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Debut Fiction Sampler

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Fall 2025 Debut Fiction Sampler

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'A RIP-ROARING ADVENTURE' *Daily Mail*

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'ENTHRALLING' *Financial Times*

'UNPUTDOWNABLE' *Sun*

MURDER IN CONSTANTINOPLE

A Ben Canaan Mystery

Pushkin Press
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Prologue

As soon as she saw him, she knew that she was going to die.

She had not noticed him at first. She was too focused on getting away. It was only once she had stepped from the jetty onto the sailboat and cast off that she caught sight of his face. He was sitting beneath the boom, wrapped in a cloak, hands gloved – staring at her in the darkness that shrouded the waterfront.

Her heart jabbed in her chest. She knew that look.

'Go on,' he said, in a gentle voice. 'Don't let me interrupt you.'

She scanned the waterfront one last time. They were alone. Moored *kayiks* and cutters creaked in the tide. Firelight smouldered on the skyline across the Strait, tracing the contours of rutted rooftops and towering spires. She tasted the air: burnt dust, salt, softened by a cool night-breeze.

'How did you know?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'Don't make this harder than it has to be.'

He took the tiller from her and guided the boat onto the open waters of the Bosporus. The lights of Constantinople drifted away. Now the moon was their only beacon, shining through a thin sheen of cloud-cover.

'It's a nice boat,' he said, patting the deck. 'You could have sailed far.'

'Why don't we sail together? We can disappear.'

He raised a hand to silence her. ‘I have no choice. The decision was unanimous. You knew what you were doing when you went to Heathcote.’

He was right. The die had been cast. Tears formed in her eyes.

‘Give me a moment, please.’

She listened to the faint ticking of his pocket-watch. She took a deep breath, trying to remember every sensation: the churning waters, the crisp air, the singing of the nightjars. Then a sinking feeling – the life ahead of her that she had wanted to live, that she would never live.

‘I’m sorry,’ he finally said. ‘There’s never enough time to say goodbye.’

He donned the mask, obscuring all but his grey eyes. It suddenly struck her that she had never considered what it felt like. Was it painful? Or was it as peaceful as falling asleep? She closed her eyes and a murmured name escaped her lips—

‘Ben—’

It was the last thing she said.

1
Canaan & Sons

It was Friday night in London's Jewish East End. Across four miles, from Cheapside to Blackwall, the bells of St Mary-le-Bow were ringing. As the city sweltered in the evening smog of high summer, the East End began to close up shop.

Young *yeshiva bochers* migrated to synagogue in black-clothed droves, released from rabbinical study to bring in the Sabbath. A frenzied whistle stabbed the air as the last omnibus left Whitechapel. Fruit-hawkers and florists loaded up donkey-drawn wagons with pears and peonies and the market squares gradually emptied. Meanwhile, the pubs were filling up with day-labourers, chimneysweeps and men of the docks, knocking back the first of many pints as twilight congealed in a thick haze at the window.

Teetering over Whitechapel Road – that squalid thoroughfare of jewellers, sponging houses and struggling artisans – was a narrow three-storey house. It perched precariously above a tailor's, where a sign was hanging: *Canaan & Sons.*

From the outside, it looked unremarkable. Just another worse-for-wear abode belonging to some humble craftsman and his small family enterprise. But inside was a different story: a home

bursting with the benign chaos peculiar to Jewish households on the Sabbath eve.

Tonight, one question was on everyone's lips. A familiar question, but no less urgent: *Where's Benjy?*

It echoed up and down the house. From the dusty workshop in the basement – cluttered with half-made suits, mottled mirrors, treadles and needles, bobbins and fabrics – up to the shuttered shop on the ground floor. Through the kitchen swirling with steam and the scent of chicken broth, where the matriarch Ruth was cooking up a storm. Then up the rickety stairs lined with miniature watercolours from the Bethnal Green flea market. And finally, to the very top of the house: that mysterious attic-room which nobody but the absent Benjy was permitted to enter.

Grandfather Tuvia sat in a leather armchair in the living room: his fireside throne. He was an odd-looking fellow – short and stooped, with an unusually full head of white hair. Strangest of all was the pinkish scar that ran along his chin, just under his lower lip, which was curled into a smile as he sucked on a pipe and squinted at the *Jewish Chronicle* through thick spectacles. Next to him was his wife of fifty years: Hesya, deftly knitting a scarf without so much as looking at her fingers.

'That boy will be the death of us, lovie,' she intoned mournfully, in Yiddish.

'Speaking of death,' Tuvia replied, 'guess who's pushing up daisies.'

'Who?'

'Rudolph Zemmler.'

Hesya set down her knitting. '*Rudolph Zemmler?* But he was in such good health! He swam fifty laps of the baths at Goulston Square every Sunday. How did he die?'

‘Heart attack,’ Tuvia tutted. ‘Forty-ninth lap.’

‘What a brilliant man!’ Hesya sighed dreamily. ‘And a *mensch* to boot. He looked after himself. Not like you with your smoking.’

‘“He looked after himself”? He’s dead!’ Tuvia barked – then, in an apologetic undertone, ‘May God rest his soul.’

‘You’re just jealous because he was tailoring for Cabinet ministers while you were out hawking *schmutters* to *yidden* fresh off the boats!’

Tuvia shook his head. ‘Rudolph Zemmler was like all those Viennese types: looking down his nose at us Litvaks. What’s more, he was a chancer. Like when he never showed up for my seventieth – “sick with scarlet fever” – but was sitting on his *tokhes* at the races the very next day!’ Tuvia puffed on his pipe in indignation, then convulsed in a fit of coughing. He was feeling a little sorry for himself. ‘Pah! Next it will be me.’

Hesya took her husband by the hand. ‘May you live to a hundred and twenty, my love,’ she said, pecking him on the lips.

‘Bobba! Zeyde! You’ll get the flu!’ A waif of a girl, no more than six, was standing in the doorway, hands on her cheeks in an expression of utter shock.

‘Nonsense, Golda,’ Tuvia said merrily. ‘Kissing is the cure!’

Golda took a few cautious steps towards her grandparents, twirling her black locks. ‘Mama’s asking if you’ve seen Benjy…’

‘Benjy, Benjy!’ Tuvia cried, ‘How could I see Benjy when I’m marinating like a pickled onion in this *farshtinkener* chair?’

Ruth appeared behind Golda, red-cheeked and flustered, wiping chicken fat onto her apron. ‘Papa, have you seen Benjy?’

‘Why would you send the child if you were going to ask me yourself?!’

‘Why do you always answer a question with a question?’

'*I haven't seen Benjy!* Now leave me alone! Can a man not read his newspaper, *Erev Shabbos*, without interruption?'

Ruth retreated to the kitchen to finish dinner before her father launched into another one of his tirades. A bespectacled eleven-year-old boy was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping chicken broth as he pored over a notebook filled with numerical scribblings.

'Max!' she shouted, and the boy jumped out of his skin, 'I told you to go find your brother!'

'But Mama, I'm looking for a way to help Papa reduce his expenditure! Anyway, Benjy is always late and evidently not home.'

'Don't give me lip. "Evidently"! For all we know he's already snuck in and is hiding in that den upstairs. Why don't you make yourself useful and go check?'

Max traipsed off. Benjy causing problems again! Did they not realise that Max was cracking something infinitely more important than his delinquent older brother? Nobody dared talk openly about it, but the business was in dire straits: run- ning at a loss, with expenses mounting and turnover dwindling. For the past week, Max had devoted himself to tallying up the costs of fabrics – cashmere, cotton and crêpe, tweed, twill and toile – and coming up with a plan to economise.

His theory went like this. Currently, his father was buying overpriced muslin and fine calico by the pound from those miserly Ganguly brothers in Spitalfields. Max calculated that it would be more efficient to buy cheaper fabric in bulk from the wholesalers up in Dalston. His father objected that this would compromise the quality of their garments.

But Max had seen the kind of business those slopsellers were attracting – the ones making enough money to leave

Whitechapel for Kensington and Islington – and it was not because of their superior craftsmanship. It was because they had the one thing that all the retail bigshots at synagogue murmured about: *scale*. If his father hired junior tailors with his disposable income (plus a bank loan for short-term capital if needed), he could create more product and give the shop real volume—

'Haven't you heard of knocking, you nosy thing?'

Max came to his senses. His older sister Judit, with her bright crop of ginger hair, was lying on her bed, clutching a sheet of paper to her chest.

He could tell from her blush that the letter was to Jack Hauser: their father's apprentice – a prattling *langer loksh* who could juggle five apples in one go and took her to the music hall most Saturday nights.

'Is Benjy in here?' he asked.

Judit's cheeks were burning. 'Hmm, let me check…' She looked under the pillow. 'Not here.' She opened the drawer next to her bed. 'Not here either.' She peeked down her blouse. 'And not here. I guess that means that Benjy must be elsewhere! Maybe you should check the races, the boxing club – or Newgate Prison!'

Max rolled his eyes. 'Now, now, there's no need to be facetious.'

Judit flared up – 'What did you call me?!'

'It means "to treat a serious issue with flippancy"! I read it in the dictionary.'

'Never mind! Listen, I need you to do something for me.' She folded the letter and offered it to Max. 'The next time Jack Hauser comes round to run his errands, you are to give this to him. Got it?'

Max's hand was hovering over the letter. 'Oh really? And what's in it for me?'

'The good fortune of not having your backside whipped!'

Max was still sceptical.

'And a block of Mr Benady's toffee,' Judit added.

'Done!' Max snatched the letter, stuffed it in his pocket and scampered out.

No sooner was he gone than Judit let out a happy sigh and fell back on her bed. For two months now, practically from the day that Jack had loped through their front door, he and Judit had carried out a covert courtship right under her family's nose. Normally she was indifferent to romance. In her mind, boys were half-formed men, and men were half-formed creatures – so at best boys were a fraction-formed and not a worthwhile investment. But… Jack Hauser! 'Hurricane Hauser', he called himself. The fastest talker in Whitechapel, rattling off hare-brained schemes to get rich. 'Piccadilly rich!' he would boast – with dreams of becoming an impresario in the West End, joining the ranks of those well-to-do Sephardim in Belgravia, the pinnacle of the Jewish bourgeoisie.

Just the thought of it drove her mad with joy. She leapt out of bed and ran downstairs to join her mother and Golda, who were setting out warm plates, candlesticks and silver cups for Friday night *Kiddush*.

'Mama,' Judit entreated, 'would it so terrible to invite that Hauser boy for Friday night sometime?'

'Why are you so concerned all of a sudden with dinner invitations?'

'Mama,' Golda piped up, 'you know he can juggle *five* apples in one go!'

‘He’s a nice boy,’ Judit said, ‘and he works very hard for Papa. If you want my opinion, he’d make a fine match for some lucky woman.’

Judit should have known better. A runaway train of worries left the station in Ruth’s feverish mind. *What does she mean, ‘match’? Hauser’s father was in Marshalsea for defaulting on his debts! God knows we have troubles of our own! If only she showed the same interest in Geoffrey Lovat, whose father runs the grocery shop next door – such a lovely boy…*

Ruth turned to Judit decisively. ‘We can talk about Jack Hauser with your father. More importantly, where is Benjy—’

As she spoke, they heard the sound of the front door opening. Max sprinted downstairs. ‘Speak of the devil and he shall appear!’

But when he reached the entrance hallway, Max was greeted not by Benjy, but by his father: Solomon Canaan.

As ever, Solly’s face revealed next to nothing – outwardly neutral, inwardly always thinking, observing. He was dressed in his trademark grey suit: understated and businesslike. The aloof sobriety of a man forged by decades of diligent service. Whose feelings were placed second to duty. Whose pleasures were small. Who stood upright even as the burdens of life weighed on his shoulders.

Next to Solly stood his cousin Herschel, plump and dishevelled, with the air of an extraordinary gentleman fallen on hard times. His clothes were hand-me-downs: a wilting red boutonnière, a discoloured silk cravat, oversized loafers. As the resident gopher of the Canaan clan, Herschel was always playing some unspecified role in Solly’s workshop. In exchange, he had food, a bed in the back room, money for gambling and brandy, plus the security of never having to look after himself.

Solly picked Max up and kissed him on the cheeks. 'Good *Shabbos*, young man.'

'Papa, I have amazing news!' Max babbled excitedly, 'I've formulated a business model based on a *discrepancy* in the shop's outgoings…'

'Max,' Solly cut him off. 'There's a time for business, and a time for rest. It's Friday night… It can wait.'

Solly trudged up to the living room to find his parents-in-law seated by the fireplace. '*Shabbat Shalom*,' he said with a respectful bow.

'Good *Shabbos*,' Tuvia croaked, 'and if you ask me where Benjy is, I'll bludgeon you.'

Solly's features sank. He had sent his eldest son on a ninety-minute round trip to Chelsea to deliver three exquisite dinner suits to an esteemed client. Suits that had taken him the better part of two months to complete – a crucial sale in the doldrums of summer. But that was five hours ago…

The boy was up to something. Solly could feel it in his bones.

As Ruth emerged from the dining room, Herschel whipped a bouquet of flowers from behind his back: 'For the most beautiful woman in Whitechapel!'

'Where'd you get the dosh for that, you silly goat?' Tuvia laughed.

Herschel embraced him. 'Nicked it, old man. I had practice you know – a spell as a pickpocket in Tangiers many moons ago—'

'Not now, Herschel!' Solly snapped, 'Tell your stories later!' He let out a sigh. The whole room seemed to breathe it in. 'We'll have to start without Benjy.'

Before dinner, Ruth took Solly to one side, away from the prying eyes of her parents and their precocious children. 'I

made do with what we had,' she said, 'but the chicken is our last meat – there's only one challah – I had to shave mould off the potatoes…'

'Times are tough for everyone,' Solly said with a wave of the hand. 'There's a war on.'

'It's not just that. You know how it is with my father and his gallstones… He's been in such pain, but we have nothing for him aside from cheap cognac!' Ruth broke off for a moment. 'And, well… I spoke to Rabbi Frankel, and he said – he was *very* clear – that there are ways for us to get help. The programme at Bevis Marks, or a West London synagogue if you don't want to be seen—'

Solly folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes. 'Are you suggesting that I go out and ask for *relief*?'

'It's *something*. We can get fresh food – oil for the lamps – medicine. This is worth more than your pride, Solly.'

But Solly was unmoved. 'Ruth, I was not born a *schnorrer* and I do not appreciate you trying to turn me into one. Besides, these "programmes" don't help poor Jews – they just help rich Jews feel better about themselves. The last thing we need is to give ammunition to those who claim that we Litvaks are a burden on the community. The belt is tight, but we will make it through. I will turn the shop around…'

'With whose help?' Ruth whispered. 'Your eldest son?'

Solly darkened. He had no response.

'Let's eat,' he finally said. 'The children must be hungry.'

He smoothed his wife's hair affectionately and walked slowly back into the living room, assuming his position at the head of a dining table where the family had assembled. The Canaans welcomed the Sabbath angels with a hearty *Shalom Aleichem*,

followed by a blessing for the brave boys who had gone to fight in Crimea.

Solly put on a cheerful smile for his children's sake. Despite these pressures, he told himself that he had much to be thankful for: his steadfast wife, his precious children, his health, his community. But behind that smile, an infuriating question was irking him:

Where the hell is that no-goodnik?

CAMMY SITTING SHIVA

a novel

CARY GITTER

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PROLOGUE

Saturday

Cammy was adrift at a party the night her dad died.

Her theater friend Gretchen had thrown herself a thirtieth-birthday bash at a German beer hall in the wilds of Williamsburg. The venue made Cammy a tad uneasy, given her Polish Jewish ancestors' unfortunate history with the German nation. What would she say to her grandma Ruth if she were still around? "Sorry, *Bubbe*. I know the Nazis killed your whole family, but the draft selection here is really amazing." Then again, she was probably overthinking it.

This is why Cammy was weird at parties.

Brooklyn always felt a bit like outer space to her. Unlike her hipper acquaintances who called the borough home, Cammy lived in a tiny, semilegal basement apartment off the last N stop in Astoria, Queens—an outlier among her New York peers. But here she was in bohemian BK on a crisp Saturday night in October, mixing it up with the cool theater kids at the cavernous beer hall. Raise a stein, pass the schnitzel.

To be clear, Cammy wasn't exactly a theater kid herself. Again: an interloper. She'd recently joined a group called the Drama Collective, which sounded like a histrionic communist

cell but wasn't. Rather, it was an assortment of young actors, directors, and writers who gathered every Wednesday evening at a dilapidated playhouse above a porn shop in a seedy part of Midtown to "workshop" new material together. And also to drink cheap wine and commiserate about their struggles as artists in a cold, cruel world that refused to recognize their obvious talent. And also to hook up with each other. A multifaceted mission.

Cammy was one of the writers, or, at least, she was attempting to be. Since graduating from criminally overpriced NYU with an English degree—how prudent and wise—she'd spent her twenties trying her hand at various literary forms, to little avail. She'd taken fiction classes, screenwriting classes, even an ill-advised poetry class, despite the fact that she had less than zero aptitude for poetry. What did she have to show for all these costly courses? An unfinished novel, a pair of underbaked screenplays, and some embarrassing poems she'd deleted from her computer and released into the cyber ether, where they belonged. Now, at twenty-nine, she was giving playwriting a shot. She had a decent ear for dialogue. If at first you don't succeed . . .

She wasn't used to theater people, though. They were a different breed, nothing like the timid scribes from her previous seminars. These folks were loud, extroverted, *on*. Not only the actors, who were performative by nature, but the directors and writers too. They gushed when they spoke, roared with laughter, gesticulated. It was a lot for a dry, wry soul like Cammy to take. She'd been part of the Drama Collective for a few months now, and, to be honest, she still wasn't sure if she even liked her fellow members.

Nevertheless, she craved their boisterous company tonight. Cammy's boyfriend of the past year, David, a sweet, clean-cut, serious-minded New York City librarian, had broken up with her a couple of weeks ago. The split had been her fault: She'd screwed up by drunkenly fucking a brooding actor she'd met at

one of the group's meetings. Oops. She didn't know why she'd done it. But in a moment of conscience, or Jewish guilt, she'd confessed her sin to David, and that was that. Then the self-loathing set in.

Happily, Gretchen, a whimsical director who aspired to be the next Julie Taymor—the avant-garde visionary behind the Broadway smash *The Lion King*—had come to the rescue with this welcome distraction: a party. Just what Cammy needed to take her mind off things. Right?

At present, she was sandwiched between strangers at one of the beer hall's long tables, her back to the brick wall, her butt aching from the hard wooden bench. She'd almost finished the great big stein that sat before her, which contained some amber-hued German lager with a harsh-sounding, guttural name. She found herself staring up at the vaulted, retractable roof—in the summer this room became a garden—as the voices around her carried on an animated conversation about the sorry state of the American theater.

"The problem is, there's no adventure. No one wants to take any chances."

"Well, it's all about money. It's economics."

"In Europe, the government subsidizes theater. They value the arts."

"Exactly. But this is America. Artists are expendable here."

"Excuse me," Cammy said, but nobody seemed to notice. She had to pee. She'd been holding it in for the past hour so as not to "break the seal," as Francesca, her best friend back in Jersey, liked to say. Was there any truth to that? she wondered. When you've been drinking and you pee for the first time, does it in fact open the floodgates for further, more frequent peeing for the rest of the night? If so, what was the biological explanation?

Musing on this profound inquiry, Cammy got up, though not before executing an awkward feat of acrobatics to free her

legs from under the table. Benches were impractical. She felt relieved to escape the litany of complaints she'd been listening to, which, far from cheering her up, were actually making her more depressed.

On the way to the bathroom, she was intercepted by the birthday girl. Willowy Gretchen had wild, frizzy hair and was decked out in a 1920s flapper dress and a tiara. She was, to put it charitably, drunk off her ass. "Are you having fun?!" she chirped, grabbing Cammy by the shoulders.

They had to yell in each other's faces to be heard above the din of the echoey hall.

"Yes. So much fun. Thanks for inviting me."

"Oh my God, of course. I'm so glad you joined the Collective. You're the coolest, Cammy."

"I'm not that cool."

"And you're so funny."

"I am?"

"Uh-huh. Not in a laugh-out-loud way. In a like deadpan Daria way."

"Daria?"

"Don't you remember that cartoon show on MTV in the nineties? The super deadpan girl with glasses?" Cammy did, vaguely. "That's you."

"I'll have to YouTube it."

Gretchen gave Cammy's shoulders a final playful squeeze before letting them go. "All right. I've gotta go mingle with my peoples."

"Happy birthday, Gretchen."

"Thank you!" she sang out, stepping backward into the beer-swilling crowd, teetering on high heels. And then, with a mixture of wonder and morbid glee: "I'm thirty—I'm almost dead!"

Cammy went to the bathroom, broke the seal in a stall with a broken lock, and washed her hands in an automatic sink whose

water flow was a game of chance. She eyed herself in the mirror. There was a yellowish light directly above her that she imagined as a spotlight. The rest of the restroom seemed to fade to darkness.

Ladies and gentlemen, we bring you Cammy Adler, alone on the stage of life.

What did she see in the revealing glow of that spotlight? She saw, of course, her familiar features: the olive complexion that prompted prying randos to ask if she were Greek or Italian (no, dummies—Jewish); the prominent nose she still felt self-conscious about, although men said it was cute; the shoulder-length brown hair that somehow never had quite enough volume; the same brand of black-rimmed glasses she'd been sporting since the fifth grade, save for an ill-fated dalliance with contact lenses in high school. (It's embarrassing when a lens falls out in the cafeteria and lands in your lunch food.)

More importantly, Cammy saw someone who didn't know what the hell she was doing. Twenty-nine years old, almost thirty—"almost dead," according to tiaraed Queen Gretchen. An unfaithful girlfriend. A dabbler, a dilettante, with writerly pretensions but no evidence that she possessed the skill or commitment to fulfill them. The product of a middle-class suburban upbringing and an expensive college education, she now resided in a glorified underground bunker and made a living temping as a copywriter in the most shallow of industries: marketing. Unmoored, directionless. And yet whom did she have to blame for this mess, this malaise, but herself and her own mysterious character flaws?

She even looked out of focus in the mirror. Or was it just smudged?

"Sorry, can I use that?" an irritated woman's voice asked.

Cammy was hogging the sink, another failing. "Oh. Yeah. Sorry."

Exiting the bathroom, she surveyed the bustling scene in the beer hall. Everyone appeared to be having a grand old time. It reminded her of one of those Bruegel paintings of sixteenth-century Dutch peasants soaking themselves in alcohol and dancing a merry jig. Dutch, German, same difference. Well, not really, but whatever.

Cammy realized at this point that (a) she was buzzed from the vat of lager she'd imbibed, and (b) she didn't feel like returning to the long table with the hard bench and the theater people.

No, what she wanted to do was drunk-dial David.

Good idea? Absolutely not. Was she going to do it anyway? You bet.

She wove her way through the Bruegelian revelers, careful not to get any ale sloshed on her, and made it out the door into the chilly autumn night. The usual suspects dotted the sidewalk outside the place: the anxious smokers; the pilgrims waiting for an Uber to take them home or, more likely, to the next phase of their Saturday evening; and, naturally, those, like Cammy, making reckless, tipsy phone calls.

A sidewalk outside a bar is truly some kind of holy way station, she thought. *I have to make a note of that; I have to write that down.* But she knew she'd forget to.

Shivering—she'd sacrificed warmth for style by wearing just a light jacket over a black jumpsuit—she pulled her phone out of her purse and checked the time. A few minutes past eleven. What was David doing now? He was probably in bed with a book, one of those thick Russian doorstops he'd been reading lately, or already asleep. What a good, gentle guy. And had Cammy not committed her senseless infidelity, she could've been tucked in next to him, cozy beneath his flannel covers, instead of out here in the void, lost among the Brooklynites.

She called and paced as the phone rang. Awake or asleep, he wasn't going to answer. Then she heard his soft-spoken recorded

voice. She missed that voice. "Hi. You've reached David. Please leave a message, and I'll get back to you. Thanks."

Beep. That's your cue, Cammy.

"Hey," she began, with no clear idea of what to say next. That was the thing about drunk dials: They weren't typically well thought out. "I know it's late and I, like, shouldn't be calling you, but, uh, I'm at this party in Williamsburg and it sucks and . . ." Don't complain about the party. Talk to him. "Anyway, I've been thinking about you a lot?" Okay, don't sound desperate. Cool it down. "You know, I realized one thing we said we were gonna do this fall is go for a hike, and we never did. And I know it's kind of cold out now, but what if we just did that?" A hike? What was she babbling about? Too late. Go with it. "Yeah, what if we like took a train upstate to some beautiful place and went for a hike together, with no expectations? I just think—"

The insistent beep of an incoming call interrupted Cammy's rambling. Was it David having a change of heart? A quick glance at her phone dashed this drunken hope. She saw an unfamiliar number with the 201 area code native to New Jersey and, below it, the name "WIENER." Who?

"Fuck. Someone's calling me. I'm sorry for—Yeah. Bye, David."

Nicely done.

Leaning her body against the beer hall's brick exterior, she took the call. If this were a telemarketer, she was ready to heap all her pent-up frustrations on the unlucky bastard. "Hello?"

"Cammy?" The voice was serious, sonorous, middle-aged.

"Yeah? Who is this?"

"It's Rabbi Wiener."

Oh, *that* Wiener. In her inebriated state, she hadn't made the connection. Gary Wiener was the rabbi at her hometown synagogue back in Jersey.

Honestly, she'd never been crazy about the guy. He had a bald head, capped by a colorful knit yarmulke, and a graying goatee that lent him a gurulike air, which complemented his sagely, self-important affect. She and the other kids in religious school used to make fun of his name, with its homonymic echoes of hot dogs and penises. Anyhow, he was fine; maybe she was being too hard on him. She tended to do that.

But why on earth was Rabbi Wiener calling her at eleven o'clock on a Saturday night? Come to think of it, he'd never called her directly before. How did he get her number?

"Cammy . . . I have some terrible news."

That's when she became aware of a sound in the background: crying. No, not crying. Sobbing. Wailing. The sort of primal lament she'd witnessed only in the movies, when a battle-scarred soldier kneels over the body of his wounded buddy, weeping to the heavens. This wasn't *Saving Private Ryan*, though; this was real life.

"What? What's going on?"

"Your father . . ."

"My father? What about him? Is he okay?"

"Your father . . ." he repeated like a broken rabbinical record. And then, "He passed."

Cammy heard the words but didn't comprehend them, as if the rabbi had spoken in Hebrew or some other foreign tongue. "Your father. He passed." What did they mean? He passed what? The verb was missing its object.

"I'm here with your mother. She's very upset. She asked me to call you."

"I—I don't understand . . ."

"Your father passed away, Cammy. I'm so sorry."

There was the missing word: "away." Not an object, but an adverb. What Rabbi Wiener was saying, in his euphemistic clerical fashion, was that's Cammy's dad, Cy Adler, had died.

Which, of course, couldn't be right. Her dad was sixty-eight years old. He was healthy.

Yes, he'd recently had some minor medical stuff—namely, an elective, minimally invasive laparoscopic surgery to remove a small growth from his kidney that turned out to be benign. No big deal, the doctors had said; better to be proactive and get it taken care of.

There had been one annoying postoperative complication, a mild case of "hospital-acquired pneumonia," apparently not uncommon in such settings. So instead of coming straight home last week as planned, her father had been moved to a nearby rehab facility, where, with the help of antibiotics, fluids, and rest, he was supposed to quickly recover and regain his strength. Then he'd be as good as new.

This was what the doctors had told Cammy's mom, Beth, and what she had relayed to Cammy over the phone. Calm reassurances all around.

He couldn't possibly have died. It was absurd. Why was the rabbi playing this cruel practical joke on her? As petty revenge for those juvenile Wiener puns?

"Here's your mother," he said.

Cammy heard a flurry of noise as the phone was handed to her mom. But the hysterical woman on the other end of the line sounded nothing like any version of her mother she'd ever encountered. No, this woman was the grieving soldier on the battlefield, the source of the desperate wailing. Had the rabbi hired an impostor to prop up his hoax?

"Mom?"

"He's gone," Beth slurred between heaving sobs.

"What? How? I don't—"

"Come home, babe. Just please come home." This plea seemed to be all her mom could muster. It was followed by a chaotic sonic mash-up of phone juggling, crying, muffled voices, more static: an electronic symphony of trauma.

Rabbi Wiener came back on, intoning words like "sudden" and "unexpected" in his grave, pulpit-patented timbre, but Cammy had stopped listening. She was, to use a therapeutic term she hated, "processing." Either the rabbi was hosting a psychopathic reboot of that early-aughts MTV prank show, *Punk'd*, or this was all legit: Her dad was indeed dead.

In which case, why wasn't she crying too? Glancing around the Williamsburg street teeming with weekend life, she felt only a shocked numbness. She told the rabbi she'd be there soon, hung up, opened Lyft, and typed in her old address in River Hill, New Jersey. It would cost $83.89 to get home. Did Lyft offer a special parental-death discount? Doubtful. She requested the ride. Her driver, Sergei, and his red Hyundai Sonata were two minutes away.

Cammy spotted a huddle of hipsters smoking on the corner. Although she'd never been a smoker herself, except for the occasional intoxicated indulgence, now seemed like a wonderful time for a cigarette. She went over and asked to bum one. An ethereal person with long, dyed-white hair in a fabulous faux-fur coat lit it for her. Wandering away from the group, she took a drag and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Maybe the smoke contained the secrets of how she should feel and how she should act and what it meant to be newly fatherless. De-fathered. But before she could perceive them, the cloud dissolved into the night air.

The red Hyundai pulled up to the curb, right on time. Sergei rolled down the passenger window. A burly man in a green Adidas tracksuit, he looked too big for his car, like one of those driving bears in the circus. "You are Cammy?" he barked in a thick Russian accent.

"Yeah," she said, strangely unsure.

"You going to Jersey?"

"Yeah."

He gave her a knowing smile, displaying a row of tobacco-stained teeth. "Going home, huh?"

"Yes." She flung the cigarette to the ground, steeling herself for everything that was to come. "I am."

★ ★ ★

The front door was unlocked. Cammy pushed it open, stepped inside, and found her mother standing alone, dimly lit, in the middle of the modest living room she'd decorated in her beloved Arts and Crafts style. It appeared as if she couldn't move, as if she didn't know whether to go left or right, as if she'd lost her basic powers of decision-making along with losing her husband.

Beth was sixty-five, dark-haired like her daughter, still active and attractive but forever striving to shed the few extra pounds that were her eternal bête noire. At this moment, though, she looked like an entirely different person, crumpled, tear-streaked, quivering even with a burnt-orange fleece blanket draped over her hunched shoulders. Cammy marveled at how swiftly a tragedy could alter one's physical form. It was frightening.

With her mom rendered temporarily immobile, Cammy came to her. She expected a heavy hug, but instead Beth tumbled into her arms, no longer able to support herself. Holding her mother up, keeping her from collapsing in a heap on the floor, was one of the most disconcerting sensations of Cammy's life. Wasn't this pietà tableau supposed to be the other way around?

Then Beth said the only thing that really could be said, in the same shattered voice Cammy had heard on the phone. "What are we gonna do without him?"

A simple, unfathomably huge question.

"I don't know, Mom." Her own cracked voice sounded alien to her. "I don't know."

Day One: Monday

♦ 1 ♦

Cammy woke up early Monday, the morning of the burial, in her childhood room.

Sunday had gone by in a blur. Toby Goldfarb, Beth's close friend and fellow synagogue member—a short, sandy-haired woman who talked fast and buzzed about like a bee—had come over around noon to help with the "arrangements." For nourishment, she'd brought a homemade kugel, her specialty, a dense Jewish casserole made with egg noodles, sour cream, and cottage cheese. Cammy sat, spaced out, at the dining room table, picking at crunchy bits of baked noodle, while Toby assisted her mother in calling the funeral home, the cemetery, stunned friends and family. All the efficient business that accompanies a death.

Since Cammy had hardly any stuff at the house, she'd excused herself at one point to take a quick, exorbitant round-trip Lyft to her basement lair in Astoria, where she shoved clothes, toiletries, and her beat-up old college-era MacBook into an oversize graphite JanSport backpack. When she returned an hour and a half later, Toby departed, leaving her and her mom to spend an eerily catatonic evening together. They reheated the remaining kugel, ate what they could without saying very much, and went to sleep before ten, saving up their energy for today.

Now she lay awake in her narrow twin bed in her little room in Jersey.

Joisey. Dirty Jerz. The state, the myth, the legend. Butt of a million mocking jokes.

Cammy had a love-hate relationship with the place that definitely skewed more toward hate. She'd grown up in River Hill, a one-square-mile town—er, borough, whatever that meant—sardined among dozens of other similarly sized towns in Bergen County, which lay just across the Hudson River from glittering New York City. North Jersey was a bucolic land of highways and factories, strip clubs and smokestacks—a pastoral paradise whose natural wonders included the swampy Meadowlands, where the Mafia had once dumped bullet-ridden bodies. *The Sopranos* captured the vibe pretty vividly. And if you ventured south, you wound up in the famed seaside idyll known as the Jersey Shore, a region made glorious by Bruce Springsteen and grotesque by Snooki and the rest of her caricatural reality-TV crew.

Ever since she was a kid, Cammy had wanted to get the hell out of here. To her, River Hill represented an unholy trinity of boredom, mediocrity, and small-mindedness. Seriously, the cultural landmarks on Main Street were a Dunkin' Donuts and a CVS. But on the other side of the polluted water, over the traffic-clogged George Washington Bridge, magical Manhattan beckoned. The sophisticated city, with its museums, theaters, art-house cinemas, and bookstores, all full of interesting, fashionable people. That's where she yearned to be.

Well, she'd gotten there, and things weren't going so great, and now her dad was dead and she was back home for a week.

Life comes at you fast.

Her weeklong stay was due to the Jewish custom of *shiva*, not to be confused with the Hindu god. No, for the Jews, shiva, which means "seven" in Hebrew, refers to the traditional mourning

period that begins after a loved one's burial and lasts for seven fun-filled days. During this happy time, friends and family visit the home of the bereaved to bring condolences and, more usefully, food. The ritual is called "sitting shiva." Who came up with it? Cammy had probably learned about its biblical origins in religious school, but she'd retained next to nothing from all those stultifying Sunday mornings.

She did recall, however, that more observant Jews took shiva to further extremes. They tore their clothing, sat on low stools, covered up their mirrors. At least she'd been raised Reform, in the "lightest" brand of Judaism, and didn't have to practice that type of ancient lamentation.

Still, the prospect of seven days of visitors streaming in and out of the house, offering earnest expressions of sympathy, seemed like a nightmare to Cammy, private person that she was. Not to mention seven straight days spent in close quarters with her mom, which was a whole other story. But she was here, and she had to get through this goddamn week somehow.

First, though, she had to bury her father.

★ ★ ★

Groggy and gassy—a delightful morning manifestation of her IBS-prone "Jewish stomach"—Cammy crawled out of bed and shuffled downstairs in search of coffee. The wooden steps groaned underneath her feet, just as they had whenever she'd stayed out too late as a teenager and tried to sneak back in and up to her room. Inevitably, she would find her mother's shadowy form looming in the doorway of her parents' bedroom, arms crossed in silent disapproval. Caught again. It was tough to be stealthy in a creaky, hundred-year-old house.

Entering the kitchen, she saw her mom hovering in a stupor by the coffee machine as it burbled and gurgled. That's one thing they had in common: a major coffee dependency. Cammy's dad

had been even worse, drinking the stuff day and night as if it were the elixir of life. A family of java junkies.

"Hi," Cammy said.

Beth started, shaken from her trance. She had on a faded nightgown, and her hair was matted on the side where she slept. "Morning, babe. You want some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"How 'bout some toast? I can make you some whole wheat toast."

"No thanks."

"English muffin?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"How 'bout just one slice of toast?"

"Mom, I don't want any toast."

"You need to eat something. Today's a big day—"

"I know today's a big day. We're burying Dad. That's why I'm not hungry, okay?"

Beth flinched, and Cammy instantly regretted the harshness of her tone. This was a typical interaction of theirs: nagging, bristling, then boom—a nasty jab and a pang of remorse. They never seemed to know how to talk to each other. Her dad had usually managed to defuse these tense moments with his easygoing old-school humor and a cringe-inducing Borscht Belt joke, but now that he was gone, they were on their own. How in God's name was this dynamic going to work?

The machine beeped. Beth poured hot coffee into two of the blue-floral-patterned porcelain cups they'd been using for decades. Cammy took one and murmured, "Sorry."

Her mom didn't respond. She gazed out the window above the sink at the overgrown lawn. Unlike the Schmidts next door, who mowed their grass with all-American fervor, the indoorsy

Adlers often let their landscaping go. "I just can't believe it," she said at last.

"What?"

"That we're doing this. Burying him."

"Me neither."

"Two days ago, I was with him, talking to him. How can that be? It's surreal, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Mom. It is."

This they could agree on.

★ ★ ★

Both dressed in black—grief couture—and shielded from the gray October light by sunglasses, mother and daughter climbed into Beth's white Toyota Corolla. Cammy had to move a stack of papers off the passenger seat in order to sit down.

"Where do you want me to put these?"

"Just throw them in the back."

The back of Beth's car was a cornucopia of clutter: papers, binders, receipts, takeout bags, water bottles, loose tissues, and sundry other detritus. After all, the Corolla served not just as her vehicle but also as her mobile office: She was a real estate agent. Cammy's mom spent her busy days on the go, traversing Bergen County to show clients high-priced homes nicer than her own. A master of friendly small talk and gentle yet persistent nudging, she fielded calls round the clock to keep up with the ever-competitive North Jersey housing market. (Everyone wanted to live *near* New York but not *in* New York.) As her envious peers admitted—most of them middle-aged ladies too—the woman was good at her job.

"Mom, are you ever going to clean out your car?"

"Someday."

They drove in silence to Star of David Cemetery, an "exclusively Jewish" burial ground in Saddle Brook, a sleepy town about fifteen minutes away. Cammy counted the diners they

passed, an old game she used to play when she was a bored only child stuck in the back seat. Diners were Jersey's gift to the world—largely Greek-owned palaces of Americana with glowing stainless steel siding, offering up exhaustive menus and, best of all, twenty-four-hour breakfast. She couldn't begin to calculate the number of hours she and her high school friends had spent hanging out at these spots, shooting the shit while eating cheese fries smothered in gravy.

"I'm going to sue them," Beth said out of the blue.

"Who?"

"The hospital. Or the rehab place. Or both."

"Sue them for what?"

"For killing Dad."

"What do you mean?"

"He was healthy when he went in for that surgery last week. They cleared him for it, they said it was a minor procedure. Then he gets pneumonia in the hospital, and they move him to rehab. The rehab people said he was getting better, but I could tell he wasn't. He seemed weaker. He couldn't stop coughing. Then they go in to check on him, and he's stopped breathing. He's gone. They took a healthy man in his sixties, and they killed him."

Beth said all of this in staccato bursts, keeping her Ray-Banned eyes on the road. She reminded her daughter of Joan Crawford in one of those melodramatic movies from the 1940s: an angry widow bent on revenge.

As accusatory as her mom's description sounded, from what Cammy understood, the sequence of events was pretty accurate: from healthy to dead in the span of a week. A Filipina nursing assistant who liked her dad and his bad jokes had stopped into his room on Saturday night and found him unresponsive, without a pulse. She'd called Beth immediately, crying and apologizing. The doctors still had no explanation for it. Perhaps an

underlying, undiscovered respiratory condition exacerbated by the pneumonia? Her father *had* been a cigar smoker decades ago. Hey, folks, let's play *Name That Cause of Death*!

"Mom, maybe you shouldn't think about lawsuits right now."

"What else should I be thinking about?"

"Grieving? Dad died two days ago."

"I can grieve and sue people at the same time."

Okay.

They reached the entrance of the cemetery, whose wrought-iron gate featured a large Star of David, the centuries-old symbol of Judaism. It tacitly announced, "Only Jewish dead people welcome." This exclusivity struck Cammy as only fair given all the establishments that had once closed their doors to members of the Hebrew persuasion: restaurants, country clubs, colleges. Take that, Gentiles; you ain't gettin' into this here cemetery.

As they drove onto the grounds, she saw manicured lawns, sturdy trees beginning their autumn transformation, and a sea of tombstones. Rows and rows of them, like the Grim Reaper's domino set. Had this many Jews really died in North Jersey? It seemed crazy, impossible.

No, it was just life.

"Where's Dad?" Cammy asked.

"Hold on." Beth pulled over and snapped open her purse, which was no less cluttered than the back of the car. She took out a folded sheet of paper.

"What's that?"

"A map of the cemetery. They faxed it to me." Yes, her mom still owned a circa-1990s fax machine that operated slightly faster than a carrier pigeon. "They circled where Dad's plot is."

Beth unfolded the paper, revealing a poorly photocopied map with microscopic text, divided into dozens of tiny numbered sections. A smudged, hand-drawn circle marked the location of the

burial plot. It looked like the scrawl of a pirate seeking hidden treasure: X marks the spot! Oddly, the paths through the cemetery had names derived from both the Old Testament and the US presidency: Moses Avenue, Judah Road, and Israel Way intersected with Washington Avenue, Jefferson Road, and Lincoln Way. Was this some sort of half-baked nod to American Jewish assimilation? In any case, the map was barely legible.

Beth lifted her shades to peer at the gridded confusion. "I can't read this without my glasses," she said, shaking her head. "Can you navigate?"

"Mom, I can hardly read it either."

"Do your best."

"How do the others know where to go?"

"I took a picture of the map and texted it to them. They're all early birds. I'm sure they're there already."

Cammy glanced at the clock on the dashboard: 9:56. The ceremony was scheduled for ten. What kind of lousy people were late for the burial of their own husband and father? "We should've left ourselves more time."

"I wasn't paying attention."

"Neither was I."

"Well, they're not going to bury him without us."

This was true.

Beth resumed driving, and Cammy took charge of the hieroglyphic map. She wished she had the enormous magnifying glass her grandma Ruth had used to read her cherished *Time* magazine. Alas, despite Cammy's squinting efforts, the following few minutes quickly devolved into a black comedy of errors, a roundabout journey through the cemetery marked by wrong turns, reversals, and the requisite soundtrack of bickering. "No, Mom, make a *left* on Judah." "You said make a right." "No, I said left." "Fine, I'll turn around. Are you sure you're reading that thing right?" "Nope, not at all."

At five past ten, after completing yet another desperate loop, they spied activity up ahead: cars, people, and, sure enough, a hearse. They'd made it. As Beth pulled up and parked the Corolla, Cammy heard her mother take a deep, trepidatious breath. Here goes nothing.

On cue, a light rain began to fall.

Mercifully, the decision had been made to keep the burial small and private, so there were only a handful of attendees standing out in the drizzle. Aunt Miriam, younger sister of the deceased, a slight, redheaded bundle of neuroses whose ever-shifting collection of cats no one in the family could keep up with; Toby Goldfarb and her gangly husband, Stan, an avid amateur juggler; and, last but not least, today's master of ceremonies, the leader of Congregation Sons of Israel himself, in all his sagely splendor—Rabbi Gary Wiener.

Before Beth and Cammy could get out and join them, the driver's door of the hearse swung open, and a thin, somber man in a dark suit appeared. He slid open a large umbrella and jogged over to their car.

"Who's that guy?" Cammy asked.

"I think he's from the funeral home."

Beth rolled her window down. The thin man leaned his face in—unnecessarily close, Cammy felt—and said, "Hello. Are you the bereaved?"

"Yes. I'm the—the widow." She'd almost said "wife." It seemed unfair that the children of a dead person still get to be their children after they're gone, but their wives must become widows and their husbands widowers. Maybe Cammy could coin a new term out of solidarity: "chidow."

"Would you and your daughter like to see him?"

"What?"

"Would you like to see your husband before the burial?"

"You mean—"

"I can take you over to the hearse, and we can open the casket for a moment if you'd like."

Beth turned to her daughter, dumbfounded. Neither of them had been anticipating this option.

Open caskets, gilded coffins—none of that morbid Christian/Catholic pageantry was part of the Jewish tradition, which Cammy, a committed agnostic on her best days, appreciated about the faith. To the contrary, the Jews wanted their dead in the ground pronto—within twenty-fours, technically—and in as simple and unadorned a receptacle as possible. That made sense, didn't it? Just get the damn thing over with. Why have a procession file past a bejeweled sarcophagus to gape at the embalmed, painted, frozen face of a corpse?

So then what was this business about getting a last glimpse of her dad? A little loophole? She didn't want to do that. Or did she?

"Yes," Beth said. "I want to see him."

Cammy was startled. She thought they'd at least confer before reaching a decision. "Mom—"

"You don't have to come if you don't want to. But I want to see him."

Beth got out of the car. Cammy hesitated, then followed. Sheltering them from the misty spray with his umbrella, the thin man led them to the hearse, from which another dark-suited employee emerged. The two funereal colleagues exchanged efficient nods, and the second man darted around to open the vehicle's back door. These guys were pros. Cammy felt her mom's trembling hand grip hers.

And lo and behold, there it was: the plain pinewood box that would house Cy Adler for eternity. Humble accommodations, to be sure, but not lacking a certain modest dignity. The second man, who clearly had to do all the dirty work, lifted the top of the coffin.

Cammy stared into her father's face, examining it for a final time, taking a mental picture of its topography. The salt-and-pepper beard she'd never seen him without, and now never would. The features so similar to her own: the ample Adler nose that snored mightily, the full Adler lips that parted when he guffawed at one of his own punchlines. His eyes were closed, those intense but mischievous eyes that contained traces of his old-world Polish Jewish ancestry. He was wearing his favorite beige wool sweater, a cozy layer to protect against the coolness of the earth in which he'd soon reside. The sweater must've been her mom's choice.

"I'm never gonna see him again," Beth said. "I'm never gonna see him again."

Cammy had been so absorbed in her own private contemplation, she'd failed to notice that her mother was breaking down, losing her shit, utterly decompensating right beside her. Beth kept on repeating that mournful mantra, "I'm never gonna see him again," punctuating it with convulsive sobs. Cammy glanced over at the others—her aunt, the Goldfarbs, the rabbi—who'd turned away out of respect. It was interesting how people gave each other a free pass to behave primally, to display pure animal emotion, in moments like these.

"It's okay, Mom," Cammy said, placing an awkward hand on Beth's shaking back. A pretty paltry consolation, but she couldn't think of a better one.

The thin man nodded again at the second man, who closed the lid, sealing Cy off from his weeping wife, his dazed daughter, and the cares of the world he had lived in and left behind.

★ ★ ★

The burial itself was blessedly brief.

Rabbi Wiener spoke about how funny Cy was, how he'd always had a new, often inappropriate joke to share, at which he would invariably laugh harder than whoever happened to be his

lucky (or unlucky, depending on one's perspective) audience. Aunt Miriam bawled and blabbered about how he'd been the perfect brother, a saint among men, even though Cammy knew she'd driven him up the wall when he was alive. The Goldfarbs said nice, unremarkable things about his loyal friendship, his laid-back nature, his entertaining conversation. And Beth managed a few tearful words of gratitude for their three decades of marriage, for the "beautiful daughter" he'd given her and to whom he'd been such a wonderful father.

To everyone's visible puzzlement, the beautiful daughter chose to say nothing.

She didn't feel like it.

The rabbi led the group in the Kaddish, the ancient Jewish prayer for the dead: "*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba b'alma di-v'ra chirutei* . . ." Cammy instinctively mouthed the words, which she knew by heart from her childhood years of compulsory synagogue attendance. (After her bat mitzvah at age thirteen, she was out of there for good.) For reasons she'd learned but forgotten, the prayer was in Aramaic, not Hebrew. What did it mean? Something about praising God and his greatness, surprise, surprise. Didn't even mention death directly. Talk about beating around the bush.

Now it was time for the dreaded concluding custom: tossing shovelfuls of dirt on the coffin. Cammy supposed this act was intended to signify closure or some such lofty concept, but she found it bizarre. It almost seemed outright insulting to the deceased. You wouldn't hurl dirt on the body of a living person, would you? Not if you didn't want to get punched in the face. Then again, you wouldn't stick them underground either.

In all his solemn glory—the man simply loved being solemn—Rabbi Wiener picked up a small shovel and approached the grave, into which some stocky cemetery workers had earlier lowered the casket. "*Al mekomo yavo veshalom*," he intoned. "May he go to his place in peace." (What place was that, by the way?)

He stuck the shovel into a mound of freshly dug earth and dropped a bit of the soil onto the coffin. Cammy winced as it hit the wood with a dull thud. He passed the tool to the Goldfarbs, who followed suit. Then Aunt Miriam, then Beth.

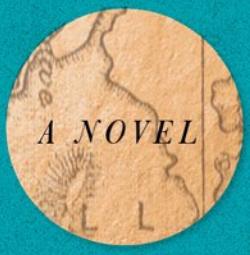
Finally, it was Cammy's turn. Her mom handed her the shovel. But as she took a few heavy steps toward the grave, she realized she couldn't do it. She didn't want to do it. She didn't want closure. Not now, not yet, not like this.

"Go ahead, Cammy," the rabbi prodded.

She wanted to say, "Fuck off, Wiener," but she held her tongue. Instead, she jabbed the shovel into the mound of earth in protest, so that it stood as straight and upright as her own signature stubbornness. What were they going to do, argue with her? Make a scene because she wouldn't fling dirt on her father? Nobody said a word.

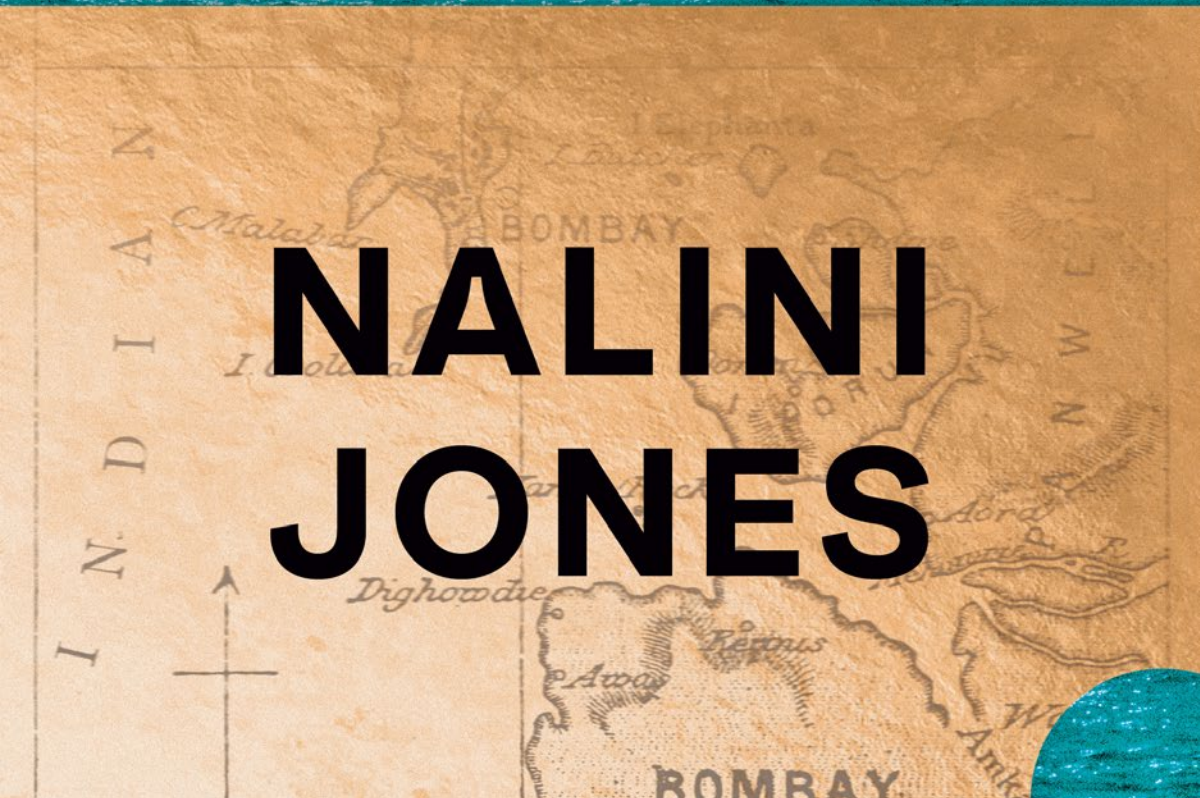
Cammy half expected her dad to pop out of his resting place to break the tension with one last off-color joke—an outrageous crack, a Cy Adler special, that would scandalize them all. She waited and waited, even after the others turned to leave, even after her mom squeezed her hand and began to trudge back toward the car.

He didn't come.



A NOVEL

THE UNBROKEN COAST



NALINI JONES

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PROLOGUE

1640

The rainy season had come and gone, the boy's grandfather said, and then a last storm kindled over the western sea. The boy watched from the beach as lightning flashed from the bellies of distant clouds, blazing jagged paths to the surface. The grandfather could not see much but listened. It won't reach us, he promised, though waves raced in like couriers with urgent news. He did not fear for their boat even when drops began to pock the sand.

By dawn, the storm had passed. The sea and sky were milky-calm when the boy spotted the ship. He leapt onto a rock for a better view and counted three masts. Before him was the great bowl of the bay, pearly in the morning light, its coastal waters studded with fishing boats from Koli villages like his own. The tide was low, the shallows drained to ribbons of water. A litter of wild pigs rooted in drifts of seaweed, and women slapped their washing against rocks that would be exposed only a few hours. Children who had fanned out to find clams began to hop and point and wave.

The boy was in his thirteenth year and had seen such ships before, which the Portuguese called *naos.* They sailed the coast regularly, bringing men and priests with crates of European necessities; and bearing away silk, cotton, peppercorns, saffron, gold, porcelain, animals, furniture, or tea. But the voyage took

many months and an arrival was always an occasion. Most of these vessels moored in the deep natural harbor of Bombai to the south, but some rounded the point to anchor close at hand, in the waters off Mahim, where the boy could watch them come in.

The village beach ended in spume and cliffs, a promontory the boy could not see past unless he ducked inland. He set off running to the high spit of land where the Portuguese were building their watchtower.

A last cool breath of dawn was caught in the marsh grasses, and the boy cut through the shaded courtyard of the Church of the Loaves and Fishes at the base of the hill. But once he began to climb, the sun broke loose of the treetops and fell hard on his shoulders. The boy was a fisherman, like all his line before him, but he imagined being a fish instead, swimming through air as though it were water. About halfway up he passed a work yard; a new chapel was under way for Stella Maris, a statue of Mary as queen.

Not even the oldest villager could remember the day she arrived. Long ago, priests brought her from Lisbon to preside over the growing parish of Santa Clara: not just Portuguese settlers but local converts—fisherfolk, paddy farmers, orchard tenders, merchants. The boy's grandfather told stories he'd heard from his grandfather: Stella Maris draped with fine red cloth, her crown studded with jewels, her robes touched with gold. She first sheltered in a mud hut, and every day the Kolis brought flowers to keep the air fragrant until her shrine was ready. All those who labored for her, from the stonecutters to the sweepers, were baptized before laying a single stone, and for a full year they were preserved from harm. No men fell ill; no women succumbed to childbirth; no one was taken when storms swept other boats away. They built the Lady Mary a house, said the grandfather, and the Lady protected them.

The boy did not know if he believed this. He knew with God all things were possible, but he also knew his grandfather liked to tell stories, making small changes the way a hand dipped in water made ripples.

His grandfather said that on the same slope lived a woman who befriended birds. These birds came to her for food, birds of great variety and beauty, birds who joined her in song. But the priests claimed the high ground for Stella Maris, and the birds disturbed their worship. The woman was relocated to the marshlands below, and one by one, her birds flew away. Soon only the injured remained, those with a crushed leg or broken wing, until slowly even the most grievous wounds healed. On the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, the remaining birds rose up in a cloud of song, circled over the hillside, and disappeared to the east. The woman vanished, abandoning her hut and all her belongings except her favorite blue shawl. This she had drawn around her shoulders, the grandfather said, at just the moment when she transformed into a kingfisher. She flew away and was never seen again.

This was only a story, but as the boy neared the point, he checked the skies anyway. It was possible to imagine some rare bright bird taking flight over the palms below, but he saw only gulls and crows.

The hilltop leveled to a broad headland that tumbled down on three sides to cliffs. Guards and laborers camped beside the base of the half-finished watchtower of Castelo do Riacho, and the boy skirted piles of stone that had not yet been fashioned into walls. From the eastern ridge, he watched the ship round the point into the bay. Gulls rode the updrafts while the ship followed the line of the promontory into the harbor. The morning air churned when they dropped anchor—men shouting, sails snapping, a great slow groaning as she turned on her line. When she was moored, the sailors began to sing, a rough, joyful sound, and the boy heard the names of Maria and Cristo in their song.

Soon small boats scudded back and forth in a brisk exchange of men and fresh water. The boy lingered, wishing he could see whatever goods and people were below deck. Eventually, they would emerge into the light, lift their eyes to the cliffs and the coconut palms, and become part of the scene of this harbor, his home. But he imagined that the hold of the ship contained pockets of air from far-off ports, so that for a little while longer,

the people breathing the musk of those cities belonged to places he would never see.

That night, his father woke him to catch the tide. Together they rowed to the mouth of the bay to cast their nets. The moon looked like a pebble worn smooth on one side, the kind the boy's grandfather rubbed when he told stories. But his vision had grown too cloudy for the boat; he feared he would soon be blind. The boy missed him.

Just before sunrise, they began to haul in the nets. One dragged. A shark! thought the boy, before seeing they'd snagged a block of wood—not waterlogged, though wet enough to sink below the surface—likely from the timber barges along the northern coast. "Quick," his father warned and the boy struggled to lift it by hand before the net tore. The boat rocked, his father plunged his oar to steady them, and the boy heaved up a dark shape, swathed in the net and streaming water. A few small fish flopped against it. The father put down his oar and stared.

His son had dragged a statue from the sea. Her robes looked nearly black, and her face was obscured by the veil of the net. Yet they knew at once who she must be.

1

OCTOBER 1978

Francis Almeida, emeritus professor of history, rode slowly toward the shrine of Our Lady of Navigators. It was eleven at night, a ridiculous hour for cycling, according to his wife. Francis had not bothered to argue; he slipped away while Essie was occupied.

He had not expected a full house that evening. Only the last of his children lived at home, and Jude ducked out before dinner—a study group with university friends, he told his mother, though Francis suspected they would study chord progressions. His son, who played no instrument, had somehow joined a band.

Essie was too absorbed in her own arrangements to object. The following night, she would fly to America to visit their daughter, Marian. For days she'd been laying out various necessities: cardigan sweaters, jars of mango pickle, gifts for their granddaughter and the new baby, due in two weeks. Francis could not sit in peace for ten minutes without being drawn into consultations over what to pack in her cases.

Instead, the telephone. Essie rushed from the kitchen with half a potato in hand. She had learned not to hope for calls from their son Simon in Greece; "That is a wilder place," Francis once heard her explaining to friends. But she behaved like a lovesick girl whenever the phone rang in case it was Marian from the

States, a call they themselves could not place without waiting hours, often overnight, for a long-distance operator.

It was Daniel, Marian's husband.

"What do you mean?" Essie's voice soared. "When? Frank, Frank!"

The baby had come three hours before. Another girl, a healthy girl. Francis came to listen over Essie's shoulder. He felt a certain pride when he heard Daniel's voice. He had been the one to like Daniel, to insist on opening their home to the couple when Essie was set against him.

"But why didn't you call when labor began? Where is Marian—"

"Let him talk," said Francis, and she tried to shoo him away with her potato. Marian was resting. Daniel had run home from the hospital to check on Nicole, who would turn two in another month. In the next hour or so, they would move Marian to a room with a telephone, and he would try to place a call then.

Francis did not like to ask but felt he must be certain. "The baby is breathing well?"

"Of course the baby is breathing well, Frank! Otherwise he would have said."

Francis lifted his voice. "So no difficulties?"

None, Daniel assured him. A quick delivery. The nurse told them that the doctor had just been closing his eyes when she went to find him. He'd thought they had hours to go.

Essie laughed loudly. This was the kind of story she liked, one in which everything ended well. "What kind of doctor goes for a nap! And I believe it was eighteen hours for Nicole."

Daniel could not talk long; he must get back to the hospital.

"But who will stay with Nicole?" Essie asked.

"My sister is here."

Francis saw Essie's mouth tighten: Daniel's family, not Marian's, in attendance. But she carried on. "How is my little girl? Excited to have a sister? Tell her Grandma is coming on the big, big airplane."

Talk of airplanes sent Francis drifting back to his chair. He had heard all he needed. The child had come safely. Marian was well.

Dinner was a slapdash affair. Francis took his meal properly, but Essie stationed herself at the telephone, making call after call to let people know. She did not even fill a plate until Francis had risen from the table. When they heard the compound gate swing open, Essie lifted her head. "That will be Jude!"

But it was their neighbors, bringing a cake to wish Essie goodbye. The kitchen girl cut it into slices to serve just as Father Evelyn turned up, a leather jacket over his clerical collar. He used his pulpit voice, clear and booming, to congratulate them.

Soon the room had filled. With each fresh arrival, Essie recounted the story of the birth. Eventually the girl removed the empty cake plate and brought bowls of sweets and nuts.

The telephone rang just as Marian's godparents arrived. "Here, my girl, say a quick hello." The phone was passed among Essie and the other women. "I believe the doctor was fast asleep, isn't it?" Essie prompted Marian. Then a small note of insistence. "No, but the nurse said he had to be shaken awake." Questions about resemblances, temperament, the name—which displeased Essie, though she would neither yield nor argue in front of friends. "That may be the American way to view it, but we can think more carefully when I come." Finally, she passed the phone to Francis.

"Hallo? Hallo?"

Speaking on international calls felt like throwing words down a deep well, one splash echoing after another. And Marian's voice seemed faint; was that the connection?

"How are you, my girl? Feeling better?"

"She's not ill, Frank!" said Essie, and a few women laughed.

"And the little one? Curls, is it?" He laughed, trying to remember if Marian ever had curls as a baby. "Yes, why not? You call her what you like, my girl, we are happy. Here, your mother wants to speak. Lots of love."

The front room was hot and close, the air thick with talk. Once Francis made sure no one had an empty glass, he joined a group of men at the railing in the front of the house, where a bank of windows opened to become a balcony. A few smoked, tipping their ashes into the garden below. They did not require

him to say much. They remembered the days when Marian was small.

"*Two* children." One of the men shook his head in a disbelief Francis recognized.

"And Essie is gone for how long?"

Three months, the full term of a visa. There had been no question of his accompanying her; one must stay to look after the house and Jude. But Francis had already met his elder granddaughter, Nicole; she was a year old when Marian brought her to Bombay. She liked to run the full length of the front room, from the balcony railing all the way to the kitchen, where Essie waited with open arms. If Francis leaned forward in his chair and put out a hand to catch her, she shrieked with laughter. She tried to mimic him when he stood on his head, resting her head on the cushion beside his with her feet firmly planted on the floor. Had his own children been so fearless and happy? Surely, they could not have been *unhappy* at that age, he told himself, but hadn't they always been quieter, wary? This child was delighted to jabber to the kitchen girl, who spoke no English. She leaned back against Francis when they paged through a book, as though she had known him from the start. She called out greetings to street dogs.

He thought of this later: the road quiet, a sandy noise beneath his bicycle wheels, dogs curled on stoops or banked against walls. Most of the Almeidas' friends had gone, but a few women lingered to apply themselves to the puzzle of Essie's suitcase: How many packets of tea, how many jars of vindaloo? Would there be time the next morning to replace the yellow baby garments with pink? On Linking Road, Essie could find full lehenga choli outfits for small girls, lovely colors, good mirror work; she must get matching; she must get sizes to last a few years.

The women crossed from one bedroom to another, great swaths of chatter sweeping behind them. The girl had finished collecting glasses from the front room and was dragging chairs back into place with the pointed irritation of one who wished to be sleeping. Jude had received the news that he was an uncle once more with absentminded incredulity, as though this had

not been the expected outcome, and retreated to his rooms downstairs. Within minutes, the noise of his records came floating up through the open windows. Francis could not find a corner of his house in which to sit quietly. He was going out, he told Essie.

"At eleven?"

He wouldn't be long. Just a breath of air.

"Go and sit on the balcony!"

The church, then. He would light a candle for the baby.

"Don't be ridiculous, Frank. The gates will close any moment."

But her attention was already skittering. She turned back to the women, whom she had decided to consult on a family matter: surely they agreed that the child must have a saint's name?

Francis rode toward the sea, coasting past the Church of the Loaves and Fishes and straight into Varuna, the Koli fishing village.

A single road formed its boundary, which began at the foot of Seaview Hill and carried on past the church and a tight row of storefronts. At the heart of the village was a statue of Our Lady of Navigators. The area near the shrine passed for a public square but was really only a brief relaxing of the narrow track, as though the road exhaled before twisting past a few last shops and a spatter of huts.

The Almeidas lived half a dozen blocks away, in a well-planned neighborhood overseen by a Catholic housing association. But in the village the grid of streets dissolved to a more elemental arrangement. The curves of Varuna Road echoed the coastline. On one side were shops; on the other, crooked lanes—impassable by car—which flowed to the shore like rivulets of water. The houses had been built generations before, two stories high and one room deep, standing shoulder to shoulder, from a time when only fisherfolk would live so close to the sea.

Francis liked the sensation of moving effortlessly into an older footprint of Santa Clara. The history of indigenous peoples had never been his field; his period was the Age of Exploration. But centuries before the Portuguese or British came calling, people had walked this same patch of ground. He was on an ancient

way. And in the middle of the night, the past and present did not feel so very distant. He could listen to the ticking of his cycle wheels and remember riding through Santa Clara with Marian strapped into the child's seat behind him. Only a pinch of years, nothing that signified in the great mound of centuries. It seemed he should be able to turn and ride back into a day when his children were not on the other side of the world. He paused briefly, a foot planted on the pavement; then a flash of movement drew his gaze.

A woman was running, nearly stumbling, up the lane. She clutched something to her chest—a baby, he realized when she passed beneath a string of lights and her foot overturned a pail of wash water before she reached the shrine. Francis watched as she approached the statue, the baby tight to her body, then bowed her head low.

He knew the origins of Our Lady of Navigators better than anyone; he had written its history for the church. In a report to Lisbon dated 1669, a Jesuit priest wrote that a Koli fisherman had cast his net into the waters and recovered a statue of Mary. Its provenance was uncertain, but Francis guessed it was intended for one of the niches in the vast Church of the Loaves and Fishes and went overboard in the harbor. Statues of St. Andrew and St. Peter, fishers of men, eventually filled the niches, and the Kolis built the Lady a shrine of her own in Varuna.

She was removed only once, when pirates invaded the bay and looted the chapel on Seaview Hill. They seized any valuables they could find, including a sixteenth-century statue of Our Lady, Star of the Sea. Accounts of the pillage described a scourge of starlings diving low to pursue the thieves as they tried to drag Stella Maris away. This legend, Francis noted, may have inspired the carvings of birds on the great wooden doors of the later basilica. At any rate, Stella Maris was too unwieldy to carry for long. The pirates wrenched the jewels from her crown, chopped off her forearm for the gilt object she held—likely a scepter, though no reliable descriptions survived—and abandoned her on the hillside. The recovered statue was tucked into

a storeroom, where her desecration would not distress the faithful, and Our Lady of Navigators was conscripted into service, ascending from the village to preside over the chapel.

This state of affairs lasted until an outbreak of illness in the mid-eighteenth century prompted the fisherfolk to demand the return of their Lady. She had come into a Koli net as their protector, they argued, and cited legends of healing from the era of her discovery: pains eased, maladies cured, an old man's dimming sight restored. Their pleas intensified after several children succumbed to fever, and eventually the priests agreed. The crown of Stella Maris was restored with rubies, a new arm was fashioned with a detachable Infant Jesus, and she was raised once more above the altar.

Our Lady of Navigators returned to Varuna in a grand parade, borne high on the shoulders of the fisherfolk in a boat filled with marigolds. A century later, when the plague ravaged the city, Varuna fared better than nearby villages and the survivors gave thanks to their protector by building her a fountain. This water was not consecrated, but residents considered it to have healing powers. People dipped their fingers into the tiled basin when they asked for Mary's blessing and hung blossoms around her neck on feast days.

Standing astride his bicycle, Francis watched the Koli woman as she made the Sign of the Cross and turned to go. The baby was small, he could see. Not yet a year.

"The child is ill?"

The woman stared at him. Then she gathered the baby close. "She is better," she said fiercely. "She will be better."

Francis nodded. What more was there to say? He had lost a child, a daughter who lived only a few hours. It happened sometimes with twins, the doctor said. A problem with her lungs. There had been a long hollow silence when his wife was told the baby could not live. She looked at them as though from a great distance. Then she found her voice—"A priest, Frank"—and whatever else they might have said to each other was lost in the rush of what must be done. The older children, summoned to wish the child goodbye. Godparents, baptism, the prayer for

the dying. The newborn boy wailing, unable to feed; the doctor urging Essie to try again. She could not lose them both, so she laid her hand on the girl's tiny chest before she gave her to Francis and fixed her attention on their son.

Francis carried his daughter out of the room, away from the tumult. He stood at the balcony so she could see a bit of sky. It was not yet dark, too early for stars. He had not known what to say to her, so he told her the names of her family. "You are Theresa, named for my mother. Your sister is Marian. Your brother is Simon. We just named your twin also; he is Jude." He held her long after she stopped breathing.

He watched the Koli woman disappear down the lane and wondered if her child would live. But when he stopped in front of the statue, it was not to offer a prayer. He was not a man to petition a statue or expect Mary to come to his aid. What he imagined instead was the crowd of villagers bringing the statue down the hill, the ship in which she came to these waters, the tools the sculptor used to carve the long stiff folds of her robe. Since his retirement a few months before, his days felt like a series of empty rooms he must wander through, one after another: classes he would never teach, children who had gone, grandchildren he would seldom see. The future would be lonelier than the past. But he could stand where others had stood, swept up in currents of history.

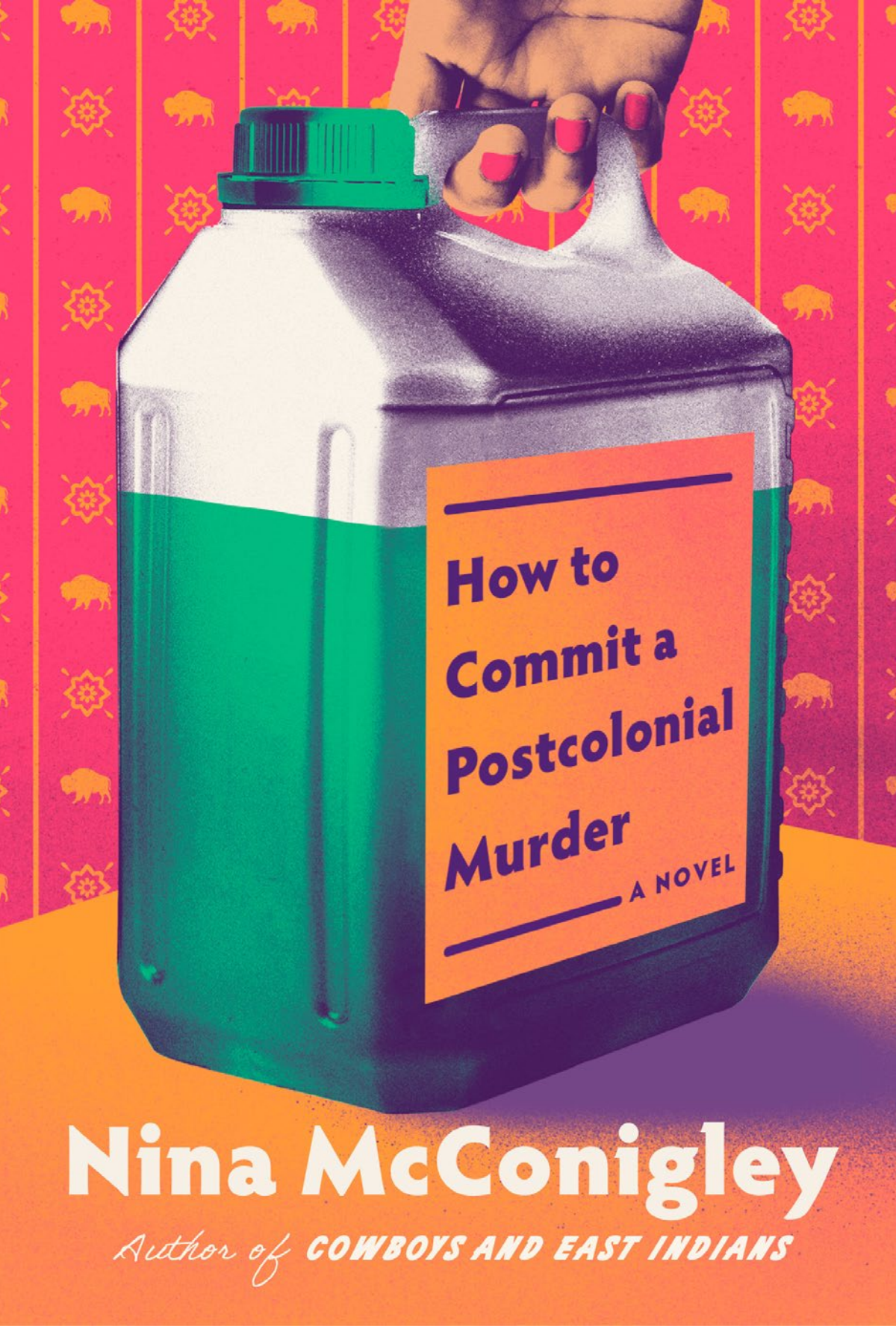
When his thoughts turned to Agnes, Francis did not push them away. It was what happened when slippages or collisions in his life left cracks; Agnes flowed into them like water. But he was a man of dignity. He did not indulge in regrets. Their history, like any other, was fixed. So he wondered small things. Was she awake also? What did she think about late at night? Did she remember they once walked here together?

He dipped three fingers into the water and made the Sign of the Cross. That was all. No statue could restore Theresa to him, or Agnes. But he was a man of ability and purpose, only in his sixtieth year, with ample time to look ahead. Tomorrow morning he would go to the jeweler's and choose gold chains for each of his granddaughters. He would accept the seat he'd been

offered on the Santa Clara Historical Commission. He would see friends at the gymkhana, cycle to keep fit, fix up a regular game of cards. He could join his brother and their friends on a holiday to Goa, or go hear Jude's band, or mount a trip to visit Simon in Greece. Within a year or two, Marian would bring the little ones to visit; until then, it was enough to know they were alive in the world. He looked at the lines of the statue's face, her stern, mournful stare, and felt a wave of affinity for the Koli woman whose child might be dying. Let her live a little longer, he thought. Then he climbed on his cycle and rode out of the village.

When Francis stopped at the shrine on his way through Varuna a few days later, Our Lady of Navigators was simply another feature of the bright, busy street. A chicken roosted in the deep wedge of shade the statue cast, glaring at the people who stopped to dip their fingers. All along the road, fisherwomen sat on plastic crates to sell the day's catch. Francis glanced down the row, wondering if he might find the woman he'd seen, but almost at once he realized he would not recognize her. What he remembered was her lopsided run, the way she clutched her child, and the strangeness of their being alone, or nearly alone, on a street in Bombay. No one was ever entirely alone in Bombay. Someone was always walking or watching, selling or buying, jogging or scolding, drinking or begging, tending a fire, awaiting a train, wiping a windshield, hailing an autorick, sifting through rubbish, slapping a bullock, sleeping in a doorway. A dog ate from the street gutter. A man ducked his head for a roadside barber. Girls laughed on a balcony, their calls raining down. At all times, a child was watching.

But for a short while, until the Koli woman appeared, Varuna Road had been deserted. Francis had slipped free of his wife and neighbors, the city had rolled back like a wave, and at first even the young mother had not been aware of him. The whole episode felt like an obscure piece of history, something so far from his own life that he might never feel the force of it.


How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder
A NOVEL
Nina McConigley
Author of COWBOYS AND EAST INDIANS

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PROLOGUE

THE BLAME

My sister, Agatha Krishna, said it started when they came, and so that's where you could put the blame. But then she said we had to go further back than that. So we blamed it on Reagan; everyone blamed him that summer, the summer the country went into a bust, the summer we watched an exodus empty our town. Then I blamed the Cold War, and Gorbachev—he had the stain on his head, and thus, I felt, couldn't be trusted. We blamed famine in Ethiopia after Amma posted a photo on the fridge of a child with a belly like a hot-air balloon. We blamed AIDS, which we didn't really get, but thought you *could* get from the water fountain at the public library you stepped on with your foot. We blamed the Olympics and hated Sam the eagle, their feathered mascot, who dressed like Uncle Sam in red, white, and blue, though secretly I had a button of him with his sly smile and torch. We blamed it on my par-

ents for moving to Wyoming in the first place, for settling in Marley. Then we just generally blamed them for everything. We thought they shouldn't have married, that they shouldn't have mixed us up. Shouldn't have made us halfies. Agatha Krishna said we could blame it on our grandparents too, for having one child who went to school and another who stayed at home. For letting Amma wear a crisp, white uniform and leaving Vinny Uncle to read Curly Wee comics.

But then she said, "Let's blame it on the British." Everything went back to the British. They did it first, Agatha Krishna said. They were colonists. They were the reason our amma went to school and our uncle stayed home; they were the reason that we were quiet around most white people, the reason our mom drank tea when everyone else we knew, except Mormons, drank coffee. It was the British who shaped Amma's world. That made her spell *favor* with a *u*, use a knife and fork, and bake fruitcake with sultanas and nuts. It was the British who taught us to keep our upper lips stiff at all times.

That year, we had an Indian summer twice. A frost had come and left the garden in disarray. Tomato stalks broke in two, my mother's peppers dangled like limp green earrings from the stem. But then the days warmed again and an infestation of millers descended.

They threw themselves in swarms at the streetlights, marking the intersections. They offered a kind of suttee to the light. Black dots against the Krishna-colored sky. My father, tired from coming off rigs, would fill a large stainless steel bowl with dish soap at night. Leaving it on his desk, he would shine a desk lamp into the soapy bowl. By morning, the bubbles would long have gone flat and the little bodies of the millers would be floating in the water, their wings soaked and black.

I always felt bad for them. Drawn to something beautiful, something almost ethereal, only to find themselves trapped. I didn't think it was a good way to die. But what is? And the only way you could justify it was when Amma held up saris eaten to lace, sweaters with holes the size of coins.

Years later, I would learn that miller moths don't eat clothes. They're actually great pollinators. We were wrong. Small clothes moths are the real pests. Clothes moths barely fly and don't like the light. But Appa didn't like the sound of the millers hitting the lights at night. Of them clogging the sills of our doors and windows with their downy scales.

It was in that second wave of warmth that they came to us. Not tired or wretched or tempest-tossed, but poor. We drove to Denver to pick them up. They did not come off the plane looking bewildered by this new land

before them. If anything, they came at us like moths. Fast, a little frantic, and seemingly, as the months would show, drawn to all the wrong things.

Amma, who had not seen a member of her family since marrying my father almost fourteen years earlier, ran to her brother, Vinny Uncle, pressed a carton of Marlboro Reds into his pocket, then squeezed my cousin Narayan like a lemon and filled his hands with chocolate. She gave Auntie Devi a rhinestone necklace.

We piled into two cars to drive home. Narayan screamed when he saw his first antelope. Auntie Devi stuck her head out the window to catch the wind. Vinny Uncle just remarked on how fast the car went. That we didn't have to stop for animals in the road or pause at scooters packed with bodies.

The Ayyars dipped into our lives like a tea bag into the whiteness of a porcelain cup. They muddied the water and made our house feel small, having taken over Agatha Krishna's old bedroom. Now she slept with me. They left rings of talcum powder on the carpet; the bathroom floor was slick with water from their cup and bucket, and the house became smelly with the food Auntie Devi cooked: dosas and sambar, prawns fry and molee. If she wasn't cooking, she stood on the lawn in a sari and cardigan, looking out at nothing. Feeling the air and the altitude with a kind of wonder. Or sometimes she sat in front of the television. She watched a

lot of *Dynasty*. She no longer had her own house; she didn't drive. She had to ask Amma to buy her everything, from underwear to airmail paper. To us, she said little, just cooked us food, then slipped back to the bedroom to watch TV late into the night. She was like Amma. Same long black hair. But not Amma. She was ghost-Amma. The Amma who didn't say anything. The Amma in the room who faded into the furniture. As if she had only half come to America.

When you really came down to it, we blamed our uncle. And no matter who started it, we were the ones who had to finish it. So at night, as we lay in bed, Agatha Krishna in a sleeping bag zipped tight to her head, and me under a blanket half-eaten by moths, we told ourselves that it wasn't our fault. She sang a mantra: "The British are to blame, the British are to blame, the British are to blame, and Vinny Uncle will pay." And soon, I joined her. We would make him pay.

Looking back, though, I'm not sure if that's how it works. I'm not sure you can ever cancel out someone who has taken from you by taking more from someone else. But I think that was the only way we could do it, the only way we could have killed him. The only way we could take our uncle's life and not look back. Not be filled with any blame.

1

YOU

But.

But before I give you that, before I tell you what happened, I have to give you this.

Because you ask for it, I give it to you.

Because you don't ask for it, I give it to you.

Because you always seem to want to take what I give you and translate it into something else, something that fits your narrative, you can have it.

Let's just say it. This story is for you; I know you want it to go a certain way.

I get it. We all do. And don't worry, I'll give you that story. But before we go back, before I tell you about the murder, about that year, I'll tell you this, just to get it out of the way. Here is what you want. Here it is as a list, so organized, so efficient:

1. Mangoes. I am going to give you mangoes. Fat, green globes of fruit. Green, because they are picked

too early and sent to Wyoming with only a hint of blush. These mangoes show up a few times a year. They are from Mexico, their taste a kind of thready sweetness, but my mother buys them anyway. We don't all like to eat mangoes. They're a heaty food, and my mother (*Amma*, *Amma*, *Amma*) makes us drink a large glass of milk an hour after we've had one to offset the heat she thinks will build in our stomachs. I hate milk. But when she serves us slices of mango with Tang, it's as if we're eating fire. She will chew on the seed for hours. Ripping off every piece of the flesh, the fibrous pit like a heart in her hand. She buries the seeds in pots, and we wait for a mango tree to bloom. It will not grow, even as Agatha Krishna and I grow other things—crystals for a science project, sprouts in a two-liter pop bottle that becomes a mini greenhouse—earning each of us a Girl Scout badge. But the mango never does. And yet somehow, there are always more mangoes. All the superstores have them. Now we can get them at Target, make eye contact with the other *others* as we reach for the fruit, as we squeeze the skin, as we wonder what the flesh is like, under that taut, green skin.

2. Saris. Only Aunt Devi wears saris. Sorry. Amma gave them up years ago. She wears jeans and sweat-

ers. When the Ayyars arrived, she wore saris again for a bit. But usually, they just sit on the top shelf of her closet, stacked one on top of another. Occasionally, one slides to the floor, the slipperiness of silk on silk, a pool of gold and incandescence on the carpet. Months after the Ayyars moved in, Amma and Aunt Devi went to JoAnn Fabrics to look through the bolts of fabric. I do not wear Indian clothes. Not because I don't want to, but because there is nowhere to buy a pavada, so I wear my own dresses to Indian functions. I don't like playing dress-up. I, who was soon to lose interest in Girl Scouts in favor of joining 4-H in the fall, would enter the fair with cotton Butterick dresses the following summer. I delighted in calico and sprigged lawn, neither of which hang well enough for a sari. I wanted to make a dove-in-the-window quilt like Laura Ingalls. But Amma and Aunt Devi bought six yards of various rayons. Unlike calico and sprigged lawn, rayon hangs well. They'd pull cholis out of their bags and match the spray of a tulip or the stem of a daisy to them. "Lots of fabric!" the lady at JoAnn would say. "Yes," said my mother. "There's so much to cover." It was true—sometimes we used Amma's saris to make a fort.

3. All the spices. All the food. You want this the most. And yet, there was nothing magical about our meals.

When my dad was on a rig, we often ate ramen, or bread with deviled ham. But sure, there was plenty of Indian food too. Dosas with ghee and sugar for breakfast, rasam when I had a cold, which Amma would make me drink from a small steel cup, one night's leftover rice turned to the next day's curd rice, dal that sat on the stove for days, never refrigerated, and curries. Lots of curries. We drove to Denver every so often to buy our spices. My job was to use the mortar and pestle to pound down garlic and ginger. My hands always smelled of somewhere else. When I went to Camp Sacajawea, which is now Camp Sacagawea, my mother tucked a jar with a tablespoon of curry powder inside my sleeping bag. She knew I would be homesick. Brushing my teeth by the small outdoor sinks, I'd dab some up my nose. To smell her, to smell home.

4. Wild animals. We did not have tigers. There were no elephants. But there was a small museum in town of one man's taxidermy collection. He'd shot a lot of African animals. Zebras, warthogs, antelopes with horns that looked like long, twisted lollipops. At one point he took to hunting in colder climes. A polar bear in an angry pose and an arctic fox graced a room that also held a walrus. This man, this rancher, shot everything, from elk to coyotes.

We knew that outside of town, and on the foothills of Marley Mountain, there were herds of antelope and deer. Occasionally there would be a rumor of a bear roaming around on the mountain. Campers would come out to find slashes in their duffels, pillowy bags of chips and coolers full of hot dogs gone. When Appa was home, he read us *The Jungle Book* at night, and we wondered which was more dangerous, a rattlesnake or Kaa.

5. Poverty. We weren't poor. We weren't rich. We were dependent on the price of oil. The Ayyars were beholden. But none of us was worse off than the boy on the fridge. The boy from Ethiopia, whose wide eyes and mound of a belly were the excuse Amma used to get us to eat anything she cooked for us. But you always ask: Aren't people poor in India? I guess. I don't know. I've never been. We did get free tuition at the Catholic school, all three of us: Agatha Krishna, me, and Narayan. To be fair, almost everyone did. Marley is an oil town, and we were in a *bust*, *bust*, *bust*.

6. Religion. We weren't Hindu; I know that's what you assumed. There are a lot of Christians in India. St. Thomas was martyred there. By the time we killed my uncle, we had been parishioners of

St. George's Episcopal Church for years, nearly all twelve years of my life. Agatha Krishna had just been confirmed the year before. For a while, our priest, Father Stewart, had been unsure if Agatha Krishna was ready to give a "mature public affirmation of her faith." His doubt stemmed from a worksheet she'd had to fill out on basic church vocabulary; when asked to explain what a bishop was, she answered: *a chess piece that can move diagonally*. But she was confirmed anyway. Because she, as an Episcopalian, had missed the pleasure of a first communion years ago when the rest of her class at school had received the Holy Sacrament, my mother allowed her to wear a white dress and veil for her confirmation. Most of the other kids wore starched Gunne Sax dresses and pressed khaki pants, but Agatha Krishna donned white from head to toe. She even wore a pair of white gloves I suspected she stole from the acolyte's closet in the church basement. I had seen her take a handful of Dubble Bubble from the Mini-Mart, forgetting the eighth commandment. But she gave me a few and knew I would not say a word.

7. Colonialism. There is some of that in this story. As I said, we blamed the British, whom we had no real sense of, as we knew no actual British people. But we blamed them whenever something went wrong. We

blamed them when it rained. We blamed them while we sipped milky tea instead of pop. We blamed them for Amma saying *to-mah-toe*. She, of course, liked the British, even if she never admitted it outright. She had gone to a British school, had followed the curriculum for the senior Cambridge exams in Madras, where she'd grown up. She could recite Shakespeare. She had once met Lady Baden-Powell, one of the founders of the Girl Guides, and her enthusiasm for Powell's mission is the reason that Agatha Krishna and I both were Girl Scouts. And then there were our names. I was named after Georgette Heyer—Georgie Ayyar Creel, a clever play on my mother's maiden name. Heyer was my mother's second-favorite writer. Her first was Agatha Christie, who, of course, was Agatha Krishna's namesake. She was always Agatha Krishna Akka to me, or AK Akka. Amma insisted I add the Akka. Though Agatha Krishna never called me Thangachi. Heyer and Christie wrote at more or less the same time. They were good wives and had both followed their husbands to places like the Caucasus Mountains and Tanganyika, Cairo, and Baghdad. They both wrote mysteries, although Heyer was better known for her romances. My mother, as a schoolgirl in India, ate up Heyer's Regency stories just as she did Christie's tales of drawing rooms with Oriental rugs and

cups of tea. Christie was later made a dame commander of the British Empire; Heyer never received any awards, but her husband was appointed Queen's Counsel. All of which is to say—we were named after proper white ladies, even if we ourselves were never proper anything.

8. Cows. Yes, there are a lot of cattle in Wyoming. Yes, I eat meat. Again, when Appa was away on rigs, Amma would serve us tins of meat. And hot dogs that floated in boiling water. Hamburger patties cooked until there was no pink left in them. At school we ate meat with names of people: sloppy joes, Salisbury steaks, and shepherd's pie. Amma did not consider chicken meat. Some nights she'd coat chicken in Shake 'n Bake, then grind pepper into the crumbs. She'd turn and turn the grinder until the chicken was almost gray.

9. Magical realism or the uncanny. Being of color is uncanny. Why do we need any more? You will always be exotic. Your skin a mystery. Your presence unsettling.

There—I think that's it. Now I can tell you the rest of the story without worrying that I've forgotten any of those details I know you're anticipating. Now I can be

free to tell you the story I want to tell you, in exactly the way that I want to tell it. I'm not very good at this ventriloquist act. I am, after all, half-and-half. People tend to be fascinated by half-and-half beings. The fat Ganesha with his elephant head and pudgy man body. The jackalope with horns like a gate behind its ears. Mermaids, centaurs, satyrs, and sphinxes. All peculiar. Me, I take my skin—which is brown, not blue—and gather you round like Gopis.

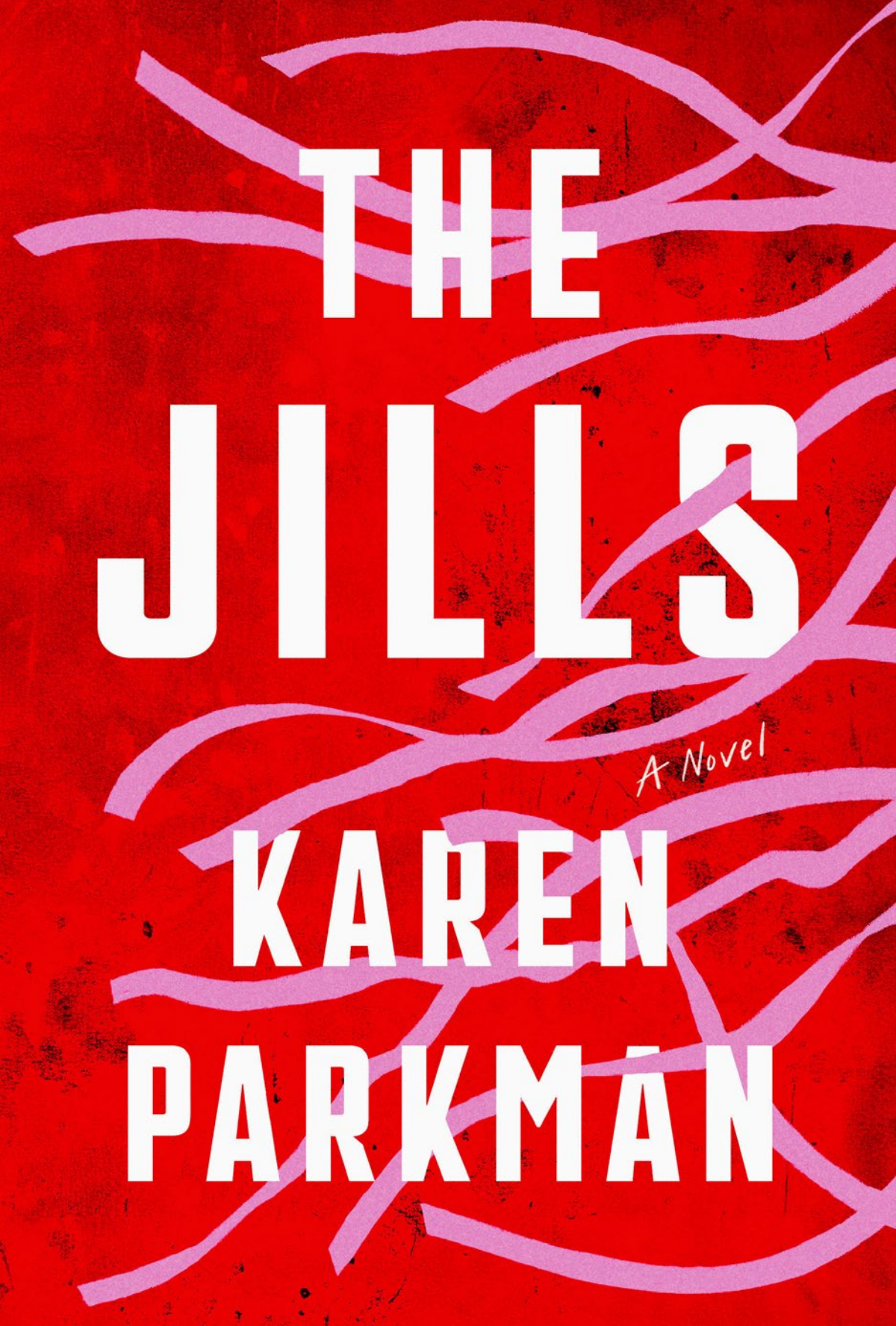
Does it bother me that you want to hear the story this way? Yes. Does it make me angry that you need all of these specific details to feel like you're reading a proper brown-person story? Yes.

But what did I ever do to you? you say. *I'm not the one who made the world this way*, you say.

And then you're blaming the colonists too—but, of course, you're nothing like them.

Aren't I allowed to be angry though? Even just sometimes? Usually, I work hard to please, keep my head down. But now, let me be angry.

And if you're lost, if you have no idea what I'm talking about . . . If you're wondering what the big deal is . . . It's brownness. It's being the Other. It's having to perform. It's what happens when people are split, when countries are split. I have been performing forever. My own little dance. But I'm going to stop now. You can take it. I've been taking it my whole life.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Chapter 1

On sundays, jeanine and I got ready for games together. We'd trade off whose apartment we met at. My place had the smaller bathroom, but in my bedroom was a big vanity mirror where we could smear on makeup, outline our lips and eyes with slick crayons, and watch our faces brighten and sharpen without bumping elbows. Jeanine's apartment had the bigger bathroom, complete with double sinks to clutter with our makeup and appliances, the air growing humid and close from the heat of our curling irons. These were the conditions under which we labored, piling on products until we looked like we were supposed to, until we looked like Jills.

It was better to get ready together. We could laugh and fret through our pregame nerves, reassure each other and fix each other's hair, and exclaim about how hot we were becoming in front of our own eyes. Alone, I was more aware of the shakiness of my hands and the churn in my stomach. I'd been dancing in competitions or on football fields since I was four years old. I loved the fear, I cherished it, but I wanted to share it with another person. It was so astoundingly affirming to meet your teammate's gaze and see your fear on her face, too. You could fall in love with someone that way, and you

could fall in love with yourself, by sharing the fear of what you were about to do and knowing you were going to do it anyway.

But today, the only face in the mirror was mine. It was seven-thirty A.M., five and a half hours till kickoff. I grabbed my phone. **I'm driving you, right?** The screen turned grainy and slick from the foundation on my fingers as I typed. I sent Jeanine a picture of my hair. **Do you see this volume? The hair gods are with me today.**

I squeezed into my tights and typed again: **Are you at your place? Getting a ride from Bobby? Have you been struck dumb by post-coital bliss?** My body was alight with adrenaline, energy searching for an emotion as an outlet—annoyance, panic, anticipation, ecstatic glee. Jeanine's silence was making my nerves collapse in on themselves. I stalled, checking the contents of my monogrammed Jills duffel for the third time, waiting for her to respond. After five minutes there was nothing to do but leave.

When Jeanine went AWOL for a night or a weekend, it meant she was with Bobby Paladino. Bobby had a brownstone in Park Meadow, as well as a condo in Tampa. He'd flown Jeanine down there a few times, as well as to Tulum, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and San Marco. Back in February, they went skiing in Lake Tahoe. This wouldn't be the first time she'd sprinted straight from the airport to a game or practice at the last minute.

On my way to the stadium, I stopped by her apartment, an impressive one-bedroom in a freshly built complex two blocks off Chippewa. The building towered over Main Street near the intersection with Pearl, all faux brick and gleaming windows absorbing the gray morning light. I double-parked and shimmied into the small glass vestibule to lay on her buzzer.

It was a damp fall morning and the vestibule was muggy, like a cooled sauna. I hit the buzzer again and practiced the turn from bar eight of our opening number, teetering on the business-casual pumps I wore to walk into the stadium. The temperature was perfect for dancing, but our hair would be deflated by halftime.

After four turns I teetered to a stop. I looked back at my car, illegally parked. At this point I had just enough time to drive to Orchard

Park, navigate tailgating traffic, go through security, and make the winding journey through the stadium's inner corridors to the Jills' locker room. Not enough time, certainly, to ride up nine stories to Jeanine's unit to see if she was in there.

I tried not to be annoyed as I ducked back into my car, gesturing at a massive honking Ford truck to go around me. I almost texted her, **Don't be late or Suzanna will murder you.** The word *murder* glared up at me like a dare. Probably, she was rushing from Bobby's brownstone at that very moment, her phone tangled in the bedsheets or balanced on the edge of his sink. Or she'd swung home to pick up her uniform and I'd just missed her.

How many nights had I lain awake picturing the various ways in which my sister, Laura, might be attacked or murdered or kidnapped or run off the road or left in a ditch? I'd imagined each scenario in as much detail as possible, in a perverse attempt to protect her from these potential fates—surely they couldn't happen *while* I was thinking about them. But I never would have joked about these possibilities or put them in writing. That wasn't how the spell worked.

Obviously, I understood that the worst could and often did happen, whether you thought of it or not. Still, I erased the text, dropped my phone into the cupholder, and drove. I just didn't want to have sent it.

THE SMELL OF feet and hairspray nearly knocked me over, flooding my system with dopamine. It was four hours to kickoff, and the locker room at Ralph Wilson Stadium was crammed full of Jills.

I stood on the bench to scan the crowd for Jeanine. We got ready in the former referees' locker room, which featured three walls of lighted mirrors and a row of defunct urinals. Every inch of this tiny space we filled with the glorious mess of girls: tumbleweeds of hair, deflated ribbons of ripped pantyhose, sports bras browned at the armpits, athletic socks stained with blood from popped blisters, hair ties and bobby pins and spilled glitter littering the carpet, the air thick with aerosol. Girls sat at their assigned mirrors or cross-legged

in groups on the floor, compacts propped up on the benches, squinting at their makeup—MAC products exclusively, which were provided at a discount from Edges Salon, one of our newest sponsors. They fought over outlets to plug in hair curlers and dryers. They practiced choreography and fussed over hair and eyebrows and emerging zits. One of the youngest girls on the squad, Maria, had brought some ridiculous little instrument, a recorder or a piccolo, on which she was loopily tootling out the notes to our opening number, Pitbull's "I Know You Want Me." The girls around her dissolved into fits of laughter and begged her to stop, wiping at their makeup. Beneath a muggy layer of jasmine and coconut, the locker room reeked—of dried BO and something deeper, the metallic scent of concealed fluids: blood, urine. The mess, the stink of it, made me dizzy with love and elation. It was the only proof we had of how hard we worked to appear shiny and perfect and effortless. I was so happy to be in this place, with these girls. My unease shrank to a dull twinge and retreated.

I clambered down from the bench and bumped into Lana from Line 2. "Help," she begged, fanning her face, false eyelashes drooping from her left eye. "Did I smudge my eyeliner?"

Scattered around her feet was a pile of dropped cotton balls smeared with foundation and mascara. Our required makeup ran when we danced, but substituting other products was strictly verboten.

"Let me fix it," I said. She pointed her gaze to the floor while I patted her falsies back into place. "Have you seen Jeanine? She wasn't checked off the roster at the door."

"Uh-oh," said Lana. "Think she got held up on the beach with Robbie Richboy?"

"Bobby," I corrected, as she studied her lashes in her compact mirror. Her face smelled waxy and greasy, like a fresh crayon.

"If she's coked up at a resort while we're here in the chicken coop, I swear to God." Lana said this without judgment; Jeanine knew where to get drugs of all kinds—coke, Adderall, illegal diet pills—and Lana had purchased them off her many times. She snapped the

mirror shut and glanced pointedly at the digital clock on the wall above our heads. "I'm sure she's sprinting across the parking lot as we speak. She's got exactly twenty minutes before Suzanna starts breathing fire."

We jumped as Sharrice kicked open the door behind us, brandishing a bag of ice above her head like a trophy. The room erupted in cheers. She emptied the bag into two urinals, forming twin mounds of ice into which the girls shoved champagne, wine, cans of Diet Coke.

I joined my Line 4 girls—Sharrice, Gina, and Alicia, minus Jeanine—and took a swig from a bottle of white wine Sharrice handed me. I was overcome by the full-body nausea that preceded every game and wanted to be close to the girls I'd be dancing with for most of the day. After performing as a big group for our opening number, we split into six lines to dance on the sidelines facing the crowds. Together, we five would be sweating and moving the entire game. We moved more than half the football players, who sat around on the bench while we jumped and kicked and swerved for hours on end. My line was, basically, my platoon.

Gina crouched in the corner, elbows propped on her spread knees, forehead wrinkled in discomfort. "Yeast infection," she muttered in response to my look.

Sharrice was warning Alicia, the rookie of our group, about Steelers fans.

"They're the ones you have to watch out for. They yell the worst stuff at us."

"Like what?" said Alicia, as she spritzed a new pair of pantyhose with hairspray, a trick to prevent runs.

"Oh, like names. Or 'Take your top off.' They're also more likely to throw things."

Alicia's eyes widened, pantyhose dangling from her hand. "Like *what*?"

"The usual—snowballs, beer cans," said Sharrice. "Batteries."

"You lost a chicken cutlet," said Gina from her deep squat position, her head even with my hip.

She handed me the gel insert that had slipped out of my bra, and I shoved it back in. Once you made it on the squad you got a free—meaning, mandatory—consultation with a local plastic surgeon, a Jills sponsor, who offered discounts on procedures. I was complimented on the slope of my nose but strongly advised to augment my breasts, which don't quite fill a C-cup. I told him thank you but opted for inserts and other optical illusions to make them look bigger.

Sharrice turned to me. "Where's Jeanine? Didn't you drive together?" Her eyes darted to the digital clock on the wall overhead, its red numbers glaring, and her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God, she's officially late. Oh my God. She's going to get benched. We're already a girl down today. What the heck? Does Suzanna know? What are we going to do?"

"I'm here ready to dance all day with a bum vagina, and Jeanine can't even be bothered to show up on time?" Gina exclaimed from the floor.

"Be careful not to strain your Kegel muscles," said Alicia, with complete earnestness, dousing her pantyhose with another spray.

We collapsed into fits.

"*Alicia*!" Sharrice shrieked. "That's the name of the exercise, there are no *Kegel* muscles, oh my gosh—"

Alicia covered her face, overcome with giggles, while Gina gestured weakly for us to stop, clutching her lower abdomen.

Sharrice wiped her eyes and liberally applied setting spray to her stomach, which she'd contoured with blush to enhance her abs.

"I needed one more laugh," she said, "before you tell Suzanna and the ceiling comes down on us all."

WE DIDN'T DO it for the money. For game-day activities, we were paid in comped tickets and free parking passes. Charitable appearances and mandatory events for the Bills and our sponsors went unpaid, as did our six to eight hours of practice each week. We got free swag from sponsors, free gym and tanning salon memberships, and discounts on teeth whitening, and you could sign up for paid corporate

appearances at thirty-five bucks an hour, but that didn't come close to covering our hair, nail, and tanning appointments for the month, even with the discounts.

But none of this was why we showed up. The real reason you never missed a game was because dancing at games was the best part. It was the *point*. Between pre- and regular season, plus the Toronto game, we were guaranteed ten home games per season, plus more if the Bills made the playoffs, which wasn't likely—the Jills hadn't had a chance to cheer in the postseason since 1999, and we were under no illusions that Chan Gailey or Ryan Fitzpatrick would end the twelve-year drought this year. So every week we counted down our remaining games, our last chances to perform. We were here to dance. That was why we sprinted from our day jobs to make it to practice and appearances week after week, why we dieted and sweated and lost sleep. That was why we went through two weeks of grueling tryouts every spring, and endured a brutal training camp every summer, and survived conditioning throughout the season: to be here, at the stadium, to dance. What was it for if you didn't show up to dance?

Three hours to showtime, Suzanna clapped her hands and the locker room went silent. "I'm not seeing that," she said, pointing to Sharrice, who hid the wine bottle behind her back.

Behind Suzanna stood Terry Fitzsimmons, the lanky, balding man who owned the broadcasting company that owned the Jills. He surveyed us happily, as though we had all been arranged according to his specifications.

"I was hoping you wouldn't all be so decent," he said, and waited for us to laugh. "I wanted to say go break a leg out there, ladies. You are the glue holding the Bills community together. I think I speak for all of us when I say—being a Bills fan is special. When I think about football . . ."

He paused with feigned gravitas and we all went still, gripping our hair and makeup products, wondering how long this was going to take. I was fond of the Bills, but football was, for me, more of an accessory to cheerleading rather than the other way around. My dad, before he died, was as ardent a fan as any. He'd drag me and Laura

to games, rant to us about Jim Kelly's stats, explain Marv Levy's strategies in excruciating detail, and send himself into conniptions over each failed attempt at a down. Meanwhile, I took refuge in the constancy of the Jills—who were always smiling, always happy to be there—and spent games watching them through a pair of binoculars, trying to memorize the dance moves. Now I memorized flash cards of facts about the current players and stats from the previous game so I could talk about them at appearances.

"When I think about football," Terry went on, "I can't help but think about evolution. Thousands of years to create this team of men in top physical condition. Each generation perfecting on the mistakes of the past, to bring us to today. Football is men doing exceptional feats. And cheerleading—that's women doing their own exceptional feats. In this stadium we have gathered together the best men and women to represent the fighting spirit of Buffalo. But looking at you girls, I realize: this is not just the best of Buffalo I see here in front of me. This may be the best goddamn group of girls on the planet."

Suzanna stood next to him, arms folded, the curve from her chin to her collarbone deep as a cave. Even in her forties she kept her hair platinum, feathered bangs teased high over her forehead, with her cleavage propped up beneath a well-moisturized clavicle. Her white tracksuit practically gleamed. Her face, as always, was beautifully made up. Currently, it was arranged in a look of rapidly diminishing tolerance.

Terry finished, "I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm proud to be a Bills fan and I'm proud to root for the Jills, too. Let's go, Buffalo!"

We shouted, "Let's go, Buffalo!" and launched into applause before he could start talking again. Terry backed out of the room, clapping for himself.

I found Suzanna with Sara, the Line 1 captain, huddled over the giant white three-ring binder where Suzanna kept track of all our faults.

I broke the news swiftly: "Jeanine isn't here."

Suzanna lifted her gaze, her headset crackling softly. From the way

her eyes darted, she seemed to be making a set of rapid calculations. Over Suzanna's shoulder, Sara clenched her teeth in terror and ran her index finger across her throat.

There was a terrible silence, which I tried to endure with poise. Girls got benched all the time, for showing up a minute late to practice or failing uniform check. It was one of the most embarrassing things you could endure as a Jill, to be found so lacking you weren't even allowed to step foot on the field. It also brought the most collective shame, because of the stress and inconvenience it caused the other girls—when a Jill got benched, we all had to deal with the fallout by reconfiguring our lines, dancing one girl down. But for someone to simply not show up for a game, without warning, was completely unheard of, and it was a girl on my line, a girl *I* was responsible for.

"You." Suzanna snapped her fingers at Sophie, a rookie standing nearby, awaiting instructions. Sophie'd been benched earlier in the week for being photographed at an appearance with her bra strap showing. Even benched girls had to show up on game day to provide support, hand out supplies for autograph signings, or follow whatever orders Suzanna barked at them.

"I saw you lugging in your uniform bag. Did you pack everything you need to dance today?"

"Yes!" Sophie said, leaping to attention. She was lean and muscular, Korean American—the only Asian girl on the squad. "I didn't know what you'd need from me, so I brought everything just in case."

"We can't redo the lines this late. There's not enough time. This is your lucky day, Sophie. You're off the bench, on Virginia's line, Line 4. This will *never* happen again."

"Thank you, Suzanna." Sophie's eyes glistened with tears.

"Get your girls organized," Suzanna said to me. "Do *not* put Sophie in the front row. Go."

I led Sophie, who was gripping her face and chanting, "Oh my God, oh my God," back to our corner. There was no time to think: we had to run through the steps with Sophie, we had field rehearsal, then pregame appearances, and photos, and more hair and makeup

back in the locker room while we scarfed down protein bars and room-temperature yogurt cups to fuel us for the game. We had to hydrate and stay upright and not pass out.

Thirty minutes to kickoff. We gathered into a wide circle, elbows linked, poms gripped in our sweating palms. It was Sara's turn to pray. She prayed that God would protect the players on the field, and the fans in the stadium, and the whole Bills community watching at home. She prayed that our dancing would fill the hearts of all those present today with love and goodwill. She prayed for all the Jills who came before, and for those who could not be here. She prayed that we would dance as well as we could, in the glory of Jesus's name, amen.

Then we lined up in two parallel columns in the walkway of the Miller High Life VIP area. We waved to the people who had purchased the right to stand in this little concrete thoroughfare and watch us and the football players stream through the tunnel and onto the field. People filmed us on their phones, and we shook our poms at them good-naturedly. Though the hallway was air-conditioned to an arctic chill, pinpricks of sweat began to burst along my bra line. My hands were numb. Handlers and cameramen and people with headsets dashed around us. We held hands and whispered chants at each other, like protective spells, preparing for the yawn of the stadium ahead, the eardrum-bursting roar, the vast expanse of field it was our job to fill with our thirty taut female bodies. Our fear was both immediate and ancient. Even in my second season, I felt like I was being sent to the arena to be mauled by lions. Like my abs and mouth and butt all had to get as hard and tight as possible, lest my guts and vomit spill out all over the place.

The fog machine at the tunnel's exit began to billow, and my stomach tried to escape out through my belly button. Sharrice and I bared our teeth at each other to check for lipstick—MAC Ruby Woo, our signature shade. Then we began to march out on tempo, a steady one-two skip with a pom-pom flick every second beat. We streamed into formation on the fifty-yard line while an incomprehensible voice emerged from deep in the echoing shell of the stadium to introduce us.

A lump formed in my throat, an automatic physiological reaction to the swell of cheers that greeted us. Tens of thousands of people, together, all caring about the same thing. And every set of eyes on us, waiting for us to dance. This was the best you could hope for: an audience of more than seventy thousand people screaming with anticipation. A mass of shifting colors coalescing into a single entity, one heart, one gargantuan cheer droning one note. We were all here, caring our guts out. Who wouldn't want to weep at the sight?

The music began and swallowed me whole. A dull, sweeping roar engulfed the stadium, my body merely obeying the rhythms, submitting joyfully to the punch and drive of each beat. I moved as one with the girls around me; our boots pounded into the turf in unison, we panted to the same tempo, our fists and elbows swung into the air in one motion. This was not the part you skipped. Jeanine would never willingly miss this.

OUTSIDE THE STADIUM after the game, where my phone had reception, I waited for the buzz of a text from Jeanine, or a voicemail alert.

We were supposed to leave the stadium in pairs, as a safety measure, to ward off fans who wanted to follow us to our cars and ask for our number. Jeanine was my parking lot buddy, so I strode toward my car alone, phone aloft to catch a band of service. The sun had started to sink behind the silvery clouds, and the lights of the parking lot flickered on as I walked. Already the late October days were contracting into darkness, the crystal chill of coming winter rolling off the lake, four miles west.

A few strides from my car, I stopped short. There, by the nearest lamppost, stood Ray, waving earnestly in his blue polyester Bills jacket. Everyone on the squad knew Ray. We were always running into him in the grocery store, or while out to dinner, or doing errands, leading some of the girls to fret that he knew our addresses and kept track of our movements. He seemed to like me especially; on my birthday, using the Jills fan mail address, he'd sent me a handwritten note: *Virginia you are EVERYTHING the world spins so you*

can DANCE you bring everyone JOY and when I see you I feel I could be UNDERSTOOD, accompanied by a painting of me in my uniform, the paper dented from pencil lines erased over and over until the perfect, stiff outline of my form was achieved, with my breasts depicted considerably larger than they are in real life. When I found him waiting by my car after one Jills practice—it was late, and dark, and I had no idea how he knew which car was mine—I had to tell him, in no uncertain terms, that he was not allowed to do this. He seemed horrified that his actions had upset me, and now waited thirty to fifty feet outside the stadium entrance, which wasn't really better. At the moment, he was far closer to my car than he was supposed to be.

"I didn't see Jeanine enter the stadium today," he said. "Is she sick?"

Even with problem fans like Ray, I was expected to maintain the Jills standard of conduct: be professional, smile, deflect. But I was so distracted and fatigued that out popped the truth.

"Actually, Ray, I don't know where she is."

He blinked. "Now, that's strange. Jeanine has never missed a game. I know the lineup has already changed once this season, after Gabby got a new job and switched to ambassador squad. And Ashlee missed the first two home games thanks to that knee injury. But Jeanine's like you," said Ray. "You're the girls I can count on. You don't go disappearing on me."

Yes, Ray kept meticulous track of our appearances and placement on the field. It was clear from the number of comments he left on the Jills' YouTube and Facebook pages and the *Cheer Blog* on the Jills site that he spent the majority of his time squinting into the glow of the computer screen, looking for pictures and updates about us online. I wondered if he kept a spreadsheet more detailed than Suzanna's of our performances and appearance schedules.

"I like when you're all out there together," said Ray, fitting his palms together as though we were a bouquet of flowers he could hold.

"If one of us misses a game, it's for a very important reason," I said, regaining my composure. "We love to be here, just like you."

"If you need help looking for Jeanine—"

"No one's looking for her. Everything's fine. You know what you could do, Ray? Send out good thoughts for us, like always."

"I only have good thoughts for you. There's no other type of thought," he said happily. I wondered, not for the first time, how old he was. He had a moony face cratered by teenage acne. He could be anywhere between nineteen and forty-five.

"Did you know you were on the jumbo screen today?" he said, as I hurried past him to my car. "I always get the feeling when I catch sight of you that everything's going to be okay."

Ray was harmless, probably, but I didn't love having him behind me in a darkening parking lot. It brought to mind the threat of real stalkers. Last season Mackenzie had one who sent her Barbie dolls with the limbs and heads removed. The police told her they couldn't press charges or file a restraining order until the man actually attacked her, so she spent the year waiting for it to happen. Luckily, he got arrested for beating his girlfriend half to death and was now in jail awaiting his court date.

I DROVE STRAIGHT to Jeanine's apartment. On a Sunday evening the streets were empty, and I was able to park by the entrance of her building. I dug out the key buried in my purse. She'd given it to me so I could watch her cat whenever she ran off with Bobby or visited her mother overnight in Rochester on short notice. On instinct, I stopped in the lobby to empty her mailbox, as I always did when I cat-sat.

She'd be in there, I told myself as I rode up in the elevator, the stack of envelopes from her mailbox clamped under my arm. Bobby had taken her on a surprise weekend trip to Tampa. They'd gotten delayed, they'd had mechanical issues on his rented jet. She was inside, unpacking her skimpy bathing suits, smelling of sunscreen and

the metallic scent cocaine left in your pores, laughing. "Does everyone on the squad want to kill me?"

In my apartment, the creak of neighbors' footsteps and the smell of cooking oil wafted through the walls, but the residents of Kinsley Apartments & Lofts suffered no such exposure to other human lives. The building was quiet and only half-occupied, as was often the case in these expensive new buildings. Every five minutes, it seemed, another developer was snatching up a piece of battered real estate downtown to turn into luxury condos. As I padded down the hallway to Jeanine's door, even my footsteps were silent, all evidence of my passage swallowed by the plush carpet.

I swung open the door and there, just beyond the darkened threshold, was her little black cat. It mewed and swiped at my ankles, then went careening inside. I flipped on the light.

"Jeanine?" I called.

Her apartment was ridiculously nice, if a little corporate for my taste. The living room opened to a gleaming kitchen of stainless steel and green faux-marble countertops. The new-building smell of fresh paint hung in the air, mixed with Jeanine's scent—the American Spirits she smoked on and off, her Marc Jacobs perfume. The rent had to be a small fortune, but she found reasons to mention—a little too often, a little too casually—that it cost much less than I probably thought, because Bobby knew the building owner and had gotten her a great deal. I wondered if Bobby helped pay for it, but I never asked.

The cat crept out and followed me across the satiny wood floors as I circled the living room. It meowed at alarmingly regular intervals—"Don't, don't!" it seemed to be yelling, or "Help! Help!" The green velvet sofa was gently rumpled, one of the seat cushions dislodged and propped on the floor, and the chairs of the oval dining room table next to the kitchen were askew. I picked up the fallen cushion to put it back into place and noticed a neat tear in the fabric of the couch, as though it had been intentionally sliced open. I stuck a hand through the slit, and felt only the hollow frame inside. Jeanine had ordered all her furniture online, and though it looked luxurious, the quality was dubious.

The bathroom fixture had been left on, spilling a glowing strip of light into the hallway. "Jeanine?" I called again as I turned on the bedroom switch. The bed was half-made, her jeans and heels scattered on the carpet as though someone had run straight out of them. The dress she'd worn on Friday night, when I last saw her, hung on the edge of her hamper.

I became suddenly convinced there was a presence in the living room. I hurried back out and circled the patterned rug, taking in the total emptiness of the apartment. Though I was nine stories up, the floor-to-ceiling windows left me feeling exposed, like a telescope or camera had trained its eye on me from a distant high-rise. The presence, whatever it was, seemed to be right over my shoulder.

Inside the bathroom, the litter box emitted the ammonia stench of urine. It hadn't been cleaned in at least a couple of days. Her toothbrush was in a cup by the sink. On the mirror, she'd taped a few old photos of her and her ex-boyfriend, Landon, a likable pot dealer whose only ambition was to be in love with Jeanine. In the pictures they grinned wildly or stared into the camera with the intensity of doomed lovers. In one, a teenage Jeanine wore a choker and Landon's hoodie, her heavily made-up eyes closed while Landon kissed her cheek. In another, taken a couple of years later, they sat on the steps in front of a neon-lit bar, beers in their hands and cigarettes balanced between their fingers, looking mournful and ruined and sexy. I'd done my makeup a hundred times in this mirror and never noticed the ominous quality of these pictures. Like death waited for them in the black, grainy backgrounds beyond their overlit faces.

I picked up the cat, slung it over my elbow, and hurried out of the apartment, filled with the sensation that there was someone right behind me.

In the elevator I hit the lobby button and realized that Jeanine's mail was still crushed beneath my elbow. The cat squirmed in my arms, nearly dislodging the envelopes. Back at my car, I tossed the whole mess, cat and crumpled mail, into the backseat and drove.

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PROLOGUE

THE CHILD DIDN'T know it then. Her mind was too muddied by hunger and fear to think beyond her next steps, but she was about to become the second most interesting thing to have ever happened in Koraha.

Her arms, more bone than flesh, trembled as she pushed against the heavy door and collapsed into the cool air of the grocery store. The floor, smoother and shinier than she thought possible, caught her hands as she stumbled and fell forward, leaving two dirty smears. Her body slumped as though there were stones in it, but then she spotted them, a glimpse of red, and she pulled a forgotten strength from her bones.

Later that day, as news of her arrival ate through the remote town, its ninety-two inhabitants would offer different accounts of what the child did next, their stories spanning the aisles of their only shop.

The lights on the fridge flickered and the girl dragged herself toward it, half-walking, half-stumbling. There was only one witness, a pimpled cashier, but the boy didn't move. A few minutes later, when he eventually reached for the landline, he'd stutter as he tried to communicate the scene to the town's lone police officer.

The girl, her throat and mouth parched and raw, lunged at the display of cold fruit and ripped a plastic box of strawberries from the shelf. She tore off the lid and hooked her fingers into the juicy red flesh, stuffing the berries into her mouth two at a time. The juice dripped down her sunburned face and stained her handmade dress. With the rush of sweet liquid, she felt her body coming back to her. Throat first. Then lips. Then cheeks. Like when they scoffed spoonfuls of honey straight from the hive.

Her favorite dress, an eighth-birthday present, was muddy, and the neckline was stained with something sour. She wiped her hands down the rough cotton and stared past the lanky cashier, spying the milk fridge. Rallying her legs, she shuffled over to it and wrenched the door open, her tongue pulsing. Real milk wasn't allowed where she came from—just lumpy white powder water. But there, in front of her, sat liter after liter. She reached out and unscrewed one of the blue caps, then she lifted the bottle to her lips. The milk spilled out in a torrent, soaking her face and clothes. When she couldn't drink any more, she slid to the floor and rested her head against the fridge door, her little body spent.

As her thumping heart settled, she stared down at her grubby arms and legs, looking for some sign that she wasn't the girl she was a few days ago. That since she'd started walking—running—she'd changed. As her brain adjusted to the surge of sugar and calories, her mind stirred up images of what she'd fled from. As the memories took shape, she contemplated sticking her fingers down her throat and spewing them all up.

She cocooned her face in her hands, trying to shut the memories out. But the horror had settled in her. She couldn't unsee it. Couldn't blink it away. Her eyelashes brushed her palms, where dirt had congealed with blood, and she started to shake. Later that evening, as a silver-haired woman wiped her down with a cloth, the

girl would wonder whose blood it was. She'd wonder if it was the blood of one person, or two, or three.

When she glanced up, a pair of hands reached for her, forearms veined and strong, and she lashed out. She swiped at the air and kicked with her legs, but the man held her still.

"You're okay, kid," he said, his voice soft. "You're safe. I've got you."

The girl stopped fighting and let him hold her—why, she didn't know. It was bad to let him, against the rules. But she sank into him, into the smell and warmth and safety of the strange man, too tired to unjumble her thoughts. As the policeman's heart thrummed in her ear, she knew it was bad—that she would be one of those children now. One of the children whose faces filled the front pages of those dangerous newspaper things.

"I'm Constable Lewis Weston," he said. "What's your name?"

"Anya."

She slapped a hand to her mouth, wanting to put the word back. It was then that the policeman flinched, the muscles in his arm tensing slightly. But it wasn't the blood, or the mess, or the state of her clothes that had startled him. *Nope*. It was her face.

Something flared in her chest and she gathered herself, remembering the rules. She didn't belong in this village. She didn't belong with these people. Outside people wouldn't understand. And if she told him the truth, if she answered any more of his questions, she would be punished. The past few days would grow teeth and horns, and the truth would consume her; it would swallow her whole and she'd burn forever.

"Where did you come from, Anya?" His voice was kind. A trick. "Are you with your family?"

The large volume of cold milk churned in her stomach and she closed her eyes. She buried herself away, safe in the quiet. It wasn't hard. She'd gone days without speaking before.

"Is there anyone we can contact?"

She scrunched her eyes and lips tight, not letting anything slip out.

"Anya?"

She would go with the officer, first to the small police station and then to a stranger's house. She would let them bathe her and feed her and dress her in new clothes. But she wouldn't speak. Not when they asked about her home. Or her parents. Not when they asked her why she was in Koraha.

And that night, when she overheard them whispering, she would lock their words away. She was a ghost, they said, something unnerving and impossible. Anya, they murmured, looked just like the girl who had gone missing nearly twenty years ago.

The exact same face.

The same green eyes.

NOVEMBER 2001

THE WEST COAST BUSH, NEW ZEALAND

THE FOURTH OF them burst into the world like a storm. Loud and messy and out of the blue.

Mum's newest bush child.

He slipped into the small hut screaming. Into their middle-of-nowhere home. Just trees and ferns and his big voice.

The baby was impossibly tiny, all smooshed and scrunched up, and his skin was pale purple. It was impossible that he was even there—his miniature body wrapped up in Effie's wool jumper—because Mum hadn't been pregnant. There had been no bulge under her T-shirt. No swelling in her bra. With Aiden, Mum's belly had swollen and grown white lines, but this time, her stomach had stayed its normal shape.

Effie held her new brother in her arms and tried to push the tip of her finger into his tiny mouth.

"Shh, baby."

When Aiden was tiny, Mum had spilled over with milk. Sometimes it had dripped through her shirt and Effie had looked away, embarrassed, the damp circles reminding her of a leaking cow.

"Sorry, little boy. I don't have anything for you."

The baby opened and closed his wrinkly purple fists and tried to push his face into Effie's jumper. At almost nine, her chest was still flat, but the baby didn't seem to notice.

"Stop it."

The boy's searching lips creeped her out, and Effie wanted Mum to take him away. Mum needed to feed him and bathe him like she did with Aiden. Babies needed to be fed all the time, but Mum hadn't moved since the baby had slipped from between her legs an hour ago. Dad had thrust him at Effie, his newborn body sticky with white slime, and slammed their bedroom door in her face. Dad's face had been strange, his familiar eyes dark in a way that Effie didn't recognize.

She stared at the closed door. Other than the main living area, where they cooked and slept and did schoolwork, it was the only room in their back-of-beyond hut. Effie adjusted her position on the sofa, careful to hold the boy's head. The younger kids had been sent outside to pick mouku and pikopiko to steam for dinner. There was no noise apart from the baby's cries and the tōtara trees knocking on the corrugated metal walls. Mum's screams had stopped ages ago, when the little hand on the clock was pointed at three. Effie held the boy tight, afraid she might drop him. She'd seen Mum hold Aiden a thousand times, but the baby was so floppy and fragile, and he didn't seem to do anything but cry.

"It's okay, little boy. Mum will be out soon."

Effie tried not to look at the bedroom door, or to imagine what was happening on the other side of it. Feeling bad things made them real, that was how the game worked—Mum's inside-out feelings game. Sometimes in the winter, the hut got so cold that Effie's toes went blue. Then Mum would knit them all bright-colored hut socks and odd-shaped quilts. But Effie hated the hut on those freezing days. It was too cold. Too small. Too ugly. It wasn't like the proper houses she saw in town. But Mum said it was. Mum

said that it was a proper home. She decorated their hut with pots of ferns and hung homemade art from the walls. Mum said that home was a feeling, a warm yellow tingle. So, they'd practice. They'd picture lots of yellow things. The sun. Kōwhai trees. Bumblebees. Hurukōwhai. Buttercups. Until the warm outside feeling became real and her toes didn't feel so blue.

But it wasn't working now. Effie needed Mum to make the game work. She needed Mum to come out of her bedroom and make everything normal again.

"Shh. Please." Effie shook the baby gently. "I don't know what to do."

Before Aiden came out, Mum had walked the six hours through the bush to the Roaring Billy Falls. Then she'd taken the tinnie across the river and hitched to Koraha to find a midwife. Mum had lined up small bottles by the sink—important baby vitamins—and she'd stopped hunting with Dad. But Mum hadn't done any of those things with number four. He'd just arrived, screaming like thunder.

Effie reached across the sofa for one of Aiden's old wooden toys. She shook the homemade rattle above the baby's head, but it was no use.

"Please, please stop crying."

Then, over the noise of his wails, she heard a crash from the bedroom—something breaking—and a pained angry yell. Effie wanted to run at the bedroom door, to batter at it with all her might. But Dad had been clear. No kids.

She held the baby tight, as if squeezing him might spare his tiny ears the sounds of anger. Then she closed her eyes. After the second crash, Effie slumped to the floor and pulled her knees in, supporting the baby. She needed to run, to get help. But there was nowhere to go. Just trees. No one to help them.

Effie rocked the baby and whispered words she'd only read in books, about a man in the sky who could save them. She was still

rocking and muttering when the bedroom door creaked open and Dad appeared.

He was crying. Full, ugly tears. Effie froze, not wanting to be noticed. He would be embarrassed; Dad hated the weak bits in people. She'd never seen him cry, not even when the skinny hunting dog died. But now his face was a blotchy angry mess and his shirt was stained dark red.

"Get up," he muttered.

But she couldn't. He didn't look like Dad.

"Dad?" she whimpered.

But he didn't hug her. He stepped past them and yanked his jacket from the hook. Then, without looking at her or the baby, he stormed out.

The boy stirred in Effie's arms and she crawled forward, the wooden floor bashing against her knees. It was too quiet, too still—the hut limp like a gutted pig. Like there was no heart in it.

"Mum?"

Effie peered into the wrecked room. Mum's chair was broken in two, and her mirror lay in splinters across her favorite braided rug. The sheets and the floor were damp, stained with blood and another clear liquid. Effie stumbled to her feet, fighting pins and needles, then inched toward the bed. Toward Mum.

"Mum?"

Effie shook her arm.

"Mum!"

But Mum was already gone.

2025

ISLE OF SKYE, SCOTLAND

"THIS IS BEYOND humiliating," Effie shouted as she struggled to stand in the gale-force winds. She pulled at the hood of her jacket, trying to shield her face, but the rain stung her cheeks.

"No," Blair shouted back, their bodies huddled together. "What would be humiliating would be dying on the side of this bloody mountain because you're too stubborn to ask for help."

"We can get down ourselves. You can lean on me."

"No! We absolutely cannot." Blair dug her fingers into Effie's arm, clinging to her, as a gust of wind threatened to topple them. "There's no way I'm walking out on this ankle. The rocks are like ice, and it's going to start getting bloody cold and dark."

"I can get—"

"We need to call mountain rescue."

"I *am* mountain rescue," yelled Effie, her words diluted to a whisper by the elements.

"Right now . . ." Blair said as she lowered them to a crouched position on the wet ground, "what you are is a stubborn idiot who's about to watch her best friend freeze to death with a sprained ankle. Or, quite possibly, get blown down the Dubh Slabs to end up as a puddle of flesh and bones at the bottom."

"I would never let that—"

"Then *phone* them."

Blair gestured with her gloved hand, and the small plastic buckle caught the side of Effie's eye. The tender area of cold skin screamed on impact, but she blinked it away.

"I can't." She glanced down as water dripped from her hair. "I'd never live it down. Keith would rib me about it forever and—"

"For Christ's sake, Effie. Listen to yourself." Blair rubbed furiously at her arms. "We could die. This isn't some game. This is our fucking lives."

"Greg will be on call," Effie murmured, without meeting her friend's eyes.

"So?" Blair's mascara had started to leak down her face. "That's great."

"We broke up last night."

Blair shuffled across the wet rocky ground, guarding her left foot, until they were snuggled together. Then she put a drenched arm around Effie.

"You need to phone them," she said again, but her voice was softer.

Effie looked out at where the Cuillin Ridge should have been. But there was nothing to see but gray and cloud and lashing rain. On a good day, she could have named every point from Loch Coruisk to the end of the curved mountain range—a route she'd completed a number of times. She'd once run the Black Cuillin stretch—all twenty-two summits and eleven Munros of it—in just four hours and three minutes, barely an hour off the world record.

"I know," said Effie.

"Oh, thank god." Blair exhaled. Then she buried her face into Effie's chest. "Cos there's no way I'd have the energy to fight you on it."

"Well . . ." Effie managed a smile. "I'm fully intending to tell Keith that you did—that you resorted to blackmail and forced my hand."

"Whatever gets me into a helicopter and off this fucking mountain with my fingers and toes still attached."

Effie sat for a moment, feeling the weight of her friend against her, then she pulled her phone from her pocket and cocooned it between her ear and hood.

"It was just bad luck, you know." Blair reached out and took Effie's hand. "Bad luck and shitty Scottish weather."

"Thanks, Bee."

Effie closed her eyes and held 2 for the mountain rescue team, a team she'd been a part of for eight years. As it rang, she prayed it wouldn't be Greg who picked up. The last thing he'd said to her, as she'd stormed from his flat, was that she'd end up dying alone on the side of some mountain. And as she'd slammed the door, she hadn't hated the idea.

"I know this shouldn't be in the least bit funny," said Blair, unable to keep the amusement from her quivering lips as Effie got off the phone with Keith. He'd promised to have a team deployed as soon as possible.

"It's not." Effie groaned and reached into her rucksack.

"But . . ." Blair smiled. "Come on, it's going to make for a great story."

"It's not."

It would take a while for the helicopter to fly in, and the wait would be more pleasant without the elements trying to drown them. Effie pulled out the storm shelter, wrestling against the wind, then she and Blair stood nose to nose, chest to chest, torso to torso, under the fluorescent-orange sheet. The waterproof fabric came down to just below their bottoms, leaving their legs exposed to the downpour.

"Right," said Effie, their faces just inches apart, "on three, we sit."

"Got it." Blair giggled.

"And," Effie continued, "remember to pull the seating panel underneath you so the water stays out."

"Loud and clear." Blair suppressed a laugh as a gust of wind thrust her forward and their cheeks smooshed together.

"One . . ." Effie started, ignoring Blair's snorts. "Two. Three."

As they lowered to the ground, the material formed a protective tent around them, their world reduced to a billowing orange bubble.

"This isn't so bad," Blair shouted over the flapping fabric. "Romantic, even."

Effie rolled her eyes. "Christ." She rubbed a hand across her face. "Seriously, even now?"

"Now what?"

"I don't know." Effie couldn't help but smile. "I thought that maybe, just maybe, the threat of death might have dampened your . . . your . . ."

"My what?"

"Your infuriatingly persistent enthusiasm."

"Aw, come on." Blair nudged Effie's leg with her foot. "You love it."

"I tolerate it."

"And I tolerate you nearly letting us die on our girls' day out." Blair smirked. "So we're even."

Effie smiled back, and for the next few minutes, they sat in a comfortable silence as the orange nylon flapped around them and the rain pummeled the two circular windows.

The natural light had all but vanished from the evening sky, swallowed up by October's bleakness, and they were relying on two head-torches. One remained off, safe in Effie's pocket, while the other was around her hat. Half an hour later, when the phone buzzed twice in her pocket—two texts coming through at once—Effie knew something was wrong. Removing her gloves, she opened the messages. The first from Keith. Then Greg.

"What is it?" asked Blair.

Effie looked at her phone, then back at her friend. "The chopper from Stornoway had to turn around . . . because of the severe winds."

"So"—Blair took a breath—"no helicopter?"

Effie shook her head.

"No cozy airlift out?"

"I'm afraid not," said Effie.

"What happens now?"

"Keith said they've already prepped a team to head out on foot."

Blair's eyes widened. "In this?"

"Yeah." The muscles in Effie's stomach tightened. "They know what they're doing, Bee."

"Fuck." She glanced down at the flooded ground. "So did we."

The shelter muted the outside storm, creating an eerie quiet. But after a minute's silence, Blair looked up. "How long will it take them?"

"Five to six hours," said Effie. "Maybe longer. The conditions are—"

"Less than ideal," finished Blair.

Effie actually laughed. "Yes. They are definitely less than ideal."

"And this plastic bag of yours," said Blair, gesturing at the emergency shelter. "It can hold its own?"

"You, my friend," said Effie, "are sitting within 275 grams of mountaineering gold. I can personally guarantee you an almost warm, almost dry, mostly bearable night."

"Excellent. It already sounds better than night shift at the hospital."

"Fewer intoxicated patients. Less assistance with toileting."

"God, I hope so." Blair grimaced. "Neither of us is peeing until I can urinate without fear of it blowing in my face."

"I'm sorry," Effie muttered. "Again. For getting us into this situation."

"We just got caught out, Effie. The weather turned and conditions changed." Blair sighed. "Then I did my bloody ankle. Shit happens, and sometimes there's nothing we can do about it."

Effie squeezed Blair's hand.

"So," said Blair, "what happened with Greg?"

"I'm not sure this—"

"This is *exactly* the time." She grinned. "It's not like I'm going anywhere. So spill. You owe me some gossip at least."

"You're awful. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I do."

"It was nothing. Nothing new, anyway." Effie fiddled with her zip. "The same hashed-out argument."

"You being an irrational commitment-phobe?"

"Yeah."

"Couldn't you just get a set of keys cut for the poor man? He's at your place half the time anyway. Then maybe, down the line, you might feel differently."

"No." The word came out harsher than Effie intended. "Sorry. It's just . . . it all feels too hard. Greg, he's . . ."

He's not him.

"I'm not ready," said Effie. "Besides, the whole commitment thing looks better on you."

"I do make it look exceptionally good." Blair placed a hand on Effie's leg. "Bloody hard work though. Ewan required some serious pre-wedding training."

Effie looked at her friend. "I said things, Bee. It wasn't good. I think it might really be over this time."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I almost did." Effie offered a half smile, knowing she didn't need to say anything else.

"So . . ." said Blair, "just so I know where we're at—tomorrow, once we're off this sodding mountain, will I be taking you for a massage and a sauna, or for beer and chicken wings?"

"Beer." Effie forced a smile. "A lot of beer."

"Well, that I can—" Blair swore suddenly as a rock thumped into the tent a few centimeters from her head, and she lurched to the side.

"You okay?" Effie leaned forward.

"Yeah. Shit." Blair patted her chest. "Just caught me by surprise. Jeez, that wind's strong."

Effie peered through the small plastic window, but visibility was down to a few meters and the sheets of rain blurred even the closest patches of heather and rock.

"It's going to be a long night," said Blair.

"Perhaps not long enough." Effie buried her face in her palms. "I can already imagine the headlines." She peered through her fingers. "'Local police officer saved by her own rescue team. Cold and wet cop grateful to be alive.'"

"'Incompetent police officer endangered beloved best friend.'"

Effie raised an eyebrow as a puddle of water leaked in around her right foot.

"Come on," said Blair. "No one reads the paper anymore."

"Keith does."

"Yeah, Keith definitely does," said Blair, feigning concern. "He'll probably frame them and mount them somewhere prominent in the station."

"You're awful."

Effie shivered, the waterproofing on her jacket long since defeated, then blew warm air down her collar. Her fleece was sodden too. The color had drained from Blair's face, her eyes darkened by smeared makeup and exhaustion, and each time she coughed, the guilt twisted Effie's insides. People were stupid to trust her, to think she would do anything other than fail them.

Effie tucked her knees into her chest as the shame pulled her mind back. No matter what she did, the past was always there, lapping at her shins. It was like standing at the edge of a vast ocean, the water sucking at her feet as she tried to wade back to the shallows. He was always there, floating just beneath the surface, his fingers clawing at her ankles and pulling her farther out to sea. One day

he would eventually drown her. And as the water poured down her throat and her arms and legs gave up, Effie would apologize to him over and over.

I'm sorry.

The howl of the wind pierced through her, louder than her thoughts, and Effie bolted upright, her body disorientated and cold.

Blair was staring at her, her skin white and her eyes wide—her expression one of terror. Effie's chest tightened as her brain fired and realization poured through her. It wasn't the wind; it was Blair who had screamed. Effie followed the direction of Blair's eyes, and she froze, her blood running cold.

There, in the small circular window, was a face.

A stranger. His left eye filled with blood.

NOVEMBER 2001

EFFIE STUMBLED BACK to the bedroom door with the baby hugged into her chest, unable to look away from the strange figure that lay in Mum's bed. It had Mum's clothes on, and Mum's face, but the important bits were all wrong.

"Mum?"

Effie gripped the baby, her voice shaking as tears dripped down her face and her tummy threatened to spill out.

"Mum?" she said again, louder.

Mum needed to wake up. She needed to stop playing. The baby wasn't meant to be here. Mum hadn't mentioned having another one—three was plenty, she said. There was no cot set up in the corner. No nappies on the line. Mum had sewn for weeks before Aiden came, but there were no lengths of fabric on the table. No reels of thread.

Effie jiggled the baby a bit until his little eyes closed fully. Then she took a step toward the bed—toward the thing that was both Mum and not Mum. Like, from a distance, Effie couldn't be sure. The thought tingled in her skin as she inched closer. Securing the baby—his sleepy body like water—Effie reached out a shaking

hand and touched her mum's forearm. It was warm. Effie inhaled. Mum's skin was still warm.

"Dad!" Effie screamed as she clutched the baby and rushed from the room. "Dad!"

Dad had got it wrong. He'd made a mistake. Dad always said that it was impossible to skin possums when they were still warm—that you had to wait until they were cold and proper dead. But Mum was warm. She wasn't proper dead. Effie hurried from the door and out onto the porch.

"Dad!" She shouted his name at the dense bush. "Dad! Come back."

Then she hurried across the deck and down the steps, the baby screaming, and aimed her scrawny frame at the wall of ferns and rimu and rātā trees. Dad would have headed for the river. It was the only way out. There were no paths or tracks other than the occasional deer trail. Every few months when they went to town, it was the water that guided them out. Other than the Roaring Billy River, it was just bush—thick green forest for kilometer after kilometer, farther than Effie's legs could take her.

"Shh, baby." She kissed his head. "You need to come with me."

Effie turned, her mind in a whirl, as she scanned the outside of their small hut. There was no Aiden. No Tia. The only sign of her siblings was an upturned basket, the fresh pikopiko ferns spilled out on the ground. And next to it was Aiden's wooden rainmaker.

"I can't leave you here, baby. You have to come too."

The baby's face crumpled as he screamed. His eyes wrinkled into two slits, the thin lines lost in puffy flesh, and his mouth formed a dark hole. The noise hurt both her ears and her heart, like how she loved and disliked him all at once. The confusing little thing made of the same stuff as her, the same blood and other ingredients, flailed his tiny arms and legs, and she tried to soothe him.

"Don't cry, baby." She didn't want him to be sad. She didn't want him to hurt or cry. "Shh. Shh."

But she didn't want him there. She wanted Mum. It wasn't a fair trade. No one had asked her. Having both of them might be okay—the baby and Mum—but not just him.

"Come on. Let's get Dad." Effie bounced him in her arms. "He can help Mum."

Spying a length of rag on the deck, she picked it up and wrapped the baby to her chest, just like she used to do with Aiden. It helped a bit, having him all squished in; it quietened him a little. Then she headed into the forest. The river wasn't far—fifteen minutes if she didn't miss the marked trees. As Effie slipped into the bush, the kahikatea and tōtara towering above her like green giants, she felt the first drops of rain falling from the high branches. Her feet stumbled with the extra weight as she navigated the carpet of ferns and moss, but she bashed through the thick vegetation without pause, digging her feet in as it got steeper.

Effie was Dad's favorite. He never said it, never did anything to make the young ones suspicious. But Effie knew. Dad always kissed her last before bed, and he let her do things that the others couldn't. Like cleaning out the trout and going bush with him to check traps. Mum said that Dad loved them all the same. But he didn't. Dad had given Effie his red hair and his green eyes—made her just like him. And when Dad had been out all night, tracking deer or chamois, he'd always leave a handful of supplejack tips on the table for her, and Mum would fry them up in oil. Even when Dad was tired and grumpy, maybe a little scary sometimes, he aways had a smile for Effie. But not that afternoon. He'd left without even looking at her.

Like he wasn't Dad at all.

Effie pushed the ferns aside, using her other hand to shield the baby's head from the spits of rain as the first rumble of thunder rolled through the green valley. She paused and looked up through the thick trees, the blue sky almost gone as the storm clouds moved

in. On any other day, she would have turned around, respecting the black sky, and curled up in the safety of Mum's bed. But on no other day had her mum been almost dead.

"We'll be okay, baby." Effie reached out, touching the pink strip of plastic that Dad had tied around a tree. "Not too far now."

The bush thinned as she neared the river, and the ground became less steep. But the rain had turned from spits to heavy drops, and the baby was too quiet. Holding the back of his head, Effie sped up.

"Dad!" she tried screaming, but the wind gobbled her words.

She kept running another fifty meters or so, until she caught sight of the Roaring Billy River—a thread of dark silver that cut through the trees. Then she saw him. *Dad*. He was wearing his waterproof poncho and he was waist-deep in water, already a third of the way across the river. Effie blinked against the rain as she stepped from the cover of the trees. Her heart raced and she tried to shout, but the sky was too heavy; it squashed her voice. She stumbled across the small white rocks, getting closer to the river. Dad was in the wrong place. He wasn't at the shallow bit. He was too deep. Too far down. They always crossed farther up where the river got thinner over the gravel bar, where Dad had shown them, again and again, that it was easier to wade across. There the water was only thigh-deep and the current was slow enough that Effie could catch herself. On their last trip to town, Dad had encouraged Effie to cross the river by herself, rather than on his back. She'd waded out slowly, positioned between Mum and Dad, fighting as the water tugged at her feet and cringing as the icy liquid neared her waist. Twice she'd felt the river snatch her. Twice her dad had saved her.

"Effie?"

She turned at the whisper of her name. "Tia?" Effie stumbled across the stony ground, the baby silent now, and knelt down. "What are you doing here?"


"ENTRANCING AND EERIE." —Megha Majumdar,
New York Times bestselling author of *A Burning*
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A NOVEL
SAMANTHA
BROWNING SHEA

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ONE

For years, Oona had dreamt of her return to Marrow. At night, lying in bed beside Jacob, she used to fantasize about the sour brine of the marsh air, pretend she could still feel the grit of salt on her skin. It would bring her a kind of peace, she'd thought, to see the island materialize on the horizon, to catch sight of its foggy shores and rocky coast. But of course in her dreams, Oona had always imagined herself up on deck, stationed at the bow like a figurehead. In reality, though, she spent most of her first ferry ride in over a decade down in the bowels of the boat, squatting on the slick floor of the head, vomiting up her breakfast.

As yet another wave crashed into the side of the hull and the ferry lurched sideways, Oona tried blaming her nausea on the years she'd spent onshore. She blamed the storm that had rolled in earlier that afternoon, the reason they were all running late. But deep down, she knew it wasn't as simple as any of that. She'd thought it would've passed by now, but the truth was she'd been sick back in Portland too.

It had been a struggle, trying to conceal it from Jacob. She couldn't tell him yet, though. It was too soon. Something could still go wrong.

Something always went wrong.

Belowdecks, Oona braced herself once again as the captain threw the engines into reverse, but thankfully no great pitch forward followed. Instead, she heard the grinding whir of the propellers as they began churning in the water, and she realized they were docking. They'd made it. She was home.

Marrow Island was large compared to some of its neighbors—rocky outcroppings reachable only by dinghy or rowboat—but compared to towns on the mainland, compared to Portland, it was nothing. Just twenty square miles of marshland, caves, and tide pools. A tiny town that had grown up around the port where the ferries docked. As a girl, Oona had lived in awe of that small town. She'd loved its hustle and bustle: the shops that lined the cobbled main street, the dive that sold lobster rolls and french fries in the summer. She'd even loved the hawking cries of the fishermen at dusk, the way the gulls would circle overhead as customers stooped to examine the daily catches displayed in rows of coolers on the docks. Still, she was surprised to find the town largely unchanged.

It was April, offseason, so the town's only restaurant hadn't opened yet, but everything else was just as she remembered it. As she made her way down the ferry's gangplank, she could see the grocery store off to her left. Its faded green canopy still said *Albert's*, though she'd read in the papers that Al himself had died a few years back. Next to the grocery was the Robertses' pharmacy, and then after the pharmacy was the hardware store owned by the Clarks. Looking at those

shops, all in a row, Oona couldn't help but remember the last time she'd seen their owners, the way those three men had stood to block her entrance to the funeral. They were only doing what the Tanakas had asked them to do, only trying to support their grieving friends and neighbors, but that didn't mean Oona couldn't hold a grudge. *Good riddance*, she thought as she turned away from Al's.

At the end of the dock, she put down her bag to rest. Her luggage wasn't heavy, but she was out of breath. That last hour in the ship's bathroom had taken a lot out of her. She leaned against the dock's railing and stared down at her duffel. She didn't even know what she'd packed. An old pair of sneakers? Her navy raincoat? Her trip—it hadn't exactly been well planned. She'd panicked, that's what Jacob would say if she was to call him, tell him what she'd done. She'd started feeling desperate, so she'd allowed herself to be lured in, once again, by the fairy-tale promise of a simple solution. If she let him, she knew he would convince her to return to the mainland.

"Mrs. Jones?"

A young woman approached Oona tentatively. And though she wasn't wearing anything all that telling—wasn't, for instance, dressed in a purple robe—still, Oona's first thought was that the girl looked like an Initiate. Only, to be an Initiate, she would have to be pregnant, and as far as Oona could tell, she was not.

"Are you Mrs. Jones?"

It took a minute before Oona remembered the name she'd assumed when she'd called the Center from Portland and found there was actually one guest not yet accounted for, her arrival time for that very weekend still unconfirmed. It was a minor miracle—though the Center technically remained open all year long, the midwives spent the offseason caring for local women. The only time they accepted outsiders was during the Summer Session, which ran roughly from

just before Beltane to Lughnasadh, or from late April to August 1. Oona hadn't actually expected to be able to attend. She'd called out of sheer desperation. But when she'd discovered there was an opening, she'd made the split-second decision to claim it as her own.

"That's me," Oona said on the dock. "I'm Maggie Jones."

The girl breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness! For a second, I thought I was going to have to tell them that I'd lost you." She laughed, but Oona offered only a small smile in return. "I'm Holly," the girl said. She reminded Oona of a Girl Scout—all bright helpfulness and good cheer. "I'm an Initiate here this season."

She stuck out one hand, and this time Oona smiled more genuinely. So she'd been right, she thought. The girl *was* an Initiate. That was good news. It meant that she was new to the island.

"Here," said Holly. "Let me get that bag for you. We've got a Jeep waiting just over there. You see it?"

She pointed and Oona nodded. The Jeep, though, that was also new. It even had the Center's name stenciled on the side: *Bare Root Fertility Center*. Fancy. When Oona was little, the only car the Center had owned was a truck. Red, with rusted wheel wells, it broke down at least once a month. That's how Oona got to spend so much time running wild on the docks in town, watching the fishermen. Otherwise, for many years, she'd rarely left the Center's grounds.

"You were late getting in," Holly said, as Oona followed her to the Jeep. "We were expecting you all closer to two. I was just telling the other ladies here that I'm afraid you've likely missed supper."

When Holly opened the car's back door, Oona realized there were already two other women waiting: a wealthy-looking Asian woman, who was perched on the bench seat farthest from Oona, her wrists adorned with gold; and a tall Black woman, who was holding a small

spiral notebook. Once Oona finally got herself up and into the car, the woman with the notebook chuckled. "This thing needs a set of stairs or something," she offered. Oona smiled politely but didn't respond. She'd never been very good at small talk, and anyway, she figured she wasn't there to make friends. Friends were just a liability for someone like her, someone who needed to go unnoticed.

It was bad enough that she'd shown up looking like such a mess.

The two women to her left were dressed quite differently from each other—the woman seated by the window was wearing a pair of fur-lined duck boots and what looked like an expensive winter coat, while the woman with the notebook was dressed more simply—but they both looked put together, tidy, and well-groomed. Oona, on the other hand, was greasy and bloated. When she glanced down, she saw there were flecks of vomit on her coat. She hadn't bothered to look up how much a visit to the Center would cost because any amount would have been too much for her, but now she worried that her ratty duffel, her thrift-store jacket would give her away.

"Ready, gals?" Holly called from the front seat, as the Jeep's engine turned over.

The other two women chirped back, "Ready!" but Oona just slouched against her door, pressed her forehead to the window's glass.

It was after six and already the sun was dropping low in the sky, dusk drifting in like a rolling fog. As the car pulled onto the main road the other two women closed their eyes, probably grateful for the respite after the long ferry ride, but Oona found she couldn't look away. She needed to see the salt-stung, shingled buildings of Port Marrow give way to the sharp rise of the forest's towering pines, to stare out at the breathtaking expanse of rocky tide pools that stretched along the shore for miles. She told herself that she wasn't scared, she

just needed the reminder that it was all real, that she was finally home, but when she glanced down she saw she was gripping her seat belt so tightly, every one of her knuckles had flushed white.

Still, despite her anxiety, Oona soon found herself lulled by the journey, drowsy by the time they pulled into the Center's long clamshell drive. As soon as the car came to a stop, though, the fear was back in her chest, thrashing like a caged bird. She jiggled the handle on the door twice before Holly told her to wait a minute. She would come around to let them out. *Trapped*, Oona thought, briefly panicked, but then the door swung open and she tumbled out onto the drive.

The woman with the notebook followed, but when the other woman moved to join them Holly told her it wasn't yet her turn. She was going to be staying in a cabin on the other side of the compound, in House Imbolc. Oona and Shelly (for that was the name of the woman with the notebook, Shelly) were marked down for House Samhain. Oona had nearly forgotten that the cabins were each named after one of the eight sabbats.

"Here are your keys," Holly said, as she handed first Oona and then Shelly a heavy iron key, strung on a band of soft white ribbon. "Go on in and make yourselves at home. Like I said, you've missed supper, but there should be plenty of healthy snacks in the pantry in the common room, if you're hungry. Fresh fruit and organic granola. Stuff like that. Oh, and skyr in the mini-fridge, if you eat dairy. But if none of that is to your liking, just call the kitchen. They'll send over anything you want. Okay?"

Dumbstruck, Oona nodded. The cabins had never had mini-fridges before. They'd barely had electricity, running water.

Holly turned eastward and pointed to a sandy path that wove through the trees, then she explained what Oona already knew: that

the part of the compound where they were standing was still surrounded by forest, but if they were to follow that path the woods would open up onto a bluff, below which they'd find the beach. After checking her watch, Holly told them that the Welcoming Ceremony would be taking place on the beach in thirty minutes, just after sunset. "Meet us down there?" she asked.

"Of course," Shelly said, answering for them both.

And with that, Holly climbed back into the Jeep and drove off.

Oona watched her taillights disappear around a bend while Shelly picked up the handle of her rolling suitcase and turned to the cabin. "Shall we?" She didn't wait for Oona to respond, she just started walking, taking quick, purposeful steps as if she'd been there before.

Oona felt jealous of her confidence and her getup. Despite the fact that Oona had never traveled out of state, Shelly, in her heavy knee-length rain slicker and her grip-soled boots, seemed somehow better dressed for the climate. But Oona was relieved to discover that, unlike the wealthy woman from the car, none of Shelly's belongings looked particularly expensive. Rather, it appeared that she'd bought most of her gear at the army-navy store. Oona was pretty sure she even recognized the boots. Jacob had a pair just like them.

As they neared the cabin, Oona stalled so she wouldn't have to be the one to use her key. It was stupid, maybe, but she was afraid of betraying herself, afraid her breathing would turn ragged, afraid her hands would shake. As a child, tasked with changing the linens, she'd worn a whole necklace of those keys, and as she stood there at the cabin's door she once again felt the weight of them pressing against her chest.

"Coming?" Shelly prompted from inside.

Oona hurried to catch up with her in the common room.

"It looks like there's four of us staying here." Shelly pointed to a

chalkboard that hung between the two bedroom doors, where the women's names were written: June, Shelly, Maggie, Gemma. "Or maybe more. . . ." She walked across the common room toward the final door, and Oona spoke without thinking.

"No," she said. "That's just the bathroom."

Shelly pulled open the door and peeked in. "So it is." She turned to smile, curious, back at Oona. "Good guess."

Oona's heart pounded, but she tried to look casual as she shrugged. "Well, it was that or start looking for an outhouse."

Shelly laughed, and Oona thought: *If you only knew.* The Center had been built on a former campground. She was thirteen by the time they'd saved enough to put in proper plumbing. Now . . . Oona turned and saw that the whole back wall had been transformed into a kitchen, like the efficiency motel where she used to work as a housekeeper. Only nicer. Much nicer. The countertops looked like they were made of real marble. Oona could hardly believe her eyes.

"The others must already be down at the beach," Shelly said, brushing her locs off her shoulder. "I'll just throw my stuff in my room and then we can walk down together."

"Together?" Oona echoed.

"Unless you don't want to." Shelly's left eyebrow ticked up, and Oona saw her gaze turn inquisitive.

No, more than inquisitive—she looked suspicious, which in turn made Oona tense. "I'd love to walk together," she hurried to say. "Let me just find my phone. One second."

She ducked into her room and closed the door behind her, hefted her duffel onto the foot of the only unclaimed bed. She'd packed underwear at least, she was relieved to discover, and two pairs of cotton shorts. Her red bathing suit and her white canvas sneakers. Her fa-

vorite fisherman sweater and her baggy jeans. It wasn't much, but it would do for the long weekend.

At the bottom of the duffel, she dug around for her cell phone, which she'd purposefully buried beneath her clothes. Zero missed calls. Oona released the breath she'd been holding. Technically, Jacob's boat was supposed to remain at sea for the next three days, but his trips were always somewhat unpredictable. It wasn't unusual for him to stay out longer if his team had trouble locating the herring population they were attempting to research. Oona's plan, if you could call it a plan, was to make it back to Portland before her husband, but she'd known when she boarded the ferry that she was taking a risk. Jacob could easily end up getting back to the house before her, and then what would she say? What would she do?

For a moment Oona felt overcome, sure she'd made the wrong decision—or at least gone about things the wrong way. After all, she wasn't trying to start a fight with Jacob. In fact, she was attempting to do the opposite. The reason she'd left the way she had was because she hadn't wanted to argue with him again. Still, she couldn't ignore the niggling feeling that she'd put in jeopardy the one thing she couldn't bear to lose: the only family she had left, her husband. Only when she stood up, ready to—what? Pack her things and leave?—she felt it, the quickening, and she dropped back down onto the bed, stunned.

Of course she'd thought about this moment before. On the message boards, one woman had claimed that when she'd first felt her baby move she'd thought she was just nervous, experiencing "butterflies," while another had said that for her it felt like gas. And so, based on their descriptions, Oona had always imagined that the feeling would be subtle, easy to miss or to mistake, and in each of her five previous pregnancies there had been moments when she'd

wondered—or at least hoped. But this time was different, this *feeling* was different, something impossible to ignore. For Oona, the quickening didn't feel like butterflies or gas, it felt like what it was: a baby, *her* baby, moving inside her. Unmistakable, and yet hard to believe.

She still had her hands pressed to her belly when Shelly called her name, or her fake name. "Maggie?" It sounded like her mouth was full. "Are you almost ready?"

"Oh, yes, sorry." Oona got to her feet and grabbed her jacket. "I'm coming right now."

In the common room, she found Shelly knelt down in front of the pantry, holding her notebook and a half-eaten protein bar. "Nothing too good," she said. "But they have almonds and rice cakes. And some kind of fruit leather. Do you want anything?"

"No," Oona said. "I'm not hungry."

"You sure?"

With a heavy swallow, she nodded. Already, the smell of Shelly's protein bar had wafted her way, and for whatever reason, peanut butter was a no-go for her this time around. Even standing close to Shelly was making her nauseated.

"I missed lunch, so I'm starving," Shelly explained. She took two more bars and a handful of almonds and stuffed them into her coat pockets along with her notebook. "But this should hold me for a while. Ready?"

Oona nodded. When they left, she locked the door with her key.

The beach was only a little more than half a mile from their cluster of cabins, and as Oona trailed Shelly through the woods she

caught the scent of the pine trees' sap in the air and found herself transported back to her girlhood. How many hours, she wondered, had she spent roaming that forest searching for skullcap and stinging nettle? How many nights had she used the light of the moon to follow the path to its end? She used to like to sneak out to the overlook and hide among the scrub brush, spy on the women down below in the sand. Now it was hard to believe she was going to be one of them. The thought made her feel first giddy and then terrified. She stopped short at the end of the trail, but Shelly didn't notice until she was halfway down the rocky slope.

"What's wrong?" she asked, when she realized Oona was no longer beside her.

There was a bonfire going down on the beach, but its light didn't quite reach them up on the hill, and in the dark Shelly seemed tentative. She stood with her knees bent, both hands extended in front of her as if she was bracing for a fall. When she was younger, Oona would've smirked at her cautiousness, would've clapped a hand over her eyes like a show-off and marched deadman-style straight down to the sand. But not anymore.

Shelly held out her hand. "I know it doesn't look like it, but there's a path here. I promise."

"I'm fine," Oona said. "You go on ahead. I'll catch up."

"No," Shelly said earnestly. "I'm not leaving without you."

Christ, thought Oona. This was why she'd wanted to walk over alone.

From where she stood she could see all the other Mothers (for they were, according to Center credo, all of them Mothers, even if their babies hadn't been born earth-side yet) mingling down below, swaying to the beat of whatever song was playing over the speakers,

but she couldn't see their faces, couldn't tell much at all about them from so far away. Was she down there? Oona wondered. Was she that woman standing by the fire? Or was she the one walking barefoot by the tide?

She didn't mean to, but when Shelly said her name again she startled and accidently spoke her question out loud. "Do you see her?"

"Who?" Shelly asked.

"*Her.*"

For a minute Shelly looked blank, then suddenly she seemed to recognize the awe in Oona's voice, the urgency. "Ursula?"

Oona hadn't heard anyone say her mother's name in years.

Still unsure of her footing, Shelly turned warily back to the beach. After a moment's worth of scanning, she shook her head. "I don't see her, but Vivian told me that she often doesn't join until the end of the ceremony."

"Really?" Oona asked. Her mother had never been late to a ceremony or ritual when Oona was still living on the island.

"That's just what Vivian said. You remember Vivian. From the car?" When Oona said nothing, Shelly pointed down at the beach. "There she is. The one with the black hair. I know she was quiet earlier, but before the waves picked up she was telling me all about the Center. I think maybe she's been here before? Or a friend of hers has? I can't remember. I don't think she was expecting that boat ride, though. It was rough out there, wasn't it?"

Oona hadn't noticed either Shelly or Vivian on the ferry, so she'd assumed they also hadn't noticed her, but something about Shelly's comment made her wonder if perhaps she'd been more conspicuous than she'd imagined. "It was a bad storm."

"You're telling me. My flight had to land right in the middle of it. Nearly blew us off the tarmac."

When she reached Shelly, Oona took her outstretched hand. "Where'd you fly in from?" she asked.

"SFO," Shelly said. "The Bay Area. But I'm from Portland, originally."

Portland, Oona thought. That wasn't good. Then again Shelly had said *originally*, so hopefully that meant she'd been out west awhile, that there was little chance she and Oona had ever crossed paths.

When they reached the sand, they took off their socks and shoes and left them at the base of the hill like everybody else. The sand was cold on Oona's feet, and damp from the storm earlier, but she knew it would be warmer once they got closer to the bonfire, which was burning hot and bright only twenty yards away.

"Do you want anything to drink first?" Shelly asked.

Not far from the fire was an old wooden picnic table with a tin tub on one side holding bottles of water and green juice, and on the other end an assortment of what Oona knew had to be nonalcoholic wines. Bare Root was a dry facility. Always had been. But from the number of women "drinking," it looked like maybe Ursula had stopped mentioning that bit in the brochures.

"White or red?" Shelly asked, once they made it across the sand.

Oona thought about explaining Ursula's policy, but then she noticed that a few of the other witches in her mother's coven were standing by the far side of the table, pouring their own drinks. She recognized them right away—Joyce with her twin gray braids, Donna in her dungarees. It had been fifteen years and still Oona could remember how it'd felt whenever Joyce had tugged on her ponytail. Standing there in the sand, she could feel the nape of her neck begin to ache and she knew that if she was able to recognize them so easily, then it stood to reason that they might recognize her in return, even despite her rushed dye job. It was safer just to stick to the

shadows. Safer, too, to avoid launching into a history of Bare Root. After all, Oona was supposed to be a first-time visitor, a newbie. She wasn't supposed to know what the rules had been fifteen years ago.

"Shelly!" Oona heard someone call, and she turned around. It was the woman from the Jeep, Vivian. Somehow, though they'd been given only a few minutes in their cabins, she'd not only changed clothes but had found the time to reapply her lipstick and pull her long black hair into a perfectly messy bun.

She was standing with a group of similarly well-styled women, waving, and before Oona could think of a good excuse, Shelly took her by the arm.

"Come on," she said. "I'll introduce you. I have a few things I want to ask Vivian anyway, since she seemed to know so much about the Center." Shelly dropped Oona's arm to pull her notebook from her coat pocket, but when Oona didn't follow she reached for her again.

"Come on. They won't bite," she teased, as she dragged Oona closer.

Oona said nothing, but she knew that even sharks could look harmless from far away.

"Hey, Vivian," Shelly said, once they were within earshot of the group. "You remember Maggie. From earlier?"

Oona thought she saw Shelly and Vivian exchange a look, but it happened so fast she couldn't decipher what it might mean. Were they onto her? Already?

"Of course," Vivian said. "You were on the ferry too. Rough waters. Do you get seasick?"

"Not usually," Oona said, which was the truth.

"Lucky." Vivian took a sip from her bottle of green juice. "I can still feel the rocking." She placed her palm on her stomach and spoke to the rest of the circle. "And I think I'm still a little nauseous, but

maybe that's just nerves. I can hardly believe I'm here. Like, am I really doing this?"

Every woman in the circle bobbed her head.

"But nothing else has worked," she continued. "I was telling Shelly on the ferry. We've done four rounds of IVF. Four! We've been trying for more than five years now."

"Gosh, we've been trying for eight," the woman to Oona's right admitted. Vivian held up her bottle and with a shy smile the woman clinked her own against it.

"Here's to not giving up hope," Shelly said, lifting her own glass in turn. "I know it can be difficult, but it's true that you never know what will happen. I've seen my own patients succeed when every expert told them there was no chance."

"Shelly's a doctor," Vivian explained. "A gynecologist."

Oona turned, surprised. "You are?"

"She's practically a saint," said Vivian. "She works at Planned Parenthood. Isn't that right, Shelly?"

"Yes, that's right. I do. When my older sister got pregnant at sixteen, she struggled. I went into this line of work with the goal of being able to help girls like her."

"That's so commendable," said Vivian. "Isn't that commendable?" She looked out at the rest of the circle, as if she were somehow responsible for Shelly's decency.

"So you're a doctor," said one of the other women. "And you still came . . . here? You still believe in—"

"I believe in following every lead," said Shelly, and there was something in her voice that made Oona think this was a speech she'd given many times before—to her friends, to her family, maybe even to her fellow doctors at the clinic. "Just because one person calls a thing magic, doesn't mean it isn't real. Take the ancient Egyptians,

for example. They used to apply an eyeliner that they thought was a gift bestowed by the god Horus to protect them from eye disease. Today, we don't necessarily believe that the eyeliner came from Horus, but when analytical chemists at the Louvre studied the composition of that eyeliner, they were able to identify two types of lead salt that, when applied to human skin, have the potential to help activate the immune system and kill the kind of bacteria that cause eye disease."

"Wow," said one of the other women.

Across the circle, Vivian nodded sagely. "I think that's such a wise way to look at all this."

Oona prickled at Vivian's overly earnest admiration, but Shelly seemed unfazed. As a doctor, she was probably used to her words being met with a certain kind of wonder. But Oona couldn't help it, it all just rubbed her the wrong way—reminded her of the Initiates who used to follow her mother around, gathering at her feet like disciples.

When Oona looked out across the crowd, her gaze landed on Holly. Just like Oona expected, she was wearing an Initiate's robe. As was the girl beside her, who looked even younger, with a teenager's sulky pout and a thorny tangle of black hair.

It was hard to tell in the dark, with the robe, but Oona didn't notice any obvious signs of a belly on the second Initiate, either. It was all so strange, she thought. For years, Ursula had insisted that the Center could only accept Initiates who were not only pregnant but had passed the point of viability, because any potential new coven member needed to be able to be tested for power. But now it seemed that she'd relaxed her rules. Unless, of course, the two Initiates were mothers who had left their children at home for the summer?

Oona squinted at the two girls standing by the fire. She supposed it was possible they were both already mothers, but it seemed unlikely

given how young they were. Plus, it wasn't just that they weren't pregnant. There was something else different about them too. When Oona was young, the Initiates had always seemed, well, desperate. They'd shown up at Bare Root looking hungry and afraid. They'd come with black eyes or busted lips or bruises. They'd come with track marks or burst veins. Holly and the other girl, though . . . they looked healthy. Well-loved, well-fed.

As she watched them, the Initiates both began stoking the fire's flames, and Oona couldn't help but think that if she'd been the one in the robe, she would have worried about the ashes, about the soot that was rising in the air to cling to their sleeves. She would have wanted to keep the robe pristine because, as a girl, there was nothing she'd wanted more than a robe of her own.

On days when her mother was out, teaching a workshop in the lodge or attending a birth in town, Oona used to sneak into her bedroom closet. She never dared to take down her mother's ceremonial whites or lay her hands on any of her ritual jewelry, but the Initiate robes were something else. Simple cotton and the same soft purple as the asters that grew in the shade of the lodge, they were lent out nearly every Summer Session when a new batch of young women—and they were usually *young* women—showed up at the Center's grounds. Most years, Ursula managed to recruit only one or two Initiates, but because the robes were rarely, if ever, replaced, it wasn't long before they started to look pretty ragged. By the time Oona was twelve, nearly every hem on every robe had begun to fray, and each robe carried its own set of mystery stains: grass or blood or berry juice. Still, when Oona pulled one out of her mother's closet and slipped it on over her head, when she tied its sash around her waist, she used to swear that she could feel the robe transform her, that as soon as she put it on she could feel her power begin to gather right there at the base of her spine.

Of course, it was only a few years later that Oona lost the chance at her own robe forever. She was eighteen when her mother expelled her from the coven and banished her to the mainland. The last thing she told her? *There's nothing left for you here.*

Now, standing on the beach, Oona could taste her own bitterness on her tongue, like copper. Or was that fear?

God, how she hoped her mother had been wrong.

In the circle by the water, the woman directly across from Oona dropped her voice and leaned in closer. "I've heard that she speaks in tongues."

A second woman added, "I had a friend who came two years ago. They tried for over a decade and never got anywhere. Not so much as a chemical pregnancy. But one summer with Ursula and that was that. She went home and got knocked up the very next day."

Distracted by Holly, by the fire, Oona had drifted out of the conversation, but at the sound of her mother's name she tuned back in.

"They say Ursula conceived a child on her own," added the woman with eight years of fertility treatments under her belt. She was so soft-spoken, it almost sounded like she was whispering.

Shelly opened her notebook. "I heard that too," she said. "Someone told me she gave birth to . . . a daughter? Is that right?"

The woman nodded. "Immaculate conception, they say."

"No," Vivian countered. It was clear to Oona, even just a few minutes into knowing her, that Vivian was the sort who liked to be an authority on things. "It wasn't immaculate conception. It wasn't religious. It was parthenogenesis. It happens all the time in the animal world. Bees, snails, even snakes and lizards—the females of those species can all reproduce on their own."

"Gosh, is that really true?" Eight Years asked, first of Vivian and

then of the rest of the circle. She turned her big blue eyes on Oona. "Is that true?"

But what could Oona say? Parthenogenesis. It sounded good. And while it was the first time she had ever heard of it, that didn't mean it wasn't true. As Oona was growing up, though, her mother had always explained it differently. *I spoke you into being.* That's what she used to say. It had left Oona in awe of the sheer power of her mother's will, the dominance of her desires. But it had also left Oona feeling, in some way, proud. As she grew, she came to question a lot about her mother and their relationship, came to wonder if perhaps she wasn't a disappointment, not the daughter Ursula had imagined when she'd willed her into existence all those years before. But for all the worries and suspicions, there was one thing Oona never doubted: that once, at least, she was wanted; once, she was loved.

"I think—" Oona began, but she never got to finish her sentence because she was drowned out by the sound of a splash. Though the storm had passed some hours before, the waves were still white-capped and frothy. All the while she'd been standing there, they'd been rushing up to the shore, crashing against the rocks. The sound had been loud at first, but Oona had gotten used to it. The dull roar had faded to the background, become as gently lulling as white noise. Now that steady rumble had been punctured.

There was somebody in the water, and Oona's first instinct was to scream, to call for help like she'd been trained to do since she was little. For while the water in Casco Bay was never warm, in the summer at least it was possible to swim in. As a child Oona herself had often braved the cold. But there was nothing brave about wading out to sea in the spring. That was just stupid—suicidal. It had been a frigid winter. Oona doubted the water was any warmer than thirty-five

degrees, and at that temperature a person could get hypothermia in a matter of minutes. In cold like that, the easiest thing to do was drown.

But just as she turned to cry for help, Oona felt a hand on her shoulder. Shelly was pointing back up the beach, to the base of the hill where the looming pine trees cast a long shadow against the moon's silver glow. "She's here," Shelly whispered.

Oona didn't have to ask who she meant. The reverence in Shelly's voice, the hush that had descended upon the circle, told her everything she needed to know.

On the ferry ride over from Portland, on the long drive away from the docks, Oona had tried to resist imagining this moment—her first glimpse of her mother in almost fifteen years. But when she *had* thought of it, when she'd allowed herself that small indulgence, the very idea left her clammy and cotton-mouthed. Just picturing it back in the ferry's bathroom, she'd been able to feel the blood thrumming in her throat. So to reassure herself she'd gazed into the little mirror over the sink, no bigger than a porthole. Her image there had been a comfort, proof that she was very likely unrecognizable with her hair dyed a mousy brown and cut to just above her shoulders. On Marrow Island, Oona had been known for her mane of copper curls, but as soon as she'd held that ferry ticket in her hand, she'd known that what she would need most once she reached Bare Root was the ability to blend in, to go unnoticed. If she wanted even the chance of making it through the long weekend, of receiving the protection spell at the Beltane celebration on Monday night, then she couldn't risk getting caught.

Still, when Ursula emerged from the shadows and the firelight hit her face, Oona had to fight the urge to run. Tall and square-jawed, her mother had always cut an imposing figure, and the past fifteen years seemed to have done little to dampen the effect. If anything,

Ursula appeared even more intimidating, with her eyes the color of deep sea and her long white hair styled in a fishtail braid.

Standing in the sand, Oona had never felt so exposed. A small voice in her head told her to step back, to take shelter among the circle of women surrounding her, but when she went to pick up her feet she found she couldn't move. She couldn't do anything but stare—at the new lines that creased her mother's forehead, at the long coil of white hair that whipped behind her as she strode down toward the water's edge. For one frightening moment, Oona felt as if she'd traded places with whoever had made that splash. The warmth of the fire seemed to ebb away, and without it she was left paralyzed, too stiff with cold to swim.

But just as quick as it came on, the feeling passed when Oona saw Holly stand up in the surf. She hadn't noticed either Holly or the other Initiate rush down to the water; she'd been too busy looking at her mother. But while Ursula stood on the shore, Holly waded through the waves with her arm wrapped around the waist of another woman.

No, Oona thought as she watched them. *Not a woman, a girl.* A tiny thing with limbs like sapling branches. She was still a ways back, but Oona could see that she was wearing some kind of long white dress. As the water swirled about her knees, her ankles, it clung to her bony chest, to the tight drum of her belly. It was enough to make Oona sick.

Not again, she thought. Prayed.

And then the girl was kneeling in the sand, coughing, sputtering. Shivering, but alive.

Oona closed her eyes in relief, and Shelly squeezed her shoulder. "Thank god," Shelly whispered.

Across the circle, Vivian rolled her eyes. "Of course it's her," she said.

Eight Years bobbed her head, seemingly in agreement. Oona had met them only minutes earlier, but already it seemed clear that Eight Years was the nodding type, ready to second anything someone as imperious as Vivian had to say.

"Do you know her?" Oona asked.

Vivian's eyes lit. It was unnerving. "Don't you?" Her lips curled into something like a smile. "Take another look."

Oona glanced back at the water. Both Holly and the girl had gotten to their feet and made their way back up the beach. Now they were standing, huddled together, in front of the fire. As Oona watched, Ursula draped a heavy wool blanket over each of their shoulders. Oona turned to Vivian again. "I don't know what you mean."

"She doesn't look familiar?"

"Ohh," said a woman from the other end of the circle. "She's that girl, isn't she? The one whose mother runs that magazine. What's it called? *Glow*?"

"It's a blog," Vivian said. "Well, it's practically an empire, with the website and the newsletter, her social media following, the cookbooks, and the line of candles and bath salts. But yes, that's Astrid Nystrom's daughter. Remember her? Astrid used to post pictures of her all the time in her mini-couture, with all those blond curls. Now look at her. Knocked up at sixteen, and by some junkie at rehab, or at least that's what I've heard."

"No!" the other woman gasped. "At rehab? Really?"

Vivian shrugged and smiled her Cheshire Cat smile. "That's just what I've heard."

"From whom?" Shelly asked.

"What?"

"How do you know all of this about . . ." Shelly's eyes flicked back toward the fire. "What's her name?"

"Gemma," the other woman said. "I remember seeing pictures of her when she was, like, five years old. She was the cutest thing. Big brown eyes. Rosy cheeks. She looked like an angel."

Vivian snorted. "Well, she's clearly no angel. From what I've read, she's had some serious issues with drugs. So Astrid sent her here to stay clean and wait out the pregnancy. Too late for an abortion, I guess."

"Poor girl," Shelly said, softly.

Oona touched her stomach. "How far along is she, do you think?"

"I've heard five months," Vivian said.

Shelly frowned. "Tragic."

And Vivian nodded, newly solemn. "It really is."

But Oona could tell from the pinch in her mouth, from the cant of her eyebrows, that she wasn't feeling what Shelly was feeling—some kind of pity. Instead, Vivian looked bitter. No, she looked jealous. Oona looked around the circle: They all did.

With a spike of fear, she snatched her hands back from her belly. Better not to draw attention, she thought. If her goal was to blend in, then she couldn't risk becoming the focus of these women's ire the way Gemma Nystrom had.

Oona peered over at the fire. Gemma. Where had she heard that name before? And, of course, that's when it came to her: the chalkboard between their bedroom doors. Gemma was her roommate.

Oona glanced at Shelly and found Shelly was already looking at her. Apparently, she'd arrived at the same realization. This girl—this half-drowned harpy—was theirs.

By the refreshment table the speakers cut out, and when Oona looked over her shoulder she saw that Holly was leading Gemma up the hill and into the woods. If Oona had pulled a stunt like Gemma had, back when she still lived at the Center, her mother would've

dragged her away. She would've grabbed a fistful of the keys Oona wore like a necklace and pulled till the string bit into the back of her neck. But Gemma . . . Oona watched as Holly draped her arm gently around Gemma's shoulders, hugged her to her side to keep her warm. Gemma was being treated like what she was: a child in need of coddling. Fragile, delicate. Maybe even ill.

Oona turned away, surprised and more than a little embarrassed by the resentment she felt bubble up inside her. When she looked back at the beach, she saw that Joyce was standing on an overturned apple crate, waving her short, muscular arms to gather the women close. Behind her, Ursula was already sitting cross-legged in the sand, her white silk robes pooled around her so from where Oona stood it looked like her mother was floating in a circle of light.

"I think it's time," Shelly said.

Vivian's head jerked up. It appeared she hadn't noticed, but as soon as her gaze landed on Ursula she took off. Without so much as a goodbye, she started power-walking toward the fire, determined—it seemed to Oona—to beat the others and get a front-row seat.

"Hello, everyone!" Joyce called out once the thirty or so women on the beach had collected around her. They stood in a layered semicircle, row after row like shark teeth. "And welcome to those of you who came in on the later ferry today. I know you missed our traditional Welcome Talk and likely have a few questions about the layout of the Center, your schedule, and the times you'll be expected for daily meditation and meals. In your cabins, you should find a map as well as both a daily and a weekly calendar. And of course, our staff is always available to help. I'm Joyce," she said, moving aside one of her thick gray braids to gesture to her name tag. "And over there are: Lally, Donna, Carol, and Alice. We're missing Holly right now, but

over by the fire you'll see our other Initiate for the summer: Inez. Inez, can you wave so everyone can see you?"

Begrudgingly, as if the act pained her, the younger, darker-haired Initiate raised one hand in a kind of salute.

"Holly and Inez will both be at morning meditation, which will be held here on the beach at seven o'clock. If you need anything, just come find them in the morning. Okay?" Joyce asked the Mothers, and around the circle Oona saw their heads jog. "Okay." She clapped once. "Then let's begin. Inez?"

At the sound of her name, Inez stepped up to the fire with a tin pail of seawater. When Joyce nodded, she cast the water out over the flames. It took a few pails, a few resolute trips back and forth from the water's edge, but eventually Inez succeeded in dousing the bonfire. As the women watched in silence, the remaining embers hissed and glowed.

Oona knew the next step so well—had spent so many summers spying from the scrub grass—that she nearly sat down before she was told. At the last moment, though, she caught herself and she waited: for Joyce to pick up the apple crate and exit her make-do stage, and for the women around her to grow quiet and shift their attention over to Ursula, who was still sitting with her eyes closed in the sand.

Only once the circle was silent did Ursula speak, and even then she didn't open her eyes. "This is a moon fertility ritual," she announced, her voice rising above the sound of the waves. "It's how I always like to begin our Summer Sessions here at Bare Root. Please." She gestured toward the beach around her. "Join me."

Immediately, Vivian rushed to sit by Ursula's side, and the rest of the women scurried after her, inching this way and that until they all sat shoulder-to-shoulder in one large circle. Without the fire, the wind

coming off the water was chilling, but at least the sand, so close to where the fire had burned, was still warm.

"Now, as many of you have, I hope, noticed, tonight is a full moon. A Pink Supermoon, to be exact. So it's the perfect time to take advantage of the moon's power and the pull of the tides to cleanse ourselves of whatever negative energies we may have brought with us to Marrow. Maybe, last month, you received a disappointing diagnosis—PCOS, DOR. Maybe your IUI didn't take or your egg retrieval yielded no viable embryos. Maybe you suffered yet another miscarriage. Whatever it is that broke your heart, that brought you here, it's time to say thank you to it because we are grateful that it got you to this place of healing, and then it's time to let it go. So"—Ursula looked out over the circle, and Oona followed her gaze as her mother's eyes lifted up to the moon shimmering over the water, to the stars, now bright without the fire's flames—"I want you all to close your eyes," she said. "And listen to the waves. Do you hear them? Listen as they crash against the rocks. And then the undertow. Try to feel it, the pull of the moon, the tide. That tug, can you feel it? Feel it deep down in your belly. Now picture your negative energy. Name in your mind the thing that hurts, and force that energy down to your core. Imagine it there, like a ball of light. Feel its heat, pulsing. Then take a deep breath in through your nose, out through your mouth, and imagine pushing that ball of light out into the world, imagine you're giving birth and push, push, push!"

Oona cracked an eye and snuck a glance at the women on either side of her. To her right, Shelly was panting, breathing in short little gasps. While to Oona's left, Eight Years had furrowed her brow and screwed up her eyes, like she was attempting to make out something far in the distance. They were trying too hard, Oona knew. Vivian too. Sitting in the sand next to Ursula, she was grunting so much it sounded

like she was constipated. It took everything Oona had inside her not to laugh like she had when she was little, spying from up above.

"Now," Ursula said, and afraid of getting caught, Oona clamped her eyes shut again. "Now that the bad energy is out of your body, imagine the waves carrying it away. Picture the water rushing in, and then the pull of the tide. That power. Dragging, dragging. Take a breath in through your nose, breathe in the moon's white light. And then out through your mouth, releasing those final dregs of hurt, of heartbreak. Breathe out that dingy gray light. Now open your eyes. Do you see it leaving your body?"

Around the circle, Oona heard the women begin to giggle and gasp. They could see it, they said. Look! Look! And indeed when Oona peeked open one eye, she could see it too: Each time she exhaled, a tiny cloud formed before her, gray as dirty bathwater. It was a relief, she found, to see it all made so real. All the bad energy she'd felt stewing inside her now for months, years—all the loneliness and bitterness and frustration, all the anxiety and angst, all the fear. There on the beach, she could see it all. She could reach out and touch it. And while she knew that if given the chance Jacob would find some way to sap the magic from that moment—explain that it was just condensation, their warm breath in the cold night air—seeing that cloud of fog made Oona feel better. After only a few minutes, she found that she was able to picture her last miscarriage without becoming dizzy and weak.

"When you were accepted to this year's Summer Session," Ursula said, "you were sent a packet of materials in the mail. Do you remember?"

Beside Oona, Vivian nodded. Eight Years reached for Oona's hand in the dark.

"You were asked to spend some time thinking about which fertil-

ity goddess spoke to you, which one you were going to spend your time here, and hopefully ever after, calling upon and praying to. Some of you probably chose Demeter, goddess of fertility and the harvest. Or maybe Diana, protector of childbirth. I won't ask you to name your goddess now. We'll get to that in the days to come. For now, I just want you to close your eyes again and picture her. Imagine your goddess sitting there, right in front of you. What does she look like?"

All around the circle, Oona watched the women dutifully close their eyes. Eight Years pulled her hands back into her own lap and knit her fingers together. They were all concentrating so hard to conjure their goddesses—women they likely imagined looking something like Ursula. Clad in long, billowing white robes. Hair in a loosened braid. Silver jewelry glinting in the moonlight. But Oona knew that was child's play. If a goddess were to really sit down in the sand before you, she wouldn't look like a fairy stepped out of a dream. She would be a nightmare. The sea incarnate. A woman birthed from a storm. All whipping winds and swelling waves. She would be a fury. Or at least, that was how Hekate had appeared to her.

As a girl, Oona had spent years waiting to see her first goddess. She'd expected that it would be Persephone because her mother had told her that Persephone was always the first goddess to visit a young witch. In fact, that was one way her mother tested for power: Any girl nearing puberty was instructed to report her first day of menstruation, and then the coven waited to see if Persephone would appear. But as desperate as Oona had been to gain access to Lally's herb stores and the coven's spell books, she'd never trusted herself to lie convincingly about seeing Persephone. For as long as Oona could remember, her mother had insisted that she was not, and never would be, a witch. Magic, she told Oona often and definitively, did not run through her blood. So Oona had known that if she claimed to see

Persephone, Ursula wouldn't simply take her at her word. She would demand proof; and when Oona could not provide that proof, she would be found out, humiliated, punished. So no, Oona had never even considered trying to lie. But she'd also never considered admitting the truth, because if she had, her mother would have written her off for good. So instead, for years, she'd taken each pair of her stained panties and buried them deep in the woods.

It hadn't been much of a plan, but then again Oona had never been much of a planner. That was another of Ursula's regular complaints: Too often, Oona flew by the seat of her pants. She lacked self-control and discipline. She was impulsive. Still, for a time, her plan had worked. Lally convinced her mother that Oona was just a late bloomer, and Oona, for her part, spent all her free time trying to will Persephone to appear. She wasn't allowed to attempt any real magic—she wouldn't be considered a Maiden until she saw Persephone and therefore wasn't allowed to even *study* Craft—but she tried yoga, meditation, and lucid dreaming. She tried acupuncture and Reiki. She even snuck some of Lally's herbal pills. But nothing worked. At least not until that last summer on the island, when she went on a hike with Jacob up the east-side cliffs.

They'd just reached the peak, the tallest point on the island, when Oona looked down and saw something floating in the ocean. No, not something. Some*one*. She and Jacob took off running, but Oona was the one who reached the shore first. And that's when she saw her—Hekate—rising out of the water. Her hair dark and lank as kelp. Her skin the kind of white that signals death on the water—sun-bleached, like the belly of a washed-up seal. She was carrying the body in her arms, like a sleeping child, bearing it through the waves' froth and tumult. And then, suddenly, Jacob was next to Oona in the sand, sprinting past her, kneeling over the body in the surf, and Hekate was gone.

In the circle, Ursula asked the women to call upon their goddesses to help them on their journeys, then she told them all to place their hands upon their wombs. "Picture yourself pregnant," she said. "Feel your round, full belly and the little baby kicking and rolling inside."

As Shelly began to rub her stomach, Oona placed her hands back on her belly and closed her eyes.

"Talk to your baby," Ursula commanded. "Tell them how much you love them, how much you long to be their mama. Let them know that you are ready for them now and ask them if they need anything from you before they come. Ask, and then listen."

In the sand, Oona tried to fight back her unease. All around her, she saw women mouthing messages to their children, not just unborn but unconceived. And while Oona understood their desperation—she was nothing if not desperate, sneaking back into her hometown like a thief—their sincerity, their *sweetness*, left her feeling like a fraud. She wanted the pregnancy, yes. She wanted the title of Mother. But the baby? She hadn't allowed herself to think much about what would happen after the birth. All she'd known when she'd left Portland was that she was unhappy. More than unhappy. That every morning, she'd woken up longing to go home. But was she meant to say all of that to her unborn child? Surely not.

Defeated, Oona opened her eyes and looked out at the water. When she'd first told Jacob what she'd seen that day by the cliffs, he'd assured her that she must have been mistaken. It had just been a trick of the light, he'd said, or a seal's head bobbing in the surf. He'd meant it as a comfort, of course, but looking back, Oona couldn't help but feel gaslit. Once, she'd thought that Jacob was the only person who loved her without expectation, who thought she was magic even without her mother's gifts. But now . . . now she wasn't so sure. Because it had turned out that Jacob was just like everybody else. He,

too, wanted her to be different. Not the same kind of different, but different all the same. And while she'd thought it might be a relief to finally stop trying so hard to prove that her mother was wrong about her inheritance, to give up her nightly attempts at lucid dreaming, quit the acupuncture and the Reiki, the truth was that living on the mainland had been just as hard as living on the island. Harder, even.

Jacob was often gone, crewing for a research vessel out at sea, and Oona's job cleaning motel rooms had been far from fulfilling. No, as she'd tried to explain countless times to Jacob, she needed more. There had to be more to the world, she thought, than unmade beds and dirty toilets. There had to be more to *her*. That's why she'd returned.

It was clear by now, twenty years after she first got her period, that she was never going to see Persephone, but she still thought there was a chance that she had power. In another life, she might've begged her mother or Lally to test her the way they tested the Initiates at the end of every Summer Session, or the way they tested the witches who were not brought up in the coven but who joined later on in their lives. She might've been able to prove herself, she thought, if she'd been allowed to remain on Marrow. But of course she hadn't been allowed to stay. She'd been banished, exiled. And now her only hope was that she could start over. If she could just become a Mother, then even without Bare Root, she'd come into her power and gain enough strength to practice Craft on her own. Then she could start her own coven, like her mother had done. And once she had her own coven, her own community, then maybe she would be happy. Happy enough, anyway.

Sitting there in the sand, Oona heard Shelly mutter something under her breath. It sounded like "please." And without thinking, Oona reached for her belly again. *Please*, she thought. *Please be real.*

She wasn't sure whom she was talking to—the baby or Hekate—but begging felt familiar. She'd pleaded that same way a dozen times before as she lay alone on the floor of their rental's tiny bathroom, unable to stanch the flow of blood. It had never worked before, so Oona wasn't sure why she thought this time would be any different, why this *place* would be any different, but still she kept asking—praying—for help, until she felt Shelly shift beside her, heard Eight Years begin to stand up.

The ritual was over, and she felt no different. Nothing had changed for her. She was not transformed. She was just a stupid woman sitting in the dark, playing at witchcraft. She might as well have been at a sleepover, whispering "light as a feather, stiff as a board."

When Ursula stood and began her speech to end the ritual, Oona opened her eyes. The cliffs she'd hiked with Jacob were still about three miles away, but the ocean in front of her was the same ocean. If Hekate were anywhere, Oona had thought she'd be there. But that, she supposed, was just wishful thinking. No, Jacob was probably right. She hadn't seen anything that day at the cliffs. No goddess had ever appeared to her, which meant that she had no powers. The ritual she'd performed had failed and there was no curse.

She was not her mother's daughter and she didn't belong—not to the Bare Root coven or to any other. So there was no use waiting for Beltane. In the morning, she told herself, she could go.

But no sooner had she gotten to her feet then she saw something dark move out of the corner of her eye. "Did you see that?" she asked Shelly, who was standing beside her. Oona pointed at the water.

"See what?" Shelly asked.

"It looked like—" Oona started, but before she got a chance to finish her sentence she felt them: the flutters. So much stronger than before. "I thought I saw something in the water."

Vivian stepped closer. "Probably just a cormorant."

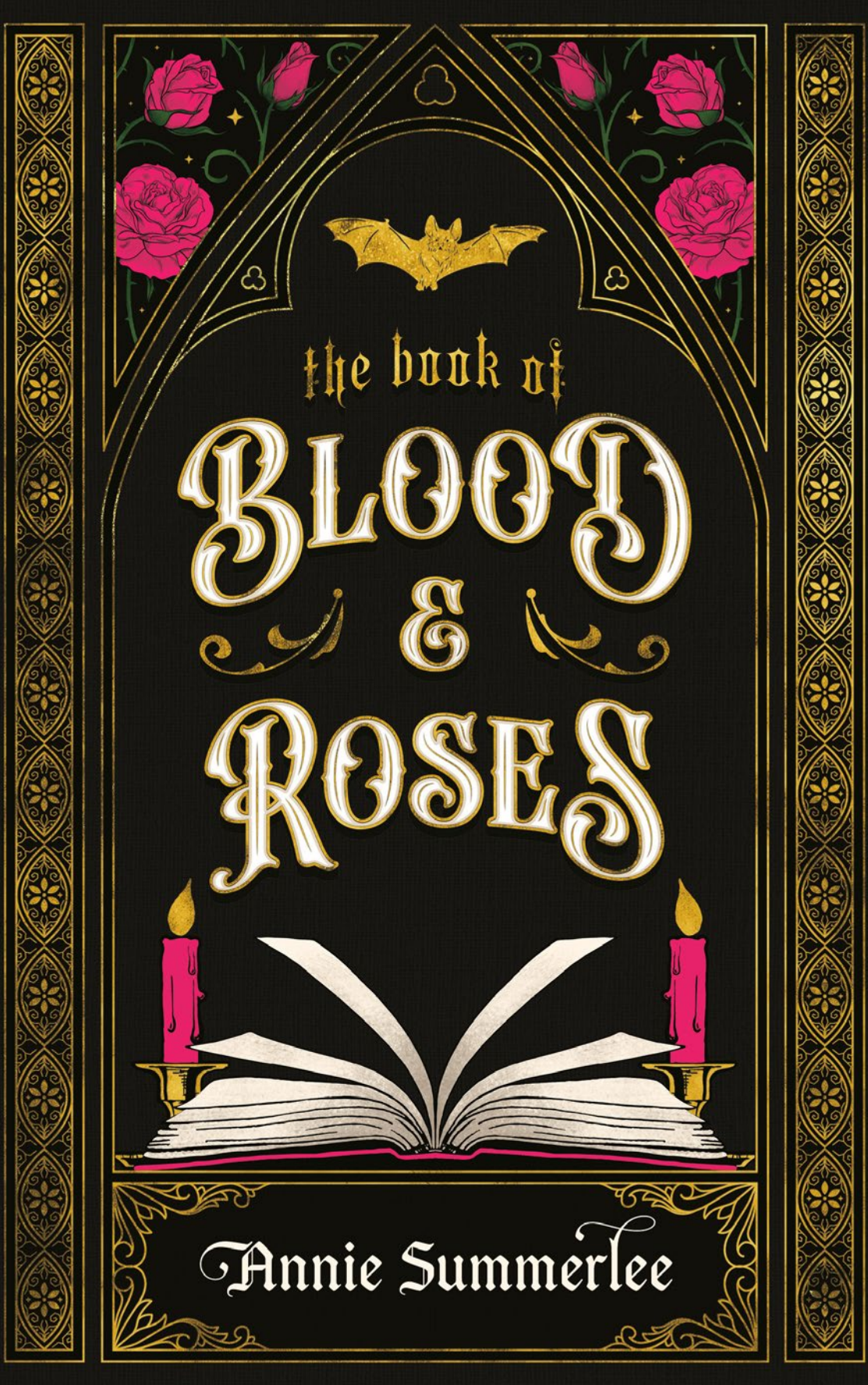
"Maybe," Oona said, but in the dark she gripped her belly tighter. The baby—she could feel it moving, *swimming* in there. It didn't make sense—it was, as Jacob would say, utterly illogical—but somehow she had the feeling that the baby had felt it, the presence of whatever Oona had thought she'd spotted offshore. Some kind of waterfowl, as Vivian had suggested, or a seal, like Jacob had guessed all those years before. But then again . . .

"Don't forget!" Ursula called as the women began filtering up the beach toward the woods. "Morning meditation is at seven tomorrow!"

Shelly turned to Oona. "Do you want to walk back with me? I'm headed home."

"Home," Oona repeated under her breath. It was hard to believe that she was finally back, finally allowed to call some tiny part of Marrow home again. It felt so good, so *right*.

She might even sleep, she thought, as she followed Shelly back up the beach. For the first time in more than a decade, she might not startle awake missing the sounds of the sea.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chapter TWO

It's a beautiful coffin. Long, elegant, built upon a cabinet. A golden moon, surrounded by a ring of thorned vines, decorates the lid.

I squeeze my eyes shut, certain that it'll be gone when I open them again. But it remains there.

Where there's a coffin, there's a vampire.

I rush back outside. The number etched into the wood is 904. *Jesus Christ.*

I take a deep breath. I'll head to the registration office. Contact the human dean, if necessary. *There's been a mistake,* I'll say. I clench my hands to keep them from shaking, and step further in. If I'd explored the room in its entirety before the welcome lecture, I would have seen it.

I don't blink as I stare at the coffin. After a moment's hesitation, I tug at my watch strap, pulling out the silver chain. I can kill the leech now. But it's dark outside. Meaning my *roommate* is probably up already, and on its way to class.

I slide the chain back into my watch and explore the bathroom. It

has a large old-fashioned tub and a walk-in shower. All the appliances look old but are impeccably clean. There are two sinks, one with a mirror, the other with a screen and a camera. I press a button, and the screen comes to life. The creature's sink has a toothbrush balanced on top of a blue bottle of mouthwash. I can always drop one of my supplements into the liquid. A quick and easy kill.

I take off my glasses and splash my face with water. The cold helps. As much as I don't want it to be true, my roommate is a vampire.

I BARELY GET any sleep during my first night at Tynahine. I try to keep my eyes open, waiting for the leech to arrive, but soon, the usual nightmares start to invade me.

I've had this dream before: I'm at my parents' funeral, but instead of the closed-casket service my aunt organised in real life, in my dream their coffins are wide open, revealing their mangled bodies. My extended family don't show any horror at the sight. Instead, they ask me when the reception is starting, and if blood will be available.

Someone, a cousin, asks me what happened to my parents, and I try my best to explain, all while my cousin sharpens their fangs, not too interested in what I say. Instead, they point at the coffins, where my parents have started to stir, their skin knitting back together as fangs stretch out between their lips.

"It's your turn, Rebecca," my father says, before the nightmare ends.

Even when I wake, the images are stuck in my mind. My parents weren't attacked by *ordinary* vampires. They weren't compelled to offer their veins, nor were they taken to a blood party. Instead, they were killed by *parched* vampires. A vampire becomes parched if they spend seven days without drinking blood. They transform into monsters stripped of all human features, with bloated bodies, elongated limbs, and razor-sharp teeth.

And even though the monsters that killed my parents were completely feral, their death wasn't a random accident. Someone had

calculated it: My parents had won a trip down to London, to dine in a nice restaurant and stay in a fancy hotel. At three a.m., their corpses were found in a car without a license plate, drained of blood and torn to shreds.

I went down to London to identify the bodies. It was my first time in the city, my first time out of Scotland. And in the mortuary, instead of a police officer, I found Penny. She was the one who lifted the sheet covering their faces. She told me what kind of monster did it. Then, after the funeral in Saint Ignatius, she offered me a train ticket and a chance at revenge, and I seized it as if it was my last breath.

I should sleep, I think, turning. If I don't, I'll be far too tired come tomorrow. I pull the sheets up to my neck, closing my eyes, just before a soft beeping sound comes from the front door. Instinctively, I reach for the stake hidden under my pillow. The warm wood slows my racing heart, and I remain still as the front door clicks open.

They're finally here.

The footsteps that follow are quiet, careful, as though my roommate doesn't want to wake me. My throat tightens. Maybe they've got a syringe with them, and will steal some of my blood that way, thinking I won't notice. I'll let them. The garlic in my blood won't kill them quite as fast as a stake to the heart will, but that kind of death will be far more painful.

I breathe as quietly as I can, waiting for them to open the canopy. Instead, their steps turn to our shared bathroom. Seconds later, I hear the shower. My heart is racing, and they can probably hear it, can't they? I hold the stake so tight my palm aches. I know I can't kill them, but the weapon still calms my nerves.

Minutes pass and the shower stops. I hear the rustling of clothes, and I sit, waiting. I glance at my watch.

Just when I was wondering if three a.m. is a bit early for a vampire to go to bed, I hear the front door open once again, then slam shut. My breath slips through the gap between my front teeth, and I lift the curtains. The room is empty. The vampire's side of the room is exactly as it was before I went to bed. Messy but deserted. The only

difference is the bathroom, steam-filled, with a damp towel hanging from the heated towel rack.

I go back to bed, every muscle in my body tense. Adrenaline still rushes through my veins and, beneath that, the frustration of an unfinished mission, an enemy escaping unscathed.

Unsurprisingly, the next morning I am exhausted. The black curtains that separate the room are shut, just as they were when I arrived. Red hair dye runs down the drain as I shower, and when I get back out, I realise the vampire's toothbrush has moved. Yesterday it was at a ninety-degree angle over the mouthwash. Now it's at an eighty-degree angle. They must have come in here again after I fell asleep. Their towel is gone, the floor is clean, and there are no traces of blood.

I open the curtains that separate our room. On the right wall is a false window with a picture of the Highlands drenched in sunlight. Above it is a shelf full of books, thick tomes on different painters, some I've heard of, like Frida Kahlo, Gentileschi, and Van Gogh, followed by a dozen more with names that, based on the books' opulent bindings, I imagine are vampire artists.

Just as I pick up one of these books, I picture the leech doing what I'm doing now. What if it has already rummaged through all my things? Before my thoughts spiral, I tug the curtains shut.

I really can't do this.

I can't stay here. Now that I've calmed down, now that I'm thinking clearly, I know there's no way I can share a room with a vampire. I won't be able to sleep, I won't be able to focus. I skim over the campus map, looking for the registration office. Surely, if I ask for a new room, they'll say yes?

Regardless of what I think is the best course of action, I have to tell Penny first. I leave the room and head to the end of the hallway, where there's a small common area. A bunch of bookcases and three green velvet armchairs. I stand next to a small and blacked-out window, from where I have a perfect view of the hallway.

I dial her number, and she picks up after a minute. Even before she speaks, I can sense her bad mood. "I told you *I* would contact *you,*" she says, and I force myself to ignore her, clearing my throat. I look up, studying the cross vaults of the ceiling, and wait. "What is it?"

"I have a roommate," I say, stepping over to the window. The shutters don't budge when I try to open them. I thought Penny would have snapped at me immediately, told me that *of course* I have a roommate, and that I shouldn't be complaining. But instead, she hesitates.

"You're not supposed to have one," she says. I try to picture her in her office, in the run-down convent, scribbling this conversation into her black notebook.

"And it's a vampire," I add. A heartbeat later, I say: "I'm going to ask for a new room."

"No," she says. "Any other student would be glad to have a vampire roommate. Jealous, even. Who are they?"

"I don't know," I say.

I hear a familiar sigh, somewhere between irritation and exhaustion. "As soon as you know who they are, tell me. But be careful," Penny says. "Some vampires can be deceivingly *friendly*."

"Don't be ridiculous." Frustration builds up inside me. But once she hangs up, I force myself to calm down. If Penny says I can't ask for a new room, I won't. I won't disappoint her.

According to Penny, the hidden library is somewhere in the depths of the campus's underbelly. A web of tunnels, centuries old, built for vampires to cross the campus during the summer. I can imagine the new human arrivals are not welcome down there.

I pull out Penny's compass as I eat breakfast. It's a clunky thing from the 1850s that's supposed to help me make my way through the tunnels. While I'd been hoping for something a little more modern, Penny said it was all I'd need.

The white needles are supposedly made of vampire dust, and the

black background is a mix of cobalt, blood, and silver. Penny herself used it eleven years ago, when she broke out three hunters from a Council prison. They'd been kept in a dungeon, hidden deep beneath a labyrinth, and after she got them back to headquarters, she became the youngest hunter to ever be promoted to Stake. She hasn't told me about any of her missions after that one.

I stare at the compass, knowing it will also lead me to a promotion.

The fireplace in Tynarrich's dining hall warms my legs. I'm already getting used to the smell of ashes and old books that clings to every corner of the hall.

Breakfast is warm porridge, with a sprinkle of salt and cold semi-skimmed milk. Back in the convent, breakfast was usually coffee and protein bars. And before that, when my parents were alive, toast and runny eggs. The tables around me fill with groups of fellow humans talking excitedly about their new classes and lecturers. I search for Stephan amongst them, but he's probably still asleep.

I'm not changing my sleep schedule. I'm going to find *The Book of Blood and Roses* and get out of here before my first week is over.

The first tunnel I come across is directly beneath Tynarrich, with deep brown bricks and a low ceiling. Lanterns cast an amber glow on the dark stones. I draw out Penny's compass and shine my torch on it. The white needle is ticking back and forth like a metronome, but after I glare at it for half a minute, it settles on north.

"Here we go," I whisper. The hall curves and then forks into three separate tunnels. I pull out my notebook and sketch the first lines of what will hopefully become a coherent map.

There are two types of tunnels. I'll call group one the *modern* kind, although they could very well be like the leeches who built them, ancient but well-preserved. Their walls are made of grey bricks, smooth cement filling each joint. Vintage-looking gas lamps line the walls, just two feet apart, all fitted with LED bulbs. These tunnels, the modern ones, have signs pointing to different buildings. *Ambrose Hall. Palau Collection. Traquair Hall. Union Hall B.*

Then there are the old tunnels, serpentine, dark, following no

rhyme or reason, some ceilings too low, others too high. Dead ends, broken stairways, puddles, and white weeds. They're on a constant incline, ramps or steps, sometimes so steep I'm forced to hang onto the wall. And while the modern tunnels are bright, here you're lucky if you find a single lamp. If I had to guess, the secret library will be at the end of one of these old tunnels. But after an hour mapping the network, I have a feeling I've only scratched the surface.

I REACH THE first Integration lecture three minutes late, and spot Stephan all the way down on the second row. He sees me just as I walk in, motioning at the empty space he's saved for me. Luckily enough, I'm not the only one late; Professor Clemence, a human in his late fifties, tells us he got a little lost on his way here.

After projecting a syllabus and a reading list, he lets us know, in a matter-of-fact way, that anyone who fails Integration will be expelled. Apparently, there are hundreds of equally motivated students waiting to take our place if we don't exceed his expectations.

"The Old Council," Clemence says, walking across his wooden platform with a piece of snapped chalk between his fingers. His hair is shaved, and he's wearing a Steve Jobs–like turtleneck. "Unlike modern vampires, the Old Council were very much in favour of using humans as a source of food, with no regard to their well-being."

My knuckles whiten. Did the *modern* vampires who killed my family care for their well-being?

"However, after the massacres of 1781, and the Coup of the Heirs, which we will delve into during your second semester, nine of the ten families that comprise the Council went through an *enlightenment.* It is around this period that we find the first attempts to create synthetic blood. And during those attempts, the rights of human feeders grow."

I roll my eyes, and his gaze, his naïve and brainwashed gaze, falls on mine just in that unfortunate moment. "Anything you'd like to add, Miss . . . ?"

"Cassie Smith," I say. I clear my throat, and heads turn, necks craning in my direction. So much for not drawing attention to myself. "The president of the New Council, Ares Astra, governed the old one for over a thousand years, didn't he? Even if the rest of the board is different, if the one calling the shots has been in power for so long, how can we be sure things have really changed?" I ask, trying to sound curious instead of insolent.

"Great question," he says, twirling the chalk stick between his fingers. "Ares Astra is still in charge because unlike the other family heads, he was able to adapt. He also wasn't killed by his offspring, like his peers. Though his actions in the past may have been dubious, he is very much a reformed man."

Does his boot taste nice? I want to ask. But I've already drawn too much attention to myself. Clemence moves on, stopping on the invention of synthetic blood in 1908. "We'll see this in the second semester," he says. The ramifications of the invention, the subsequent splintering of vampire society, and then the victory of the New Council over its dissidents.

"That was brave," Stephan whispers, and I sigh. "You're having dinner with us, aren't you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course not," he says.

At dinner, around the time most vampires are probably starting to wake, Stephan and I make our way to one of the dining halls. "Tynarrich is too busy," he says, already an expert. "Plus, Ambrose Hall is *much* better." We enter a large building in the campus village, and I stop in my tracks when I see what's inside. An illusion decorates the walls, projecting an image of trees, identical to those outside, with branches arching over the ceiling. The light from the projection that shines on my face feels natural and warm. I gawk up at the clouds, trying to figure out how it works, all while Stephan walks ahead, heading towards one of a dozen food stalls.

Ambrose Hall has been set up to resemble a food festival. Bunting hangs between tree branches, along with strings of fairy lights that will become brighter as the false sky darkens. There's a bandstand in the

corner, currently empty, but a few instrument cases are set up against the wall, waiting for their owners. The place is huge, with countless tables stretching across the hall and queues forming between them.

There's one stall in particular that makes my stomach turn. A large sign on top of it reads *BLOOD BLOOD BLOOD*. My heart starts racing as I look around. I must get used to them. I grab a wrap from a Greek food stall, and when I spot Stephan again, he's already found a table. I suck a breath in through my teeth.

I knew Ife would be here. But she's not alone.

I walk over, steadying my trembling hand. The feeling of being watched from every corner crawls across my skin, and I try my best to ignore it. The garlic supplements are hiding my scent. No one will try to attack me, even if this place is ridden with leeches. "Mind if I join you?" I ask upon reaching the old wooden table, a stained checkered cloth covering it.

"I *knew* you'd come," Ife says as I place my tray on the table. She's wearing cherry blossom earrings, and a fang peeks out between her full lips. There's only mild curiosity in her large brown eyes. It's strange. I'm not used to vampires looking at me as anything but a walking meal.

"This is Julia," Stephan says, nodding at the second vampire he forgot to mention would be joining us for dinner.

Where Ife is warm and deep, Julia is a white canvas. Her eyes are pale blue, fringed by white lashes, and her hair is long and fair, almost as white as the hair of the vampire I saw at the library. I spot several paint splatters on her milky skin, and she pulls her sleeves down to hide them.

"I'm a painter," Julia says.

"Cool," I say, and I'm glad that Julia doesn't smile, because I don't want to force one, either. A painter, she said. I think of my roommate's books. What if *she* is my roommate? I look about the table, taking them both in. Two vampires. *I can do this.* I've done small talk with vampires before. It always ended with them turning to dust, that's true, but if anything, this should be easier. I just have to think of them as human.

"And what about you?" Ife asks. When she looks at me, I don't get the feeling she's trying to get through obligatory small talk. Her attention is genuine.

"I'm— My parents work in logistics. They want me to take over the company, but I'd rather work in the Council."

"Which department?" Julia asks, still busy with her sketch. I glance over to see she's drawing a train cabin, shadowy silhouettes filling every seat.

"Ethics," I say.

"I assume you'll be looking at a lot of Familiar contracts then," Ife says. "Making sure everything is aboveboard, and that sort of thing?"

"And that no one is sired against their will," I add, though I highly doubt the *ethics* department of the Vampiric Council does anything whatsoever. I watch the two vampires, trying to figure out their impression of me. I've told a few lies in the last minute, but neither Ife nor Julia seems to have noticed.

"You're staying in Iolairean Hall, right?" Iolairean Hall, or *Taigh nan Iolairean,* as it's labelled on the campus map, is on the edge of the campus village, built on the riverbank.

"No, Tynarrich," I say. Her mouth makes an *o,* and I furrow my brows. "Is that strange?"

"I didn't know they'd let humans into Tynarrich. I thought you were all in Iolairean."

Why, exactly, am I not in the human hall of residence? I pause, try to hide the panic rising inside me, residue of when I saw that bloody coffin. "I guess that explains why my roommate is a vampire."

Julia's pencil, which had been busy scratching the corner of her page, stills. Ife's eyes widen. "No way," Stephan says.

"Aye," I say, frowning at the three of them. "You don't have a vampire roommate?" I ask Stephan.

"I *wish*," he says. "But it's already a miracle that Tynahine's managed to get Heritages and Converts to coexist."

"Why?" I ask. Despite knowing there are two types of vampires, I never stopped to think about how they see each other.

"*Heritage* vampires usually think they're superior," Julia says. "Ife

is an exception to this rule, of course." She smiles at her friend, who in turn grins back.

"So you're—"

"A Convert," Julia says, her dry voice telling me she isn't interested in sharing anything else about herself.

"There're only a couple hundred Heritage vampires here," Ife says. "The Council doesn't have a single Convert on their board, even though their population far outnumbers ours. So you can imagine why there's some tension between us."

"Seems a bit unfair," I say, and Ife nods.

"Definitely. I have a classmate who was persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition back in the day, and I'm always telling him that he should apply to be on the board. He'd be fantastic."

"You have a classmate who survived the *Spanish Inquisition*?" I ask.

"When he was human. Five hundred years ago."

"Why—" I lean back. "Why the fuck is there a five-hundred-year-old in your class?"

Stephan laughs, and Ife shakes her head, as though I'm an ignorant child.

"Vampire and human education are not the same, Cassie."

"How so?"

"Well, when a human studies, unless they want to stay in academia their entire lives, it's mainly to get a job, isn't it?"

I think I know where this is going. I nod anyway.

"A human life, a mortal one, is *linear.* Structured, too. It's not the same for vampires. Our interests change every century. My brother was a famous opera singer before he became a doctor. And I'm not sure if you've gone through Tynahine's website, but we have an undergraduate degree—philosophy, I think—that lasts sixty-two years."

"Wow," I whisper. "How many decades have you been here?"

"Oh, only four years," she says. "But I'm pretty sure the Night Dean told us the average age of Tynahine's students is eighty-nine. Plus, some of our faculty have been here since the university first opened its doors in the thirteenth century."

I try to picture someone working the same job for eight hundred years. Ife walks off to get another round of blood, and as Stephan chats away with Julia, I feel myself growing awkward.

"So," Ife says, putting down two steaming glasses of blood. "You were telling us you have a vampire roommate?"

"I haven't met them yet," I say. I bite into my wrap, lettuce, spinach, and crispy Halloumi filling my mouth. I glance towards the edge of Ambrose Hall just as a new crowd appears.

A dozen girls, all with an ethereal vampiric beauty.

One stands out amongst them. Tall, hair short and white. The same girl I saw up on the fifth floor of the library. The fifth floor was near-empty when I ran away, so I'm pretty sure it was her voice I heard, either begging to be bitten or saying, *We've got company.*

"Not her, right?" Ife asks, noticing who I was just staring at.

"Uh . . ." I clear my throat. "I don't know."

"As if Aliz Astra would share a room," Stephan scoffs. Every muscle in my body tenses when I hear the name. *Astra?*

"Never mind live in a hall," Julia says, looking up from her paper to stare at the white-haired vampire. "Doesn't she own the hunting lodge?"

"More like hunting *palace,*" Stephan says.

"You're right. She does own it," Ife says, pouting. "Damn it."

"Astra?" I whisper the name, still not believing it. "*The* Astras?" I ask. Ife nods, amused by my reaction. The vampire in question, Aliz Astra, joins the queue to the blood stall, while the girls around her fight for her attention. The Astras are the most powerful vampires in Europe. And I was bad-mouthing her father in our last class.

Before I look away, Aliz Astra turns, and our eyes meet from afar. Just like last night, something tightens inside me, as though there's a chain drawing me towards her.

She cocks her head slightly, her cool features broken by a sly grin. My heart skips a beat.

"Why is she looking at us?" Ife asks, drawing my attention away from Astra.

"I—" Why indeed? "Well, I may have accidentally overheard her

"Saying what?" Ife asks in a hushed voice, eyes wide with excitement.

"More than saying, it was *doing,*" I say, and for some stupid reason, my cheeks burn.

"Shocking," says Julia, rolling her eyes. Astra must have a reputation, then. I look back over at the crowd. She's no longer looking at me, and air flows easier into my lungs now that her attention is gone. I wish I knew which of the girls flocking around her was the one I heard her with in the library.

I also wish I could get her out of my head.

"Most of the vampires here are serious about their education," Ife says, playing with her straw. "And if I remember correctly, Astra was, too, at the start. I had a few classes with her during my first year here. Then she started failing."

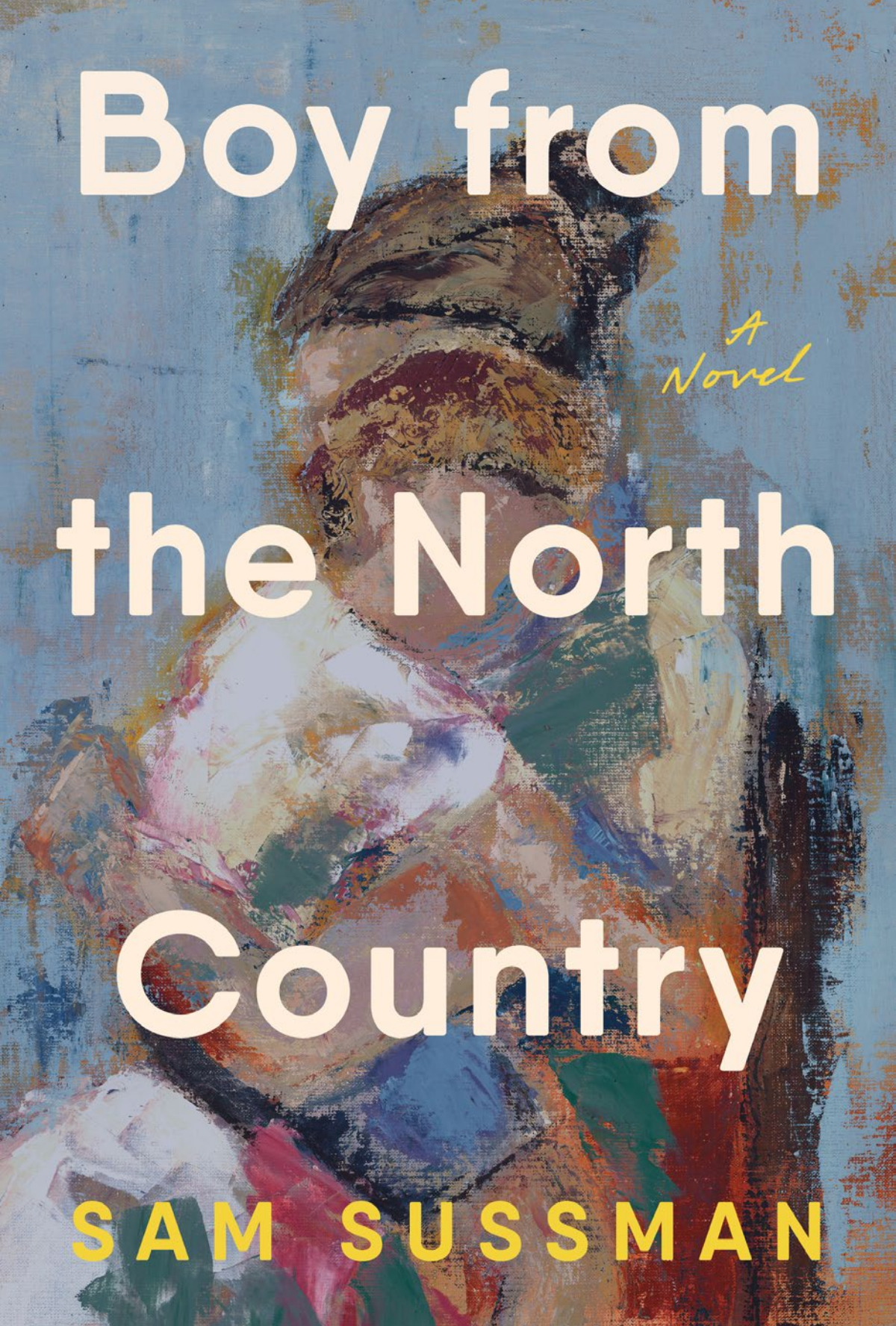
"Failing?" I ask, glancing back at the white-haired vampire.

"She may come from the most powerful family in Europe, but she is surprisingly stupid."

"She's had to retake the same classes four years in a row," Julia says, her slender neck elongating as she turns to stare at Astra. "Vampiredom is truly doomed if *she* is going to become the next leader of the Council."

"So, humans can be expelled for failing Integration, but Aliz Astra gets to stay here for as long as she likes?" I ask, and Ife nods.

"She treats Tynahine like a playground," Julia says. Her pale eyes meet mine, and for a second, I forget that she, too, is a vampire. "So, you better hope she doesn't decide you're her next *plaything.*"


Boy from
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SAM SUSSMAN

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She did not leave her bed through our first day at the house. She lay beside Lucy, the two of them inseparable, my mother stroking her ears and feeding her bites of the scrambled eggs she had no appetite to eat herself. She readjusted herself constantly, the strewn sheets an archive of her futile search for comfort. She asked for the painkiller, oxycodone, and complained about the wooziness it caused. She did without and complained about the pain. She closed her eyes and meditated, her palms held open at her sides. She explained that meditation can reduce the mental fog caused by painkillers. She listened to neuro-acoustically modified classical music designed to combat cognitive fatigue. I sat in the antique wooden chair beside her bed and tried to distract her from the pain by reading *Harry Potter* aloud. She gazed beyond her window to the pine trees swaying in the summer breeze.

"Is the marijuana here yet?" she asked that first evening.

She had ordered medical marijuana that was supposed to dull her pain without fogging her mind. The California supplier had promised it would be waiting by the time we returned from the surgery, but it hadn't arrived.

"I don't see any packages, but I can find pot. I'll walk into Goshen High waving a twenty and come out with the best weed in town."

"Please check again," she murmured, easing herself onto her side. "California shipping address. Medically engineered. This fog . . ."

It was not until our second day at home, when she had the strength to rise from bed, that I realized how completely my mother had transformed the house into a stronghold against the cancer. We limped downstairs, her hand gripping my shoulder. The guest bedroom was lined with medical equipment. She eased herself onto a vibrating black plate and explained that it had been developed to prevent astronauts from suffering muscle atrophy in space. Research showed it could also help chemotherapy patients retain weight. She had installed a cedar infrared sauna, which research linked to increased immune function in chemotherapy patients. She lay in a device that looked like a lawn chair, called a BEMER, that pulsed electromagnetic waves through her body, increasing blood and oxygen flow, a shadow war on the cancer cells.

"The human body," she said, reclining on the BEMER, "is designed to heal. With the right support, our bodies can recover from far more than we think."

Lucy pranced around her. My mother lifted her carefully onto her lap.

"There are so many ways to support the body through cancer," she said, caressing Lucy's glossy ears. "Most women are never educated about this," she continued, a hint of frustration in her voice. "The diagnosis comes, and the pressure is for an immediate, maximalist procedure: surgery, chemo, radiation. Women are made to feel that if we just do everything the doctors say, we'll be fine. But surgery and chemo aren't complete strategies. Rather than research all the ways to help our bodies through cancer, people tend to displace their anxiety onto one rigid plan."

My back creaked as I stretched over a rubber medicine ball, readjusting after the three nights on the hospital chair.

"Last year," she went on, "I watched two colleagues die from cancer. One refused any conventional treatment and the other refused any holistic treatment. These were savvy women, health professionals. It broke my heart to see these women so crippled by anxiety that neither could draw on her own best judgment. When I was diagnosed, I promised myself I wouldn't be led by fear."

She looked at me intently. I felt pride that she was managing the density of medical information alongside the physical and emotional burdens of her diagnosis. The CT scan had revealed that Dr. Chen had removed sixty percent of the tumor: more than the average debulking, less than she had hoped. The approach now was to eliminate the remainder of the tumor with chemotherapy, while my mother did everything she could to strengthen her body against the debilitating side effects.

The refrigerator was lined with kale, chicory, chard, each selected for its biochemical virtues. She unscrewed a bottle marked Huel, releasing a putrid stench. "Each scoop has five hundred calories," she said, "it's helping me slow weight loss. Too bad it tastes like steamed rodent." She reached for a raw burger from the refrigerator, and I felt the usual repulsion of seeing murdered animals transformed into conveniently shaped meals.

"After the first chemo," she said, dashing coconut oil into a stainless steel pan, "I hardly had the strength to chew. These burgers are grass-fed, the meat is so high quality I can eat it practically rare. Don't worry, I'll cook these myself."

The meat hissed in the pan, the awful stench wafting through the

kitchen. I felt relieved that I didn't have to touch the meat. My mother yawned. Her body had dwindled from its healthy weight of one hundred and thirty-seven pounds to one hundred and eighteen. She had arranged everything in her life against the cancer, and I had to arrange myself that way, too. It didn't matter that dead animal repulsed me. There was no time to indulge any emotion besides my desire for her to heal. I reached for the spatula in her hand.

"Really?" she said, looking at me uncertainly. "I understand why you're not comfortable cooking meat."

"You should rest, Mom," I said.

"All right," she said, letting go of the spatula with some reluctance. "But you can tell me if you change your mind." She glanced at the meat. "If you are able to cook the burger, try to leave it pink at the center, OK? It should look almost raw. It's easiest for me to chew that way."

We climbed the stairs to her bedroom, my mother gripping my arm for balance.

Back in the kitchen I stared at the maimed remnant of cow sizzling in coconut oil, trying not to think about the animal grazing on a summer day. The only relevant concern was preventing my mother's weight loss. This cow had died so that she could live. I prodded at the meat, trying to sense how quickly it cooked. Our struggle rested now in detail. My mother's health depended on the precision with which the burger was cooked, the changes to her cancer cell count induced by the sauna and BEMER, the struggle for her weight fought by the Huel's addition and the chemotherapy's subtraction. After a few minutes the meat was lightly browned around the edges and pink at its center, as she had said it should be.

She sat up in bed, inhaling the scent of the meat. "Too well-cooked,"

she said, spitting out her first bite. "The meat is so tough, I don't have the energy. Can you try again? I'm sorry, honey."

She gave the burger to Lucy, who licked tentatively at the greasy surface, glancing at my mother as if asking for permission to eat.

"Yes, that's right, Lucy," she said. "It's all yours. That's how good you are!"

Lucy nodded politely, then devoured the meat.

On my fourth try the burger was rare enough for my mother to chew slowly. I sat beside her on the bed and tried not to cry with satisfaction.

THAT EVENING the medical marijuana arrived. Relief eased my mother's face as I handed her the package. She was reclining on the sofa, responding to emails from clients, Lucy's head tucked over her ankles. Inside the bubble wrap was a white vape pen, a dozen cartridges of oil cannabis, and twelve dropper bottles of tincture. The tinctures would have to wait. We were vaping tonight, like any responsible mother and son.

"You know how to use this?" she asked, looking skeptically at the vape pen.

"I have never," I said, "done drugs."

I slid one of the oil cartridges into the vape pen. There was a silver button on the barrel of the pen, and I held it down as I inhaled from the mouthpiece. The soothing force of the vape was far more immediate than the rolled joints I usually smoked.

"Oh, it's nice," I said. "You try. Just press that button as you breathe in."

She put the vape pen to her mouth and took a hesitant whiff.

"Come on, Mom, not some Clintonian non-inhalation."

She inhaled more deeply, coughing over the hit. Lucy looked up with concern.

"There we go! Just breathe, like you're meditating. That will prevent coughing."

She took another hit, this time calmly inhaling the drug.

"Oh, it's strong," she said. "Strange to think I used to do this all the time."

"Strange to think we've never lit up together," I said.

She reclined on the sofa, the drug already setting her at ease.

"When did you first smoke?" she asked.

"Second year at Oxford. This guy on my hall, Yonatan Emontovic, knew all about German lyric poetry, Japanese literature, Russian rock music. First time I smoked was from his water bong. Before the hit I was talking about Dostoevsky and afterward I felt like a kitten."

My mother laughed, the way she did on our video calls, even at my bad jokes.

"How about you?" I said, taking another drag. Gosh, that felt good. Just to breathe. That was the secret of marijuana, it was a breathing meditation as much as anything.

"I was fifteen. Some park in Great Neck. It was '68, you weren't invited to the revolution if you didn't have a joint in hand."

"A revolution in Great Neck?"

"A revolution in our minds."

"What did you want out of it?"

"To make love not war, haven't you heard?"

I was starting to feel the weed, could sense the room turning soft. Lucy wagged her tail. That's right, she was a dog. We held one another's gaze. *You are a dog*, I told her telepathically. I scooped her onto my lap, her eyes staring meaningfully into mine. Her ears were so soft. Oh,

I wanted to sauté them. Yes, that would be superb. To take off those doggie ears, so sleek and rare, and sizzle them in coconut oil. Those ears would go wonderfully with portobello mushrooms or eggplant. Maybe a little sliced onion and garlic. A Manhattan restaurant would charge a hundred dollars for that meal. I could have those ears here in the house for free. Lucy nuzzled her head into the crook of my arm. She needed her ears, I supposed. Through her ears she sensed predators in the woods, knew when to bark at coyote and dart away from a falling fork. No matter how tasty her ears might be, the sauté would be only a singular experience for me. Meanwhile, she would be condemned for all her days to a diminished life. No, it could not be justified.

"—much as anyone," my mother said.

"Sorry?" Smoke lingered between us. Lucy licked my face. What was she trying to tell me? Maybe she wanted me to have just one bite of her scrumptious little ears.

"I was saying how lovely it is to see you two admiring each other," my mother said, lowering her phone. Had she photographed me considering whether to sauté Lucy's ears? I would have to destroy the evidence. She slouched on the sofa, holding the vape pen like a teenager with a prized spliff. Gosh, it was good to see her smiling.

"Lucy," she said, "has taught me as much about life as anyone. She was so scared when she came to me. She barked and bit. The rescue shelter misled me. I told them I could only have a dog who was comfortable with people, six or seven patients come to my office every day. The first day Lucy snarled at a little boy. I didn't know what to do. If I sent Lucy back to the shelter, she might die. Still, I couldn't ask my patients to let a dog nip and bark through their sessions."

Lucy wagged her tongue at these past troubles.

"You know what Lucy taught me? There was more grace in my life

than I knew. I could tell my patients Lucy is a rescue, has a traumatic past, and might bark or snarl. Some people let Lucy stay in the office. Others asked Lucy to stay in my bedroom. With enough love, she stopped snarling. She cuddled. She kissed. Lucy had never been loved before. Once she learned about love, her world opened."

Lucy stared at me, taking measure of my reaction to her biography.

"It's amazing to watch her live," my mother went on. "Every moment is joyful for her. A snuggle, a romp outside, a good meal. The same squeaky toy thrown the same way is always an adventure. We walk the same trail in the woods three or four times every day, and for Lucy it never has less than infinite potential. Every smell is divine. Life is magical because she sees it that way."

I took the vape from my mother and inhaled, the drug moving seamlessly through me.

"Do you remember," she asked, "when I used to read you Martin Buber's Hasidic tales?"

I didn't. I was certain I had discovered Buber in college.

"Buber was interested in this idea," she said, "first expressed by the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. The idea is that divinity is in every moment. The Baal Shem Tov lived in the eighteenth century, when Jewish knowledge was hoarded by the rabbinical class. He was a democrat, the Jewish version of Martin Luther. He believed ordinary people have access to the divine through every moment of our lives. Buber thinks Hasidism has forgotten this. Hasidism tries to find divinity in the preordained: ritual, prayer, clothing. Buber doesn't think that's how God works. God is in this world rather than outside this world. Every blade of grass is holy. In a way he's more Hasidic than the Hasidim. So is Lucy."

My mother took another hit on the vape pen.

"Because I have never," she said, "met anyone who finds more divinity in every moment of life than her. Lucy is my Baal Shem Tov."

Lucy lay serenely in my lap. Lucy, the last in the line of animals who lived at the farmhouse, the knights of our Round Table.

My mother reached to the shelf over her shoulder, withdrawing a book I recognized, a Ginsberg collection. "I," she said, "am in the mood for poetry."

She circled the room, glancing at the page before declaring, "'Holy! Holy! Holy! The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! . . . The typewriter is holy the poem is holy!'"

I remembered the day I was thirteen and discovered that Ginsberg collection, read all I could, and then, embarrassed by its sexual explicitness, hid the book out of fear that my mother would discover it, forgetting that it was hers.

"'Holy forgiveness!'" she recited. "'Mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity! Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!'"

"Holy!" I called.

"Holy!" said my mother.

Lucy stared anxiously between us. She need not worry, her ears were safe for now.

"I've always loved that poem," my mother said. "After 'Howl,' people thought Ginsberg had only criticisms to make. He didn't hate the world. He wanted to tell us what he loves."

"The typewriter is holy!" I called out.

"Your turn to read me something," she said.

"Did you ever meet Ginsberg?" I asked.

She looked quizzically at me.

"Why would I have met Ginsberg?"

"Because he was friends with Dylan."

My mother's fingers tensed on the vape. I sensed her lifting herself beyond the reach of the drug, as if she did not trust what she might say under its influence.

"I didn't meet his friends," she said. "If that's what you want to know. It wasn't that sort of relationship."

"What sort of relationship was it?"

"Let's discuss this another time."

"What other time, Mom?"

"Evan, please."

In the years since I'd left home I had almost never spoken about Dylan. I'd done all I could to keep the painful story pressed below the surface of my life. I had sought to become my own person on my own terms. But the question was always there, present even when absent. Blazed in the den, I wanted to know everything my mother had concealed from me. Every detail of their time together. What he was like as a person. If there were ways we were similar. Or if there was no reason we would be similar. Because above all I wanted clarity on a singular biological fact.

"You never talk about that period in your life," I said. "I hardly know anything about who you were at my age."

She breathed slowly, closed her eyes, and said, "My beloved son. Will you please share with me a poem you love?"

I didn't need to press the matter tonight. This was the first time since her surgery that she was at ease and I didn't want to take that from her. We had time ahead. This was the best chance I'd had in my adult life to speak with her directly about him and I wasn't going to waste it.

"From Bashō," I said, running my hand over Lucy's ears as I recited:

"'Coming with a light heart / to pick violets / I found it difficult to leave / and slept overnight / in this spring field.'"

"I've always loved Bashō's love of nature," my mother said, her voice calm once more.

"Then you'll like this one: 'Light, fancifully / sprinkled upon this world / tiny rains of spring.'"

She sighed contentedly, her eyes in mine.

"Even when I am a dog," I recited, "when I howl at the coyote / I miss being a dog."

"That's Bashō?" she laughed.

"With edits," I said. "You want the original?"

"Yes, please."

"'Even when I am in Kyoto / when the cuckoo sings / I miss Kyoto.'"

"It's beautiful that you committed all this to memory," she said.

"I don't know about commitment. The words just stayed with me."

She inhaled on the vape pen. Since we'd been smoking she hadn't said anything about the pain.

"One more Ginsberg," she said, holding up the book.

"Three more," I said.

She read. The words gathered around us. I could see the poem in the space between us.

"I saw the greatest minds of my generation," I intoned, "ruined by smokin' weed with their mothers."

"I've seen some of the dullest minds of my generation lately," my mother laughed.

"Dating again?"

"This last one charges into the diner fifteen minutes late, clutching a bouquet of roses. He says he's sorry to be late but he *had* to find the

perfect roses because *I am the one*. He knew from the moment he clicked on my match.com profile. Didn't I feel it, too?"

I took another hit, sending the smoke through the open window.

"He starts rambling about his work in boat sales and all I can think is, *How soon am I allowed to leave?* On he goes: no breath, no questions, no distraction, except when the waitress comes he orders for both of us ('You have to try the broccoli omelet here!'). The first question he asks is whether I mind if he goes to the bathroom. As soon as he was out of sight I left the diner."

"Bravo!" I cheered. "I've been telling you for years to bail on these dunces."

"So much to unlearn. *Men!*" She tossed her arms overhead.

"Remember that time," I said, "you called me frantic from the car because you couldn't remember your date's name? You asked me to go into your office and find his dating profile. On your desk were all these photos of men, and I found the one you described, Hank. But I told you his name was Humbert. You kept repeating the name: Humbert Humbert Humbert. I was laughing so hard I had to hang up."

My mother gripped her abdomen as tears of laughter shone in her hazel eyes.

"But then I felt bad and called you back to tell you that his name was Hank. You were almost in the restaurant. I could tell you were stressed, you were going on so many dates at that point. Sorry I made things harder for you."

"I remember thinking," she said, still laughing, "that Hank/Humbert was so boring I'd rather have gotten his name wrong."

"I think part of me wanted you to know it was a prank. I mean, *Humbert*?"

She turned earnestly to me and said, "Thank you for being here."

"Mom?"

"Evan?"

"Where else would I be?"

She looked at me a long moment.

"We can talk," she said, "about New York. You should know it wasn't the easiest time in my life."

"Whatever happened," I said, "I want to know."

She nodded, and her expression relaxed into a smile, and she said, "Oh, you know what would be wonderful? Raspberry chocolates!"

She stood woozily from the sofa and wandered into the kitchen. I followed her, calling out, "Mom, you have the munchies?"

She reached into the cabinets and withdrew bar after bar of chocolate.

"And a sweet tooth? Who are you and what have you done with my mother?"

"They're all at least seventy percent cocoa," she laughed. "Did you know pure chocolate has anti-cancer properties? Chocolate is a natural insulin resistant *and* anti-inflammatory! Chocolate gets a bad rap because the commercial brands use so much sugar, but it's actually a health food. Antioxidants, endorphin boosters, dopamine support, oh my!"

"Mom, you are *blazed*."

She pointed the chocolate bar like a dagger at my heart.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory!"

From the cabinet she withdrew almond butter, stevia, and cacao, and heated the ingredients in a pan. She dripped the molten chocolate into the twelve penguin shapes on an ice cube tray. Then she set a raspberry atop each of the chocolate penguins and placed the tray in the freezer.

"I love," she said, "healthy sweets!"

This was the next best thing to sautéing Lucy's ears.

"Isn't it lovely," she said, "the way cancer gives as well as takes?"

At the word she was gaunt again, her hair gray beneath the kitchen light.

"Gives?" I said.

"We wouldn't have this time without it," she said. She was right. I would never have returned home just to read poetry and eat chocolate raspberries with my mother.

We sat on the sofa eating the raspberry chocolates as the coyote howled and the freight train echoed through the valley and the pine trees swayed over the farmhouse.

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