "That would be fifty each. Unless the mixer is Red Bull."

Megan was an art history major but seemed happiest when doing simple math. I tolerated her orderliness by indulging in small acts of rebellion: unscrewed toothpaste lids, late phone bill payments—all calibrated to satisfy an inner urge for chaos without disrupting our friendship, which was important to me if only for its rarity, like an ugly diamond.

"I told Trent what we discussed about not inviting the whole world," she said as she took a sip of her cosmopolitan, casting a significant look at the boyfriend. Poor Trent. I had expected them to be broken up by now.

"Is Joey Morrow coming?" Trent said to me, with one eye on Megan. When I shrugged, he pushed: "You were talking to him at the bar, right? He's in my econ."

Megan twisted to peer out of the booth. "Oh, him—Joey and Zoe who both like Bowie. Yeah, they're cool."

I knew this, that he had a girlfriend. I watched him across the bar and thought of a rom-com I'd seen at an unfortunately impressionable age in which a man says, gazing longingly at the female lead, "A girl like that is born with a boyfriend." With Joe it wasn't the

flawless jawline, the arching eyebrows over wide-set eyes—those were offset, in the equation of attractiveness I had learned from these same movies, by the hooked nose and gapped teeth, the too-square shoulders atop a gangly-tall body. But the way he held those angular limbs, as if this jerking energy was the obvious way to make them work. The way he smiled so easily, and frowned so easily, tortured by a blue-eyed soul song. A boy like that is born with a girlfriend.

"Amoeba warning," Megan muttered, her eyes darting over my shoulder.

I felt a rush of fight-or-flight but didn't turn around. I knew she was referring to staff members of Amoeba Music, the legendary Berkeley record store where I'd worked sophomore year before switching to its inferior cousin, Rasputin Music, just up the street. Amoeba had been a hellscape of pretentious snobs and one thoroughly horrifying sexual encounter; Rasputin had been fine but boring, and nobody ever talked about the actual songs there either. Now I waitressed at a diner for twice the money and felt lucky to be free of the lot of them.

"Just the undergrads," Megan updated. "The guy with the muttonchops and two others. No Neil."

Of course. Neil would never come to a bar like this, blocks from campus, famous for accepting even the worst fake IDs. My adrenaline eased.

"Should you invite them to the party?" she asked, nostrils flaring. "You have two seconds to decide."

This stumped me—I hated them, but I could talk to them. "Okay!" I yelped, just in time for the Amoebans to pass by our booth without so much as a nod, let alone a conversation. Trent whistled a low tone that could be interpreted as either pity or mockery.

I recognized all three from behind. We hadn't been close as coworkers; they had been too focused on proving themselves to the elder statesmen of the staff, the ones with hard drug experience and complicated living situations in Oakland. There was also an incident in which the muttonchops guy had made fun of me for not knowing

the Brian Jonestown Massacre and I'd responded by accusing him of being "all breadth, no depth," a view I still held: music was a collector's habit to those guys, a sprawl of knowledge more than a well of joy. But still. A hello would've been called for.

Megan caught my eye, communicating sympathy with her face. I sent back gratitude. "Let's just get Red Bull for ourselves," I said, and she beamed.

Trent began dropping hints that the two of them should go back to his apartment, even though it was only ten and our names were on the list to play shuffleboard. At least I'd gotten out for a bit, I figured. At least I wouldn't have to keep discussing the relative merits of vodka mixers. He slid me his half-finished pint before following Megan out of the booth. It was the kind of beer that tasted like rubber bands but I drank it anyway, urgently, aware of the clock ticking on how long a girl could be alone in a bar before she became monstrously conspicuous. I feigned interest in a stained-glass lampshade hanging low over the booth.

"Name a song that's both."

Joe was standing at the foot of the booth.

I lifted the beer to hide my smile, thinking fast. "'In My Life' by the Beatles," I said. "The original cut with George Martin's weird sped-up piano solo. A perfect song with perfect bones, plus they nailed the context."

"Eh," he said, visibly disappointed by this answer. He slid onto the bench across from me. "I would argue the double-tracked vocals were a mistake."

I folded my arms and tried to play the song in my head.

"Lennon insisted on those effects because he hated his voice," he said. "But it's such an intimate song—we should feel like he's just alone, singing to us, don't you think?"

"It's not like he's got a choir behind him," I said. "It's just John, multiplied."

"Oh, like it's his multiple personalities?" He smirked. "Sounds like one of those bullshit things a music journalist would say."

I was starting to wonder if he might be right about the song, but I wanted the last word: " 'Bullshit things a music journalist would say' sounds like one of those bullshit things a college boy would say."

He looked at me over the rim of his pint glass, then smiled a little as he drank. "It's still a perfect song," he said. "That's more important."

"Is it?"

We kept talking and couldn't stop. Time stretched like pulled taffy, dipping and clumping. We took turns selecting songs that the jukebox actually, miraculously, played. The overlap in our musical tastes grew wider and wider until it began to seem infinite: indie rock and Elephant 6, the entirety of the '60s, no guilt attached to pop pleasures. When we finished our drinks he disappeared for a few disorienting minutes, then returned with a teeming pitcher and two fresh glasses and we were right back in it. The booth was like its own room, enclosed on three sides by a wall and the high wooden backs of our benches. The rest of the bar—dark and murky, swimming with normal humans—we would observe occasionally, as if from a great distance.

Casually, I invited him to the party, but he said it was Zoe's dad's birthday. "Do you know Zoe?" he said, leaning over the table, his high eyebrows relaxed now.

"No." Zoe was a tasteful punk—rail thin with narrow hips, baby doll tees and platforms, bleached hair with black roots. They had arrived together that fall as a fully formed unit, transferred into our junior-year cohort from some suburban college, both poli-sci majors.

"I think—" He did a quick survey of the bar crowd before looking back at me. "I think Zoe and I might be a perfect track. We need that context—family, friends, our hometown. I don't know about the *bones* of our relationship."

My initial response to this was guilt, as if whatever issue he had identified with his girlfriend was somehow my fault. Then I felt a stab of panic at the possibility of him being available, which I knew

would turn this scenario into something I was incapable of handling. So I backpedaled: "A perfect track isn't nothing! A perfect track can be everything! 'Sara Smile' was killing you, before I started my blathering!"

He nodded, running his thumbnail over a pair of initials carved into the wooden tabletop. "True. And I can't imagine my life without her anyway, so." He patted the table conclusively.

This relieved me enough to ease the panic. I leaned back into the corner of my side of the booth; he leaned into his. I stared at the remnants of beer foam clinging to my glass and thought about his metaphor: a relationship as a perfect track. There was something delicious about it, the way he'd made my little take on a pop song so emotional, so very real-world. I nursed it like a hard candy.

The closing-time lights came on, and his face looked different in the glare—something sad and determined around the eyes, brutally alive. I felt a sudden yawning high in my chest, like a door inside me being pushed wide open.

He scooted to the edge of the bench and nodded at some guys near the door, then turned back to me. "Can I show you a song I'm working on?"

So he was an actual musician. I would spend the next few days processing this news, recasting the night's conversation in light of it, but in the moment it left me stunned. Wordlessly I wrote my address on a napkin and then he was standing, bonking his head on the hanging lampshade, buttoning a ratty navy peacoat. I stayed seated.

"Who'd you come with?" he asked.

"Oh, just some people who tolerate me," I said. "They left."

"Walk with us, then?"

"Nah," I said, then realized I needed a reason. "I don't hang out with musicians."

"And why is that?" he asked with a laugh, walking backward toward the door.

Because they make me unbearably jealous. "Because they always disappoint me," I said, which was also true.

He held the napkin up in a fist. “Challenge accepted!”

I sat in the booth until someone cleared the array of empty glasses and the stunned feeling began to mutate into anticipation. His song was certain to be either mediocre or terrible, but I relished the possibilities anyway: Whispery acoustic? Glitchy blips and bloops? On the way home I bought a slice of pizza which I ate as I walked, grease dripping from the corners of a strangely unstoppable smile.

Somebody Said

The next night we threw our stupid party. It made for an exhausting Saturday—borrowing a car, buying booze, shoving furniture around in an attempt to make our living room, which was my bedroom, suitable for hosting. Megan and I shared a one-bedroom unit in a dilapidated triplex four blocks south of campus, though the name on our lease belonged to Megan's sister's ex, who hadn't lived there since 1994—which meant that our rent was well below market value, and also that we were terrified of raising eyebrows with the property management company and thus did not complain about the non-functioning oven, the shower that took twenty minutes to drain, or the hole in the back of the closet through which a thick tree branch was definitely growing. It was heaven compared to the dorms.

The party spilled out the front door and onto the sidewalk. I spent the night moving between clusters, laughing at things that were funny and laughing at things that were not. I had burned a perfect party mix but of course people put on whatever they wanted; by midnight I couldn't even find my disc in the haphazard piles. I viewed parties like a job: they simply had to be done. Freshman year I'd been lazy about socializing—I'd said no when the heads popped in my door, spent Saturday nights tending to a poorly timed Elvis Costello obsession that dominated my imagination and endeared me to zero percent of my dormmates—but didn't love the crushing loneliness that eventually resulted from this approach. Since then I'd

been clawing my way toward a normal college existence, and I was proud of what I'd achieved: an apartment, one actual friendship, an impressive mess of inherited CDs.

The day after the party we cleaned in short, hungover increments until it was time for Megan to host one of her informal yoga classes. I joined out of necessity, since it was happening in my bedroom, and was already brainstorming a reason to excuse myself when I heard footsteps on our porch, the tin lid of our mailbox clattering shut. I stepped over the stretched-out bodies.

A blank disc in our mailbox read "untitled for percy," an email for Joe Morrow scrawled below. The sidewalk was dark. All I could think was had he seen us through the window? The other girls in shiny black stretch pants, me in my sweats?

When I returned to the living room, Megan shot me a curious look from her sun salutation. I mumbled something about having a paper due. I hadn't told her about Joe; I knew she would reduce it all to some boring crush. I gathered my laptop and headphones and set up in the kitchen.

Joe's song was quiet but with full instrumentation, programmed drums, heavy reverb. A little Elliott Smith in the guitar styling. The lyrics were pleasantly inscrutable, with themes of gossip ("The night lit up with talk of your talk"), betrayal ("Let's both be Judases, see where it takes us"), and looming heartbreak ("Awoke to the memory of the possibility of the worst").

I played it again. It didn't suck, which I recognized for the enormous miracle it was. His singing had a striking ease to it, like he opened his mouth and some beautiful, mangled truth just fell out. But the song itself felt overly considered, with plodding verses and a nice-enough melody that seemed to leave my brain the moment the song ended.

After several listens, I began composing an email response. And then the bubble next to his screen name turned green. The yoga concluded; girls began filing into our tiny kitchen to fill their water bottles. I hunched over the laptop, trying to stay out of their airspace,

and went for it. IM was a new medium for me but I knew enough. I knew to keep it lowercase, keep it cool.

ileanpercy: hey

joeymorrow: hey!

ileanpercy: it's percy

joeymorrow: did you listen already?

ileanpercy: yeah it's great!

joeymorrow: thanks man i thought you'd like it

ileanpercy: i do wish it had more of a hook

joeymorrow: i think the verses are pretty catchy no?

ileanpercy: oh, sorry, but no way—the melody in the verses is super generic.

ileanpercy: and yet also over-written, somehow? it sounds kind of forced.

joeymorrow: damn

ileanpercy: but your singing is magical, joe, and the bridge is beautiful. so beautiful.

ileanpercy: and weirdly it doesn't sound like a bridge

ileanpercy: there's no big changes or anything, same line-length

ileanpercy: it's just a better melody out of nowhere.

joeymorrow: hah i hate writing bridges, i just tossed that out

ileanpercy: if that's what happens when you toss out a melody, i'm scared of your talent

joeymorrow: hah thanks. too bad it's just a bridge, who cares about bridges

ileanpercy: well that's a dumb thing to say BUT i was thinking . . . could you swap the melody of the bridge with the verses?

ileanpercy: then you would have a hook to end the verse

joeymorrow: what would i do with the current verses?

ileanpercy: recycling bin? they were really boring.

joeymorrow: damn that would be a totally different song

ileanpercy: you could keep the lyrics, just use the other melody.

joeymorrow: interesting

joeymorrow: i'm singing it

ileanpercy: me too.

ileanpercy: i think it works, right?

joeymorrow: dunno

joeymorrow: i'll try it out

ileanpercy: rad.

I realized I'd been a massive asshole almost immediately after logging off. Instead of sleeping that night I revised my end of the conversation in my head over and over, a lifelong pastime I always rationalized as productive since the lessons could apply to future interactions, though that never seemed to happen. I hadn't slept so terribly since the dorms, when I used to spend every night optimizing the thousands of social touch points I'd been forced to have in each cacophonous day.

Eventually I stopped revising and switched to crafting an apologetic speech. It was casual, sincere, amply self-deprecating. My plan was to deliver it on Tuesday, when I ran into him on campus, after the economics class I happened to know he shared with Trent in Haviland Hall.

The run-in worked: he was loping out the front doors of the building just as I walked by. There was a dark look on his face until he saw me, at which point it flipped to sunny surprise. I asked if he was okay and he waved me off.

"Zoe skipped econ," he said. "You want a coffee?"

We went to the Free Speech, a modern café recently installed next to the computer lab, filled with informational plaques about Berkeley's free speech movement that everyone ignored. We took turns ordering coffees and brought them to the outdoor deck.

"The song is so good now," he said as soon as we sat down. "I'm freaking out."

A loosening in my shoulders and neck, the muscles Megan called traps. I scrapped my apology.

"Still tweaking lyrics. They had to be changed a lot to fit that melody." He leaned back against the concrete bench and blew into the hole in his plastic coffee cup lid. "Zoe says I owe you a beer, but a beer seems measly. Two beers?"

"Two beers sounds great. I'm just glad I didn't hurt your, you know, feelings."

"Fuck my feelings," he said loudly, swatting them out of the air.

The girl sitting next to us looked annoyed. She was clutching a pink highlighter and hunched over a thick textbook, which she inched as far from us as our shared table would allow.

"Sorry," Joe said, flashing a smile at her. "I mean, it is the Free Speech Cafe."

Unbelievably, the girl smiled back. She returned to her highlighting noticeably less hunched.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Joe said to me. "Do you sing, or play, or write at all?"

"No." I took too big a gulp of coffee and burned my throat. "I have no talent, just opinions about people who do."

"How can that be? Did you ever take piano lessons?"

"Yes. I sucked. And I just couldn't. It's too important to me."

He tugged a curl of hair at his temple. "But you're an English major, right?"

"Only by default. I started with theater to get closer to music, but I couldn't stand those cheesy songs, all that jazz-hands enthusiasm." I glanced at our tablemate's book: enough numbers to reassure me she wasn't a theater nerd.

"Surely you've written lyrics?"

"No," I said. The traps were tensing again. "I get paralyzed. I'm actually getting a bit paralyzed by this conversation, to be honest."

He laughed and leaned back. "Okay, okay. Let's talk about something other than music."

We sat in silence for a second, then laughed at ourselves, playacting an old joke. Finally I asked where he was from, though I already knew it was one of those Bay Area suburbs that meant nothing to me, and then we were talking about our childhoods and he mentioned his mom had died when he was young. Diagnosed with melanoma the beginning of the summer before he started high school, then buried ten weeks later, Labor Day weekend. I had to go to the bathroom but I held it.

"Were you okay?" I asked. "*Are* you okay?"

"No," he said. "And yes."

The sun came out, dappled through the low-hanging trees, and he pulled a pair of sunglasses from his backpack.

"Sensitive eyes," he said. I remember this so clearly. The black sunglasses, the pile of curls, the blue sky and shuffling leaves behind him—the image still comes to me at random times. Then his eyebrows shot up over the sunglasses. "I almost forgot! Do you want to write a music column for our zine?"

The zine, he explained, was helmed by Zoe, with contributions from a rotating cast of a dozen or so women. Joe provided the occasional band interview. It was called *Ring Finger*.

"I'm not really a writer," I said.

"Think of it as opinionating. You're good at that."

"Opining," I said.

"Girls opining is basically *Ring Finger*'s whole deal."

"So is it like a riot grrrl thing?" I asked. "Because punk music interests me only up to a point, and that point would come fast."

"Write about whatever you want. As long as the *spirit* is a bit punk—I told her you'd have no trouble with that."

I felt that door pushing open inside me again. John Cale! John Cage? The liberation of Tina Weymouth! Curse words to my heart's content!

We both had class but agreed to meet at the campus pub afterward so he could buy me a beer, which he did, and then bought me another, and then we got burritos and ate them on the side of a grassy hill in the dark.

The next day I bought a copy of *Ring Finger* at the bookstore. The logo featured an ink drawing of a ringless ring finger raised liked a middle finger, with black polish on a bitten-down nail. None of the names were familiar to me, thank God—nobody who had known me in my pre-Megan weirdo days. Zoe Gutierrez had written a long, smart article about her first period, studded with historical menstruation horrors. I liked it, but there was a heaviness to the whole thing, a want for humor and lightheartedness. So I decided to start there. I scribbled ideas in the margins of my lecture notes, on the plastic inner flaps of my three-ring binders, anywhere I could find an empty space. When I wasn't scribbling I was wondering about Joe's song, humming the bridge melody. I had this dreamlike feeling of nearing some place I'd been looking for—a vacancy just my shape, hidden inside an enormous puzzle.

That Friday night after I got home from my shift at the diner, there was an email from Joe with the subject line "DONE":

> *my roommates are out tonight so i can play it for you if you wanna come over, the brown shingle house on derby by the church*

I stepped straight back into my boots and walked to his house, a once-gorgeous Craftsman with a deep, creaking porch.

He smiled when he opened the door. "You're here!"

"I'm dying," I said.

He rubbed his hands together like he was about to cook me a really good meal.

His bed was in the living room, a futon folded into a couch, which put us in the same socioeconomic strata of upperclassmen—though a room in an actual house cost a lot more social capital. The mattress was so deep I had to tuck my feet up. I could see a sizable kitchen off the living room and a grand staircase decorated with college-boy mess: hoodies slung over the banister, a greasy bike chain curled on the first step like a snake.

When I looked back at Joe, he was shaking the mouse of a desktop computer. "Oh," I said. "You'll *play* it for me. I thought you meant you'll *play* it for me."

He turned, surprised. "Do you want me to *play* it for you?"

"Yes," I said. "I mean, whatever. But yes."

He shrugged, then picked up a guitar from the corner and perched on the opposite end of the futon. "You should hear the track afterward, though. Beer?"

He seemed nervous. I shook my head, fighting a smile.

"Okay," he said. "It's called 'Somebody Said.'"

He cleared his throat and began. His guitar playing was good, fingerpicking assured. It occurred to me his hands would be rough to be touched by—or do calluses feel smooth, I wondered. The verses sounded as I knew they would with that melody, elegant and right, with a new lyric in the repeated final line that gave the song a clear hook: "Somebody said you said it was over." He flinched when he sang it, voice cracking, and I felt with some certainty that I was watching a star—that the reaction I was having would be the reaction of anyone with eyes and ears, of hordes of college girls and sensitive young dads across America; I was not special. It gave me a surge of vertigo, like I'd leaned too far over the edge of a balcony.

The new bridge brought me back with a predictable chord change, a half-hearted couplet. It would do. A perfect third verse and that gap-toothed grin to finish.

"Holy shit," I said.

He exhaled. "Oh, thank God."

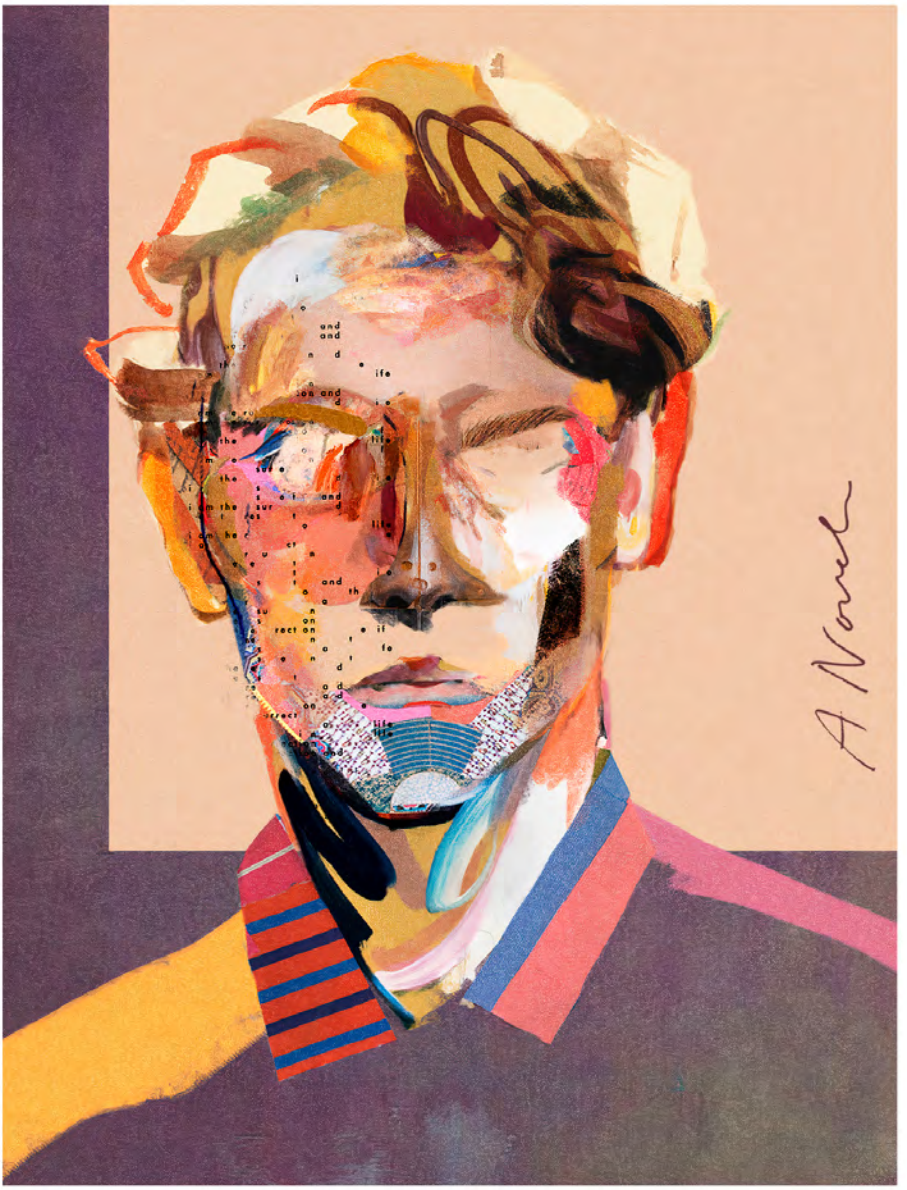
"You need to play shows."

"I'm getting a band together."

"I think my hands are actually trembling, slightly?" I held out a hand for observation and he lunged for it, clasping my fingers awkwardly in his.

"Thank you," he said.

WHAT YOU MAKE OF ME



SOPHIE MADELINE DESS

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I've stopped writing for a bit. It's dark now. Through my kitchen window I can see across the street into an elderly woman's bedroom. She's asleep but has left her lamp on. I like to stare out at her. On the pane of glass between us I see my own reflection, a specter. I stare at her real form through my reflected one. I open my mouth and arrange it so that her whole bed is inside me.

A week after the reception, Demetri wants to sit down for lunch. We choose our usual place, Awang, where the women like to talk to him about the hair on his knuckles ("like from a baby's head").

He sits on the linoleum chair across from me, sweating from the spices, and announces: "At certain dates in life you are to do certain things *with* your life."

I think he's talking about me. At this point, as far as my art is concerned, no one likes what I'm doing. Or, worse, no one cares, including myself. My most recent work was shown in a group exhibition titled *Chronos*. The theme was "new ways to register time." My piece was sculptural. I'd collected bits of hair from my own combs, shower

drains at the gym, or anywhere public. I dried and then glued the hair together into long, wiry stalks. Then I arranged the stalks of hair so that they outlined shadow patterns cast throughout the day at the park on Seventh Avenue—the shadows at dawn, at noon, at dusk. I was trying to combine the idea of biological time—accumulated hair loss—and spatiotemporal time—sun, shadows. I am still seething from the sole review ("labored, trite") when Demetri, his mouth full of noodles, says: "I guess I'm thinking that right now you need, or maybe we both need, but mostly you need, I think, to find someone to fall in love with." This is how I know he is going to tell me about Nati. His elbows rest sharp on the table. "Where do you find someone like that?"

"To fall in love with?"

He nods yes, numb to the bits of chili on his lip.

"You go pick a girl from the line," I say, gesturing toward those standing and waiting for their takeout in a little parade of shifting weight. "Just go say hi."

Behind him a waiter opens a swing door. Briefly, I see inside the kitchen—two chefs are standing, one with his fingers in a bowl, the other studying a smoking pan. The door swings shut.

"I'm not just gonna go say hi," Demetri says.

I turn around. "She's cute." I'm nodding my head toward a young woman in jeans and a tunic, her brown hair up in a tortoiseshell clip. Fingers painted black. Medium-

round tits. I look back at Demetri. His eyes match his shirt, gray and cottony. "You're afraid you'll expose yourself?"

"Yeah. And the wrong version of myself. The bolder version."

"The better one."

He nods and studies the splinters on his chopstick. "Yes. I've thought about doing that—about just talking to a person in a line, random like that. But the issue is that she'll start off thinking I'm spontaneous. That I'm comfortable in making unprompted, impulsive decisions. Really, the rule is I'm uncomfortable." He wipes his forehead. "And over time she'd come to realize this. What do I say when she realizes who I really am, which is a lover of routine? But not just with the big things, like the time I fall asleep, but the little things . . ."

"Like?"

"Like you know. All my shit. The ring stains." Demetri's wooden table was riddled with ring stains. He didn't mind the stains. He never bought coasters. He only made sure that if anyone were to put a cup down that cup would land right over an existing ring stain. Not to protect the wood. "I just like things on top of each other like that," he tells me.

"I know. That's not too bad, Demi."

"Well, they're all like that. These fucking habits."

"Well then you'll be okay."

"Okay well, what do I tell this girl, is what I'm asking

you. Because habits live longer than we do. I mean when we die, we're remembered by them. He always took his toast like that. She always ordered the red." He's pointing and pointing. "We live by them and then are remembered by them . . . so that all we are when we die is really just a collection of decisions we made so often that we stopped making them. That's my point. We are remembered by a series of decisions we made so often that we stopped making them. We like to be efficient. To eliminate choice for ourselves—let's replace real desire let's replace our free will."

"Right."

"But then at the end of your fucking life you're wondering what in the fuck did I actually even do, or feel, for myself. Unless you're an artist." He looks at me like he's caught me in something. Suddenly everything on him and in him—every bone—is very still. "If you are an artist you get to escape this whole thing. If you're an artist you're remembered for your work. You transcend your habits. No one really knows Sappho's *habits*. No one knows Shakespeare's habits. Their habits are irrelevant. Though the truth is I felt much closer to Hemingway once I knew his habits. And that he wrote standing up and all that. But I think ultimately, I respect the person who *has* no habits. A person who lives most freely. But then, of course, living freely becomes a habit and loses its charm. So what do I say? Do I tell her this? Maybe she'll think I'm condescend-

ing. Because she knows this already. Because we all know this already."

"We do," I say. I know he has some kind of point but I've lost it. I'm only following his energy.

"And then one day"—he's no longer talking to me—"I'll have to make some huge fucking admission. I'd have to give her source material for my personality. Something complex enough to keep feeding into her sense of my potential for depth. And then what if it doesn't work."

"Demetri."

"Because that's a great fear, I think, Ava, that we tell someone everything about ourselves and they say, 'You know, you don't go down as deep as I thought. I can see the bottom of you.'"

"Demetri."

"I don't even know what I'd say. To tell her anything that has actually happened would be like seeking congratulations. But then if I *don't* tell her I'll just be congratulating myself on my own restraint." He's rubbing hard at his temples. "Or I *do* tell her—something totally strange, like I let my mother walk into the sea and drown . . ." I look down. "And this girl's going to think I can think nothing complicated in the present moment because everything complicated is behind me. Because that's the plot of my life. And that's grotesque. But also maybe true."

I say nothing. Demetri knows that I won't. My mind

cleaves white. Until—with a clarity that surprises me—I think of our mother walking up the steep hill to our house. She had one friend in our town, named Audrey, who she liked to go on walks with. Audrey dressed like our mother and said things to Demetri and me like "I'm speaking with my mouth" every time she spoke to us. She thought this was hilarious. Audrey and our mother told each other things: They were going to go out auditioning together. My mother would move beyond the commercials our father wrote for her. They'd take trips to the city and branch out. They'd start a production company themselves. They'd only hire each other. I knew Audrey would never. She had an underactive imagination that liked to be taken over. Our mother was then growing quickly and increasingly deluded and ready to subsume. Sometimes Audrey couldn't keep up. Sometimes they let Demetri walk with them. "What do they talk about?" I asked him once. "Audrey doesn't talk," was all he said.

At Awang, my mother's face pounds into my consciousness, and I haven't spoken. The woman I pointed to earlier is picking up her order. She has a beautiful speaking voice. I gather my focus. "Who is it?" I ask. "I mean tell me the real thing. Who is the woman? Who are you talking about? You don't want me to meet her?"

"You know." But he doesn't say her name.

"The Italian," I say. He only nods. "Okay. And the issue?"

He sighs. “She’s in America. But she hasn’t contacted me, and I don’t know if I should get ahold of her.”

I ask him why not.

“We met the last time she was here. Just two months ago.” When he leans forward, he rubs his hands over his eyes. The people seated at the table beside us look at him. His feet tap the back legs of my chair. “Soon after we got back from Italy. She was here in the city the day of that *Chronos* opening. It’s why I didn’t go. I was with her.”

“I thought you were ill.”

“I was ill,” he says. “Because I knew she was here, in town.”

I push my pot away.

“You don’t even go to your openings.” Demetri springs forward. “You don’t even know who shows up.”

“Yes, but I like when you go.”

“But I wasn’t going to invite her to your thing. And then what if I went on my own and saw her there. And then if she fell in love with me, it’d be through you.”

I protest. “That does not tend to happen.”

“It does.” Again his feet tapping the back of my chair. “I’m there at your show and I watch women think maybe they’re falling in love with me, when really it’s with your work and I just happen to be there and catch the excess. Or they don’t love the work. Equally possible. But then they want to feel the things they think they *should* be feeling.

So I'm there. They give me the imitation of a feeling. Or, I don't know, the periphery of a feeling. I don't know."

I put a napkin under my coke can. "Or, Demetri, what you think of as peripheral is actually center."

"Oh boy." He leans back.

"That's the point of my work, maybe: to take all the weight of all your suppressed peripheral sensations, over your whole life long, seriously, and in my art I center them, glorify them and give them focus, so that the totality—"

"We're not talking about your work." Demetri laughs.

"I know. I'm talking about you."

"As if I'm part of your work."

"You are."

He looks at his plate.*

"So most interest in me must be facilitated—awakened—through what you do . . ." Demetri thinks. A mushroom bows over his chopsticks. "Never mind," he says.

I am not in a position to tell Demetri that Nati had emailed me that morning. In fact, I had only then officially learned her name, from her caps lock signature. Her email to me was cold but eager: *We met a couple months ago. In my city, by chance. Although not formally. You only stood there, outside, a hard stance with that tilt in your hips*. I

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*__Plate__, watercolor on rice paper, small
Think of someone you know well and have been to dinner with. Think of the way they look at a plate when it arrives before them. It's the energy with which they look that is in this.

did not breathe but kept reading. She was reinventing her Rome gallery, which she named Minni. They hoped to fill the entranceway with a few large, permanent pieces, and asked if I might contribute. *You'd really be giving us a piece as a gift, essentially*, she wrote. *We would try never to have to sell it . . .*

. . . You only stood there, outside, a hard stance with that tilt in your hips. In front of Demetri, I try to decide why exactly I am withholding this.

"But so, you two met," I say, "when she was last here."

"Yes. Just, maybe, a month or so ago. It was all kind of rushed and coincidental. She called me right when I was out. She happened to be staying nearby. She came with me to the grocery store. To Morton's. She was on her way somewhere. Some kind of event. She'd forgotten to pick up food." I watch him shovel rice down his throat.

"And?"

"And nothing."

"And what? How did she make you feel?"

Demi looks like it is all too much and also like he is dying to tell me.

"Demetri, she makes you feel what? Different? That you have to have her tastes? Italians are persuasive that way."

Demetri leans back now. "I can't explain it to you. No. She forced me in literally fifteen minutes to have tastes. But about things I never would have considered. I mean at the supermarket for example she picks up an orange and asks

which half I like, because one half is, I think, the *pediculo*"—he holds out his hand—"and the other half is the *restos del estilo*." His bad Italian accent. "But more than that. I can't say." He pushes his hair back. "She writes off anyone she suspects might not be bursting with life."

"Are you bursting with life?"

"She's very methodical." Demetri sits up in his chair. He laces his fingers together. "I mean in the way she tries to get to know people. Like she'll ask a question all sphinxy like she knows it's so ridiculous to be asking, and then there's this laugh like she spends her whole life laughing, testing to see whether you'll be laughing." Demetri looks at me, desperate. "I mean, she could ask me my favorite color and I would take twenty minutes to respond, because what if she used it against me. I mean she makes me feel a little threatened. It's nice. But this is only after a meeting. In the supermarket. I don't know."

I tell him Nati must have found it all very charming. He shakes his head—his zigzag* part coming through like a muscle.

"Well, she's here, I mean she's back in America. And she hasn't said a word." Here, he turns, so he can stretch his legs and cross his ankles. He seems now to address another version of himself. "What's really the case is that I thought

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*_**Zigzag**_, acrylic on unprimed cotton canvas, large
You will see an egg-white strip of scalp. It will look spongy and you'll want to finger it.

we laughed very hard together. I'm sure that we did. I remember at one point, in front of the peanut butter, she even got on the floor. I think because of all the varieties. She couldn't believe it. 'Chunky,' she kept saying. 'Extra chunky. Smooth.' She read out all the brand names. And then, I mean, she bent down laughing, just saying the word "chunky," repeating the words "extra chunky." I remember because she folded at the hips as she laughed, and I thought of taking her." I picture what must've been the distance between his eyes and her body. "And if you ask me about what, I mean, if you ask me what *exactly* was funny, what *really* set her off, I can't remember. Which feels miserable." He looks up, then back at me. "I feel stupid. Maybe she didn't laugh that hard. I don't know." I expect him to stop. "There are genres of stupidity, you know—there's the stupidity of simply not knowing things. And then there's the stupidity of not remembering what you once knew. In both cases, the knowledge is not there. But the second one . . . the forgetting . . . you wonder how deep it goes: What else do I not even know that I no longer know? How much of myself am I losing and have I already lost? What will be left of me?"

"Oh my god."

"Ava." He sighs, but he's laughing. "I know. It's horrible. You need to understand an entirely new space is being carved out in my brain and I am in pain."

I think of my own hollow feeling, which is present any

time I know something that Demetri doesn't—I begin to try to tell him that, in fact, she has contacted me. I am interrupted.

"Excuse me?" It's a woman's voice. She's standing beside me, her waist is at my shoulder. I look up to find crisp green eyes. Light, fluttering lids.

"Hi," I say.

She says she works in the area. She's the publicist of a man Demi and I know. She'd been to a few openings and recognizes me. Her cheeks grow red. She says kind things to me and about my work.

"Thank you. And actually, this is my brother, Demetri." I watch her look at him and pick up on all that's overknown to me. Demetri is too polite not to smile and nod, but he does not look at her. You're missing the eyes, I want to tell her, thinking he might still look up.

The woman smiles gently. "So nice to meet you," she says. She stands there for a minute. Orders continue around us. Someone wants a new fork and an extra napkin. At last the woman walks away. Demetri is silent.

"Will you tell me if you end up meeting with her?" I ask. "I mean Nati."

"I won't have a choice," he says. "I'll tell everyone."

I remind him that the whole conversation started with me. About how I need to find someone to fall in love with.

"Just do what you can," he says. He pushes his chair back. I stand up first.

JUNIE

A NOVEL

ERIN CROSBY ECKSTINE

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Chapter One

Junie wakes up in the red mud, listening to the water that slithers between the rocks in the creek. The faint first light of sunrise slips through the gray moss tangled between black oak branches. The sunshine's needle points warm her bare legs as mud cools her from below. The earth's smell is enchanting after the rain, sharp, metallic, and sickening if you inhale too long, like copper pots on a humid day. The mud takes what should be hard and makes it soft, what should be finished and makes it raw.

The distant crack of the foreman's whip tells her she's not supposed to be here.

She can't get to her feet fast enough. Instinct makes her rub the wrinkles out of her moth-eaten nightdress, but in doing so, she coats it in caked red mud until she is crimson streaked like Granddaddy's pants after he slaughters a pig.

The whip cracks again. There is no time to fix it.

August's humidity swarms her like yellow jackets. She runs, trying to ignore the pounding in her head and the stinging in her bare feet, from stepping on cracked twigs and pointed rocks. The woods are thinning out now; she can see the field and the sun through a gap in the trees. She holds her hands up, measuring the sun's distance from the field line. It sits on the horizon like a freshly cracked yolk, and on days as hot as this one, the McQueens won't wake for breakfast until the sun's at least a half-hand above the horizon.

She has to make it to breakfast. She can't be late for breakfast. She promised Bess she'd help with the laundry, and knowing Bess, she's been out since before day.

It's another mistake, another lapse, another failure.

Junie starts running again.

Bellereine Plantation, owned by the McQueen family, is stripped bare to make room for cotton fields, but the woods that frame the edges stay thick up to the banks of the Alabama River. She's memorized these woods as well as anyone can memorize something alive enough to change, where the best blackberry bushes grow for Auntie Marilla's cobbler, the squeal the squirrels make when the hawk starts circling, the creeks that sprawl like veins from the river, which hide the best skipping stones. Bellereine is the only home she's known in her sixteen years. Sometimes, when she's running, she imagines that the branches and roots bend, allowing her to slip through, like they know her, too.

The whip cracks again, this time too close to be the foreman.

Someone else is in the woods.

It's still too far to the cabin for Junie to make a run for it. She can't stay on the ground; she has to get out of sight.

She searches for a branch low enough to catch and hauls herself up onto the nearest oak tree, wincing as the bark cuts into her clammy palms. She climbs past layers of Spanish moss until the spiderwebs of dried plants hide her from the rusty forest floor, then leans her weight onto the trunk and covers her mouth with her blood-speckled palm.

She's done some foolish things in her life but falling asleep out here has got to be one of the worst.

The whipping is punctuated by the crack of horseshoes on dried sticks. Bellereine is miles away from a town or neighbor, and anybody coming through the county would take the main road. Even the patrollers, a bunch of white men with nothing better to do than chase Negroes, don't come through here. With the river so close, they assume any runaways will drown before they get far enough. Who is down there? She shouldn't look, but her nerves

won't settle until she does. She pinches apart the moss and squints to peek.

It's her granddaddy, steering Mr. McQueen's polished wood carriage through the muddy pig path. The horses' legs are covered in red mud, and the carriage's lower half is filthy. Granddaddy would never take the carriage through here, especially after a storm. Why is he here?

A metal cane bangs inside the carriage. Granddaddy jerks to a stop below Junie's tree as the door slams open. McQueen tumbles out like a bale of hay. On the ground, he holds his knees and vomits.

"Shit, my shoes," rasps Mr. McQueen through the heaving. The smell of sick and corn liquor rises in the humidity. "Tom, where in the hell are we?"

"Outside the main house, sir. Tree's blocking the road a half mile back; must've come down in a storm," Granddaddy says. McQueen retches again. He is drunk, as he always is.

Mr. McQueen owns Bellereine, but he might as well be a guest for all they see of him. He claims he occasionally comes home to settle accounts and mind the crops, but everyone at the house knows it's only to remind the mistress that he's the one in charge. The rest of the time, he sniffs out stiff drinks, dogfights, and any other vice not found in Lowndes County. For most of this summer, all Junie's seen of him has been his piles of sweaty French clothes that make the yard reek of liquor, tobacco, and vomit. The master isn't around enough to cause her any real trouble, but keeping Granddaddy away is enough to make her resent him to hell.

Junie knits her eyebrows, confused. Her days blend together in infinite cleaning and serving, but yesterday was her day off, meaning today is Monday. Why is the master here early?

Suddenly, she sees a pop of yellow and her breath stops cold.

Her sleeping head wrap is hanging from a branch above McQueen's head. Even a white man as oblivious as the master would know a scarf like that belongs to a Negro. Of course, she'd fallen asleep here the one time the road was blocked. Of course,

she'd lose her scarf on the one branch next to the master. Luck isn't ever on Junie's side.

That's not what everybody else thinks. Muh, her grandmother, says bad luck has nothing to do with it, that Junie is *carefree. Why you always got to be so carefree? Be careful, like your sister.* Junie wants to tell her that she's wrong, that being carefree is a good thing, that the word she means to say is *careless, thoughtless,* or *foolish*. She swallows the lump in her throat.

"You got anything to clean this up, Tommy?" McQueen asks, hunched over.

The carriage slumps to one side as Granddaddy climbs down. He holds his back with one hand while pulling clean boots from underneath his seat. As he hands them to Mr. McQueen, his eyes catch what the master's eyes haven't. Even from high above, Junie sees him shaking his head.

He shoves the scarf into his pocket.

Junie knows what he's thinking. He's thinking about what a fool his granddaughter is. He is thinking about whether she's home, safe in bed, or left for dead somewhere in these trees.

"Let's get on, Tommy," McQueen says. "Best we be back and cleaned up before Mrs. McQueen wakes. You know how she hates a mess."

The horses trot onward, bumping the carriage toward the stables. She wants to call down to her granddaddy, tell him that she's sorry, that she's all right, that she'll never do this again.

But even if she could, she'd be lying.

Precious minutes slip away. Finally, Junie climbs down and hurries to the cabin, which sits where the quarters meet the woods. She nudges the cabin door open to find Muh stretched out on her hay-filled pallet, snoring loud enough to vibrate the pine plank walls. Junie's shoulders relax a little; a scolding from Muh is the last thing she needs. She starts tidying the disheveled quilt pile she abandoned a few hours ago. It's been a nightly routine, her tossing and turning until she falls into the clutches of one of her nightmares. When the terror finally lets her go, she wanders out of the

cabin and beyond plantation grounds to her spot next to Old Mother, the ancient tree near the riverbank.

Junie slinks to pull her maid's uniform off its hook and creeps back outside.

The sun has risen over the field. By her calculations, it is still early enough to avoid most punishment, aside from scoldings from Granddaddy and Bess. Junie cuts through the footpath toward the main house until the bright morning light makes her head sting. Her eyes fall on the tall blades of grass, each crowned with a dewdrop. The crickets chirp over the breeze that brushes through the field. Each breath tastes of green and sweet dew. Junie gazes over Bellereine, turning away from the big house until her view is the field, the sky, and the rising sun.

North toward Huntsville, she has heard, there are hills and mountains, but in Lowndes County, the earth is flat all around. Sunlight brims the horizon like fresh butter on warm grits. She likes it this way, with more sky to take in. Tension fades in her muscles; a faint smile stretches across her lips. She fumbles in her apron pocket for her notebook, made from a few paper scraps sewn with twine. The words, both her own and her favorite poets', are too precious to leave anywhere for someone to find. She thumbs to the first page and reads under her breath.

Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened

The lines are from "Tintern Abbey," her favorite poem. She has it memorized, but keeping it in her pocket makes her feel like the limitlessness of the poet's world is within reach.

Is this the sublime she feels now?

Before Minnie died, Junie used to gaze over the land first thing in the morning, or watch the lightning bugs at night and feel a

shock in her belly, as though if she could only breathe in a little farther, or open her mouth a little wider, she might inhale the whole world and hold it inside herself. Maybe that is why she ventures to places she isn't meant to go. To chase after the ember that promises a forest fire.

The clock ticks inside her chest. She slips her notebook away and stares across the land.

Her sister used to walk to the house every morning with purpose. When Minnie would see Junie, lost in the sky or mud, she would stomp back, pinch her arm, and drag her to the house, repeating the same phrase:

Only a real fool could see beauty in a place like this.

A sharp pinch stings Junie's arm. A horsefly crawls on her elbow, leaving behind a swelling, red bump. She slaps it away and keeps walking.

Chapter Two

The main house at Bellereine is all refined right angles, slicing through the twisting oak trees and curving red dirt. Violet's old governess said that the house was built to look like a Roman temple, stark white, identical back and front, with six Corinthian columns placed on the wraparound porch to frame black shuttered windows and towering double doors. *Look at the balance,* she would say, pointing to a faded drawing of a façade in an ancient history book. *The design represents culture, a republic like ours, where everything is equal.*

To Junie, the house has two faces, both watching.

She crouches outside the garden gate, shoving her nightdress into a bush and changing into her black maid's dress. The wool pricks her skin like the loose straw from her sleeping pallet. The mistress loves England, a love that forces the housemaids to wear English maid outfits in Alabama summer. She wraps her long braid into a knot and shoves it into her white bonnet, careful to hide the baby hairs under the ruffled edges. *White folks don't like that nappy hair,* Muh's voice echoes in her head. *Make sure it don't poke out where the mistress can see it*. By the time she sneaks to the cookhouse to start serving breakfast, she's already slick with sweat.

If the mistress loves England so much, she ought to be the one to dress up like its people instead.

There is far worse work you could be doing. It's Minnie's voice, or an

echo of what Junie remembers of it. *You wasn't never meant to be a maid. You only get to be in the house because of Violet loves you.*

Minnie was all lightness, milky brown skin, hazel eyes, soft curls that wrapped around a knitting needle. Junie looks down at her hands, dark as the underside of a mushroom, meant for the baking sun and cotton thorns. She tries to swat the words away, but the more she fights, the louder the criticisms get, until they swarm her mind like fruit flies over a rotten peach.

I am ungrateful; Minnie was humble.

I am sloppy; Minnie was perfect.

I shouldn't be alive; Minnie shouldn't be dead.

"Where the devil have you been?" Auntie Marilla, the Bellereine cook and Junie's great-aunt, stands with arms crossed over her chest at the cookhouse door, the white scarf around her head already soaked in sweat at the brow.

Another person to tell her what a catastrophe she is.

"I'm sorry, Auntie. I didn't intend to be late, I—"

"I ain't got the time or the energy to hear your excuses, Miss Big Words. Go on and make yourself useful to your cousin. *She's* been working since before day like she's supposed to."

"Yes, ma'am," Junie says with a nod.

Sloppy and ungrateful, as always. The familiar lump struggles down her throat with a swallow, a fattened rabbit shoving itself into its shrunken burrow to escape the hunter's rifle.

The mistress takes her tea in the breakfast room overlooking the wraparound porch and rose garden. Junie yanks back the brocaded curtains to present the garden, brimming with sunset-tinted blooms, white buds, and dripping wisteria. She gives the gardener their signal, three taps on the glass to tell him to leave. He grabs his tools and runs out like a thief. The mistress prefers to imagine her own delicate hands nurturing her prize flowers.

"Where the *devil* have you been?" It's Bess, Auntie's daughter, Junie's older cousin, and a constant pain. Does Bess know that she talks just like her mother?

"Christ, you shouldn't be sneakin' up on people like that."

"I wouldn't have to if you'd been here an hour ago to help me with the laundry like you said you was!" Bess hisses.

"Bess, you don't understand—"

"Understand what, Junie? That you ain't concerned about my time?"

"The mistress'll be down here any minute, you ought not to—"

"You in the woods again?"

Junie chews the inside of her cheek. It's the question she hoped Bess wouldn't ask. There's a hint of excitement in Bess's tone, like a cat that's cornered a chipmunk. She loves any opportunity to prove she's superior.

"Leave me be," Junie says. She's too tired to fight Bess off today. The tears want to come, and Junie's not strong enough right now to hold them back. She snatches a placemat and storms toward the linen cabinet, hoping Bess won't follow.

"I won't 'til you answer me," Bess growls. She grabs Junie's wrist the way her sister used to when she'd wander off.

"Quit it, Bess!"

She hates crying in front of Bess. Even as her cousin looks sympathetic, with her head tilted and eyes soft, Junie knows that underneath, Bess relishes this.

"You up thinking about Minnie again?"

Junie wipes her eyes on her apron. She doesn't answer; Bess won't get any more satisfaction out of this.

"You know, at some point, Junie, you gonna have to start sharing with people again. It ain't like you to be so long-faced all the time."

The grandfather clock chimes eight o'clock.

"Auntie Marilla will have the food ready by now," Junie says.

"It can wait. We can't have the mistress see you lookin' fit for the barn," Bess says. "Your bonnet's all crooked, too, that wild hair of yours is comin' out all in the back." She's right, of course. Junie hasn't come across a mirror yet, but she's sure she looks like hell. Bess dunks her kitchen rag into the water pitcher.

"Do you have any idea how foolish it is to be in the woods, not

knowing what or *who* could be out there?" she asks, wiping away the tears and dirt from Junie's face.

Junie bites back a chuckle. Of course, it's foolish to sneak off the Bellereine grounds, hiding in the woods until dawn. What no one seems to understand is she does it for the wildness, the anonymity. Her cabin is predictable. The same straw poking into her back, the same creaky wood-plank floors, the same memory of Minnie's sick body, splayed next to her, skin pale and fever-slicked. There is nowhere to go but the woods.

Bess can disapprove all she wants; Junie's grandparents are the only ones who she doesn't want to hurt. After Minnie died, Junie promised herself she would do anything to protect them, to keep them from more pain. It doesn't make any sense that she runs away every night, knowing how much it scares them, which is why she tries to hide it from them as best she can.

She already failed with Granddaddy; she can't hurt Muh, too.

"Can you tell Muh I was with you this morning?" Junie asks.

"Now, why would I lie to my auntie?"

"Please, just don't tell her, Bess."

Auntie rings the cookhouse bell. If they wait much longer, they'll both get chewed out.

"Fine. You got to stop crying now. No tears in the food," Bess says.

THEY LAY OUT SILVER serving dishes overflowing with peeled hard-boiled eggs, crispy corn cakes topped with butter and honey, fragrant rosemary sausages, thick slices of fried bacon, and golden-brown biscuits. Auntie Marilla even sliced fresh, sugar-topped peaches from the orchard. Junie's stomach gnaws; she hasn't eaten since yesterday.

The mistress's heels strike against the wooden staircase just as Junie finishes straightening the place settings. She and Bess dash to the wall opposite the main door, hands folded behind their backs. Junie uses a free nail to dig into her palm's calluses.

The mistress walks in, surveying the room like a bird of prey.

She smooths her high-necked, long-sleeved wrapper dress with white embroidered roses, the same dress she wears every day. The middle part of her ash-blond hair reveals the graying roots, the length secured into a low tuck clipped with a plain comb.

When Junie first started working in the house, she'd asked Minnie why the mistress always looked so plain. Minnie raised her arm in a circle to gesture to the room they stood in. *All this is her fancy dress, us included.*

"Well, good morning, girls," Mrs. McQueen says. "Is my tea prepared?"

Bess and Junie curtsy in unison.

"Good morning, ma'am," Bess says, pulling out Mrs. McQueen's chair and pouring her tea.

"Thank you, dear," she says, swirling her spoon. "Girls, before I forget, the master arrived this morning. I wouldn't expect you to have prepared since I *certainly* wasn't expecting him, but one of you should make coffee just the same."

Bess cuts Junie a knowing look. Mrs. McQueen hates having her husband home.

"I'll take care of it, ma'am," Bess answers.

"Before you go, Bess, I must say, I love these roses! Did you arrange today's bouquet?"

"No, ma'am, Junie did," she says, excusing herself.

Junie's pulse quickens as Mrs. McQueen's mouth curls into a close-lipped smile. She wishes Bess would've lied and taken the credit.

"These roses complement my tablecloth well. My, you've grown to have such a keen eye! Now, turn around so I can look at you."

Junie steps closer, rubbing the sweat off her palms. She's known Mrs. McQueen her whole life, and yet she always feels like a stranger Junie has to examine for signs of danger. Mrs. McQueen hums approvingly before straightening Junie's collar and sleeves.

"That uniform suits you. Your grandmother must be proud." She leans back in her chair. "But, my dear, you've forgotten something." She taps her porcelain teacup with her clipped fingernail. "The milk. I'd hate for my tea to get cold before I can have it the way I prefer."

The fine hairs on the back of Junie's neck rise. She left the milk in the cookhouse.

"I'd hate to have you do extra cleaning this Sunday, but you know servants only get free Sunday if they complete their work to the *highest* standard."

Sundays are Junie's only day to roam and write poems in peace. *Carefree.* The word slithers through her ears.

"Ma'am?" Bess calls, carrying the coffee carafe. "I'm real sorry to interrupt, but I heard from round the corner while I was fetching the coffeepot. Momma just got some fresh milk from the cows, and she's pouring it now. We were gonna use canned milk for your tea, but Junie thought it would be best to use *fresh* milk since you prefer that. I should have spoken sooner. Isn't that right, Junie?"

Junie jerks to look at Bess, who nods toward the back door.

"Yes, ma'am, that's right," Junie says.

Mrs. McQueen bites her lip.

"That's all right. You've done what's best, Junie, now check with Marilla to see if it's ready."

Junie curtsies and rushes to the cookhouse. She stabs open a milk can with a knife and pours it into a jug before running back.

"Here you are, ma'am," Junie says, adding milk to the tea. The mistress nods and Junie slinks along the wall as Mrs. McQueen sips approvingly. Junie's mouth curls into a half-smile. The mistress can never tell the difference between fresh and canned milk.

Mrs. McQueen is finishing her second cup when Violet, her only child, saunters in. Her pale blue combing jacket is wide open to reveal a translucent sleeping sacque, red curls falling loose over her shoulders. Her current novel, *Pamela,* is tucked underneath her arm.

"*Bonjour, ma chérie!*" she says, coasting toward Junie.

"Good morning, Miss Violet," Junie says, beginning to curtsy.

"Oh, stop with all that curtsying pageantry! Who am I, Queen Victoria? We will greet each other as the French do, with a kiss on the cheek." She leans forward and pecks Junie's cheek.

"Violet, I'm certain I shouldn't have to say how highly irregular this behavior is. Sit down and stop this at once," Mrs. McQueen

hisses. "Knowledge of the French language is admirable, but pretending to *be* French is tremendously silly."

"Good morning to you, too, Mother. I don't see what is irregular about practicing another culture's customs. If I were to travel to France, I'd like to fit in." She sits down and Junie pushes her chair in. "Oh, Mother, is that coffee? May I *please* have *une petite tasse*?"

"It's vulgar for a young lady to drink coffee," Mrs. McQueen says. "And my days, Violet, close your jacket! It's uncouth to wander around in your sacque, but to *expose* yourself at breakfast is disgraceful."

"Why, Mother? It's just Junie and Bess." Violet bites into a corn cake and reaches for the coffeepot. "Besides, Junie sees me *dénudée* every day. You don't mind my sleeping sacque, do you, Junie?" Violet says, shooting Junie a playful glance. Junie looks down at her shoes, cursing Violet's silliness. The last thing she needs is more attention from Mrs. McQueen.

"It doesn't matter what Junie thinks. It matters what *I* think," Mrs. McQueen retorts, slapping Violet's hand away. Violet winces.

"Why's the coffee here if nobody's drinking it?" Violet mutters, taking another bite.

"If no *one* is drinking it, Violet."

"If no *one* is drinking it, Mother."

Mrs. McQueen shifts.

"Your father returned from town this morning, He's upstairs now. Goodness, Violet, stop eating with your mouth open. You're seventeen years old, more than old enough to start acting like you have some gentility."

"Daddy's here? Did he send word?" Violet asks. She wraps her robe around her shoulders.

"Well, I didn't know a man had to send word to visit his own house!"

Violet and Mrs. McQueen whip around toward the deep drawl and cigar smell that rolls into the room. Mr. McQueen glides in, wearing a perfumed cream linen suit, which hardly hides the bourbon emanating from his pores.

Junie smirks. At least he bothered to change his boots.

"Great day, did I just hear my baby girl is drinking coffee at breakfast?"

Violet grins so wide Junie worries she'll split her lip. She leaps from her chair, arms stretched.

"Daddy!" she trills an octave higher than her normal voice. She beams, kissing his sweaty cheek. "I'm so glad you're home!"

"You sure are a sight for sore eyes this morning, Sweet Pea," Mr. McQueen says, sitting down at the head. "Good morning, Innis."

"To what do we owe the pleasure, William?" she responds, stirring her tea.

"Can't a man come to his own home and see his beautiful family?"

"It is within your rights, William, not your habits," Mrs. McQueen murmurs.

Mr. McQueen leans back, spreading his legs wide to drop his belly before pouring a cup of coffee so full it drips over the rim of his porcelain mug. "I didn't see Mr. Pullman when I came up this morning. Is he all right?"

"Mr. Pullman was let go," Mrs. McQueen says.

Junie and Bess cut each other confused looks. Mr. Pullman was the plantation overseer; Granddaddy said he spent most of his time looking into the bottom of a moonshine bottle. Despite this, it wasn't as if alcoholism was something the McQueens would consider a real problem. Junie resists the urge to scrunch her brow. Why would the mistress fire him?

"You didn't think to ask me, Innis?"

"I would have, Darling. I wasn't quite sure where to find you."

"Can't see how it would be right to let Pullman go. I mean, who do you expect to watch all them field niggers—"

"Mercy, William, please don't use language like that at the table. This isn't a savory conversation," Mrs. McQueen interrupts.

"I don't give a hoot if it's savory," McQueen says with a chuckle. "I'm the owner around here, I ought to be doin' the hirin' and let-

tin' go. What will people say in town if they hear you're firin' my men while I'm gone?"

"I doubt anyone who knows anything of your character would be terribly stunned, William," Mrs. McQueen says. "And since you've suddenly taken such an interest in the affairs around here with no regard to proper table manners, you ought to know it wasn't possible to keep Mr. Pullman on financially, that is, unless you're willing to quit playing poker and drinking your way through the South."

Mr. McQueen's jaw tightens as his face turns beet red. He cracks his knuckles with a snort. "Sweet Pea?"

"Yes, Daddy?" Violet squeaks.

"It sounds as though your mother and I have some topics to discuss alone. Why don't you and your girl go on upstairs? The other maid can go, too."

Bess curtsies and slips out the front door without a sound. *The other maid.* Bess has lived her whole life at Bellereine, and he still hasn't bothered to learn her name.

Violet nods. She kisses her father's hardened cheek before starting toward the stairs. "I feel safe knowing Daddy's home again!"

Junie rushes along behind her as McQueen seals the double doors.

"I wish he'd stayed in whatever hole he crawled out of. You can smell the liquor on him from here," says Violet.

"I thought you felt *safe* now that Daddy's home?" Junie says, imitating Violet's tone at breakfast.

"Oh, hush." Violet swats Junie's shoulder. "You think that was too much? Don't matter, anyway, he's too drunk and stupid to catch the irony."

"We ought to get ready. Auntie'll have extra breakfast if you want it."

"Are you kidding? We ain't going upstairs yet." Violet pulls two glasses from underneath her robe. "I snuck 'em off the table. Now we can listen."

She drops to her knees, placing the glass on the wood.

"Violet, don't be foolish." Junie's pulse quickens.

"Mother said it wasn't possible to keep Mr. Pullman *financially,*" Violet says, eyes widening. "C'mon, Junie, you think he's leaving card games and applejack to come here and fight with my mother? I intend to know the real reason."

Violet is right. Apprehension creeps through Junie's nerves. First, the master appears at home with no notice. Then, he insists on speaking to the mistress in private, when the McQueens have never bothered to keep their fights behind closed doors.

Something strange is going on.

Junie eyes the second glass, temptation tickling her palms. But then she looks down at her hands, still nicked with cuts from tree bark.

She shakes her head. "Stay if you want, I'm going upstairs."

"Fine, suit yourself, *rabat-joie.*"

Junie knows Violet's French enough to know she's been called a stick-in-the-mud, but her head hurts too much from fitful sleep in the woods to bother with a sharp-tongued answer. She marches up the staircase to Violet's bedchambers at the hallway's end. The cornflower-blue room is twice the size of Junie's cabin. It bursts with fine dresses, silk shoes, lacy underskirts, velveteen furniture, and European dolls, but all Violet cares for are the books—novels, poetry, and a few texts in French overflow from ceiling-height white bookshelves.

Junie pulls back the curtains to let the sun in before replacing Violet's linens with clean white sheets. She thumbs through Violet's closet for a dinner dress before settling on a lacy red confection McQueen bought on his last foolish trip to Mobile. Violet will hate it, but the master will love it.

She lays out the dress, then eyes the bookshelves. Once Violet learned to read as a little girl, she insisted on teaching Junie in secret so she'd have someone to talk to about her books. Junie took to literature like a fish to water, thrilled to spend her playtime with Violet in the imaginary world of their shared stories. When

she became Violet's maid on Violet's fifteenth birthday, she decided to alphabetize the library since Violet had neither need nor desire, not minding the book piles. It is the perfect chore, a way to read while pantomiming her maid duties. This was how she'd first discovered the Romantics, reorganizing Violet's often ignored poetry books; they were short enough to read between chores without being too conspicuous. She'd read that these poets lived in misty hills and valleys, foraging off the land in a cottage, observing the quiet perfection of lakes and trees and hilltops. How many times had each of those poets found the sublime? Her fingers tingle imagining the serenity they must each feel every day, knowing they've found the great secret to life. She takes a familiar copy of John Keats's odes, sitting on the floor before cracking the book to a well-worn page.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Junie curls her knees, dropping the book into her lap. She'd been reading Keats's poems for years, but only in the eight months since her sister's death has she seen herself in his melancholic verse. She didn't use to be this way; she used to show her teeth when she smiled, to taste sweetness instead of ash when she bit into a blackberry, to hear her grandparents when they told her they loved her.

Why can't she let Minnie go, the way everyone else has? She presses her eyes into her knees.

"Junie?"

Junie covers her mouth to mute her surprise. She jumps to stand, but Violet pushes her back down.

"No, no, you ain't got to stand up. You don't look well," Violet says, pursing her lips and drawing her eyebrows together. Embarrassment creeps over Junie's cheeks.

"I'm fine, I didn't mean—"

"Stop with all that, you ain't got to apologize. Sit in the chair and I'll fetch you water." Junie obeys, her muscles melting into the chair like candle wax.

"Here." Violet passes her a glass of water. Junie sips as Violet settles on the ottoman. "What's wrong, Junebug?"

"Nothing. I didn't sleep good."

"You never sleep good." Violet scoots closer to Junie. "You ain't been yourself since—"

"It's nothing," Junie interrupts, swatting away her sister's name before Violet can say it. "Muh snored real bad. Now my head's a mess. I'm all right, really."

"You wanna sleep here instead?" Violet asks.

"I can't leave Muh and Granddaddy out there all alone."

"You can if you want to, you know. As far as I'm concerned, you can do whatever you like in here as long as Mother and Daddy don't catch on." Violet saunters to her armoire, grabbing a ribbon to tie up her hair. "You drink that water, I'll get myself ready."

Junie nods, taking another sip. Violet tosses off her combing jacket.

"You were right to head up here instead of eavesdropping, by the way," Violet says, taking off her sacque. "Daddy was off in some dirty Montgomery club spending Midas's gold playing cards, as usual. You can imagine how angry Mother was. 'We can't grow cotton fast enough for the way you spend it!' They sounded like a couple of dogs growling over scraps. *Très embarrassant.* There was one interesting thing Daddy said, though."

Exhaustion buzzes in Junie's skull like a swarm of bees. She winces, straining through the pain to pay attention.

"Junie? Did you hear? I said there was one interesting thing Daddy said. Gosh, you *are* tired."

"Sorry, I'm listening."

She blinks away the memory of Minnie's sweat-soaked body, twisted and writhing in the blankets with her pupils so wide her eyes looked like coal.

"Well, Daddy met a young man from New Orleans of all places and invited him to stay here for a *week*. The man accepted."

"We're going to have a guest, then?"

"*Two* guests," Violet says as she pulls on her underdress. "He has a sister, too."

"A whole week?"

"*And* they're arriving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow! I expected Mother to be red-hot about it, but she almost seemed happy."

Junie rubs her temples. Bellereine never has guests, save bill collectors or distant cousins passing through. Hosting strangers is the sort of thing Junie thought would send Mrs. McQueen into hysterics.

"Are you happy about it?" Junie asks.

Violet unties her hair ribbon. She faces Junie, fingers smoothing and combing her hair.

"Can I sit with you? In the chair?"

Even with a smile, Violet's blue eyes plead like a dog left in the rain.

"Sure, Vi."

Violet squeezes in, stretching her arm around Junie to pull her close.

"Do you believe in true love, Junie?" Violet asks. Junie giggles. "What? Why are you laughing?"

"Nothing, it's just like you to ask a big question out of the blue. Remember that time you got fresh with the governess for not telling you where the stars end right after you wet your new dress?"

"Big minds ask big questions and I will not apologize for it,"

Violet says, pointing to her head. "Now, do you believe in true love?"

"Like Cinderella and happily ever after?"

"Like where two people love each other and that's it. Do you believe in that?" Violet bites the nails on her free hand.

Junie rolls the question over in her mind. Muh and Granddaddy have been together since Adam and Eve, but they mostly fuss about each other to anyone who will listen. Some moments seem like true love between them; Granddaddy picking Muh fresh spring flowers, or Muh kissing Granddaddy every time he leaves with Mr. McQueen.

"I want to believe in it," Junie answers.

"I don't know if I believe," Violet says. "Well, maybe I believe in something like true love, but I don't know if I want it."

Junie's brow furrows. Violet devoured every romance novel she could get her hands on. How could she not want true love?

"You don't want some tall, handsome boy to find your glass slipper or kiss you awake like the stories?"

"I don't want some boy to save me or nothing," Violet says. "Besides, from what I've seen I don't think any boys around here could save me from much more than a goose."

"Why are you asking about love, anyway?" Junie asks.

"I don't know, I . . ." Violet trails off, fingers running over her throat. They shake against her skin. "Scoot over, I wanna get up."

Junie leans over the armrest to give Violet space to wiggle out of the chair. It used to be big enough to hold them both, and neither is willing to admit how much the sides pinch into their hips when they share it.

Violet gets to her feet and beelines to the bookshelves, feverishly examining the spines.

"What are you looking for?" Junie asks.

"Do you remember when we read *Jane Eyre*?"

"Shhh!" Junie hisses.

"Mother's not here. Do you remember?"

Junie nods. *Jane Eyre* is one of her favorites. How could she forget Jane rising above her station to take claim of a whole house?

"You're looking on the wrong shelf. It's with the *B*s, for Brontë."

Violet finds the copy, and curls back into the chair.

"*This* is the kind of love I want. Like Jane and Mr. Rochester." Violet thumbs through the pages. "Where did all my dog-ears go?"

"I replaced them with ribbons to keep the pages nice, see?" Junie points to the red ribbons dangling from the top.

"It's this line right here. '*I ask you to pass through life at my side—to be my second self, and best earthly companion.*' Ain't that romantic?"

"Don't Rochester already have a wife, Violet?"

"Oh, be serious, Junie. This is beautiful. He doesn't just want to keep Jane somewhere like a pretty pony, he wants her to be his second self, his companion, his equal. That's how I want somebody to love me. Besides, the wife's already dead by this point." Her voice drops to a murmur. "I just want something different from what God has given me."

"More things?" Junie asks, looking around the room.

"No, not things. I don't care about things. I want more feeling, Junie. I want to feel every feeling there is in this world, not just the ones Mother or Daddy or anybody else around here want me to feel. I want to feel so much, sometimes it makes me sick. Do you think that makes me a sinner?"

Violet's eyes glisten with tears. New guests aren't enough to stir Violet like this. What is she holding back?

"I ain't no preacher, Violet, but I don't think you're a sinner."

Violet's lips curl into a smile. She takes and squeezes Junie's hand.

"I swear, the worst part of Daddy coming is wearing all these ridiculous gowns he buys me," Violet says, wiping her eyes and eyeing the red dress. "I'm not even sure this one you picked is going to fit.

"You feeling any better, Junebug?"

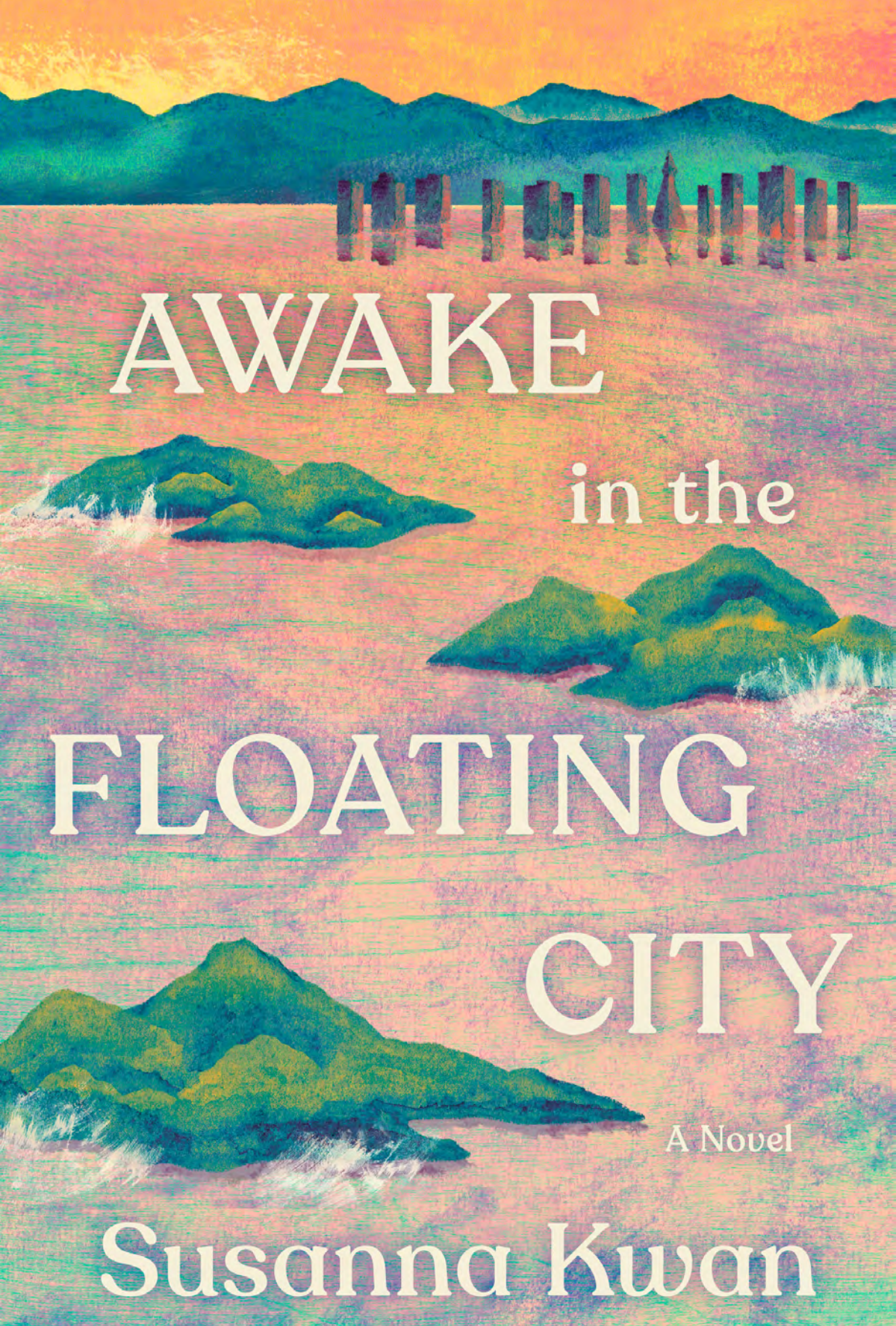
"Much better," Junie says, climbing to her feet. Her head is a little clearer after the water and rest, even if her legs are shaky.

"Good. You think you could walk down and get some breakfast from Marilla? That way we can eat and I can avoid this itchy monstrosity a little longer."

Junie nods. Violet scoots into the middle of the chair, picking up her novel from the ottoman, and leaning back to read again. The aches of hunger and anxiety gnaw at Junie's insides as she walks out of the room and down the stairs.

Two visitors. Two outsiders.

In her sixteen years, nothing like this has ever happened at Bellereine. These guests are clouds hovering at the distant horizon, and Muh, Granddaddy, and Auntie Marilla are the only ones who can tell her if the clouds carry a storm within them.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WAKE UP!

High up in Unit 7763, each night slid in like an oil spill, filling the hours with sludge and shine until it seeped into another day. Bo was carrying on a long solitude here, stranded in the studio apartment she rented, one island among hundreds in this building, in a city inundated by rain, so saturated it could be called drowned.

The rain had kept on for seven years. It slowed some days but never stopped. Overnight, it seemed, the city had transformed into a rainforest. Vines that ran from roof to ground sucked up the water and sent out shoots and tendrils. The skyline brightened from gunmetal to green, softening the sharp edges. A steward on Tamalpais, she imagined, must have seen the sudden verdant thumb of land to the south, dividing sea and bay. Below, streets transformed into rivers, and the rivers blew out windows, tore doors from their frames, widened into buildings through the new openings. The water took down statues and leveled groves, carried entire families away. People fled or drowned—or moved to higher ground, where they relearned how to live in the city they'd known as home, a place the rain had claimed.

Today the quiet was punctured by ringing. Her cousin Jenson had chartered a boat, in part for her overdue evacuation, and it was scheduled to depart in two weeks. He'd been calling at least daily from British Columbia with reminders: the boat would leave at noon sharp; she should bring only the essentials; anything else could be replaced up north. She listened until he was done recording his message.

Everyone she knew had left by now, gone to Greenland or Siberia or Maine—inland, north, overseas, wherever there was an opportunity. In their messages, they asked, with the patronizing concern of the secure, how she was doing, if their family homes were still standing, when she might move or at least try to visit. They sent birth announcements and exhibition announcements, video footage of cities that had risen in just a few short years, the occasional rumor of looming water wars where they lived. Mostly they avoided mention of the refugee camps that now lined the routes of migration that had emerged following mass displacement, the river towns engulfed by monsoons, the unprecedented temperatures that had evaporated reservoirs, fried vegetation, and filled the morgues. Bo was embarrassed not to share their urgency to leave. They implored her to find a better, safer place, and she assured them she was making plans, tried to see what they saw, but couldn't.

An electric hum pitched down and a moment later the power went out. Silence. With both hands, she lifted her preferred plate from a shelf and set it on the counter noiselessly. The swells of uncertainty paused as she pulled a few dry nubs from the mycelium wall in her kitchen and arranged an ascetic meal on the cobalt-glazed ceramic. The flowers on the trim contrasted with any food: the mushrooms, a potato, a broccoli stalk, or a halved egg, wreathed in blue. She chewed and swallowed. Then, with absolute care, as if handling glass, she washed and dried the dish and returned it to its place. A tarry feeling returned, starting low, in her legs, and as it filled her she felt soothed by its familiarity, like molten night pulling her to the floor.

When the sky began to darken, she forced herself up to the roof. The last two years, her twice-weekly trips to the market had been tiny anchors to the world. Life was going on outside. She'd make herself walk the aisles, trying to appreciate feeling, not just hearing, the rain. And she'd buy food—even without much appetite, she had to eat.

The rooftop economy had emerged in densely populated sectors as the flooding had worsened. Nimble street vendors were the

first to move their operations up, followed by small businesses with storefronts. Together they pushed the city to expedite relocation permits and build bridges to replace the wrecked roads.

It didn't take long for everything else to follow them up. The school district cordoned off areas for recess and after-school programs. The parks department put on movie nights. Talks, concerts, and community meetings took place under the shelter of portable bandshells. But even then, there was a sense that it wouldn't last. Activity had diminished steadily, as expected, especially in the last two years, and only a third of the vendors remained now. Still, everyone left moved along the roofs, by necessity and for pleasure, for groceries and exercise and socializing, and to get from one place to another.

By habit Bo made her way to the citrus stand, past commemorative murals and cairns, her arm shielding her face from the drops. Her favorite vendor stacked his table with glowing glass jars, a wall of sun against the gray sky. An illusion of bounty. When his greenhouse lemons ripened, he preserved them in salt and oil. He sold them throughout the year, but she rarely bought any; mostly she just came to look.

"Slice some up if you have a pigeon to roast," he'd suggested on her first visit, "or nibble on a sliver if you're craving something sharp." He talked just the right amount, as though sensing correctly that she was unaccustomed to people. Today he said nothing when he saw her but pointed at a basket of finger limes labeled HELP YOURSELF. She chose one and nodded in thanks. She pushed herself to continue and bought several bundles of spinach from the next table over. It wasn't much food, but she could stretch it across a few meals before it went bad, delaying her next errand. As she made her way back to the elevator, she estimated she wouldn't have to leave her apartment again for three days.

In the vestibule, she did her ritual scan of the bulletin board, noting any new flyers of the missing and checking for the laminated photo of her mother she had posted two years earlier, just after the big storm. Plain lined face, easy smile, gray pixie cut—it was still there.

Back in her apartment, she laid the food out on a cutting board and played the new message that had come in while she was out: Jenson would ride down on the boat and make the journey back north with her. Those first months after the big storm, he'd begged her to return with him. He'd given her space, said he understood it wasn't easy to leave home. But two years later, her doubts had curdled into paralysis. The situation was dire. Her inaction would be the death of her, he said. He had no choice but to decide for her, to come personally to escort her out.

Not much to do in these final weeks, little to pack, no one to say goodbye to. Now she flattened herself on the floor between the canvases stacked against the wall and the rusted toolbox that held her brushes and knives, paints and rags, lifeless things, none of it touched in over two years, none of it worth taking with her. The clawing inside subsided a little. She did her best to stay perfectly still.

The next week, while she was assessing what to pack, a note slid under her door. *I need help,* it read. *Three days a week, afternoons. Can pay in cash*. Signed in a scrawl: *Mia, Unit 5109*.

The neighbor. For a couple of years, just after the rain began, Bo had been a caregiver for Ricardo, a man who had lived on the fifty-first floor. The old woman who had lived next door to him must have noticed Bo coming and going back then, mops and bags of produce and packs of adult cloth pull-ons in hand.

Patches of the woman's life had come through the walls and windows as Bo had worked: the static from her Cantonese programs, wafts of frying garlic, tones of complaint. Bo had often wondered about her, how she'd come to live alone here, if she had any family, but when she'd asked Ricardo, he'd said he didn't know much. He'd heard from another resident that she'd arrived in America as a young mother in the years following the Second World War, long before he was born. A supercentenarian, they called people like her. A handful of the very old—those who had survived well past a century—were known to live in units throughout their building. Advancements in medicine kept extending life expectancy, but around the world, especially in cities, the elderly found themselves abandoned by family to survive personal and regional crises alone.

Bo had stayed with Ricardo until his body had given up. She'd waited until the mortuary service had collected him for water cremation before going to the clay fridge, as he had directed, and locating his will, sealed in a plastic bag, deeding his remaining accounts

to her. Not surprising, since he had long been alone, but she was neither family nor friend—just contracted labor.

It was enough to live on for a year, or several if she was frugal. This was what she'd hoped for since she was twenty: the money meant she didn't need to find a new gig—she could simply paint. But she'd found that she struggled to create with that freedom; something had changed, requiring effort she didn't know how to expend. She worked dutifully, made aimless, soulless marks while she awaited that elusive spark. As the months passed, her patience frayed and panic surfaced, coating her eyes and skin and everything she touched with a film of failure. She'd made a mistake. Her mother was right: she'd been given a gift but had wasted it. Clinging to the belief that there was meaning in the work, she'd insisted on staying to see it through. Then came the storm surge, then the long stillness that followed. The money shrank. The rain kept on.

She left the old woman's note on the floor and attended to the plan ahead. She packed some clothes, set her suitcase by the door, and waited for the day when she would walk down to the dock. The note tugged at her like a magnet, but she tried to forget it. Two or three days passed, maybe another.

The idle, fearful years had made her mind loose. Without schedule or focus, the hours had scattered. Her grasp of time had dimmed; she'd lost all sense of how the day passed outside her apartment. She had the feeling that life was spinning away from her on a widening orbit.

As a child she'd noticed that each day followed the one before, like breaths. Her mother had hung two clocks in their home—buy one, get one—the first over the mantel of a fireplace that didn't work, and the other in the bathroom as a reminder to keep their showers brief. From the table where she ate, studied, and drew, Bo could hear both as they marked the seconds, just a hair from synchronization, pushing time forward like a damaged metronome, drawing her attention to her own heartbeat as it picked up speed and turned into a forceful knocking rhythm that drowned out the clocks.

Now she sensed the days going by through slivers and swatches

of light moving between the leaves that had draped her window ever since she'd stopped cutting back the vines. She sustained a vague memory of the satisfaction of operating on scripted time.

A former painting teacher of hers, a widow, reported in a letter that her own dark period had lasted more than three years after her beloved had died. Three years before she could detect tamarind in a marinade or eat with any pleasure. Three years in which she declined to trim her nails, instead either growing them into talons or chewing them down. The black dog—that was what she called it.

It didn't help that the cycle of a year had distorted into a single interminable season.

In the early days of rain, every change had stood out. Bo had been new to the building then, drawn in by the low rent and central location after almost eight years on the west side in a poorly maintained live-work studio that she'd outgrown but hadn't known how to leave until it was condemned, the decision made for her. From her new apartment, she anxiously watched the city transform into something unrecognizable—unfathomable, at first, when for years they had known only drought and the threat of more drought. She drew daily, capturing the details, still believing the rain would end soon. Ceramic water-storage tanks filled and overflowed. Black rubber irrigation snakes secured to the perimeter of rooftop garden plots swelled and split. Farmers tried to adapt, sowing and harvesting according to this swing in the weather. Food supplies became unpredictable. People were robbed of their groceries. Sinkholes opened, like the neighborhood's collective hunger on display in the street. Mouths to swallow a city up. Inside, thick runoff stained the walls and left deposits. Streaks of copper bled down sodden curtains. She woke to putrid smells carried up through the vents from the boiler room, the basement, the street: skunk, mold, sewage, fermenting garbage. The green that blanketed the city drank up the water on its millions of fingers, and what wasn't absorbed poured down and ran into the gutters. She stopped running into other tenants on her floor and realized that most of the units had gone vacant. She watched as residents began to flee, the first of many waves of exodus, and still, the looping footage of floods on

the news shocked her, no matter that she'd seen those very scenes on her own block.

The streets ulcerated into potholes in the months that followed. A moonscape. A city on a sheet of Swiss cheese. Even roads built with self-healing asphalt couldn't withstand the deluge. Beneath the carpets of tar, the sand that held up the streets swept away in rivers of muck. Before it became futile, a contingent of concerned residents, the ones who appeared on local public broadcast feeds delivering grating, impassioned speeches on the neighborhood effects of this or that ordinance, organized to draw attention to the potholes. From the window where she'd set up her drafting table, Bo noticed the crude images, the kind found in high school bathroom stalls, drawn around the holes in spray paint. She began to work neon colors into her own paintings, using an airbrush. Then she watched as a crew of people—cloaked from the drizzle in rain ponchos, armed with bouquets and hand trowels—theatrically filled each new, still-small hole with potting soil and planted hibiscus blooms. She tried to track their campaign, searching community board posts for updates and staring down at the street each day. Finally, she was rewarded. When a particularly large pothole went untended by the municipality for over a year, they threw a birthday party for it, added streamers to the orange tape that bordered the current edges, dug forks into a cake piped in frosting. Alone in her apartment, watching through binoculars, she pounded her fist on the window and cheered along with them.

Things were lively, then less so. She stopped seeing inspired displays, then stopped even hoping to see them. Her work stalled out. In a season that ran so long that other kinds of seasons were recalled with the quality of folklore, there was little room for festivity or ritual. Property minders across the city gave up on the battle with mold, wood rot, and corroded pipes. Structures played out their destiny toward collapse. Four years into the rain, her building's super had finally fled, and piece by piece, bolts, seals, and fixtures came undone. More units went vacant. The elevator and roof were serviced, but everything else fell apart, unless the remaining residents kept it up themselves. All her friends left the city, then

her cousin and uncle, too—she and her mother had declined to join them.

At what point had the destruction become so commonplace it barely registered? One night, about two years ago, the sidewalks were clear enough that she could walk to her mother's apartment for Sunday dinner. There was too much food—her mother hadn't yet adjusted to cooking just for two—and neither had much to say. Bo reported on unremarkable tidbits from the week, her mother half-listening, on occasion interrupting to gripe about the price of melons or to mention another business that had closed. The streets had transformed into rapids by the end of their meal. The water tore sidings from structures and battered drainage pipes into angry, jagged sculptures. They watched from the window for a few moments before her mother said, "Guess you're staying on the couch again. Help me clear the plates." That night, wrapped in sheets that smelled of her mother's detergent, she'd slept for ten hours straight.

Not long after, just before the storm. She'd been getting ready for a show, her first in a while. Jenson had come to town for a work function where he would be recognized for his achievements in his field. Bo hadn't finished her paintings, so she'd skipped the event and the celebratory lunch that followed, choosing instead to work. Her cousin had been pissed, but not surprised. He'd accused her of being selfish. Her mother had disapproved, but still had dropped by with food for her that morning on her way to the ceremony. "It's important to show up for these kinds of things," she'd said as she left.

She was there, then not. She had left the lunch and then never made it home. The water had charged in with unusual force that afternoon and the lower routes still in use had been obliterated.

Jenson had stayed six months after that. He'd rented a temporary apartment in her building and left when he saw that Bo could get herself to the roof for food. And she had kept herself fed, if little else. Certainly she hadn't tried to paint. There had been times in the past when painting had been the thing that had made her feel

most herself, useful even. Now it was hard to imagine something more frivolous and meaningless. She'd chosen a painting over her own mother.

In the beginning, Bo and Jenson had searched every day. It had seemed then like everyone was looking for someone. The city had urged residents to seek high ground and stay put, but search parties formed and braved the flooding anyway. New flyers crowded the missing persons boards. Rumors of sightings fed tenuous hope. More disappeared while searching, swept off their ankles by swift-moving water.

A person could wash away. That was permanent, a fact made clearer each day. But the false starts—the familiarity of a woman's sloped posture, the overheard voice she swore she knew from birth—ignited tiny flutters inside, led to dreams more real than any waking moment. This meant, Bo was certain, that her mother was alive.

A week after the storm, the waters had receded enough that they could wade knee-high through the neighborhood as they searched. An encampment that had formed at the top of a hill the previous year was gone. It had housed a family who'd come from the outer neighborhoods to be closer to the markets but who hadn't been able to afford the vacated apartments. The wind during the worst of the storm had undone the stakes on their tents, and they'd lifted into the air like geodesic balloons, neighbors had reported. The mangled masses of nylon had floated away, impaled by poles and split planks as they moved with the currents. Everywhere, trees had been stripped of foliage, their branches now full of nests of clothing, plywood, even a two-seater electric car.

Several blocks from her mother's building, Bo saw a small figure with gray hair sleeping on a pair of seats in an old bus shelter. The glass wall behind the person had shattered, though it hadn't fallen, and someone had made an X with caution tape, two rippling yellow bands a temporary stay for thousands of ice-green pebbles. The panel glimmered. At some point the fractures would be too much, the sheet would fall, the glass gravel would disperse and disappear into the water. But for now it held, a brittle sea-colored backdrop

protecting the sleeper, who, through the angled rain, resembled Bo's mother napping.

"That can't be her," Jenson said. "Can it?"

They crossed a shallow pond and approached, and Bo placed her hand on the person's shoulder. Her heart thudded louder than the rain.

The person's small body spasmed, and right away Bo knew it wasn't her. The pallor of the skin, the yellow of the hair instead of the gray she'd imagined, the manner of fright—all wrong.

It was a child, no older than eight, bundled in a man's wool coat, eyes bright with fear. He drew a whistle from under his shirt and blew and blew, the sound so shrill and forceful that Bo thought she saw the shattered wall start to falter. She backed away, pulling Jenson with her, shouting, "We're leaving! We're leaving! Be careful of the glass."

Countless others had disappeared in that storm and few were ever recovered, it was true. But in that space of the unresolved, a tiny hope remained. Even as she reported her sighting and the location coordinates to the search boards, pushing away the unlikelihood that the child would be reunited with his family, she thought: *Someone missing could be found*.

Then came the eerie quieting. The unending rain muted the soundscape, and Bo began to long for the very noises that used to anger her, the intrusions and clamor of lives playing out in every direction—if not expletives shouted in congested thoroughfares below, then the shrieks of tires doing donuts at a sideshow. If not sirens and construction, then the sound systems of other artists at the live-work studios or the lonesome mockingbird rehearsing its repertoire of mediocre songs: alarms, miscellaneous beeps, the calls of other species. She tried to lose herself at the easel, but the silence seemed part of her now, dampening her thoughts and slowing her hand. Soon the blank canvas turned gray with dust and the paint tubes she'd left open dried up.

. . .

Then the nightmares, on repeat. They broke her sleep into short fits, image after image of her mother dying. A raft thrown over the edge of a waterfall. A hurricane lifting her body and swallowing it. A flash flood that carried away a row of prefab cottages, including one with her mother locked inside. None of these versions were far from the likely truth, she had to admit: like thousands of others trapped on this peninsula, her mother had almost certainly drowned.

Yet some residual belief lingered, the hope that she might still return. Jenson, sensing it, called it a delusion. He was right. Habituated to the rain, few had taken the storm warnings seriously, carrying on with their daily business and adjusting to each new disruption without thought. In hindsight, though, the unprecedented deluge that had taken her mother had been a tipping point for everyone but her. After that, no one doubted that worse would come, even if no individual storm since had been as singularly destructive. They realized they were on their own—half a decade into the rain, disaster response had been defunded into nonexistence. Most people, if they had means, found a way out.

Now Bo was utterly alone, with no friends to call on, and still she wasn't ready to leave. Not yet, not on short notice, not on someone else's terms. But here was Jenson at her door, all the way from Canada, practically shouting orders: "No more sulking around. Time to go. We're leaving in two days. Get it together. I came all this way."

"I'm packing." She gestured at the suitcase by the door, Mia's note still beside it.

He assessed the apartment, clearly displeased. "It looks exactly like the last time I was here." He went to the corner where she stored her painting supplies and old work. "You're not bringing any of this?"

"What for?" she said.

He pulled a small portfolio from a stack and held it up. "Are you serious?"

"You said to pack light."

"You can make new stuff, I guess." He looked like his father then, steady but tired. "I don't get why this is so hard for you. Explain to me what's left for you here."

He waited, but she had no answer.

"Just finish packing, okay?" he said, pointing vaguely around them.

"Yep," she said, and she meant it.

But then he left, and an unsettled feeling came over her. She crouched to pick up the note from Ricardo's neighbor. The few messages she received at this point were electronic, but this one, handwritten and delivered to her door, was unmistakably a missive from this world. She'd been alone, thought herself invisible. But somehow someone had found her.

And strangely, startlingly, needed her.

The day of her departure, she sat by the door of her apartment. Jenson was waiting for her on the boat at the pier, calling every few minutes. Her body rattled at the incessant ringing, at the urgency in his voice, which notched up with each message. *Where are you?* The manifest had her name on it, but they would leave with or without her. *Stop being stupid. She's not coming back. Seriously, time to go.*

She stared at the note beside her suitcase, its trembling script.

When the clock struck twelve, the ringing stopped. Her cousin left one more message: *Wake up!*

She opened the door and felt her decision slip into place.

The elevator doors glided open at the fifty-first floor. She walked toward the end of the hall, past Ricardo's old apartment, and arrived at a door with a line of locks running down one side. A rectangular button glowed with pink light. "Hi," she practiced. "Hello." She pressed the buzzer, which triggered a recording of raucous bird chatter that stopped only when the last of the dead bolts had been undone and the door swung open. The old woman stood a head shorter than Bo and gave off the musty medicinal smell of great-aunts.

Bo had seen her around the building, fussing with her plants on

the balcony or shoving her way through shoppers on the roof while dragging a cart full of produce, but she hadn't ever been this close to her. The woman's perm resembled a bleached broccoli top. Her cardigan was the same color as her skin and looked like a mass of inexpertly woven cobwebs. Her arms, soft lumps, pushed against the sloppy lace, and her bosom melted into the rolls and dips and pockets of the larger landscape of her body. A pale jade pendant of the goddess Kwan Yin rested on her belly. Her blue-tinted feet bulged from a ratty pair of house slippers.

A weak greeting escaped Bo's throat.

"Finally," the old woman spat. She looked Bo over, unimpressed, but opened the door wider. "Do you want the job or not?"

The shifts would be Monday and Thursday, and maybe an hour or two on Friday. The tasks were typical—clean, cook, shop—but likely to increase, Mia explained. Her legs had started to trouble her, curtailing the scope of her daily walks on one of the building's partially enclosed staircases, up to the rooftop and back. Delivering that note to Bo's door had almost been too much, the return walk more strenuous than she'd expected.

"My knees locked up a few times in the stairwell," she said. "By the time I reached my front door, I felt like I'd aged a decade in a single afternoon." Her legs had been bothering her for over a year, and her doctor had been pushing to insert sensors, which would transmit live data to his office and "help him help her." A few months earlier, during an especially painful flare-up, she'd finally agreed. As soon as he saw the reports on the locking events and her generally reduced speed and strength, he'd called to prescribe yet another new pill and prohibited her from being on her feet for more than a half hour at a time. "Not that I follow orders," she added. "Anyway, I need some help around the house, that's all, and all of my friends are dead and my family lives far away."

"I can help," Bo said, removing her shoes and selecting a pair of guest slippers from a bin by the door.

It was unexpectedly easy to step back into this role. When Bo notified the central agency that she had a new client, the representative was able to reactivate her account in seconds. "Glad to see you working again," he said. "It's been about four years, it says here." Then, upon waking on the first morning of the job, she felt immediately that the day had shape. For five solid hours, she'd be

expected somewhere, her time put to use. Her malaise began to ebb, the certainty a relief; even as Mia blathered on unsolicited, Bo felt it. Jenson meant well—he'd helped her a lot, especially in the last two years—but this was where she belonged. She was meant to stay.

Even though the layout of Mia's apartment was identical to Ricardo's next door, entering the space was jarring: the messes and powerful odors, all the details of someone else's living. Lightbulbs would need to be replaced, rugs beaten and washed. The answer button on the call machine near the kitchen was filthy. In the main room, heaps of bedding covered a set of folding chairs. A cabinet housed what appeared to be teapots, vases, and plastic knick-knacks, though the glass was too clouded with oil and dust for Bo to be sure. The only accessible furniture was a reclining armchair with deflated stuffing and a worn sunken seat. She glanced into the kitchen and saw a red square that hung in diamond orientation on the wall, with gold trim bordering an embossed Chinese character in calligraphic script. The priority was to set up a clean place for food preparation and storage. She would begin there.

"What did your neighbor tell you about me?" Bo asked as she slid on gloves and began to scrub at the sticky gray layer that had accumulated on the grout near the sink.

Mia monitored Bo's progress from beside her, holding on to the counter for balance. "He said that you are a decent enough cook."

"Did he," Bo said, amused.

"And he said you are an artist who takes on support services assignments when you need the work."

Bo paused her scouring. She was surprised that Ricardo had been attentive enough to describe her in this way, but by now, she felt a great distance from that identity. She hadn't painted since her mother had disappeared. Art, she'd come to feel, served no purpose in a time like this. It belonged to another world, one she'd left behind. Her drive was gone, her practice abandoned—for the best. She felt increasingly certain about this, reassured even, leaving behind a trivial pastime.

Even before her mother had disappeared, though, her painting practice had stalled. She knew she could manipulate paint and

make marks and balance visual effects in a pleasing composition, but that feeling of tapping into the beyond, of reverberating with the unsayable, was gone. Whether plein air or portraiture, it was hard to see the point. She'd lost touch with old friends, lost confidence in her movements, lost conviction. Entire years were lost to her; it was impossible to distinguish one from the next. And while she'd been lost, her peers had been reaching and amassing and anchoring, building little empires, tucking firmly into systems that promised security.

Her friend Joey, for instance, who she used to share a studio with, had exhibited with such regularity that she'd earned an early retrospective at forty-two. A guy Bo had once dated was now directing relocation projects for communities that still had time to retreat. Jenson had bought an apartment with bay views that made visitors gasp, no matter the weather.

Bo understood that she'd missed something her peers hadn't. She'd thought that she didn't believe in safety, but now she saw that they had made themselves safe while she had woolgathered in their wake. One day she looked up from the privacy she'd guarded to find that her life had emptied; all her choices added up to nothing.

And still. And still, with the comfort of being no one to the outside world, she prized the night hours that belonged solely to her, before the light, when hints of who she'd been, who she still could be, flickered. Voices broadcast into her tiny universe from somewhere close but unknown, offering respite from the dark-cold of her mind. She listened to the hum beyond the rain. She dreamed of color. She learned to live with water. In those moments, she could say without hesitation not that she was a painter but that she was real—a body situated within a day, inside a nameable hour. Whenever she was unsettled by daybreak, and the doubt and anxiety that poured in with the light, she held to the hope of three o'clock in the morning ahead.

"I don't do that anymore," she said to Mia, returning to the grout. "I don't paint."

"Don't paint?" Mia looked disappointed. She watched Bo scrub for a moment. "Well, he said that you're dependable and thorough,

most of the time. But you know, the way things are these days, it was a crapshoot whether you would respond."

"How did you know I was still here?"

"I've seen you before. And the Tran children said you buy watercress from them. They said the not-young, not-old Chinese lady cut off all her hair." Mia moved toward the small marbled diner table between the sink and a wall of disorganized shelves, the rubber soles of her slippers making a ripping sound as they peeled up from the linoleum. Every surface in the kitchen would need to be deep-cleaned.

Bo grazed her head with the inside of her forearm. For the last year, she'd neglected her hair to the point of manginess. When Jenson had informed her of his plan, she'd decided to shave it all off. It was a sloppy job, done without a mirror or the expectation of being noticed, though this morning she'd slapped some water on her head to tame a cowlick. The stubble had grown out and softened, and sometimes she caught herself touching it absentmindedly. It was comforting, like petting a cat.

"I didn't realize they knew I was Chinese," Bo said. "Some of my friends don't even know that." The section of grime she'd been working finally dissolved, and she felt a satisfaction too large for the task. She shook out a cramp in her hand and started on the next patch. Doing this detailed physical work again, even talking to a new person, felt strangely normal. Tomorrow she would feel the exertion in her arms, that forgotten sting of too much lactic acid.

The chairs that accompanied Mia's table were upholstered in a glittery vinyl and had at some point been repaired with heavy-duty silver tape, which had curled and blackened at the edges. Mia dragged one out from under the table on its hind legs, making a racket as she pulled.

"Just because you're lost in your own head doesn't mean everyone else isn't paying attention."

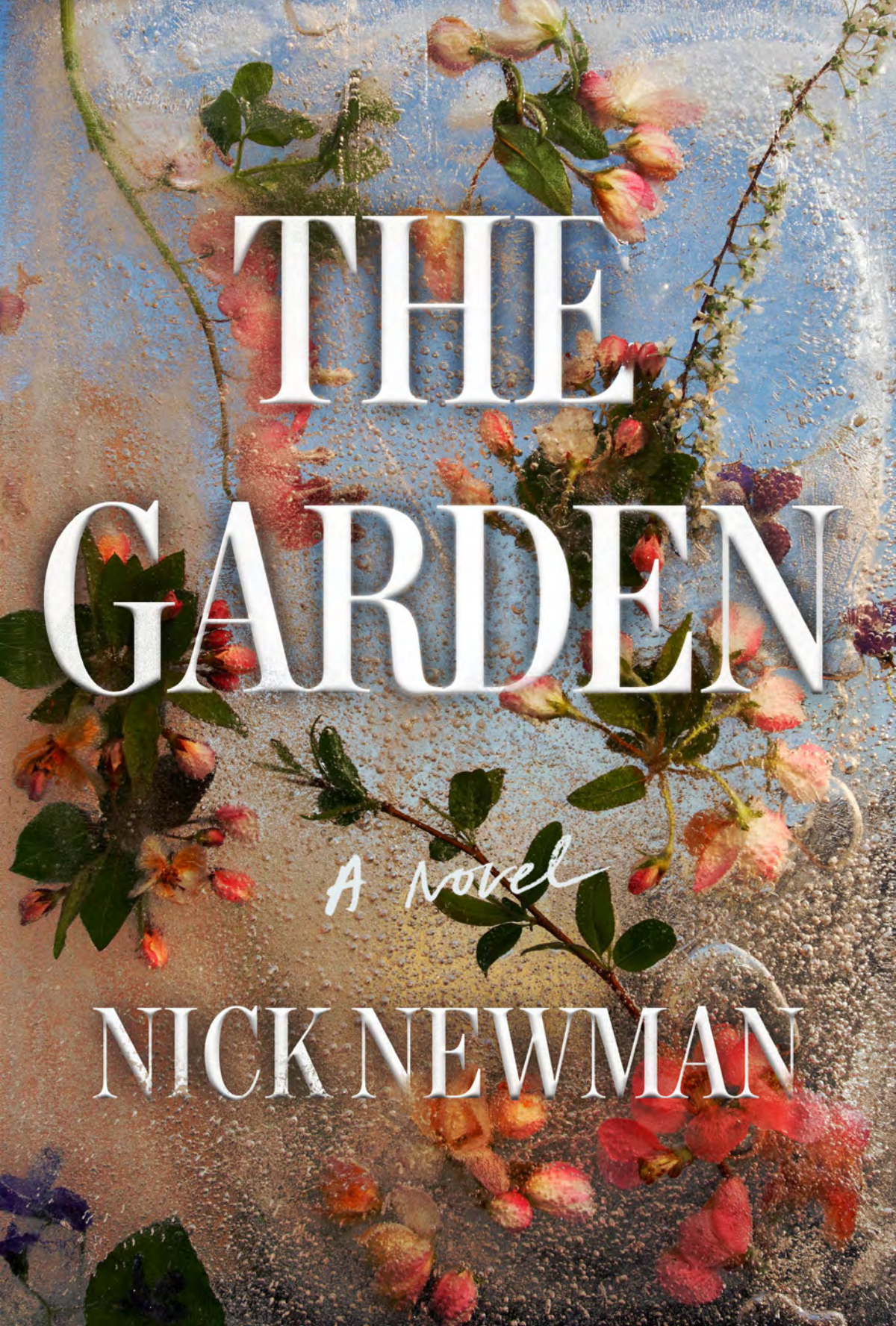
Bo felt a flash of defensiveness at the overstep.

Mia moved a bag full of bags from the seat to the tabletop. "Anyway, I thought you must be Chinese because you look a bit like my great-granddaughter did when she was young."

Bo turned to face Mia, who was seated now, framed by piles of clutter, clusters of pill bottles, balls of aluminum foil, and an assortment of used mugs. A clay pot served as the centerpiece, repurposed as a repository for assorted vertical tools: chopsticks with burnt tips, a back scratcher with tangles of dust between its tines. Her face had long lost its elasticity, but somewhere in the pouches and folds and tones, Bo saw features that reminded her of her own grandmother and the elders she and her mother used to visit during school breaks. They'd bring them oranges and pomelos, trays of chocolates, potted orchids. Bo would grow bored to the point of pain in their strange, smelly houses, in kitchens not unlike Mia's, but when she'd ask why they were there, all her mother would say was "To pay respects."

Mia slapped her hands on the table, startling Bo to attention. Her hair was oddly shadowed, and Bo realized clumps of dust had caught in it. She looked impatient, ready to issue orders.

"When you're done with that section, I'm ready for my snack."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Chapter 1

Somebody had moved the beehive. Evelyn couldn't understand how it had happened. It was at a slight angle to the others, like it had been shoved, and beneath each of its wooden feet there was a shallow red trench in the earth. An animal? A storm? It couldn't have been. They wouldn't have slept through a storm, and if they had they would now be under a foot of dust, along with the rest of the garden.

Evelyn pushed the hive back into place, clung to it for a moment, caught her breath. She felt the hum of the bees against her ribs. Perhaps they could tell her what had happened? She pressed her ear to the wood, warm and wind-smoothed, and listened. They droned on, not caring whether she was there or not.

She checked the combs for disease and mites, found the queens and counted the eggs. She tasted a little of the honey on her fingertip. The bees came and went like snatches of conversation. She brushed them from her ears, her hair, the backs of her hands. One of them stung her knuckle and she just nodded.

'I know, I know,' she said. 'Keep your hair on.'

She replaced the roof of the last hive and went up the garden to the house, following the path past the willows, magnolias, rhododendrons. The hydrangeas had started to bloom, their flowers round and heavy like fruit. In the shadow of the house she went to her sister's little vegetable patch and picked rhubarb and blueberries and put them in the pocket of her apron. When she passed the pond she got to her knees and dipped her swollen finger in the water.

She trailed her hand back and forth among the weeds, noticed, with surprise, the tightness in her brow.

Had she moved the hive, and forgotten? She knew her memory was not what it had once been. She was out of practice, remembering. There was no reason to remember anything, not really, not any more – except when to water the plants, when to refresh the soil, when to check on the bees.

Perhaps Lily had moved it?

No. The hives weren't Lily's responsibility. They always laughed about how scared she was of the bees. And with Lily's joints the way they were she was in no fit state to be hauling heavy wooden boxes around.

Evelyn's hand was numb now, and turning white. The sun had gone behind the vast battlements of the house, the jagged shadow of its many gables and chimneys creeping almost beyond the edge of the lawn. She shivered and flexed her fingers and went inside.

Lily was in the kitchen, chopping potatoes in almost total darkness. Their old wind-up lamp lit half of her face, the edge of the knife, the pale yellow skins she'd discarded on the work surface. She was wearing their mother's ballgown and she shimmered like some black and bony fish raised from the deep. Behind her, the rest of the room seemed to go on for miles. It was kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom to both of them, and still felt too large. The darkness echoed each time Lily's knife struck the wooden board.

'Hello,' said Evelyn.

Lily turned and smiled. Evelyn went to her, held her, laid her head in the warm curve of her sister's neck and shoulder. She heard Lily's blood humming inside her, like the bees in the beehive.

'Your rhubarb is looking magnificent,' she said, taking the red stalks from her apron.

'You sound surprised,' said Lily. 'I am not completely clueless, you know.'

‘Blueberries are on the way, too. A bit sharp.’

Lily nodded and turned back to her potatoes. She cut a few more slices, then said, without looking up: ‘What’s the matter?’

Of course she’d noticed. She would have felt Evelyn’s discomfort before she even entered the house – had registered the slight change in the rhythm of her footfall, the tightness of her breath. She tucked a strand of long silver hair behind one ear, as if to hear Evelyn better.

‘Did you move one of the beehives?’

‘Me?’

‘One of them’s moved.’

Lily laughed and scraped the potatoes into a dish.

‘Oh yes, your little sister up to her old mischief. I hid all the honey, too, so I can guzzle it when you’re not looking.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course not! I wouldn’t touch those things with a barge pole.’

‘So you didn’t move it.’

‘I’m surprised you suddenly think me so capable.’

‘Then who did?’

‘You probably did.’

‘I didn’t.’

Lily shrugged. ‘You must have.’

And that was that.

Evelyn watched her sister hobble over to the stove and arrange the tinder. She fumbled with the flints for a moment, dropped them, cursed. Evelyn joined her and helped to rake through the cinders. She found the flints and began to strike them herself.

'I can do it,' said Lily. As if they were children still and Evelyn was offering to help her with a jigsaw or a drawing.

Lily snatched the flints back and tried again. Her hands shaking. The light from the wind-up lamp showed every line and knot on her long fingers. They were far more graceful than Evelyn's, or at least they had been. A pianist's hands. A magician's. They were too good to spend their days thrust in the soil, but, even so, they had conjured miracles from it. Now they were shaking.

We are old, thought Evelyn, without contemplating much beyond that simple fact.

The matter of the beehive wasn't mentioned again. Of course, Lily was right. It must have been Evelyn who had moved it, because there was simply no other explanation. She'd moved it and forgotten. It had been silly to imagine anything different.

When the fire was lit they had to wait some time for the stove to heat. It was a monumental thing – two hobs and four doors, all in cast iron. They had run out of coal a long time ago and heating it with wood required hours of attention and the temperature was wildly inconsistent.

They fried the potatoes with onions and herbs and ate them under a blanket, straight from the pan.

'We should have got something from the icehouse. For a treat.'

'You'd eat nothing but treats if you could.'

'Guilty as charged.' Lily shovelled another mouthful. 'Well? It's not too late.'

'It is too late. It's nearly your bedtime.'

'It's nearly *your* bedtime.'

They fell to eating again.

Evelyn had not visited the icehouse for some time. It was a few moments' walk from the kitchen, a brick dome cool enough for curing and keeping meat all year round, but she wasn't sure its contents were getting better with age. What did? They hadn't added to their meat store since their mother had gone, and she was the only one who knew how to preserve things properly. Some of the stuff down there was positively ancient, but Evelyn and Lily still occasionally cut off the leathery strips and chewed at them like dogs. When the seasons conspired against them and the garden was barren it was almost all they ate.

Lily finished first and licked her fingers.

'Do you remember Mama's bacon and beans?' she said.

'I think so. No idea what the recipe was.'

'I suppose I could work it out. Dessert?'

'Always room for dessert.'

Lily got up to check on the rhubarb, which they'd left stewing on the hob. It was freezing outside the blanket. She prodded at the pot, tasted a little from the end of the spoon and added some more honey from their stores. She brought back two bowls, and they both ate it too quickly, 'hoohing' and 'hahing' and frantically sucking in air to soothe their scalded tongues. They laughed. It didn't stop either of them going back for seconds.

They curled up under the covers in warm, comfortable silence. Lily was snoring before the embers had gone cold, but Evelyn continued to stare into the darkness for a long while afterwards, thinking. Her finger was still gently throbbing from where she'd been stung. Outside, the garden sang into the night.

Chapter 2

Evelyn was up at sunrise to collect eggs. She left Lily under her heap of blankets and went barefoot around the great western wing of the house and the ruins of the sunroom. The chickens were already awake and waiting to be let out. Just three hens now, and an elderly rooster, in the same coops that had stood there for decades. Their father had built the wooden hutches to last and it seemed they were destined to outlive the chickens' entire lineage. They'd had no chicks for a long time.

She let the hens out and they came down the little wooden ramp and clucked and pecked at the ground uncertainly, every morning exercising the same caution, as if encountering the world for the first time. She left them prowling through the grass and opened the back of the hutch. There were two eggs hidden in the straw, one each for her and her sister. They felt like a pair of large, sun-warmed pebbles in the palms of her hands. She put them into the front pocket of her nightdress and looked up into the cold blue haze and there found most of a full moon hanging where she had not expected to see one. She'd forgotten where the month had got to. She stood and thought, counting the days and nights on her fingers, then went inside.

Back in the kitchen Lily was still asleep. She always rose later then Evelyn. Evelyn didn't particularly mind. It seemed as much Lily's duty to sleep in as it was Evelyn's to collect the eggs.

She stepped quietly over her younger sister and crossed the kitchen floor, the soles of her feet numb from the dew. She placed the eggs carefully in the cast-iron egg tree and then came back to the dresser and opened the topmost drawer. She took out the almanac and laid it open on the table.

'You're back early.'

Evelyn turned. Lily was sitting up like one of the hens in her nest of blankets.

'I'm just checking something.'

'Checking? Now there's something I never thought I'd hear. First the beehive, now this. You losing your marbles, Evie?'

Evelyn smiled but said nothing and turned back to the pages spread on the tabletop.

The almanac was their mother's work, a large ring-bound diary whose damp and wadded pages contained all that she knew, and all that she had instructed her daughters to know. There was not half an inch of blank paper between its covers. The first dozen pages showed a bird's-eye view of the house and the gardens, front and back, with plans of the plots and the beds. At the back was an appendix of recipes and remedies that could be made from the things they grew, a kind of apothecary's miscellany. In between, the lion's share of the almanac was given over to timetables for planting and growing and harvesting. Sections headed 'spring', 'summer', 'autumn', 'winter', though these meant little nowadays. The garden kept its own seasons. Each new year seemed overlayed rather than joined consecutively, a jumble of cycles within cycles. It was not unusual for Evelyn to be digging potatoes out of earth that was scattered with apple blossom.

She turned a few of the pages and traced a finger over the minuscule writing. The words had been etched deeply into the paper and were covered with a thin patina of dust, giving each page the appearance of some ancient stone tablet. She found the section headed 'autumn, first moon, gibbous, waxing', flattened the almanac, compared her mother's list to the list she held in her head. There was more to do than she had thought.

'I thought that thing was useless, anyway,' said Lily.

Evelyn felt the slightest shiver of indignation on their mother's behalf.

'Not useless. It's just a little out of step.'

‘What is it today then?’

‘Brassicas. Onions and garlic. More beans.’

‘More beans? I feel like I should have some say in this since I’m the one doing the cooking.’

‘They’re good for the soil.’

Lily didn’t reply, but Evelyn knew she was rolling her eyes.

‘I think the roses need deadheading.’

‘Oh! I’ll deadhead the roses.’

‘Mama doesn’t mention it, though.’

‘So?’

‘So maybe we shouldn’t.’

Lily got up from her blankets with a groan and came and put her arms around Evelyn’s waist. She pressed her chest against the back of Evelyn’s ribs, and Evelyn felt her sister’s heart beating through her thin bird-bones.

Lily peered over her shoulder and said, ‘I don’t know why you don’t just give up on that and write a new one.’

It was not the first time she had said it, not even the hundredth time, but the suggestion still seemed a wild one. Of course the almanac couldn’t be replaced. Evelyn wouldn’t know where to start. Besides, they had no more paper and their one pencil belonged to Lily, and Lily didn’t like to part with it. It was little more than a nub now, and writing anything so extensive would wear it down to nothing.

‘I’ll ask Mama about it,’ said Evelyn. ‘Later.’

Lily went to the back of the kitchen to make their porridge. Evelyn closed the almanac and looked at the cover for a moment. It was curled and liver-spotted and showed another timetable, a

daily schedule that did not shift beneath their feet as the seasons did. Lunchtime, teatime, bathtime, bedtime. Beside each entry were numbers that seemed to refer only to themselves rather than any objective measurement of minutes and hours. The handwriting was larger but still recognizably their mother's, the words more forcefully imposed, somehow, than the almanac's contents.

'Oh dear,' said Lily, from back in the darkness.

Evelyn put the almanac back in the drawer and looked over at her.

'What's oh dear?'

'Just two eggs today?'

'Better than yesterday.'

'Not much. How are the old girls?'

'Fine. Bad-tempered.'

'Wouldn't you be? Having to live with that cockerel.'

The remark was more a ritual than a joke, but they both laughed anyway.

Lily brought over their bowls of porridge and they ate it wordless and smiling. The kitchen door was ajar and a wedge of yellow sunlight fell across precisely half of the table. Birdsong and bristling leaves outside. Lily's jaw clicked when she ate and Evelyn liked the sound. She liked all the sounds of her sister's body. They were more in keeping with the other sounds they heard in the garden, she thought; much more so than speaking, which seemed to belong there less and less these days.

Lily pushed her bowl away and got up first, as if steeling herself for something.

'What will you do today?' said Evelyn.

‘I shall fetch the water,’ said Lily. ‘Then I shall wash the dishes. Then I shall go to the gazebo to practise my steps.’ She paused. ‘What about a game after lunch? We haven’t played a game for months. Not a proper game.’

Evelyn thought of her list of tasks.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘If I have time.’

Lily shrugged.

‘Well, I’ll play by myself if I must,’ she said. ‘Although I don’t know why you keep yourself quite so busy all the time.’

Lily always seemed surprised that there was work to do; had not twigged, after all these years, that work was all that there was.

Evelyn got up herself and squeezed her sister’s hand. She put on the same outfit she always wore – plaid shirt, jeans, holes at the elbows and knees and cinched in the middle with their mother’s cracked leather belt. She took the waxed jacket from the hook behind the door and put on her wellington boots and went out into a day that was, she thought tiredly, already well ahead of her.

Chapter 3

The sun was up and the garden was dazzling. Evelyn stood for a moment on the doorstep and closed her eyes. The skin on her brow softened like wax under a warm thumb. She went to the tool shed and took down the spade and the fork and the largest of the wicker baskets. In the basket she put a smaller bucket of chicken manure, a plant pot full of broken eggshells and a small paper packet of speckled beans and then set off for the beds at the bottom of the garden.

She took the long way around, to check all was still in order. She approached the beehives with some apprehension. She found them as she had left them the previous evening, the hive closest to the house a little skewed. She shouldered one side but it was too heavy for her to move alone, and again Lily's explanation seemed far from satisfactory.

From there she passed through the green shade of the orchard, inspecting the swelling clusters of apples. Many were already windfallen and were lying in the grass, brown and spongey underfoot. The faint sweetness of rot in the air. The day for wassailing had not even come and the harvest was already going to waste. She would have to consult their mother about that. The avenue of roses looked slightly better than she remembered, but there were fresh blooms inexplicably growing among others that were brown and limp. She would have to ask Mama about that, too. She wondered how she would take the news.

By the time Evelyn reached the bottom beds the sun was high and the garden exhaling in the heat. The wall was perhaps a hundred paces away but still she turned her back to it, just in case. She cleared the spinach of slugs, reprimanding them as she went, and scattered the soil with the broken eggshell to ward off their return. She heaved at the earth, plucked the weeds by the root, planted the beans in neat rows. Back to the tool shed, another handful of seeds, then on to the next

bed. She hardly looked up from her work, sweat running down the sides of her nose, the shirt clinging to her bones underneath the heavy waxed coat. Not as fast as she used to be, but no less dogged. A dull ache bloomed in her knees and elbows that she always assumed was early-morning stiffness but which never left her these days, however warm she got. In between forkfuls of earth she heard only her blood thumping, and occasionally, distantly, the sound of Lily practising her routine in the gazebo on the other side of the house.

She was glad to be working. When she was working she was not thinking.

At midday her sister came down to the bottom of the garden with a pot of black tea and lemon. She was still wearing the sequined ballgown, as well as an enormous sunhat and almost all of their mother's jewellery. She clinked like a chandelier when she walked, earlobes pulled so low that the earrings nearly rested on her shoulders.

Evelyn leaned on the fork. Lily smiled broadly and set the tray on the grass.

'Tea's up,' she said.

'How did it go today?' asked Evelyn.

'Coming together nicely,' said Lily.

'I don't suppose you're ever going to let me watch, are you?'

'Oh, I dare say. One of these days. It's not quite there yet.'

She perched on a stone by the edge of the vegetable plot and wiggled her toes. Then she looked up at Evelyn and pouted.

'Don't say it,' said Evelyn.

'I wish I had my shoes,' said Lily.

Evelyn didn't reply. Her sister had been lamenting the loss of her ballet shoes for as long as they had looked after the garden. She'd had them as a little girl and by now they would be far

too small, but Evelyn knew better than to remind Lily of that. Besides, the shoes were in the house along with everything else. And they never went into the rest of the house.

Lily sighed and bent over the teapot. She poured two cups and said: 'A resounding victory against the slugs.'

'They gave as good as they got,' said Evelyn. 'I still haven't got the slime off me.'

She scrubbed her palm against her hip.

'How's the soil?'

'Heavy. I did my best. The beans are in, at least.'

'Well, hurrah for that.'

They drank their tea and then lay side by side on the hot lawn and watched the sky. Evelyn listened to the insects and the birds and the slow creak of things growing. She tried to make a list of all the things that she had to do: tasks left over from the day before, tasks yet to come, tasks that, according to the almanac, she wasn't supposed to be doing at all but which were upon her nonetheless. She thought of the chickens and the roses and the apples already turning to mulch in the orchard. She thought about the beehive and tried to forget it but couldn't. Eventually Lily squeezed her hand and rolled over and got slowly to her feet.

'So, then,' she said. 'Are we playing a game, or aren't we?'

'Now?' said Evelyn. She propped herself on an elbow. 'I'm not halfway done here.'

'It's too hot for work,' said Lily. 'Even Mama would say that.'

That was not true, but Evelyn humoured her.

'What would you like to play?'

'I don't know.'

'I fixed the croquet hammer.'

‘No, not croquet. I need to use my body. Hide and seek.’

Evelyn looked at where she’d stuck the fork in the ground. There was so much to do and Lily could happily make these games last for hours.

‘We’ll play hide and seek as long as you help me with the watering afterwards.’

‘Deal.’

Lily stuck out her hand, fingers covered with their mother’s rings almost to their tips. Evelyn shook it.

‘You’d better take all of that off or you’ll be ever so easy to find,’ said Evelyn, gesturing at the jewellery.

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ said Lily, already unhooking the earrings and the necklaces and placing them one by one on the tea tray. She threw off the hat, too, and tied her long hair up in a grey bun so tight it looked like the whorl of a tree trunk. She stood to attention in front of Evelyn.

‘What am I counting to?’ said Evelyn.

‘One hundred. And face the wall.’

‘I won’t face the wall. But I’ll put my hands over my eyes.’

‘You’ll look. You always look.’

‘I promise I won’t.’

‘Fine. And don’t count too fast.’

Evelyn placed her muddy hands over her eyes and started to count out loud. She listened to her sister’s footsteps recede over the grass and then opened her fingers slightly. She watched her go up the garden path. Always the same – Lily’s gleeful hobble to the back of the house, Evelyn’s terror at the thought that this time would be different, this time she would hide somewhere new and Evelyn would not be able to find her. She counted a little quicker, skipped the numbers from ninety to one hundred, announced she was coming.

A Party

Her sister had hidden in the attic once and hours had passed before anyone noticed she was missing. They were both very small at the time. She eventually found her wandering the landing wearing only one shoe, her face red and glazed with tears and snot. She held her little white sock balled up in one fist. On her bare foot, a single pink welt that blinked in time with her pulse.

What happened? Evelyn asked, but her sister just cried and shuddered.

Evelyn took her hand and led her downstairs to look for Mama. There was a party going on in the drawing room. Guests drifting quietly and stiffly through the vast space like souls in some dark limbo. A stale smell of wine and old-fashioned perfume. Beyond the bay window dozens of cars were pulled up in rows and glinting in the house's floodlights.

She could see her father in the centre of the room, lit dimly by the chandelier. He was talking seriously with a woman who was not their mother and Evelyn knew better than to interrupt. A few of the guests noticed her and her sister but they only scowled or smiled encouragingly.

Mama was in the kitchen, perched on a stool and wearing a thick woollen jumper over her eveningwear. She was gossiping with the staff and eating canapés from a tray that had come back half finished. When she saw Lily she leapt up and pulled them both to her.

Oh, love, she said. Little love. What happened?

It's her foot, said Evelyn.

Let's see. Oh, Lils. Did something sting you?

Lily nodded.

What was it?

Lily just shook her head.

She was in the attic, said Evelyn.

Why?

We were hiding.

Hiding from what?

Each other.

Where's your father?

Upstairs.

Their mother paused and then took Lily and lifted her up on to the worksurface, Lily's skinny legs dangling over the edge. She went to the other side of the kitchen and rummaged in a wicker basket and came back holding a bulb of garlic. She plucked out a clove and crushed it with the flat of a knife and peeled away the skin. She began to rub it into the sting.

Here, she said. My mummy used to use this. Good as anything from a tube.

Their father appeared in the door to the kitchen. His body seemed almost too large for it, as if he might end up wedged in the frame if he tried to come through. A teenager with a tray of champagne flutes took a step back and imperceptibly bowed.

Oh dear, their father said. Have you been in the wars, Lily-bear?

She was in the attic, said Mama.

Well. That was very intrepid of you.

There are wasps' nests up there. They're there all year round now.

There was a general pause in the kitchen.

They got you, did they?

Yes, said their mother, straightening up. They got her.

Bad luck.

Weren't you watching them?

No, their father said.

Why not?

I was in the drawing room.

Yes, and they were meant to be in the drawing room with you.

I can't watch them and talk to the guests all at the same time.

The room seemed to darken and contract somehow. The staff slowed in their tasks to listen.

Yes, of course, their mother said. Heaven forbid you neglect your guests.

She snatched her glass by the stem and the wine slopped over the rim and on to the worksurface. She pushed past him to the back door. Their father looked at her and then at the rest of the staff. They became conspicuously busy. He turned back to Evelyn and Lily, rolled his eyes and gave a smile that disappeared very quickly.

Mummy's a bit squiffy, I think. How's the old foot?

Lily peered at it and wiggled her toes.

Hope you swatted the little bugger. What's that you've rubbed on it?

Lily held out her hand to show him the crushed garlic clove.

Golly. I'm not sure that'll make you any friends smelling like that. Come on, Lily-bear, I'm sure we've got a cream somewhere.

He lifted her off the worksurface and hefted her on to his shoulders. She started laughing as he carried her out of the kitchen. Evelyn watched them go and then turned to look out of the opposite door, where their mother was standing on the gravel, holding one elbow to herself, her wineglass raised to the moonlight. The evening air was very warm and carried with it scents of jasmine and thyme from the herb garden. Evelyn sat for a few moments and listened to the gleeful muttering of the kitchen staff and then went to join her. They stood in silence for a moment.

That man, said her mother, not to Evelyn but to the world at large. At the time Evelyn did not even realize which man she meant.

Chapter 4

By now there were only four or five places where Lily liked to hide. She was too old and too stiff to get into the tighter spots she had once favoured. Evelyn still tried to take her time, though, knowing that her sister would be disappointed if the game was over too quickly.

She set off up the lawn and looked in the tool shed and in the back seat of the ruined car. She looked around the sunroom. She looked in the stand of silver birch trees behind it, Lily's figurines spinning slowly on their filaments and glistening blackly with the bodies of ants. She looked in the icehouse, even though she knew Lily was as frightened of this as she was of the bees and had never hidden there in her life. It was better to be sure.

She rounded the west wing to the back of the house. Here the garden was wilder. Lily thought of it as her domain, but it was really Evelyn's, like everything else was, and the wildness only persisted because Evelyn allowed it to. Here there were older and taller trees, and the grass was longer and scattered with wildflowers that even their mother had not found the names for. It was divided by a narrow black lake, the gazebo standing slanted on an island in the middle and connected to the bank by a wooden bridge. Lily once said she'd seen something that looked like an eel in those dark waters, a monster ten feet long with yellow eyes like dinner plates, and Evelyn had never been able to tell if her sister was joking or not.

She skirted the edge of the lake and searched the grotto and the rockery. Nothing. She searched the pampas grass and found broken stems and feathery heads trodden in the dirt. She hollered her sister's name and said, 'Found you!', as if by saying it she could make it so, but Lily did not appear.

Evelyn made another lap of the lake then crossed the bridge to the gazebo and sat on the little bench. The boards were scuffed and dented from Lily's heels. A few stray sequins scattered there, along with a pile of discarded dresses and leotards and one inexplicable fur coat. The garden felt very quiet. In the silence she caught a glimpse of what it might be like to live there alone, and she shivered in her bones.

Something fluttered in one of the windows of the house and she looked up. She could not be sure where she had seen it. She surveyed the west wing, east wing, attic, chapel, sunroom. The house spanned the horizon like a mountain range, vast and silent. A stately home, Mama had sometimes called it, though there was nothing stately about it these days. There was hardly a square foot of brickwork that was not concealed by ivy and roses and clematis, so that now the house was more a feature of the garden than the other way around. Her mother had always wanted it that way. Would happily have seen it consumed entirely, Evelyn thought.

She saw it again. Something moving between the branches that covered one of the second-floor windows. A flicker of daylight, off and on again, as though someone were pacing around behind the window frame.

Relief was quickly overlaid with panic. How had Lily even got up there? Everywhere was locked or boarded up and always had been. Their mother forbade them from even thinking about exploring the countless halls and rooms that made up the rest of the house. There were black and poisonous things in there that were best left undisturbed. Admittedly it was only Evelyn who still followed Mama's instructions to the letter, but even Lily had never shown an inclination to go beyond the bounds of the kitchen.

Evelyn went quickly back to the kitchen, hitching her belt up around her hips. Her ankles rattled and chafed in the wellington boots. She shooed the chickens on her way and came inside without wiping her feet.

'Lily?' she called.

The house answered with a distant, almost inaudible creak. How could Lily have been so stupid? Had she forgotten how dangerous it was? Ever the wayward little sister. Sometimes Evelyn thought that the handful of years between them, rather than dwindling to insignificance, yawned ever wider as they got older.

'Lily, please! Come out here right now!'

Again, there was no answer. She went into the depths of the kitchen and found the wardrobe squarely in front of the inner door, as it always had been. There was no other way into the rest of the house, unless Lily had somehow climbed through a window from the outside. Evelyn stumbled back towards the light, calling her sister's name, and when she reached the doorstep Lily leapt out in front of her.

'Boo!' she said.

Evelyn gripped her sister's shoulders and pulled her into the kitchen. There were leaves in her hair and mud on her knees.

'Where have you been?'

'Ouch! You're hurting me!'

'You stupid girl!'

'It was just a joke! For goodness' sake, Evie, what's got into you?'

'Have you been up in the house?'

‘Just now.’

‘No.’

‘You weren’t hiding behind one of the windows?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Then where were you?’

Lily looked proud of herself.

‘I moved around. I heard you coming and I *moved*. I was in the front garden, in the orchard, all this time.’

Evelyn went back to the inner door and listened at the wardrobe but heard nothing.

‘Wasn’t that clever of me?’ said Lily.

Evelyn ignored her and went back outside, around the green wreck of the car and beyond the chicken coops and looked up at the window she’d watched from the gazebo. Lily followed a few feet behind, talking all the way.

‘What is all this hollering about, Evie?’

‘I saw something,’ said Evelyn. She pointed at the window. ‘In there.’

Lily laughed.

‘And you thought it was me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Who else would it be?’

‘Any number of pigeons, for starters.’

‘It was bigger than a bird.’

Was it though? Evelyn struggled to remember exactly what it had looked like, why it had struck such panic in her.

'Some of those pigeons are very fat fellows. They eat more of our vegetables than we do.'

'It moved across like this.'

She waved her arms stiffly to demonstrate.

'Must have been a branch. Or the reflection of a branch. That's the window that's still got some glass, isn't it?'

'It was inside though.'

'Are you sure?'

Evelyn wasn't. She shook her head. She felt suddenly very tired, as if she and her old shirt were made of the same damp and flimsy material.

'Well,' said Lily. 'It wasn't me.'

A moment passed before Evelyn replied.

'I know. Of course it wasn't.'

'But don't give me any ideas.'

'What? No, Lily, you can't!'

'Oh, take a joke, Evie!'

Lily laughed and put a warm hand to Evelyn's cheek. Evelyn shivered. She looked at the window again. Maybe this was how it started. Maybe she was going to go the way of their mama, seeing and hearing things that weren't there, until she was no longer in the world at all. Poor Lily would have to care for her, as they'd had to care for their mother. She would have to care for the garden, too. And if she couldn't? If she wouldn't?

'Another round, then?' said Lily.

Evelyn looked back at her and blinked.

'What?'

'You can hide this time.'

'I don't want to hide. I want to get back to work.'

'But we barely played at all! And you didn't even find me.'

'No.'

'Please?'

Evelyn took a deep breath and tried to smile.

'You're a mithering little thing,' she said, fixing a loose strand from Lily's enormous bun. 'And you need a haircut.'

'Never!'

'You'll have pigeons nesting in *there* if you're not careful.'

Lily swatted her hand away.

'Stop it. Come on then. One more game.'

'Not today. I've got work to do. And you owe me some watering.'

'Well. You're no fun at all.' Lily removed the paintbrush that she had used to pin her hair and it tumbled down her back and shoulders. 'Show me, then.'

They linked arms and walked over the lawn. Evelyn took a last look at the window. There was nothing there, though she wondered, for the first time in an age, what might have been left inside the house when they abandoned it. What might have grown there in their absence.

A NOVEL

YOU ARE FATALLY INVITED

ANDE PLIEGO

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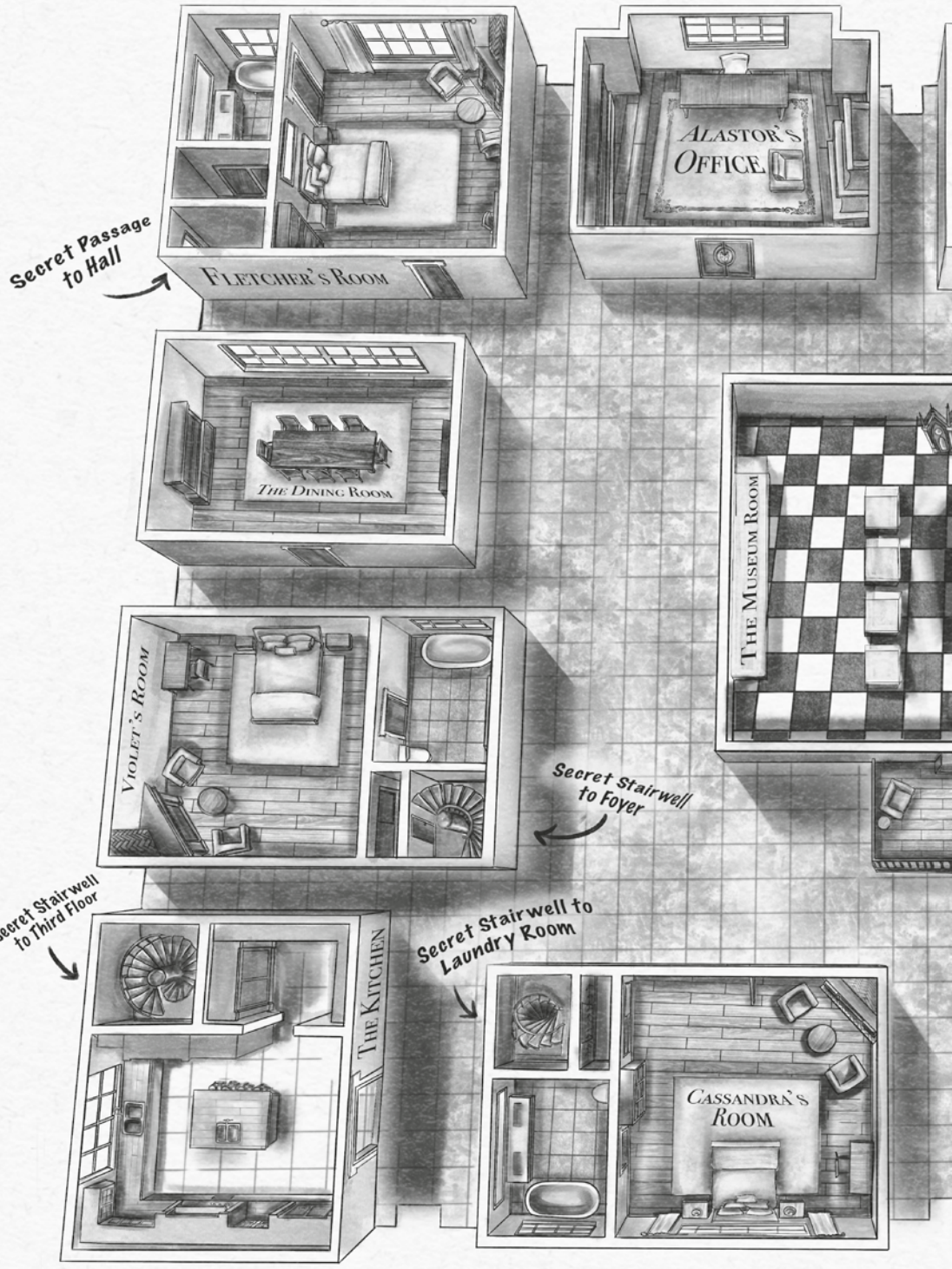
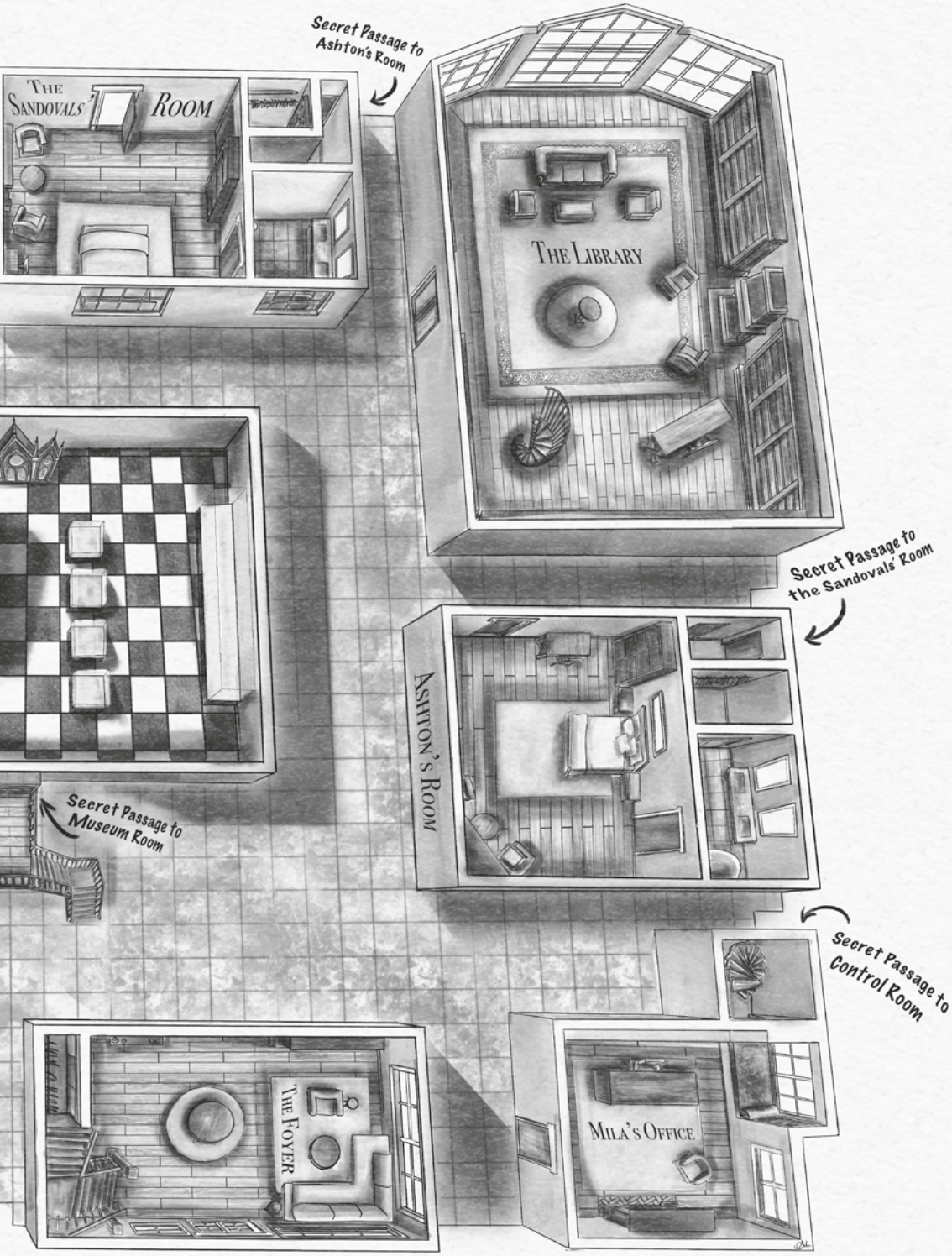
First Edition

There was only ever one choice for this book's dedication:
for my superstar agent and partner in (literary) crime,
Hannah Schofield, who always believed it was
only a matter of time.

And more broadly:
for those who know what it's like to want something so much,
they can taste the copper and salt of it on their tongues.
(So, you.)


Secret Passage to Hall
Fletcher's Room
Alastor's Office
The Dining Room
The Museum Room
Violet's Room
Secret Stairwell to Foyer
Secret Stairwell to Third Floor
The Kitchen
Secret Stairwell to Laundry Room
Cassandra's Room



Wolf Harbor Estate

An Excerpt from

The Ink in Your Veins: On Writing Fear

BY J. R. ALASTOR

INTRODUCTION

If you were to take Story, strap it down onto your dining room table, and slide a scalpel through its chest, you would find the lifeblood is *theme*. It causes Story's cold corpse to breathe, to reach through the sheets of dead trees and puncture your skin, fastening long, clawed fingers around your heart.

Let me ask you this: Why do we love the thrill? How on earth have my grisly books sold so many copies worldwide? (Abounding gratitude, by the way.) And why is *The Haunting of Hill House* still regarded as one of the greatest stories of all time?

My theory is that the monster in the house, the killer in the dark, reflects ourselves. That in reading about a house morphing into a twisted mirror of a young woman's soul, we feel as though we, too, have looked ourselves in the eye. Like the Greeks, who witnessed plays of great tragedy and comedy to experience the emotion, we, too, hunger for confrontation of our innermost secrets.

We've all done things in the dark, after all.

Only, also like the Greeks, we want this experience in a safe environment. We don't want to face ourselves, not really. We just want to feel like we have—to sample the sting of guilt, the relief of catharsis, and to move along as if nothing happened.

Writing is a kind of beautiful madness. It is slitting yourself open, bleeding your soul onto the page in that paradoxi-

cal mask of vulnerability perhaps only a writer can achieve. And writing fear requires the greatest vulnerability of all: a willingness to face your demons, and set them free.

But where do those demons come from, I wonder? Could they flow from a great burden, an unpardonable guilt, as so many of our protagonists shoulder?

I think perhaps each of you knows what I'm referring to. And if you don't—well. Over the course of this book, we shall all get rather well acquainted, shall we?

I'm dying to begin.

DAY ONE

THE DINNER PARTY

The Dinner Party (n.): wherein the characters are summoned to a secluded yet always opulent estate, usually by an enigmatic host who may or may not appear. Murder and mayhem inevitably follow.

—*The Ink in Your Veins: On Writing Fear,*
Index of Tropes

CHAPTER ONE

RODRIGO

I WAS PREPARED TO SELL MY SOUL FOR A ONE-WAY TICKET BACK to Spain, and I'd only been off the plane for three hours.

"Ro?" Olivia's cold fingers wound through mine, and I tore my gaze from the vein of dark cloud over the harbor. "What is it?"

I extracted my face from my scarf and grazed my mouth against hers. "Nada, *mi vida*."

I glanced down the dock, the graying planks warped with age. The stalks of a dozen derelict sailboats poked at the Maine sky like toothpicks, the small ferry bobbing next to us pristine by contrast. The sun was a shameless lie, having burned off most of the fog, but I still couldn't see Wolf Harbor Island over the horizon.

Olivia attempted to unsequester my hand from my jacket pocket, her cheeks wind whipped. "You're still on edge."

"My face is freezing."

"That's the only part of you I can see."

"Which is why my face is freezing."

A divot appeared between her eyebrows that I wanted to smooth away with my thumb. "Look, I know you're—"

"A suspicious bastard?"

"Beautifully put, love, but I was going to say 'nervous.' Trust me, Alastor does not have some devious scheme to land us in a courtroom and ruin our lives." She flared her eyes comically, and I felt the corner of my mouth lift against my will. "The NDA has to be just a formality. How else is an anonymous author supposed to make sure we won't let his identity slip?"

My leather necklace constricted around my neck. If only the NDA was what I was worried about.

"I'm sure you're right," I lied, sliding my arm around her shoulders. But a decade in courtrooms had instructed me that anyone was capable of anything—including celebrities, including authors. Including myself. What on earth had possessed me to think coming was a good idea?

"Fashionably early, are we?" The pitiless wind carried Fletcher's words to us, his British accent threading through them from down the dock, and the tension in my neck eased a little. His herringbone suit hugged his broad shoulders, and his hair was combed and gelled within an inch of its life. Just the way he'd looked the last time we'd gone out for drinks. Had it really been a year ago? "Hello, lovebirds."

Dread soured my relief at finally seeing my friend, who my wife was convinced was not my friend. But *finalmente,* we might get some answers about the secretive nature of this retreat.

I raised my arms affably. "Fletch."

"Been a long time, hasn't it?" We embraced, Fletcher's hand clapping my shoulder. He dipped his head to my wife. "Olivia, darling, lovely as always."

"Fletcher." Olivia knotted her pale mane around one hand to keep it tamed, her smile not reaching her eyes.

Fletcher's teeth flashed in a grin. "What a week this'll be, eh?"

"Did Alastor tell you anything?" I asked. "Particularly concerning the NDA? It's a little odd for a writers' retreat, no?"

His expression turned sly. "Unfortunately, my lips are sealed."

A growl curled in my throat. "Yes, we know you know more than we do. Can we skip to the part where you're helpful?"

"I don't think it's odd," Olivia said to me, amicably rehashing the last five months of speculation. "I mean, this is a huge deal—Alastor's first in-person event in his entire career of nearly thirty years. It totally makes sense for keeping his identity a secret. Which honestly makes me think the rumors are true, and it's not J. R. Alastor the original, but his son who's taken over writing in his name."

"*Olivia.*" I dragged her name out with my thickest Spanish accent, shaking my head with a smile. "That was one interview ages ago where Alastor mentioned having a child—"

"Or the NDA could also be because we're going to get a sneak peek of his next book," Olivia said, eyes glittering like the harbor. "Perhaps Alastor wants to work on it with us."

Fletcher snorted. "How the devil would you plebeians workshop a J. R. Alastor book? Only Ashton Carter'd be dumb enough to try, and we'd all be given the boot for letting him."

"I heard that," a voice called up the dock, and I flinched, turning toward it. A man in his late twenties or early thirties strode toward us, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, a laptop bag slung over his shoulder—Ashton Carter, a Chinese American author whose paranormal thriller appeared in every one of Olivia's book box subscriptions; we must have had three or four copies of his book.

"Speak of the devil," Fletcher said, raising his voice with a wry smile. "Carter, you fool, this is a retreat for *writers*. How on earth did you procure an invitation?"

"Charming as always, Fletch." Carter stuck out a hand to me with a grin. "Ashton Carter, *writer,* surprisingly."

"A pleasure. Rodrigo Sandoval."

"Carter here bribed himself onto an author panel with me last spring," Fletcher announced cheerfully.

"Hey now," Carter objected. "I was not the one the moderator asked to chill out."

"Now that's a story I'd love to hear," Olivia said, mouth curving as she held her hand out. "Olivia. I'm afraid I haven't read your book yet, but it'll be my reward when Ro and I finish this draft."

Between the two of us we'd tried to get through everyone's books before the retreat, but I'd rather endure the seventh edition of *The Literary Lawyer's Handbook on Copyrights, Trademarks, and Contracts in Publishing and Entertainment* again than another thirty pages of Ashton's. Something about the paranormal and haunted lost me every time.

"I'd be honored," Carter said, dipping his head.

"All right, let's see it." Fletcher flapped a hand at Carter. "Your invitation? I'll believe you were invited only when I see your name at the top, not a moment before."

Carter rolled his eyes but popped open his bag and rummaged inside. "I was actually thinking we could all compare, see if we got the same invite, or if Alastor hid, like, a clue or something in one of them."

"Oh, a clue," Fletcher said with false revelation. "What are you, a child?" He plucked a severely folded envelope from Carter's fingers, the paper a familiar matte black with a gold wax seal shaped like a skull. His nose curdled as he read the gold cursive words aloud. "'Dear Mr. Carter.' Rodrigo, Olivia, I do believe we are witnessing an anomaly. Either that, or a lapse in J.R.'s cognitive function."

Olivia had already taken out our invitation—preserved like a piece of evidence within a small manila folder, the envelope neatly slit with the letter opener she'd given me for my birthday last year—and she held it up next to Carter's, her eyes flicking to mine with a glint of excitement that, yes, I mirrored.

Dear Mr. Carter,

It would do me a great honor to have you join me at Wolf Harbor Estate in Maine for a themed writers' retreat during the last week of October.

I make it my business to be "in the know" about what thriller/horror is doing these days, and IT SWALLOWS US WHOLE rightfully snagged my eye. I think you have something unique here, something visceral, and I'm on the proverbial edge of my seat for your next book. Dare I say, it's one of my most anticipated reads.

My hope is that this little retreat will provide an opportunity for you to write, engage with other rising and established stars in your field, and provoke the Muse into speaking with you through nightly mystery dinners. You'll have a killer time, I assure you.

Please RSVP to the number below. My personal assistant, Mila, will see to the details, including sending over an NDA for your review—for my anonymity's sake, you understand.

Would you join me? I hope you will.

Yours fatally,
J. R. Alastor

"It's basically the same," Olivia murmured. "Except our names, and what he said about our books."

"Still doesn't really explain much, though." I watched a wave break over the dock onto our feet, salty water beading on my leather shoes. "Why would Alastor engage with the world now, after thirty years of obscurity?"

"Clearly he had a sudden abounding adoration for Carter's pamphlet and simply had to arrange an introduction," Fletcher said blandly.

Carter sighed. "No one believes in me like you do, Fletch."

"Perhaps he's lonely," Olivia offered. "After so many years of no book signings—"

"I have a signed book," Carter said, finger in the air. "*Sever the Name*. First edition."

"With the original cover?" Fletcher asked, frowning. "The dodgy confessional thing? Even I don't have that edition. Next you'll be saying you were the tosser at Christie's last year who swiped the phonograph used in the film adaptation of *Our Graven Bones,* hmm?"

"Not sure what Christie's is, but you have no idea how much I wish that'd been me," Carter told him, then had the grace to look abashed. "Sorry, Olivia. You were saying, about book signings?"

"Okay, so you can get signed books from certain stores," Olivia conceded, "but Alastor's never done any in-person events, launch parties, face-to-face interviews, nada."

I hid a smile; she'd slowly adopted some of my Spanish phrases.

"I'm just saying," she continued, "when you're at the top of the food chain, and no one knows who you are . . . I'm sure it's pretty

isolating. We just happen to be the lucky few he read recently and liked."

I chucked her chin with my knuckle. "I'm concerned it's more than a little loneliness, *mi reina*."

She cocked an eyebrow, wagging her head as she said, "Then you can ask him when we get there."

"Speaking of which," Carter said, eyeing the ferry, the choppy waves sloshing against the dock, "little small for the six of us, plus luggage?"

"Not a fan of boats, are we?" Fletcher seemed delighted.

"Water, more like." Then, spotting the gruff-faced captain, "Is that Alastor?"

"Hardly. You'll know when we see him."

"Oh, you've met?"

"If you must know, Alastor invited me personally before the letters went out." Fletcher flicked the sleeve of his blazer back, and perhaps his smile was a bit patronizing. "But yes, to condense a long history, we've met."

"Wow." Carter stuck out his lower lip, his face creasing with a hidden smile. "I didn't know Alastor took on charity cases."

"You're here, aren't you?"

"If I remember right," Olivia interjected, "Ashton was an instant number-one *New York Times* bestseller, weren't you?"

I winced. Fletcher's book had reached number nine, well below Carter's, and I doubted he relished the reminder.

A rhythmic thud emanated from the boards beneath my shoes. Footsteps.

The back of my neck prickled as my gaze fell over Olivia's shoulder. Two women came down the dock toward us, and one of them locked eyes with me. My throat grew taut.

"Cassandra," Olivia called, breaking away from me. "I don't know if you remember me. I'm—"

"But of course!" the older woman exclaimed, hands fluttering, her cloister of bracelets chiming. "The workshop in San Fran, how could I forget? I take credit for your career, you know. Pride doesn't even *begin* to describe how I feel."

Smile fixed in place, I held out a hand as Olivia introduced me.

I was about to be confined to an island with my wife, my former friend who shared a mutual dislike with my wife, and several strangers to witness the tension. Not to mention our anonymous host, whose books I'd worshipped most of my adult life—which might've been exciting if he hadn't *also* invited someone else from my past. One of the only people who could single-handedly destroy me.

Cielos. I should've told Olivia the truth when I had the chance.

CHAPTER TWO

MILA

The salt-soaked wind slashed at my hair, late-October fog seeping through my coat. The water slapped at the pristine white dock, and I rocked up on the toes of my heeled boots to squint at the small ferry parting the harbor like a scalpel, heading toward me.

The guests spilled out of the boat's cabin, heads swiveling in appreciation of the crimson leaves robing the trees, the tendrils of mist still curling over the island's jagged shoreline. And at the sight of them, a thrill slithered down my spine.

After years of seeing their faces in the back of their books, they were finally here.

In my hands.

The ferry's engines lowered to a growl as the captain unlashed the bowline and tossed it to me.

"Welcome to Wolf Harbor Island," I called, slipping the knot over the cleat on the white railing. My breath was a ghost in the chill, there and then gone. "My name is Mila del Angél, and I'll be taking care of you on behalf of your host."

The guests murmured thank-yous as I helped them up onto the dock, welcoming each of them by name as they craned their necks back toward the island's pebbled beach, the cliff looming above us.

"Where is the fellow?" asked a tall British man in a gray suit jacket, peering past me to the stone steps carving up the hill—the great Thomas Fletcher, whose slow-burning literary mystery took both sides of the Atlantic by storm. "He said he'd be here to welcome us."

Did he now? "I'm sorry to say Mr. Alastor has been delayed. In the meantime, your luggage will be brought up, and there are refreshments at the house." I pivoted on one heel, the heavy skirt of my black dress slapping against my thighs.

My gaze caught on the sky. A minute ago the sun had cut into my eyes, but now clouds descended, full and dark like a heavy stage curtain.

"He must've been delayed," Fletcher repeated to the others, as if I hadn't said anything. "I don't have reception out here, probably missed his call."

A shiver raked over my skin. The temperature had dropped, too, and tonight's welcome dinner was supposed to be on the beach.

No matter. This was my stage, my play. Nothing would go wrong this week; I'd obsessed over it for far too long.

After so many years, you were mine.

Crows fretted above us as we climbed wide steps of smooth rock, and I chatted idly about the island—the six miles of pine and oak forest, the beach on the south side, the boathouse. The anonymous author who went by J. R. Alastor had bought the island a year ago from an actress who'd trashed it; the mansion and grounds had gone through extensive renovations, and now, the media called it the height of luxury.

Not that any journalists had ever actually been here.

Funny how Alastor shelled out unthinkable amounts of cash just to stay anonymous, while I'd willingly made a deal with the devil so that you would remember my name.

"It's all fun and games till a storm hits," deadpanned Violet Blake, flicking her hair out of large, heavily lined eyes. The youngest at twenty-four, she'd lightened her dark hair to a burgundy wine and chopped her bangs herself earlier this year, if anything claimed on social media could be trusted.

Dramatic hair decisions were rarely without catalyst, and I couldn't help but wonder what hers had been.

"There's quite a bit of wind," I said cheerfully, ignoring the sky, dark and textured like smoke against the flame-colored leaves. "But we have a generator, a boat for emergencies, and a landline that routes directly to the mainland."

As I spoke, I was painfully aware of the source of the footsteps at my left elbow: Ashton Carter, author of a young adult paranormal thriller that had ripped my soul out through my rib cage last year. It'd be better for all of us if I pretended he was anyone else.

The canopy of trees gave way to the house on the hill. It still took my breath away, every time.

"Oh, *magnificent*," exclaimed Cassandra Hutchinson as she clapped, bracelets ringing like wind chimes. The oldest of the group, in her early seventies and on her third husband, she was a rotund woman with fluffy garnet-dyed hair she probably wore in rollers at night.

If the rumors about her were true, it wasn't all that surprising she'd gotten on Alastor's radar.

The barest shroud of fog clung to the freshly cut lawn, and from the hill's crest, the four-story colonial manor rose in tiers. The clapboard siding was a rich brown, with white trim lining the massive windows, and the stone steps we climbed led up to an expansive porch braced by round columns.

I guided the authors through the double doors, and a luscious scent wafted over us from the kitchen: Curt's apple cider, tinged with clove and nutmeg. The main foyer was a coastal combination of white wainscoting and polished wood, red to rival the autumn leaves outside. A spotless cream couch lounged beneath a long window, a minimalist gold chandelier suspended above us.

Cassandra gave a throaty squeal and rushed to the built-in bookcase. "Look! It's our books!"

Not only the hardbacks, but also paperback releases and international editions of every single one, tidily lined up by author, language, and then height. It had taken me two and a half months of ordering from ancient secondhand bookstores to find them all—apparently hardcovers went out of print when the paperbacks released, usually a year afterward (who knew?)—but the last one

had finally arrived this past week. I'd spent an afternoon arranging them with Curt's obnoxious emo pop music blaring from the kitchen down the hall.

"Cheeky," Fletcher said, prowling over. "Mildly disturbing. But then that is in character for J.R., isn't it?"

"Oh *Tim,* don't be such a cynic, *I* think it's delightful." Cassandra swatted his shoulder with a hardback of *The Santorini Scandal,* her bachelorette-party-gone-wrong mystery—just about every domestic suspense author had one.

"It's Tom, actually, but Fletcher's fine. Oh, look," he sniffed to an unamused Ashton Carter, pointing at a narrow blue book. "He even found room for your pamphlet."

"My daughter would be head over *heels* for this," Cassandra murmured, flicking through another book. My throat tightened when I saw which one. "A hungry beast for literature, she was, even as a kid. My husband—Mr. Hutchinson the First—tried to get fresh air in her lungs, took her to parks, sent her to camp. She always disappeared with a book."

"I'd have been right there with her," Ashton said wistfully.

"There must be four shelves of Alastor's books," Rodrigo Sandoval commented to his wife, Olivia. His eyes were the palest shade of sky against his Mediterranean complexion, his black curls grazing the base of his neck, and with their overkill black and white snow coats, the couple reminded me of a salt-and-pepper set.

It was amusing, watching Rodrigo's can't-be-bothered avoidance of the other guests. They probably thought it was out of arrogance or self-centeredness.

He'd be the trickiest to handle.

Olivia gasped, snatching a black book off the shelf. "Ro, look. It's Alastor's book on writing. It's releasing next week. But it's *here*."

"Oh, I've read that," Fletcher said. "Bits, anyways. Alastor asked for my input."

I deserved an award for the neutral face I kept.

Cassandra padded over, her many-ringed fingers grabbing at the air. "Give me that, and no one gets hurt."

"Over my dead body," Olivia laughed, hugging the book to her chest.

"Don't tempt her," Fletcher advised. "Every one of us kills people for a living, remember?"

"No murder is necessary," I interjected with a smile. "Mr. Alastor has kindly provided copies for each of you in your rooms. A welcome gift."

Clasping Alastor's book to her chest, Olivia smiled up at her husband, and the softness in his eyes sent a little thrill through me.

I'd kept tabs on them all for the last several months, keeping track of their book tours and events and even the vacations they posted about on social media. But watching their little moments now felt like stepping into a book or show and interacting with the characters. It was exhilarating, seeing them take on a life of their own.

"You may of course make use of any area of the main house. However"—I lifted a hand to the doors at the top of the stairs, the dark wood carved with a wolf's head the size of a dinner plate—"Mr. Alastor's study is strictly off-limits." I let the words hover in the air, sink like burrs into their minds. They'd need to remember the study on day four.

Then I continued. "Some of you might've heard the rumors of certain icons from pop culture being bought, the latest of which was the famed axe from Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*. Well." I beamed. "I am pleased to share that Mr. Alastor has been acquiring artifacts from thriller and horror history for some time now, and he's delighted to have you as the first guests to lay eyes on his newly complete Museum Room."

"How divine," Cassandra cooed over the pleased murmurs. "I simply must get a glimpse."

"Well, that solves the mystery of my missing gramophone," Fletcher harped.

Their delight was infectious; even sullen Violet's eyes glowed.

"You're welcome to visit anytime," I said. "The mystery dinners will be every evening at six sharp. Tonight's welcome banquet is a formal affair, down at the beach."

"Sorry, when again did you say our host would arrive?" Ashton Carter asked.

"He hopes to join you for dinner," I said with a practiced pause, "depending on his business elsewhere."

"Business elsewhere," Cassandra said, perking up. "Indeed, may we know what this business is?"

Look at them, so desperate for even a scrap of information about their host. I smiled, tilting my head. "Provided he arrives shortly, I'm sure he'll be delighted to tell you about it over the exquisite meal our chef has planned."

Upstairs, my heels grazed the woven carpet as I directed the authors to their rooms, the hall lined with sprawling tall doors and canvas-printed photographs of the island.

"Thank you, Mila," Ashton said, meeting my gaze as he passed me, and my breath tripped.

He said my name. He may have only published the one book, but the emotion in those pages still haunted me. I ate through my library's copy in two nights, consumed by the story of two best friends torn apart by a possessed lake, and at three in the morning, with burning eyes, scrambled to my ancient laptop to hunt for a signed copy.

I never bought books new, if I could buy them at all. Event coordinating provided a decent income, but most of it had gone straight to my mother's medical bills. But for *It Swallows Us Whole,* I made an exception. It didn't help that I'd googled him and discovered the dimples and the fact that we were only a few months apart, closing out our twenties.

But I wasn't going to back out just because I liked one of the guests' books. I liked most of their books, actually. I'd given myself to our plan: my name on every work order for Wolf Harbor Estate's renovation, Alastor's credit card in my wallet, and his whispers of bringing you to justice sweet in my mind.

And besides. It wasn't like Alastor was the only one keeping secrets.

At the end of the hall, Ashton Carter glanced back, finding me with those dark eyes framed by ridiculously long eyelashes. I pasted

on a neutral smile and glanced away—but not before seeing a deep dimple reappear as he vanished into his room, and I cursed myself.

Idiot.

I couldn't afford to catch anyone's eye; this entire plan hinged on me being one with the wallpaper. Just a light fixture in the room.

The guests were opening their doors, cheerfully oblivious, exclaiming about the brick fireplaces and the garlands of lifelike fall leaves on the mantels. My chest swelled; this was finally happening. You weren't just names on the books dominating the tables at Barnes and Noble. You were all here. Living, breathing people. Here. As if you'd walked off the pages of a story.

And into mine.

SERIAL KILLER SUPPORT GROUP

A NOVEL

SARATOGA SCHAEFER

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And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

–Friedrich Nietzsche

Support Group Rules:

1. No outside contact.
2. No identifying information.
3. No in-fighting.
4. No re-entry.
5. No communication with the police.

Those who break *any* of these rules will be killed.

1

It barely looked like a frog, if Cyra was being honest.

Simply constructed and only a few inches tall, it was made up of two round balls stuck together. No webbed feet, no long tongue. The pale green glaze and the giant white eyes bugging out of its small head were the only indicators that the clay object was supposed to be a frog. Handmade, obviously. It was sitting near the edge of the desk, crouched behind the lamp.

Cyra stared hard at the lumpy frog approximation, meeting its blank gaze, trying to keep her hands from shaking and her teeth from chattering. The precinct wasn't cold; the chill was coming from her bones, brought on by the detective's news.

The man seated across the desk from Cyra cleared his throat, noticing her sudden stillness. "Ms. Griffin?"

Cyra reluctantly drew her focus away from the frog. Something Detective Bellows's kid made in art class, no doubt. Garbage to anyone else, but important enough to him that he brought it into work and stuck it on his desk. "It's Cyra."

"Of course. Cyra." Bellows pronounced her name wrong even though she had just said it. "Did you hear what I said?"

Sigh-ra, not Seer-ra, she wanted to snap, but she had to choose her battles.

"Yes, I heard you. What else?"

"Sorry? I'm not sure what you mean," the detective replied, expression wary.

"I mean, you can't say you think my sister was a victim of a serial killer and not give me any more information," Cyra said. Her voice was steady, and she could feel the googly eyes of the clay frog watching her cheeks, as if it was wondering where her tears were.

Mind your business, she thought at the frog.

Bellows blinked at her from across his desk, which was covered in manila file folders, a beat-up old laptop, and three framed photos of a young boy being practically smothered by a woman with a cloud of black hair. The rest of the precinct hummed around them, drowning out their conversation so that it camouflaged itself among the other tragedies happening concurrently.

Cyra's hands were clasped tightly around the backpack on her lap, clutching it like it was a life raft, the only thing keeping her afloat in an upside-down sea. The zipper was pressing uncomfortably into her inner arm, but she didn't move to adjust herself.

Detective Bellows's throat worked, and he frowned slightly. "This is an open investigation. Frankly, I shouldn't have even told you that, but your little friend down in Records begged me to give you something, so that's why we're even here talking right now. You need to understand that we're doing everything in our power to find your sister's killer. Let us do our jobs."

Cyra wanted to scream, but she swallowed it like she had been swallowing all her rage since she received the call on September 25 at 2:06 PM that severed her heart. "It's been well over a month." Cyra said instead, pleased with how calm her voice sounded. She resisted the urge to get into another staring contest with the clay frog on the desk and met Bellows's eye instead. "There has to be more. If there's not . . ."

Detective Bellows seemed to understand what she was saying. "The case won't go cold." His voice softened, his irritation

leaking away. "I can't imagine what you're going through. But as I told you last week, just because we don't have a lot of physical evidence doesn't mean we can't solve this. I can't share everything with you to preserve the investigation, but there are some . . . similarities in your sister's murder that I think are pointing us in a promising direction."

"Such as?"

"I just said I can't share them." Some of the irritation returned to the detective's voice as he shot her an admonishing look.

"Was it how many times she was hit on the head?" Cyra asked. "It was a lot, right? But she would have died from the second strike. The rest was overkill. Right? Or did you find what they killed her with? The first cop I spoke to said they thought it was a rock."

Bellows looked a little green. He almost matched the frog. "That's your sister you're talking about."

Cyra leaned forward, her eyes intent. "Did you know we shared a birthday? We were both born on January 12th. Same day, five years apart. Do you know how annoying it was when we were kids? To have to share our birthday? Get joint gifts, joint parties? God, I hated it. You know what I would wish for when we blew out the candles on the cake we shared every year?" Cyra swallowed and clasped the backpack tighter against her body. "I would wish for my own birthday. I would wish that I didn't have to share with Mira anymore." Bellows looked as if he would like to be anywhere else in the world, and he suddenly couldn't make eye contact with her. "This will be the first year I'll have my own birthday. And every year after this I have to live with knowing I wished for this."

"You didn't wish for this," Bellows intoned. "No one would have wished for this."

"I need to know what happened," Cyra said. "I need to know who killed her. What's the pattern you're talking about? Was it a signature? A calling card?"

"I can't discuss this with you any further," Bellows repeated, reddish-blonde brows drawing together. "Please. Stop asking."

That means yes, Cyra thought. *There was something about Mira's body that must be connected to other victims.*

"If this is the work of a serial killer, why can't you catch them?" Cyra asked instead.

"These things take time," Bellows insisted. "Trust me, we're doing all we can. But this isn't a case that can be solved overnight." The man slumped in his seat, ruffling his ginger hair, the roots of which were starting to gray, and stared at Cyra. "I won't give up on your sister, OK? I won't lie to you; this might take a while. But we're going to get him."

Cyra tried to imagine this detective sprinting down a dark alley, feet pounding, beard twitching as he chased a perp, and couldn't. She knew, from their first meeting, on that terrible day, that he had a family. He had used them as a way to try to bond with her: "I would lose my mind if anything ever happened to my son." But all it had really done was show her that the man had priorities in his life that had nothing to do with her sister.

Maybe she could trust the NYPD to do their jobs. But maybe she couldn't. And maybe she didn't want to sit around and wait years for them to arrest someone. Besides, that outcome wasn't what she wanted anyway.

"Ms. Griffin? Cyra? Are you OK?" Bellows was leaning forward now, perhaps noticing the expression that settled over Cyra's face as she thought of the pricey switchblade she recently purchased that was tucked away under her pillow back home. She pretended she bought it for self-defense after Mira's death, but at night Cyra would clutch the knife and picture a faceless killer. She would imagine the blade plunging into his chest over and over.

"I'm fine," Cyra said, standing abruptly. "Thanks for meeting with me."

Bellows scrambled to his feet as he cleared his throat again. "Of course. But . . . in the future . . . let me contact you when we have information, OK? It'll be faster if we can work without interruptions."

Cyra understood. *Leave us alone, let us get on with it so we can do the bare minimum, and then label this a cold case and get on with our lives.*

"Will do."

"I can walk you out . . ." Bellows trailed off, his voice questioning.

"Not necessary."

Relief blossomed on the detective's face as he nodded. "We'll be in touch, Cyra. Soon, I hope."

Cyra made an effort to not roll her eyes, inclined her head toward him in what she hoped looked like a display of gratitude, and then pivoted, swinging her backpack around so it settled on her shoulders as she walked into the lobby of the precinct.

"Cyra!"

She turned to her left to watch Eli rush toward her; he must have been hovering near the stairs, waiting for her to emerge. Cyra tried to arrange her face in a way that would look welcoming—she owed him, after all. Eli worked in Records, a job he mostly hated because it was boring archival and data entry work, but whatever tiny influence he had on the force paid off. He was able to get Cyra this meeting with Bellows after the detective started ducking her frequent and occasionally demanding calls. Cyra waited for Eli to get abreast of her, and then she started moving again.

"How'd it go?" Eli jogged to keep up as Cyra kept striding toward the front of the police station. Eli *looked* like he worked in records—short curly hair, thick glasses, a pert, upturned nose, and a wardrobe that seemed to consist mostly of flannels.

"All he'll tell me is that they think it might be connected to a serial killer."

"Whoa, really? That's . . . horrific." Eli had stopped for a moment at Cyra's words, struck, but now hurried to catch up with her. "They're gonna get him then. If there are other victims. Don't worry, Cyra, we're going to get this asshole."

"They're moving too slow," Cyra replied, reaching the exit and pounding down the concrete steps into the chilly fall air. "And there are twenty-five to fifty active serial killers in the United States at any given time, did you know that? And New York City has the highest population of people. It would make sense if there are multiple killers here, but when's the last time you heard of cops catching a serial killer in the city?"

"Cyra . . ."

"They're going too slow," she repeated, Eli trailing her down the sidewalk now.

"Cyra!"

She stopped. People streamed around her, some giving the two of them dirty looks for clogging the congested sidewalk. There was an event at Barclays Center today, and the avenue was more crowded than it was the last time Cyra had shown up, unannounced, to hassle Bellows for more information. The cream brick building of the precinct loomed, looking down at the two of them with reproval.

Cyra turned to Eli, who was shivering in his plaid flannel and skinny jeans. "What do you want, Eli? I gotta get back to Queens."

"When was the last time you slept?" Eli asked.

"Last night," Cyra lied.

"Not according to Izzie."

"How would she know?"

Eli sighed. "She got in touch with Bea the other day. We're worried about you."

"Your girlfriend is keeping tabs on me by hitting up my ex?"

"Someone has to," Eli said, exasperated. "Your dad is out of his mind with grief, and Mira wouldn't want you to go on

like this. We all have to stick together. Mira needs us to be a united front."

Mira didn't need anything anymore. Didn't Eli get that?

"I haven't seen Bea in weeks. She wouldn't know if I was sleeping either. I'm fine, Eli." Cyra tried to inhale deeply, but something was stuck in her lungs, preventing her from taking anything other than shallow breaths. Her eyes ached with exhaustion, but every time she tried to lie down, images swarmed her mind: Mira, bleeding, sightless eyes, sprawled near the boathouse in Prospect Park. Images Cyra had never seen, only heard about. Images that were bloated and exaggerated by her ruthless imagination.

She had put a framed photo of Mira beside her bed, one of her sister's self-portraits, in the hopes that she could fixate on that version of her instead. The photo was staged in the dark, as Mira's work often was, but her face was lit up by the warm flicker from a beautiful candelabra, and she was smiling softly. Mira had their father's Irish features—flaxen hair, slightly curled, smooth skin, a long, thin nose, and huge, green eyes. Cyra, on the other hand, was darker, shorter, sturdier than Mira. To her disappointment, Cyra inherited her mother's face. She tried to wear her glasses as often as she could, to give her face a slightly different shape. Even so, sometimes she'd flinch to see herself in a passing mirror, thinking she was Grace Griffin, the woman who left them.

But looking at Mira's self-portrait in her apartment every day wasn't working. That version of Mira was never the one that showed up in Cyra's dreams.

"I need to find this guy, Eli," Cyra finally said. "I know Izzie was Mira's best friend, but I'm the older sister. It's my job to do this." She paused, looking up at the crisp blue sky, thinking of what she'd done for Mira in the past. "The cops are limited; they can't break any laws. But I'd do anything to find the truth. I just wish I had something to go on."

Eli's eyes widened. "I get it. OK, listen. I might be able to help you. Come over to our apartment tonight. Seven?"

Cyra was intrigued, even though it meant she'd have to trek back to Brooklyn in just a few hours. "OK. Seven."

Eli gave her shoulder a squeeze, and he disappeared back inside the precinct.

Only then did Cyra unfurl her left hand, revealing the little clay frog she'd swiped from Bellows's desk. She slipped the frog into her backpack and melted away into the crowd.

"We're so glad you could make it! I feel like I haven't seen you in a while," Izzie said, handing Cyra a chilled can of flavored seltzer. Her voice was chipper, almost forced, an obvious effort to be normal. "Did you ever end up watching the Potomac season finale? That lady is a piece of work . . ."

Cyra took the dripping can, dropped her bag to the floor, and flopped down on to the velvet sofa. "The what?" she replied absently, popping the top of the seltzer, watching it fizz.

"The Real Housewives!" Izzie said, darting back to the kitchen area to grab her own seltzer, Eli trailing behind her with a bag of veggie chips. "Potomac's your favorite, right?"

"Oh," Cyra said, looking up from her drink, fighting a wave of confusion, carefully pasting a small smile on her face and trying to inject brightness in her voice she didn't feel. Did Izzie really expect Cyra to care about stuff like that anymore? "Yeah, sure."

Eli opened the bag of chips and passed it around, as Izzie started chattering about the show Cyra hadn't bothered to see or think about in over a month. She stared down at the ridged chips, their greasy, salty smell coating the inside of her nose. A pulse of irritation shot through her. What the hell were they doing talking about reality TV and eating snacks? Eli promised her help. That was why she was here. She put the bag of chips down on the coffee table.

"Eli," Cyra said, barely noticing Izzie's chirp of annoyance as she interrupted her midsentence. "You said you had something about Mira's murder."

The apartment went dead silent. Izzie's mouth snapped shut, and Eli flushed. Cyra realized she was still wearing the impression of a smile on her face, which perhaps explained her companions' aghast expressions. Her lips flattened, and she swallowed.

"Are you OK?" Eli asked.

"I'm fine," Cyra replied. "I just need to know what you know."

"It's . . . You say it so casually," Izzie whispered.

"What?"

"Her . . . her murder," Izzie said. "You say it so calmly."

This wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation. But Cyra was too busy trying to figure out what happened to Mira; she didn't have time to constantly perform the emotions other people thought she should be expressing after a shocking and sudden death.

What she wanted to say was, "Sorry I don't burst into tears every time my sister's name is mentioned. Sorry I'm not exhibiting grief in the way that is most comfortable for you."

"Please, Eli, I've had a long day," she said instead.

"Yes, Eli, do tell," Izzie added, rounding on her boyfriend with knitted brows. "What does she mean? You know something about what happened?"

"We need more snacks," Eli muttered, turning back to the kitchen.

"I'll get them," Izzie snapped, scooting in front of him. "You talk."

"Well," Eli said, looking anywhere but Cyra's face. "OK, so Bellows told you they think this might have been the work of a serial killer. But what he didn't tell you is that there's chatter about a . . . a meeting. A weekly meeting. For serial killers."

"A *what*?" Izzie shouted as she returned to the living area, placing a bowl of peanuts on the coffee table. "Please tell me you're joking, Eli."

"I'm not. It's a serial killer support group."

Cyra ignored the snacks and scooted forward on the velvet couch, fingers wrapping around the bottom of the cushion she sat on, staring at Eli, who was now crammed into the armchair next to the loveseat.

Izzie and Eli lived in a six-hundred square foot apartment in Park Slope they paid a ridiculous amount of money for considering Eli's sad government salary and Izzie's kindergarten teacher one. But Izzie had wanted to live within walking distance of PS 321, where she taught, and both of them fit in seamlessly with the growing hipster crowd despite Izzie being from Michigan and Eli from Wisconsin. It wasn't far from where Mira had lived in Dumbo either. Cyra, on the other hand, lived in a crappy studio in Jamaica, Queens, and had to take an hour-and-a-half train ride whenever she had wanted to visit her sister.

"Explain, please," Cyra demanded, her focus on Eli only, even as Izzie puttered around nervously, digging different things out of their fridge, hoping to tempt her best friend's sister into eating something.

Eli seemed to steel himself. "I'm not supposed to know about this, so neither of you can tell anyone else. Not even your dad, Cyra."

There was no worry there. Cyra had only spoken to her father twice since Mira's death. Holton Griffin had been inconsolable during both conversations, barely functioning, barely listening, gripping his bottle so tightly his knuckles seemed permanently stained white. Her father had already been a house of cards due to his love of whiskey; he fell apart instantly and spectacularly after Mira's death. Leaving Cyra to manage everything—the cops, the stray reporters, Mira's friends, extended family who heard the news. She had to arrange her little sister's funeral alone.

Their father was struck down by his grief, and Cyra, knowing that Mira was his favorite, let him have his despair.

At first, Cyra's own pain was minor. Like someone had pinched her heart with small fingers. Not pleasant, but bearable. Except the fingers never let go. Discomfort that goes on for too long soon blooms into full agony. The pinching began to feel like a vice. When weeks went by and the fingers kept ahold of her heart, twisting, it was a relief when the pain became so intense that she finally went numb.

"How'd you find out about this if you're not supposed to know?" Izzie asked, finally coming to sit next to Cyra on the loveseat, her brown eyes narrowed, her tan cheeks paling in anticipation of her partner's words. "This better not be something that could get you fired." By the look on Eli's face, it was exactly that, and Izzie's frown deepened. "Eli, no!"

"My job is so boring, Iz," Eli complained. "Sometimes I do some . . . light reading."

"*Light reading*?" Izzie repeated.

"Sometimes I access files for interesting cases," Eli said sheepishly.

"And then you put them back where they belong, right?" Izzie demanded. "You would never bring them into this apartment, correct?"

Eli's face flushed, and Izzie's face shuttered dark.

"Get to the important part," Cyra said impatiently, trying to reign in her agitation.

"OK, OK, so about a year ago I was reading this file that was sent over from the cybercrimes department. I guess they sent it to all NYPD precincts because, well . . ."

"Spit it out, please," Cyra snapped. Her hands were wet; she was squeezing the seltzer can, sloshing fizzy water over her knuckles and down her wrists.

"There are rumors of a serial killer support group that meets somewhere in the NYC area," Eli said, his words all rushing together

at once. "The FBI found talk of it on the dark web. It seems to be local to New York; they meet weekly, there's a code word on an encrypted forum, and it's obviously very, very secretive."

"Why haven't they shut it down?" Izzie asked, her voice pitched higher than it normally was. She inched a little closer to Cyra on the couch.

"Well, first, they can't confirm it actually exists. The report notes that it could be a hoax or a couple of incels messing around. Especially because none of the Feds have been able to prove it's real; every time they use the password, they struggle to make contact. From what I understand, there's a . . . gatekeeper or something on the forum. You have to send photographic proof of your . . . kills. The Feds have doctored some images and tried to trick their way in, but whoever is monitoring the group never bites. Maybe they know the photos are fake, somehow. I don't know. And I guess most of the force is skeptical because . . . you know . . . serial killer support group? Come on, it sounds like a hacky movie plot."

"But you think it could be real," Cyra stated. "And so do the Feds if they keep trying to access it."

"Well, if this group *is* real, the forum is the only evidence of it. If they get cybercrimes to shut the forum down, the freaks will go someplace else, and they'll lose them all together. I guess they're just trying to keep an eye on it."

"And they think the group meets in person?" Cyra asked.

"I guess so? It's unclear."

"Seems dangerous. The in-person meeting, I mean. And odd. Aren't serial killers supposed to be loners? I bet it's a virtual thing."

"I don't know, Cy. Like I said, it's probably fake."

Cyra's mind was racing faster than she could keep up. Something was unfurling like a rug before her, leading her into a dark hallway, foreboding but also enthralling.

"Well, maybe it's a good thing these people are trying to get help?" Izzie suggested. "They are trying not to kill, right? Maybe they can be rehabilitated."

Eli let out a disbelieving laugh. "Oh, Iz, no. It's not like an AA group or something. It's not to stop them from killing. It's to *encourage* them. It's a 'safe space' to share."

All the remaining color drained from Izzie's face, and she buried her head in her hands. A sheet of her dark hair fell over her shoulders, closing her off like a curtain in a theater.

But Cyra sat ramrod straight, blood rushing to her face. "I need to see this file."

"Hell no," Eli said immediately. "I could get fired just for telling you this."

"You said you wanted to help," Cyra accused. "Why tell me this then?"

"Yes," Izzie asked, emerging from her hair to stare daggers at her boyfriend. "Why the hell would you tell us this?"

Eli said nothing for a moment, just stared down at the sage green carpet.

"Because there's a chance Mira's killer is in this group, if it really exists," Cyra finally said. "Did the file say how many people participate?"

"No. No info about who, how many, where they meet, nothing."

"But they have the dark web forum, and the password." Cyra stared at Eli, willing him to look her in the eye. He compromised by staring at her throat.

"Yes."

"Eli, no," Izzie said.

"What makes you think you'll get any further than the literal FBI could?" Eli asked, crossing his arms and leaning back in the chair, suddenly reticent. "It's not like you can send them a photo of a dead body either, Cyra."

"They're the law," Cyra said. "I'm not. And I'm a bit more motivated than they are. She was my sister. I don't care about following any rules." At the word "rules," Eli flinched and looked away. "Let me at least try. You wouldn't have said anything if you didn't anticipate this outcome."

"No," Izzie protested again. "It's insane! It's too dangerous!"

Eli twisted his hands together like he was trying to wring a decision from his fingers. The apartment seemed to go quiet as he sat there, thinking. Then his shoulders sagged, and he looked up at her.

Cyra didn't bother to hope. She already knew.

"OK," Eli whispered. "I can get you on the site. I can get you the passcode. But that's it. Then you're on your own."

"That's all I need."

"What do you know about the dark web?"

"Um . . ."

Eli grimaced. "Yeah, thought so. I know a little bit, some stuff I've picked up from work. I'll write down the instructions for you. Follow them exactly."

Cyra nodded. "Thanks."

"And you tell me right away if anyone makes contact with you. And you definitely don't do anything stupid like ask to meet up with anyone."

"Are you both out of your fucking minds?" Izzie shrieked.

Eli rocketed to his feet, moved around the crowded coffee table, and pulled his girlfriend up. "Give us a minute, Cyra." They moved toward the kitchen and pressed up against the sink as they whispered furiously.

Cyra kept herself rigid, but out of politeness pretended to scroll through her phone even though she could hear every word; it was a small apartment after all, and Izzie had trouble controlling her voice when she was upset.

"You're going to get her killed," came Izzie's harsh whisper. "Then both of them will be gone. And why didn't you tell me any of this?"

"Relax, she's not going to get anywhere," Eli replied, his voice softer than hers. "She probably needs this. To help with healing, with closure. She can't do what the FBI can't, OK?"

"And you didn't clue me in because . . . ?" Izzie's voice was pointed, tinged with hurt.

"Come on, Iz, not now."

Cyra tuned them out. Izzie would fold, latching on to the reasonable expectation that of course, Cyra, a marketing coordinator for an upscale nursing home, would never be able to infiltrate a secret, possibly fake, support group for the most dangerous people in the city.

But Cyra felt like everything she'd ever been through had been leading to this. Her mother leaving, everything she did to protect Mira in the past, even the mixed-martial-arts classes Cyra had taken for five years—it was all for this, and she hadn't even known it. Her sister was dead. Her father had gone off the deep end. Her girlfriend had left, unable to handle the tragedy. And yet, Cyra was ready.

Izzie didn't know that Cyra had cut her hours and was now only working part-time, barely enough to survive on. She didn't know that after talking to Bellows earlier, Cyra went online and ordered six books about serial killers for research. She didn't know that Cyra had been watching knife fighting tutorials online since Mira's murder in order to better defend herself while she hunted for her sister's killer. She didn't know that Cyra had pulled away from all her friends and family, claiming she needed time to process.

What Cyra told Bellows was true—she resented sharing a birthday with Mira, but it didn't change the fact that her entire life had revolved around keeping Mira safe.

Now it was different.

Mira was gone, and Cyra's morals were gone with her. The world was gray; everything was detached and meaningless. Cyra never broke down after Mira's death. Never cried. Never

screamed. Cyra just started planning, determined to find who killed her sister and why.

She floated away from her body and returned empty and hungry.

And now, finally, was something to feed her.

2

Truthfully, it was reprehensible, but Cyra didn't have the luxury of caring about that.

Doris Mathers was a nice woman. Her mind wasn't all there at the end, but she always smiled gummily at Cyra whenever she walked past her room. When Doris first arrived at the nursing home, Cyra had bonded with her over their shared appreciation for sea glass. Cyra sometimes wore a pendant Mira gave her, and Doris noticed, showing Cyra the jars of cloudy, color-coordinated sea glass scattered around her room.

But the sad reality of working at a nursing home was that residents died. Frequently. When Macy, the nurse on shift, caught Cyra in the hall a few days after her meeting with Bellows and quietly let her know Doris passed away an hour earlier, Cyra waited for sadness to flood in.

It didn't. All she felt was the familiar numbness that crept inside her after Mira's death. The same numbness she felt on occasions in the past. It used to scare her, this yawning, disconnected sensation, but now it was a relief.

"I know you two chatted occasionally," Macy said, squeezing Cyra's arm. Why did people always think death meant they could touch you? "I'm sorry. If you want to take a break . . ."

"Is she still in her room?"

"Oh, um, yes. There's some paperwork that still needs to be filled."

"I'd like to go say goodbye," Cyra said, aware of her disturbing lack of grief. In its place, opportunity, screaming at her to hurry before the chance slipped away. But for Macy's sake, Cyra sagged forward, squinting her eyes like she was trying not to cry. "You know, pay my respects."

"Of course. You know her room. We'll be by to move her shortly." Macy gave Cyra a brave smile, and Cyra tried to mimic it, wondering if she was pulling it off.

In Doris's room, Cyra tried not to think too hard about what she was doing; posing next to the woman's body as it cooled in a snug space filled with sea glass. Cyra angled her phone above her head, making sure both her stoic, slack face and Doris's still body were in the frame. Cyra tapped the screen, taking a selfie with the dead woman.

A shudder fluttered through Cyra's body. Morally, it was fucked up. She should hate herself, but even that seemed to require too much energy. The same way feeling Bea's hands on her body or Izzie's hugs after Mira's death required too much energy. It was easier to succumb to the numbness.

"Sorry," Cyra whispered to the woman's body, wishing she meant it.

Doris would have understood. Or maybe she wouldn't. Either way, it didn't matter; Doris was dead, and there was no changing that. It was easier to accept that instead of wailing, putting on a show for her coworkers.

Her whole life, Cyra felt like people expected more from her. Larger reactions, stronger emotions. When one of her past partners cheated on her, Cyra simply threw the belongings left in her apartment in the trash, blocked him, and never looked back. Mira encouraged her to tell him off, get revenge, do *something*, but Cyra didn't care.

The person Cyra loved the most was Mira, and when she died, all the feelings Cyra was constantly asked to have became inconsequential. It was far easier to disappear behind nothingness. Why sit in the stagnant pain of grief and loss if she could be unfeeling instead?

No, she wasn't reacting to her sister's death in a "normal" way, but it was a way that allowed her to keep going, to do whatever needed to be done to get justice.

Besides, Cyra's ability to disconnect had protected Mira in the past.

When Cyra was in her junior year at community college, Mira, still in high school, started dating PJ Longfellow. Cyra hadn't liked him right away—why was a senior interested in dating her sophomore sister? There was only one possible reason, and it made Cyra's teeth clench.

Cyra lived at home while she got her marketing degree at Duchess—it was only seven minutes from their house in Poughkeepsie, and it was affordable. Which meant she was around to see the bruises start to pop up on her sister's collarbone and shoulders. She saw how Mira's bubbly exterior grew quieter, how her clothing changed to more muted, conservative looks. Mira denied anything was wrong, so Cyra tried to talk to their father about it on one of the rare times he was home and not working at a construction site or out with some new woman who would last three weeks.

"Oh, honey," Holton Griffin said, his hands running across his rugged cheeks as if he was too tired to deal with the conversation. "I know it's hard for you."

"What?" Cyra replied, thinking that was an odd response.

"I know you two are very different," he continued, a tumbler of whiskey in his hands as he watched the Mets, his attention drifting between her and the game. "But jealousy isn't a productive emotion. PJ is good for Mira. I worked with his dad for a bit last year, he's a good man. You'll find yourself a nice guy if you stop focusing on your little sister's life and live your own."

He had said the words casually, calmly, like they barely mattered, but they sang through the air like arrows and hit Cyra's heart, one after another. Her father knew Cyra dated boys and girls, but he didn't care enough to even remember that. Her mouth dried up and her response along with it.

How could she say that he was placing too much trust in a sixteen-year-old girl because that was easier than actually parenting her? He'd never listen to Cyra. She looked too much like her mother. Mira, the mirror image of their father, only had to ask, and she got whatever she wanted, even if they couldn't afford it. Of course he would be blinded by Mira's own denial. Of course he wouldn't trust Cyra, the daughter who wore the face of the woman who broke him.

The few times PJ came over for dinner, Cyra stared daggers at him, wanting him to feel her hatred, but he barely seemed to notice she existed. Cyra always looked at his hands, scouring them for signs of defensive scratches or red knuckles. She never saw anything, only the tacky class ring he wore on his left hand. It was brassy and featured a cut ruby, but you rarely got to see it because PJ liked to wear the gem on the inside of his finger, an odd choice that Mira said allowed him to "feel beauty in the palm of his hand at all times."

Cyra threw up in her mouth a little bit when her sister told her that.

As the relationship continued, unsure of what to do, how to make Mira see the truth in what was happening to her, Cyra felt paralyzed and powerless.

Until one day Mira came home with a scarf wrapped around her neck. Cyra slipped behind her in the hallway and watched as Mira removed it in her room, revealing angry red marks around her slender pale throat.

"Mira!"

Her sister whipped around, a look of guilt passing across her face as she scrambled to put the scarf back on. Cyra didn't let

her; she raced into the room and pulled Mira's hands away from her neck, horror building in her chest.

At the center of Mira's throat was the faint imprint of a ring. The sharp indents of a gem could be seen pressed into her sister's delicate skin. Which would only happen if someone was wearing a ring on the inside of their hand.

Cyra turned and ran to her car, Mira following her and begging her to stop. But Cyra couldn't. Mira didn't have anyone else—their mother was gone; their father was oblivious. She had to protect her sister. It was her job.

Mira threw herself into the backseat before Cyra took off. As she drove, a strange calmness descended over Cyra, a disconnect from her body that crept in when she wasn't looking. Cyra found PJ in the front yard, practicing spirals, shirtless in the warm May afternoon. PJ was a whole head taller than Cyra, petite as she was, but it didn't matter. She leapt from the car and drove her body into him, knocking him to the lawn.

"You ever, *ever* put your hands on my sister again, I'll . . . I'll . . . make sure it's the last thing you do," Cyra said, voice cold and hollow.

Mira sat in the backseat of the car, pressed up against the window, crying silently. PJ looked up at Cyra from the grass, eyes wide.

Cyra didn't regret what she did to PJ, but something broke between her and Mira that day. A seed of resentment was planted. Cyra ruined Mira's first relationship—and Mira had never been able to accept or discuss the abuse she suffered. The sisters made up, remained close, moved to the city together, but Cyra felt tendrils of Mira's anger, her suspicion, touch her over the years.

Especially when Mira took the photo. The one of Cyra that went viral.

Cyra looked down at Doris, eyes half closed, face wrinkled and waxy. The room smelled of mothballs and lemon-scented air freshener.

Cry. Do something. Don't just stand there like a sociopath, Cyra snipped at herself. But she couldn't draw upon an emotion she didn't feel.

Instead, she grabbed one of the many jars filled with sea glass from the bedside table and slipped it into her pocket. She left the room, and Doris, behind.

That night, Cyra sat at her computer in her cramped studio apartment with Eli's notes scribbled on torn-out journal pages in front of her. Following his instructions, she made sure her webcam and microphone accesses were blocked, covered her camera with tape, and closed all her other applications before opening the dark web browser Eli told her to use, a network that would bounce her encrypted traffic through random nodes, making it difficult to track. Eli mentioned she would need to "rinse" her web identity every half hour and after the session, which would wipe away any traces of her existence.

The link below is for the forum, Eli had written. *It's what they call an onion address—not searchable via standard browsers.*

Holding her breath, Cyra typed the address in, glancing down at the notes to eye the password needed to access the forum and the supposed gatekeeper.

Eli described the site as a forum, but in reality, it looked more like an old school chatroom. The page was blank save for a pixelated icon of a skull. When Cyra clicked it, a chatbox appeared.

Anonyme0220: *Can women join?*
Unbear0237: *Passcode?*
Anonyme0220: *Parasitic.*
Unbear0237: *How can I help you?*
Anonyme0220: *Is it for men only?*
Unbear0237: *. . . No. But you'd be the only one.*
Anonyme0220: *Good.*
Unbear0237: *We need more information.*

Anonyme0220: *And I need confirmation that you are who you say you are.*

Unbear0237: *That's not how this works. There are steps to this process. We need more from you first. A photo. Of a recent mark.*

Anonyme0220: *[untitled.jpg]*

Anonyme0220: *Hello? Still there? It's been ten minutes.*

Unbear0237: *So you* are *a woman. Interesting.*

Anonyme0220: *I told you. Now what?*

Unbear0237: *How do you do it?*

Anonyme0220: *Shots of air. Where I work. Old people die at hospitals all the time. It's easy if you're careful. And I'm very careful.*

Anonyme0220: *Hello?*

Unbear0237: *I'm going to inbox you an address. You are to go there. Alone. Something will be waiting for you. You must dispose of it. If you do anything else, tell anyone else, we will know. Return here when it's done. Further instructions will follow.*

Anonyme0220: *How do I know this isn't a trap?*

Anonyme0220: *Hello?*

Anonyme0220: *Hello??*

<Unbear0237 has logged off.>

Cyra knew it was stupid.

She figured the chances of this being a set up or of her getting immediately murdered were high, but she didn't have much of a choice. It wasn't like she could ask for a police escort, and she needed to do this. It was her only lead.

As she prepared to leave her apartment, a hum started deep in her bones, a familiar sensation. Her breathing got short and ragged, and her armpits began to sweat profusely. A queasy feeling flooded her stomach.

"No," Cyra said, clenching her hands. "Not now."

A panic attack was a terrible sign. This was her first one since Mira's death, and Cyra needed her wits about her for what she was about to do. Dealing with panic attacks for years meant Cyra learned a few tricks for squashing them before they could ramp up. If she acted fast, she could prevent this one before it picked up steam.

Cyra rushed to the corner of the apartment that held her tiny kitchen and ripped open the freezer door, sticking her head inside and taking large gulps of the icy air that blasted out. Her body slowed down, settled into the prickling cold, her lungs burning but working as she inhaled frigid air that would travel into her chest and pack away all the emotions rising to the surface.

As she was breathing, feeling the wisps of the baby panic attack subside, she wondered if any of the serial killers she was trying to track down would be excited to think of her head sitting in a freezer.

Cyra pulled away and shut the freezer door, feeling the even and calm bump of her heart under her fingers. She'd managed to stave off the panic attack with the cold and deep exhales, but she had to get going now, before she could think too much about what she was doing.

She left the apartment, hurrying down her building's stairs and bursting out into the chilly night. Cyra's switchblade was in her back pocket, her clothing was loose and nondescript, and she wore her prescription sunglasses and a baseball cap, looking like an undercover celebrity even though it was after midnight. Unsure of what she would face at the coordinates but tipped off by the gatekeeper's use of the word "dispose" in their chat, Cyra brought gloves and garbage bags in her backpack.

The address the group's gatekeeper messaged her ended up being coordinates, sent with terse instructions: *Monday night. Arrive at 1:10 AM exactly. Look behind the dumpster on the north side of the lot. It will be there. Make it disappear. Go alone. Tell no one.*

Cyra took the N to Astoria Boulevard and walked the extra mile to a tiny abandoned parking lot not far from LaGuardia Airport. A chewed-up chain link fence surrounded the lot, but there were gaps where the links had split apart, and Cyra was able to slip through, stepping on overgrown weeds pushing their way through the cracked pavement. This block was dark, the streetlights dim or out altogether. It was quiet, empty—an industrial area that turned into a dead zone at night. The lot itself was swathed in shadows, backlit by the pinpricks of light from apartment buildings blocks away.

As Cyra slowly moved deeper into the lot, looking for the looming shape of the dumpster at the north end, her hands were shaky. She couldn't stop the sweat from pooling under her arms despite the chill in the air, but her nerves originated from anticipation rather than dread—was she finally getting somewhere?

She could barely see with the sunglasses still covering her eyes, but she didn't dare remove them, nor did she chance using a flashlight. She didn't want anyone driving by catching a glimpse of her. She was squinting by the time she got to the dumpster, heart racing, fists tight. Taking a deep breath, she peered around the edge.

At first, she couldn't see anything, which was good. She had been steeling herself for a body. She didn't want to imagine what she would end up doing in that situation. What choice she might make, and how quickly she would make it.

Crouching lower, Cyra finally spotted it, nestled deeper in the shadows. A duffle bag.

She didn't dare touch it with her bare hands. Glancing once over her shoulder to make sure she was still alone in the lot, Cyra pulled on a pair of black rubber gloves from her backpack and gingerly drew the duffle bag toward her by the strap. Out from the shadow of the dumpster, there was just enough light to allow Cyra to unzip the bag, glancing inside.

"Ah, shit," she murmured.

Not a body, clearly. But this was bad too, and she understood the assignment, how a cop wouldn't make it past this stage. A white dress shirt, almost gleaming in the night, was crumpled inside the bag. It was splattered with dark stains. She could see the tips of leather shoes under it, scuffed and covered in reddish-brown drips.

Those assholes, Cyra thought, quickly zipping the bag back up.

Even though she couldn't see anyone around, she had no doubt she was being watched. It was too dark to see a hidden camera or a person lurking in the shadows outside the parking lot, but Cyra knew her next moves would determine her worth and entry into the group. Someone in law enforcement wouldn't be able to dispose of the evidence in the bag—her ability to thoroughly disappear these belongings should cement her status as a criminal. One of them.

Cyra willed feelings of revulsion and fear to rise, but she was so focused, so close, she couldn't manage it. Just like with Doris, she knew what she was about to do was wrong, but she needed to follow it through. For Mira. Nothing else mattered. She owed her sister.

Swallowing hard, pressing her tongue against the roof of her mouth and willing the feelings of calm detachment to settle over her, Cyra pulled out a garbage bag, slipped the duffle inside it, and tied it tight, stuffing the whole thing into her backpack.

She didn't dare go back to her apartment. Not carrying what she was carrying, and not without knowing if she was being followed. Instead, Cyra used cash to book a room at one of the cheaper motels near LaGuardia, one that looked rundown, giving a fake name and pretending she missed her flight.

Cyra barely slept. She never really did anymore, but she certainly couldn't while the bloodstained belongings of a dead person rested on the floor near the bathroom.

Cyra stopped sleeping after Mira's death. Bea tried to convince her to try medication or a sleep routine, but Cyra resisted.

Why bother, when nothing felt real anyway? Most nights she wrapped herself in a blanket on the couch and watched nature documentaries as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Eventually, Bea stopped trying to lure her to the bed and let her spend the night alone on the couch. When Bea left, it had been a relief. Cyra could spiral in peace.

Cyra watched *Family Feud* until the early hours of the morning, eyeing the room's deadbolt every so often, occasionally tiptoeing over to check the peephole. There was never anyone there.

When the sun rose, Cyra checked out, bleary-eyed and exhausted, and took the subway to Sheepshead Bay. Her calmness was starting to wear off by the time she got to the kayak rental place Mira brought her to a year ago.

Cyra's eyes felt jittery, her legs leaden. But she approached the rental desk, paying with cash, clambering into the kayak at the dock, paddling her way out from the channel, through Shell Bank Creek, out toward Rockaway Inlet. The backpack stuffed with the duffle bag remained on her back until she reached an area away from any other boaters, far enough from the shore and bridges that she was certain no one could see what she was doing.

The sky was gray. Gentle waves lapped against the kayak as a cold ocean gust sprayed specks of saltwater on Cyra's skin. Her bones felt iced over, like they had freezer burn. Breezy Point was a flat stretch of land directly in front of her; the blurry outline of Coney Island was visible off to her right.

With a dry mouth, Cyra anchored her paddle between her knees, swung the backpack over her aching shoulders, and removed the garbage bag, opening the top so she could pull out the duffle. Next, Cyra dug out the rocks she collected from a park near the rental shop from the bottom of the backpack and unzipped the mouth of the duffle bag, stuffing them inside.

She bobbed on the surf like a seagull, weighing down the duffle bag, crumpling the garbage bag inside it before rezipping

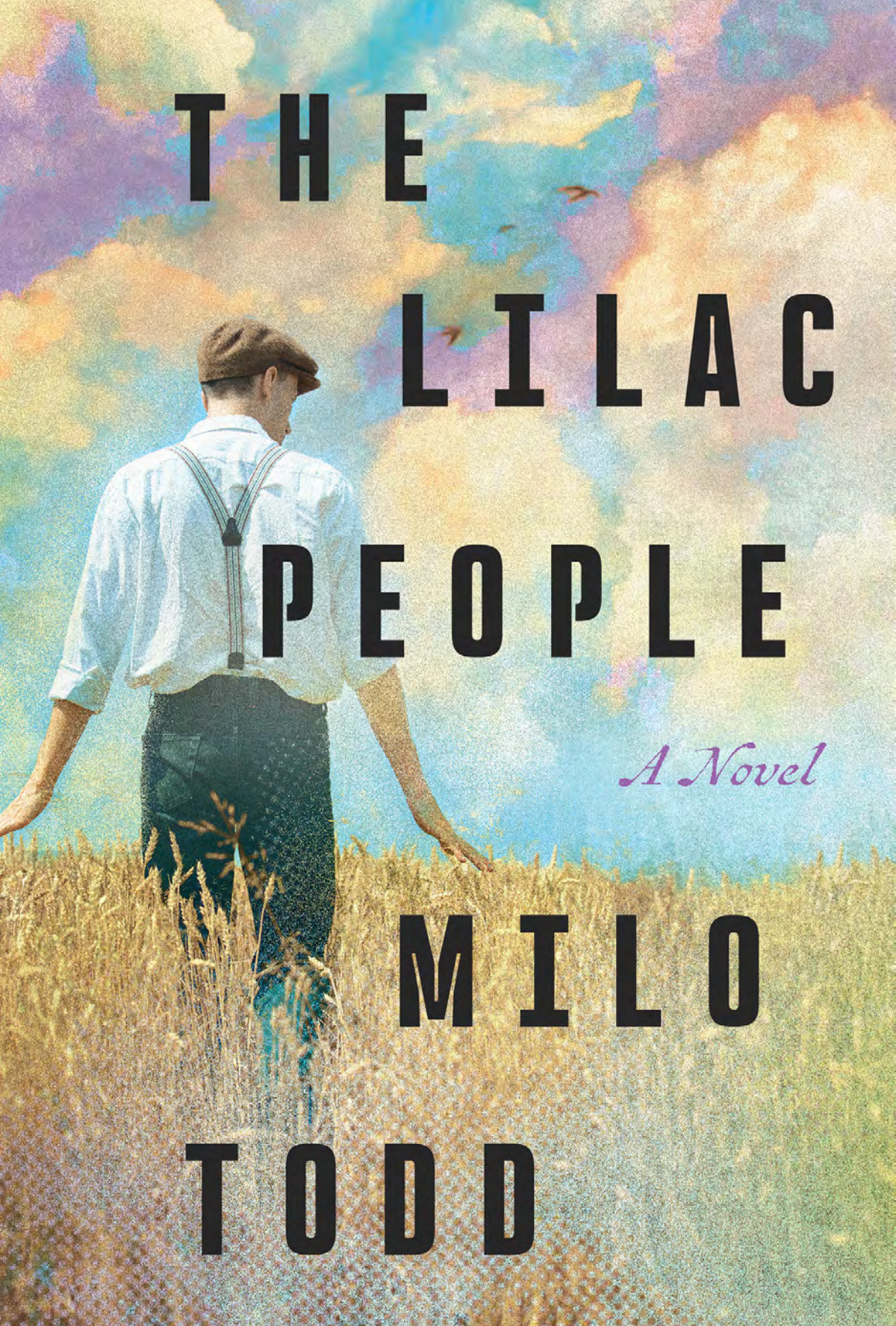
the whole thing and unceremoniously sliding it over the edge of the kayak. Cyra watched the blot of darkness sink quickly beneath the surface, hurrying to a watery grave.

Cyra paddled around the area for another half hour, watching, waiting. But the bag never bobbed back up. Satisfied, Cyra bit her lip, ignoring the tiny voice in the back of her head telling her how wrong this was, and steered the kayak back to the rental shop.

She took the long way home. She stopped at several large stores, took a few different buses and trains, trying to shake a tail she wasn't sure she even had. Finally, almost twenty-four hours after she left it, she returned to her apartment in Jamaica.

Back on the dark web, the pixelated skull glowed at her. This time, the answer was even faster, and it made the hair on her arms stand on end:

Well done. I think we're ready to meet in person.


THE
LILAC
PEOPLE
A Novel
MILO
TODD

THE LILAC PEOPLE

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Das war ein vorspiel nur, dort
wo man bücher verbrennt,
verbrennt man am ende auch menschen.

That was but a prelude;
where they burn books,
they will ultimately burn people as well.

HEINRICH HEINE (1820),
plaque at the Sunken Library
in Bebelplatz, Berlin

Please note that all terms used in this novel reflect the story's era. Terms such as *transvestite* are outdated and should be avoided when referring to transgender people of today.

We've received word that the liberation of the camps is not the celebration we'd hoped. The Allied forces are sending all pink triangles and any qualifying black triangles to jail to start the sentence for their crimes. All other categories of identity, crime, or marker have been liberated, for the Allies feel they have suffered enough.

We repeat. All inverts, transvestites, and lilac people who survived the camps have been sent to jail. If you avoided detection during the War, you are still not safe. We repeat: you are still not safe.

To any left out there, be safe, be well, and look after one another. Our sun will shine after this night. Thank you and goodnight.

1

1 • Ulm, 1945

IT WAS SUNDAY NOW, NEARLY TWO WEEKS SINCE THE WAR ended, a breezy-aired morning in mid-May. Bertie had been harvesting the potatoes, pulling them up by satisfying fistfuls when Sofie heard it over the radio, calling out as she ran to him. She left the cow half-milked, he the last row unharvested, as they dislodged the flag from their doorstep. They tore it that night, burning the scraps in the fire pit behind the house. She wondered if the news was false, more propaganda spread by the Nazis to punish those who were not true believers, who were hiding in plain sight like them. He wondered if they could soon use their real names again in public.

They had ridden out the length of the War in Ulm on a little farm that was not theirs, less than two morgen large, and in an arguably undesirable spot. They were in the hilly part, more than half of their ground useful only for heartier crops, and a quarter of it ended in a forest of five-meter conifers that ate both space and sunlight. Oma and Opa had surely built the house by the edge of those trees as a way to content themselves. But what that contentment was, Bertie was still not sure.

It was a Schwarzwaldhaus, what they had built, a wohnstallhaus cowshed made of dark wood from the Black Forest. The shingled roof was steeply hipped and near black, sloping down to the ground floor. When Bertie first arrived, he felt it all gave the look of a foreboding fairy tale, sticking out oddly dark against the sunshine and rolling hills, the chirping birds and greenery. But he had learned the intelligence behind it all. The wood was sturdy, splitting the heaviest winds and snowfalls. The roof was angled to work with the sun, shading them from its summer height and warming the walls when it hung low in the cold. During

the early part of the War, Bertie helped Opa convert the roof from thatch to shingle. Bertie slid off twice.

The farm was close to where the Blau and the Iller joined the Danube, but not too close. It was as safe enough a place as possible to survive the War. They knew they were long since surrounded by dead vineyards by now. Only them and their most immediate neighbor, Frau Baer, were left from the original small grouping of farms, far as they could gather.

Bertie sipped his hot water and placed the teacup beside him, his folded paper rustling in the light wind. He looked out over the farm. It was hilled in places, flatter in others, but he was proud to maintain such neat rows of rich green and brown. He had recently finished planting the carrots, their tiny seeds light as air and frustrating. He had once sneezed and lost the worth of an entire bed. It was impressive how much life could fit in the palm of a hand. He would soon need to choose which ones to uproot so they did not choke one another. He did not like that part. He did not like what he worried it represented, if the path from plant to person was a short one, if there was something in his blood to be terrible, deciding what lived and what did not. But the seedlings were too young yet to poke through the mounds, for now just rows of freshly turned earth, darker than the dirt around them. The pumpkins and squash would be next, planted in a few more weeks.

The hilly parts, he had been taught, were perfect for root vegetables. The drainage was natural and the soil was sandy. Root vegetables did not bring much on the market, but they kept Bertie and Sofie well fed during the War. They did not have to deal with ersatz meat or many of the other substitutes the townsfolk paid for with their ration cards.

Bertie closed his eyes and breathed. The sun felt warm and good on his eyes, painting the backs of his eyelids a deep pink. Some birds called in the distance. The chickens absently glucked among the crops, pecking at beetles and grubs that caught their eye. He had to throw only a handful of feed at them in the morning, mostly the bits and ends and peels that Bertie and Sofie did not eat themselves, and they were fine. A soft plop of liquid dripped to the ground every few moments behind him, from the lump of cheesecloth Sofie had squeezed tight and left high

on a nail an hour earlier. She had become quite good at making simple cheeses from vinegar and salt. Bertie caught a faint whiff of sharp, damp curds when the breeze turned. The air felt light and clean, the sun smelled like the sun. He did not believe a person would understand what he meant by that until they lived here.

He opened his eyes. Despite his careful planting, the asparagus made things look wild. Each crown grew at its own pace, but as soon as they started, they became eager. Some were still just baby stalks, poking out of the ground obscenely at first with their pale skins and distinctive heads. Others were already ferning, sprouting big and bushy far as they could reach. Some of the berries on the delicate fronds had already gone red as cherries and heavy with seed, others still green and new. By the end of the season, the ferns would be nearly as tall as him. An achievement for a plant, though perhaps less so for a fellow person.

Spargelzeit was his favorite season. He loved how easily the beetle eggs fell off with a tender skim of his thumb, he loved parting the tickling fronds to check the crowns beneath, he loved the juicy snap when he broke off a ready and eager stalk. He always chewed a spear raw as he harvested the others, the pale skin tender and woody on his tongue. Some mornings sprouted so many spears that he could barely make it to town at a respectable hour, other times there were only a few to be had. He and Sofie simply split those while breakfasting. They were not worth the trip.

Their crop was old, older than life, Opa had claimed, planted back when his own grandfather first bought the land. Long before this War, long before the one before that, long before the Treaty or the Inflation or the Crash or the Nazis or any of this. Long before Opa had been born, or Oma, or Bertie, or Sofie. Or Gert. The asparagus sprang up every spring without fail, an old friend, a capsule of history from when life kept growing, birthed from a better time. What they ate came from the same roots that fed people who had long since lived and died. It was the exact same asparagus that Gert had eaten. With such love over generations, the crop was wild and plentiful with Bertie barely trying.

But he worried. The current beds were slightly younger than Bertie,

as Opa had said they needed to regrow crowns from the berries every forty years or so. Opa himself had done it only once, under the instruction of his father. But now Bertie feared the time was soon to do it again. He was not quite sure how it was done. He did not know if knowing mattered.

During those precious ten weeks of Spargelzeit—easily Bertie and Sofie's most lucrative time of year, particularly since the rationing—he was crowded by people the moment he stepped into Ulm with his cart. Oftentimes, he made all his trades before he even got to the stores. If there was something he and Sofie needed—flour, shoes, soap—now was always the time. Sofie called it white gold. Spargelzeit always felt like the shortest season of the year.

Bertie took another sip and placed his teacup back upon his neglected newspaper. He had bartered for the paper with that morning's crop. A paper outside of Deutschland, from Amerika, was a coveted treat, no matter that it was already two weeks old. Such things had gotten difficult to find as the War stretched on, even on the black market, no matter how much asparagus he offered. But now with the surrender, the Allied forces brought some things with them worthwhile.

He picked up his paper, slipping it from beneath the scissors. Sofie was still inside, writing another letter to home with increasing angst. They had some time left before church.

The fronds of the asparagus ferns swayed in the breeze like lace, those with berries beginning to hang from the weight. They took to wind well. Always bending, never breaking. They danced unconcerned.

Sometimes they could forget the War entirely. The sun was nice on good days, the farm quiet, the labor working them into both distraction and deep sleep. They did not feel the sting of ration stamps. As more men of any age were drafted, Bertie dodged the draft, not only as a farmer, but also, surely, for having long since been declared dead. Still, the War was never far away. He and Sofie often rushed into the root cellar following the false alarm of the Klaxon. Only three air raids ever struck Ulm, all in the final months of the War. The first and worst hit that past December, the third just last month. The bombings had left

most of the city center in ruins, but their farm was too far out to feel the effects beyond stunted trade and their spooked cow not giving milk for days.

They were poor, they were careful, they were hidden in ways most would never know. Bertie sometimes felt ill at ease with their fortune, but they had made it to the end of the War. They had endured. If Bertie sometimes forgot who he had been in his twenties and thirties—his suits and ties, his assistance of Doktor Magnus Hirschfeld at the Institut, his leisure time drinking beer with his friends at the Eldorado—at least he had Sofie and their life together. His only keepsake from the past was a thick album full of photos of his friends, clippings from newspapers from Amerika, and his own transvestite card.

He was forty-seven now. There was always dirt under his fingernails, his hands rough and callused, his cheeks beaten by weather. He wore a flat-cap and working trousers in dark gray, his braces frayed, a dirtied white button-shirt, collarless and currently rolled up to the elbows. He still combed his brown hair from a side part, but without the shiny pomade of his youth. His hair looked fluffier and less refined. The gray did not help.

He felt his stamina wane among the other slow signs of aging: the weakening of his eyes, the one varicose vein that ran the length of his left leg, the modest ridge of fat around his middle that no amount of farmwork could strip away. These were the things his body wanted to do, and so that was what it did. But one of the wonderful things about being a man like him, he assured himself, was he would likely never lose his hair.

He finally unfolded his paper from the top down, straining to remember his stunted English. The headline was unsurprising, joyous news of the Deutschland surrender, of the end of the War for Europa. Amerika was still fighting Japan, but they had already secured their part of Deutschland, which included Ulm.

Bertie did not know what to expect from the occupation. In his latest trip to town, he heard the rumor that a ship bound for New York City was leaving Amsterdam in three weeks. He and Sofie discussed the

possibility of leaving. But it would require hurdles—stealing away into the night, risking their lives while the Allies continued to attack civilian vessels, being arrested or sent back if Amerika found them out—and they did not know if it would be a necessary feat, starting life over yet again. For now, they put it aside.

He gave a start when he thought he heard a faint knock on the front door, but he quickly dismissed it as his perpetual worries of being caught. He opened the paper and skimmed over the smaller headlines with disappointment. It was not until the end of the paper, near the bottom of the second-to-last page, that he saw something to finally add to his old collection:

> THE GIRL WHO "MARRIED" A GIRL
>
> The astonishing case of a pretty woman who masqueraded as a man for over thirty years and married her lover. Only to be found out after her death, her lover claims she did not know, and the deception has swept across the United States.

It was the Midwest of Amerika. It was always the Midwest of Amerika. He had been thinking about it for a long while, had been talking to Sofie about it for the whole twelve years of the War and then some, back when he had first noticed the pattern and started his collection. The place where someone like him could live with little intrusion. The amount of articles proved that sometimes one could be found out, but they also proved how many more were not. Transvestites were congregating there, a place of privacy and simplicity, of honest work and no questions, and he wanted to be there. He had always wanted to be there. At least since he and Sofie had lost everything.

He picked up his scissors and cut out the article with an old precision bittersweet to remember. The paper was left with a rectangular window. He held it before his face, slowly rotating his torso with a small smile as he looked at the world through his little picture frame. A moment of calmness for himself, a forgotten familiarity, an instant to capture when the world was in that blissful spot between one bad thing ending and another beginning.

The breeze picked up once more, stronger and shifting, and a smell slid past his nose. He wrinkled at it. Not dirt, not fertilizer, not sweat or worry. None of the smells he was used to. It was something foul, something new. Something wrong.

He placed his paper and scissors down, standing up as he sniffed. His first instinct was the old toilet shed nobody had the heart to finally break down. But when that proved as much a relic as it had been when Bertie and Sofie had arrived, he sniffed around again, craning his neck.

The wind gave another gust, and he heard the thin rustling of paper behind him. He turned to see the article take off, gliding happily through the air toward whatever freedom it sought. He swore and ran after it. He grabbed at it but missed, the clipping dodging him at the last moment like this was a game he was in the mood to play. It gained courage across the fields, tumbling, rolling, and already persistently out of reach.

It was not until he noticed the chickens gathered in the asparagus ferns that he stopped. One of the hens pecked at something hidden from view. Then again, then a third time. The smell got worse the closer he got.

It was the battered bottom of a bare foot he saw first, the toes flattened against the earth, the heel caught in a wink of sunlight through the thin leaves in the wild bushel of fronds. He feared the worst. An asparagus thief, most likely, perhaps who had gotten curious about the poisonous berries that hung from the swaying lace.

Bertie defied his instinct to be cautious. He ran to the body. "Hello?" When he heard nothing, he ran faster, squinting through his aging eyes. "Are you alright?"

He slowed to a walk. The chickens scuttled away. The foot was indeed attached to a body, equally small and pale white. The body itself was prone, dressed in the dirtied stripes of a camp prisoner.

Bertie swore under his breath, trying to remember where the nearest camp was. The prisoners had been liberated two weeks ago, all the news claimed. He dared to shake the body's shoulder. "Hey! Can you hear me?!"

There was a slight stir and that was all Bertie needed. He gently turned the body over. The cheekbones were shadowed, the skin stretched tight and thin, the peek of collarbone looking like it had been sucked dry. But Bertie barely registered the emaciation. What kept his

eyes was the black triangle sewn brashly against the stripes, and the face that he was sure, very sure, he remembered. The shame choked him.

He did not bother to think of the consequences, did not bother to wonder if this was the type of black triangle he would care most about, that perhaps he was mistaken, hoped he was mistaken. He picked that body up into his arms, too light, and ran to the house.

There was a low noise from his arms, perhaps a groan of worry. An arm dangled, head cocked back, mouth slightly parted.

"It's okay," Bertie said. "I have you. You're going to be alright."

He left his teacup to go cold, left his scissors and newspaper and thoughts.

"Sofie!" he called out as he struggled inside. "Something's happened!"

A drop from the cheesecloth landed on his shoulder, and he felt the chill as it reached his skin. The floorboards creaked the farther into the kitchen he went. He was careful as he crossed over the potato planks, weaker and looser than the others, worried that this extra weight, however sparse, would send him crashing through.

Oma had showed them both how to pull up those loose floorboards to expose the earth underneath. They would bury several potatoes from the end of the season to chop and cure in the following year.

The kitchen smelled of firewood and dried onion, a hint of animal and manure hiding beneath. A potent medley of herbs accented it all from the flavors Sofie grew on the windowsills, their dark little sprouts reaching toward the sunlight. Windows were plentiful in the kitchen area, their small centers sliding open for fresh air in the coldest parts of winter. They were all currently open, bringing in the breeze from all sides, the thin curtains billowing softly.

A modest cocklestove of stone rested at the center of the kitchen to warm the rooms. Their cast-iron cooking stove was against the wall, overlooking the conifers, the low ceiling blackened above it from generations of smoke. A sturdy square table rested in the near corner, flanked by two chairs and a substantial length of bench built into the two walls.

But Sofie was not at the table, her letter to her parents already addressed and ready for the post. Katze blinked up at Bertie beside it, swishing her tail as if ready to pounce for the sake of pouncing.

"Don't you dare," Bertie said. He did not know her name, did not care to know it, and so he just called her Katze. She belonged to their neighbor Frau Baer, had no business being in the house so many morgen away, but she was always finding her way inside, surely mostly from when he and Sofie left the windows open every day for fresh air. She seemed determined to come in just to torture him every day. Biting him, clawing him, getting underfoot, chasing the chickens. She seemed indifferent to Sofie, which made Sofie find the situation all the more amusing.

Bertie hissed at her now, causing her to skitter away into the sitting room with a flurry of her nails, running across the keys of the upright piano in a discord of notes. She jumped up, nearly knocking Oma and Opa off the top of the piano before leaping to the nearest sill. As she disappeared out the window, he could hear Sofie weaving fast down the old staircase.

"What is it?" she said, as scared as he was these days of the latest occupation. "What's happened?" She stopped dead in the kitchen entryway as her eyes lay upon Bertie and his bundle. Her blond hair was much longer than it had been in the old days, her temples suggesting gray under a discernible eye. The skin at her jawline had a slight sag. Her fashion was long gone, replaced with the drab gray of worn working dresses, but she still shone in his eyes.

Bertie did not know how to address the body in his arms. "Black triangle," he managed to get out before his voice choked off. He vowed years ago that he would not cry about things like these anymore. Crying spent energy needed to do labor, to eat and to live, and these were things he could not change, no matter how much he blamed himself for them. But to not cry was a silly promise. "We have to help."

"Oh, Bertie," she breathed, the pair of them once again letting their natures slip while indoors, for it felt impossible to stop calling each other by their real names entirely. "We don't even know what type of black triangle."

He did not want to tell her this was a face he recognized. "Tell me no and I'll put it back."

"You know I can't say no."

"Neither can I."

She held herself a moment before letting her arms drop. She wore the same face she had the night they had fled, the face she wore every time they heard bad news on the radio, or worse news on the radio, or news that was good for everybody but them. "Let's draw a bath."

The galvanized tub was attached to the cooking stove by a thick pipe, a thinner one underneath for drainage. They bathed there once a week in the hotter months, usually before church, nearly not at all in the winter.

Bertie carried in buckets of cold water to fill the tub. On his first trip, some sloshed onto his sock. He let his foot squish in his shoe as he returned to the pump for more, bucket after bucket. Sofie kept an eye on their guest, who had yet to properly stir.

"Breathing?" he asked every time as he came back in, adding to the tub.

She nodded and fed cold water down the young man's throat. She had already lit the stove, warming the bathwater as Bertie went. When Bertie had brought in enough bucketfuls for ten or so centimeters, they began the undressing delicately. His body was as divulging as the peek of collarbone Bertie had seen, shadow after shadow cast from bone to hollow like bruises. This body was not quite like the skeletons Bertie had seen dangling in the rooms of the Institut back in Berlin, but to see this still frightened him. In the difference of a minute, this fate could have been Bertie's.

Bertie and Sofie were quiet for a short while, the only sounds the gentle sloshing of water from the sponge and the ticking of the kuckuck clock in the sitting room just past the open-faced kitchen. The water in the bottom of the tub quickly grew gray and cloudy. Just when Bertie wondered if they should drain it all and start fresh, the man stirred. A small grunt, a flutter of the eyelids. And then suddenly, awareness as if he had just come up from drowning. His hand shot out, gripping onto Bertie's forearm, his eyes wide.

Bertie looked closer at those eyes, the recognition stronger now. He did not want to remember. He would not remember. The difference of one minute, the neglect that sprang from his own selfishness and fear.

He would finally start to make amends. He would not let the young man know, but he would make amends.

"It's alright," Bertie said with a calm voice. He thought a moment of his next words, for they were the kind of words that could never be taken back. But he was sure he knew him. "I'm a transvestite. I am Berthold Durchdenwald. And this is Sofie Hönig, my lover. We're called Goss and Ina Baumann here in Ulm."

The grip of their guest had loosened upon Bertie's wrist as soon as the word *transvestite* was uttered. "Me, too," came the worn and dusty voice. And then he took a moment, as if he could not remember. "Karl Fuchs."

"A pleasure, Karl. I'm going to get you some clothes and then we'll make you something to eat."

Karl nodded, finally releasing his grip from Bertie's arm and sinking into the water as if it were filled to the brim and still warm. Sofie brought the cup back to him and Karl took it into his own hands this time. He drank in loud mouthfuls until there was none left.

"Why were you still in those clothes?" Bertie asked. "Didn't the Allies liberate the camps weeks ago?"

Karl's voice lowered, as if using it suddenly tired him. "You haven't heard." He looked down at his wet hands. "Nobody's heard."

"Heard what?"

"The Allies." Karl picked at his fingers. "They sent all the pink triangles to jail. And all the black triangles that qualified the same."

Sofie suddenly stood, dripping sponge still in hand, as if she planned to do something. "What for?"

"To start the sentence for their crimes."

"That can't be true. They wouldn't do that." Bertie looked over at Sofie. "Would they?"

Sofie dropped the sponge and gathered Karl's clothes. "We need to burn these immediately."

Bertie nodded and began to tear up the camp wear. The fabric was so threadbare that he wrenched his arm backward with the first fistful. The rest took almost no strength at all. He took the scraps out to the fire pit and set the flame.

He stood with the flats of his palms against the small of his back, looking out across the farm as he made sure the clothing all took. Parts of the Alps were visible in the distance. The apple blossoms were beginning to show on their three trees at the far edge of their land, pollen spilling out as they blushed. The spiky white flowers of the wild garlic had also arrived, sprouting past the bushels of thick green leaves that coated their territory, stretching out from the forest. Bertie left those alone, for wild was wild, and he liked the carpet of greenery that licked his ankles. Their two hazelnut shrubs loomed naked and imposing near the garlic, closer to the forest edge, finally showing peeks of leafing. They would not be ready until fall, and they would likely produce poorly. Bertie swore he could already smell their earthy sweetness on the air.

But now, it all felt different. He thought about what Karl just said. When he was sure all the scraps had caught fire, he returned inside.

Sofie was finished washing Karl. She picked up the final bucket, still cold. "Sorry," she said simply before dumping it over his head. Karl closed his eyes against the cascade, but he did not seem to mind the cold. His shoulders slackened against the rush, head tilted toward it like the sun. He swallowed the water that trickled into his mouth. When it was over, Karl opened his eyes and gave a gentle puff of exhale, the small droplets glinting against the streaming sunlight before they fell in feathery plumes. Droplets clung to his dark lashes. Bertie knew he was being watched as he went up their single wheezing staircase.

He ignored the second bedroom, door always closed, bringing down some of his own clothes instead. More working trousers and his other flat-cap, a worn button-shirt. He held the bundle out to Karl, but as Karl stood and dried off, Bertie realized the young man was smaller than he was not just by many kilograms, but some centimeters as well. Bertie could barely get by on his own with the clothes of Opa, bigger and longer than he could comfortably work in. On Karl, they would look ridiculous. He would look suspicious.

"Wait," Bertie said, his voice flatter now. The thought sank his stomach. "I have others."

He went back upstairs, put away his own clothes in the main bedroom,

and stood out in the small hallway. He rested his hand on the door of the second bedroom. Finally, he turned the knob. It was thicker in there, older and dusty, the only room they did not air out. Not since they had moved into the main bedroom. It was hell for Bertie to live in here before then, and he could not, had not, stepped inside it since. He opened the curtains; dust motes leaped off and fell to the floor. He squinted against the sunlight as if he had been left there in the darkness, too.

He did not like the room's quiet. The creaks of the floorboards sounded disrespectful, like laughing in church. He knew the noises, dredged up like an old memory, and they made him sad. He surveyed Gert's small room as he filled his lungs for a sigh. The single twin bed, his wardrobe, the small desk Gert studied at in his youth, even his old toy chest filled with glass marbles and wooden planes before he left for Berlin. His life before he met Bertie. The place where he was loved.

Bertie took a moment to release his breath, to gather himself before he opened the wardrobe. As the wooden hangers wobbled, the smells of Gert wafted out, compressed and ready to pounce, hitting Bertie hard. The beer drinking, the singing, the walks around the Tiergarten, the laughing, the times they fell asleep on each other, with each other, in Bertie's old apartment. He felt a pressure surge in his head and he crouched down in a single sob. He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth and nose to keep him from biting his tongue. The fingers of his other hand balanced him in his crouch, uncovering a streak of hardwood in the dust. He breathed through his own skin, the smell of dirty fingernails and apple blossoms and feed scraps, of chores just that morning before he saw Karl, before he had to go into this room.

He suddenly was not sure how long he was taking, how long poor Karl was standing naked and cold in the middle of the kitchen. He breathed twice more, deep, before removing his hand from his mouth. He forced his knees to straighten. He took things out of the wardrobe with as little thought as he could manage. Some trousers, a shirt, a pair of braces. Socks and shoes.

He left the bedroom door open as he left. Bertie knew what keeping someone in their home would mean.

Gert's clothes fit Karl much better. Bertie helped him dress as Sofie heated a cast-iron pan, the handle wrapped thick with old fabric and twine. They did not need to discuss as she fried all three eggs the chickens had laid that morning.

Bertie went down into the root cellar, the square grids of stone smelling of damp and dirt. It was notably cooler than the rest of their home. The potatoes he had harvested when they caught word of the War's end were there, alongside their cabbage and kohlrabi from early spring. Their onion bulbs were endless. He knew he should be grateful, but sometimes he was not. The onions never stopped. They split and split and kept growing from themselves. They were like a plague. He was long tired of the turnips and radishes of winter, the beets, some of the mushrooms left from the fall forage, and was glad they could soon move on to fresher things. The fiddlehead ferns and tender green onion stems were already long gone.

He fished through jars of pesto from their wild garlic and pulled out one of apple preserves. He returned to the kitchen and set Karl a plate as Sofie warmed a thick slice of stale bread. Karl sat at the table in his new clothes. He was on the bench side, his back to the open windows toward Ulm proper, staring at both of them silently as the breeze caressed his neck. Bertie was not sure if Karl was too tired or just did not know what to say. He worried he was being watched. He worried he was being remembered.

Bertie and Sofie loaded his plate. Karl thanked them many times until they both insisted he actually eat. Bertie watched quietly as Karl ate faster than he should have, barely chewing, but neither of them wanted to lecture him.

"Where did you come from?" Sofie finally asked.

Karl slowed his chewing. A dribble of yolk leaked from his mouth and he licked it away, glancing at the table before meeting her eye. "Dachau."

Bertie gave a slight jump, like he had been stuck with a pin. He willed himself to say nothing.

"You came all the way from Dachau?" Sofie said. "Isn't that over a day's walk without rest?"

"I've been so tired and staying out of sight that it took me two weeks to get this far." Karl suddenly looked confused. "It's been about two weeks since the War ended, right? I worry I lost count."

Sofie nodded.

"Were there others like us there?" The words spilled from Bertie, his resistance weak.

"Don't push him right now, Bertie."

"Did you come across anyone named—wait, wait, I have pictures…"

"Bertie."

But he was already kneeling to the potato boards, lifting the few he needed to pull out a burlap sack, smashing his finger between two of them in the process. He pushed aside his old work satchel from Berlin and removed a thick photo album from the sack. Returning to the table, he scraped Karl's plate to the side and slipped the album, opened to a page of photographs, before him. He pointed.

"Anyone here? Karsten? Gebhardt? Markus?"

"Bertie." Sofie's tone was twice the warning it had been before.

"Wait, wait." He was talking faster now, his breathing lighter. He flipped a page until he found a photo of a younger him sitting in a chair at the Eldorado, grinning widely as a smaller man sat in his lap, holding up a passport and laughing. "Him. Do you recognize him?" He could have sworn he saw a small spark light in Karl's eyes. A slight change in the way he held his jaw. He felt both hopeful and sick.

"Bertie—"

"His name is Gert Baumann." He was tripping over his own tongue now, his voice unnecessarily loud. "He—"

Sofie yanked the album from him so hard that Karl's plate almost crashed to the floor. Karl caught it with both hands, his face still as quiet and hidden as when Bertie had started.

Sofie clutched the album against her lap, her veined pianist hands sharp as claws. "Not. Now." She stared at him until he sat back down.

The quiet suddenly felt too much. Bertie bounced his leg beneath the table, his eyes flickering to the album as he opened and closed his hands in his lap. He felt like when the War had made him stop smoking.

Sofie turned her attention back to Karl. Her voice was gentler toward him. "How did you manage to get out?"

Karl slowly scraped the plate with his fork for the last dried flecks of yolk. He sucked on the tines. "I fled when they came."

"Who?"

"The Allies."

"Is it true?" Bertie stuck in again. "They're setting everyone but us free?"

Karl nodded slowly at the table, the fork still dangling from his mouth. He kept sucking on it like a nervous tic. "Anyone with a pink triangle was taken away immediately. All those with black triangles were cross-checked with the surviving Nazi records. If you qualified, you went, too. I ran while they were checking for mine."

Sofie clutched the album tighter in her lap. "And so you just . . . ran? They didn't shoot you?"

"The only difference I've seen between them so far is their style of murder. I was surprised when I made it past the grounds alive. That hadn't been my plan. I've been wandering ever since, hiding and stealing wherever I can." He glanced at Bertie before looking back at his plate. "I was going to steal from you, too. The last few farms either just harvested their latest crops or recently planted the new ones. Your neighbor had nothing. But then I saw your asparagus ferns." His thoughts seemed to trail off as his gaze wandered to the aged, upright piano in the sitting room before finally looking back at the pair of them. "I'm in Ulm?"

Sofie nodded. It was a full minute before anyone spoke again. "How old are you, Karl?"

It was a fair question. Men like him and Bertie were often difficult to pinpoint. Sofie sometimes joked about her jealousy that Bertie was a year older and yet looked at least fifteen younger.

Karl moved his mouth as if to answer with confidence, but then caught himself. Once more, his mind seemed to trip over the question. "What's the year?"

"Nineteen forty-five."

He licked his dry lips and Bertie got up to refill his water cup for him. Karl furrowed his brow, clearly trying to hide that he was counting

on his fingers. They twitched one after the other in lines as his mouth faintly moved. When he came to his answer, his face weighed heavier than before. "I think I'm twenty-seven now."

Bertie spoke again in an attempt to make amends from earlier, to keep himself from asking what Karl had witnessed while inside Dachau. "You'll stay with us in the spare bedroom upstairs. We'll just need to keep you hidden until we know what's happening with the Allies."

He did not want to say that even when wearing Gert's clothes, Karl was not immediately convincing. His manner of speech, the way he carried himself, nothing seemed to be working for him. Before '33, it would have been less of a problem. But these days, being unconvincing put all of them in danger, especially if what Karl was saying was right.

Sofie glanced Bertie's way. They seemed to have the same thought. "We can't let anyone see you. Not yet."

"And perhaps when you're rested," Bertie said, "I can teach you how to transvest."

Karl placed the fork against his mouth, his bottom lip puffing slightly between the tines. He swallowed. "I am not a man exactly like that."

"I know, but being"—Bertie cast about for the proper word—"*unassuming* is our only choice."

"Or you could wear some of my things," Sofie added gently.

Karl put the fork back down on the plate, his eyes now to the table. "So we have to be who we're not in order to be who we are."

"I'm afraid so, yes." He knew Karl knew it was the truth, but also knew how much he did not want it to be true. "Even before, we only got what we got as long as we didn't draw attention to ourselves. If we were respectable, if we behaved like them, then we were rewarded. It surely would've gotten better over time, and some strides were being made, but . . ." It was not necessary to finish his thought.

"And if either of us were to be found out, it could put all of us in danger."

Sofie nodded. "Me by association, but yes. But once you've gotten used to it, you just need to do it outdoors, among other people. Otherwise, you can stay here and work on the farm."

Karl toyed with the fork, nudging it gently across his plate and back.

His brow flattened and his mouth twisted into a grimace of defeat. "What sorts of things would you teach me?"

Before Bertie could answer, a sound hit his ear. Across that late, quiet morning, slow footsteps scraped against the dirt path outside.

"Down!" he rasped. Karl ducked beneath the table before the command was even fully uttered. Frau Baer turned onto their path just as Karl's back disappeared from the open window. Small and stooped, she patted her fraying church hat atop her cottony hair. She looked as unpleasant as ever. Bertie never trusted a lick of sweetness from her.

Sofie angled her chair in front of where Karl crouched while Bertie answered the door, positioning himself to further block her view.

"Herr Baumann!" she said in her singsong way as he appeared. Her Deutsch had such a light accent that Bertie could never quite place it. He suspected she originally came from Austria. "Why weren't you at church?"

Neither he nor Sofie realized how much time had elapsed since they found Karl. "Oh!" He reminded himself to resonate his voice, to draw the breath from his stomach. He stood straighter. "I was feeling ill."

"But you've never missed church." Frau Baer attempted to peer over his shoulder, so Bertie angled himself further in the opening of the door to block her view. "You even hobbled in that time you twisted your ankle in a rabbit hole."

Squeezed between the door and the frame, he surely made a poor show of looking relaxed. "Yes, well—"

"You should be careful," she said. She leaned in slightly, as if intending to lower her voice, which she failed to do. "Appearances are everything, you know."

He thought about her words, how she always talked like this, something between a signal and a threat. He and Sofie had always concluded the latter. She had taken her flag down as quickly as they had. But that could mean anything. She was nosy, and nosy types were the ones looking to grab information.

"Indeed," he said. "Appearances are quite important. But I fear I must go now, Frau Baer. Must continue to rest. We thank you for your concern."

Frau Baer blocked the door with her fragile foot, and for a brief moment Bertie considered slamming the door on it, to hell with the consequences. "Quite something, the end of the War, isn't it?" It was the fourth time she posed the question to him. In the last two weeks, she had visited three times, forever unannounced, to ask the same thing.

"Why, yes. Yes, indeed it is."

She seemed to wait for more from him, but he did not give it. "What were you burning out back? So early to be handling debris, and on a Sunday no less. It smells like it may have been some sort of cloth?"

Bertie was unsure if this meant she had been sneaking around their property that morning. Perhaps it was something she had done before. Though, surely she would not have done so in her Sunday clothes. But if she had, perhaps she overheard them talking with Karl.

"Your cat let herself into my house again during our fresh-air time," he said after a pause, attempting to pull anger into his voice. "Keep her on your own property. And while I'm so unwell, too."

"How can one control a cat? And she's such a sweet thing. If she doesn't like you, it's your own doing."

Bertie opened his mouth to respond, to readily engage in their usual bicker, but she was not so easily taken off the scent. She ambled several paces to the side, craning around the corner of the house. Bertie was unsure what was wiser, to stay put or to stop her.

"It looks like your teacup is still outside," she finally said, coming back to him. "And a paper. It's like you suddenly abandoned everything."

"Yes." Bertie shuffled, wanting to remove himself from the door immediately. "Well, that was when I suddenly took ill and had to lie down."

"But—"

"Oh! Frau Baer!" Sofie called cheerfully from behind, squeezing through the sliver of open door to appear out in front. "I didn't know you came calling!" She smiled wide. "Thank you so much for coming to check on Goss! But I'm afraid I must insist he return to bed. He's doing much better and I intend for him to stay that way. You know how men are!"

Frau Baer's body slumped lower than its usual stoop at these words,

at the indication toward her own late husband and his illness. It sucked the wind from her.

"Indeed." Her look lingered at the pair of them before she finally nudged her chin toward the front of the door itself. "It would appear you've received an order, too."

Bertie frowned and looked at the door as Frau Baer turned away and down their dirt road. He ripped the folded paper that had been nailed to their door. So that explained the knocking he thought he heard earlier before he found Karl.

They both went back inside and closed the door. Bertie watched through the window to ensure Frau Baer was indeed walking home instead of around to the back of their land. Sofie turned to the table.

"You said you went by her farm first?" she whispered.

Karl remained beneath the table, waiting for a signal from Bertie. "Yes."

"Did she see you?"

"I don't think so."

When Frau Baer disappeared down the road, Bertie gave a small twirl of his wrist near his waist and Karl came out and stood.

"How do you know for sure she didn't see you?" Sofie asked.

Karl shrugged. "I can't." He sat back down at the table. "Why is she so suspicious of you?"

"We took the names of the couple who lived here," Sofie said. "We hoped it would hide any question that the farm was ours. And we're so far on the outskirts of Ulm, only one person would've known."

"Frau Baer."

Sofie nodded. "Honestly, we didn't think she would live for so long. It was a chance we took."

"So why has she never turned you in? Why does she play along?"

She paused. "We still don't know."

As they continued to talk, Bertie opened the piece of paper. It was in English, but that was not what slowed his reading. He read it once, paled, and read it a second time. On his third time, he knew that what he was seeing was true.

Mr. and Mrs. Goss Baumann,

By order of the United States of America, you are hereby notified to report to the Oberer Kuhberg camp on the first of June to begin your compulsory labor. You will work no less than twelve hours each day, at which point you may return home. Any person who does not report for duty will be imprisoned until deemed suitable for work.

—Lt. William Ward, United States Army

It all ran through his mind at once: They would be found out in the camps, surely. Even if they both managed to be unassuming the entire time. And then there was the matter of Karl, who, with his inability to transvest, had suddenly become an even heavier risk than earlier that morning. They could not subject him to the camps again. They would not make him go back. Neither would they end up in a camp themselves after all they had done to avoid one. They had to flee. That boat in Amsterdam was leaving for New York in three weeks, but they needed papers, and they needed reason to be let into Amerika. These were things they could never get. They could not stay, and they could not leave.

"Sofie," he said simply. He handed over the order for her to read. "Things have just become quite difficult."

THE ORIGINAL DAUGHTER

A Novel

JEMIMAH WEI

www.doubleday.com

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PROLOGUE: THE END

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1

Arin was somewhere in Germany when my mother got sick again. She'd been sick before, but never like this, and I knew it was only a matter of time before she would change her mind and start asking for Arin. The prospect filled me with dread. My sister and I hadn't spoken for years, not since she first got famous, not even when my mother was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer a couple of years ago. Back then, too, I'd been afraid that if things got really bad, my mother would want Arin there. But we'd had her breasts lopped off, one after the other, and it appeared to have stopped the cancer's spread. The subject of Arin never came up.

Our relationship hadn't been good for a long time, and in recent years my mother's irreverence had dampened into a more respectable muteness. But after she recovered, my mother immediately became irritating again. She'd lost so much weight from the chemotherapy, it didn't seem to matter that she had no breasts. She sheared off her fluffy black hair, wore nothing but singlets and shorts, and gleefully told everyone passing by the photocopy shop that between this and menopause, she was finally relieved of the trappings of being a woman. The word she used, one I caught her selecting carefully from the Oxford English Dictionary by our sole electric night-light, was "liberation."

Liberation? When had she ever not acted exactly as she pleased? I felt that she was baiting me; I refused to respond. Then, a few days ago, I woke to find my mother still in bed beside me, one arm thrown over her face.

"Ma," I said. "It's eight."

She was usually out of the house by six, either at the wet market or doing exercises at Bedok Reservoir Park with her tai chi group before opening the photocopy shop. To her, sleeping in was something only rich people did, a sign of weak character.

My mother peeked at me from under her arm and didn't say a word. Rare for her to forgo a chance to tease. I put my face to her wrist, her neck, sniffing. When I clambered over her body and saw the milky splatter of vomit on the floor, beside the massive potted sansevieria my mother insisted on keeping by our bedside as an air filter, she hid her face again.

"Get dressed," I said after a long moment. "I'm calling Dana."

Dana was her oncologist, one my mother had scammed into friendship. When they first met, she told Dana she'd been involved with a church deacon years ago who abandoned her when she became pregnant with me, and sweet Dana, in spite of everything one might assume about doctors and intelligence, truly believed God had called her to be the attending physician the day I brought my mother in. All lies. My mother wasn't religious, and my father was a taxi driver. But when I confronted her, she waved me off with a laugh and stayed in touch with Dana, forwarding her prayers and Bible verses on WhatsApp.

It worked. Dana loved my mother. She dropped by the photocopy shop frequently to bring her food, or just to chat, and even ordered me to bypass the hospital's call center and ring her directly if we needed anything. When the neighborhood aunties found out, they teased us relentlessly—of course Su Yang would charm the famously stuffy hospital staff, of course she would be the person to pull the wool over their eyes. Whoever heard of a doctor giving out her personal number, it was absurd, it wasn't done. But in all their ribbing there was a sense of glee, as if we had won something. Not to me. I found my mother's relationship with Dana deceitful; I swore we would never call on this favor.

Yet here we were.

It turned out to be leptomeningeal disease. Neither my mother nor I had heard the term before, but Dana was crying as she delivered the news. She knew we couldn't afford surgery; we were still paying off debt from the first one. Because of her preexisting health conditions, we didn't qualify for the experimental drug trials. Because my mother belonged to the generation too poor, and therefore too proud, for insurance, there were no secret reserves

of cash that could be accessible to us via a sleight of hand in the medical paperwork. It was a terminal diagnosis. Terminal: that I understood. I wanted to know how long she had.

"Anywhere from three to six months with treatment."

"And without?"

"Four to six weeks."

I was stunned. Beside me, my mother let out a little sigh. "No treatment. I don't want to do that again."

The diagnosis invigorated her. She stood and stretched, then hopped around Dana's office, peering at confidential folders, fingering the stethoscope and green swimming goggles hanging by the door; making Dana laugh, teasing her for crying. But her voice was too bright, her eyes tired. As soon as we got home, she showered and changed into a fresh set of clothes. We stared each other down in our bedroom.

"Where are you going?"

"To work."

"They can manage without you, you should rest."

She didn't even stop. "Rest isn't going to cure me. You want me to lie at home like a useless person for the next six weeks?"

I could see her rib cage through the singlet arm holes. She'd gotten so skinny, I hadn't even realized. She watched my face twist and said quickly: "If you want to help, Genevieve, call your sister."

"She's not my sister."

"I want to see you and Arin together one last time." I kept quiet, and she pushed further. "I never ask you for anything." It was another one of her untruths; she was full of requests, both vocal and implied. "Promise me."

"No."

"Then you might as well kill me yourself."

She left.

Later that night, when she crawled into bed beside me, I didn't turn. I pretended I was asleep. But she pasted her skinny body to my back and began speaking. She repeated that she had never asked anything of me, not even when I left her back in 2010 and moved

to Christchurch, New Zealand, maintaining radio silence for six months, refusing to speak to her, refusing to explain how she had offended me to warrant that kind of severance, breaking her heart, shaving years off her life from worry, forcing her to communicate only through Arin, and then when I finally returned, how I exiled Arin, refusing to bend in the last four years, despite being brought up to understand that family was the key, the heart, the cornerstone of life; that, too, broke her heart, how could I be so callous, so cruel, perhaps these rash decisions could be made as a child, but wasn't I already twenty-seven, basically thirty, wasn't it time to grow up, yes, perhaps our childhood wasn't ideal, but whose is; anyway, wasn't it kind of silly to hold on to old grudges, and more importantly, she was dying, couldn't I put aside my own selfish desires for six short weeks, might not even be six, might be four, four weeks minus one day we had just wasted on yet another petty argument, come on, how hard could it be, didn't I love her, didn't I care?

By the end of that tirade, the sun was rising. I was crying too. Wasn't she the one who insisted we would only hold Arin back, wasn't she the one who said it was better to let her go? She was reverting to her old habits of lying in order to get what she wanted, increasingly convinced by the passionate tenor of her own voice till she truly believed the stories she'd constructed. And me—kidnapped by her emotions, unable to protest. A child again.

Even in the dark she could feel me nodding; her agitation subsided.

"You'll call her?"

"Yes."

But I wasn't a good daughter and no longer claimed to be one. There was considerable freedom to be had in knowing and accepting that I was a disappointment to my mother. The minute she let me go I put her plea out of my mind. I'd spent most of my adult life trying to divorce myself from Arin and wasn't about to stop now.

The next day, as if conjured by my mother's desires, Arin appeared on the cover of *Life*! I ignored the headlines and scrutinized the picture. Once upon a time we were so inseparable, people would often get us confused. If the neighborhood aunties had to

differentiate us, they'd say, Su's girls: the big one, the small one, even though I was only a year older than Arin. We looked so alike; people wouldn't believe Arin was adopted. Now, no. The picture showed Arin on a red carpet somewhere, looking straight into the camera. Her hair was coiled and resting at the top of her head like a snake, her eyebrows arched and sly, her gaze simultaneously placid and amused.

I recognized that expression, we'd practiced it together; I felt my own lips curling in response and made myself stop. I recognized, also, the dress she was wearing, a backless silvery contraption from a small Singaporean designer who had gone viral on Instagram after Arin was spotted using one of her pencil cases as a clutch. Everyone knew the story—Arin had reached out to the designer, postvirality, offering her talent a platform, connecting her to couture seamstresses in Jakarta, Indonesia. Like a modern fairy tale, the designer went from hand-sewing small leather goods to creating modern gowns, pantsuits, hairpieces; now, whenever she announced a new collection, women all over the country set alarms on their phones before bed despite their lives occasioning no gowns. But perhaps that was the true marker of her success: one doesn't buy an investment piece without also buying into a grander flight of fancy. *Dreams really do come true*, the designer had been profiled saying, *all you need is that one person who believes in you . . .*

Arin rarely gave interviews and didn't participate in the media circus around the designer, happy simply to remain the catalyst for her success, but I noticed that from then on she only wore pieces from independent Asian designers. When she turned down an offer to be dressed by Valentino, a small wave of think pieces sprouted online, opining how this signaled a turning of the tides, how these young, beautiful actresses from all corners of Southeast Asia no longer felt the need to follow the traditional Hollywood playbook—they had their own ways of doing things, how exciting, how new. The articles flooded the internet for a month before public interest moved on, but the glow of admiration endured.

The narrative was almost flawless. I was impressed. Arin had never been creative; someone in her team must have orchestrated

it. But in her cool, amused gaze, I could feel the undercurrent of delight, smirking at the layers of performance she'd successfully pulled off. I folded the newspapers away.

Another day passed, then another. My mother pressed me about Arin, and I told her I'd been trying, with no luck. Arin was too famous now, it was impossible to reach her; if she didn't believe me she was free to try contacting her herself. My mother got distracted, she returned to work, she asked about Arin again. Each time she asked it was easier to fob her off with an excuse. Because I'd already given my promise, she held on to the childlike trust that it would all work out, that I'd find a way to make it happen. I don't know where her faith in me came from. It made me sick with guilt.

My mother's headaches returned, worse than before. She became even more unmoored, missing days at the photocopy shop and weeping when she realized. At her behest, I went down over the weekend and spoke to the lady boss.

It was located in a string of shops crammed in the void deck under a block of HDB flats five minutes from home, sandwiched between a value dollar store perpetually advertising a closing sale, and a barber offering ten-dollar haircuts. The void deck aunties all recognized me. As I approached, the photocopy auntie nodded and called out in Mandarin: "Su's girl. So big now."

I grimaced. "Ma asked me to apologize in person. She's not well—"

"Yes, that's obvious." The photocopy shop was full of the baby sansevieria plants my mother propagated and dispensed throughout the neighborhood, and the photocopy auntie touched a stubby, swordlike leaf as she spoke. "Tell her to take as much time as she needs."

"Ah—Auntie, can I ask for a favor? Can you let my mother come in as and when she's able? I'll return you the money, you wouldn't have to pay her."

I'd been working up to that offer all week. I wasn't sure how much exactly my mother was paid at the shop or whether I could actually afford to give the money back. I'd only just started a job marking compositions for a private tuition center, it was the kind

of job that paid by the hour, a student job. The photocopy auntie waved me off. "It's been going on for a while, don't worry about it."

"A while?"

She looked surprised that I didn't know. "She misses days here and there, it's fine."

We weren't speaking loudly, but the entire cluster of void deck aunties were listening in. The value dollar auntie rang up a customer, who lingered until it became apparent the conversation wouldn't continue while she was there, then said: "Your sister hasn't been in touch?"

"No, she's on tour."

Disapproval rippled across their faces. None of the void deck aunties had seen her movies, which were too Western and modern, not their kind of thing. As a result, they were caught in between the glamour of stardom, which they did not understand and therefore were in reluctant awe of, and tradition, which they did.

In the end, tradition won out. "You should tell her to come home," the photocopy auntie said. "It's not good for Arin to forget her family when she gets a bit of success. She'll regret it later."

The rest of the aunties began murmuring in agreement. I left.

2

My mother was gone when I let myself back into the apartment, without even leaving a note. I wasn't worried. The parameters of her life only stretched an hour's walk either way. The older she got, the more resistant to public transportation or cars. I sat at the dining table and tried to catch up on correcting compositions.

But evening came and went with no sign of her. I started to worry. I sent her a WhatsApp, I tried to call her—nothing. When she finally walked in, it was close to 10:00 p.m. I was slumped in a corner on the floor, surrounded by unmarked papers, trying to figure out how to file a missing person's report on my phone. She looked surprised. Her phone had run out of battery, she hadn't thought to charge it. I lost my temper; how could she be so irresponsible, so unaccountable, but she found it funny.

"Life can't be lived on a leash, Gen," she said mildly. It was something I'd said to her, when I first left home at twenty-three. I ignored this, I wanted to know where she'd been.

"I went for dinner with your father." She looked at me. "You didn't tell him I was sick?"

"You two don't even talk."

"Yes, dying changes things."

She went into the kitchen, pulling her singlet off as she went, shedding her shorts, too, until she was standing only in her boxers, getting herself a glass of water. "Ma," I said, glancing at the shirtless uncle smoking out of the apartment window across from us, "the window."

She turned to face me, her chest ribbed and bare. When I averted my gaze, she laughed loudly. "Did you reach your sister?"

"Stop asking, I already told you I've tried. Anyway, she's not here, I am."

"Call her again."

"If you want to see her so badly, call her yourself."

She just smiled. "Of course I could."

Was this a game to her? Irritation surged, and I returned to my papers, ignoring her. One of her remaining six weeks had passed, but I could not imagine how my mother might go from the skinny, sarcastic person before me, still present enough to tease and make demands, to a woman on her deathbed. I had begun to doubt the doctor's diagnosis. People made mistakes; in fact, if anyone was to twist out from the grip of certain death, it would be my mother. She had no respect for rules. The thought that a medical diagnosis might be the thing to finally pin her down suddenly seemed laughable.

Dana agreed to meet me privately during her lunch break, but the warmth she exuded in my mother's presence dissipated as I explained my theory.

"For the patient to engage in magical thinking is one thing, but family members need to be realistic." We were sitting in the hospital's kopitiam. I'd offered to buy her a coffee, but she'd waved it off and paid for us both with her staff pass. She'd barely touched hers, and was speaking slowly, looking at me as if I were a child. "You need to be realistic, Genevieve," she repeated. "To be otherwise is dangerous, even detrimental." At this stage, the patient's quality of life was the priority, it did no one any good to pretend otherwise. My mother had already refused medication and surgery. Even though she seemed fine, if a little frail, we would soon reach the edge of a cliff, and the semblance of normalcy would fall off rapidly. Did I understand? It was coming, we were already approaching that point.

She downed her coffee, glanced at the wall clock, and started talking about preparations for the next stage. I nodded but couldn't bring myself to focus on her words. Dana broke off, leaving us to sit in silence as people—other medical staff, patients, families—ate, drank, fretted around us. A couple of doctors called out greetings to Dana as they returned their lunch trays; she acknowledged them with a slight nod. I braced myself for her inevitable reprimand. But when she spoke, her tone had changed. It was low, worried. Unprofessional. Just like that, my mother was with us again.

"You should probably know that a columnist from *The New Paper* has been asking around. She wants to know what kind of care Auntie Su is receiving, and if your sister has been involved at all. Obviously, hospital records are confidential, but if your mother is with a public hospital, it's not hard to put two and two together." Dana frowned. "She's persistent. She's already written to the head of radiology, and a mutual friend reached out to ask if he could connect us."

I didn't know what to say. Dana had thus far been too courteous to articulate her opinions on Arin's absence, but they hovered at the periphery of our every conversation. I was quite literally useless, but Arin? To be so successful, yet absent in person and deed, was unforgivable. "If hospital records are confidential," I said finally, "it should be fine. The reporter won't get anywhere."

Dana's lunch hour was over, she stood up. She looked at me and I felt ashamed. "Auntie Su doesn't need any additional stress now. Call your sister."

A bus arrived with Arin's blown-up portrait plastered on its side. In a fit of childish irritation I let it go by, only to be squished up against a sweaty boy in school uniform on the next one. He had his phone held horizontally and was playing an obnoxiously loud game, each electronic bleep drawing the ire of exhausted housewives and overworked students trying to take naps against the oil-stained bus window.

Then his game was interrupted by an ad. I glanced down: a trailer for Arin's new movie. It was a cheesy superhero flick, a standalone, Arin's character a clear Lois Lane rip-off—though no one but me seemed to have noticed. The trailer showed a transformation sequence, the protagonist leaping out of his office window in a running jump. Arin's anxious face filled the screen, her hair teased into fat waves, nose scrunching in an adorable gasp as her apparently suicidal coworker shot upward into the sky, newly wrapped in dark red spandex. The worry melted away, her eyes sparkled with admiration and mischief. A tiny X appeared in the corner of the screen, but the boy didn't notice, he was enamored. It wasn't even one of Arin's good angles, but it was easy to conflate fame

with beauty. The trailer continued playing: he took a screenshot. I flinched at the sharp snap of the mechanical shutter, and the boy became aware of my presence for the first time. His body stiffened slightly; then, without ever looking at me, he relaxed into a defiant, embarrassed pride.

I got off the bus.

Dana was wrong. The tabloid writer could dig all she wanted, but Arin was unimpeachable. She was the only Singaporean in recent years to breach mainstream Hollywood, making her a national treasure—any attempt to defame her would immediately be buried by the newspaper editors, only bubbling up in gossip forums or a pathetic LiveJournal blog, if at all. But more than that: even if the writer found us, interrogated us, we wouldn't have sold Arin out for a story, no. Nor would I ever allow Arin to pay our way out of this situation, even if my mother's disease weren't terminal. Not with the success she earned by plagiarizing my life. To win by accepting her help would be no triumph at all.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Dana's expression, the way her voice had dropped as she tried to draw me into a conversation about Arin, the frustration that had flashed across her face at my dull response. In that twist of her mouth I could see what was so plainly written on the faces of everyone who interacted with me—that they had gotten the short end of the stick, that they had gotten hold of the wrong sister. I was usually able to take comfort in this; it was better they had no expectations of me. Still, on occasion, my old sense of injustice bubbled up. Like now. I went home, ignored my mother's questioning face, and thought to myself, if only people knew. The story wasn't that Arin was unfilial, abandoning the family that had taken her in all those years ago. It wasn't that she wouldn't drop everything and reappear, the shining, generous daughter, by my mother's side again.

It was that she was an impostor, a usurper. Our violent amputation took eleven years. My independence from her was hard-won, it was the most precious thing I owned. But if she came home, I wasn't certain I could leave her again.

PART I: A BEGINNING

1996

Singapore

3

Arin didn't appear the way regular sisters did. She was dropped into our lives, fully formed, at the age of seven. And she left like this, too: suddenly, decisively.

I was eight. One evening in May, right before dinner, my grandmother explained that her husband, who'd been politically "disappeared" and presumed dead when my father was a child, had actually been thriving this entire time in Kedah, Malaysia, with his other family, right up till last week, when he tripped and ripped his thigh open on a rusty nail. The wound blistered and bloomed, refusing to close up; it got infected, the fever burned through his body, shutting down his kidneys and liver, washing acid through his blood. Within two days he was dead. He'd left behind a son, daughter-in-law, and a gaggle of grandchildren, but his secret family could no longer afford to raise them all, so we would be taking in the youngest, a girl around my age. After she said this, she looked at my face, switched from Hokkien, which, like most of my generation, I could understand but not speak, to Mandarin, which I could understand *and* speak but not to her satisfaction, and in the manner of one making something absolutely clear, said, "Sepsis—blood poisoning. This is why you're not allowed to play in the longkang."

I knew better than to talk back. There is a kind of person who considers themselves superior for having endured calamity, and my grandmother never let you forget that she'd lived through the war as a little girl. Instead, I dipped my head and peeked through my eyelashes at my mother, who had turned very slightly toward my father. Her eyes were creased attentively, but in her mind a million shifting calculations flipped. She blinked once, then again, in quick succession.

My father snapped out of shock. "He's *alive*?"

My grandmother made an impatient sound. "No."

He backtracked. “Right, right. How do you know this?”

“Qiang—that’s your pa’s other son—wrote to me.”

“Were you aware he had another family?”

“Obviously not.” My grandmother drew a piece of folded yellow paper out of her pajama pants, which she wore everywhere, including to the wet market. It was full of angry Mandarin characters. My father held himself very still as he scanned the letter, clean-shaven skin drawn tight against his jawline. But I knew he was exerting himself greatly for this show of self-restraint. His cheeks blanched the way they always did when confronted with life’s indignities: rising gas prices, my grandmother’s tyranny, that time he accidentally drank from the cup of chicken fat my mother was saving for rice. I watched this struggle play out on his face, imagined him crushing this new information into a small, compact pill and swallowing it. I watched his Adam’s apple quiver and held my breath. It seemed to me that as long as he maintained his composure, whatever threatening reality my grandmother had conjured wouldn’t spill out and scald our family. His eyes ran over the paper, twice, thrice, before his lips parted.

“Even so,” my father said, still in that same fantastic, careful tone. “He made his choice years ago. I don’t see how this affects us.”

My grandmother put her hand out. He folded the letter in half but didn’t move to return it.

In Hokkien, the shrinking dialect of her authority, she snapped: “I’ve already agreed.”

“Just like that?”

Only now did my father’s voice peak. I glanced at him, alarmed. He’d forgotten to close his mouth after the outburst and his lower lip hung slightly open, revealing a pale white ring of gnawed skin. It was the first time I’d seen the inside of my father’s mouth, his defeat so total that to this day the increasingly lonely sound of someone speaking Hokkien is enough to render me pliant. Calmly, my grandmother extended her wrist and plucked the letter from between his fingers.

“What’s past,” she said, “is past. Let’s eat.”

4

There was no arguing with my grandmother. The apartment was hers, she had final say over any decisions made in it. When my mother's parents disowned her for getting pregnant and dropping out of school, my grandmother took her in. For three weeks, the women shared a bed while waiting for an appointment at the Registry of Marriages, my father curled beside them on the floor. After that, my grandmother moved behind the foldable shoji screen, which demarcated her new sleeping area from the rest of the living room, disabled the lock to the only bedroom, and insisted the newlyweds take it.

We lived in a second-floor flat in one of the oldest Housing Development Board blocks located within Bedok's Fengshan Estate. My grandmother bought it dirt cheap from the government in the late 1970s with money she'd made from, among other questionable things, nursing strangers' babies in her right hand and selling contraband cigarettes out of her left, and had lorded it over us ever since. And although she could neither speak nor read English, and was in fact openly bitter about the government's decision to make English the language of administration and Mandarin the official dialect unifying the various clans of Singaporean Chinese, thereby rendering much of her Hokkien/Cantonese/Hakka/Teochew/Hainanese-speaking generation linguistically irrelevant, my grandmother would often lay open *The Straits Times* on our dining-room table and cackle at the real estate ads, mocking the newer condominium developments on the Bedok Waterfront for having one-bedroom units five times the price of our home. If I could catch her in these moments, and join her in decimating the false promises of private property by pointing out and translating the descriptions and price tags on apartments with the same square footage as our own government-subsidized flat, she'd forgive my slouching posture of perceived

disrespect, my general inability to match up to the idea of who she thought I should be, and for one glorious second, look at me with pride, which on my luckiest days manifested in her giving me a dollar.

Other than that, she was mean. And unrealistic. Even I, at eight, could see this. In this home, everything was something and also something else. The living room was also my grandmother's bedroom. The dining table was also my mother's study. In the one bedroom, my parents and I were stacked. Growing up, I slept each night cocooned between both parents, their hands finding each other over my growing body and latching on so they wouldn't fall off either side of the bed. Already they had begun fretting over what they'd do when I grew too big for the bed, a point I diligently endeavored to delay for as long as possible by rationing out my meals. Which begged the question: Another child? Where would we put her?

My grandmother refused to discuss it any further. The fact that we had no money, no space—none of this mattered. She had made her decision. As my father asked increasingly agitated questions, interrogating the veracity of her account, the logistics of taking in another child, debating our obligations to relations we hadn't even known existed, she spooned small, deliberate bites of dinner into her mouth. Her papery cheeks moved only to chew the food, her throat bobbed up and down with each swallow. When her bowl was scraped clean, my grandmother unfolded herself painfully from the chair, putting one hand on the table to steady herself, and left the flat for one of her long walks, which she claimed were good for digestion.

The second her steps faded, my mother turned to him.

"Here. Let me see." She had changed into her black satin kimono right after getting home from work and, while reading the letter, toyed with the neck of the T-shirt she wore underneath for modesty. "Ming," she said, finally, "this only just arrived, Mama must have been reacting impulsively. Let her calm down, then you two can talk properly."

I let myself sink into the thick, low cadence of her Mandarin. For a moment, it seemed unfathomable that things might not play out exactly as she said.

But my father, who I had only ever seen performing loving ges-

tures toward my mother, who still kissed her when he thought I wasn't looking and laughed at her jokes, who gave her his daily earnings at the end of each day even though the neighborhood aunties gossiped and called him pussy-whipped, surprised us both by laughing loudly.

"It's fine, Su," he said. His face smoothed out and took on an expression of amusement. "She's old, she's losing her mind. How could my father have had another family? He's been dead for years."

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