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— SUMMER 2025 —



What Will You Read Next?

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Excerpt from *Sunburn*

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Excerpt from *The Whyte Python World Tour: A Novel*

© 2025 by Travis Kennedy

Excerpt from *The Great Mann: A Novel*

© 2025 by Kyra Davis Lurie

Excerpt from *These Summer Storms: A Novel*

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Excerpt from *Loved One: A Novel*

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First published Doubleday, Crown, Ballantine Books, Alfred A. Knopf, Viking, Dutton, and Random House, which are divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Verve.

First published by Alcove Press.

First Printing, 2024

First Printing, 2025

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CROWN



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Summer Reading Excerpt Sampler 2025

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sunburn

"Addictive . . . lushly written."

—LAURA SIMS,
author of *LOOKER*



A NOVEL

CHLOE MICHELLE HOWARTH

SUNBURN

First published in 2024 by Verve

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First Melville House Printing: May 2025

Distributed by Penguin Random House LLC, 1745 Broadway, New York,
NY 10019 USA. www.penguinrandomhouse.com

Melville House Publishing

46 John Street

Brooklyn, NY 11201

and

Melville House UK

Suite 2000

16/18 Woodford Road

London E7 0HA

mhpbooks.com

@melvillehouse

ISBN: 978-1-68589-211-1

ISBN: 978-1-68589-212-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025934187

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and
compliance is Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621
Tallinn, Estonia. gpsr.requests@easproject.com

APRIL 1991

IN THE LAST YEAR, THINGS have changed. These days Martin cannot pull himself away from Rita for long enough to even look at me. Only once, on my seventeenth birthday, does he take himself from her to give me a peck on the cheek and wish me a nice day. As he leans in towards me, I swear I can hear a low sound of longing, gurgling deep inside him. Sometimes I just hear what I want to hear.

It's hard not to convince myself that he still wants me when everybody tells me that he still wants me. Isn't it sad that we are still at this? Mother, the girls, all of Maria's sisters, they tell me to be patient, because soon Martin will realise that he never cared about Rita and that he should be with me instead. It makes me feel bad for her. Even when she has him in the palm of her hand, nobody believes that she has him at all. I wonder if he realises all the things that people say about us; I wonder if he hates me for it. All year he has had an arm around her and ceaselessly talked about her and been happy with her, and yet the weight of me is on his back. His mother won't let him forget that I am only down the road, with my lovely farm, with my two parents and all my nice, traditional ways. Similarly, my mother won't let me forget that teenage romances don't last and that all that camouflage will give Rita awfully muscular legs and that men may wander but they always come back. The expectation for us to be together doesn't weigh as severely as it once did, but it is there, undeniably, and will only get worse when they break up. If they break up. The girls keep

whispering about how fat Rita looks in her school jumper. I pretend to care. Poor Rita. Poor Martin! They're only trying to have a nice time.

They only want me with him because they want me to fit expectations. There are plenty of other ways for me to do that. I can be a social, busy person, who knows all the girls and likes all the boys. So I go out every evening, I let the boys walk me home, I know every vile detail about the girls, perhaps even more than they know about themselves. It's easy to understand other people and their feelings, and why they all think they are protagonists with important stories to tell. When Patricia bosses us around I know it's only because she has no control at home, and I know that the reason Bernadette is so concerned with her appearance is that she wants a boyfriend more than the rest of us but thinks she is the least likely to get one. When I am this deep in them, it's easy to forget about myself. My own feelings are a hedge of briars that I can't bring myself to touch. There are so many unhappy people, I just don't want to find out that I am one of them. They walk among us, they touch you, and you become them. Introspection is like cyanide. Life is fine this way, ignorance is easy, I do what is easy. Doesn't that make the most sense? I think that is more sensible than worrying about Martin and how he has forgotten me for Rita or worrying about how mean the girls and I really are. It's surely safer to be ignorant than to let myself go on thinking about the many greens of Susannah's irises.

Ms O'Neill, our Home Economics teacher, is one of the unhappy people, and she wants to infect us all. Today Susannah has not brought any ingredients to class. Catriona didn't get home until after eleven, and by then all the shops were closed. It was a human mistake: she just didn't get a chance to buy anything. We are supposed to be making meringue, but instead Ms O'Neill has Susannah standing at her desk and is shouting at her in front of the class.

In September, Ms O'Neill's boyfriend of eight years left her for another woman. We all heard about it. The sky was coloured like pink lemonade, and with a fresh gash in her heart, she walked around the town in a daze, trying to digest what had happened to her. Susannah was there, in a halter top outside the chipper. As an older boy put a lighter to her cigarette, she locked eyes with Ms O'Neill. Because they weren't on school property, Susannah didn't put the cigarette out, rather, she sucked on it as she held her teacher's gaze. The glowing top lit a fire deep inside Ms O'Neill. Since then, Susannah has been her favourite student to pick on. She thinks Susannah is disrespectful and too young to look the way that she did that evening. Coming unprepared to class is just another reason for Ms O'Neill to justify hating a teenager. When Susannah told us about that evening, she said she felt really sorry for her teacher, and she didn't even laugh. It's April now, Ms O'Neill should be getting over that old boyfriend. Something about the Summer coming in makes the students lazy and unafraid; the frustration makes her heartbreak harder to heal from. She cannot understand why Susannah didn't go to the shop this morning.

'I didn't have any money.'

Susannah says softly. We all feel it. A small gleam comes to Ms O'Neill's eye, because she likes making the girl from the biggest house in Crossmore admit that she didn't have as much as a fiver lying around. Since Phil left, and took his income with him, Susannah and her mother have been asset rich, but nothing more. She doesn't even get pocket money unless she begs for it.

In truth, it doesn't matter that Susannah won't get to make meringue today, because this will be the third time we have made it. None of us has ever been able to complete one without it cracking, and Ms O'Neill insists we will make it once a month until somebody gets it right. She says it's something about the way we beat the eggs. I don't

know why it matters so much to her. I could bet my life right now that we will be attempting it again next month. We are seventeen, we don't care about meringue. Ms O'Neill won't stop shouting at Susannah; it's not even interesting, it's just uncomfortable. Another teacher admonishing another student would be entertaining, but Susannah is mortified, we don't want to watch this. Ms O'Neill might never stop ranting, if Eimear didn't interrupt her.

'Sorry, Miss, I've no eggs.'

She says, as she slides her carton of eggs over to Joan's side of the table.

Ms O'Neill likes Eimear, but not enough to abandon the tone of aggression she has set. Huffing, she rolls her eyes like a teenager, but before she can give Eimear a watered-down version of what she gave Susannah, Maria says,

'I've a load of eggs. I've enough of everything, sure, Susannah can help me.'

Ms O'Neill hates this, because she loves Maria, because of her brightness and her bright sisters before her.

'Well, that's very nice of you, Maria, but it isn't really the point. This class is supposed to be about responsibility.'

'Not being cheeky, Miss, but would it not be irresponsible for me to waste all these extra ingredients?'

What angels I have surrounded myself with. How well-assembled our group is. I knew that we were nice girls. For a second, Ms O'Neill is quiet, she is exhausted by this. In the end, she lets Maria share with Susannah, because she can't be bothered arguing anymore. Susannah does not let on that she is upset. She pretends it's all very funny that she got in trouble and that Maria has gotten away with being cheeky, rather than admitting that she wants to cry and that Maria was just

allowed to be charitable. I didn't do a thing. I just sat and watched as she was torn to pieces. And still, somehow, I am the one that she chooses to whisper to,

'Ring me after school.'

How am I supposed to get past this delusion when she comes directly to me? My heart lurches, as if it wants to leave my awful body and go make a home in her. All I want is to avoid what I feel, yet it seems that all Susannah wants is to bring these feelings to the centre of my attention. How lovely it would be to ring her and listen to her. Imagine making her feel better. But I could not say the things that she deserves to hear with Mother listening on the other line. As is my greatest talent, I disappoint Susannah, saying,

'I can't stay on the phone long, Mam will kill me.'

She knew I would say this. It's the attempt at talking that she needs, the thought of actually being listened to terrifies her. That's why she always comes to me, because I never want to listen. The worst of it is, Mother wouldn't really care. There's just something about being on the phone to Susannah that is intimidating to me. Our backs are straight, our heads are down at our bowls, I don't need to look at her to know that she is scowling at me. It's nice to have her staring at me for a change, even if she is cross. Although I can't talk to her on the phone, I am still here for her. I want her to know that I would always be here to disappoint her, if she would only give me the chance.

'Write me a letter then.'

All that venom in her voice. She never talks to me like this. For the rest of the lesson, she ignores me. I mustn't give in, I really can't talk to her on the phone, it's too dangerous. Her sadness would be coming down the line, and even with Padraig crying and Mother breathing into the receiver of the phone in her bedroom, I wouldn't

hear anything but the warmth of Susannah's voice, saturating my cochlear fluids and deafening me to everything but her. There are ways of avoiding my infatuation; talking on the phone would only invite it. I need to ensure I take the right ways, not the ones that she tempts me with.

Susannah knows that I've been avoiding anything intimate with her. I think that's probably why she always seeks it out. There have been times – rare and far apart times – when she has talked to me and I have let myself hear what she is saying. When we are the last two awake at a sleepover, or when we have been drinking, we get brave. She talks, and I don't ignore her. It's only in the darkest dark, and in a voice that isn't her own, when she admits that she's very lonely at home and that she misses her father and that she doesn't have the things she needs. It is very difficult not to let the heat of her whispering burn up my cheeks, not to let the closeness of our hearts affect me. It means the world to me to be so near to her, and so I don't let myself be near to her, because I don't think it means the same thing to her. It is a terrible dynamic, but I don't know what to replace it with.

Maria flicks icing sugar at Susannah's face. They are sparkling, I am ignored. It's probably for the best. When she is close to happiness, I don't mind being a casualty.

Ms O'Neill is squawking about the correct way to hold a whisk.

'Forget the wooden spoon, girls, this thing is nothing like the wooden spoon!'

She spent a year in France, which is the reason the school allows for her temper. Nobody else who applied for the position of Home Ec teacher had studied Culinary Arts in Lyon. Principal Sheehy thinks that it is an attraction for parents considering our school, as if parents don't just send their children to whatever school is closest to home.

Principal Sheehy has notions about St Joseph's that have made teachers like Ms O'Neill untouchable.

When she knows enough people are watching, Eimear discreetly spits into her bowl and asks Ms O'Neill to taste her mixture, to check that it isn't too sweet. Ms O'Neill dips her little finger into the white goo, sucks it off, and in a very local accent tells Eimear,

'C'est parfait!'

'Pervert.'

Eimear says under her breath.

Mine is the only meringue that survives the oven. It has somehow come out perfectly, while everybody else's has cracked in one place or another. I hit its centre with a dessert spoon, so it cracks right down the middle. I want Ms O'Neill to lose all confidence in her ability as a teacher.

I want to ring the school pretending to be Catriona or write to Principal Sheehy on Phil's letterhead, but Susannah is too cool and too proud to let me. Ms O'Neill doesn't realise how threatening Susannah's parents could be, or how threatening I could make them out to be. Nobody seems to realise how obsession has weakened my limits.

Against my better judgement, I write Susannah the letter she asked for, and which she definitely does not want. There's a good chance that if I give it to her, it will be insulting and I will make things worse; but there is just as good a chance that she will think I'm stupid and funny, and it might make her laugh. The small effort might make up for not phoning her.

Each sentence is very carefully considered; I don't want to write anything to upset her further. It comes out very boring, but it is authentic, and even if it is embarrassing, I would like her to know me authentically and to be taken away from the house she is so lonely in, even for a minute.

Susannah,

This evening was dull skied and mild, the type of weather that makes the day seem pointless.

Martin told me that Ronan Breen cut his hand open in Woodwork. The table saw went right through his palm – he said it nearly hit a vein. I don't know how we didn't hear all the commotion. He said that Colm Cafferey fainted and Mr Smith screamed. You'd swear they never saw a drop of blood before. Isn't it typical that we would miss the most exciting thing to ever happen in St Joseph's?

We had veg and chops for dinner. Three pork chops between the seven of us, the state of it. My plate was mostly veg. We could have had one each if mam would buy cheaper meat. She can't afford her own standards.

Tonight has been quiet. Martin is doing my Irish homework for me. I tried to do my Maths homework but I can't figure it out. I'll have to copy Joan's tomorrow. I don't really need to tell you that. Pdraig is crying. I think he's getting a little old to be crying so much. What age do they stop being upset all the time?

It's such a clear night. Don't you love the country sky? I hate so much being in the city at night, when you look up and the sky is orange from all the lights. Things like the sky make Crossmore so nice. I hope you had a good night.

I hope your bed is warm and you sleep well.

See you tomorrow,

Lucy x

PS Sorry about Ms O N, and sorry I didn't say anything.

When I read it back, I cringe at all the things I have said. I shouldn't have told her that we missed something exciting; I should have said

more about Ronan's severed vein. I shouldn't have said that we cannot afford enough meat for all of us. That is mortifying. I should not have mentioned her bed, or its warmth. What a disgusting intrusion. Her bed is none of my business.

In the morning, she is in a sunny mood, like always, like yesterday didn't happen. It might annoy her if I remind her of her cold snap, but still I give her the letter, very casually, like it's a joke. She asked me to write it, and I always do what she asks, doesn't she know that?

Her eyes widen, like she is embarrassed, like this is my petty way of mocking her. But she is sort of smiling.

'Jesus, you didn't actually have to write me a letter.'

'Yeah, I did.'

She puts it in her skirt pocket, and all day I see her touching its folded corner. I don't mind. I don't think about it all evening, or as I go to sleep, I don't.

A new morning comes, and in school, she quietly approaches me and hands me a note of her own.

L,

Sound for the letter. I hope you weren't taking the piss when you wrote it, because I read it while I ate dinner and on the sofa and in bed, and I think I'll read it a thousand times more. It was nice to have some company. I know that sounds sad. I'll take another if you want to write it haha. You're the best.

x S

The best. Tonight and every night, I will defend my title and write her more letters that chronicle my tiresome evenings and do all that I can to keep her warm in her big empty house. And she will read them while eating, lounging, and in bed.

We're sitting in the garden, Martin's back against the bumpy oak tree, mine against the stucco side of the house. He is pulling up clumps of long grass in his fists and dumping them back down again. Last year we would spend so much time together that we hardly had anything to talk about, but now he is with Rita so much, I feel that we are always catching up. It isn't a bad thing. For the first few months that they were together, I felt myself becoming less alluring to him every day. There is no more fascination with my bra straps or a patch of armpit hair missed by my razor. If he is still interested in me, he hides it very well.

It's so nice these days, just me and him hanging out. Everything he says makes me laugh. It's different to the girls, they can't make me laugh like this. Nobody can. When I talk, he listens differently to how he used to, and it is better. Even though he is less intent on what I'm saying, he's also less intent on agreeing with me. It makes things much more interesting. For a while, he was so biased toward my opinion that talking to him was like having a conversation with myself. Now that I'm just an ordinary girl, there is less for him to be careful about.

Although the sun is pale, he is squinting to look at me. And I suddenly notice his legs. Look, they are dark with hair. They were never like that before, were they? Boys take so long to change, and then they seem to do it overnight.

Eimear likes his friend Ryan O' Toole, who doesn't go to our school. Martin knows him from hurling, Eimear likes to go to their matches and watch as Ryan shakes his hair around when he takes off his helmet. She keeps telling me not to tell Martin about it, knowing that I will tell him and that he will tell Ryan. Though Ryan is a little unruly, Eimear could do worse, which she has, and which she will likely do again. Martin has no objection to helping her out.

‘You’re mad for setting people up, aren’t you?’

He leans his head against the tree, passing a long blade of grass between his fingers.

I shrug my shoulders. I suppose I am always setting people up. It’s not a passion of mine, just a task that keeps finding me, and that I have no reason to turn down.

‘You don’t want to be set up yourself?’

He asks, looking down to the piece of grass, almost like he is asking it and not me.

Again, I shrug, I shake my head. I know everybody that he knows, I wouldn’t need him to set me up.

‘You never like anyone, do you?’

He sounds shy, like he is concerned with me always being single, as if it’s dangerous for me.

‘Dunno.’

It’s all I can manage, because I really don’t know. Nobody has ever asked me so directly before, and I’m not sure how to skirt around this. I’m sure I like people, just not in the way that he means. I don’t like any of his friends, if that is what he’s asking. Of all people, I think he is the one I could talk to about this honestly and openly. And yet I don’t. What would I even say?

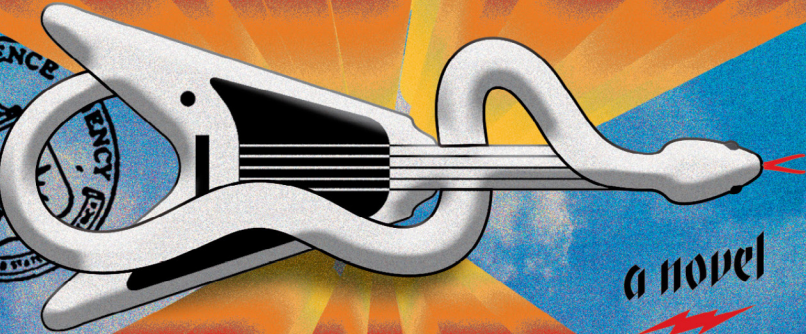
When I answer, he looks smug, and he rubs the piece of grass up to pulp in his palms. He seems satisfied with what I’ve said, as vague and far away as it was. It will be fun to get Ryan to notice Eimear. We like sharing these projects, because ultimately, we don’t care about how they turn out.

It’s so good to do things like this together. I miss him always being around. It’s stupid, because I was never going to be his girlfriend, but I do miss being a priority. Sometimes I wonder whether I’ve missed out on him. Sometimes, when I indulge in my insecurities, it feels

like Rita has surpassed me in importance. All the time Martin and I have spent together is forgotten, because Rita has come along with her warm mouth and easy body. I'm jealous, but I'm not jealous. It's complicated, I think.

the

WHYTE PYTHON WORLD TOUR



a novel

TRAVIS KENNEDY

FIRST DOUBLEDAY HARDCOVER EDITION 2025

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Published by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC,
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kennedy, Travis, author.

Title: The Whyte Python world tour : a novel / Travis Kennedy.

Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024029251 (print) | LCCN 2024029252 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780385551335 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780385551342 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781524712846 (open market)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction). | Satirical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3611.E64 W49 2025 (print) | LCC PS3611.E64 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240812

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024029251>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024029252>

penguinrandomhouse.com | doubleday.com


Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is
Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street,
Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

PROLOGUE

1989

 H, DUDE, this is bad. I'm pretty fucked up.
Not from drugs! I mean, sure, I took some drugs backstage. But just, like, the normal amount of drugs. What's got me worried, as I lurch up this little steel staircase and onto the platform, is that I probably have some broken bones—and maybe I'm bleeding inside my body? If that's possible? Can you play drums with a cracked rib?

This is not good.

I'm on the stage now. It seems too bright. At first, I wonder if the lighting guys got baked and turned the dials all the way up again; but it dawns on me that I probably just have a concussion.

The crowd has finished cheering for Spencer Dooley, our bass player, and now they're going nuts for Buck Sweet on lead guitar. I'm confused. *Why are we doing introductions now*, I wonder, *instead of at the end, like usual*? Then I remember that until a few seconds ago, I was missing, and they couldn't start the concert.

I'm dizzy and nauseous. My head hurts. My ribs hurt. My feelings are hurt. But as I hobble under the lights, I hear it: the roar of a crowd, thousands deep, going totally apeshit because Rikki Thunder has stepped onto the stage. I'm really popular here. The sound wave hits me like an electric shock, and all of a sudden, I'm doing okay.

I limp toward my drum set. Buck steps into my path and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Rikki," he says. "Is that blood?"

That seems like an important question, so I touch my cheek—and sure enough, my fingers come back red. I don't think the gash on my

head is bleeding anymore, but my hair is tacky and stuck to my face on one side.

“Uh, yeah,” I say to Buck. “Definitely blood.”

“Rock ‘n’ roll,” Buck says. “Can I lick it off your face?”

“Nah,” I say.

Buck shrugs and goes back to his spot. Up front, Davy Bones is doing a rooster strut around his mic stand, aping Mick Jagger to keep the crowd busy while I get my shit together.

I can only see his silhouette in front of the lights; but I figure he’s pissed at me, like usual. In fairness to Davy, though, I did just vanish right before showtime—and then wandered onto stage late, looking like I got spit out by a bear.

Davy steps away from his microphone and turns his back to the crowd. “Dude,” he growls, “what happened to you?”

“Nothing,” I say. Davy looks like he’s ripshit at me, but he also looks worried. It makes me feel bad. I can understand why he’s confused. I was perfectly fine the last time he saw me, which was less than ten minutes ago. But needless to say, it turned out to be a pretty wild ten minutes, and I’m not allowed to tell anybody why.

So I wave him off. Take my seat. Find my drumsticks.

Davy turns back to the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen!” he screams into the microphone. “Rikki Thunder!”

A spotlight blinds me. The crowd fucking flips out again. I raise my arms over my head, and I feel a sharp, stabbing pain in my side. But pain won’t matter for the next couple of hours, as long as the crowd keeps screaming and the boys have got a good night’s shred in them.

Davy raises a fist in the air. “And I’m Davy Bones!” he sings, and he drags out “Bones” for at least six seconds. “Are you ready to rock, Berlin?” Davy asks the crowd. Berlin screams bloody murder back at him.

Davy pinwheels his arms and stumbles, like the crowd was so loud that they blew him backward. Even though Davy does this during every single concert, it always makes Spencer laugh so hard that he accidentally tickles the strings on his bass. It’s probably the only reason Davy still does it.

My heart hurts for both of them suddenly. If anything happens to them tonight, it will be my fault. And they won't even see it coming.

"I think they're ready," Davy shouts. The crowd screams again. Spencer chuckles again.

Davy grabs the mic with both hands. He leans forward, hovering so far over the platform ledge that the kids in the front row mechanically put their hands up, in case they need to catch him. He takes a deep breath. And then he shrieks, "*We are Whyte Python!*"

That's my cue. I clack my sticks together four times and then bring them down hard on the drums, just as Davy finishes screaming. Pyro explodes. The arena fills with light. We start playing "Till the Bell Rings."

My eyes finally come into focus. Everything is how it's supposed to be. There are the guys—Davy, Buck, and Spencer—glowing under the stage lights like gods in their leather and scarves and massive hair.

There are the roadies in their jean jackets, scurrying around backstage.

There's the pyro, firing in rhythm with my kick drum.

And there's the crowd: pure chaos. There are enough Germans in this arena to fill a city, a swarming mass of hair and lighters and nudity and mayhem, screaming and dancing and cutting loose together in the darkness beyond the stage. To *our* music. I mean, *come on!*

Now everything's cool. There's no pain anymore. No worries. The crowd's energy fills up my tank.

For a minute, I even forget that at least one of them is trying to kill me.

Shit, dude, let me back up.

1



KAY, I'LL SET the scene for you.

The place: the Sunset Strip in L.A.

The year: 1986.

Me: Rikki Thunder, twenty-two years old. Skinny, leather pants, ripped T-shirt, jet-black hair sprayed a mile high.

I was playing drums in a band called Qyksand with some of my buddies from high school. It's pronounced like "quicksand," but we spelled it with a y, because spelling stuff wrong is rock 'n' roll, bro!

I do have to admit that we were kind of copying this other Sunset Strip band, Whyte Python, by doing the y thing. See, those guys were just on the verge of breaking out. If you're gonna steal something, steal from the winners, right?

Anyway, I thought we were pretty good. Ron Finch was our lead singer, and he had a great scream. There was Sully on guitar, Marty on bass, and yours truly on the sticks and tubs. We covered Mötley Crüe and Ratt, a little Jovi for the ladies, and a few originals that Ron and I wrote together.

But it was seriously dog-eat-dog on the Strip at that point. Metal bands like Van Halen and Mötley were on top of the world, and everybody was doing the same act in their wake. It was all big hair and leather and makeup, everywhere you looked. So it was hard to get noticed if you were new and didn't have a gimmick.

It was getting close to sunset, and the streets were packed with party animals. I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the Shed, a little dive bar that Qyksand played two nights a week. The owner, Gus Conley, paid us a hundred bucks to play—total, not each—but

we had to earn it back for him by getting enough people to pay a cover, so we technically didn't cost him anything.

If we didn't break even, we never got to play there again. He charged three bucks at the door, which meant we needed to get at least thirty-four people to come on a show night or we were a failed investment, and some other band who was just starting out got to take our place.

The Shed was one of the shittiest clubs in town. A lot of bands got started there, but a lot of bands got finished there, too. If you couldn't break even at the Shed, nobody else was going to book you on the Strip. You either had to quit playing music or move to Anaheim, and I don't know what's worse. And there were probably fifty other bands who looked like us, trying just as hard to sell out their own clubs so they wouldn't get stuck playing at the Shed.

Every concert night, the Strip was elbow to elbow with a bunch of other glam band guys handing out flyers. You had to have a shit-ton of flyers. Flyers to hand out, flyers to put on windshields, flyers to staple to telephone poles. And then you needed a whole *other* stack of flyers to replace the ones some dickhead in another band tore up.

But flyers cost money, and between all the hustling and shredding and partying, we didn't have the time or life skills to get actual jobs. So we pretty much just hustled here and there.

I sold Italian ices along the Strip. Sully took shifts with a moving company, and he sold weed. Ron's brother worked at a grocery store, and he paid Ron in cash to clean the bathrooms so he wouldn't have to do it himself. Marty also sold weed; but sometimes he sold it to Sully, which really cut into our profits.

If we had any money left over from the latest gig, it would go toward flyers. If we had any money left over after buying cereal, beer, and weed, it would go toward flyers.

If we got it right, we would have *just* enough money to make *just* enough flyers to bring in *just* enough people to get another gig at the Shed, so we could buy more flyers for next week.

If we fucked that cycle up anywhere along the way—even one time—we would probably starve to death.

I hope that by now I've made it super clear just how important these flyers were.

Now, some of the bigger groups had other tricks to turn out a crowd. They either knew the DJs and could get a plug on the radio, or they had merchandise, or the club they played at would actually promote them with posters and whatnot.

But the real players—the ones who had it made in the shade—had *groupies*.

Groupies were the most valuable resource on the Sunset Strip. Locking down even a small army of groupies was like owning a gold mine that sometimes gave blow jobs.

The bigger bands had groupies making handmade flyers and T-shirts, flirting with horny dudes, talking the band up all over town, and bringing in fans.

The more loyal groupies would even cook and clean for the band, so they could just focus on thrashing. Those bands didn't have to do their own marketing at all—which freed up, like, 90 percent of their time to get better at playing music, which meant bigger gigs and cooler clothes, which meant recruiting more groupies. Next thing you know, you're Poison or Whyte Python, and you're fighting off record labels.

Me and the guys in Qyksand daydreamed about having groupies all the time. Like on the nights when it was raining and we'd be five people short of our quota, so Marty and Sully would have to beg their parents to come to the show and Ron would sneak his grandmother out of her nursing home.

Or the time Sully's van blew a tire coming back from the used music equipment store and none of us knew how to change it, and we pined for a team of grease-monkey groupies to pit-crew for us while we walked to the nearest gas station.

Someday! we would promise one another. Someday, if we work hard enough, we'll have groupies. And then it will be straight to the top.

But we hadn't earned them yet, so it fell on us to spread out across town on show nights and hand out our own flyers. Now, on the night in question, I was posted up in front of the Shed, shoving paper at strangers and saying, "Come see Qyksand at the Shed? Come see Qyksand at the Shed! Lots of babes!" Just mixing it up, seeing what got people's attention.

I wasn't getting very far. Most of the people who bothered to take a flyer just dropped it a few steps later. If I could grab it before somebody else stepped on it, I would pick it up and hand it out again.

I was so focused on getting flyers in hands that I didn't notice a commotion brewing down the block. Then somebody yelled, "Fight!" And *nobody* was taking flyers anymore.

Everyone on the street moved at once, becoming a mob as they formed a big circle around whoever was fighting. I couldn't see who was in the middle, but after a couple of seconds Sully's head popped up and turned my way.

His eyes were saucers, and he very clearly mouthed the word "Ron."

Aw, dammit.

2



HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RON FINCH:

I met the guy in the band room at school, all the way back in junior high. I was practicing on the drums during study hall when the door banged open and this wild little animal came running in. He was short and skinny, with brown hair down to his shoulders. His face was ghost white, and he was sweating bullets. He slammed the door.

I was like, "What's up, dude?"

And he was like, "You gotta hide me."

I told him he could scoot under the risers and nobody would see him. Just as he slipped out of sight, the door banged open again. A gang of dudes came running through, asking if I'd seen a "long-haired little pussy" who had mouthed off to them in the cafeteria. I shrugged. They left.

The kid came out from underneath the risers and wiped tears from his cheeks. Then he puffed up his chest and strutted around the band room, all confident now, and he said that he would've beat all of their asses at the same time but he couldn't get suspended again.

He said his name was Ron, and he asked if I was a good drummer, and who my favorite band was.

His eyes kept darting back at the door while he talked. I could tell he was stalling so he wouldn't have to go back out into the hallway. But I didn't really have any friends, and I was psyched to have somebody my age to talk music with. So I just started gabbing.

I talked about Rush and Zep and Creedence, everybody else with big drums. Ron was soaking it all up, and before we knew it, the

period was almost over. He demanded that I play something on the drums for him, so I played the beginning of “Immigrant Song” by Zeppelin.

His mouth opened in a silly, toothy grin. He said he knew that one, and he started singing. And I shit you not, this little dude sounded exactly like Robert Plant.

I mean, he sounded like Robert Plant if he was thirteen, but still! So I was like, “Dude, we should be in a band,” and he was like, “Dude, we already are.”

That’s Ron.

Now it sounded like he had gotten himself into another one of his jams. I ran toward the scrum and pushed my way into the middle. Sure enough, Little Ron was on the ground and this tall, jacked metal rocker was putting a hurting on him.

“What’s going on?” I said to Sully.

“That guy papered over us,” Sully said.

Aba. In rock-speak, getting papered over meant that the big guy had stapled one of his flyers directly on top of one of ours. It was a dick move, and Ron saw him do it.

Sully didn’t have to tell me what happened next. I had known Ron long enough to fill in the blanks.

“Yo, cut the shit, you guys,” I shouted. I pushed myself in between them, and the big guy punched me right on the back.

It hurt, but it also proved that the guy didn’t really know how to fight. In that situation, he had the advantage. He could’ve punched me in the spleen or chopped my shoulder or at least taken a shot at my head, anything that would actually slow me down. Instead he punched me in the middle of the back, which didn’t really do anything but sting.

I fell into a crouch and brought an elbow up into his stomach. I heard him drop to his knees and let out an “*oof*,” and I knew I had knocked the wind out of him.

I probably could’ve walked away then. But if there’s one thing I learned growing up, it’s this: once you’re in a fight, you stay in it until it’s over.

“Kick his ass, Rikki!” I heard Sully shout from the crowd. I stood

up and leaned over the guy while he was trying to catch his breath. I grabbed a handful of his big mane of hair and the fingers on his right hand, and I bent them backward. He squealed.

"Don't make me, bro," I whispered to him.

"I give," the guy coughed out. "I give."

I let him go, and I helped him to his feet. Sully and Marty helped Ron up, and he looked okay. "All right, dude. Good on ya," I said to the stranger, and I smiled as I wiped imaginary dirt off his shoulders. "See, that's my buddy Ron, and we're just starting out. You don't like to get papered over, either, right?"

"I guess not," he said.

"Who are you playing with?"

"Symphony of Chaos."

"Right on," I said. "I heard you guys shred." The guy grinned a little, all bashful now, and shrugged. Here's a secret: I had not actually heard that his band shreds. But he'd just gotten humiliated in front of the whole Strip by a skinny kid half his size, so I figured he could use a little boost.

"What time do you go on?"

"Like, ten o'clock," the guy said.

"Well, all right," I said. "We go on at six-thirty, over at the Shed. We'll send everybody your way after, if you take my buddy Ron here around and hang flyers together. Cool?"

"Yeah, cool," the guy said. "Hey, I remember when we were going on before dinner. Keep scrapping, dude."

We clasped hands and bro-hugged, cementing a new friendship. I waved Ron over.

"Hey, buddy," I said. "You got yourself some security." I patted the big guy on the back, like you might do to a new dog to show your own dog that everything is cool. "Go get those posters up!"

"With this guy?" Ron sneered. His breathing was short and hitched, like he was trying not to cry.

"Better off with friends than enemies, right?" I said.

"Fine," Ron said. "See you in an hour." And then he looked at me as if to say, *Thank you for saving my ass for the millionth time, Rikki*, and I looked at him as if to say, *It's all good, Ron!* and off they went.

The crowd split up, and it looked like everything was about to go back to normal. I was feeling pretty good about smoothing things over and making a new ally for the band, until I remembered something bad.

Something *really* bad.

A cold shock went through my body.

I had dropped all my flyers.

Fuck, dude.

I scrambled through the crowd, back toward my post in front of the Shed, my eyes on the ground. I was praying that I'd see a pile of flyers there, that some of them hadn't been stepped on or crumpled and could be salvaged.

But I didn't see them anywhere. The show was in less than two hours. Without those flyers, we had no chance of getting at least thirty-four people to come. We were going to get shit-canned by the smallest club on the Strip.

I had no way of knowing at the time that this very moment was one of the biggest turning points in my life, and everything that followed would be a roller-coaster ride of fame and notoriety and danger that would end with me running for my life in East Germany.

I couldn't know any of those things at that point, while I stood there with my mouth hanging open. I only knew that Qyksand was done for.

My heart sank. I didn't know what to do. I finally lifted my eyes from the pavement.

And that was the first time I saw Tawny.

3



THERE WAS A GIRL standing in my spot—and, I shit you not, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life.

For a few seconds, I forgot entirely about my predicament. I forgot I was playing a concert in an empty room in less than two hours. I forgot that when we failed to break even, I'd have nowhere else to go. I even forgot my name.

Because there was a bona fide goddess on the Sunset Strip, hanging out by the Shed in red heels and a ripped denim miniskirt and fishnet stockings, a crop top with fringes and a little denim jacket that was basically just sleeves and a zipper.

It was like Marianne Gravatte had just stepped out of her Playmate of the Year cover and posted up in front of the shittiest club in Los Angeles. She was a California-tan blonde, maybe five feet seven. She had big blue eyes, pouty lips, curves like a supermodel, and an ass that seemed to be saying, *Hey, Rikki! Check out my ass!*

But the most gorgeous thing about her at that moment was the stack of Qyksand flyers in her hand.

It all came crashing back then, and I felt a mix of relief and terror. My life was in the goddess's hands now. I would have to play this cool. So I floated over to her and just stood there, grinning like an idiot.

Finally, she made the first move. "You're in Qyksand, right?" She held the flyers out to me. "I think these are yours?"

She had a strong voice, with the tiniest hint of gravel in it—maybe a smoker, maybe a singer, maybe both. It sounded like music. I forgot why I was there again. Then I saw the flyers, and before I could stop

myself, my hand darted out and grabbed them a little too fast. Like she might change her mind.

“Oh shit, thank you,” I said, and I clutched the flyers to my chest.

“No worries,” she said, letting out a sweet laugh. “Can’t lose your flyers, right?”

“Nope,” I said. I couldn’t even look directly in her eyes for more than a second at a time. Jesus, what was wrong with me?

“I liked how you handled yourself over there,” she said. I didn’t know what she meant at first. And, I mean, I didn’t even understand the words coming out of her mouth. I was basically hypnotized.

The goddess smiled and nodded over my shoulder, and I followed her eyes back to the scene of the fight.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Thanks. No big deal, I guess.”

“What do you play?” she asked.

“Drums.”

“Oh my God.” Her hands went to her chest. “I love drummers. Stamina and rhythm, right?” She smirked deviously, like she was talking about drumming but also about *doing it*.

I started to feel a little confidence seeping in. “Takes a lot of practice, I guess,” I said with a shrug, and I held her gaze now. Did my little half smile that I’m told is charming.

“He can handle a fight, he can handle the drums,” she said. She leaned in close and lowered her voice. “I wonder how he could handle me?” And then she winked and smiled.

This sounds corny, but when our eyes met I felt this *connection*, like people talk about only happening a few times in your whole life? The rest of the world behind her went dim and fuzzy, and suddenly it was like we were alone in the universe, just me and this one other person, seeing through each other’s eyes into our hearts?

And then we were banging!

Well, first we went into the greenroom of the Shed, and then, next thing I knew, there was leather and denim everywhere. Her legs were wrapped around my hips and she was pulling my shirt off over my head.

“I’m Rikki,” I said.

“Tawny,” she said, and then she tried to eat my tongue.

“You really do like drummers!” I managed to say.

“Shut up, Rikki,” she said.

We dropped our underwear and she slid on, and we went at it against the wall, on the couch, on the floor—and for a few uncomfortable seconds, on top of Marty’s bass guitar. It was awesome.

We had finally tired each other out and were sorting through the pile of clothes on the floor when my brain crashed back down to earth. I remembered we were about to play in an empty room.

“Oh shit,” I said.

“What’s the matter?”

“There’s no way we’re gonna get enough people to break even with the club tonight.”

“Is that bad?”

“Really bad,” I said. “Like, the-end-of-my-career bad.”

“How many people do you need to show up to break even?”

“Thirty-four,” I said. The number might as well have been a million.

Tawny’s face scrunched up like she was thinking on something, and then she pulled her jean jacket on. “Gimme those flyers,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

An hour later Qyksand was fully assembled, and we were waiting backstage for Gus to call us out to play what would probably be our last concert. We didn’t even really have it in us to party, so we only drank, like, five beers apiece and smoked a little weed and did a couple of shots.

“All right, all right, settle down,” we heard Gus say, his amplified voice muffled through the wall. “Okay. We good? Everybody put your hands together for our opening band, Qyksand!”

We ran through the door and onto the stage, and we were stunned by the room that greeted us.

There had to be at least a hundred people in the place, all of them screaming and cheering. They were crammed into the Shed shoulder to shoulder, way above capacity. Ol’ Gus was beaming.

We stumbled to our places, kind of whiplashed by our sudden good fortunes. “Wow, I guess it was worth hitting the streets with that big dude,” Ron whispered.

“Yeah,” I said.

But I had a feeling Ron’s flyers didn’t have anything to do with it. I scanned the crowd from left to right, hoping to see one specific face.

And then I found her: Tawny, leaning on the bar. She raised a bottle of beer in the air.

“Hey, buddy.” Ron nudged my shoulder. “You okay?”

I felt a dopey smile spread like warm water across my cheeks. “Never better, Ron,” I said. “I think I’m in love.”



THE GREAT MANN

a novel

KYRA DAVIS LURIE

CROWN
An imprint of the Crown Publishing Group
A division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway
New York, NY 10019
crownpublishing.com
penguinrandomhouse.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Lurie, Kyra Davis, author. Title: The great mann: a novel / Kyra Davis Lurie.
Description: First edition. | New York City: Crown, 2025. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2024045546 | ISBN 9780593800867 (hardcover) |
ISBN 9780593800874 (ebook) Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3604.A972 G74 2025 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20250103
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024045546>

ISBN 978-0-593-80086-7
Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-80087-4

Editor: Shannon Criss
Editorial assistant: Austin Parks
Production editor: Patricia Shaw
Text designer: Andrea Lau
Production manager: Heather Williamson
Copy editor: L. J. Young
Proofreader(s): Rob Sternitzky
Publicist: Dyana Messina
Marketer: Kimberly Lew

Manufactured in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is
Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street,
Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

Chapter 1

“Wake up, I said it’s the end of the line.”

My eyes fly open, my hand automatically reaching for my weapon. But instead of metal, I find paper.

This isn’t Bastogne. I’m not in the middle of a battle-scorched forest. And the words aren’t coming from a Kraut. Instead, it’s the old Chicano who’s been sitting next to me since he boarded the train back in Texas, his heavy jowls draped over a frown as he shakes me awake. In my other hand is a folded-up copy of the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper, not a grenade. The ink’s been smudged at the top so all that you can see of the date is the 45. But I know it’s October. I know the war’s over. The place I was just in while sleeping . . . that was just a nightmare’s retelling of a memory. Guess that’s why those Nazis were wearing white hoods.

“Son, we’ve reached Los Angeles,” the frowning man says, “you’re blocking my way.”

I grab my duffel and join the line of all the folks deboarding, making way for the white ones as a precaution. Got to figure out the rules of this place before deciding if they’re worth breaking.

On the platform, I stop to read the giant clock hanging over a newsstand across the way before being startled by a sudden impact. I’m being pushed . . . no, more like bumped out of the way by some careless white man in a rush. He presses past toward some destination,

cheerily using his shoulders and elbows on everybody blocking him, no matter their color or sex.

Something's different about this place.

Maybe it's the air, unseasonably warm for autumn. It pours into your lungs, thick, like this crowd. All these white folk looking hurried.

But there're a few folks here with skin like mine. Negroes dressed like they're ready for church.

I'm dressed for war.

I changed into my uniform somewhere 'round Arizona.

Margie says they respect uniforms out here. Not like back home where any Negro in uniform is a target. Maybe I shouldn't put so much trust in my cousin's assurances seeing as I haven't seen her since we were both half the height of a tobacco plant. What do I really know of her now? In those two decades since her family fled our hometown, she may have written me half a dozen letters in total—most of them filled with nothing more than exaltations over the latest romantic Hollywood movie that made her laugh or cry. She rarely ever wrote about anything real.

I didn't get around to watching most of what she recommended because the nearest theater open to Negroes was forty miles from my home. Instead, I used my letters to describe the books I loved although reading had never been her passion. Then three years ago, I got to see *Casablanca* while training at Camp Hood and I wrote to tell her how much I liked it. When she wrote back, she suggested I come out to L.A. after the war, where I could both find a good job and occasionally accompany her to the movies that her husband didn't have the patience to sit through. At the time, I wasn't sure I'd take her up on it.

Yet here I am.

Maybe it was foolish to assume the girl who had always made me laugh had grown into a woman who could guide me right. But looking around . . . I don't think so.

It's different here.

I see it in the way these people ain't seeing me. I'm accustomed to

white folk sizing me up, trying to work out if I'm a predator they can beat down to prey.

Invisibility feels clean.

Except I do feel one pair of eyes. A Negro girl, dressed like she's headed to a lily-white country club, her skin walking the line between copper and gold. That girl's smiling at me like she knows me.

I'd like to know her.

My train arrived early, so I got time to kill before Margie shows to fetch me. I navigate through the maze of people, heading toward those seeing eyes until I'm close enough to smell just a hint of perfume. "Somethin' I can help you with, miss? I'm new 'round here, but I can work out a train schedule if you need it."

"Why, don't you recognize me?"

Her voice. Light, sweet . . . familiar.

And the laughter bubbling out of her, I know that, too.

"Charlie, it's me, Marguerite!"

Can't be. I've never met this woman before me.

"Margie, that really you?" When her smile gets bigger, I see it. The undeniable spark of mischief her mama was always trying to slap out of her. "Damn, girl, you changed! You out here looking like a movie star!"

"Hush, I'm the same girl you knew from Miss Peesly's class."

Now she's got me laughing. The idea of this woman, in her tailored jacket and unscuffed shoes, that she could have anything to do with the one-room schoolhouse where lil' Margie and I used to spend our days! A girl we called Margie 'cause she was too tiny to bear the weight of that foreign-tongued name Uncle Morris brought back from the Great War. A cheap, expensive gift for his next-born daughter.

But then, overnight, four days before her ninth birthday, Margie and her family picked up and left.

Seems she used all those years to expand into the rest of those French syllables.

"I think you're the one who's changed the most," she says, taking a

step back to get a better look at me. “Tall, handsome, and . . . oh, you have medals!” She gestures at the ribbons on my chest. “You never mentioned them in your letter! How thrilling! Did you get them saving a damsel in distress?”

I force a smile even though I’m also gritting my teeth. “Don’t think they give out medals for saving pretty girls.” I can’t hold her flippancy against her. All she knows of the Nazis is what she’s seen in the movies. Hollywood makes them seem like gentile villains, not the swastika-wearing sadists I encountered on the battlefield.

“No, I suppose not, there are other awards for that.” She gives me a playful wink. “Anyway, you always were my hero. Ever since we were babes.” I don’t move as she reaches to touch my face, so tender you’d think we ain’t cousins and she ain’t married. “Is it my imagination, or are you one tooth short?”

Shouldn’t have smiled so wide. Don’t like thinking about things others knocked out of me.

“I happen to know a marvelous dental surgeon, Dr. John Alexander Somerville. Graduated top of his class at the University of Southern California. They say he’s the best in the whole state. I do believe he could give you a smile that all the pretty girls would feel compelled to return.”

“I don’t got money for nothin’ like that.”

“Oh, John’s a friend. Perhaps he’ll do me this favor.” She turns and starts walking, her confidence a clear sign I’m meant to follow.

“This must be some kind of paradise.” I direct the words to her shoulder blades, moving with rhythm as she leads me out of the station. “Even in Europe, I can’t imagine a white man doing that kind of favor for a Negro.”

“He’s not white. He’s one of us.” There’s a line of freshly waxed automobiles up along the sidewalk. Few of them got Negro drivers, looking sharp in their black suits and caps. And they’re looking at Margie with the same kind of wonder I’m feeling. The cloth her clothes are cut from looks too expensive for our kind. Her hands look like they never

washed a dish and the diamond sitting on her finger is either fake or looted from the goddamned Louvre.

I look up at the distant hills that press against the skyline. I can just barely make out the white letters mounted on the closest one. “That’s the Hollywoodland sign!”

“That old thing?” She briefly tilts her head in the far off direction. “It’s a bit of a wreck, but the city says they’re going to spruce it up. Maybe remove the *land* so it just says *Hollywood*, which would make more sense. Speaking of Hollywood, I saw that flick you liked so much, *Casablanca*? You didn’t tell me how sad it was! Bogart doesn’t even get the girl! He sends Ingrid Bergman away!”

“Yeah, but you gotta remember, in the movie, Bergman’s married to another man. That’s who she ends up with,” I point out.

“Paul Henreid? Please, Bogart is much more dashing,” Margie shakes her head, as if disappointed by the whole affair. “I’m done with sad movies. Now that the war is over, perhaps there will be more fun films in the theaters for us to see next year.” She stops in front of a Lincoln Continental. “Hop on in!”

“Girl, you’re pullin’ my leg, this ain’t your car!”

“I’m afraid it is.” She laughs, dangling the keys in front of me. “I promise I haven’t run over a single thing.”

Negroes don’t drive cars like this. Not in Virginia, not here. I can see the truth of it on the faces of the Negro drivers still checking her out.

She takes my arm, brings her singsong melody down to a volume just north of a whisper. “My husband would prefer I have a driver. But we can’t quite afford it. Not yet.”

She releases me, unlocks the door, and gets behind the wheel.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to avoid the freeway,” she says as she pulls from the curb. “I simply don’t trust myself on it. If I let myself go too fast I might never slow down!”

I let her do the talking as we drive. She’s going on about how, after they left the tobacco fields for the paved streets of Richmond, her brother Willie took up with a colored girl so light she could disappear

into the white world, taking him with her. Margie hasn't heard from Willie in years.

It's hard to focus on the words, though. The people on these streets are a whole mix of races, most of them looking like they haven't had a bath since Hoover was running things. The men are all stumbling and yelling, their sentences scrambled by dope, drink, or some other kind of misfiring of the mind. And there's no missing the five Black and brown men lined up against that storefront, hands against the wall as white officers pat them down. Everything outside is filthy and ugly, everything inside this chrome is neat and beautiful. It's got me off balance.

"Where are we?"

"Hmm? Why, this is Skid Row. Isn't it a horror? Don't worry, we'll be out of it soon," she says before going back to her family saga.

Sure enough, it only takes a few minutes for things to get better.

There're apartment buildings, boxy and utilitarian but well maintained, and the people walking on the sidewalks are all colored and it looks like they got work. But there's too many of 'em. Everybody's crammed together like they were at the station. In a city the size of Texas, it don't make much sense.

Margie keeps talking as she takes a corner, moving the car up an incline.

She tells how, after Willie took off with his white-passing girl, Uncle Morris took the rest of them briefly to Maryland before changing course and trying out the urban centers of Georgia, where her two other brothers found good work and nice wives. Georgia's also where her mother's family heralded from, so while they were there Margie got to know aunts, uncles, and cousins she hadn't met before.

As she talks the streets get better.

Whiter.

Spanish-style homes with tile roofs. Manicured lawns. White folk playing with their dogs, sipping on what could be iced tea and lemonade. Saturday afternoon being treated like the day of rest it is meant to be.

Margie keeps chattering, telling me about how her younger cousin Daryl was lost in the early days of the war. Telling me how he led the charge in a heroic battle only to catch a bullet in the heart while raising the victory flag, and how his death was that elusive trifecta we all hope for—quick, proud, and painless.

It's the kind of myth Margie always weaves for the loved ones she's lost. But I can pick out the pieces of truth. The killing. The death. Been way too much of that in our family.

She's taking me through her history while driving me through a city. We're high enough now that we can look down on where we've just been.

The houses grander, the spaces between them wider, the cars in the drives got a sheen on 'em. The women got porcelain skin and scrawny hips, the men sporting button-downs tucked into pleated pants. I spot one Negro face: a woman wearing a maid's uniform so pristine you'd think she was hired for decoration, not dusting.

Margie presses on, talking about her nomadic family adventures. Telling me how at first it was just her and her parents in California. The three of them came out on the rumors of better opportunities and bluer skies.

We're driving up into that sky right now, the whole city laid out beneath us. We reach the top of the hill and the streets get different.

Real different.

What I'm seeing ain't possible.

Houses replaced by mansions, fancier cars, the men and women as fashionable as Cary Grant and Rita Hayworth.

Except Cary and Rita ain't colored.

Everybody here's a Negro.

A Negro woman wearing a mink stole as she strolls down the pristine street. A colored man stepping out of a brand-new roadster. Black children playing on the lawn of a manor as a few women watch over them while chatting and sipping what might be iced tea from sparkling glasses.

Like they own the place.

“Charlie, if you don’t close your mouth, you’re bound to catch flies.”

“Am I dreamin’?”

“I certainly hope not!” She lets out that charming little laugh. “I’m about to introduce you to my husband and son and I expect you to be fully awake for the occasion.”

“But where are we?”

“Why, this is West Adams Heights”—she waves at our surroundings as she takes another corner—“but anyone who’s worth talking to knows it as L.A.’s very own Sugar Hill. Isn’t it heavenly?” Her ring catches the light and throws it back with a flare. “God willing, I’ll live here ’til I die!”

Chapter 2

I'm still reeling from the tour Margie and her husband, Terrance, just gave me of their home.

I'm struggling to make sense of what seems impossible.

This house of Margie's has two stories, a giant lawn, and a gazebo out back. I've been standing in the middle of the living room with her and her husband for the last twenty minutes drinking wine that's as good as anything I had tasted while serving in France. Margie's sitting in an upholstered armchair that don't got a single rip or stain, her foot wiggling to the sound of some old-time melody coming out of their mahogany radio.

"Do you mind the music?" she asks. "I always tell Terrance a room simply isn't complete without music."

"The music's fine. . . . You're in insurance?" I ask Terrance for what might be the fourth time. I don't know much about insurance, but I never would have guessed working with it could buy a man all this.

"I'm a VP at Golden State Mutual, the most successful Negro-owned insurance company in the nation." Terrance's grin lets me know he doesn't mind repeating himself, at least not while talking about himself. "Technically I'm second in command behind our president, Norman Houston. But between you and me? I'm often the one in charge." He pauses, making real sure that last part sinks in. "Rumor has it the *California Eagle*, L.A.'s foremost Negro newspaper,

will be naming me businessman of the year. I was one of the first Negroes to graduate with a business degree from the University of Southern California. They don't allow many of us in, but they're savvy enough to make exceptions for the truly exceptional." He leans back, sizing me up. "Marguerite tells me you have some education yourself."

Terrance reminds me of the East Coast Negroes I dealt with in the army. The ones who thought any colored man with a slow, Southern drawl also had a slow, docile mind. All my life I'd been combing through dictionaries, collecting words like baseball cards. I had welcomed the excuse to pass the expensive ones out among the other Southern Negro soldiers. Whenever those Northern boys came 'round we'd toss words like *perspicacity* and *evanesce* into our sentences just to get 'em gawking.

"I've been trained in accounting by those who know the field. Fair to say I've also read more literary classics and history books than your average professor. I was invited to enroll at Virginia Union," I tell him. "But all those plans got sidelined on account of the war."

"Why, when we were children you couldn't stop Charlie from learning," Margie chimes in. "Six years old and he'd pull old newspapers right out of the trash just so he could read them!"

"'Fraid that's true." I lay heavy into my drawl and give Terrance a down-home smile. "If a book got somethin' to teach me, I'm gonna read it. I'm just one curious, autodidactic son of a bitch."

Gives me some pleasure to see this "exceptional Negro" silently trying to work out what *autodidactic* means without lowering himself to ask.

"Oh . . . oh, they're playing the Charleston!" Margie leaps to her feet and starts to dance. "I was born too late, I would have been a wonderful flapper!"

"Flappers were hussies," Terrance retorts. "That's not you."

"Oh, don't be such a drip and dance with me!" She laughs, throwing her arms and feet around. "Why, if I was born twenty years earlier,

I would have gone to all the most cosmopolitan speakeasies and danced the night away Monday through Sunday.”

What’s this woman talking about? I remember being with Margie when her mama, my aunt Henny, returned from the tobacco fields, the sap making her hands five times blacker than the rest of her. Her back would ache so bad she could barely handle standing for the time it took to make supper. And the few freewheeling fools we did have in our family didn’t make it to twenty. That’s the stock we come from. This halcyon history Margie’s going on about ain’t ours to claim.

The door bursts open and a little boy, somewhere under five, runs on in. His face is just two shades darker than Margie’s and one shade lighter than Terrance’s. They’ve got him dressed up like a lil’ British lord. “Mommy, guess what? I had cake!”

A blue-black Negro woman follows him, smiling down at the boy in a way that makes me think she’s one of his aunties.

“Charlie, this is my son, Art!” Margie says, still dancing. “Art, this is your cousin Charles.”

“Hello, Art.” I bend down to greet him. His face gets serious as he shakes my hand, his little fingers stretching out, as if he thinks he might somehow get them around my palm. I turn to the woman who entered with him. “Charlie Trammell,” I begin, but then Terrance breaks in.

“That’s our nanny,” he says, real dismissive and haughty, before turning to the woman. “I assume Art behaved himself?”

“He minded his manners the whole time,” the nanny assures him.

“Oh, let the boy have a little mischief!” Margie pulls her son to her to teach him a few dance steps. “I do wish I could have come with you today, Art, you know how much Mommy loves parties.”

“There was cake and ice cream and balloons and a clown with bright red hair!” He’s trying hard to match his mother’s rhythm. But when she goes into the knocky-knees move he gives it up. “What are you doing, Mommy?”

“This? Why, it’s the Charleston!”

Art looks around the room, his smooth forehead creasing. “Cousin Charles has a son?”

Margie and Terrance crack up at that, the nanny does, too. “It’s a dance,” Terrance explains.

Art blinks at his father, still not understanding but not interested enough to ask for further explanation. He turns back to his mother. “Can I play outside?”

“Gertie, do you mind?” Margie asks, smiling kindly.

“Not at all, Mrs. Lewis.”

“Nice to meet you, Gertie,” I call out, which gets me a quick nod of appreciation in return before the woman and Art disappear into the backyard.

Margie collapses, pink-cheeked, into her chair. Terrance observes her fondly before turning back to me. “Have you ever had a job that required more of your head than your hands?”

“I did the books for a man named Alvin Flynn. He had a small general store for the colored folk.”

“Oh, I remember the Flynn’s!” Margie exclaims, still slightly breathless. “His daughter was just a few years older than us. . . . Brenda, wasn’t it?”

“Barbara,” I say.

I won’t add that the last time I saw Barbara was in her coffin. She’d been found naked, beaten, and lifeless along the banks of the Potomac. No one bothered investigating. We all knew the white boys who did it. I won’t add that years after the murder Mr. Flynn refused to remove his hat while passing one of her killers on the street, that he failed to step off the curb to make way, a clear violation of the Jim Crow laws. It was enough to get that grieving father a night in a cell. When he got out there was nothing left of his general store but ash.

“Well, there’s a lot more to insurance work than numbers,” Terrance tells me. “The challenge is Negroes are used to operating without insurance. We need it, but most don’t have it because white

insurance companies won't write us policies, at least not ones you can count on them honoring. My company can give members of our race the very thing this country has worked so hard to deprive us of. We solve their greatest problem."

"Are you sayin' the Negro's biggest problem is not a lack of human rights," I ask, working hard not to chuckle, "but a lack of insurance?"

"Don't be dense," he snaps as Margie uses her hand to hide her smile. "Insurance is more than a policy."

"I'm not following."

"It's a sense of security!"

The veracity of his response pulls down the corners of my mouth.

"To the Negro," Terrance goes on, "a sense of security is worth all the money in the world."

"Which is why it's not such a big thing to ask them to part with just a little of their money to have it," Margie adds with a giggle.

"You think this is a joke?" Terrance's glare doesn't cow her one bit, robbing him of a certain satisfaction.

"Oh, darling, no." Her tone's sweet, but her eyes are narrowed. "A man taking pains to keep his family and *home* protected, why, that's the most serious of responsibilities! Why, any man who can't manage that isn't much of a man at all!"

Is that a tremor I detect under the syrup of her voice? And as for Terrance . . . something she said has got him agitated. He gets up and starts pacing. "My company—"

"*Your* company?" she interrupts.

But he pays her no mind. "We're not just selling policies, we're providing our clients with dignity and well-deserved respect—"

"And fidelity," Margie breaks in again, putting an odd emphasis on the word. She pats her hair, making sure nothing's mussed. "Isn't that what your boss, Norman, was going on about at dinner the other night?"

"Stop calling him my boss! He doesn't oversee me!"

"Didn't he say that along with respect those you serve deserve *fidelity*?"

Terrance positions himself so that he's towering right over her. "I don't serve," he corrects. "I provide."

Margie doesn't even blink, just sits up straighter, looks him dead in the eye.

Just then their son hurls himself into the room, Gertie at his heels. "Mommy, we saw a gopher! He stuck his whole head out of the ground just to look at us! He had the biggest front teeth you've ever seen!"

Both his parents seem a little flummoxed by the announcement. Gertie gently pulls the boy away. "Maybe I'll just get him bathed and ready for supper."

"Yes, that would be best," Margie agrees and watches the two disappear again, this time up the stairs.

"Didn't I tell the gardener to exterminate those rodents?" Terrance asks.

"You did," Margie confirms. "Of course you did."

"I knew I shouldn't have hired him. You know who recommended him to us?" Terrance asks me.

Did Negroes in these parts have gardeners? And nannies? And . . .

"Your white-ass-kissing landlady, that's who. I shouldn't have trusted her. People like her are the reason Les and his ilk think so lowly of us. She's sold out our entire race at every turn, why should this be any different?"

"Wait a minute, I have a landlady?" I could ask who Les is, too, but Terrance said too many confusing things at once for me to inquire about all of 'em.

"Darling, I hardly think recommending an incompetent gardener is on par with selling out the race, or . . ." She pauses, giving the matter more thought. "Oh, could there be a metaphor in there? What might the gopher stand for?"

"Uncle Toms maybe," Terrance replies, his lip twitching with humor.

"Or white trash perhaps?" Margie offers.

"All the ugly that burrows under the surface of America," I suggest.

Margie and Terrance exchange looks and then fall into a fit of laughter. “Ah,” Terrance says, once he’s caught his breath, “you do have a brain in there after all. You’re what, twenty-six?”

“He’s twenty-five,” Margie corrects, “eleven years your junior and a year younger than me. Although I swear I still feel like I’m twenty.”

“Twenty-five, old enough to be taken seriously, young enough to give a company decades of work,” Terrance muses. “Okay, come with me to work on Monday morning . . . no, wait I have a meeting . . . make it Tuesday. I’ll introduce you to some people, get you an interview. We’ll see if you can continue to impress. But keep your smiles small,” he adds, chuckling again. “That missing tooth gives you the look of a field hand.”

I let the barb slide. “I’d appreciate that. But . . . I have a landlady?” I press. “Or is that a metaphor, too?”

“Oh, yes.” Margie’s got the sense to at least look abashed. “Seeing as we only have three bedrooms and there’s four of us, when you include Art and Gertie that is, well, we thought it might be better for you if you stayed elsewhere, quite nearby, of course,” she adds quickly as she reads my face. “Really, it’s just a short walk from here. Louise always has a few boarders. And we’ve paid your first month’s rent, so don’t worry about that one little bit. You’ll be more comfortable. Her house is much grander than ours.”

“Tell him how she paid for that house!” Terrance demands with a good-natured bellow.

Margie sits up properlike and announces with exaggerated seriousness, “The house is paid for with Black shame!” Then the two of them fall into another laughing fit.

I might as well be back in France for all the sense I’m able to make from the words coming outta these two. “If I’m not staying here, should I be headed out? When am I expected by this Louise . . . Louise . . .”

“Beavers,” Terrance supplies.

That can’t be right. “Louise Beavers . . . like . . . the actress?”

“Actress?” Terrance scoffs. “More like Hollywood shill!”

“Louise Beavers lives here? In your neighborhood?” It’s not possible . . . is it?

“Oh, dear.” Margie shoots me a teasing wink. “I fear our Charlie has a bit of a crush!”

“Give me a break,” Terrance snorts, “she barely qualifies as a woman.”

Louise Beavers. Mama had been so excited to see Miss Beavers in the movie *Imitation of Life*. The word was that her character, Delilah Johnson, had as many lines as the white lead. Finally, a studio film with a colored woman in a major role.

We had found the time to make a special trip into Petersburg for that movie. We walked into that theater feeling as proud as can be.

We walked out feeling different.

“It *is* nice they gave her such a big role,” Mama had said. And I nodded, not willing to voice what we were both thinking.

White folk gonna love this movie.

It wasn’t Delilah’s servility. Lots of us gotta bow our heads to eke out a living.

Ain’t no shame in it. But her love of her servility . . . the way she wouldn’t give it up even when independence was on offer . . . that just didn’t sit right. Delilah was the kind of Negro the white boys who burned down Mr. Flynn’s store thought we should all be.

I’m not exactly a fan of Louise Beavers. But she *is* a bona fide movie star!

Terrance’s still ranting like a preacher outside a whorehouse. “It’s not just the parts they play. The way these actresses behave off set is just as bad. Going through husbands like they’re tissues. Sleeping with any man who whistles at them. They have no idea what it means to be a lady. Not like my Marguerite here.”

“But they do seem to throw good parties,” Margie says wistfully.

“We’re not going to lower ourselves by attending some sordid bacchanalia! Not that any of them are educated enough to know what a bacchanalia is—”

I'm having a hard time focusing on what he saying. Partly because he ain't saying nothing interesting. But also . . .

. . . *I'm gonna board with a bona fide movie star!*

"Should I go now?" I ask.

Margie's laugh makes me blush, and I stare down at my feet. "Well, I was hoping you'd stay for dinner," she says. "But after dessert, I promise to take you right over."



These Summer Storms

A NOVEL

SARAH
MACLEAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Ballantine Books
An imprint of Random House
A division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
randomhousebooks.com
penguinrandomhouse.com

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Hardcover ISBN 978-0-593-97225-0
Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-97226-7

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

246897531

First Edition

BOOK TEAM: Production editor: Jennifer Rodriguez
Managing editor: Pamela Alders • Production manager: Erin Korenko
Copy editor: Briony Everroad • Proofreaders: Deborah Bader,
Claire Maby, Cameron Schoettle

Book design by Elizabeth A. D. Eno

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is
Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street,
Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland. <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>

CHAPTER

1

THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT TRAINS.

If she marked the minutes of her life, Alice Storm would not be surprised to discover that she'd spent nearly a third of them in transit:

- The shiny crimson bicycle that had been her seventh-birthday present and most prized possession, until her brother had sent it flying into Narragansett Bay, never to be recovered.
- The white rowboat her father had captained into that same salty sea every Saturday in July for her entire childhood, because he insisted on *facing nature as God intended*.
- The endless line of nondescript black town cars with silent drivers that ferried her from private school to private art classes to the Storm family's Park Avenue penthouse, New York City muffled and dim beyond the window.

- The skateboard she'd ridden into a tree one Sunday morning during her first year at Amherst—determined to prove herself a completely ordinary eighteen-year-old—resulting in an arm broken in three places.
- The helicopter that airlifted her to Boston to be pinned back together and returned her to school in time for a nine A.M. Art History midterm, before her classmates could discover there was nothing ordinary about her.
- The private jets that took her around the globe whenever her father issued an international summons on a whim.
- The commercial jet that had taken her to Prague eighteen months earlier, diamond ring tucked into her boyfriend's carry-on bag.
- The subway car she'd been on that afternoon when her phone had rung and stolen her breath—Incoming call . . . *Elisabeth Storm* (never *Mom*)—all beige walls and harsh lights and advertisements for clear skin and uncluttered apartments and that one William Carlos Williams poem about plums and iceboxes and forgiveness and the parts of us that will never change.

And still, there was something about trains.

Probably because she'd discovered those herself. All the other ways she'd traveled through the world had belonged to someone else. Were shared with someone else. But trains . . . they were her secret.

They did not come with flight plans, no siblings jockeying for position inside, no mothers calling for champagne, no fathers playing silent judge. They did not come unmoored. Instead they remained locked into their path, weighty and competent, unchanging. Unable to be sent over a cliff and into the sea. A marvel of modernity that ran counter to all the technology that came after them. Solid. Even. Stable. Constant.

Alice dropped her suitcase onto the luggage rack inside the door of the train car and found the first empty row, tossing her worn olive green

canvas satchel onto the aisle seat and sliding over to the window, hoping that a Wednesday night on the 9:32 P.M. Northeast Regional would reward her with a row to herself in the last few hours of peace before what was to come.

Before she faced the barrage of family—with one glaring, irreversible absence.

Through the window, on the train platform beyond, a group of twenty-somethings tumbled down the escalator, laughing and shouting, a collection of duffels and weekender bags, bright smiles, sundresses, shorts and sunglasses, as though night hadn't fallen outside. And maybe it hadn't for them. Maybe they were in that gorgeous moment in life when there was no such thing as the dark. Instead, it was all daytime, full of promise and empty of fear.

Behind them, a freckle-faced, redheaded family of five, a teenager in hoodie and headphones, twin girls no older than ten, and their parents, loaded down with suitcases and backpacks and a *Paris Review* tote that might have once been for literary cachet, but was now for stainless steel water bottles and organic snacks.

A middle-aged Black woman in flowing linen, her tiny silver roller bag the only evidence that she was traveling. A tall, stern-faced white man in his thirties, leather duffel in hand, backpack slung over his shoulder. An elderly, ruddy-cheeked man in a cream-colored windbreaker, pushed in a wheelchair by an Amtrak employee in a trademark red cap.

One by one, they piled onto the train.

Alice had been wrong; the train wouldn't be empty. Instead, it would be packed full—laden with a few hundred New Yorkers headed north for a weekend of cobalt skies and gray-green ocean during the most magical time of year in New England, when the rest of the world was back to school and work and Northeasterners were spoiled with one last week of sun-soaked seclusion, clinging to the promise of endless summer.

She'd forgotten it was Labor Day weekend.

The lapse in memory seemed impossible, considering she'd left her

freshly painted, newly organized classroom in Brooklyn six hours earlier, planning her own final long summer weekend as she waited for the subway. Pilates that afternoon. The Grand Army Plaza farmers' market for the last of the heirloom tomatoes. Governors Island on Saturday with Gabi and Roxanne, who insisted she leave her empty apartment. A long Sunday, painting in the last of the summer glow, before school made the days too short for sunlight.

Then her phone rang, and she'd forgotten.

Leaning back against the rough fabric of her seat, Alice focused on the train schedule, announced over a staticky loudspeaker, the conductor's voice thick with New England—*Old Saybrook, New London, Wickford*—loud enough to keep people from the wrong train, Amtrak hoped—*Providence, Back Bay, South Station*—loud enough to keep her from remembering.

The train lurched into motion, the awkward first step before it gained speed and momentum, heavy and smooth. Familiar comfort.

Next stop, New Rochelle.

She exhaled. Four hours to what came next.

"Is someone with you?"

It shouldn't have surprised her but she startled anyway, straightening to meet the serious, gray gaze of the man she'd seen on the platform earlier—tall and stern. Taller now that he was close. Sterner, too.

Dark brows rose, punctuating the question as he tilted his chin in the direction of the seat next to her, where her ancient canvas satchel sat, forgotten.

No one was with her.

"No." She grabbed the bag and shoved it to her feet. "Sorry."

The noise he made in reply was almost impossible to hear above the sound of the train on the track, the white noise of the air-conditioning, the slide of his overnight bag onto the rack above. He folded himself into the space she'd cleared, knees pressed to the back of the seat in front of him.

On another day, she might have paid closer attention, but she did not have time for noticing him. In fact, she vaguely resented his pres-

ence for reminding her that she was single again, for filling up the seat with his long legs and the kind of judgment that came from strangers who had no idea that you'd had *a day*.

That you were preparing to have *multiple days*.

Five days. And then she was out. She could survive five days.

She cleared her throat and adjusted her position in the seat, closing her eyes, trying to lose herself in the rhythmic thud of the wheels as the train shot out of the tunnel in Queens and they left New York City behind.

An hour into the ride, they pressed east along the southern coast of New England, and Alice, unable to sleep, phone dead, and lacking capacity to focus on the book she'd shoved into her bag as she'd rushed from her apartment that afternoon, peered into the inky darkness outside the window, where Long Island Sound lay still and flat and invisible in the distance, beyond the saltwater marshland of the Connecticut coast.

It would have been impossible to see anyway, thanks to the late hour and the dark sky, but the view had competition—the fluorescent lights reflecting the inside of the train car against the glass, casting a pale glow over the cluttered shelf across the aisle, full of sleeping bags and suitcases and a large tote bag with electric pink piping, pickleball paddle jammed into the side pocket. Beneath the collection of travel detritus, two teenage girls laughed at a curly-haired boy hanging over the seat in front of them, a goofy smile on his face. On another night, Alice might have smiled at the picture they made—late-summer perfection. But tonight, it was a different part of the reflection that distracted her. The bright, shining rectangle glowing in her neighbor's lap.

His phone was open to some social app, one with endless scroll.

He should turn that off. Endless scroll rotted a person's brain. It had been rotting hers before she boarded the train, searching for the dopamine hit of makeup tutorials and cat videos . . . antidotes to her mother's call—the first she'd made to Alice in five years.

Her seatmate paused, a headline impossibly large against the darkness outside. She had no trouble reading the text in the mirrored reflection.

TRAILBLAZING GENIUS FRANKLIN STORM, DEAD AT 70

His thumb hovered over the link.

Don't, she willed, not sure she would be able to look away, even though she knew the story within. Had known it since she was born. Franklin Storm had stepped into his parents' garage in North Boston at the age of seventeen and changed computing and the world with \$1,107 and a dream. He'd made computers large and small, brought them into homes and schools, and placed them in pockets and on wrists the world over.

That was the first paragraph. The ones that followed would be about his company, his vast collection of art, his philanthropy, his charm, his daredevil tendencies (no one should be too surprised by a gliding accident, really). And then, his family.

There'd be photos, probably from his seventieth birthday, taken that past April—the ones Alice had pored over in the Style section of the *Times*. Captions. A footnote about the child not pictured (not invited). A reminder of why.

Don't open it.

He didn't. Alice breathed again.

Swallowing the urge to tell him to read a book or something, she reached down and pulled a newspaper out of her bag. She hadn't held a print newspaper since she was a kid, when a stack of them would be delivered to the apartment every morning.

Still, she smoothed her hand over the front page of that morning's *New York Times*, printed twenty hours earlier, rendered instantly obsolete in this world where (allegedly) BREAKING NEWS came all day, all hours, directly to a person's preferred rectangle, there, then gone. Turned instantly into the past to make room for the future—a shift so quick that the present simply disappeared.

Why had she bought it? Alice rubbed a thumb across the words, tattooing herself with the ink of yesterday's news—the Before. Tomorrow's paper would be the After.

The top of the fold on the front page would be devoted to her father's death—the biggest story of the week. Of the year.

Longer for Alice (and her therapist).

She traced a headline about inflation. Another about unhoused New Yorkers. A third about the solar power revolution. Stories that were more important than anything the paper would say the next day.

Stories she couldn't read because there, in her peripheral vision, her seatmate had turned over his phone, and the back of it gleamed smooth, black obsidian, without any reflection, its only mark a swirling silver S, like the eye of a hurricane.

Years ago, when she was young, that insignia had words that came with it—repeated over and over on television commercials. Radio plays. Print advertisements. The whole world knew them.

Storm Inside[™]

The world didn't know the half of it.

CHAPTER

2

BEFORE THE ROBBER BARONS of the Gilded Age changed the face of American business with steel and banks and oil, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt changed the face of American travel, snapping up and consolidating more than a dozen small railway lines and amassing a fortune that few had ever seen outside of royalty. (Who needs titles when you can have trains?)

In 1870, Cornelius Vanderbilt II—nepo-grandbaby to Cornelius Vanderbilt, Original Flavor—did what rich young men have done for as long as they have been rich young men: He used his grandfather's money and power and influence to make it easier for him to have friends over for parties.

With his brother, young Cornelius established the Newport and Wickford Railroad and Steamboat Company, overseeing a mere three and a half miles of train track from the main rail line connecting New York and Boston to the port of Wickford, RI, a sleepy town with wildly desirable geography. Wickford was located on the western edge of Narragansett Bay, the 147-square-mile estuary that divided the western, mainland half of Rhode Island from the eastern side of the state, an

archipelago where New York City's wealthiest nineteenth-century families built the over-the-top mansions that would remain a hallmark of Rhode Island tourism and American film for more than a century.

It was the Vanderbilts who put Wickford on the map, quite literally, plucking valuable farmland and ocean views from unsuspecting Rhode Islanders (eminent domain isn't just for present-day billionaires) and laying the track that would become the safest, easiest journey to Newport for New York's elite, along with their dogs, servants, and secrets. It also opened up access to a collection of small private islands peppering the Bay.

On that particular Wednesday before Labor Day, as Amtrak Northeast Regional train 1603 crossed the Rhode Island border, it occurred to Alice that if the Vanderbilts got one look at the train's worn maroon carpet and polyester-blend upholstery, they would have bemoaned the ceding of rail travel to the common man and paid someone to set the whole thing on fire.

Robber barons would robber baron. Of that, Alice was certain.

She'd been raised by one, after all.

With a soft "Excuse me," to the long legs in the aisle seat, Alice gathered her bags and headed for one of the three doors that would open to the elevated platform of the once-again-sleepy town—no longer a hub of travel for the wealthy and famous.

Staring at her newly charged phone, she ignored the red bubbles at the corner of every app she used regularly. Fourteen new voicemails. Sixty-three new emails. One-hundred-and-twenty-one new text messages.

She swiped to a rideshare app, her thumb hovering over the green square as she waited for the SOS at the top of the screen to turn to bars indicating service. And tried not to impart double meaning into that SOS.

"This is my stop, too."

She whirled to face the words, and the man standing there. Tall, stern, long legs, rotted brain. Nice voice, quiet and deep. The kind of voice that made someone want to listen. Alice hadn't noticed that before.

“Sorry?”

“I’m only saying it so you don’t think that I’m following you.”

It was a perfectly nice thing to say. But Alice Storm, third child of TRAILBLAZING GENIUS FRANKLIN STORM, DEAD AT 70, had spent a lifetime being followed.

The train began to slow.

“That sounds like something someone following me would say.”

The corner of his straight, serious mouth tilted up. Barely. “Scout’s honor.”

Before she could respond, the conductor came through the automatic doors. “Wickford?”

It came out like *Wickfahd*, and Alice couldn’t help her smile at the sound of her childhood. “Yes.”

“Nice place for Labor Day weekend,” the conductor noted.

Her smile faded.

“Sure is,” the man who wasn’t following her replied.

“Gonna get some lobster?” *Lobstah*.

The train stopped and the doors opened with a heavy slide, a modern-day portcullis. “Sure are.”

Surprised by his use of the plural, Alice looked back. He wasn’t looking at her.

The conductor tipped his chin toward the train platform. “Lucky. Have a good weekend.”

“Thank you,” Alice said, stepping down onto the platform as her neighbor replied, “You too.”

The words were lost in the rhythm of the wheels, steady and reliable, already headed north. Alice hesitated, watching the train go and, for a wild moment, wondered what would happen if she ran after it, like in a movie, leaping from the end of the platform, catching the end of the last car. Riding it all the way to Boston. *Hero shit*, Gabi would say.

Alice sighed. The likelihood of her catching the back end of an accelerating train aside (zero likelihood, for the record), doing so would change nothing. The news would still be the same.

That, and her family was already expecting her not to show up, and she refused to give them the satisfaction of being right.

Alice's phone showed two bars, thankfully, and she made quick work of summoning a ride. It was too far of a walk to the docks, and too late to wait inside anywhere—nothing in the quiet town was open past ten, even on the last week of summer.

She set her bags down in the cone of a bright yellow streetlamp—staying outside the light to avoid the potato bugs that danced around an enormous NO LITTERING sign—and settled in for the twenty-minute wait for the driver she'd been assigned, watching as the handful of other passengers piled into cars lined up along the street. A few happy hugs and excited hellos and slammed trunks later, the street was empty except for two cars and an SUV parked on the far side, dark and quiet.

Leaving Alice alone.

Or, alone-ish. Thirty feet away, her neighbor stood under a streetlamp of his own—braving the potato bugs—phone in hand.

Looking her way, he lifted the rectangle as though it meant something. "My ride . . . isn't here."

"It's okay."

"I don't want you to think—"

"That you're following me."

He nodded once. Firm. "Right."

"You're doing a good job of throwing me off the scent."

"Good."

A few minutes passed. Her driver, Benny, would arrive in seventeen minutes in a gray Honda. Which meant she'd be at the wharf in twenty-five minutes. On the island in an hour.

If she was lucky, everyone would be asleep. It would be almost two in the morning. Everyone should be asleep.

Please let them all be asleep.

A rumble sounded in the distance, far away and almost unnoticeable, the heavy promise of a nearby storm, the kind that came on summer nights by the water, streaks of lightning and roaring thunder and rain that soaked you through the moment it started, before it blew past, leaving clear skies and bright stars in its wake.

Dad loved a summer storm.

The thought whispered through her, and she sucked in a breath at

the sting of it—an ordinary thought that had no place in her extraordinary relationship (such as it was) with her father. Eager for distraction, Alice checked on her unlikely companion, still staring at his phone.

He was in gray slacks, which was weird. Normal people didn't wear business attire in South County in the middle of the night. Especially in the first week of September, seventy-five degrees and full of the humidity that came with being five minutes from the ocean.

Nevertheless, gray slacks and a white button-down it was, the only nod to the time or season or location the way he'd rolled up his sleeves to reveal forearms Alice noticed—as a student of the artistic form, not for any other reason.

One of those arms boasted a spill of black ink that she couldn't identify at a distance. She wondered if the people he dressed for knew about that tattoo. Hiding pieces of yourself was something Alice recognized.

Her gaze tracked up to his face, along the sharp line of his jaw, unyielding. *Distracting.*

She called across the wide expanse separating them. “You were a Boy Scout?”

He looked over immediately, as though he'd been waiting for her to speak. He didn't miss the reference to his words on the train. With a dip of his head, something a lesser observer might call chagrin, he replied, “I wasn't.”

“Impersonating a uniformed officer is a pretty serious infraction, you know.”

He put a hand to his chest. “I'm sorry.”

“I'm not mad, just disappointed.”

White teeth flashed and he looked away, down the quiet one-way street, as though willing a car to come around the corner and stop him from making a bad decision. When it didn't come, he said, “What if I told you I'm good at building fires anyway?”

“An arsonist, then.”

“Nah.” He shook his head. “I'm even better at putting them out.”

Considering Alice was about to walk into fire, it was the exact right thing to say. “In that case, you can wait over here with me . . . if you'd like.”

On a different day, at a different time, she never would have made the offer. Twelve years riding the New York City subway gave a girl a very real sense of self-preservation around even the handsomest of men. And if the subway hadn't, up until two months ago, the existence of the handsome man she'd been intending to marry would have made her tread very carefully around this one.

But there was something reckless about that moment, in the dark, in the dead of night, in that place somehow uncomfortably close to her real life and wildly far from it, with a man who might have been the last person she met for a while who didn't know exactly who she was, exactly why she was there.

What was the harm?

The invitation hung between them in air heavy with salt water and the coming storm. Long Legs stayed perfectly still, time stretching until Alice thought he was going to decline, and she would have no choice but to walk directly into the sea from embarrassment.

"Are you going to set a fire?"

I already did. "You never know."

When he moved, it was all at once, with no hesitation. Nothing but a long stride claiming the space between them with even, steady grace, and then he lowered himself to the bench next to her with a level of control that few people had so late at night.

Like a train. Like she was a scheduled stop.

She smiled and he looked at her, curious. "Is that for me?"

Another day, another time.

"I was just thinking about trains."

His gaze flickered to the tracks behind her. "Wish you'd stayed on it?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I might feel the same way."

For a heartbeat, she wondered why, but she knew better than to ask, knowing that her questions would summon his own. Instead, she spilled a new conversation into the silence hanging between them. "Trains make me think of Duke Ellington. He was a—"

"I know who Duke Ellington was."

“Are you a musician?”

“Are you?”

“No. But my father—” She cut herself off. She didn’t want her father there.

The handsome stranger didn’t notice. “Why do trains make you think of Duke Ellington?”

“He toured the whole country, with a full orchestra, in a private rail car.”

“Hmm,” he said, the sound low and thoughtful. Alice liked it. “Sousaphones don’t really fit in the overhead on the Amtrak regional.”

“I don’t think there was a sousaphone.”

“If you say so,” he said, and she couldn’t help her little surprised laugh. There was something easy about this man, smooth and competent. The kind of guy who made you want to mess him up a little, make him have some fun.

Except, there wasn’t time for fun.

She looked at her phone. Benny was ten minutes away. She pushed away the messy thoughts and was left with jazz. “Most people don’t know that Duke Ellington’s orchestra went stratospheric here. In Rhode Island.”

“Do you think that private rail car stopped here? In Wickford?” He exaggerated it like the conductor on the train. Long and flat, missing the *r*.

“It did, in fact. A few times.”

“And all we got were lukewarm hot dogs and day-old coffee.”

“The fall of civilization,” she said, softly, thinking of the many ways she’d traveled to this place in her life. Expensive cars. Helicopters, sailboats. She resisted the memories, turning, instead, to the excellent distraction before her. Solid and tall and with those forearms that—

The tattoo was a compass. Geometric and beautiful, arrows extending in long, fine lines to his wrist and elbow. She spoke to it. “You’re not local.”

He didn’t have to reply. She was right. Anyone would see it. He was pure stranger comes to town—nothing about him even close to home—

grown by seaweed and salt and clam shacks on the beach. He was too serious. Too smooth.

He lifted a hand. Hesitated. "You have . . . paint in your hair."

She brushed the hair and his hand away, self-conscious and unsettled by how easily he had identified the paint, as though he knew where she'd been that morning, before she'd gone to her classroom, before her mother had called and everything had changed, back when it had been a perfectly normal day, distant now. The past.

Before.

He cleared his throat. "I should introduce myself," he said, extending that hand that hadn't touched her, like they were normal people doing a normal thing. "I'm—"

"Don't."

He didn't. "Why not?"

"Because then—" Then she would have to introduce herself. And then he'd know. And then it would get weird. And this wasn't weird. Well, it was weird, but it wasn't weird in the way that every other interaction in her lifetime had ended up weird.

Storm like Franklin Storm?

Storm like Storm Technology?

Storm like Storm Inside™?

Yes, she'd answer, and always with a laugh—like it was the cleverest, most original thing anyone had ever said—when what she'd really meant was *No. Not like that. That's my father.* When what she'd really meant was *Don't think about it. Don't remember. Just let me be commonplace. Common name.*

And then she'd pretend to be someone else. Because someone else was always more interesting than the truth, which was this: No matter how hard she tried, the most interesting thing about Alice Storm had always been her last name. She had been an outline of a person, shaded by the stories of her father—madcap genius, daredevil billionaire, visionary world-changer. And then she'd been shaded by the story of what she'd done to him—how she'd betrayed him, how he'd exiled her. How she'd either deserved it or was better for it.

Another rumble in the distance, louder. Closer. *Of course.*

"Names make things complicated," she said, finally, meeting his gaze, intent beneath a furrowed brow, like he was trying to understand. "I know it sounds dramatic, but my life is complicated enough this week. Any chance we could just . . . skip them?"

He understood. "Sure." He nodded and looked down at his phone. "My car is almost here."

She mirrored his actions. "Mine, too," she lied. Benny hadn't moved since the last time she'd checked.

"It's late," he said. "Are you going to a hotel?"

"No." A hesitation, leagues long. "Are you?"

"I'm staying at the Quahog Quay."

Her brows rose at the mention of the motel that had been a Wickford landmark since electricity had come to South County, with its blinking neon VACANCY sign. No one ever stayed at the Quahog Quay. "Why?"

"Why the Quahog Quay? Or why, in a more existential sense?"

"I assume you chose the Quahog Quay for its clever name."

He didn't hesitate. "I can't resist alliteration."

Alice smiled and tilted her head, warm from something other than the summer evening. "Do you even know what a quahog is?"

"I assume it's not something to be discussed in polite company."

She laughed. "And the existential sense? Why are you here?"

A pause. "Work."

"Superior business center at the Quahog Quay, I hear."

"I prioritize a quality fax machine." When his smile flashed in the darkness, something coiled inside her: desire. And then, with a heavy thud, something else: suspicion.

She met his eyes. "Are you a journalist?"

"No."

She had absolutely no reason to believe him, and still— "Scout's honor?"

"Should I build you a fire to prove it?"

A rumble in the distance, and she looked to the sky. "Think you can do it before the storm gets here?"

"I'll have to owe you one."

"I'll hold you to it."

When she returned her attention to him, there was something in his eyes that she hadn't seen in a while. That she hadn't realize she missed. "Good."

She liked that word, clipped and certain, as though this was a man who made promises and kept them. Who'd be around long enough to keep them. Then he was closer, and something had changed, making her wonder what would happen if she took a night for herself before facing . . . the inevitable.

Another rumble, a reminder that any wild thoughts about a one-night stand with a perfect stranger were just that—wild thoughts. And Alice Storm was simply not the kind of person who made good on wild thoughts.

She had a father who did that, and look where it got him.

DEAD AT 70.

The words crashed over her, discordant and unwelcome and she hated them for it. Grief shouldn't feel like this, should it? It should feel like screaming and crying and rending of clothes. Not like this—empty. Like she wanted to fill it up with anything but sadness.

Like she wanted to fill it up with this man. With one night.

A car door slammed in the distance.

She cleared her throat and looked back to her phone. "Dammit."

"What happened?"

She shook her head. "The universe. My ride canceled."

A gray SUV turned the corner from Main Street. Long Legs said, "That's mine."

"Thanks for keeping me company." There was no reason for her to feel like this, like his departure was a loss. Like he was a port in the storm.

"Are you okay?" No reason for him to notice that she wasn't and still, it felt— "Do you . . . need a ride?"

"That *definitely* sounds like you were following me."

"Okay, but what if I don't want anyone *else* following you?"

It was a really decent thing to say. The kind of thing she'd remember

fondly in an hour or so, when she recounted this bad day (understatement) to her best friend. A sort of, *And then a really handsome, very decent guy asked me if I would be okay by myself*, kind of memory. *And I wondered what he would say if I said, "Definitely not, you should stay and protect me. And also let me climb you like a tree."*

And Gabi would laugh, and Alice would talk about the rest of the day—her ride bailing and the train being loud and packed with people and the missed calls requesting comments and interviews she was never going to give. And the calls that never came from the people who should have called. And somehow, everything would seem better when she hung up the phone.

Except this wasn't the kind of bad day that was made better by a phone call. This was the kind of bad day that came along once in a lifetime. Because the bad luck—the ride and the train and the texts and the missed calls—it was all layered on top of something worse.

My father died.

The words were a knot in her throat.

My father died, and we hadn't spoken in five years, and I don't know how I feel.

She couldn't say them to the stranger. Instead, she stepped toward him, tilted her head to the side, and tried for a different kind of feeling. "If I let you give me a ride . . . what happens next?"

Something flashed in his eyes. *Heat.*

That felt good.

The heat wasn't alone, though. It came with regret. Or some cousin to it, like that decent guy didn't want to be so decent, but would be, nonetheless.

The car pulled up beside them.

She tilted her chin toward it. "I'll be fine. It was nice meeting you."

"We didn't meet," he said. "No names, remember?"

"Maybe we will," she replied. "Someday." They wouldn't, but Alice stored the idea away like a memory anyway.

Lightning flashed.

She counted. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four.*

A heavy rumble of thunder.

"Five miles," he said.

She didn't look at the car this time. "You should go before . . ." *Before I make a bad decision.*

"You're right." He didn't move.

They were so still, hanging like the salty humidity around them. Was he going to kiss her? Was she going to kiss him? Surely not. That wasn't the kind of thing Alice Storm did, right in public, in Wickford, Rhode Island, in full view of a thousand insects and the driver of a Kia Sedona, rideshare timer counting down on the dash.

And still . . . she was tempted. One kiss. One out-of-character decision. One stolen moment. One last reprieve, a mad scramble to avoid the unavoidable.

Another rumble, this one in his chest, lost in a much louder one above, a wicked crack, breaking everything apart: the sky, rain suddenly everywhere, all around them, in heavy sheets; the darkness, a flash of lightning so bright and close that they should have felt the heat of it; and then, her name shouted from what seemed like inches away.

"Alice!"

She turned.

The bright light hadn't been lightning. It had been a camera flash. "Alice!" the photographer shouted again, compact, wrinkled, unshaven, as though he'd been waiting for the train for hours. And maybe he had?

Another shout. Another man running from the far side of the street, where the three cars had been sitting, dark. Watching. Waiting for something worth photographing.

How had they known she would be there?

How had *she* not known *they* would be there? There were two stories this week, after all. One Storm gone, the other returned.

"Alice! Were you and your father still estranged? Why didn't you come with your brother and sisters? Are they speaking to you? Are you welcome at home?"

Years of training kicked in. *Head down. Stay on course.* But there was no course. Benny and his Honda had bailed on her, and she was alone

under this streetlight in the rain, outside a closed train station, surrounded by the enemy.

Unmoored.

"Please." She held up a hand, knowing it was futile. "Don't—"

Before she could finish—*what had she been going to say, even?*—she was in motion, pushed behind the not-a-Boy-Scout (but-honestly-kind-of-a-Boy-Scout?), her view blocked by his wide shoulders, plastered with rain-soaked white cotton.

"Get back," he said, his tone unyielding.

They didn't get back. Of course they didn't. Pictures of Franklin Storm's daughter today were worth this decent man's annual salary, and the paparazzi knew it.

More flashes as the rain poured, and Alice felt just slightly like she was drowning. "Who's your boyfriend?"

"Is it serious?"

"Goddammit." The man who was decidedly *not* her boyfriend sure sounded serious. "Get in the car."

A lifeboat.

She turned to get her bags, and he grabbed her hand, strong and sure. "No." The word stopped her in her tracks. "*Get in the car, Alice.*"

He said her name like he'd been saying it for a lifetime, and she obeyed him instantly, unsurprised to find the driver already opening the rear door. Behind her, she heard Long Legs growl, "I said, get *back*."

Another rumble of thunder, covering up whatever happened to cause a sharp shout and a high-pitched "What the fuck?!" as she climbed inside the car, the driver looking past her as he said, "Those assholes deserved that."

Once inside, Alice ducked her head and waited as her unexpected rescuers shoved bags into the trunk and joined her. The driver turned around, excitement in his eyes. "Guessin' you don't wanna head where the app is sending me."

"Not yet," came the terse reply from her companion, whose name she still didn't know. She should ask him. But maybe if she didn't, he wouldn't ask her, either. Or anything else. Anything like *Why are paparazzi waiting for you in this sleepy Rhode Island town in the middle of*

the night? Why aren't you speaking to your family? Come to think of it, who is your family? "Think you can lose them?"

A big smile—this driver was going to get free beers forever on this story. "Dumbasses are from New York City. They know nothin' about Rhode Island."

"Let's lose them, then."

"Yessir." The car peeled out of the drive, barely missing the man who leaped out of its path, the engine straining to live up to the full requirements of a getaway car. "Then to the motel?"

"We'll drop her first."

It was a prompt, which she'd answer, eventually. Just as soon as she looked away from his hand, balled into a fist, attached to that forearm that boasted the compass, wet with rain and, in the flash of the street-lights beyond, red-knuckled.

Like he'd hit something.

Later, she would chalk it up to a wild combination of grief and loneliness that she liked those knuckles, scraped and raw. But in the moment? When he turned his fist over and opened his hand with a ragged, "Here," she liked it for other reasons.

Especially when she recognized the small rectangles on his palm. A pair of external SD cards.

Her eyes flew to his, and he said, "From the cameras." That was it. Nothing more, no pressing her for information he was, frankly, owed, considering he'd committed some light assault for her.

There was something powerfully appealing about a man who still didn't seem to care who she was, or why she'd brought chaos into his life.

"Are you okay?" he asked, the second time since they'd left the train. *No. But this helps.*

"Where to, sweethaht?" The driver, this time.

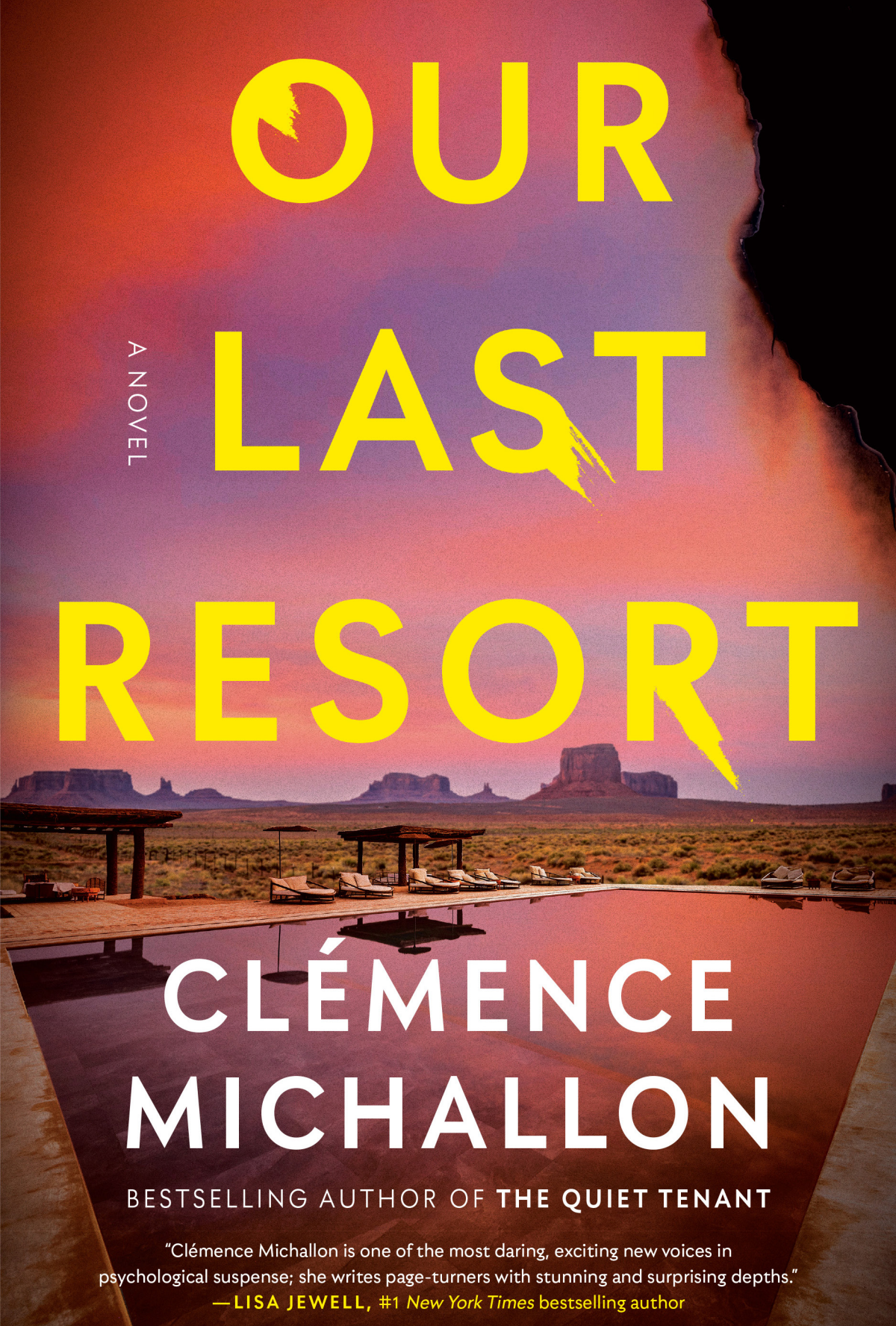
Where *was* she going? She'd been so sure of her path—so certain she'd been on the right one. And now . . . nothing made sense. Nothing but this moment. She'd been in danger, and now she wasn't. And tomorrow, everything would return, but tonight, this made sense.

He made sense.

She reached out—not for the SD cards. Instead, she put her hand in his, capturing the rectangles between their palms, reveling in the heat of his touch, rough and firm. Steady. Like the train.

Unlike everything else.

“The Quahog Quay.”



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Published by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC,
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

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Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Michallon, Clémence, author.

Title: Our last resort: a novel / Clémence Michallon.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024045795 | ISBN 9780593802762 (hardcover) |
ISBN 9780593802779 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction). | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.I344475 O97 2025 |

DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20241001

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024045795>

penguinrandomhouse.com | aaknopf.com

Printed in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

The pool will shimmer, golden blue, like a mirage. Guests will head to breakfast in a sleepy shuffle.

But for now, it's all quiet. All mine. The insomniac's privilege.

I reach in the pocket of my hoodie, pull a cigarette from the pack, click my lighter. Empty. I hesitate, then use the one provided by the hotel for the gas fireplace.

First puff. A gust of wind teases the hem of my shorts, lifts it at the edge of the three white stripes.

I'm not alone.

The thought cuts through my mind in a red slash.

Two voices disrupt the night's quiet.

I know these voices. I've heard them intermittently over the past four days, rippling in hushed tones near the spa, in clipped sentences over the dinner table.

The young wife and her old husband.

I recognized them by the pool on our first day, from a *60 Minutes* segment I watched last year. Most of what I know about the world, I learned on TV.

"Look," I told Gabriel, my elbow digging into his ribs. "That's William Brenner."

When he didn't respond, I explained: "He's a big tabloid guy. Wealthy. I think that's his . . . third wife?"

What a pairing they make. Sabrina Brenner, not yet thirty, her skin already tightened by injectables. Her long hair, shimmering platinum. Everything about her delicate and airy, a cloud of sweet perfume enveloping her, something evoking a state fair, the wholesome aromas of sugar and vanilla.

Trailing her, the blunt shape of her husband. William Brenner radiates a bullish kind of confidence, from the shiny top of his balding skull to his professionally polished loafers. He's got that smile, too—the sly grin of a man who has never wanted for the company of ladies. Who knows himself to be not handsome, but charming, and who understands that *charming* is enough to get what he wants.

The *60 Minutes* segment was about the tabloid culture of the early 2000s, specifically the ways in which it ruined people's

lives. “People like good stories,” William Brenner had said, his bulk perched on an ornate armchair in his Upper East Side apartment. “And we are here to give them exactly that.”

What’s he saying now?

My cigarette hisses softly as I stub it out on the sole of my sandal. The concept of tobacco does not exist at the Ara hotel, nor do ashtrays. Back inside, in the bathroom, I hold the cigarette butt under a thin stream of water, wrap it in toilet paper, and bury it in the trash can.

Gabriel is still sleeping, curled in a fetal position. Like when we were kids: limbs tangled at his front, a knot of a boy shielding himself from the world.

I grab my key card and slip away.

The voices lead me close to the edge of the compound, to the last patch of sandstone before the hotel ends and the desert begins.

Here they are. The Brenners.

Sabrina paces away from her husband, still in the outfit she wore to dinner, the white satin, the high heels. She’s almost fluorescent in the moonlight, a glowing fish darting across the bottom of an aquarium, the sleek folds of her dress rippling like fins.

William staggers after her. He, too, is still in his dinner clothes, white button-down and a suit, the fabric a little too thick for the desert.

Standing about twenty feet from them, I keep my shoulders hunched, hoping for invisibility.

“I’m sorry,” Sabrina says, in the voice of a woman who has been sorry for a long time—always in vain.

Has anyone else noticed?

How Sabrina keeps herself out of her husband’s reach? How her gaze rises whenever he stands up? How she tracks his movements, no doubt the same way she monitors his moods?

“Oh,” William growls. “Now you’re fucking sorry?”

He snatches at his wife’s arm, misses, stumbles forward.

“Stop lying to me.”

Sabrina raises her palms in front of her.

"I'm sorry," she says again. "I'm not lying to you. Let's just go back to the—"

William grabs her young wrists. A phantom pain buzzes through my right side: a pull at my shoulder years ago, my arm hanging limp afterward.

William slurs: "You stupid whore."

I realize I'm holding my breath.

Get away from her. Leave her the fuck alone.

Sabrina whips around to face her husband.

"I'm not stupid," she says.

All trace of apology has left her voice. This version of Sabrina is strong, willful, outraged on her own behalf.

William goes still.

"What did you just say?"

"I said, I'm not stu—"

As Sabrina moves to step past her husband, her gaze travels above him.

She spots me.

I think I see her shoulders tense.

She must have assumed they were alone. Our fellow guests are safely tucked in their suites, asleep behind thick stone walls and triple-pane windows.

Within the compound, the Ara has created discrete, hushed bubbles for each set of guests. Our suites are standalone buildings, nestled at the end of individual walkways. Tables in the dining room are distanced, other people's conversations reduced to a low hum. It's a trick the hotel has been playing on us: assuring us that we don't need to concern ourselves with the other guests, that we are safe from one another.

For half a second, Sabrina considers me. Then she gives the faintest shake of the head.

Don't.

I understand. Back when I was a kid, the mothers grew irate if we called for help. Their voices rose, indignant: *What the hell do you think you're doing?* If they were in a hitting mood, they

hit harder. They made sure we regretted looking for a lifeline, every single time.

William follows his wife's gaze.

Shit.

I duck behind a large planter. There are dozens around the hotel: oval-shaped, each the size of a small bathtub and housing a lone tree. The soil is hidden beneath a layer of decorative rocks. "A lot of trees in the desert manage to grow through cracks in the stone," Catalina, the hotel's manager, explained when she gave us a tour on the first day, her sleek, dark ponytail gleaming in the sunlight. "Our architect was very inspired by them."

These rocks aren't ordinary, though. Nothing at the hotel is. "White marble chunks from Italy," Catalina said. "You won't find them anywhere else in the region."

I crouch as low as I can behind the planter and its expensive rocks. My heartbeat pulses in my ears.

"What are you looking at?" William asks, imperious.

Is the sound of his voice closer, or am I imagining it?

"Nothing. I'm not looking at anything."

Still crouched, I inch behind a nearby wall.

Like a coward.

No.

Sabrina doesn't want me to get involved.

"Leave me alone," she tells her husband.

"And what would you do, if I left you alone?"

Her answer is muffled as I sidestep back toward the suite. There are words I can't make out, then: "I would thrive."

Her tone is clear and self-righteous. The tone of a woman who knows she contains limitless worlds, and who is sick of reining them in.

Tomorrow, I'll talk to her.

I won't say anything about her husband. I'm not an idiot. But I'll do what I've avoided for the past four days: I'll introduce myself, ask her how her stay is going. I'll make a comment about the weather.

I'll let her know that someone's here for her, that she has a friend if she wants one.

Tomorrow. In a few hours.

Everything's easier in the daylight. We're all braver in the morning.

2 ESCALANTE, UTAH

THE FOURTH NIGHT

A decade ago, a developer looked at this flat patch of the Escalante Desert and thought, *I will build a hotel here*. This became the Ara. Hidden from the highway, accessible only via an unmarked dirt road. There's a gym, a spa, a boutique. Of course, the pool. An open-air entrance lounge leads to the lobby, which itself leads to the dining room. The hotel's sleek lines melt into the desertscape. There are no barriers around us, no fences.

A cold splash of water on my face. The moon shines directly into our bathroom, the ivory belly of our soaking tub glowing beneath the arched window. When I return to the room, it's quiet.

Too quiet.

I peer at the two queen-size beds. Mine is on the right, the million-thread-count Italian cotton sheets folded back. On Gabriel's side, a blur of linens where his resting body should be, pillows still punched with the outline of his head. The alpaca wool blanket he plucked from the sofa lies abandoned on the floor.

"Gabriel?"

I switch on the ceiling light.

He's not here.

I pick up my phone from my nightstand, find our most recent text (yesterday afternoon, when Gabriel messaged me from the pool bar asking if I wanted a smoothie), and press the call button.

A buzz breaks the silence. My gaze falls on Gabriel's phone, vibrating on his own nightstand.

Shit.

Where is he? At this hour, there's nothing to do at the Ara but sleep. We're a thirty-minute drive from the nearest town. Even if Gabriel had a reason to head there in the middle of the night, we don't have a car. A driver picked us up from the airport in one of the hotel's gleaming vans, an air-conditioned capsule around which the desert materialized like another planet.

"Gabriel?"

I check the patio. Empty. He must have left while I was still outside.

Stay calm. You're not the person you were fifteen years ago. A girl with a life like a blank page, everything to figure out from scratch. Delivered to a world that allowed her to be safe only with a man at her side.

The door handle rattles.

There's a sliding sound, the mechanism unlocking at the touch of a key card on the other side.

Gabriel starts when he sees me.

"There you are," he says.

"I— What?"

"Where did you go?"

Without waiting for my answer, Gabriel shuts the door behind him. He squints at the ceiling light.

"Mind if I switch this off?"

I tell him to go ahead.

Even in shadows, I can make out his silhouette. Here, his bare arms, there, the white words on his T-shirt: TIBERIUS & DOMITIAN & NERO & CALIGULA. (Four Roman emperors, four brands of insanity. I learned about them when I picked the names three Christmases ago, before mailing Gabriel the T-shirt as a

present. Those four, in order: tyrannical; paranoid; burned people alive; demanded to be worshipped as a god.)

"I was looking for *you*," I say. "Just now."

Gabriel disappears inside the bathroom. There's the trickle of water, the sluicing sound of soap lathering against skin.

"I don't know what to tell you," he says from the other side of the door. "I woke up and you weren't here."

He walks back into the room, wiping his hands on his sweatpants. There is a brief ray of moonlight, then the bathroom door shuts, and we're in the dark again.

"Where did you disappear to?" he asks.

"I was . . . outside. Smoking."

I can't make out his face, but I think he's shaking his head.

"If you get us kicked out before the end of the stay, remember you're the one on the hook for the bill."

His voice is light, teasing. I try to laugh, but all I can produce is a small cough.

A whoosh of sheets and blankets. Gabriel folding himself into his bed. I don't need to see him to know his legs are slightly bent. The curse of the tall man: always compressing his body, hunching his way through doors and train cars.

"Are you going to try to sleep," he asks, "or . . . ?"

"I saw something."

It comes out as a whisper.

"What?" he asks. "What did you see?"

My throat tightens. I don't want to talk about any of it with Gabriel: Sabrina and William Brenner; husbands and the things they do to their wives.

It's what kicked him out of my life almost nine years ago.

We've been finding our way back to each other. Still, in our four days at the Ara, there have been moments when he's slipped away. Retreating to our suite in the middle of an afternoon by the pool. Untethering from our dinner conversation and gazing into the distance.

Just yesterday, he skipped a morning hike, invoking a migraine. I believed him. Gabriel has had migraines since we

were both fifteen. But I also remember something he told me years ago, once he'd found the right treatment: "Now I only get the migraines that my body wants me to have."

Which meant the timing of his migraines was no longer random. He got them when he worked too hard, or when he was depressed. They became his body's way of forcing him to rest, of bailing him out of moments he wanted to avoid.

Like yesterday's hike.

We came here to talk. But we haven't discussed it yet—the documentary, the thing that brought us here. I've tried to bring it up a couple of times, but Gabriel wriggled out of the conversation. He had a phone call to make, a question to ask at the front desk.

There are layers between us. Things unsaid, embraces that were never given.

But I'm trying.

"Our neighbors," I say. "The Brenners. The old guy and his wife."

"What about them?"

Gabriel's voice is warm, patient.

"They were arguing," I tell him. "Fighting."

"It happens."

I shake my head, even though he can't see me. "This was different. Bad. It reminded me of—"

My voice disappears at the back of my throat.

There are things I can't say. Not even to my brother, not even in the dark.

"Come over here," he says.

A mental picture from our childhood: me on the top bunk, Gabriel on the bottom one. Back when I was the brave one.

I slide down to the floor and feel my way toward him. There, I sit, the wood of his bed frame digging between my shoulders.

"Everything's fine," he says.

"Sabrina Brenner," I tell him. "There's something wrong with her husband."

"There's something wrong with most husbands."

Before I can ask him what he means, before I can insist,

No, really, Gabriel, I'm not kidding, my brother shifts under his blanket.

"We're okay," he says, his last word swallowed by a yawn.
"It's all going to be okay."

Just like that, he's asleep again.

I stay seated by his bed. In other circumstances, I'd fall asleep right here, the regular pattern of Gabriel's breath like a lullaby.

Not tonight.

I sit, eyes open. Listening. Standing guard.

It's nothing I haven't done before.

3 THE ONLY TOWN WE KNEW, HUDSON VALLEY

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

In the beginning, there was Émile.

Émile knew everything. His head was full of ideas, stories, music. He'd built a whole world for us using his thoughts as bricks.

In Émile's world, birthdays were acknowledged but not celebrated. There was no cake, no song. We nodded to the passage of time, and then we moved on.

On the day I turned eight, Edwina, a tall twelve-year-old girl who had started leading our woodworking workshops, came to find me.

I was outside, drawing a figure eight in a patch of dirt with a stick. It was almost time for lunch, almost time to head to the cafeteria. But Edwina had other plans.

"Come," she said.

I followed her. She took me across the old schoolyard, past the communal showers, the cafeteria, the dorms, the reclaimed chapel.

My stomach tightened. "Where are you—"

"Shhh."

"But—"

Edwina whipped around. "No questions."

Impossibly, she led me all the way to Émile's building.

This forbidden land, the only part of the compound in pristine condition. I'd never been inside. Émile's office, we all knew, was on the first floor; his living quarters, equally off-limits, upstairs. He lived there alone, and—for the most part—worked there alone.

Edwina's skirt swished across a small foyer. She nudged me in front of a closed wooden door.

"Stand here."

She knocked and, before I could ask her what she was doing, skittered away.

I braced myself. Misbehaving came at a cost, always. We had learned to be afraid of hands that grabbed, of feet that kicked.

There were rumors, too. Of starvation. Of dehydration. Of a dark and secret place where disobedient children were sent.

On the other side of the door, Émile's voice rose.

"Come in."

He sounded calm, as if he'd been expecting me.

I pushed the door open.

To a child's eyes, Émile's office was enormous. There was a desk. A bookshelf to house his writings, as tall as three kids standing on one another's shoulders. A globe on a console.

At the center of it all, Émile. His eyes, a grayish blue, glinting behind reading glasses. He gestured to one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"Sit."

I sat.

"Do you know why you're here?"

I shook my head.

"I'm going to ask you a question," he said. "I want you to answer it in the way that feels the most truthful to you."

Truth was a concept he spoke of often. Émile was big on looking inward, on not lying to yourself about who you were.

"This is a test," he said. "Everyone here has taken it. Your answer will tell us a lot about you as a person."

Émile got up from behind his desk. He seemed ancient to me. It would be a shock when, years later, the papers printed his

age. He was in his late thirties on the day of this test, in his late forties when the world ended.

The question was insultingly simple. I realized, much later, that he had borrowed it from the most mundane setting imaginable.

In hindsight, it was clear he'd heard it on a plane.

We didn't know, then. We didn't fly. Émile did. Not frequently, but he had to. He was an important man. He went to meet dignitaries, people with their fingers on the pulse of the world.

(Well, that's what he said. When everything came out, we learned that Émile was usually visiting family. Not in his native France—for a variety of reasons, Émile couldn't cross international borders—but in Florida, where he had an uncle and a few cousins. Improbably, he did meet the prime minister of Canada, at the very northern tip of the state of New York, once. He kept a framed photo on his desk of the two of them shaking hands. Later on, it made all the papers.)

"Chicken or fish?"

The question made no sense to a child of Émile's world. We didn't eat animals. They were poison, Émile said. His was a world of plants, beans, pulses. The mothers cooked together, in large batches. Stews were easy to share, one large pot and a ladle. In the mornings, oatmeal, steel-cut, gritty against the roofs of our mouths.

Émile must have sensed the need for visual aids. He switched on a small television against the back wall and fed it a black VHS tape.

"Chicken," he pronounced.

Images flashed up on the screen. Pillowy hunks of white meat, drizzled with brown gravy. A platter of darker cuts, a family joining hands around the table. Smaller pieces, rolled in bread-crumbs, then plunged into hot oil until they emerged, hardened and—Émile adjusted the volume on the television—crispy.

There was incomplete dialogue, a cacophony of music that started and stopped haphazardly. The videos must have been spliced together from TV ads, some of them from series or

movies. I didn't realize any of that at the time. All I knew was that I was hungry.

I stood there, stomach roiling, my mouth filling with saliva.

"Or fish?"

More delights—baked underneath a golden crust, grilled on hot stones and served with dripping tomatoes. Tender pink slabs fanning out under a tilted fork. Chunks of white flesh in paper-thin batter, stacked against French fries in a paper cone.

A whole world out there—of treasures, of appetites.

Chicken or fish?

It was the most important question of my short life, and I had no idea how to answer it.

Émile weeded out bad people. They were plucked from our lives and disappeared forever. We had no idea what happened to them. In this black hole of knowledge lived every imaginable nightmare.

Émile tapped his foot.

I had to say something. Anything.

"Chicken?"

Émile's eyes flashed. He inhaled.

The exhale was a sigh.

Émile ejected the VHS tape, inserted another one into the VCR.

"These," he said, "are the consequences of your choice."

The new tape did not make sense, either. Chicks on a conveyor belt did not make sense. It was not a thing nature would let happen. Hands, gloved in plastic, shot into the frame, grabbing at the chicks like boiled tomatoes to be squished into sauce. Unbearable sights: chicks fed to a metallic machine, trapped between its jaws. Soft little lives ending in a splatter of blood.

There were chickens on the compound. We didn't eat them—just their eggs, taken as respectfully as possible, our hands wrapped delicately around the shells, careful not to break them, grateful for our bounty.

My heart raced. The massacred chicks were anathema to Émile. Anyone associated with such evil had no place in his world.

Émile switched off the television. We sat in silence for what must have been a full minute.

“What do you think I should do?” he said finally.

Another impossible question. Only Émile knew what anyone should do.

“I’m sorry.”

Émile sat back behind his desk and crossed his hands over his abdomen.

“You say you’re sorry. Do you know how you can show it?”

No more words. Only my hopeful gaze rising to almost meet his. Only my heart, open, should he want to help himself to it.

“Remember this. Remember the consequences of your actions. Remember that you have this force inside you, and you do not know how to wield it.”

I nodded.

Émile leaned over the desk.

“That’s why you must listen. Learn. Remember you do not know anything. You need to be guided. If you listen, you have a chance.”

I nodded some more, twisting my fingers, palms rising, prayerlike. But no. Émile did not want to be worshipped. He didn’t want anyone to call him a guru or a savant.

With a flick of his wrist, he dismissed me.

“You can go now.”

The door to his office shut behind me with barely a sound.

What I didn’t know, what I wouldn’t learn until much later: There was another tape for fish. That one was a mix of big-game and deep-water fishing—hundreds of creatures caught in nets, thrashing, eyes swelling and stomachs popping out of their mouths as they were brought to the surface too fast, the change of pressure too great to survive. Bigger animals with hooks puncturing their mouths. Majestic predators reduced to nothing by the folly of men.

The question was *Chicken or fish?* The only correct answer was *Neither*.

Why had no one warned me?

Everyone took the test, according to Émile—yet no one

talked about it. I'd never heard a word of caution, not a whisper, not a rumor.

Of course.

Everyone took the test, and everyone failed it.

And so we stayed quiet. Every last one of us.

Émile didn't have to ask us not to tell. He didn't need to rely on our loyalty.

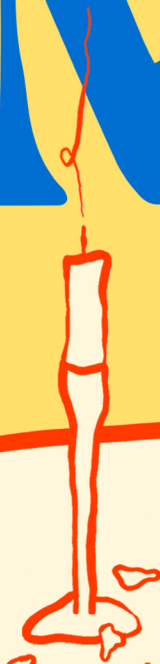
Shame kept us silent all on its own.

I certainly didn't feel like telling anyone about my experience.

Later, after everything unraveled, people kept asking the same question. *How did he look so legit to so many people for so long?*

They didn't understand. For the kids, it started when we were eight. The lesson of the test settled around our shoulders like chain mail: There were hurricanes within us, devastation in our bodies. Without Émile to teach us, to save us from ourselves, we would destroy it all. Our dark hearts would end the world.

LOVED ONE



novel

AISHA MUHARRAR

VIKING
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
penguinrandomhouse.com

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Designed by Cassandra Garruzzo Mueller

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Muharrar, Aisha, author.

Title: Loved one : a novel / Aisha Muharrar.

Description: New York : Viking, 2025

Identifiers: LCCN 2024041426 (print) |

LCCN 2024041427 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593655849 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9798217060542 (international edition) | ISBN 9780593655856 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.U3835 L68 2025 (print) |

LCC PS3613.U3835 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20241025

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024041426>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024041427>

Printed in the United States of America
\$PrintCode

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

ONE

There was no bride. There was no groom. No seating chart with my name in calligraphy—a blue dot next to *Julia* indicating a preference for fish. No DJ coaxing guests to the dance floor with a multigenerational crowd-pleaser, no maid of honor fiddling with a sheet of white printer paper, unfolding it from eighths to fourths, then taking a theatrical deep breath before she says, *Okay! So.*

Which made sense because it was not a wedding.

But there were approximately a hundred of us gathered at Berkeley City Club, a grand Italian Renaissance Revival building often rented out for private events (like weddings), and there were two sections of dark wood folding chairs separated by a wide stripe of hardwood floor (an aisle if you will), and more important, it just *felt* like it should have been a wedding. It's what we did that year. We went to weddings. Not together—though Gabe did ask, the year before, when the invitations went out and before he'd started dating Elizabeth, if I'd be his plus-one to the Tokyo wedding of his percussionist and backup vocalist. They'd met on tour with him. I would

have loved to go to Japan, but I already had another wedding on the same day. By September, I'd been to six and RSVP'd to three more. I was thirty—Gabe, born the same year but in December, was twenty-nine—and apparently we'd entered that stage of life where if you haven't nailed down your version of semiformal cocktail attire, you'd better do it quick because that's what your weekends were going to be for the next decade. This perpetual wedding season was such a well-known truth about people our age that I could feel an awareness of it in the room as I stood up, clutching my own folded sheet of printer paper, and began to speak about my dear friend Gabe. It was one of the things I had to avoid saying in Gabe's eulogy—the obvious thing—that he was only twenty-nine, and his death was so sudden, by anyone's estimation, it would have been more likely I was speaking at the happiest day of his life.

My dear friend Gabe. This was the one line I'd prepared and now I'd said it. I'd hoped to come up with more by the time I arrived at the funeral. In my studio as I packaged orders. On the flight from LA, the car ride from the airport. But no, nothing. I lowered the microphone, stalling for time, and tried to remember how I was supposed to feel about Gabe. Outside, UC Berkeley students chatted on the street below us, cars and trucks drove along the city's concrete hills. It was a beautiful cloudless day.

"Gabe was the kind of friend who was more like family," I said. This was true. Having briefly dated as teenagers, when we met again in our twenties, we became friends so quickly it was clear we worked better that way. And we'd remained close for years.

"I could always count on him," I continued, launching into one quickly delivered anecdote after another to prove this point. As I

scanned the faces in front of me—mostly Gabe’s music associates and peers, plus both sides of his family: his father, his cousins, the aunts who’d flown in from Colombia, and his mother and her relatives and friends—I was sure none of them could tell, but I knew there was a disconnect between the words I was saying and what I was feeling. Not because I was in shock or numb. Though I probably *was* both in shock *and* numb. And not because the stories weren’t real. I had plenty of examples of Gabe being sweet and constant.

Of course it would never have been painless, giving that eulogy. But it should have been easier.

The problem was even though Gabe was one of my closest friends, the month before, we’d made a dumb mistake and slept together.

AN IMMEDIATE AND IMPORTANT CAVEAT: GABE AND I WERE ACTUAL friends. I won’t mention this again, because then the lady doth protest too much, but the point has to be made. We weren’t the kind of friends who were never really friends. The kind of friends you see in a romantic comedy where there are two incredibly attractive people who are deeply emotionally invested in each other, and we’re supposed to believe they have never once considered the idea of sexual intercourse. The kind of friends who are secretly in love with each other and only realize minutes before one of them is about to get married or leave town, and the next thing you know they’re jumping in a car, or on a horse, or running down the street, *whatever*, and they tumble into bed, or out of frame, depending on the rating of the movie. Having several male friends, this depiction of male-female friendship was always a pet peeve of mine, but somehow

Gabe and I had tumbled (onto a couch, not a bed, but then, yes, eventually a bed too), and we'd ended up in this exact ridiculous situation, except we'd done worse than that because we hadn't even gotten a stolen honeymoon or new zip code; we'd just made a real, and awful, mess of everything.

But—you may be thinking—there's always a chance to make things better. Even if it gets really bad, if you're truly good friends, then you can work it out. And absolutely, totally you can. Unless, three weeks later, one of you dies.

“OH, JULIA, HE *LOVED* YOU.” THE FIRST PERSON I SPOKE TO AFTER my eulogy was Gabe's manager, Kathy Liu. We were in the restroom. It was small, with two narrow stalls and two side-by-side sinks. Kathy was middle-aged, probably closer to my mom's age than mine. She was wearing a Tina Turner concert tee over a long-sleeved black dress. Gabe's mother, Leora, had asked that instead of the usual funeral garb, in honor of Gabe's career as a musician, we wear our favorite concert tees. I'd chosen a Billy Joel's *The Stranger* shirt (an inside joke for no one but the deceased) under a black tuxedo jacket. It was clear Leora wanted Gabe's funeral to be a departure from traditional mourning and as much of a celebration of his life as possible. His producer and frequent collaborator Jabari Bernier was currently leading a twenty-minute musical tribute with a jazz quartet. *A time of reflection* is what it said in the program. A time for a bathroom break is how several people interpreted it. I'd avoided the long line for the women's room and found an empty restroom downstairs. Well, empty until Kathy walked in. She

hugged me, then took a step back, concentrating with concern as if she were appraising car wreckage.

“He just adored you,” Kathy said, clutching my hands in hers. “I remember we were headed to a show in Houston, and he kept saying, ‘Julia’s going to be near here. You have to leave some time so I can see Julia.’ And I said, ‘Okay, where’s Julia staying? Which hotel in Houston?’”

I knew this story. Kathy had told it to me before. She was one of those people who connected with acquaintances by continually reminding them of the single experience they shared, imbuing an anecdote with dramatic reverence, as if it were Kerri Strug’s Olympic vault or some other monumental event worthy of its own ten-part docuseries. Now finally we’d reached the episode about the dismount.

“And *then* he said, ‘Oh no, Julia’s staying in *Austin*.’ Austin! I said, ‘That may as well be a different state, honey.’ But I got him there. So sweet.”

I had once found this story sweet too; now it was, at best, proof that Gabe was terrible at state geography.

Kathy rested her funeral program on the edge of the sink. *Gabriel Wolfe-Martel, 1986–2016*. “I’m sorry we couldn’t reach you directly, our priority was Leora.”

“Of course,” I said. I’d found out the same way everyone else had. Through the internet. I was at a workbench in my studio, tightening the prong setting of a bespoke ruby ring, the chain nose pliers gripped between my thumb and index finger. Mandy, the new production manager for my jewelry line, was at her desk.

Mandy had only worked for me for a few weeks, but we’d hit it off instantly after realizing we’d both grown up the only Black girl

in a mostly white suburban school. There was often an immediate bond with other onlies, a shared interest in things that would probably go on some ill-conceived this-is-for-white-people list that we'd come by honestly and early before realizing those things weren't made with us in mind. Somewhere Mandy had a photo of herself with her all-white soccer team and somewhere I had a similar picture; we got each other. But we hadn't known each other that long, and it can take some time for me to open up to people, which is why it wasn't her fault when she looked up from her laptop and gasped. "Wait, don't you know one of the guys from Separate Bedrooms?"

"It's just Gabe," I said. This was a common mistake. Separate Bedrooms wasn't a band of four or five guys, it was a stage name for one person.

"Oh," she said, her voice tentative. "People are saying he, like, died?"

Kathy pulled a handkerchief from her purse. A handkerchief. You didn't see those too often. I pointed to it. "Am I going to need one of those?" I was sort of trying to make a joke, sort of genuinely afraid. I'd never been to a funeral. Which I knew at thirty was lucky. Though it's hard to feel lucky at a funeral.

"Oh yes, dear," Kathy said. Her face softened into a maternal tenderness. "You may not feel it yet, but at some point, it will hit you. And then you'll be back to normal, talking to someone, just like we are now, and it will hit you all over again. Grief comes in waves." She patted my shoulder. You let me know if there's anything I can do."

There was something Kathy could do. What I'd realized I needed as soon as I entered the bathroom, ironic because I'd purposely

avoided the long line of women waiting for the upstairs restroom and was now on my own. “Do you have a tampon?” I asked.

She didn’t. (“Oh, darling, I’m menopausal!”) I checked the bathroom tampon dispenser, but of course it was empty. Or broken. Either way, nonfunctional. (Had anyone ever seen a functional public restroom tampon dispenser?) I searched my bag again, then ducked into a stall. I was in there, preparing to make a toilet-paper-constructed menstruation nest, when someone walked in and entered the other stall.

“Sorry, excuse me? Do you have a tampon?” I asked.

“I do actually,” a voice said in an English accent. The stalls were the type where you could see the feet of the person next to you. In this space, a woman’s hand, long fingers with short, unpolished nails, appeared. A tampon in the palm. It was the European kind, no applicator. I took it from her, and as I did, I noticed a large statement ring on her index finger, a garnet in a silver setting.

It wasn’t unusual for me to notice the pieces people wore. But it wasn’t the first time I’d seen this ring. I knew that burgundy oval, the chunky cigar band. But from where? Then with a mental click, a memory popped it into place like a bone reset.

It was from Gabe’s texts. A selfie, and in the corner was a woman’s hand—with this ring—on his shoulder. I was pretty sure it was his most recent ex-girlfriend. I’d seen other pictures of her too. She was white, a brunette. What was her name? They’d dated off and on for a year. She lived in London and Gabe had moved in with her at the end of his European tour.

I took the tampon. “Thanks,” I said.

“Of course,” she replied. “Just make sure I get it back.”

Funny, I thought. Given the day's events, it was the equivalent of me guffawing.

When I exited my stall, she was at one of the sinks. Kathy had left her funeral program balanced on the edge. Between us, Gabe looked up. Sitting on some steps, leaning forward, his forearms on his knees. His black hair spiked up away from his face. A slight squint, like the sun was in his eyes.

I turned on the faucet of the other sink, glancing over to confirm her identity. Reddish-brown hair, wavy and just past her shoulders. A strong jawline and the kind of skin I'd heard pale friends complain resisted a tan. Taller than me. A statuesque womanly figure that I, still waiting for a growth spurt, had never possessed. She was wearing a black wrap dress. Great boobs, I thought. Nice pull, Gabe.

She turned toward me. Elizabeth! That was her name. And it was definitely her. Her eyes narrowed, I assumed because she was trying to place me.

I extended my hand. "Elizabeth, hi. We've never met. I'm—"

"You're Julia." There was an abrupt downshift in her tone, her words a shove. As she pulled a paper towel from the dispenser, she said, "I know who you are. I know exactly who you were to Gabe." Then she walked out, tossing the crumpled paper into the trash as she went.

I stood for a moment, dazed. I didn't go after her. In the same way you wouldn't pursue a bear after it mauled you or pick up a sizzling-hot pan that had just scalded you. It was how she'd said it, like an accusation, but also with total confidence, like she already knew everything.

When I left the restroom, there was no sign of Elizabeth. I walked

into the assembly room where I'd given my eulogy. The jazz quartet was playing a fizzy party anthem from the third *Separate Bedrooms* album. People mingled, talking softly. I scanned the room for a tall Korean man in a Fiona Apple shirt. Finally I spotted my friend Casey. Long face, warm eyes, the perfect posture of a man who'd put a lot of time into core training. He was standing in front of a diamond-paned window. When I caught his glance, he and his fiancé, Will, a thin, wiry Black man who was never without his round-frame glasses, headed over to me. The three of us met in the middle of the room, facing the quartet. We were silent, our usual conversation topics paused. What would we have been talking about if we weren't at Gabe's funeral? The headlines of that summer: the election, Zika, more takes on Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, the swimmer who'd been accused of lying about being held up at gunpoint at the Rio Olympics. Our own lives: Will was training to become a therapist, he'd recently completed an intensive graduate study program and was now a supervised intern. Casey was a lawyer at the LA office of a big global firm. He could never tell us the specific details of the cases he was working on, but he *would* share how stressed he was working seventy hours a week on them. Then I'd talk about a professional nuisance of my own, like the frustration of invoicing (why could not *one* outlet I worked with remember to pay on time?). There were so many things that had been on my mind before I heard about Gabe, but now I didn't have the energy to discuss even one.

Instead I listened to Jabari conclude his tribute. I smoothed over a crease in my shirt. Casey put his arm around me. He'd never really had his own friendship with Gabe, but they'd hung out a ton when we were younger, usually in groups with me; Will had met Gabe

once. If it weren't for me, they probably wouldn't have been at his funeral. I'd told them they didn't have to come, but now I was glad they were here.

After the tribute, one of Gabe's uncles announced that those of us who'd been asked ahead of time should head to the cemetery. Only I'd been invited, so Casey said he was going to take a quick work call and then he and Will would meet up with me later. He went to find a quiet spot for his phone conversation, which left me and Will alone.

"How are you?" Will asked.

"Okay," I said.

We walked out of the building onto the front steps. Most people were either still inside or heading to the cemetery. Kathy had said she'd give me a ride there and I was waiting for her. Will was watching me—I think hoping I'd say more, maybe give an honest response to his question. He wasn't like me and Casey, content to keep communication light, packed with nineties pop culture references or a tally of what we were currently watching. We liked to tease Will about his failure at small talk, his instinct to search for the hidden hurt in everyone. Always hopeful for a transformative breakthrough, he spoke in eighth-grade Earth Science terms: *metamorphosis, energy, capacity, a shift*. When he asked *how are you*, he genuinely wanted to know. And maybe it would help, I thought. If I told him.

I said, "So Will, say you *were* hypothetically a therapist."

A proud look slid across his face. "Almost there."

"Right. So what would you say if I were your patient and I told you Gabe and I slept together?"

Will looked puzzled. “You did? Oh, from when you dated a long time ago?”

“No. We actually didn’t have sex then. I meant more recently.”

“How recently?”

“. . . Like a month ago?” I chuckled, awkwardly. “It’s actually pretty funny.” It was not at all funny. “Because then after that, I didn’t hear from him.”

“What do you mean?”

I spoke quickly. “We said we’d be in touch and then I texted him and called him, but he didn’t respond. And then he kept not responding.”

Will clasped his hands together and slid them down his forehead, across his head, his hair was buzzed to the scalp, just the impression of a curl. “That’s a lot.”

There was more. By the end I wasn’t too proud of my own behavior, though I blamed that also on Gabe.

“Does Casey know?” Will asked.

“No,” I said. “And please don’t tell him.” I’d considered this. Aside from Gabe and Casey, my other closest friends were my college friends Nneka and Rose. When someone said “best friend,” I thought of these four people as a group, even though they were not close to each other. I imagined telling my three remaining closest friends what had happened with my fourth. Nneka would listen, then give me a pragmatic summary. Rose would cry, somehow even more hurt than me. Casey would want to tie a big romantic bow around the whole thing. It was enough trying to figure things out on my own, I didn’t want to hear anyone else’s interpretation of events.

Which was why it was strange that I was *still* thinking about Elizabeth. Even after I left Will on the steps and drove with Kathy to the cemetery, I was replaying our conversation in the bathroom. Elizabeth had seemed so sure in her assessment. *I know exactly who you were to Gabe.* And I envied her certainty. For years I'd known exactly who I was to Gabe. It was a long story but I could tell it confidently, like a bartender sharing the recipe for her signature cocktail. Now things were so jumbled up in my head, I had no idea where to begin.

The actual beginning would have to do.

A woman wearing a red dress with a gold patterned bodice and a pearl necklace is holding a large, unrolled scroll. The scroll is white with some dark markings. The background is a warm, reddish-brown color. The title 'The SHAKESPEARE SECRET' is overlaid on the image.

The SHAKESPEARE SECRET

D.J. NIX

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Brown Fox & Company LLC.

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Company LLC.

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (hardcover): 979-8-89242-152-2

ISBN (paperback): 979-8-89242-252-9

ISBN (ebook): 979-8-89242-153-9

Cover design by Lynn Andreozzi

Printed in the United States.

www.alcovepress.com

Alcove Press
34 West 27th St., 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: July 2025

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance
is eucomply OÜ Pärnu mnt 139b-14, 11317 Tallinn, Estonia,
hello@eucompliancepartner.com, +33757690241

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For all my sisters whose talents go disregarded.

May we open our eyes to you and kick down the doors.

London, November 16, 1591

The serpent offered Eve the key to all knowledge, but the price was death. Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, reflects on this tragic absurdity as she falls headlong into a snake pit.

With the lift of two fingers, Lord Pembroke draws Mary's attention as they proceed toward the Presence Chamber of Whitehall Palace—and Her Majesty. Such is Pembroke's way, a man of small gestures and guarded words that belie the power, calculation, and restrained menace beneath the surface. He regards her with sharp gray eyes against an otherwise blank expression.

"Remember. Your three-year absence from Court is cause for suspicion." His voice is a growled whisper. "Chin low and do not meet her eyes. My family remains too near the succession to give reason for Her Majesty's disfavor."

"Thank you, Lord Husband." She fails to restrain her growing pique and squeezes his elbow until he winces. "However, might I remind you that I am no longer that naive maiden you married fifteen years ago. And I have been known to Elizabeth since my childhood—a fact you cannot claim."

His right cheek tics, a reaction that under more casual circumstances might reveal a soft smile. "This I know, my lady

countess. I press, though, because our reputation at Court demands it.”

“Of course.”

Mary understands Pembroke’s relentless strategy. Elizabeth runs her court with a hand of velvet iron, good-humored and gracious until she is not. While other nobles often fall out of favor with the queen for overstepping boundaries, her husband avoids censure through discretion and abject humility in the queen’s presence—though he sometimes rages about her in private. The intrigue and innuendo so studiously practiced by other courtiers remains a barred and bolted door to Mary, which she much prefers.

“The Lord Pembroke and Lady Pembroke.”

The liveried herald nasally intones their titles as Mary and her husband enter the queen’s presence with steady, stately steps. Through subtle cuts of her eyes, Mary assesses the battlefield. Lining the chamber walls are the fixtures of the court—ladies-in-waiting, advisers, peers who have come to pay homage—all seeking the queen’s favor while navigating personal ambitions that sometimes lay at odds with the Crown. This, and the army of servants, soldiers, and court musicians, overstuff the room to an elbow-jostling state. A hundred competing perfumes mask the creeping odor of overheated bodies, aided by an array of scented candles and the strewing herbs that crunch beneath Mary’s shoes. Elizabeth does not abide the scent of stale sweat, but the counter effect leaves Mary slightly nauseous.

The crowd thins before the throne, revealing a clearing occupied by the queen and those who have her ear. This elite group includes the Lord Chamberlain and the enigmatic Robert Cecil standing in for his ailing father. Cecil’s rise to prominence since Mary’s previous visit to Court proves a source of intrigue. His

diminutive, hunchbacked frame and lack of a title until his recent knighthood should have relegated him to the margins. Yet he has always left an impression on Mary as a man in constant motion—his asymmetric gait propelling him along a path that keenly cleaves the affairs of state. That trait has fashioned him into a man to be reckoned with—a man ruthlessly loyal to the queen and devoted to destroying those who mean her harm.

Mary pauses with her husband, a dozen steps short of the throne, to await the queen's invitation. To show humility, she avoids the queen's gaze by studying the court musicians packed into one corner, with instruments at the ready. All are men but for a startling exception—the beautiful and infamous Emilia Bassano who is mistress to the Lord Chamberlain. This is quite a coup as the Lord Chamberlain is first cousin to the queen, the son of a Boleyn sister. She has grown in beauty since Mary last saw her, with wavy midnight-black hair; sparkling brown eyes; and plump lips, softly parted. Her bright yellow skirt and deep red bodice illuminate the young woman like a war beacon within a court of fainter flames. A true Helen of Troy with a thousand ships at her command. The musician briefly studies Mary before deferentially lowering her gaze.

Envy nibbles at Mary's edges—and not for the girl's beauty. What Mary wouldn't sacrifice to frolic in fields of art without the iron constraints of nobility! As a child, she constantly shadowed her eldest brother, Philip, and they had composed impromptu poetry for each other's amusement. Philip's later circulation of epic verse and sonnets written for his mistress had cemented his reputation as England's finest poet. His most ambitious work, though, had been a translation of the Psalms into soaring verse—an undertaking known only to Mary and a few others. His untimely death five years prior had hurled Mary into a pit of darkness. It

had been her decision to continue his translation of the Psalms that had lifted her out. Since then, her sharpest recurring fantasy features the abandoning of her role as a lady of estates to wander England as a poet and a bard.

She shakes her head gently over the impossibility. Station and sex render that dream a barred and bolted door as well. Instead, she limits her artistic talents to acceptable pursuits—translations and the bestowing of her patronage on a gaggle of male poets whom her brother had claimed were her inferiors. How she misses Philip! He had understood her plight. He alone had known the true depths of the suffocating well she inhabits.

The tug of her husband's elbow forces Mary to swallow mounting frustration. She drops a perilously deep curtsy, holds it until her forward knee quivers, and returns upright. She fixes her attention on the queen's feet, studying the woman's emerald shoes festooned with gold bangles. As always, Elizabeth's fashion declares her femininity while reflecting her princely grandeur.

"Lord and Lady Pembroke."

The queen taps one of the shoes twice, clearly inviting a response. Pembroke slides a half step forward, leaving Mary off his hip.

"Your Imperial Majesty, Prince of the Realm, and Avenger of England." He speaks in that same sonorous voice, but now it fills the hall. "We, your faithful servants, come to swear fealty and offer adulation for the anniversaries of your accession and your magnificent defeat of the Spaniards three years past."

Mary briefly marvels at her husband. Such a grandiose statement from most nobles would ring hollow with flamboyance designed only to satisfy court protocol. From her husband's mouth, though, it resonates with sincerity alien to the abilities of his peers.

No wonder he has avoided the famous displeasure of Elizabeth for three decades.

“A delight as always, Lord Pembroke.” The queen’s response, though, carries a sharp edge that pricks Mary’s ears. She fights to keep her hands steady under Elizabeth’s iron regard. “As for you, my dear Lady Pembroke . . .”

Mary curtsies again. “Your Worship.”

“Let me see you.”

Mary stands straight-backed, watching the queen’s lips as they purse in consideration. Elizabeth circles her thumb with her forefinger three times before closing the hand into a loose fist.

“You have changed little these past three years, to your credit. However, I would have you explain your extended absence from Court. Most noblewomen trip across the threshold in their eagerness to grasp at my attention. Why have you not?”

Mary and her husband have rehearsed her defense dozens of times since her recent arrival from Wilton House. “My abject apologies, Your Majesty. Circumstance rather than intention sent me from London three years past. The loss of my parents, brother, and uncle, as well as a month at death’s door left me hollow, and the crush of Court began unspooling my health again. Only recently have I reclaimed the vigor to undertake the challenge once more. I humbly beg your pardon for my reprehensible lack of homage to the Crown, circumstances aside.”

The thin set of Elizabeth’s lips softens, and she raises one nearly unseen eyebrow. “I knew as much, and your frankness is a welcome respite from the acid flowers that drip from most tongues. And you must know, I too mourned for your family, may the Almighty rest their souls. I loved your uncle and counted your mother among my dearest friends for her candor. That trait clearly persists in you.”

“I thank you, my Queen. Your concern for my family touches me deeply.”

Elizabeth flicks her hand but again closes it to a fist. “I would question you on *another* matter, though.”

Uncertainty flutters in Mary’s breast. Another matter? Have they not anticipated everything? Mary lifts her gaze to blink into the piercing eyes of the queen. Elizabeth tilts her head to one side.

“Regarding your procession into London not one week ago with nearly one hundred in your train. Though I did not witness it, many recounted to me the spectacle of it. The regal nature of it. As if fit for the entrance of royalty.”

A chill wind slices through Mary, and Pembroke tenses by her side. The queen’s implication is clear—that perhaps Mary considers herself equal to Elizabeth and wishes others to believe the same. Mary’s resemblance to the queen—red hair, proud nose, regal beauty—does her no favors in completing the illusion. In desperation, she pins her attention to the queen’s gold-bangled shoes, harkens back to those idyllic days of wandering the meadows with Philip, and unleashes the public poet within her that must otherwise remain caged.

“Your Excellence, my sovereign Queen. History elevates the great princes of the world, the towering kings, the invincible warriors who stand against the whelming tide of the adversary and snatch triumph from defeat with sword and iron will. Against such luminaries, chroniclers will not record my arrival on this globe nor my inevitable departure from it. My existence will fade like a plucked flower, crushed underfoot and forgotten.”

She draws a breath.

“Conversely, those exalted regents and soldiers of old pale beside your glory this day. You are the prince who scattered her enemies on the waves, who laid to waste the indestructible

Spanish Armada, who delivered her people from calamity and destruction with unbowed resolve and a mother's love. No trivial procession, no vacuous finery, no faint imitation of glory can ever compare to your indomitable feats. Time will forget me anon, Your Grace. Your magnificence, though, will illuminate the pages of history for as long as the words of men endure."

Mary remains frozen as the court holds its collective breath. After a few yammering heartbeats, the shoes shift. "Come forward, Lady Pembroke."

Mary moves woodenly to the queen. Astonishingly, Elizabeth leans forward to kiss her cheek. The musky fragrance of damask rose powder, Her Majesty's favored scent, washes away the nausea and settles Mary's stomach. The queen begins to pull back before pressing her cheek to Mary's in a startling maneuver.

"Let me tell you what I know, Lady Pembroke." The queen's whisper is faint, an intimate thrum in Mary's ear. "Men endure only through the persistence of the female sex, and that is *our* secret. We must exert our will within the shadows of men or possess no will at all—and we must exceed them at their own game."

Mary cuts her eyes toward Robert Cecil, who alone perhaps overhears the remark. One corner of his mouth quirks upward, but his eyes remain blank. The queen leans back against her chair and lifts her voice. "You freely wandered my court as a child as your mother withheld the leash, but you have long since disappeared into your husband's estates. I would see more of you in times to come, Countess."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"More specifically, I would see you remain this evening to dine with a gathering of notables so that you might lend credence to your fealty. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Queen."

“Very good.” Queen Elizabeth flicks a wrist. “Oh, and my players will stage a pleasant diversion for us. I remember well your love of a good play, a conceit we share.”

“You recall correctly. I offer my sincerest thanks.”

Mary curtsies again and returns to her husband’s arm. Before her head clears, they have left the Presence Chamber. She ventures a glance at Pembroke to find him shaking his head. Rather than offering reprimand, he pecks the same cheek the queen had kissed and produces a rare half smile.

“Well spoken, Mary Herbert. Well spoken, indeed.”

Though Mary appreciates the approval, she is only happy to have survived another encounter with the one person who could crush her with a word. As they return to the great hall to wait, however, familiar heaviness begins settling on Mary’s shoulders and invading her soul, just as it had three years earlier.

“Lord God,” she whispers. “Not again. Not now.”

Having been on the run since the age of nine, Jane Daggett holds loosely to new places, novel occupations, and fresh acquaintances. She does not expect the city of London or her new job as mistress of the wardrobe for a company of players, the Queen's Men, to change that trend. In fact, the prospect of visiting the *by God* Queen of England's court on just her second day of work has Jane considering possible paths of flight. However, she cannot draw her eyes away from the looming presence of Whitehall Palace as the barge approaches the shore. The collection of grand halls and noble apartments stands clear of plainer surrounding structures, buffered on each side by large gardens and various outbuildings.

No sooner does the barge thump the Whitehall landing than the troupe leader, John Dutton, leaps onto the stones and squares to face his company mates. Though nearly fifty, he retains a handsome face and a violent vigor. He expels a misted breath in the bitter cold and levels a finger at them.

"No fighting, no cursing, and no fondling the kitchen maids. One cross word from Her Majesty, and I will run you through."

Though the players grin, the flatness of their eyes tells Jane all she needs to know. Dutton is deadly serious and, so she's heard, expert with a sword. As the players begin shuffling off the barge,

Dutton seizes two of the younger men by their respective shoulders and turns them toward Jane.

“Simon. Will. Help . . .” He snaps his fingers. “What’s your name?”

“Jane Daggett.”

“Right. Help Miss Daggett cart the props and wardrobe to the tying room. And do not dally.”

The conscripted men shuffle back to the barge, toss a pair of sacks atop a heavy chest, and seize the handles, one on each end. The man called Will peers sidelong at Jane. His gray eyes are wide set and brimming with warm intelligence, offsetting a proud, straight nose and a small mouth with upturned corners. An earring adorns his left ear, marking him as a gentle scoffer of tradition. This small act of rebellion appeals to Jane. His lack of gray hair but deep laugh lines place his age anywhere between twenty and thirty—an enigma. “Mistress, can you manage the remaining sack, or shall I call for a team of oxen?”

“Gods, no. I will carry it myself.”

“As I suspected. Off we go, then.”

She must demonstrate to them that she is strong. Her best defense against ill-intentioned men, she has learned, is to show them that any unwanted advance might cost them an eye, a finger, or some other precious member. So far, the strategy has worked. Mostly. Jane hefts the largest sack and flings it across her back. She is no stranger to hard work, but the pendulous shifting of the bag as she climbs threatens to send her tumbling back down the Whitehall Stairs and into the muddy Thames.

She follows the company through an arched gate into a narrow outdoor passage, where they dodge liveried servants hurrying between the great hall and the kitchens. The entire

company funnels into a large pantry on the right side of the passageway. Dutton shoos out a bug-eyed kitchen maid and faces his group.

“As most of you know from our previous visits, the great hall lies across the passage, with an antechamber suitable for entrances and exits behind the screens. I shall serve as bookholder when not on stage. The tyring house will establish here as usual. That’s you, Miss Daggett. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes, sir!” Her shout echoes into the passageway and flings Dutton’s eyes wide.

“Shout again and I will . . . I will . . .”

“Run her through?” says Will drolly.

“Yes. That. And we shall dispense with the song and jig after the performance as the nobles find it less amusing than do the common hordes.”

A few of the players groan until Dutton shoots them a baleful eye to silence the disappointment. Just then, a man with a hatchet face and an enormous ruff emerges behind Dutton.

“You are late,” he barks.

Dutton wheels on him. “We are here now, steward. When do we go on?”

The steward curls one side of his upper lip. “This moment, but only if it pleases you. I am certain Her Majesty will not mind waiting while the rabble assembles.”

Dutton shrinks from the little steward and grunts. “We shan’t keep her waiting.”

“I will alert the queen of your magnanimity.”

Before Jane knows what is happening, the players raid her garment sacks and the chest, which sits precariously atop a

barrelhead. They file out the door in a rush, dragging the chaos with them. The last to leave, Will, slows and lifts his chin to her.

“It is customary for the mistress of the wardrobe to lay out the garments for easy retrieval and to turn a blind eye when a player drops his hose. I am sure you already know this, but do as you like.”

Then he is gone. Jane swallows hard and spreads the garments across various foodstuffs and sundries while wriggling her nose. They reek of the sachet powder that keeps moths at bay. She freezes when Dutton begins introducing the play beyond the wall with a booming presentation. An abrupt jolt of pure joy tremors through her, and memories of watching a dozen traveling troupe performances rush through her recollection. Despite the chill air and fading light, she scrambles into the passageway. The mammoth gray stones of the wall block her view into the great hall, hiding the queen and her nobles. However, the voices of the players drift through open windows some twenty feet above her head. She soon falls into the story’s embrace while avoiding players who rush in and out of the pantry for costume changes.

The Queen’s Men present a play new to Jane. The story features a pair of soldier brothers who wager that each can win the hand of the beautiful daughter of a wealthy landowner. After a series of comic misadventures and outlandish deeds performed to impress the fair maiden, the brothers learn that she has secretly wed their youngest brother, who had the good sense to remain at home to woo her. Although the remarkable skill of the players pleases Jane, she grimaces over the simplistic plot and the flat portrayal of the young woman. The fair maiden is in turn emotional, easily duped, and capricious. The boy playing her speaks with a shrill twittering voice for comic effect. Despite periodic applause and laughter from the audience, Jane fails to shake her

disappointment over the characterization of the fair maiden. The finest steel is forged by the hottest fire, and the punishing rules of society plunge women into the heart of the coals. The portrayal of the female sex as weak and wilting completely misses the obvious point—that every woman is constructed of steel because she would otherwise not survive.

Jane knows better than to suggest any improvements to the players. Unsolicited suggestions have gotten her expelled from more than one village, the last running her out with accusations of witchcraft. Only the kindness of her employer, Mr. Burnham, had saved her. The old man had spirited her away beneath the nose of a mob and had given her enough money to survive in London for a time. Unfair, she knows, but dangling by the neck from a tree is not a future she relishes. Jane's tendency to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, or the right thing in the wrong way, will spell her doom if she can't learn to bridle her tongue. Still, she clings to the perfect stories that live in the wilderness of her head. There they must remain, though, if she wishes to survive. This hard truth threatens to end her as surely as any mob could.

During the stretching final act, in hopes of catching a glimpse of the queen in all her terrible glory, Jane creeps to the antechamber door and slips up behind the offstage players. She has never laid eyes on the sovereign before but has heard breathless stories. Does her face really shine like the moon? Does she truly breathe fire? However, Jane can see nothing past the pack of players—save a remarkable female musician tucked into one corner. She pads back into the pantry as the players take their bows to warm applause. A voice rising above the rest knifes through her.

“Well conceived and masterfully executed, men.”

A tremble wracks Jane. *Can it be?*

“No players in all of England grace the stage with more proficiency and good humor than do the men of my company,” the voice continues. “Now, make haste to the kitchen for well-earned repast. And let not the master cook denigrate you, as is his wont.”

A chorus of “Your Majesty” and “Your Grace” confirms the speaker’s identity. Jane presses her back to the wall to escape the glory that is Elizabeth, Queen of the Realm. The company rushes to the pantry within moments, giddy and flush with triumph. Jane remains one with the wall as the men disrobe from their costumes amid a rising stream of banter.

Dutton returns last and shoves a crimson garment into Jane’s hands.

“John Garland tore this, the fool. Ensure its repair by Thursday next.”

He departs the pantry without another word, leaving Jane to study the garment with dawning delight. Only titled nobles may wear crimson, but players have been granted an exception by the Master of Revels for costume use. Servants of nobles do a brisk business selling the glorious castoffs to player companies. Jane has never mended such a startling garment before. She briefly considers her empty stomach, but the lure of the spectacular cloak overpowers her immediate need for food. After packing scattered costumes into the various sacks, she retrieves her sewing kit and examines the torn cloak with a squint.

“I need better light,” she says aloud.

Perhaps the antechamber might prove sufficient. Upon reaching the door, she jerks her head up to find a tall man barring her way. He wears blue livery, a copper breastplate, and a sheathed sword. He cocks one eyebrow and frowns.

“Absconding with a nobleman’s frock, are you?”

Jane's spine goes bolt straight. "Gods, no. I am the mistress of the wardrobe for the Queen's Men, seeking better light that I might mend this costume."

She shoves the cloak nearly into the man's face, forcing him back a step. His lips soften. A deep pit marring his left cheek speaks of past violence that stands at odds with the gentle lay of his features. "Of course. I humbly beg your pardon, mistress. The warming house atop the stairs is kept ablaze with light and is presently unoccupied. Might I suggest that venue?"

Jane looks over her shoulder to find the chamber of which he speaks, marked by a single torch burning in a sconce outside. "That will do, good sir."

He strides around Jane and leads the way to the warming house, where he pauses to push the door open. As the man has claimed, the cozy chamber is bright from a hearth fire and a trio of candles. And it oozes glorious warmth. Jane slips inside and shoves a chair toward the fireplace.

"I will stand watch outside," says the man.

Jane frowns. "Why?"

He smiles again through the diminishing crack of the closing door. "There are many about who would think nothing of ravishing a lovely maiden left alone."

The door thuds shut, leaving Jane with the twin glow of the fire and a rare compliment. She shakes her head to rid herself of the sentiment. Years of fleeing the displeasure of her neighbors has taught her to dismiss kind overtures, for they eventually turn sour in the face of her oddness. She should expect no different from the handsome guardsman.



"Gone Girl . . .

but make it trad wives."

—TIA LEVINGS, author of the
New York Times bestseller
A Well-Trained Wife

EVERYONE IS LYING TO YOU

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Piazza, Jo, author.

Title: Everyone is lying to you: a novel / Jo Piazza.

Description: New York, NY: Dutton, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024055762 (print) | LCCN 2024055763 (ebook) |

ISBN 9798217046478 (paperback) | ISBN 9798217046485 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels. Classification: LCC PS3616.I214

E94 2025 (print) | LCC PS3616.I214 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20250211

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024055762>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024055763>

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is

Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street,

Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

PROLOGUE

TRANSCRIPT OF DETECTIVE JIM WALSH INTERVIEWING WITNESS ELIZABETH MATTHEWS

E. MATTHEWS: *First off let me tell you that I have no skin in the game here . . . Shit. Sorry. That's probably a bad metaphor given how he was . . . how he was killed, right?*

DET. WALSH: *It is in fairly poor taste.*

E. MATTHEWS: *All I am trying to say to you is that I don't really know them. Together, I mean. I don't know anything about Bex and her husband—what is his name again, Guy?*

DET. WALSH: *Grayson.*

E. MATTHEWS: *Right. Again, no disrespect. I'm nervous. I knew his name was Grayson. I never met him. Until yesterday I hadn't seen her in about fifteen years.*

DET. WALSH: *But you did attend college with the deceased's wife. You used to be friends with Rebecca Sommers.*

E. MATTHEWS: *Yeah, I knew Bex back in the day. That's what we used to call her. Bex. No one ever called her Rebecca. I think she hated being*

called Rebecca back then . . . but it seems like something he would have liked.

DET. WALSH: *He? Her husband? The one you don't know?*

E. MATTHEWS: *Yeah. From what I've seen of him on her Instagram account. He just seems like the kind of guy who would be more into a Rebecca than a Bex. Rebecca sounds more proper and sophisticated . . . more wifey.*

DET. WALSH: *Wifey?*

E. MATTHEWS: *Yes. Wifey.*

DET. WALSH: *But you said you didn't know the deceased, you never met him.*

E. MATTHEWS: *Exactly. I've never met him.*

DET. WALSH: *And until recently you hadn't been in contact with Mrs. Sommers.*

E. MATTHEWS: *A couple of weeks ago she reached out asking me if I was still a journalist and if I would be interested in writing a profile about her.*

DET. WALSH: *And that is what you were doing with her on the night he was killed.*

E. MATTHEWS: *Yes. We were hanging out. I had plans to write something for the magazine I work for. We were attending the conference and then I was supposed to go with her to her ranch.*

DET. WALSH: *Were you with her all night?*

E. MATTHEWS: *No.*

DET. WALSH: *When did you last see her?*

E. MATTHEWS: *Around eight-ish.*

DET. WALSH: *Do you have any idea where she is now?*

E. MATTHEWS: *Do you?*

DET. WALSH: *I'm going to be the one asking the questions for now. Grayson Sommers was brutally murdered in his own barn and you are the last person to speak to his wife before she disappeared. Do you think she would be capable of that sort of thing?*

E. MATTHEWS: *No. I mean . . . I don't think so. I don't know what she's like now. She did use to be one of the most capable people I'd ever met. She used to be able to do anything.*

DET. WALSH: *How about you start at the beginning . . .*

CHAPTER ONE

LIZZIE

Two weeks earlier

There are things I know I should be doing before bed in order to get a “good” night’s sleep.

I should wash and moisturize my face with at least five different products, turn the temperature in my bedroom down to slightly chilly, put all my screened devices in another room to charge.

I should meditate and then engage my husband in some sweet and meaningful conversation about our days. Or maybe the conversation comes first, then the meditation.

I can’t remember.

I should light a candle and write in a journal. I should think about what I’m grateful for.

I should just be.

But I’m not doing any of that. Who actually *does* any of that? I’m scrolling Instagram like any normal thirtysomething woman with a dirty face in a too-warm room while my husband reads

the news on his phone next to me, sometimes murmuring in disgust, sometimes chuckling for no discernible reason, since absolutely nothing in the news is funny anymore unless you're a sociopath.

I must have made a noise during my scroll because Peter leans over and places his scruffy chin on my shoulder.

"Are you creeping on that girl you went to college with again?"

"Nope."

"I see her chickens on your screen." I tilt the phone away. "And that three-legged goat. Why doesn't someone shoot that thing?"

"That goat has its very own Instagram account with 1.2 million followers," I reply, even though I've explained this to him before. "Tripod is their own influencer."

"What's her name again? Skanky Betsy?"

Back in college we all used to call her Slutty Bex, not Skanky Betsy. And it was a nickname she fully embraced. She owned it. I realize that it isn't politically correct to call someone Slutty anything anymore, but when that person gets their own T-shirt made with the nickname Slutty Bex on it and they wear it on senior day, then I think it's okay to remember them like that in your own head or, in a moment of weakness when you feel weird about looking at their social media account all the time and even stranger about how your friendship ended terribly, to tell your husband about the nickname Slutty Bex and maybe laugh about it.

I really haven't talked to her in fifteen years, not since Bex ghosted me after college. It's funny how a slight like that can still sting so many years later, but it does.

Back then she wasn't the person she is now, the one I only let

myself peek at once or twice a week because her Instagram account infuriates me for no rational reason. Or maybe it *is* rational. The issue is that Rebecca Sommers, or rather @BarefootMamaLove, bears absolutely no resemblance to Bex, the woman who once did a forty-five-second keg stand in the basement of Sigma Chi with her top off. Or the woman who befriended me the first day of college by ordering two pizzas to our shared dorm room and watching *Sliding Doors* with me because I was too nervous to go out to the frat parties. I'd never had a single sip of alcohol before and she didn't make me feel dumb about it. She bought me some fruity wine coolers and taught me how to handle my booze. Rebecca Sommers has absolutely no resemblance to the girl who convinced me to pierce my belly button with her even though I had never even pierced my ears.

In her new life, the one I watch on social media, Rebecca now lives in a renovated farmhouse on a ranch somewhere out West where she raises fluffy heritage chickens, cows, sheep, and goats. No one in her family ever wears shoes but their feet are somehow never dirty. She makes her own cheese, milks her own milk, and bakes enough bread to feed a small army. These days she's very, very blond, not the dishwater-blond variety from college, but like a honeydew-meets-a-gold-doubloon kind of yellow. It's a blond that costs money. Bex didn't have money in college. Like me she worked in the cafeteria as part of her work-study program. We were the only ones in our sorority who had actual on-campus jobs. None of the other girls needed them. Their parents were the type who paid their tuition in full, who bought them off-campus apartments and rented out the rooms to other students because it was a "good investment."

It was Bex who got me to rush for our sorority because she said it would be “a hilarious social experiment,” and she was probably the reason they let me in. She charmed all those fancy Tri Delts with her off-color jokes and her ability to score drugs from a townie. We were a package deal, so they accepted me too.

Bex was also an RA in one of the freshman dorms like I was because it gave her free housing. It wasn’t cool, but it was cheap. Being lower middle class gave both Bex and me an edge, it made us weirdly chic to the trust fund girls from NYC and LA. We weren’t exactly charity cases, but we gave the sorority street cred. We were inseparable back then, and our friend-breakup, if you can even call it that, still has the ability to make me overwhelmingly sad, especially when I’m scrolling social media after one and a half glasses of wine.

I’ve never met Bex’s husband. But it seems like she married up in a big way. I, on the other hand, just got married.

That’s unfair. I married well. I married a man who is funny and tender and a good father and who still thinks I’m interesting after a decade of marriage. I married a man who knows how to change a tire, find my G-spot, swaddle a baby, make my mom laugh, and do our taxes. He’s a man who can tell when I’m sick of small talk at a school-parents party and always finds a way to extricate me from a conversation with the head of the PTA. These are not trivial things.

But I also married a man who is now unemployed despite being overeducated at one of the top schools in the world. A man who has never worried about saving or investing. A man who might never work again because he’s too proud to take a job he considers beneath him.

But he's still a good man. I have to remind myself of that.

And he's still stupidly handsome as he pushes forty. If I weren't so tired from work and raising our two small kids, I would happily have sex with him more often than the once every two weeks we seem to be managing these days.

Bex and her husband apparently do it every single day. I know this because they crafted a reel on Instagram with their pastor (their actual pastor) about how they decided to reignite their sex life for their thirty-fifth birthdays. They encouraged their followers to participate in the #WhoopieWithYourSchmoopie challenge. That video got something like eight million views and the comments were uncomfortably supportive and also slightly sad, filled with women who I assumed were complete strangers to Bex bemoaning their lack of a sex drive or their husbands' affairs or their closeted sexuality. I gobbled them all up like a grocery-store romance novel, all those secrets spilled onto a small screen.

If I called Peter my "schmoopie" he would likely divorce me. And rightly so. I would respect him for that. It would be the correct decision. I made the mistake of showing the whoopie challenge to him, which led to my having to explain how I knew Bex in the first place, which led to his scrolling through her account and then calling me out every time he caught me looking at her or Tripod or her six beautiful kids.

"She seems terrible," he said the first time I showed him her profile.

I loved him even more for hating her as much as I do now. That's one of the best things about Peter. He hates what I hate and that's a real turn-on for me. Some people want to like the same things as another person, but give me a man who also despises

work birthday celebrations, loud chewers, and people who talk on wireless headphones in public and I swoon.

Hate is the wrong word when it comes to Bex. I'm wounded in ways I can't properly explain. I miss her and that ache turns into frustration, which turns into disdain. Her feed riles me up with misplaced envy because there is no way in hell I would ever want to live on a farm with six children. I want to say that scrolling her Instagram is not some regular thing for me. But that would be a lie. I swear that I have my own fully functional (mostly) adult life and priorities that do not include her. I just sometimes get sucked down the rabbit hole and then I feel all the feelings.

Both Peter and I hate influencers, but as magazine editors—or in Peter's case, a former magazine editor—we have a reason to. They did sort of help destroy our industry. I don't think any of them meant to. In fact, I know they didn't wake up one morning and get together in one of their beautiful McMansions or rustic off-the-grid cabins or anti-vax communes and say, *Oh, I want to kill print journalism and the careers of thousands of reporters*, but that's what happened over the past five years. I'm still holding on to my managing editor job at the magazine by a wisp. When Peter got laid off we used our savings to move out of New York and over to the Philly burbs, where our kids could go to public school and my mom could help us with childcare. Everyone at the magazine is remote now anyway so I only need to be in the office one day a week, if that. Peter is allegedly working on a novel. I'm trying to keep my job so that we all have health insurance.

I scroll Instagram so often because I'm looking for stories that will keep the magazine relevant, or so I tell myself.

Peter nuzzles my neck in a way that I usually enjoy, but I'm too exhausted to think about what leaning into the nuzzle might lead to. It's not that I don't like the sex. It's wonderful once it gets going, once everything is firing. It's just that getting there can be tedious. Even though I've wasted an hour on social media, the ten minutes it will take to get everything situated for sex with my husband (the stroking, the rearranging of the pillows, more stroking, the lube) doesn't seem like the best use of time when I could be failing at trying to fall asleep.

I lean just slightly away, and he knows I'm not into it tonight. When you've been together as long as we have you only need to make the slightest bodily movements to indicate your mood. It's one of the things I appreciate most about marriage, the shared sign language. He rubs the sore spots in my shoulders and my neck instead and that is almost as good as the bygone orgasm.

"Her farm does look lovely," Peter says. "Is it a vineyard or a farm farm? Do they actually grow things or raise things?" Peter grew up in central London. I don't think he's ever been on a farm except for the scraggly pumpkin patch we take the kids to in October.

"Her profile now reads, 'Building our ranch from the ground up with the help of God's grace.'"

"What does that mean? Growing the ranch from the ground up? Don't most things begin on the ground? You wouldn't construct something from the sky down, would you?" Peter is a stickler for both grammar and proper use of language. I think it's in the genetic code of most British people. They can't help themselves. It's like they all learned to read from the *Oxford English Dictionary* while we Americans got our first sentences from *Hop on Pop*. His

dictatorial command of words served him well at the hard news magazine where we met and where we both worked at the start of our careers. I left after I had the kids, when I was politely told that my time constraints as a mother would be incompatible with going out on the campaign trail and doing long-form investigative pieces. Peter left when the time constraints of all our readers precluded them from reading the magazine anymore and it shut down.

"I honestly don't know what building it 'from the ground up' means. It seems like it's been there for quite some time," I say. "No one is building. I think she's just being poetic. There's the high protein grain. Apparently, it's made with pig colostrum. Gross. There are cows. They love raw milk."

"Do they also love salmonella?" Peter scoffs. I ignore him.

"I think they started making soap. Definitely organic eggs. And she seems to breed those chickens. You can actually buy baby chicks. They ship them in the mail. Seems cruel to me. And sheep for wool, which she uses to knit, and they also sell lamb meat. She has a whole online store. You can buy everything in her pictures. Look, I could buy this baby carrier right now!" I click an Instabuy link.

"We have a carrier," Peter points out. "And besides, Ollie is getting too big. He hates it."

We do have one, but it's nothing like this one. We have a secondhand BabyBjörn that's been passed through my mom group and probably seven babies. It's frayed on the top where it's been chewed on and there are stains from various bodily fluids that will never come out.

Rebecca's baby carrier, the one that is almost always strapped to

her chest in her photos, looks like it's been spun from the rawest of raw silk. There are no stains, no teeth marks. It fits her like a couture gown as she sweeps the porch, hangs the sheets on a line in the fields, bakes everything from scratch. Her pristine carrier looks blessed by the gods. It costs an otherworldly amount too: \$575.

Her audience adores the carrier except when she has one of the babies facing out in it. Then they're enraged. Then they rail on her for being a terrible mother because everyone ought to know that letting a baby face outward is a massive safety concern. Her audience seems very fickle. They love her one day and hate her the next. I think she must just let the baby face out for the camera. It makes better photos. Who wants to stare at the back of a baby's head in a picture?

"Was she always a Jesus freak?" Peter asks. We are not a religious family. Peter's religion is soccer and mine is lapsed Episcopalian. I don't remember Bex being religious at all. In fact the only time we talked about religion was when she told me her mom had been ostracized by her very Catholic parents for having Bex when she was a teenager.

"Her husband must be religious. She wasn't into that at all in college. But she does mention God a lot in her stuff these days."

"You know quite a bit about this woman for not having spoken to her for over a decade," Peter says. He has said this before.

"Probably about as much as you know about your favorite sports dudes," I snap a little. "Stats and whatnot."

"But she isn't a professional athlete. She's just some girl on the Instagram."

A woman, I want to correct him, *a woman with eleven million followers*, but the semantics aren't worth getting into when it

comes to social media and influencers. Peter has no patience for any of it. He never even joined Twitter back when it was still called Twitter and almost all of us at the magazine were required to use it. “The people who want to read my writing will find it,” he always said. They didn’t.

I’m about to drop the phone on the floor and shove it under the bed like I do every night since I don’t have the energy to get up and go plug it in in the bathroom as Goop recommends. But then I get a notification.

Shit! Can someone now tell if you’ve been looking at their profile too long? Did I accidentally like that last picture of Bex and her six kids milking that cow? Six feels like too many children to me. Two children feels like a lot of children to me. I don’t even know how your vagina would handle that many kids. But thinking about Bex’s vagina feels invasive now that she’s sending me a direct message.

Hey Lizzie, is this you?

It is, right? I have been totally
insta-stalking you for a few
months now, so I know it is.
Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii

She has been insta-stalking *me*? Well, that’s sort of nice to hear. But what is she even looking at? The sad backyard birthday party I had for Nora with the recycled balloon arch I borrowed from my cousin’s baby shower, or did she see my taco Tuesday reel where I very cleverly made a train of taco shells for my twenty-month-old to follow into the kitchen? (In hindsight that was a terrible idea. We’ll be finding pieces of those taco shells

until the kids go to college, but there were five minutes when it looked pretty damn cute, and it got a ton of likes from my small coterie of followers from the neighborhood, which gave me an endorphin boost that I enjoyed too much.)

What am I supposed to write back? And why does her casually cheery tone piss me off so much? The answer to that is painfully obvious. She was the one who chose to end our friendship. She was the one who didn't show up at the airport to pick me up like she was supposed to or answer my calls or texts afterward. She was the one who outgrew me and tossed me aside. She said the cruelest things to me that anyone has ever said.

Yet, I answer her. And I am cheery as fuck when I do it.

Oh my gosh! It's me. Oh wow, this is such a blast from the past. :) How are you? What have you been up to?

We live in such a strange time where we have to pretend not to know exactly what a person has been up to even though they post about what they have been up to nearly daily—or in Bex's case, hourly. Am I supposed to pretend I don't know about the ranch, the six children, the three-legged goat, all that whoopie, while we message each other on the very platform where I've seen all these things?

Oh you know. Just living

Ha. Me too.

The banality of it is soul crushing.

Peter is staring at me now. I'd be staring at me too if I were him. What expression must be on my face as I furiously type to this random person while lying in our bed in the middle of the night?

Emily, I mouth my sister's name. My younger sibling has been working in Asia for the past six months so it's never inconceivable to get texts from her at all hours. Peter rolls his eyes and then blows an imaginary kiss my way before turning over. I hate lying to him. And he hates it when I keep tapping away at my phone once he goes to sleep. We both do. We have an unspoken rule that once one of us shuts our eyes the other puts down the phone. I type a quick bye.

It's late here . . . going to bed.
Great to reconnect though.

Sorry. I always forget about
time zones. You're in New
York. I'm such a turd

I smile at her use of the word *turd* because it doesn't seem at all like the kind of thing she would ever post in one of her captions and I feel like I've gotten a little bit of the real her. I hate the rush that gives me. Also, I don't want to correct her about where I live. Leaving New York feels like a failure. There are a dozen things I want to type, but my fingers are frozen.

She keeps going.

But I really want to talk. It's important. Maybe tomorrow?

Sure.

Great. Life is crazy. CRAZY. And I have been thinking about you a lot. I think you are the one person who can actually help me

AISLING RAWLE

THE

COMPOUND

A Novel



Random House
An imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
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Published in the United Kingdom by The Borough Press,
an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, London

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Rawle, Aisling, author.

TITLE: The compound : a novel / Aisling Rawle.

DESCRIPTION: First edition. | New York, NY : Random House, 2025.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024061227 (print) | LCCN 2024061228 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780593977279 (hardback ; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593977293 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCGFT: Novels.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PR6118.A5226 C66 2025 (print) | LCC PR6118.A5226
(ebook) | DDC 823/.92—dc23/eng/20250108

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024061227>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024061228>

International edition ISBN 978-0-593-97945-7

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

\$PrintCode

FIRST U.S. EDITION

BOOK TEAM:

PRODUCTION EDITOR: *Cara DuBois* • MANAGING EDITOR: *Rebecca Berlant* •

PRODUCTION MANAGER: *Sandra Sjursen* • COPY EDITOR: *Julie Ehlers* •

PROOFREADERS: *Megha Jain, Catherine Mallette, Vincent La Scala*

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety
and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland.
<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>

ONE

WOKE UP FIRST. THERE WAS NO PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE TO IT, only that I have always slept poorly and generally wake early in the morning. I had no way to tell the time, but I thought that I had slept a while: my limbs were heavy and stiff from a long, motionless sleep. The room was dark and windowless, with only a small skylight directly above my bed, though it didn't smell of sleep, or musk: it smelled fresh and airy, as if it had recently been cleaned. I thought I could detect the slightest trace of air freshener, citrus-scented, or maybe pine. There were ten beds, though only one aside from my own was occupied. The girl in the bed across from me was slowly emerging from sleep. She sat up and looked at me. She was beautiful, but that was to be expected.

"Hello," I said after a few seconds. "I'm Lily."

"I'm Jacintha," she said. "Nice to meet you."

I put my feet on the floor, feeling newly born. I stretched, arms high above my head, and heard my joints pop. There was air conditioning whirring, but I could feel the heat that lurked behind it, thick and cloying. When I looked over, Jacintha was standing. She was wearing underwear and a tank top. Looking down, I saw that I was wearing something similar.

It might have been awkward, but she smiled at me. "Will we find the others?"

We made our way through the house, exploring as we went. The house was at once familiar and entirely new to me. On either side of the bedroom were the dressing rooms: the boys' to the left, ours to the right. The boys' room held no interest for us, and we went directly to our own. It was enormous, much bigger than the bedroom. It was where we could

keep all of our things, once we had them. The room was mostly composed of storage space: built-in wardrobes, chests of drawers, cupboards, and some glittery boxes, similar to one I had used to store my dress-up costumes as a young girl. Running through the center of the room was a gray laminate-covered table, with a bench on each side. Along the table were lighted mirrors and the little screens. I touched one, but the screen remained black.

While the bedroom had been clean, the dressing room was distinctly untidy: there were clothes strewn across the floor, and makeup stains along the table, with the lingering scent of feminine products still hanging in the air. Jacintha and I looked through the drawers and storage spaces and found mostly clothes, the majority of them cheap and worn: swimsuits that had been stretched to the point of translucency, stained dresses, and tired-looking T-shirts. There were a couple of nice pieces, possibly designer—a few dresses, a skirt, and a jacket. They were stiff and creaseless, and I thought that they likely had never been worn.

Down the hallway was the bathroom, tiled and pristine. There were two toilets, a urinal running along the length of the wall, a shower, and a bath, large and inviting, shaped like an oversized canoe. There was a sleek gold bar on which towels hung, matching gold knobs on the cabinet doors, and a similar gold bar over the mirror by the sink. The taps were a fine brass color, with an impressive number of soaps lined along a shelf, and an artfully arranged stack of toilet paper. On the wall beside the bath was a painting, large and abstract. It was the only piece of art I had ever seen in the house. I knew that the place had changed drastically over the years, but the same piece of art stayed, unmoved. The bedroom and dressing rooms had been nice enough, but they were designed for practicality. The bathroom was pure luxury: perfect, except that it had no door.

Jacintha and I went downstairs. There were a number of empty rooms, perhaps four or five. There were some empty boxes left in them, and I thought that the rooms must have been used for storage. There were two more bathrooms, and though they were nice enough, they were clearly the lesser bathrooms.

We came to the living room and paused uneasily in the doorway. While the dressing room had been messy, this room had been trashed.

There was no sofa, but there were folding chairs that lay in one corner. There was a mirror on the ground, shards of which reflected the mess around it: a dented wall, a legless coffee table, a shattered vase. Nearly everything in the room had been broken or destroyed, except for the big screen, which hung on the wall, untouched. Like the little screens, the big screen was blank. Neither Jacintha nor myself commented on the mess, but we stayed standing in the doorway for a minute or so, waiting to see if the big screen would turn on.

Then there was the kitchen, large and mercifully well stocked. There were granite countertops with the usual appliances, and a small island with three barstools. The kitchen had an industrial feel to it, designed to accommodate several people cooking at the same time, or cooking in large amounts. Jacintha and I spent a while there, rooting through cupboards and drawers. There was enough food to last for a long time—weeks, at least.

Although it was well built and well supplied, it was incredibly messy; bewilderingly so. There were eggshells on the ground, splashes of sauce on the wall, and dishes in the sink. The floor was dirty, the counters sticky. The bins were overflowing and smelled of rotting meat.

“There’s no freezer,” Jacintha said.

“The fridge is huge, though,” I said. I opened the chrome double doors, admiring its wingspan, and smiled at her. She looked at me like she wasn’t sure about me yet.

There was a large window above the sink that stretched almost the length of the wall. It had a nice effect, though it meant that the kitchen was uncomfortably warm, almost pulsing with heat. Through it, I could spot the swimming pool in the distance. It was only when I saw the blue-tinted water, glinting in the sun, that I fully came to terms with where I was and what we were doing.

“Look,” Jacintha said. It took me a minute to see the girl, curled up as she was, sleeping on the ground at the lip of the pool.

We went out to inspect her. When we approached her, she didn’t move. I wondered briefly if she was dead. Jacintha crouched down and shook her by the shoulder. For a second, looking down at her, I thought that she looked a lot like myself, and felt a pulse of worry. Then the girl

woke, and I could see that she didn't actually look like me: she was just thin and blond too. She was faintly pink all over from lying in the sun. The girl looked up at us, adjusting her hair.

"Hey, guys," she said. "I'm Susie." Jacintha and I introduced ourselves, and Susie smiled and nodded. "Those are great names," she said with energy.

We looked at each other, trying to think of something to say.

"Isn't the pool incredible?" Susie asked.

I said, "I was just thinking that."

"I don't know how I woke up here. I don't remember going to sleep, but that doesn't really matter now, does it? Oh," she said, looking around her. "There's so much sand. Wow. It's warm, too. I've only just woken up, and I don't think I've ever been so warm in my life! Where did you two wake up?"

"We both were in the bedroom," Jacintha said. Susie looked a little thrown, so I said, "You're the first we've found." She looked happier, and we set out to find the others.

As we wandered, we were able to take in, for the first time, the scale of the place where we would be living. The compound spilled out, varied and brilliant: red-brown earth, yellowed grass in some places and startling, vivid greenery in others; pebbled paths, small bits of vegetation and amenities, and surrounding it all, separated from us by a ring of bushes, the desert stretching endlessly to the horizon. Toward the back of the compound, the grass and vegetation bloomed, and an irrigation system spat lazy drizzles of water, the light casting rainbows through the droplets, a casual sort of beauty that contrasted almost garishly with the monotonous plains that lay beyond. The sight of the desert gave me pause; I had seen it before on the television, of course, but it was a different thing entirely to see it before me. The pale gold sand and the flat, barren land seemed as though it had never been tempered by human feet. It was from there that the boys would come, and to there that we would be banished, if it came to that.

While the sheer size of the compound was incredible, it was distinctly run-down. It looked a lot like the home of a billionaire, if the billionaire's staff had gone on strike.

Directly in front of the house was a patio, wrapping around the side. To the west of the house the grounds were lush and attractive, with long paths intersecting pretty flower beds. There was a pond glimmering in the distance, and gates and walls that led to nowhere as though someone had started to section off parts, but had given up. At the farthest western point sat an immense maze, green and imposing.

The west was picturesque, while the east was functional. There was a tennis court: no net or equipment, but the ground had been properly marked. There was a small outdoor gym with a bench and a step machine. A little farther beyond, there was a ping-pong table, which looked fairly new, and a trampoline with rusted springs and tired, sagging canvas.

Curiously, though there were many parts of the compound which were in serious disarray, you could see that there had been a concerted effort to build a boundary. As well as the bushes, which had been planted a long, long time ago, there was a simple wooden fence running along the entire grounds, demarcating where our home ended at the expanse of the desert. Previously, I knew, there had been only barbed wire. The fence was an upgrade.

There was much to explore, but I was most interested in the huge, egg-shaped pool, and wherever we walked, I kept turning back to look at it again. The pool was the thing that held the place together: it was what transformed some ill-kept gardens and strange walkways into a residence.

The next girl found us; she was already awake. She was standing in a sandy patch of ground behind the house. She had her hands on her hips, looking out into the desert, so still that we hadn't noticed her at first. She raised her arm in greeting, and I felt her eyes move across us, taking in what she could. Even before we reached her, even from a distance, and with her face partly covered, I could tell that she was beautiful. There was something in the way that she stood, or maybe something about the way her hair fell. Sure enough, when we reached her she dropped her hand, and I saw that she had the kind of face that drove people to madness, with desire or with envy.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Candice." She looked at us expectantly, and we each introduced ourselves. I remembered that I wasn't wearing any makeup.

I couldn't help but stare at her, even as I tried not to look too bothered by her presence. Her hair was long and dark, intimidatingly straight despite the humidity. She had particularly striking eyes of a very light blue, almost translucent; they looked over us carefully, appraisingly. Her mouth was not of a shape or size that was currently in vogue; my own lips were carefully constructed to look full and plump. Her mouth was wide with narrow lips, a decisive slash of pink across her face. There was no part of her beauty that didn't make me question mine.

"Four of us, now. I think I saw someone asleep by that flower arch. This way," she said, and we followed her.

It took us a long time to find the others—probably a couple of hours. We searched the whole compound, except for the maze, which none of us wanted to enter, even in a group. When all ten of us had gathered together, we headed toward the pool. The heat was relentless, shocking even, and I had no thought beyond getting cool. We stripped down to our underwear and slipped into the water, relief coming at once.

I lay on my back and looked at the sky above me. It was a different blue than I was used to. It was clear, entirely untouched by clouds or smog, with no tall buildings to block out great chunks of it, nor artificial lights to disguise its hues. The compound was rough around the edges, definitely, and needed a great deal of work, but there was something about it that felt fantastically real. Wherever the cameras were, they weren't easy to spot.

We all drifted about the pool aimlessly. We smiled if we caught each other's eyes, but didn't speak. I didn't enjoy the silence. I thought it made it seem as though we were hatching plans of some sort, though I suppose people only wanted to be left to their own thoughts. Toward one end of the pool, Susie was doing handstands. I didn't join in, but I swam toward her and watched. She was pretty good: her legs were straight as an arrow in the air, and when she was done, she did a tumble under the water and returned to the surface, smiling.

I've always been a passive kind of person; it is both my worst quality and the thing that people like most about me. If the others had stayed in the pool for the rest of the day I would have done the same, but apparently they only wanted to cool off, so when the others got out, I got out

too, and when everyone sat under the shade of a tree, I did the same, though I dreaded the thought of insects on my bare skin. Were there ticks in the desert? I wanted to look it up, but remembered that I had no phone.

Candice was the last to get out of the pool. I watched her from the shade; we all did. She slicked her hair back in one casual sweeping motion, pressing it close to her skull and away from her face. She dived under the water: sleek, without a splash, only her ankles flashing in the air before she was fully submerged. For a few seconds, she traveled silently under the water, an abstract blur, and emerged at the other side. She walked slowly up the steps, exposing her body one inch at a time, until she was beyond the domain of the water and stood on the deck, dripping and strong-limbed, her hair still in place.

I could imagine just how impressive it would have looked for people watching. It was sort of embarrassing, actually: Candice knew exactly what she was doing, and the rest of us were just bumbling around, trying to avoid the worst of the heat.

When we all had found a comfortable spot to sit, we got to talking a little. A blond-haired girl named Eloise said that she liked my hair, and I said that I liked her nails. Another girl, beautiful and buxom, who I thought might be called Vanessa, added that she felt as though she might die from the heat. It was all harmless chitchat, as there wasn't much we could really say. Then Candice caught my eye, and said, "If the boys were to arrive this minute, what kind of guy would you go for?"

The gaze of every girl was resting on me. I wrung my hair out a little, to give myself time. It was a good question. It was the question we needed to get out of the way, before they came.

"Probably the guy who gets me into trouble," I said. I thought it was a good answer, even if it wasn't necessarily true; I had prepared it in the weeks before I came. I thought that it was open enough that I wasn't hemming myself in before I'd seen anyone, and it made me sound adventurous. Some of the girls nodded thoughtfully as they looked at me. "And I definitely prefer an older man."

"Do you have daddy issues?" Susie asked.

"Not that I know of," I said.

“What about you?” I asked Candice. “What are you looking for?”

She shook her hair out; it was still wet, and small droplets flew about her, one landing on my ankle. I pressed a hand to my arm: it was warmer than the rest of me. I was burning already.

“I like boys who are driven,” she said. “A man who knows himself. That’s what I want.”

The question of what kind of man we each wanted was passed around from girl to girl. Susie liked boys who treated her nicely, and who liked to have fun. Susie didn’t like boys who were boring. Jacintha liked boys who were kind, especially to people they didn’t know. Jacintha cared deeply about her family, and she wanted a man who was also family oriented. Mia liked boys who worked out: it showed dedication, and she appreciated a man who could pick her up above his head. She liked to feel dainty. Short, scrawny guys disgusted her. Becca, who was quiet, and blushed as she gave her answer, said that she liked a man who was kind—that was all. The other girls didn’t answer, which I thought was suspicious.

“When do you think the boys will get here?” Mia asked.

We all glanced at each other.

“It can take a while,” Jacintha said carefully. I understood that Jacintha wanted to say that in previous years it had sometimes taken only hours and sometimes days. She couldn’t say this explicitly, because it would have broken one of the rules.

There were several rules at the compound. The first was that it was forbidden to discuss that the show was in fact a show, or that we had seen the show before. It ruined the experience for the viewer and the participants, we had been told. The second was that we couldn’t discuss our life outside of the compound unless we had been instructed to do so. The third was that it was forbidden to harm another resident. There were other rules, but they wouldn’t come into effect until the boys arrived. We all understood that if we broke any of these rules we would be punished.

“We should start getting the place in shape now, in case they’re here by tonight,” another girl said. I couldn’t remember her name, but she was tall, with sharp features and a faint accent that I couldn’t place. I imagined her as a marketing intern, going out for salads for lunch. As I exam-

ined her, she turned and looked at me. I pretended to stare at the sky behind her.

“Where to start?” Eloise said. “The whole place is a mess.”

“The house,” Candice said, and stood. “The rest can wait. We need to get the kitchen and bedroom in shape first.” Candice held her hand out to me. Her grip was strong, and the muscles in her arms moved subtly as she pulled me to my feet. I was small and soft by comparison. The rest of the girls got up too, and we filed into the house like a line of ants. I kept looking around me, trying to make sense of the space, the condition that it was in. Along the way, we picked up the odd bit of rubbish that we found, left by the residents who had come before us.

WE SEPARATED INTO DIFFERENT rooms, and it was a relief not to have to look at all nine of the girls at once. Some went upstairs to clean the bedroom, while a group went into the living room to tidy up the mess. I helped in the kitchen, cleaning the surfaces and taking the rubbish out. There was no Hoover, and no dustpan either: we swept up the dust using a table mat. The absence of a Hoover particularly disturbed Mia, who said, “I didn’t think it would be so poorly equipped. It’s primitive, no?”

“We have a washing machine and a dishwasher,” Vanessa said. “It’s not a bad start.”

I picked up a half-eaten apple from the windowsill of the kitchen, around which fruit flies had begun to swarm. The inside of the apple was brown, but not rotten. I reckoned it had been eaten a day ago, maybe less. As I was throwing it out, I saw greasy paper plates and pizza boxes in the bin.

“They had pizza,” I said. No one responded or showed any interest, but it was interesting to me at least. It made the previous residents seem real. I had already begun to see the place as ours; it was strange to think of other people living there before us.

I didn’t know under what circumstances they had left—as this year’s batch of contestants we hadn’t been allowed to watch for the last couple of weeks. The last time I had been able to watch, the rewards were just starting to get really good. One of the girls had gotten a hair straightener

that I'd always wanted. "Salon standard," I remembered her saying, showing the steaming straightener to the other girls. She had shared it on the first day she received it, but after that had locked it in a drawer and did her hair only at night, when the others were asleep. The other girls would wake up, frizzy-haired, and look at her resentfully.

"I don't understand why they didn't take better care of the place," Mia said.

"It's not that bad," Jacintha said. She was standing at the window in the kitchen and pointed out to the garden beyond. "They planted flowers, see?"

I looked out into the garden, at the brushes of pink and violet among the yellow-green grass. Yes, the place was beautiful, even if it needed work. We could begin in earnest when the boys arrived.

We cleaned the dishes and left the kitchen in some semblance of order. But before we prepared dinner we opted to change for the evening, lest the boys arrive and find us as we were, hair uncombed and faces bare.

In our dressing room, we sifted through the various garments that had been left behind. We were generous with each other, bestowing pieces to the girl they would suit the best, and lavishly complimenting each other every time we tried something on. I found a couple of things I liked, and picked my second-favorite one to wear, a pink gingham romper. I decided I would save the nicest piece—a red dress with a sweetheart neckline—for when I needed it badly.

On the front of each wardrobe was a mirror, meaning that even though we turned our backs or retreated into corners there was no way to avoid seeing each other. As I stripped off my shorts and my tank top, I saw flashing limbs in the mirrors: someone's arm contorting to slip into a dress, someone else's thigh, hair being swept over a shoulder. I knew that there were a number of cameras in the room, and that we all were being filmed, but, oddly enough, that was one of the aspects of the day which perturbed me the least. I didn't bother to examine the room to see where the cameras might be. I more or less acted as I had on the outside—with the assumption that we were all being watched in some way or another.

There were very few makeup products, only some different shades of foundation, and two tubes of mascara which we passed around without hesitation. In a different situation I might have thought twice about sharing eye makeup with strangers, but we were in no position to be fussy. Jacintha hovered around when we were sorting through the foundation, and I saw that there was no makeup for dark skin. She met my eye and shrugged. "It's fine," she said.

"Sit down," I said. "I'll do your eyes."

I did her makeup with careful swipes, my hand pressed lightly to her cheek to stop her head from moving. When I was finished, she opened her hand and showed me something dark and spiderlike.

"Here," she said. "Have them. I don't think they've been used."

They were false eyelashes. I fingered them, feather-light and delicate. "Are you sure?"

She nodded and passed me the glue. I said, "If you want, I can try to use the mascara to do winged eyeliner on you."

As we did our faces, we kept looking toward the door. Though we were looking at ourselves, we were thinking of the boys. Every so often, if someone thought they heard something and emitted a sudden, sharp "Shhh!," we all fell deathly silent, straining to hear. When nothing came of it, we laughed at ourselves.

Once we were ready, presentable if not glamorous, we went to the kitchen and made a simple dinner of omelettes. There were two bottles of champagne in the fridge, which we divided up, drinking little sips from little glasses. In the absence of chairs, we sat out on the grass, plates in our laps or balanced on our knees. The air was not sweet, but thick and filled with a desert musk, sitting heavily on my skin. It was intoxicating, and I felt my head go light and airy. I smiled genially at everyone, until I remembered that I look clown-like when I smile too widely. I tried for a moderate curling of my lips, like I had just recalled a joke.

We began to chat with more enthusiasm now, imagining different things we could do with the compound, imagining the kinds of boys who might show up and what kinds of rewards we might get. After a while of saying different variations of the same thing, I was able to speak

without thinking, and observe the girls, trying to fathom what I could from their idle chat. The truth is, we weren't interested in getting to know each other—not yet. We were assessing who was the most beautiful and who might cause trouble. At the same time, we were analyzing what our own place in the group might be. Within minutes of speaking to the girls, I knew that I was one of the most beautiful, and one of the least interesting.

I kept smiling and chatting pleasantly while I examined the girls before me, comparing them to myself, and trying to see them as the boys might. Ten of us: myself, Jacintha, Sarah, Candice, Susie, Becca, Melissa, Mia, Vanessa, and Eloise.

Ever since I was a teenager, I worried that in a group of people I would be the stupidest one there. It was sometimes the case, and sometimes it wasn't. I didn't think I really was stupid, only that I didn't know much about bookish things; I became uncomfortable when history or geography was mentioned and had an innate fear of politics. I think I have my own smarts, though. I can read people okay, though sometimes I get things wrong. I don't think of that as a flaw in my small skill, so much as a testament to the unpredictability of human nature. But with relief, I realized that as long as Susie lived in the compound, I would not be the dimmest person there. I'm not saying that to be disparaging—I don't actually value intelligence that much in a person. Intelligence can be artificial, but charm is always real, and Susie had that in spades.

"I love it here already," she said to me earnestly, her hand on my arm. "It's so nice to be somewhere new." I was curious about Susie's age. I thought that she might be a little younger than me, but it was hard to tell. She had a certain youthful quality to her. I imagined her working as a tour guide, high-fiving children and telling couples that they looked cute together.

Becca was the quietest; she fidgeted with her shorts and looked down at the ground when she spoke. She was pretty in an understated way, particularly when she smiled. She didn't smile often, but looked around her a lot, as though waiting for someone else to step in. She was the smallest of us all, and paler than anyone. She had applied no tan in preparation for coming. She was also the only one with short hair.

Mia was bitchy. I could tell that she was trying to hide it for the sake of first impressions, but bitchiness will out, and more than once I saw her eyes slide sideways or roll upward when she disliked what someone was saying. I had also seen her openly sneer in another girl's face. Wisely, she didn't try it with Candice, but she didn't go out of her way to be nice to her either. I could tell that she didn't want to be mean: she tried at kindness, and sometimes succeeded. She was generally thoughtful, and was the first to jump up to get people water, or to clean the dishes. She was a self-proclaimed realist.

"I don't like bullshit," she said, looking around her, meeting people's eyes. "I'm straight. I expect others to be straight, too." Her hair was a bright, artificial red, which she moved about a great deal as she spoke, and she had long, well-maintained acrylic nails. She was a lot, but she was still someone you wanted to be around: she had that kind of energy.

But it was Candice who shone, and toward Candice that we all gravitated. She was nice, in an offhand kind of way, and had an air of authority about her that we unquestioningly submitted to. Within minutes of sitting beside her, I found myself thinking, with a quiet, burning intensity, that if I could have been anyone in the world, I would be Candice.

At some point, I heard a girl whose name, I thought, was Melissa say, "I have been to a desert before actually, on a family holiday. It was very different." We stared at her. She looked back at us, uncomprehending.

A voice sounded around us, clear as a bell. I couldn't tell where it came from. Watching the show the voice sounded androgynous, but listening to it in person I thought it sounded distinctly feminine.

"Good evening," the voice said. "Please refrain from revealing personal information unless instructed to do so in a task."

We sat still and looked at each other. It was entirely silent: there were no birds overhead, or sounds from the house, and no boys yet. The cameras, which I guessed were all around us, hidden in bushes and stuck to walls, did not whir or click; they, too, were silent.

"I'm sorry," Melissa said at last. "I forgot."

"It didn't mention a punishment," Mia said.

"I think it was just a warning," Candice said. She met Melissa's eye. "Any one of us might have slipped up. Not to worry, Melissa."

“Let’s go to bed,” Becca said, her voice soft and flutelike. “When we wake up, the boys will be here.” We helped each other up, and went into the house. I kept glancing behind me, as though I would find the boys staggering in through the thicket.

When we passed by the screen in the living room, I saw that it was still blank. “Why do you think it hasn’t lit up yet?” I asked Jacintha.

“It can’t start until the boys are here,” she said. “It would be an unfair advantage.”

I had already known the answer: it was the same every year. I only asked out of my old habit of prompting people to explain things to me even when I knew the answer. When I was a child, I found that it would make people more likely to want to help me, and it served me just as well as an adult. When we sat at our benches and took off our makeup, Jacintha peeled my eyelashes off and set them gently on my desk. I knew then that we were friends. Some things are that simple, and so it was with Jacintha.

I went to the bed that I had woken up in, and across from me Jacintha took hers, while the others debated over which beds they wanted. I lay down and smelled the air, which was still sweet and fresh, though there was now a slight scent of sand and sweat. The girls murmured around me. Goodnight, we said, our voices soft. Goodnight, goodnight, goodnight.

IN THE MORNING THE boys still hadn’t arrived, and we started to worry.

I opened my eyes—the first to wake, again—and reached for a phone that wasn’t there. I woke up properly then, and looked around at all the other girls sleeping soundly. I couldn’t see them well in the dark, and I seemed to have forgotten most of their names. The small trace of familiarity from the night before had vanished, and I was reminded that they were strangers to me. In that moment I would have given anything to have gone home.

I padded through the house, checking for any changes. In the living area, the screen was still blank. I walked outside, and fancied that I would see the boys waiting for me by the pool. But there was no sign of them.

It might have been peaceful outside—all that flat, pale land stretching out into the distance—but I disliked the extreme quiet, and went into the kitchen, where I made coffee while keeping an eye out the window. Then I made a huge pan of scrambled eggs and wolfed down what I judged to be a moderate amount. I thought of how ugly I must look on the cameras, stuffing my face alone in the kitchen, my hair unbrushed, my face not yet washed. I finished eating as quickly as I could.

When I returned to the bedroom, the other girls were awake. They had been talking, but stopped when I walked in. Mia looked at me with wide eyes. “There you are,” she said. “We didn’t know where you had gone.”

“I got coffee,” I said.

“Why did you get up before everyone else, though?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just woke up.”

“Were you just wandering on your own? That’s so weird,” Mia said.

“No,” I said. “I just made breakfast. I made eggs for everyone.”

“Thanks, Lily,” Jacintha said. “That was really thoughtful.” I met her eye, and felt a profound rush of gratitude for her, as though she had stopped me from falling off a cliff.

After we ate, we took our coffees to the outdoor dining area. There were no chairs, and we stood self-consciously, leaning against the wall, hips cocked.

It was difficult to know how to plan our day. We decided to go back to preparing the house in the morning; we could spend the afternoon relaxing and getting to know each other. Cleaning was hard in the heat, particularly in the kitchen, where the temperature was so extreme that we were forced to take frequent breaks, sprinkling our faces and necks with water.

When we were done, we changed into our bikinis and got into the pool. I noted the relative flatness of everyone’s stomachs, and found that, while Sarah had the most toned abs, I was a sure contender for the shape-liest hips.

The pool was enormous; even with the ten of us in at the same time, there was still room left for about fifty refrigerators. We were not as reserved as we had been the day before; we did handstands and splashed

each other. Mia and Eloise raced each other, and I swam as deep as I could, keeping my eyes open under the water and navigating around the blurry shapes of the girls' legs.

But where were the boys? As we lay in the shade, snacking on tortilla chips and guacamole, I wondered if they had been hurt. Four years ago one of the boys had broken his leg on the way to the compound and had been stranded for twelve hours before the show's execs got to him. It would have taken less time but he had said, over and over, that he didn't want anyone to come get him and that he could make it to the compound eventually. He was taken home immediately.

I knew I was going to drive myself mad with thinking, and asked Jacintha if she wanted to play ping-pong. It was tucked around the side of the house, and we played for a while—I think probably an hour. There was a ball but no paddles, so we played with our hands. I thought that Jacintha was a relaxed kind of person, but she became tremendously competitive once we started to play. She liked to do victory laps of the ping-pong table while I crouched on the ground to retrieve the ball.

"What time do you think it is?" I asked her between sets. She pointed above us, at the sun.

"It's hard to be sure, but I think around three or four. It's definitely the afternoon." She came to stand beside me and pointed up, again. "See?" I nodded, but I didn't understand precisely how she knew. For me, the sun was just the sun. She turned to face me. She wasn't wearing sunglasses, and only minimal makeup, and her face was clear to me. "Do you think any of the boys will be Black? There's usually one, but not always."

"Maybe," I said. I thought about it, then said, "I'm sure there will."

"If it's all white boys, I'm screwed," she said. "The white boys never go for the Black girl."

"You're stunning," I said. "Any of the boys would be lucky to have you."

"You think?" she said, and twisted her earrings around. "Well, you have nothing to worry about anyway. Is that your natural hair color?"

I laughed. "What do you think?"

We went back to the lawn, where the majority of the girls were sunbathing. "Where were you?" Mia asked. "Why are you always disappearing?"

“We were playing ping-pong,” I said. She looked like she didn’t believe me. What could I say? We were playing ping-pong.

Jacintha and I took a seat a little bit away from her, and Candice came over and sat cross-legged on a cushion beside us. Candice had changed out of her swimsuit and into a crochet dress patterned with pretty greens and blues. She wore her long, thick hair in a high ponytail. I could see the beads of sweat on her neck. “Don’t worry about Mia,” she said. “She’ll lighten up once the boys get here.”

Some of the girls had decided that they would make dinner for everyone. They went inside, intent on their task, and I felt impressed by their industriousness. All I could think of doing was getting cool. Eventually lying about got boring too, and Jacintha asked me to help her sort out some kind of makeshift door for the bathroom.

I’ve always been useless in these kinds of situations: I don’t have any sort of mechanical understanding. I’ve never assembled furniture myself, and I’ve never voluntarily looked inside the bonnet of a car. But Jacintha seemed to know what she was doing, and I encouraged her and made affirmative noises. In the end, she just hung a sheet over the doorframe. It was easy to move and provided a degree of privacy that we could live with, for now.

When dinner was ready, we ate tacos outside and covered our mouths as we spoke. I got the impression that everyone was saving their more interesting talking points for when the boys came; I know I was. Jacintha sat next to me, and I was glad that we were becoming friends. She was nice, and smart, too. Already the ten girls had split into two cliques: throughout the day, Vanessa, Sarah, Melissa, Becca, and Eloise had kept to themselves, cleaning upstairs and eating lunch by the swings, and at dinner they sat a little apart too. Privately, I thought that the second group—comprising Candice, Susie, Jacintha, Mia, and myself—was the better one. The other girls were boring and had nothing much to add to a discussion. Mia, glancing at them, remarked, “Vanessa’s the only one of them who’s pretty, anyway.”

We were slightly more tense that night, and some of the girls were impatient with each other, interrupting or rolling their eyes. We drank more than we had the first night, too, and struggled to find things to talk

about. Only Susie remained enthusiastic; I don't think the fact that there was a sort of gag placed on our conversation topics bothered her at all. Susie could talk about anything. "I don't even want the boys to come," she said. "We're having so much fun without them."

We went inside eventually, to shower and to tend to the burns that we had accumulated. I had a long, red burn running up the length of my arm from when I had fallen asleep in the sun. We lathered aloe vera on each other, until the room smelled sharp and sweet, and we walked around with slow, hesitant steps. I slept poorly, waking constantly. I kept curling my arms under my chin in my sleep, and then wincing myself awake. Eventually I lay like a starfish on my back, listening to the cool rush of the air conditioning and the even breathing of the other girls.

The following morning, the boys arrived.

T W O

THEY HAD COME FROM THE HILLS BEHIND THE COMPOUND, south of the tennis court, slipping through a gap in the fence in the early morning. If we'd have thought to go around to the back of the house we might have seen them yesterday, slowly, slowly crossing the terrain and making their way toward us.

They were clearly exhausted: even the ones who were in good shape had cracked lips, were sunburned and covered in brown-gold desert sand. Some of them looked worse: there were three or four who had scrapes and bruises across their faces and arms. One of them, huge and hulking, had scrapes all across his chest, a gash on his leg, and an impressive black eye. I wondered if any of the boys had fought in the wars.

It was with some embarrassment that we led them to the grass to sit—they seemed a little surprised that there were no seats, but they didn't complain. We brought them endless jugs of water and had some food ready to give them: toast with jam, bacon, eggs, bowls of baked beans. One of them lifted the bowl of beans to his face and poured it into his mouth like it was the final dribbles of milk in a cereal bowl. They'd had some supplies with them, they told us, but it wasn't the same as real home-cooked food. It felt almost indecent, we girls rested and showered, gazing at the boys, dirty and exhausted, their eyes darting around the compound, and traveling inexorably back to us. I thought that the oldest might have been in his early thirties, while the youngest was surely no older than twenty. Even after three days in the desert they were beautiful. But we were beautiful too, and we sat straight and let them look.

"How many of you are there?" I asked, though I had counted already. I had to ask, because it was the most important question.

“Nine,” one of the boys said. He had neatly trimmed brown hair and warm brown eyes, and sunburn across his neck and his collarbones.

One of the boys who had scrapes across his chest, who had introduced himself as Andrew, said, “One of the boys got lost. He won’t be coming.”

Yet another said, “How many of you are there?”

“Ten,” Mia said, and we all fell quiet as the boys looked at the girls, and the girls looked at the boys.

“We’ll show you around,” Candice said, getting suddenly to her feet.

I knew what had motivated her into action; we all did. This was the rule of staying in the compound. It was what made people watch the show, day after day, and what people talked about during the ad breaks: you stayed in the compound only if you woke in the morning next to someone of the opposite sex. If you slept alone, you would be gone by sunrise. There were usually ten girls and ten boys to start with, but now, as the girls outnumbered the boys, one of us would be gone by tomorrow.

“It’s too big a group to show around,” Mia said. “Candice, you take four and I’ll take five.”

If this plan was disagreeable to Candice she didn’t show it. I went with Candice, as did Jacintha. Eloise and Susie went with Mia. Becca and some of the other girls cleared the boys’ plates and brought them into the kitchen to clean up.

Candice took us to the west, the prettier side of the compound, where the maze lay, and the gardens and pond. Of the four boys in our group, I remembered only a few of their names. Candice walked slowly, keeping in mind the boys’ exhaustion, though they had perked up considerably, and were looking around with interest. We were showing them around like we were showing off our own property, and they were viewing it as though they had never seen it before.

“Was it terrible out there?” Candice asked. “I wouldn’t like to have done it myself.”

Andrew said, “It was an interesting experience, for sure. We got to know each other pretty well. No, it wasn’t terrible, but we were certainly glad to see you all.” I glanced again at the marks on his chest and face. I thought they made him look more handsome. He was of an average height and build, with light, curly hair. When he smiled, dimples emerged

deep within his cheeks, softening his appearance and lending him a certain boyishness. There was something about him, though, an ease of movement and a way of holding your gaze that set him apart. Candice walked alongside him, glancing at him now and then. Of all the boys, he seemed the most approachable.

"You got a few scrapes, there," I said. "What happened?"

"There were some issues," he said. "But we worked them out." He smiled at me. "It's good to be around women and be civilized again."

The rest of the boys stayed silent. Whatever had happened, they weren't going to tell us.

"Well, thank God you made it," Jacintha said.

One of the other boys piped up. He was tall and broad-shouldered, like a rugby player. I thought his name might be Marcus. "I can tell you this much. You really learn a lot about yourself in the desert. It was difficult, but it was thrilling too. You have to rely on your wits. There's nothing to hide behind."

Another man, wiry and wearing tortoiseshell sunglasses, possibly named Seb, said, "A man can be a man in the desert."

Candice made a polite noise of interest and turned back to Andrew, pointing out the dusty area that we thought must be for boules.

The man with the sunburned neck fell into step beside me. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't catch your name."

"Lily," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Lily. I'm Sam." He held out his hand for me to shake. I took it, smiling at the formality.

"What?" he said, smiling back. His eyes were a very warm brown, the same color as his hair.

"I don't know," I said. Rounding a corner, I bumped into him a little, and the small act of my arm brushing against his seemed uniquely embarrassing. "Sorry," I said. He took a small but noticeable step away, placing distance between us. I pretended to look in the opposite direction.

"I'm, ah—" Sam said. "I'm conscious that I haven't showered in a few days."

"That's okay," I said. He smelled faintly of sweat, and there was dirt and sand clinging to his legs. Perhaps outside, at home, it might have

thrown me off, but after days of waiting for the boys in the clean, orderly house, the sight of this man before me, dirty and fantastically real, thrilled me.

He looked around, as though taking in the sights. He stepped closer again. The ground beneath my feet was sandy and gritty, scuffing my white shoes. His arm brushed mine again, the hair on his forearm grazing the underside of my wrist. I hadn't felt so excited since I had come here. He turned to me. "Do you—?" He stopped himself. "I keep forgetting that we can't talk about our lives outside the compound," he said.

"It gets easier after a couple of days."

"What do you talk about?"

"The house, mainly. The grounds, the weather." I shrugged.

We walked in silence for a few moments. I could see the other group on the east side of the compound, Mia leading them around like a tour guide. I could hear her voice perfectly from across the way, loud and nasal.

It was clear that the boys were tired, though they didn't say so. Candice announced that she was hot, and wanted to sit in the shade for a bit, so we paused under a tree. When I glanced at Sam, he was looking above him, his face tilted to the blue sky. In the clear light, I saw lines on his forehead. I wondered how old he was. When he saw me looking, he smiled. "I think this will be good," he said. "A chance to start again, right?"

"Right," I said. The truth was, I wasn't entirely sure I agreed with him. Neither was I sure that I disagreed with him. I thought that it was endearing that he wanted to start again here. I didn't say what I actually thought, which was that it was a good place for a break.

When Candice felt that the boys were sufficiently rested, we wandered over to the eastern side of the compound, passing the gym. The man shaped like a bodybuilder and with the worst injuries fell into step beside me, and Sam shifted forward, as though to give us privacy. I thought the other boy's name was Tom, but I didn't want to ask for a second time. He had closely cropped blond hair and slate-gray eyes. But it was difficult to focus on anything other than his enormous build. He said, "What did you girls get up to while you were waiting for us?"

"We cleaned, mostly. We were excited for you all to get here."

He nodded. There was sweat on his forehead, and he wiped it off unselfconsciously. I had surreptitiously been swiping at my upper lip for the past half hour, when I was sure that none of the boys would notice.

"I imagine you've been making lots of plans for what to do with the place."

"I guess. Yeah, we've talked about it."

"I have lots of ideas," he said. "Even before we got here I had ideas for what we could do. But," he said diplomatically, "I wouldn't want to get in the way of what you girls have planned. You were here first, after all."

He glanced over at me. His appearance was unremarkable, except for his size. "We can talk about it when we're all together," I said.

"We're happy to be here. In the desert it gets so cold at night, you know. You can't feel it here, because you've got shelter. It'll be nice to share a bed tonight."

I wondered if he was stating it as fact, or if he was providing an opening for me to suggest that we might share a bed. I felt sure, however, that he wouldn't react well to being turned down. When I said nothing, he walked over to Candice.

The boys took a few minutes to test the equipment in the gym, and Jacintha stood beside me and spoke quietly. "What did you say to Tom?"

"Which one is Tom?"

She made a Tom-like gesture, squaring her shoulders, holding her arms separate from her torso. It was a good impression. In unison, we glanced around to make sure he hadn't seen it.

"I didn't say anything," I said. "We talked for, like, a minute."

"There are ten girls and nine boys. Whether we're here in the morning or not depends on if a boy likes us. Don't shoot anyone down just yet, all right?"

When we had finished the tour, we all sat in the grass. It wasn't uncomfortable anymore: I was already getting used to it. Candice sat beside Marcus, and Susie sat beside Sam. I sat next to Jacintha. Everyone was relaxed, except for Tom, who was looking around restlessly. "The fence around the perimeter," he said. "That's new, right?"

We couldn't say that it was likely put up in the last couple of weeks by the previous residents, so Candice only said, "Brand-new."

“That’s good,” he said, his eyes following the boundary line. “And there’s the barbed wire, too. It’s safe, then? I mean, you’ve felt safe here, the last few days?”

“It’s safe,” Candice said. Tom nodded. I thought then that there was something off about him. While the other boys were staring openly at the girls, Tom was staring out into the desert.

“What about a glass of something a little stronger than water?” Marcus said. “To celebrate us finally being together?”

I met Candice’s eye, but she looked quickly away. We had drunk all of the alcohol already. “There isn’t any, yet,” she said.

Irritated, Seb said, “Have you not been following the instructions?”

“The screen hasn’t been on,” Jacintha said. “We think it was because they needed us all to be here.”

Andrew stood. “Why don’t we check if it’s on now?” He offered Candice his hand, and the two of them made their way into the house. A moment later, Candice emerged, her arm waving in the air. The big screen had lit up.

EVERYONE KNEW HOW THE big screen worked: it would detail daily instructions for all of us to carry out. We could only be rewarded if everyone took part. If successful, we would receive items for the compound: food, furniture, appliances, or other things that would make our lives easier. There would additionally be Personal Tasks, which were detailed on our little screens; these rewards would benefit us individually. There was no limit to how many tasks you could complete on the big or little screens: every time one was completed, another one would appear. If it wasn’t completed in a day, that reward was lost forever; a new task would appear the next morning.

The quality of the reward for each Communal Task depended on how well we executed the task, while the quality of the reward for a Personal Task in addition depended on how many people were remaining in the compound—the fewer people there were, the more valuable the reward. It was one of the most entertaining parts of the show, actually: they pushed people into couples, and otherwise tried to get you to forge rela-

tionships with the other residents, only to see if you were willing to sacrifice those same people in order to get better prizes. When there were twenty people the rewards were pretty basic, but as the numbers dwindled the rewards grew luxurious. In a previous year, a contestant who made it to the final pair got the actual dress that a famous actress had worn to an awards ceremony. Another time, the winner got a watch worth tens of thousands.

That was the other thing: if you won, you got unlimited rewards. Not all of them were as expensive as the watch, but once you were alone in the compound, you didn't have to complete a task to earn a reward—you just asked, and it soon appeared. Your other prize was the compound itself. You could theoretically stay for as long as you wanted, but generally the winner gathered as many rewards as they could carry and left to enjoy their life of fame and further riches on the outside. The minute the last person left, the next group of contestants could enter.

On the big screen, it said:

Task: Every boy and girl must discuss their previous relationships

Reward: Outdoor seating

"Piece of cake," Seb said. There was something about Seb that was easy to dislike. He was tall, yet seemed to make an effort to take up more space than was necessary, slouching insolently as he sat, legs spread wide, arms draped behind him. As well as that, he had an annoying, moneyed accent, and smirked when other people spoke.

"Did anyone check the little screens?" Mia asked. Several people started to move toward the changing area, but Candice said, "No one goes anywhere until we get this first task done. We need a place to sit." She was right: aside from the fact that seats seemed a necessary thing for civilized living, the ground was so hot. Those of us who had started to move toward their dressing room stopped when Candice said so.

We created a rotating line by the pool. The girls stayed in one place, while the boys moved to the girl to the left after two minutes. We had no clock or means of measuring time, so whatever girl was not speaking to a boy would call "switch" after counting two minutes.

We had been waiting for the boys for two days, but the reality of seeing them standing before us was jarring. Even the smallest of them, Evan,

was taller than the tallest girl, and they varied in appearance—ranging from trim and toned to enormously, threateningly muscled. The girls had their backs to the pool, and I felt, as they stared baldly at us, that at any minute the boys might either fall at our feet, or launch us backward into the pool.

“All right,” Jacintha called, standing at the end. “Begin!”

In front of me was Seb. He was wiry and tattooed: ink curled from his wrists all the way up to behind his ear. He had taken off his shirt in the midday heat, and I could see the divots of his six-pack. When the boys had arrived, I had quietly slipped into my red dress, the nice one, but I wasn’t sure, now, if it was the right thing to wear. I felt overdressed, too obviously trying to look alluring. We stared at each other for a good ten seconds, not speaking.

“I’m Lily,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “We spoke earlier.”

There was another brief silence, and I could hear the others beside me speaking rapidly, as though they couldn’t fit all of their relationships into one two-minute conversation. Beside me, Melissa was describing a poly-amorous relationship she had been in. “It’s much more relaxed than you might think,” she said.

“When I was fifteen,” I said finally, “I went out with a boy in my class for three months. His name was José, and we would go swimming together when it was hot. It was a summer fling. When I came back to school in September, neither of us were particularly interested in the other. Then when I was seventeen, I had a brief . . . thing with my teacher. His name was Mr. Donovan—Richard. I used to help him file books in the school library after school, and then we started locking the door to the library and staying there for hours. He was married and ended it when his wife found out. Directly after that, I started going out with Louis. He was really, really nice. He was my friend’s brother, and we just had a really nice time together. That lasted, I think, less than a year? I broke up with him because I kind of was bored and wanted something different. And then I met Brian, and we went out for three years. We broke up two months ago. He cheated on me with a girl he met on holiday. So, that’s me.”

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