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What Will You Read Next?

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Excerpt from *When We Were Birds: A Novel*

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Excerpt from *Memphis: A Novel*

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— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

What Will You Read Next?

<u>When We Were Birds: A Novel</u> <i>by Ayanna Lloyd Banwo</i>	3
<u>Probably Ruby: A Novel</u> <i>by Lisa Bird-Wilson</i>	23
<u>Don't Know Tough</u> <i>by Eli Cranor</i>	47
<u>The Echo Man: A Novel</u> <i>by Sam Holland</i>	63
<u>Disorientation: A Novel</u> <i>by Elaine Hsieh Chou</i>	77
<u>Housebreaking</u> <i>by Colleen Hubbard</i>	89
<u>A Botanist's Guide to Parties and Poisons</u> <i>by Kate Khavari</i>	107
<u>Portrait of a Thief: A Novel</u> <i>by Grace D. Li</i>	125
<u>Neruda on the Park: A Novel</u> <i>by Cleyvis Natera</i>	145
<u>The Violin Conspiracy</u> <i>by Brendan Slocumb</i>	167
<u>Memphis: A Novel</u> <i>by Tara M. Stringfellow</i>	183



WHEN
WE
WERE
BIRDS

A NOVEL

AYANNA LLOYD BANWO



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7

Yejide

Is three days, Yejide curl up on her bed under the mosquito net, listening to the storm outside. Three days since the wind set up and the first few fat raindrops pound the roof. Three days since her mother Petronella lie down in her bed to die.

Soon as the storm start, Yejide feel her belly begin to rise and swell with a weight that feel like a hole. She have no other way to describe it—a hollowing, a dread, slow emptying out. She hear about mothers who lose their children to early, unexpected death. They washing dishes, cleaning the house or at work in town, and the minute the child gone they feel a hole in that keening place, feel it pull taut, like the womb know the second the child leave the world. Yejide womb empty, and she have no dead children to mourn, but that is how it feel, like something in her anticipating absence. It pin her to the bed. The storm outside, the mosquito net and the half-light of dawn press down against the air above her.

She tell herself is not grief. Grief is a thing that come from love and love simple like breath. But what she feel for her mother was never simple. She don't know if she have enough room for a big, solid word like grief along with everything else that exist in her heart for Petronella.

She toss and turn in the bed, in her room at the end of the corridor, sheets wrap around her body like a shroud, and listen for a knock on the door. She think she hear footsteps on the landing, whispers on the stairs, someone stopping outside her bedroom, listening and then moving on again. Every creak of the floorboards, every shudder of the windowpane ask the same question: why her mother don't call for her? Petronella can't go before she call, but what stopping her, even now, from calling for her only daughter? Every time Yejide open the door to look, hoping that they send for her, she find the long corridor dim, yawning and empty.

It hard to know if she asleep or awake, what real and what is only dream. First day of the storm, she see her mother's twin sister, Geraldine, dead more than a year now, walk into her room wearing Petronella clothes—a long green dress with lace at the collar—a cup of tea in her hand. Yejide could almost smell the earthy turmeric root and feel the heat of the steam rising from the cup. Geraldine put the tea on the bedside table, walk to the window and step out through the glass pane into the night air.

Second day, she thought she wake up in a bamboo patch in the middle of the forest, no storm, no vigil, just cool breeze blowing sweet and the smell of green on the wind.

Now, in the soft early-morning light of the third day, she remember the great storm, many years ago, that take Granny Catherine away. Yejide was only nine then but she remember like it was yesterday.

The rain had start after church on Sunday. The baubles around her plaits too tight and she hate the stiff, white rib-

bons wrap around their ends, but the first few drops of rain mean freedom. She look around for her best friend Seema so they could walk home together but Seema had already head off with her own mother, Laurence. Yejide feel a stirring of excitement. She pull off the shiny patent-leather shoes, drag the knee-high socks off and start to run up the hill for home, feeling the wet earth squish under her bare feet.

Mud splatter her white dress and she don't even know where she leave her socks. If her mother see, she would be vex with her for running barefoot in her good church clothes and losing yet another pair. Granny Catherine would pretend to make a fuss too, for Petronella's sake, but Yejide know she wouldn't really mind. Once Petronella back turned, she and Granny would giggle together and snuggle in the big wooden rocking chair in the front room.

She run up the drive out of the rain and tiptoe through the side door of the kitchen. In a house as sprawling and bustling as theirs, with everyone coming and going, with big people always doing big-people things—some who live there and some who just passing through—and Petronella and Geraldine lock away in their secret world that no one else could enter, Yejide know she could slip in unnoticed. But that day was different. She didn't even need to sneak in; the house was in uproar. A woman she don't know rush past her from the laundry room, through the kitchen into the drawing room with a pile of fresh sheets in her hand. Peter, who always pull her plaits and say, "How the princess going today?," walk past her and head upstairs with his arms full of black sage bush like if she invisible. Laurence was there too with a whole set of people that Yejide never see before. Even Seema creep past her up the stairs, trying to

balance a cup of tea, her eyes full of confusion. The kettle screech in the kitchen; no one care enough to take it off the heat. She could not find Granny Catherine anywhere.

The storm reach its height and daytime turn to night before Peter find her, still wearing her damp church dress, sitting in Granny Catherine chair. His eyes flick from her to the living-room door, down at his feet and back to her face.

“How the princess going today?”

But the words sound wrong. Like they hiding things. Peter love Petronella for as long as Yejide could remember; he was not her father but was as good as. She never see him look nervous before.

“What happen, Peter? Where Granny?”

Peter shift from one foot to the other. Keep looking around to see if anyone else there, like he not sure if it is his place to say anything to her.

“The storm come for your granny. She going.”

“Going where?”

“Where she must.”

She should have known better, but she ask anyway. “Where Mummy?”

Peter look down at her with a half-smile that she recognize even then.

“Your mother doing what she must too. She waiting for her mother to call for her.”

“Granny Catherine going to call for me too? I want to see her.”

Peter shake his head. “Only person Catherine calling is her daughter.” He take her hand. “Come. Let’s find somebody to get you out these clothes.”

She move to the window seat and watch the rain. It come down in grey sheets, the wind snatch and snap branches, crashing them into the windowpanes, and the Lengua River roar through the settlement below, full to bursting, threatening to spill itself into the valley. When you live in the hills, close to the sky where the clouds gather first and press down, you learn to read the rain. Granny used to tell her that they come from the storm and the storm come from them. Make her think that every time it rained it was because they had willed it. She would run out into the garden and raise her arms high, she and Seema dancing like rain was a gift for them alone because they had been good or because they had been especially bad and gotten away with it. It take years for her to realize that all storms not the same.

When Geraldine die last year and the whole of Port Angeles flood away, the house brace, thinking it was Petronella time. But the way the raindrops crash on the galvanize roof and thunder peal out was nothing compare to the way Petronella bawl to find her twin sitting in her chair, crochet needle in her hand, red thread piled around her lap, fingers still. Peter make the sign of the cross, grateful not to lose Petronella, but none of them coulda prepare for the grief to come. Geraldine funeral was small and quick; she always said she didn't want no fuss. But even with the repast done, Geraldine clothes pack away, the requisite time pass for respect till they could open the shop again and the shroud of mourning start to lift from the house—Petronella was still on pause. Yejide couldn't remember when last Petronella sit at her desk with the ledgers, when last the workers see her in the shop, and with no Geraldine to tether her to here while the heart of her take wing and fly elsewhere,

all Petronella was prepared to do was move from one chair to the next. In the morning was the rocking chair on the porch, her sister's matching rocker empty beside her; in the evening was the velvet armchair with Geraldine crochet on the headrest; and once the sun set it was the garden bench where she and her sister used to ask questions of the stars. Then, when the moon high and the dark thick and deep, she walk up the stairs to her bed without saying a word.

And is so the time pass till the pattern so set that Yejide don't have to look to know where her mother is. Just once she try to reach her in that place, not long before the storm come back. She find Petronella on the porch, taking in the last of the sun. Yejide fill the black kettle, put it on the stove and turn the burner on high. Two cups with the flower pattern, the good ones for company. Not like they does really have as much company again. Since Petronella start to play musical chairs whoever here is more family than company, and those who used to pass through all the time from since Granny Catherine days don't come so much anymore; Petronella grief drown them out.

Yejide root around in the bottom cupboard and find the jar of dried lemongrass. The smell fill the kitchen, the orange and blue flame flare beneath the kettle and the light from the window filter through the white curtains.

All of them well know that mourning is not a thing that have an end—is not a rope—but every day they carry the hope that today might be the day that Petronella shake herself up and start back living. Every now and again Yejide catch a whisper between Peter and Mr. Homer. She know they worried—bout the business and bout the other kind of work that they can't see—now that Petronella hiding away inside herself.

When the kettle start to scream she hear it call for

Geraldine like it miss her. And she know is not the steam but Petronella outside, her grief loud like a kettle on the boil. Yejide feel like her hands might be good bread hands like her granny say, but her shoulders too slim to carry the whole house, the whole family, her mother whole grief. She know she should, but she don't miss Geraldine one bit.

She sweeten the lemongrass tea with honey and put the cups on the doily coasters, a linen napkin on the tray. She had to try. Maybe, with Geraldine gone, her mother would look upon her face and see something in it to find favour with. At least she could start with tea. Tray in both hands, walking slow so the steaming liquid don't spill and stain the linen, Yejide walk out the front door and bend the corner. Petronella sitting in her chair, back straight like a board, and next to her was Geraldine, dead, but there, plain as day. Yejide feel her hands tremble but she catch herself before the tea spill.

The twins move in unison like always, elbows and shoulders moving up and down, fingers pulling long lines of deep crimson crochet thread from the same skein between them. The bedspread that they start making a year ago flow from Petronella fingers, onto her lap and down into the basket at the side of the chair. But nothing spill from Geraldine fingers. There was just the motion of the needle, her shoulders, her elbows, the basket beside her chair empty.

Resentment flare in Yejide but she breathe deep and push it down in her toes. She pretend she don't see Geraldine. "I bring tea for you, Mummy." She set the tray on the small folding table beside her mother's chair. Petronella don't answer, her fingers picking at the thread, the gold needle flashing. She wind the red thread around it, pull it through the loop, the pattern growing more and more intricate.

Yejide bring a smaller chair from further down the

porch and sit next to her mother. “I went down by the store today. Things in okay shape. Shelly pregnant again so we will have to find someone else at the cashier soon but she good for the next few months.”

There was no other sound than the breeze and the buzz of the tiny hummingbirds darting around the plastic feeders that hang from the veranda.

“Your tea will get cold if you don’t drink it. I put extra honey in it for you.”

The two women, one dead and one alive, keep their eyes on the thread as if she not even there.

“Mummy, you can’t keep going like this. You have to talk to me. I trying but I don’t know what to do. I not ready.”

She can’t make no sense of the store’s ledgers on Petronella desk since she insist on keeping all the records by hand, and the suppliers still had a way of watching her like they was just waiting for her to make a mistake. And there were other things Petronella was supposed to be teaching her too, things more important than accounts for the shop and how to manage the shipments, who to bribe in customs.

The steam had stop rising from the cup. It would get cold soon. She reach for the tray, hoping it would spur her mother to action, but Petronella hand flick out fast like a hummingbird and block her hand, brush it away. She put the crochet down on her lap and drag the folding table with the two cups of tea closer to her and Geraldine. Yejide out of the circle again. She fight tears. Geraldine reach for her tea.

8

This time Yejide not wrong. It wasn't a trick of the ear or the storm. Footsteps shuffle outside the door. Before she could get up, Seema walk softly into her room, close the door behind her and sit on the empty bed.

"You didn't eat anything." Seema look at the trail of ants that come from the window, across the floor, up the bedside table and into the bowl of soup that Yejide left untouched.

"Not hungry." Yejide shake her head.

"Hungry have nothing to do with it. You have to eat."

"You eat?" She doubt whether anyone in the house remember.

"Whether I eat or not is my business." A half-smile tug the corners of Seema mouth. "You forget, Jide, that I am not you."

It was the thing that had always hung between them—the thinnest of lace curtains, almost transparent, yet unmistakably there.

Seema eyes look tired, brow furrowed. The last year wasn't easy on her, on them. Since they small they inseparable. The word "family" had nothing to do with biology in the house on Morne Marie. Kin was better, and Seema

people had live in the house as long as Yejide's. But Seema was more than her sister, more than her friend, so they never think too much about what coming for them, so far in the future that it seem impossible. They know some time in that distant never-coming future it would be different. But is one thing to know that Yejide must eventually take Petronella place as the matriarch of the house, is another to watch it happen slow, day by day, when her mother still here, doing her best to fade herself away before time.

"Anyway," Seema continue, "you don't know what going to happen when Ms. Pet gone. I figure is best you face it with some food inside you. Stop wasting my good soup."

Yejide climb down from window seat and sit next to Seema. Lace Seema fingers through her own. "Stop trying to feed me all the time. Let me feed you sometimes nuh."

Seema laugh. "The way you cook? To poison all of us inside here?"

"I not that bad."

"You worse!"

Yejide frown, bite her lip. "You could teach me, you know."

"Jide, I like cooking. I good at it. Everybody in this house have a role. I good at mine."

They both pretend not to hear the edge in her voice.

Yejide lift Seema hands and kiss them, one then the other. They tiny and delicate-looking, nothing like Yejide's, but coarse like hers from planting in the garden and running the shop and loading the crates and doing all the other things needed for living in a house as old as this, with all the people that depend on her family. She feel a warmth in her chest, in spite of everything.

"Want to trade?"

Seema reach out and stroke her cheek. "Not for all the

money in Port Angeles.” Her eyes start to twinkle again. “Besides, Port Angeles don’t have as much money as it used to. If I had to get the shittiest destiny in the world, it shouldn’t come cheap.”

And they both laugh harder than they had in days, drowning out the storm, and the branches on the window, and the flapping sheet of roof galvanize that threaten to blow away in the wind. For one moment they was just girls again.

“Come.” Seema shoo Yejide off the bed and gather the mosquito netting. “Gimme these sheets, clear up a little bit. Will make you feel better.” She tuck it out of the way behind the bedhead and then pull off the sheets. Yejide start picking up clothes from the armchair, the floor. It feel good to be useful, helping Seema clear away the detritus of the last three days. She open the top drawer on the bedside table, shake a green mosquito coil and tiny silver stand out of a box, stick the prong into the centre of the coil to hold it upright. She light a match and touch the flame to the end of the coil and place it in a small saucer in a corner, out of the way. The smoke curl upward and its acrid smell fill the room.

She brush the white dead-moth dust from the keepsakes on the bureau with her hand. A pocket watch that belong to Maman, her great-great-great-grandmother. A dark blue, fleur-de-lis enamel pill box belong to Babygirl, her great-great-grandmother. The heavy gold bangle was from Deborah—Babygirl daughter and Yejide great-grandmother. And finally, her favourite, her Granny Catherine ebony pipe. Catherine was the only one she know in the flesh and she stroke her pipe like something precious. Soon something of her mother’s would be there. Her silver cigarette case? Her jewellery box? And then one day there

would be something of her own to be added, like another bead on a rosary. But she had no daughter. Who would be there to select it?

“Seema?”

“Hmm?” She was pulling a clean fitted sheet onto the corners of the mattress.

“Remember when we used to talk about running away?”

Seema smile. “Get an apartment in town, smoke cigarettes and drink red wine whole day.”

“The one time we try it, we realize we didn’t know where to go after we reach the main road.”

“And Mummy find us by the junction on her way home from the market and carry us back up the hill.”

“She never tell on us.”

“Cut my tail, though,” Seema grumble.

Yejide remember it happier. She and Seema heading out into the world, no idea where they was going and no intention of coming back.

“I still feel to do that sometimes, to run away from here, go somewhere else. Sometimes it feel like the only thing we do in this house is die and pass death down the line. You ever think about it like that? Nobody does ever tell you about what to do when we living but everybody know what supposed to happen when we dying.”

Seema pause. The quiet settle. “Don’t worry.” She smooth the top sheet on the bed. “She will call and you will be alright.”

Yejide wipe her dusty hands on her leg. “Right.” She almost taste the resentment on her tongue.

“She don’t have a choice. Ms. Pet know—even if she like to pretend not to—that this is about more than just you and she.”

“Ms. Pet didn’t give a damn about what she was sup-

posed to do when it come to me for all this time. Why you so sure she have damns to give now?”

Seema smile and take her hand as if to say enough now and draw Yejide back to the bed. She lie down and watch Seema unravel the mosquito netting and drape it over her. Through the gauze Seema look like a ghost. She lift the net, crawl in beside Yejide and cover them both. The warmth of her body pressing against Yejide’s make her forget her worries a little bit, just lie there listening to the rain, and Seema soft voice.

“You know what I remember from standing on the junction, running away, no idea where to go? The feeling that nobody down there knew where to go either. That they was all just as lost. Most people out there, people down the hill, people in the city, all of them fraid dying. Fraid it every day. Is like a black curtain that block out everything they think they know. They don’t know that death is a blessing, a balancing. That it have women living on this hill who whole life is about making sure that death don’t have to be a thing to fear, that somebody here to make sure that is nothing more than a good, long sleep. To be able to do that, to be part of that, is a blessing too.” She glance over and stroke Yejide cheek. “But you not dying, Jide. Not today . . .”

A little light filter through the curtain as the sun rise. It bathe the room in a cool blue. Yejide curl her body around Seema’s and tuck her head into the space between her shoulder and chin. She smell like clove.

Seema hands stroke her hair, her shoulders, trace down her back, her hip, lower.

Yejide press into Seema, then feel her body let go and drift. She push the resentment down and lock it away.

Yejide spend her whole childhood searching Petronella face for signs of her own. She never find any. Her face round and soft, her hands wide and calloused. But Petronella and Geraldine thin and spare, like the maker really had just enough for one woman and last minute decide to try and make two. With twins, it common for one to be the sun and the other to be the moon, but with Petronella and Geraldine—one didn't make sense without the other. Petronella never stop moving, like if she fill up with a kind of energy that hum in her bloodstream and make it impossible for her to stay still—rifling through piles of papers and neat black ledger books, swishing her long skirts busy-busy as she head out the front door to manage the store in town. Geraldine was always in her wake, quiet and still except for fingers that was agile like spiders when she crocheted. Whatever bond there was supposed to be between Yejide and her mother skip a generation. No accounting for twins.

But Yejide had Seema. They was like two manicou, Peter used to say, always sneaking out the house, always listening to big people from corners, always running in the bush, have a way they move quiet-quiet so nobody even realize they there. Even when she get older and Peter shake his head and bouf them for sneaking away, “Is time you start to act like you have some sense, Princess. Why you don't come with me to the shop?” But from the time his back turn she and Seema would speed out the house and disappear into the green. Her mother already ignore her enough at home. Yejide don't need to go in the shop for her to do it there too.

She only know her mother through moments meant for someone else—glimpses through a half-open door, a snatch of conversation she wasn't supposed to hear. She put each

of the moments into boxes. Sometimes she open them, spread out their contents to take inventory.

A small light-blue box that smell like loneliness. She was nine. The first few months after Granny Catherine gone. She and Seema playing in the corridor outside. Petronella brown legs hanging off the side of her big bed, her toes barely touching the floor. Faint sobs drifting out the crack of the door. Peter murmuring soothing sounds.

A round rose-gold box, the same colour as one of Petronella fancy dresses that Yejide would sneak into her room and try on when she wasn't looking. She was eleven. Petronella sitting at her bureau, Peter bareback behind her, his hands on her shoulders, stroking her neck. Petronella spraying a tiny bottle of something that smell sweet on the inside of her wrists, putting deep red lipstick on her mouth. Her face beautiful and grave in the mirror.

Forest-green box. Wide, with a false bottom. Space enough to hold this from when she was thirteen: Petronella and Geraldine in Geraldine room on opposite end of the corridor laughing quiet and whispering to each other; Geraldine sitting at an identical bureau, Petronella fingers oiling her sister scalp, the whole room smelling like rosemary.

Another, black. A tiny sickle, padlocked and humming with the knowledge that her mother did not belong to her. She was fifteen. Petronella sitting silent, her body taut, almost vibrating, straining with the energy it take to keep herself still, her eyes staring at a point in mid-air, and Geraldine next to her crocheting, like if not for her hands making chains and loops and stitches Petronella would lift off and fly up into the air, leaving her daughter with no mother at all.

Purple box, heavy like an unanswered question. Sixteen. Their voices identical. She can't tell who talking until

she peek around the corner and see Petronella and Geraldine arguing. “You have to teach her.”

“I don’t have to do shit except stay alive.”

Geraldine mumbling but she can’t hear.

“. . . and when it don’t need me anymore? Expect me to just dead like all I good for is this?”

Footsteps on the landing coming closer toward her. Yejide back away, press her body tight into a nook just out of sight, until she can’t hear them.

The cobalt box pulse and change shade depending on when she open it. She was seventeen. Old Year’s Night. Moon heavy. Fireworks lighting up the sky from Port Angeles in the distance, villagers bussing bamboo in the valley. The whole night bright and full of energy and she and Seema sneak out past the gathering in the living room—Petronella and Geraldine sipping port, Laurence playing guitar, Peter and the rest of men cooking black-eye peas in the kitchen to bring them luck and good business for the year to come. None of them even notice when she and Seema slip out the front door and take off across the yard, stolen cigarettes and Granny Catherine lighter in her pocket. She remember the wind on her face as they run through the bush, the smell of carbide burning in her nostrils. A low whistle lead them to the clearing and the boys’ eyes light up to see them. They couldn’t believe their luck—them girls from up the hill give them the time of day, and on Old Year’s too! They would have a story to tell for months with this one.

The red one with thick curly hair pull out the rum bottle from his back pocket and grab Seema hand. She tip her head back and he pour the brown liquid down her throat and they collapse on the soft clearing, laughing and melt into the shadows. The next one skin shine like midnight and he look at Yejide like he never see anything like her a

day in his life. His eyes make her shy, but she shake it off and pull out a stolen cigarette and light it, pout her lips like she see Petronella do, wonder what his hands would feel like on the back of her neck. She exhale slow and pass the cigarette to him. He take it from her and, when he done, grind it into the ground. They kiss and it taste like smoke and rum. He fumble with her dress. His lips firm and the bark of the tree up at her back rough. He kiss his way down her collarbone and a giggle make her look up, over his shoulder. Halfway in shadow, Seema breasts bare, her hand gripping the hair of the boy on his knees in front of her. Yejide stifle a giggle of her own as a tongue curl round her nipple. She and Seema hold each other's gaze, the boys none the wiser. This moment was theirs, and theirs alone, while the bamboo keep bussing, lighting up the hill.

Hours later the hill quiet, the edges of the sky turning pink, they run back to the house, tipsy from the rum and drunk on their own power. When they reach close, they muffle their giggles and out-of-breath laughter so nobody can't hear them. They tiptoe up the drive, up the few steps to the wooden porch, and hope nobody awake so early downstairs to hear the creak of the floorboards. Yejide feel alive. She wasn't thinking about her mother and why she don't like her and what she ever do wrong and nothing about any old legacy that nobody ever really bother to explain to her. Her spirit flying so high, she almost miss it. If she didn't take one last look at the sky she woulda never see the faint orange light through the window on the landing upstairs, the outline of a woman standing there looking out. The lamp flick off quick; she know she not drunk enough to imagine it. The thought fill her up and make her feel warm: her mother stay up to see her home.

When she and Seema finally make their way back down-

stairs, late for New Year's breakfast, Petronella, Geraldine, Peter, Mr. Homer and Laurence was already finishing up at the table. Petronella drinking lime-bud tea and Yejide reach over and take a float from the tray in front her mother and smile at her a little bit. She want her to know that she see her, but Petronella don't look up, just continue reading the newspapers. She coulda kick herself. She imagine it after all. The euphoria of Old Year's, the boys, Seema, actually make her think her mother care whether she come home or not. She reach for the coffee pot, feel the disappointment settle in her, let it quieten down. And then she feel eyes on her. Geraldine gazing at her silent like always, but this time a faint smile on her lips.



PROBABLY

RUBY

A Novel

LISA BIRD-WILSON

“A passionate exploration of identity and belonging
and a celebration of our universal desire to love and be loved.”

—IMBOLO MBUE, AUTHOR OF *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS*



HOGARTH

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Bart

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“MAYBE WE’RE TWINS,” SHE JOKED, BETWEEN SAMPLING Bart’s salty lips and his tobacco tongue. “I’m adopted.” She bit his bottom lip. “Could be true.”

He paused, pulled away, and looked at her, shuffled his feet on the cold aluminum ridges of the baseball bleachers. They were making out behind his old elementary school. *He couldn’t think of anywhere else to take me*, she thought. Over his shoulder, the hulking school building was distracting. Ruby imagined authoritarian eyes watching her from the dark square windows. It made her want to walk up to those opaque windows and yell, *What are you lookin’ at? Huh?* and raise the left side of her lip in a tough-girl sneer. She hated school. School was slow and full of rules and judgment. She wanted fast. And fuck the rules.

“I read about it. They’re called *pheromones*,” she prompted Bart. “Like a secret smell.” She sniffed the air and pressed herself up against him. “Yup. We’re probably related,” she taunted, leaning in to nibble his fat bottom lip with her teeth,

licking it with the tip of her tongue. “Ruby and Bart, sitting in a tree,” she sang, teasing, still kissing him.

He broke off just long enough to say, “Kissing cousins.” He smiled before continuing trying to feel her up under her shirt.

She liked teasing him about their birthdays—the freaky coincidence that they shared the same birth date, August 24, 1975. Both sixteen. Exactly the same age. To. The. Day.

“Beavers do it with their cousins and stuff,” she said. She pushed him away, one hand on his chest, and reached into her inside pocket with the other. The inside pocket of *his* jean jacket, which *she* wore because now *she* was his official girlfriend. Officially. Which was the sort of thing that made other girls call her a slut, mostly because they couldn’t think of anything more creative to say. All the girls in her school were sheep. *Baaa*, she imagined them saying. *Sluuut*. Seriously. No originality. No thinking for themselves.

As for Julian, Bart’s best friend, he was at least slightly more creative. Julian had lotsa creative shit to say, him. All sortsa shit.

From the inside pocket of the jean jacket, Ruby retrieved half a joint she’d saved from the morning and Bart, ever the gentleman, fished out his Zippo, flipped it open, rolled his thumb over the wheel, and sparked her up. The dry weed snapped.

She took a deep drag and held it in. “Where were you born?” she asked from her throat, toke solid in her lungs, squinting against the smoke. She was thinking United General Hospital or Sisters of Charity. One of the usual suspects for their city.

He reached out his hand to take the joint but she twisted her arm back over her shoulder, away from him, shook her head, and blew her smoke in his face.

She turned her head for another hit. “Tell me.” She paused before adding, “*Cousin.*” She laughed, and let the smoke puff out of her mouth while she threw her head back to look at the sky, blue and close to perfect, even though the spring air was still cold. She handed him the joint.

He hit it and croaked, “North.”

“What kinda fuckin’ place is that?” She stared at his dark curly hair, long and shaggy, in perfect harmony with his deep brown eyes and dusky skin. “*North,*” she mimicked. “*I’m from da Nort,*” she mocked.

“That’s not funny,” he said, getting all serious on her.

“Oh hell.” She waved her hand to dismiss him. “You know what’s gonna happen? We’re gonna find out we’re beavers. Maybe I’m really from *da Nort* too. Wouldn’t that suck? To think you’ve been doing it with your twin?” She took a toke and let the idea settle. “*Incest,*” she said. “Eww.”

BART AND JULIAN HAD known each other since grade one or something. Best friends. Julian—what a trip, man. And not always in a good way. She tried, okay? She really did. But then Julian was such a bastard, she’d started calling him Judas. Sometimes she sang Aerosmith’s “Dude Looks Like a Lady” around him and laughed her ass off and he hated her for it. And for calling him “Julie,” too. But most of all he really hated her for being Bart’s girlfriend, even though he would never admit

it. He was just so jealous.

Julian, aka Judas, had this long, dark hair that hung straight down his back, no braid or anything, almost to his waist. And tall! And skinny! His legs were long and he had a spectacular hip swagger that could take an eye out. Tight jeans and a firm little ass. Seriously, so many dudes thought he was a chick at first glance and gave him the drive-by whistle. And when that happened, Julian turned and looked, the guys saw he wasn't a chick and they peeled away, and Julian just went "Like, what the hell, man," put his hands up in a baffled gesture, and kept on doing his sashay-thing down the street. Here was the thing: Julian had this *e-normous* beak on him—you know, like a real noble Indian nose. So when he turned around and the guys with the whistles and pickup lines saw him, they really shut the hell up. Or sometimes they swore at Julian, called him a faggot. Guys are all so macho, they probably responded to their mistake by trading a round of punches in their car and then going somewhere to smoke a joint and try to pretend they all didn't just totally catcall a dude.

One time, though, a guy actually got really pissed off. The guy pulled up behind Julian. Ruby and Bart were about half a block back, holding hands and grabbing each other's asses and generally making Julian sick, so he had walked ahead.

"You working?" the guy said to Julian, when he got close enough.

Julian turned, gave the guy a real good full-schnozzle profile and the finger at the same time. The guy started swearing at Julian. He pulled his car to the curb. He was yelling at Julian and then he got out and just *attacked* him. Serious psycho, you

know? He punched Julian right down to the sidewalk, like, *one, two, three* and Julian just collapsed with each blow: down, down, down to the cement. Then the guy kicked him in the spine before he jumped back into his car and drove off. The whole thing took like, seconds. Julian didn't even get to fight back. It happened so fast there was no time to respond. Ruby couldn't stand Julian, in a general sort of way, but no one deserved that, right?

Even so, even given that, Julian was still a first-class prick, as far as Ruby was concerned. As for his creative names for her, he called her Red instead of Ruby, and sometimes added “nipples” or “lips.” He always said it in a lewd but grossed-out way. Like he was trying to indirectly convince Bart she was disgusting for being female. Ruby's typical response was to tell him to shut the fuck up, but still he insisted. And it got worse. Her last name was Valentine—her so-called dad was English. As in, from England. Accent and all. Who the hell ever heard of a British Indian? Who ever heard of an Indian called *Ruby Valentine*? What the hell were her parents thinking?

IT WAS LATE, AFTER ELEVEN, and Ruby had Bart in her bedroom. She'd snuck him in through the window. Through the same window where she could hear the trains change cars every night. They crashed and echoed against each other while they hooked up and then endlessly pushed on somewhere else. Huddled on Ruby's narrow bed, Ruby was trying to get Bart to be quiet. He always forgot to whisper. In her tiny house, Ruby's mom was totally going to hear them.

“I have four beers in my closet,” she whispered. “You want one?”

Bart smiled. “Where’d you get those?”

“Stole them from Judas, last time we were over there. I know he’s your official boyfriend and all, but don’t tell him, okay?”

“Oh yeah?” Bart said playfully and pushed her off the bed.

She landed on the floor with a thump. “Jesus,” she hissed. “You’re going to get us caught.”

Her mom’s footsteps instantly arrived in the hallway.

Ruby froze, still on the floor. Alice was outside the door. Ruby could hear her breathing.

“Ruby? What’re you doing in there?”

Bart stifled a laugh.

“Shut up,” she whispered, waving her hands at him.

Alice rattled the doorknob. “Why’ve you got the door locked?” Her voice was shrill.

“I’m changing! Jeez!” Ruby shouted in her best annoyed voice. “Can’t I even *change* in private?”

“You need to let that dog out. I don’t want her peeing in your room.”

“She doesn’t *pee* in my *room*,” Ruby yelled, trying to sound offended.

Her mother scoffed and walked away down the hall. The TV blared again. More news about the shooting. Her mom was obsessed with it. She kept talking about it, as if it was supposed to be important to Ruby because she was Native. Or something like that.

Now there was an inquiry into what happened, which was

more or less: A white supremacist pulled a gun in a store. A pawn shop. Up north. An Indian man. A Cree man, to be more precise. A trapper. Shot. Shot in the back. Shot in the back as he tried to leave.

This wasn't exactly news, in terms of racism in this town. All the same, Ruby struggled to process the cruelty. Even though she'd grown up seeing it, in different ways, every day. Hard to explain, exactly. Maybe it was this: hearing the story again and again made her throat ache, like she was going to cry. Only she didn't cry, as a rule, so that wasn't quite it. She tried to block out the noise coming from the news. Tried to think of it as just "white noise," ha ha ha.

She petted Hound. Alice hated Hound because Bart gave her to Ruby—a "Valentine's present." He thought her mom wouldn't say no to keeping her if she was a present. She called her Hound after *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which was her dad's favorite book, even though her Hound wasn't a hound at all. And Ruby had no idea what her dad's favorite book actually was *now*, since it was more than a year since he abandoned them, this time for good, to take his crappy accent back to London. As in England.

Ruby looked at Hound, a Doberman-lookalike mutt, curled in the corner, listening to them talk disrespectfully about her bladder. Ruby made dog-whining sounds and Hound's ears shot up.

"We should run away," she whisper-said to Bart and Hound at the same time. "They're all assholes here."

She rolled to her feet and retrieved two of the beers from the back of her closet, returned to the bed, and sat cross-legged

beside Bart. “No opener,” she said, handing him a bottle. “Use your teeth.”

Bart tipped his head sideways and put the edge of the cap on his bottom back teeth and clamped down. With an upward twist of his wrist he pried the cap off, spit it among the blankets, and handed her the opened bottle. He took the other one, opened it the same way, spit the cap out, and held the bottle up as if to say cheers.

“Let’s chug two each,” he said, “and then I’ll go down on you.” He smiled his perfectly charming smile and tipped his head back to drink. She guzzled her beer as well, then stashed the empties in the closet and grabbed the other two. On the way back to the bed she unzipped her jeans and kicked them off.

LATER, BART ASKED HER, “Did you mean what you said? About running away?”

“Hell, yeah.” She ran a finger along his jawline. “But where would we go?”

“I have a place,” he said, all mysterious. He wanted her to ask where.

“I’m not running away with you to Julian’s tree house,” she joked.

“You’re real funny,” he said. “No. My family has a cabin up north. My auntie owns it. But I know where the key’s hidden.”

“I don’t know. What about Hound? Who’s going to look after her?”

“We’ll take her with us.”

“How would we get there?”

“We’ll hitch.”

“Where is it, exactly?”

“Porcupine Lake. Probably about a two-hour drive from here.”

THE NEXT MORNING, RUBY left her mom a note—to convince her not to get all excited about things and call the cops like the other times she’d run away. After all, she reasoned in the note, sixteen was legally old enough to leave home, so technically she wasn’t doing anything wrong. She promised to return, to call, and to be safe. She said, truthfully, that she felt more stable and happier than she had in a long time, especially now that it was just the two of them, since Alice had kicked out Jay. Ruby said it was nothing personal, but she needed to get some space to deal with her dad leaving the country, which was the bullshit part, designed to get Alice to leave her in peace and also to let her come back when she was finished “running away,” which she knew she was really too old to be doing anyway.

Ruby should have known better; Alice never believed a word Ruby said.

They scored four hits of acid and a quarter-ounce of weed, packed a couple of cans of corn and ravioli, and took off. Standing on the side of the highway taking small sips from a bottle Bart got off his brother, they reconsidered their image after a lot of cars went by. Two dark-haired Native stoners in jean jackets and Adidas, with a Doberman-lookalike pup? With a tiny bladder? Yeah, sure. As if anyone was going to

pick them up.

Bart and Hound needed to be out of the picture until Ruby got someone to stop. The two of them retreated to the scrubby brush near a farmer's barbed-wire fence line. With Ruby alone on the highway, it didn't take long before a guy in a silver Trans Am pulled up. His car was full of crap, the back seat crammed with what looked like fishing gear. She opened the passenger door so he couldn't just drive off.

"Hey man," she said, leaning down and looking the guy over. "Can you give us a ride?"

"Sure. Hop in," he said, throwing his arm over the back of the passenger seat and turning to give her his best macho grin. His green-and-white lumberjack shirt fell open to expose his pale chest with its brown, pube-like tufts around his nipples, trailing a line down his stomach, the same color as his long brown hair and three-day beard. He was wearing jeans and an earring and white sport socks, driving with no shoes on his feet for some reason. He didn't look like much of a fisherman to Ruby. She couldn't begin to guess where his shoes might be.

"Just a sec," she said, looking over her shoulder. "My friend's just taking a piss."

Bart ran to the car, Hound loping all puppy-like and cute behind him.

The guy's demeanor soured but Ruby had the car door open and she could tell he wouldn't pull a complete asswipe and drive off, although the thought of it flickered across his face as plain as the disappointment in his eyes. Ruby pulled the seat forward for Bart and Hound to get in the back. She took the front seat.

The driver turned and faced the road. “Watch out for the shit in the back,” he said, his voice flat. Once they got up to highway speed he asked, “Where you guys going?”

“Porcupine Lake,” Bart answered from the back seat. Poor Hound was trying to get comfortable with all the crap in the back. Ruby took a good look around the car. A couple of rods, tackle boxes, rain gear or tarps, hard to tell; rope, maybe camping gear, none of it neatly packed. It looked as if he’d just tossed anything he thought he might need into his car in under five minutes and took off with no shoes. Why was he in such a hurry? she wondered.

Across the center console, near the shifter, was a large hunting knife in a leather case. Ruby thought then about the guy who attacked Julian.

After a while the driver flipped on the radio. The news again.

“. . . after a couple of shots into the floor,” the newsreader said. *Who shoots a gun into a floor?* That was when Leo LaChance was shot in the back: after the couple of shots into the floor. What were those shots about? Warning? Intimidation? LaChance was leaving the store when he was shot in the back with the third shot from an assault rifle. He was as good as gone. They didn’t need to make him go. He was practically out the door. An assault rifle. Like shooting him was sport.

“They should give the guy a medal,” the driver said.

At first, she thought he meant Leo LaChance. Then she saw what he meant. He looked at her sideways, his eyes darting from the road to her face, back and forth. As if challenging her to say different. Bart drew in his breath.

Ruby leaned over and pointed to his socks. “What’s the deal?” she asked. “Where’s your shoes?” She leaned way over, trying to get a good look at his sock feet.

He laughed. “Long story,” he said. “Lost them at a party.” Then he added, “Or something like that,” and smirked.

“Something like a party?” Ruby asked. She tucked the hunting knife under her armpit. Sat back up straight.

“Huh? No.” He shook his head. “It *was* a party. My shoes were—oh fuckin’ never mind.” He reached into his pocket and took out a pack of smokes. Ruby took out Bart’s bottle and had a slug. Handed it back to Bart. She felt the driver’s sharp eyes follow her. He lit his smoke and rolled his window down a crack. The air rushed in. In that moment of distraction, Ruby tossed the knife to Bart in the back seat. “Check this out,” she said.

The driver turned to see what they found, but it was already too late for him to do anything about it. Bart pulled the knife out of its case. Not menacing, really. Or maybe just the right amount of maybe-dangerous.

The driver’s face turned red. “Don’t fuck around,” he said.

“Exactly,” Ruby said. “Don’t fuck around. No one should fuck around.” Then she added, “Bart here doesn’t need any medals today.”

At the first turnoff, the guy couldn’t get rid of them quickly enough. She gave his car the finger as he fishtailed away. Bart unsheathed the knife and flashed it in the sun, but soon the quiet settled around them and they began the long walk along the access road, hemmed in by trees. Ruby remembered the first family fiction she’d ever made up: a story about how her

real mother walked very far when she was pregnant with her. She asked Bart if he wanted to hear it.

“This is about my *real* mother,” she emphasized. She had never tried telling the story to anyone before.

Her mother walked and walked, big and pregnant, until she ended up under a tree—a great big, swaying weeping willow—ready to have her baby. She’d hunched on her haunches and gripped that tree, hugged it like it was her own mother, forehead on the rough cool bark, gaining strength and courage from the tree, whose strong deep roots would help sustain her during a difficult childbirth. She was tired from walking and thirsty, but the baby was coming and the tree propped her up, gave her shade and encouragement. Finally, the baby was born and her mother buried the placenta under the tree to help nourish it and to pay the tree back for how it had helped her out.

“Now, every time I walk near a willow tree,” she told Bart, “I feel like I’m walking over my mother’s heart.” Ruby regularly applied herself to creating and owning the many fragments of her existence.

BART FOUND THE KEY under a rock at the side of the cabin, just like he’d said.

The front of the cabin faced the road. The back faced the lake. The main room was one large space with a couch and a kitchen table, a counter with a sink, a hotplate, and a fridge. There was one bedroom off the main living space. Outhouse for a bathroom. Got it, all in a matter of seconds.

“Is that a phone?” she asked.

“It’s a party line.”

She had no idea what that was but nodded and said, “Oh. I like parties.”

Bart laughed. “Not that kind of party. It means other people use it. You can sometimes pick up the phone and there’s other people on it. We never use it because it costs a lot to call long distance. Here”—he put his hand on the receiver and looked at her. “Shhh,” he said, then carefully picked up the handset and put it to his ear. He smiled and motioned her over with his hand. He held the receiver so she could hear. She leaned in to listen, expecting the thrill of overhearing someone else’s private conversation. But it was only dial tone. He laughed at her disappointed face.

“Well, sometimes you get people talking. The ring for here is one long and two short.”

There was a dock, with a canoe on shore. The sun was warm.

“Let’s go swimming,” Ruby said.

“The water’s fucking cold.”

“Skinny-dipping!”

“Someone will see us,” he said, but she heard the give in his voice. He liked the idea of being naked together. Guys always wanted to have sex in weird places.

“There’s no one out here,” she argued. “It’s only the start of May. No one does lake stuff until the long weekend, right? We probably won’t see anyone.”

“Let’s get some wood for the fireplace,” he suggested. “Then we can take our clothes off.” He smiled. She examined his perfect teeth. Jesus.

Instead of skinny-dipping, they sat on the couch and smoked a joint. A ghetto blaster and a shoebox of tapes were the only items of interest. She dragged the box to the couch and they looked through them. Most of them were marked. Some of the music was not bad, like Blondie, Pink Floyd, Queen, Led Zepelin, and even some Alice Cooper. But then they found bad stuff like Jefferson Starship, Olivia Newton-John, and Bette Midler. “Kenny Loggins! Air Supply!” Ruby shrieked. “Oh my god, whose music *is* this?”

“My brother and cousin made a lot of the tapes,” Bart said, “but some belong to my uncle and auntie. I don’t really know, they’re just always here.”

“Well, I don’t mind ‘The Rose,’” she said, holding the Bette Midler tape.

Bart pretended to stick his finger down his throat and gag.

“I taught myself how to play it on the recorder in grade seven.”

“Oooh, talented.” Bart whistled, mock-impressed.

“Shut up,” she said. “It wasn’t that easy.”

They checked out the bed and Ruby decided to get naked under the covers while Bart built a fire. She heard it crackling and smelled the smoke. The cassette clicked and the sound of Queen filled the cabin. Bart came to the bedroom and whipped the covers off her.

“Don’t! It’s cold,” she shrieked, grabbing them back.

“I’ll warm you up,” Bart said, pulling his clothes off and jumping into the bed, putting his warm flesh next to hers. They kissed and kissed for so long she felt lost. He put her hand down so she could feel his hardness, like he wanted her to know

something about him. She grabbed his hand and pressed his fingers between her legs. After they finished fucking they lay under the blankets and Ruby put her head on Bart's shoulder. She played with his one free hand, pushing his arm in the air, looking at their hands together, fingers entwined. He was darker than her, his knuckles brown and smooth. His fingernails squared off, trimmed and even.

"This makes me happy," she said. "I wish we could stay here forever. Right here. In this bed."

"But we're going *swimming*," he laughed.

"Okay, well. How about we take the canoe out instead? There's probably paddles somewhere?"

"I have an idea," Bart said, sitting up and looking at her. "Let's take one hit of acid each. And eat something, I got the munchies."

They mixed together a can of corn and a can of ravioli and heated it on the hotplate. Ruby found a radio station with music and danced around the cabin. They found the end of a bottle of whiskey in the cupboard over the fridge and took turns drinking shots straight from the bottle.

Bart picked up the party phone and called Julian. Told Julian to come. To bring beer and food. "We've got the munchies," he laughed.

"We love you!" Ruby yelled at the phone receiver, the acid hitting hard.

IT WAS NEARLY SUNSET by the time they found the paddles and pushed the dark-green canoe into the shallow water.

“No, Hound,” she scolded. “You stay here.” Hound whined, prancing her front paws on the sand, watching them. “No,” Ruby said more sternly.

Ruby attempted to enter the boat first, trying to save her shoes from getting wet. As soon as she got one foot in, with Bart standing at the edge of the water and holding the canoe to steady it, the canoe wobbled and she nearly fell, grasping for the edges. Her free foot got soaked with cold water. She screamed and lunged forward, throwing herself into the canoe. Her weight scraped the boat bottom on the sand and rocks. She laughed.

“Sit down,” Bart yelled.

Hound whined from the shore.

“Fuck off,” she said to Bart. She resented being yelled at. Especially when she was in such a good mood.

Bart pushed out further, jumped in, trailing water from his sneakers, and nearly tipped them over.

“Don’t boss me around like that,” Ruby said, trying to make a point. “Buzzkill,” she muttered.

“Well, you can’t stand up in a canoe,” he snapped. “You’ll tip it.”

“Right,” she said, with much the same tone she would say *fuck you*, and she stood up in the boat, lifting her leg as if to step over the side of the canoe, which then tipped sharply, pitching Ruby face-first into the icy water. She fell to her hands and knees; water splashed up her nose.

Behind her, Bart choked on a laugh; he managed to stay upright in the canoe. Hound splashed into the water. Ruby put her hand on Hound’s strong neck and together they waded

through the shallow water to shore. Ruby was so mad she ignored Bart calling to her from the canoe. She walked away, up the beach, fuming that he hadn't even come to help her. Prick. She left him behind, still sitting in the boat.

Ruby didn't notice the cold at first. She walked fast and angry, trying to put space between her and Bart. If she could have, she'd have walked all the way back to the city. Soon, though, she slowed down and the sharp awareness of being high on acid took over again. The moon was beautiful—full, luminous. Hound ran ahead and back, disappearing into the darkness and then resurfacing. They walked for what seemed like a long time before she noticed she was shivering.

There was only one cabin on the shoreline with lights on. Bart's cabin was somewhere that felt like a long way behind her. People were at the cabin with the lights. Ruby walked right up to the porch and looked in the window of the door. A circle of chairs and several people sitting around the circle. The lights were low, a fire in the fireplace. Someone opened the door for her. Warm air, ripe with the scent of sweetgrass and sage. She stepped in, Hound at her heels. The door closed behind them. She felt shy but no one really looked at her. She had a small revelation: she wasn't special; she wasn't un-special. She was just there. No one was surprised, not even her.

“Bart,” she said out loud. She didn't know what she was trying to say. Her voice sounded thin and far away.

“Astum,” an older, heavysset man said in a slow northern accent. “Sit down, Bart. Sit down here”—he motioned to a chair, a smile tipping the corners of his mouth.

Ruby laughed and took her place where he said. Did he

think her name was Bart, or was he teasing her? She was aware of the amber light in the room, the brilliant color of the flame from the fireplace, and the smell of burning wood and sage. A woman with shoulder-length dark hair and kind eyes draped a blanket around Ruby's shoulders.

They were talking, those people in the circle, about a lot of things. And then Ruby heard them talk about the shooting. Sort of. In a roundabout way. She only heard some of the conversation because she was too heavy. Somewhere in there she thought she fell asleep.

MAKE HIM DANCE. THERE were three men in the store, drinking alcohol. Drinking and firing a gun. Not just any gun. An assault rifle. Into the floor. They were firing the gun into the floor. They were making Leo LaChance dance. *Dance.* LaChance.

There once was a man named LaChance.

She drifted.

A LOUD KNOCK AT the door. The old man shook her shoulder gently. "Bart," he said, still teasing, but also serious. "I think that's for you. Better get ready."

Cops. And a woman, who told Ruby she was Bart's auntie. The cabin was hers. Ruby and Bart were overheard on the party line, calling Julian. Ruby heard the words *runaway* and *dangerous*. *Stealing*. She thought about the Trans Am guy and the knife. She searched the face of the old man who she thought

was being nice to her, teasing her like an old moshom. The woman who brought her the blanket. They called the cops on her, she realized, betrayed.

Someone took the wet blanket and gave her a dry one. She sat in the back of the cop car. They wouldn't let Hound in with her and she was immediately defensive. They questioned her again and again. Sternly. Gently. With patience and impatience. They asked about Bart.

"I'm not mad anymore," she said.

She laughed a few times, even though it was wrong to laugh—she couldn't help it. They asked if she was stoned and she only told them about the pot and the whiskey because adults couldn't handle the truth. She told them she'd done it before and no, she did not need to go to the hospital.

"Where's Bart?" she asked.

"We don't know," his auntie told her, maybe for the first time.

Oh.

They were searching for him. The canoe was gone.

After that, they let her out of the car, left her alone on the beach where she could hear them, calling, searching. Ruby and Hound lay down on the sand and she wrapped herself around Hound's warm body. She thought about Bart, maybe out on the lake. Was he cold too? She willed him back to shore. She thought about Leo LaChance on the cold street after being shot. All bad news is cold.

There once was a man named LaChance

She pulled Bart in with her mind. She held his beautiful hand.

They wanted to see him tap-dance

Someone tried to take her to the cabin but she resisted.

“No. I need to stay here,” she pleaded. They left her alone again.

Two shots in the floor

Julian arrived. How long had it been?

“Where’s Bart?” she asked him. She already knew it had been way too long.

And one out the door

Julian lay down on the sand with her. He folded his arms around her from behind and held her there. She buried her nose into the collar of Bart’s jean jacket. It smelled like wet lake and Bart.

He didn’t have even a chance



“A searing and stunningly poignant study in what makes us and what breaks us.”
—S.A. Cosby, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Razorblade Tears* and *Blacktop Wasteland*

DON'T
KNOW
TOUGH

A NOVEL



ELI CRANOR

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1.

Still feel the burn on my neck. Told Coach it was a ringworm this morning when he pick me up, but it ain't. It a cigarette, or at least what a lit cigarette do when it stuck in your neck. Just stared at Him when He did it. No way I's gonna let Him see me hurt. No way. Bit a hole through the side of my cheek, swallowed blood, and just stared at Him. Tasted blood all day.

Tasted it while I sat in Ms. Miller's class. Woke up in Algebra tasting it. Drank milk from a cardboard box at lunch and still, I tasted it. But now it eighth period football. Coach already got the boys lined up on either side of the fifty, a crease in between, a small space for running and tackling, for pain.

This my favorite drill.

I just been standing back here, watching the other boys go at it. The sound of pads popping like sheet metal flapping in a storm.

"Who want next?" holler Bull. Bull ain't the head coach. Bull coach the defense. He as mean as they come.

I tongue the hole in my cheek, finger the cigarette burn on my neck, and step into the crease. Coach hand me the ball and smile. He know what kind a power I got. Senior year, too. They got that sophomore linebacker lined up

across from me. The one with the rich daddy that always paying for everything.

Coach blow his whistle.

I can see Him smiling as He stuck the hot tip in my neck, smiling when He put Little Brother out in the pen. I grip the ball tight, duck my head, and run at sophomore linebacker, hoping to kill him.

When we hit, there real lightning, thunder explode across the field. The back of sophomore linebacker head the first thing to hit the ground, arms out like Jesus on the cross. I step on his neck and run past him.

The other boys cheer.

Coach blow his whistle and already the linebacker getting up like I ain't nothing. He shaking his head, laughing, and standing again. Disrespecting me?

Disrespecting *me*?

This time I spear him with the top my helmet. Dive and go head to head. There's a cracking sound—not thunder, not lightning, and damn sure not sheet metal—this the sound of my heart breaking, the sound of violence pouring out.

Coach blow his whistle like somebody drowning. Sophomore linebacker scream cause he don't know what's on him. This boy a poser. He don't know tough. Don't know nothing. Bet his momma woke him up this morning with some milk and cookies. I try to bite his cheek off, but the facemask, the mouthpiece. I see only red, then black—a cigarette, a dog pen.

Sitting outside Principal office after practice when Coach call me in. Principal a big man, soft in places used to be

hard. He look like a football coach, got a black mustache and everything. Coach look like he from California cause he is, hair all slick and parted. And skinny. Too damn skinny.

“Bill,” say Coach. “What happened out there?”

Bill my daddy’s name. Nobody call me Bill except Coach and my brother Jesse.

“You realize the kind a shit you in?” Principal say, cussing for me, trying to make me feel at home. “That boy you stomped? His daddy liable to sue the whole damn school.”

Feel my jaw flexing, like if I could, I just grind my teeth down to the gums.

“You hear us talking, boy?” say Principal.

I raise one eyebrow, slow.

“Swear to God,” say Principal. “Tell you what I ought to do. What I ought to do is call Sheriff Timmons. How about that? Let him charge your little ass with battery.”

I nod. Know bullshit when I hear it. Then Coach say, “But he’s not going to do that.”

Principal grunt.

“Listen, Bill,” say Coach. “I’m going to sit you for the game tomorrow night. Principal Bradshaw thinks that’s best. Okay?”

I hear Coach but I don’t. My ears ringing. That burn on my neck turn to fire.

“Call the cops then.”

Principal laugh. Coach don’t.

“We’ve already qualified for the playoffs,” say Coach. “You’ll be back next week, and then we’ll be going for the real goal—the state championship.”

“Senior Night,” I say.

Coach breathe in deep through his nose. He ain't got no idea what it mean to my momma to walk across that field on Senior Night. What it mean to me. Have them call out my name, my momma name, and everybody in Denton ring them cowbells, stand and cheer? Something like that outside Momma's mind. And now they trying to take that from her, from me?

Coach look to Principal, but he already turned away, looking at something on his computer. "Bill," say Coach, "I think this is fair. It's as good as I can do."

I nod, waiting for Principal to say something, at least look up from that computer and see what he just took from me, but he don't. Whatever on that screen bigger than Billy Lowe. I'm out the door before he ever turn back, running with blood in my mouth.

"Aw, *hell* nah," say Momma.

Little Brother dangle from her arm like a monkey. Tiny fingers, white at the knuckles, holding on to her shirt like he know how it feel to be dropped. And Coach wonder why I ain't never fumbled, not once.

"Senior Night? And Coach Powers sitting you? For what, Billy? What'd you do?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie."

"Just a drill, at practice. Hit a boy hard, real hard. Just kept hitting him."

"*Football* practice?"

"Yeah."

"Nah, *hell* nah," say Momma.

Momma already got the phone out, already dialing

Coach when He walk in, smelling like beer-sweat and gouch.

“Who she calling?” He say to me.

I just stare at Him. Don’t say nothing.

“*Boy.*”

“Coach.”

He make a jab for the phone. Momma jerk away. Little Brother hold strong.

“Calling Coach,” say Momma. “Done kicked Billy off the team.”

“He ain’t kicked me off. Just—”

“*Naw,*” He say, grabbing Momma by the shirt now, pawing for the phone. “No fucking way—”

“Yes, hello? Coach Powers?” Momma say, but it ain’t her voice. It the voice she use when she talk to the water company, DHS, teachers, and Coach. She talking fancy and slow. Don’t sound nothing like her. “This is Billy’s momma.”

The man who live in our trailer but ain’t my daddy start pacing. He got a bottle of NyQuil in His hand. Drink NyQuil most the time, save His whiskey up. He pull from the bottle and wipe His mouth with the back a His sleeve.

“Billy say he ain’t gonna play? On Senior Night?” Momma stop rocking Little Brother. Look at me. “Austin Murphy got a concussion? Was out cold for five minutes?”

He start to laugh. “Shit yeah. That’s my boy.”

“Alright,” say Momma. “I understand, Coach.”

She still got the phone to her ear when He take it. “Billy the only fucking chance you got. You hear me? Either let him play or we take his ass down the road to Taggard. How about that?”

He chug the NyQuil some more. Don't even know how stupid He is. Cain't change schools this late in the season.

“Yeah. That right, *Coach*. See you at the game, and if Billy don't play—Billy don't *play*.” He jab the phone screen three time with His thumb then throw it at Momma. She try to get out the way. Little Brother hold tight, but the phone corner hit him in the back, a sad, hollow sound. Little Brother look like he about to cry, but he don't.

Kept my mouth shut when I left the trailer the next morning. Didn't say nothing to Him on my way out. Didn't have to. The NyQuil bottle empty. Everything empty when I left Shady Grove.

Now it game time, and Coach still letting me run through the tunnel and the paper the cheerleaders spent all day coloring. Even say he gonna let me walk out on the field at halftime for Senior Night. But I ain't told Momma. He'd wanna walk too, and I'll be damned if He get to walk out there like He my daddy. I stay in the back. The band blow they horns, but they ain't blowing them for me. Used to blow them loud and sing the fight song when Billy Lowe run across the goal line.

Sophomore linebacker here. In a wheelchair, God, a fucking *wheelchair*. Ain't nothing wrong with his legs. Wearing sunglasses too. I walk up behind that wheelchair, just stand there, while our team getting beat by Lutherville. Lutherville sorry as hell, but the Pirates ain't got shit without Billy Lowe. Still standing there behind that wheelchair, smelling sophomore linebacker hair—smell like girl hair—when I hear Him start hollering from the stands.

“Ain't got shit without Billy Lowe!”

I go to gnawing my cheek.

“Bes play ma Billy!”

Now Momma too, and I can tell by her slur, she gone. I look back quick to the bleachers, time enough to see Little Brother dangling from her arms with his Billy Lowe jersey on: number thirty-five.

“Fuck this shit.”

“Yeah. Fuuuuck this shit.”

Ain’t no telling them apart now.

Coach a true believer, though. He out near the twenty, fighting for a holding call. Don’t see Principal wading through the stands like a linebacker on a backside blitz.

“Nah, hell nah. Don’t touch me.”

That’s Momma. She see Principal coming for her.

“Swear to God,” He say, like He the kind a man do something about it. He ain’t. He all talk and shit and empty bottles. “Swear to God, you touch her and—”

“Boy, you listen,” yell Principal at Him. “You touch me and I’ll have the sheriff up here faster than greased lightning. You hear me?”

Sophomore linebacker stand and push them sunglasses up in his shampoo hair. Probably thinking they about to fight, but I know He won’t do shit. Principal ain’t a kid like Little Brother. And He know Principal would get the sheriff up there, and the sheriff got Tasers and clubs, and He don’t want no part of that.

“We going, alright?” He say. “We gone.”

Lutherville got to punt. Coach turn to the sideline to holler for the offense, and he finally see. I still got my back to them, but I know it ugly, embarrassing too. Feel them hot on my neck. I look to Coach to save me. Just put me

in the game, send me to the locker room, take me by the facemask and beat the hell out me, anything, but don't leave me standing here on this sideline.

“Come on, Billy!”

It Momma.

“Take my boy down the road!” she holler. “Take Billy Lowe to run the ball at Taggard!”

Roll my neck. The burn cracks. Hot blood on my back. My mouth a open wound. I think about spitting on sophomore linebacker, covering his face with my crazy. But I'm watching him watch my people in the stands. Watching Momma and Little Brother just holding on. I look one more time to Coach, but it third and six and he got to call a play. Sophomore linebacker still watching Momma holler for me. Watching Him too. Everybody know they drunk now, and it embarrassing, fucking embarrassing.

Then sophomore linebacker save me. He elbow another sophomore in the ribs, kinda point up in the stands, point right over me like I ain't nothing. And now he laughing and pointing at my momma, at Little Brother.

“Come on, *son*, fuck this place,” He yell, but He ain't my daddy, and that does it.

This time there more blood. My blood. His blood. Little Brother blood. The blood that connect us. I feel Bull tugging at my jersey. I seen a cop try and pull a pit bull off a Lab once. Had to pry the jaws loose with a billy club. I'm head-buttin the boy now. Got his arms nailed down, head-buttin him when Bull finally pull me loose.

As he dragging me away, I see Coach over there, kneeling beside sophomore linebacker. Look like he whispering

something in his ear. Bet he saying, “Billy didn’t mean it. Billy a good kid, heck of a running back too. Billy just got it tough. And his momma crazy and won’t stop fucking. And the other day he got a cigarette stuck in his neck, and he took it like a man, and that was after his momma boyfriend put his little brother out in a dog pen, and he had to take that baby boy scraps for lunch and dinner, then breakfast the next day. Billy didn’t mean nothing by it. He was just embarrassed, stuck on that sideline, right there close to them, close enough to feel the heat. Can you imagine? You imagine that, sophomore linebacker?”

No. You cain’t.

2.

Arkansas happened quickly, like a tornado. In just under twenty-four hours Trent Powers drove his family the sixteen hundred miles from California, interstates leading to highways, highways revealing the occasional town, the countryside, and eventually their journey ended at a single hanging traffic light. Beyond the light was Denton, Arkansas. When Trent arrived, the football field—a hundred yards, lined and marked with white paint—was the only thing he recognized.

That’s how Trent had explained the trip to his only assistant coach, Butch Kennedy. Butch can still remember the starry look in the young coach’s eyes his first day on the job, like Trent couldn’t believe where he’d landed. Denton was a long-ass way from California.

Seventy-some-odd days later and the two coaches are lining the field, heat rising up from the grass, remnants of an Indian summer burning on through November. Butch has been an assistant for nearly his entire thirty-year career with the Denton Pirates, a man the boys refer to as Bull. He’s short and wiry, bent from the grind of the gridiron, sunspots and moles marring his thin, pale skin. Bull helps Trent with the paint, the laundry, the defense. Everything. Bull knows football. Bull knows Denton.

Trent admitted he'd never painted a field before Arkansas, only artificial green turf in California. It's tedious work, each line a representation of his patience, each line either crooked or straight.

"Young ball coaches always in a hurry."

This is Bull's only advice.

"Right," says Trent, hustling the paint carriage across the fifty-yard line.

"Going too fast, Hollywood."

"Please, don't call me that."

"Gonna have to get the green paint out."

Trent swings wide of the fifty, jerking like a distracted driver hitting a rumble strip. Bull shakes his head. He knows what—or better yet—*who* is troubling the young coach.

With an older brother who holds most of the school records for touchdowns and tackles, Billy Lowe has Pirate blood in his veins. He's a sawed-off white boy with tree-trunk thighs, built hard and low to the ground, trapezius muscles bulging up from his shoulders to his earlobes. No neck. A pit bull.

Bull knew there weren't kids like Billy in California. Bull doubted there were kids like Billy anywhere else in the world. Arkansas hills produce crazy like the Earth's mantle produces diamonds: enough heat and pressure to make all things hard.

Bull already has the green paint out, spraying over the crooked fifty-yard line, when Trent makes it across the field and turns to him.

"What are you doing?" says Trent.

"Crooked line."

“We have bigger concerns than this field.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Bull grunts, shaking his head. “Everything was fine until Blood Alley.”

The Blood Alley drill is outlawed in most states. It’s actually illegal in Arkansas, but in a place like Denton, a small town nestled in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains where poultry farms and trailers outnumber any other signs of civilization, the law is bendy like a chicken’s neck. Blood Alley is football at its most primitive: one boy with a ball, one boy without, the rest of the team lined up on either side, any hope of escape afforded only through violence. It’s something you do early, back in August when the players don the pads for the first time. But Trent had pushed for it on a Thursday in November, the last practice before Senior Night. And though Bull liked the crack of a solid hit as much as the next man—probably more—he knew the drill was not a good idea, not that close to game time, not this late in the season. High school boys are quick to blow their load.

The drill was fine until Billy got involved. Bull could see it in his eyes. See it before the boy ever took the ball and flattened their sophomore linebacker, Austin Murphy.

“I’m not painting that line again,” says Trent. “I can barely think straight.”

“What’s your plan for Billy?”

“I’ve scheduled some meetings for today.”

Bull takes the paint carriage from Trent and starts back across the fifty, straight and slow, an old man feeling his way with a cane. “Meetings?”

“Yes, Bull. Principal Bradshaw wanted to talk about what happened last night. So I told him to stop by this

afternoon. Billy and his mother are coming in after we finish up.”

“Billy stomps a mud hole in Austin Murphy on Thursday, then does it again on Friday—on Senior Night—and you schedule some *meetings*?”

“So we can talk about it.”

“Don’t take Billy for the talking kind.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means don’t get in a hurry, Hollywood.” Bull produces a buck knife from the back pocket of his jeans, flicks the blade open, and goes to picking his teeth.

“Is that necessary?” says Trent.

“Always thought it a fitting nickname.”

“The knife, Bull. Is that even legal to have on school grounds?”

The old man studies the young coach, trying to make sense of him. The locals have had trouble drawing a bead on Trent Powers, too. In Denton, football is as big as it gets: pride and pageantry, parades on homecoming, all the shops closing down on Fridays, even the Walmart. Now the Pirates are in the playoffs for the first time in years. But when Trent Powers rolled into town driving that silver Toyota Prius, football was about the furthest thing from the townsfolk’s minds. Ball coaches, at least in Arkansas, drive trucks—preferably Fords.

Bull walks on, painting the field one slow line at a time. Trent stays behind, gripping the ball tight, but Bull knows he’s scared. All the years he’s spent watching high school boys step onto the gridiron—the old man can smell fear. Bull reeked of it nearly thirty years ago when he had his one shot as head coach of the Pirates. He was younger than

Trent but just as eager. He was in a hurry too, wanting the glory without having paid the price, the pain. And then he pushed those boys too far in the heat of an Arkansas summer.

“You ever think about why we do what we do?” Bull says as he walks.

Trent tosses the ball up. Catches it. “Of course.”

“Busted knees, shattered shoulders, not to mention all them shots to the head—that sit right with you?”

“It’s part of the game.”

“But there’s the problem,” says Bull. “It’s just a game.”

Trent stops, staring at the ball in his hands. “Football is a tool, Bull. We should use it to teach our boys how to be better husbands and fathers—better *men*.” He runs his fingers along the ball’s white laces. “We should use the game to sharpen them. It’s all part of God’s plan.”

“You’re in the Bible Belt now, Hollywood,” Bull says, throwing up his free hand but still keeping a steady line. “Everybody’s on the same team down here. *God’s* team.”

“It’s one thing to be on the team, and another thing entirely to truly believe,” Trent says, still standing with the ball at midfield. “Back when I was a boy—back when I was lost—a coach saved me. And that’s exactly what I plan to do for Bill Lowe.”

Bull grunts and walks on, already halfway across the field again. He pushes the carriage slower, barely moving at all. Paint hisses from the can. A plume of white rises in the morning sun. Bull hopes Trent is watching, hopes the young coach will at least understand the field before he puts eleven boys on it and sets them in motion.

Bull stops. His chin goes to his shoulder. The field stands half lined and empty behind him.

SAM HOLLAND

THE
E
C
H
O
MAN

A vertical photograph of a person walking away on a path through a forest. The path is flanked by large, dark tree trunks. The scene is lit from the right, creating a strong silhouette effect and a warm, golden glow on the right side. The title 'THE ECHO MAN' is overlaid in large, bold, red, sans-serif capital letters, centered vertically over the path and the person.

A NOVEL

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

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PROLOGUE

LEAVES CRUNCH UNDERFOOT. The black closes around him; he exists only in the narrow tunnel of light from the car's headlights. He takes a deep breath in. The forest smells of wet foliage; mud; clear, crisp air. So far it has been as good as he imagined it would be. It's all coming together perfectly.

He's holding a woman, one arm hooked under her knees, the other around her back. She's still fresh, and blood runs out of the stab wounds, down his white plastic trousers. He savors the warmth on his cold hands.

He looks at her fondly for a moment, then heaves her into the trunk. She lands with a heavy thud against the second body, her leg lolling out over the bumper. He pushes it inside.

Everything has to be just right.

He looks at them both, then leans down and undoes the handcuffs. Even in the darkness he can see faint red and black marks on her wrist, made while she had a body responsive enough to bruise. He's pleased: it'll show what he did.

He walks back to the front of the car, opening the passenger side door. He picks up the two implements left in the footwell, taking the cover off one of them. The stainless steel blade of the knife shines, clean and newly sharpened. It's his favorite; he knows it works best for instances like this. Smaller and more precise than the one he used to kill.

He takes both instruments back to the bodies. Stops. Looks at the girls. He's never done this out in the open before, in the dark. He doesn't like to be rushed. But needs must.

He grabs an arm and tugs her half out of the car trunk. He straddles her body, taking a good handful of hair. Blood flows, but he knows what he's doing, it doesn't interfere with his process.

He changes position, pulling the body around so he can get access to the other side. Then he puts the knife down and picks up the other tool. It's bigger, heavier. The weight is reassuring. He does what he needs to do, and then, with a final twist and pull, it's finished.

He stands up, rearranges the bodies, then repeats the action on the second girl. This one is quicker, his technique is better second time round, and after, he pauses, standing back from the car and appraising the scene in the trunk.

It's not perfect. He sighs. It bothers him that he can't complete the tableau properly this time, that none of this is in the correct order, but he wants these to be found.

He shuts the trunk. With the heel of his shoe, he smashes out the right taillight. He walks over to the second vehicle, pulling off the plastic clothing, placing it in another bag to burn later. He climbs in and puts his hand on the ignition key, willing the old car to work. As it splutters into life and he drives away, he looks back at the car. From the outside, nobody can tell what lies within.

Nobody can imagine what horrors are still to come.

C H A P T E R

1

Day 1
Monday

I AM SO FUCKING bored. The thought darts into her head, intrusive and distracting. She looks in the mirror above the sink. The expression on her face isn't lust or desire—it's boredom. Pure unmitigated boredom.

She's bent over the taps: the soap dispenser in front of her, the hand dryer to the left. She can see the man behind her. The man that's doing a below average job of fucking her in the disabled toilets of the community center, barely fifteen minutes after dropping their children off at school.

Her underwear is around her ankles; her skirt, pulled up to her waist. He has his hand shoved under her bra, kneading her breast like unproofed dough, the other gripping her hip as he thrusts into her.

Ethan? Evan? Whatever, she thinks. She remembers his kid's name is Hayden. He'd said he was in the same class as Alice, pointing toward the throng of indistinguishable children running into the school as the bell rang.

He stood out among the throng of yummy mommies in tight gym gear and hurried career women on their way to work. Short brown hair, a little skinny for her liking, but decent enough. No wedding ring. That was the only sign she needed before making the suggestion. He ignored hers, the platinum band now reflecting in the stark fluorescent lighting.

She cringes as he spasms, coming with a suppressed cry, then slumping against her back. She wriggles out from underneath him and stands, pulling her skirt down, trying to preserve some sort of modesty.

He has his back to her, cleaning himself up. He drops the piece of toilet paper and the condom into the loo, then flushes it.

He refastens his belt before opening the door and peering out nervously.

“Jessica, right? Do you want to . . .?” he asks.

“Just go,” she says. He leans over to give her a kiss, but she pulls back.

“Thanks,” he mutters awkwardly, closing the door.

She locks it behind him and sits on the toilet. She shakes her head with disbelief, pulling her tights back on.

I’m so fucking bored, she thinks again.

* * *

Jess has a shower when she gets home, washing away all traces of Ethan/Evan. She makes a cup of coffee and takes it out to the garden.

It has stopped raining, and the winter’s air is cold and biting. She sits on the edge of one of the concrete steps, dressed only in a sweatshirt and jeans, her feet bare, her hair still wet from the shower. She knows she can’t stay out here long, but she enjoys the feeling of the cold on her body.

Their garden is large and rambling. Overgrown grass, weeds pushing their way through the gaps in the paving slabs, shrubs no more than twigs. Her husband occasionally makes comments about the mess, but she tells him she likes it this way—nature forging its own path, ignoring regulation or order.

She finishes her coffee and looks down at her feet. The flesh has turned white, her toenails blue. She’s started to shiver slightly. It’s time to go inside, and she turns her attention to what needs to be done before she picks Alice up from school.

She used to work, but the balance with the school run was a nightmare. She doesn’t miss it—she was just as bored then as she is now—but she liked the distraction it gave. Now, there is nothing for her to focus on. Nothing to do.

* * *

At school pickup she nervously scours the crowd, but Ethan/Evan is mercifully absent. She hovers at the edge of the playground, ignoring the other moms as they chat, their banalities an anathema to Jess. The

door opens and the children bound out, one by one, directed by the teacher toward their mothers.

And then, there's Alice. Her curls are escaping from her hairband as she skips toward Jess, a huge grin on her face, her school bag still massive in comparison to her tiny body. Jess pulls her into a hug, then ushers her toward the car, listening to her chatter about her day.

As she drives, she looks at her daughter in the rearview mirror. It astonishes her how she managed to create this beautiful, confident creature: unselfconscious, lithe, full of energy. The only good thing to come from her, she thinks ruefully. Alice talks about Georgia, about Isabelle, about Ned. Faceless kids Jess has never met.

"What about Hayden?" she throws back to her daughter.

Alice shakes her head. "I don't know him," she replies, and Jess is relieved. The last thing she needs is a forced playdate with the guy.

They get home. Alice rushes off to her toys and Jess gets on with dinner. She's making beef in a red wine sauce tonight, chopping vegetables carefully, sautéing the meat. She hears her husband come in the front door, and Alice runs to greet him. Jess barely looks up until she feels him behind her, kissing the back of her neck.

"Smells good," Patrick murmurs into her hair.

"Me, or dinner?" she asks, and he laughs.

She turns and watches him as he goes into the hallway. He's taking his suit jacket off as he walks, pulling the tie from around his neck. She takes him in objectively.

Patrick's never been slim, but lately his metabolism seems to have been getting the better of him. His shirt strains at the neck, a belly pushes over the waistband of his trousers.

She turns back to the hob. She's not being fair, she knows. He's devoted, compassionate, hard-working. All the Good Husband adjectives. She should be making the most of him, she thinks, pouring a glass of red from the bottle, then transferring the rest into the pan. She should be screwing *him* in public toilets, rather than nameless strangers. Maybe then he wouldn't be so keen to get it elsewhere.

She goes to take a swig from the glass of wine, but her hand is slippery from the cooking and it slips, smashing on the floor.

"Mommy?" she hears Alice shout from the living room.

"It's okay—just dropped something. Don't come in here."

She looks down, scowling, at the spikes of glass on the tiles, the red from the wine flowing slowly outward. One shard is curving from the floor, the sharp tip pointing toward the ceiling. Her feet are bare, shoes and socks unnecessary with their expensive underfloor heating, and she

picks up her right foot, placing it down on the fragment. She slowly transfers her weight across. She hears a crack as the piece splinters, then senses the slight pop as her skin breaks and the glass enters the soft tissue.

It feels good.

She watches a slow trickle of blood ebb away from her foot, the bright red mixing with the lighter hue of the wine.

“Jess! What the hell are you doing?”

She feels Patrick’s hands on her upper arms. He pulls her away from the mess, pushing her toward a chair. She sits down with a thump. He looks at her, his hands on his hips. She can tell he’s angry, but he doesn’t want to shout.

“You know better than this,” he says, bending down and looking at the wound. “Shit,” he mutters under his breath, wincing as he pulls the slice of glass from the fleshy part of her forefoot. “You’re going to need stitches.”

“I’ll sort it,” she says. “I’ll get Nav to come over.”

Patrick stands up and looks at her. He goes to say something, then stops himself. “I’ll get dinner finished,” he says instead.

She pulls her foot around so she can look. The edges of the cut are straight and precise, but they gape apart, blood flooding from the incision. Patrick passes her a roll of paper towels, and she roughly wraps several around her foot, then hobbles off to the bathroom.

Inside, she locks the door and sits on the closed lid of the toilet. She takes the first aid kit out of the cupboard and opens it up, resting it on the edge of the bath. It’s more than your usual household plasters—a collection of bandages, gauzes, tape: everything she might need for situations like this.

She looks at the bottom of her foot again, then sets to work, pushing the sides of the cut together, drying the area around the wound and sticking it as best she can with surgical tape. But it’s still oozing blood. Patrick’s right: it’s going to need stitches, and she picks up her phone, sending a text. A response comes back immediately.

I’m at work, Jess. I’m on nights. Go to the urgent care clinic like a normal person.

She replies: *I’m not a normal person, Nav. You know that. It can wait. When’s the earliest you can come round?*

Three small dots appear—he’s typing. Then a pause. She knows she pushes their friendship to the limit, but she can’t bear to go to another drop-in center. The same questions, over and over again. The same looks, the same suspicion.

Her phone beeps.

Fine. Tomorrow morning. I finish at the hospital at 8.

Then a follow-up: *I can't keep doing this.*

She sighs and puts her phone down, bandaging her foot as best she can. She puts socks on: she needs to hide the injury from Alice.

When she goes back into the kitchen, Patrick and Alice are sitting at the dining table, Patrick starting to serve dinner. She ruffles Alice's hair as she sits down, and her daughter looks up, beaming at her.

"Everything okay?" Patrick asks.

She gives him the response he wants: a smile and a nod. She wonders, not for the first time, what's wrong with her.

* * *

They eat dinner, and Alice tells them about her day at school. It's a ramble of words, an incoherent telling of a story, but they listen, the indulgent parents of a five-year-old only child. Patrick asks her questions at the right points as she babbles away; she doesn't notice any hostility between her parents.

Jess runs her bath and puts her daughter to bed. She reads her a story. Everything is calm. Alice snuggles down under her duvet, and Jess gives her a kiss and a cuddle. Her daughter smells of shampoo and warmth and innocence, and she feels a swell of love in her chest. She is thankful—for the hundredth time—that her daughter is normal.

Patrick comes in after her and says goodnight, turning off the light. Jess waits in the hallway as he closes the door, but he walks past her without a word, going downstairs. She follows him into the kitchen, hovering in the doorway as he takes a beer from the fridge.

"I'm sorry, Patrick," she says, and he nods slowly without looking at her.

He opens the bottle and puts it to his lips, downing a long swig.

"I'm going to London in the morning," he replies. "It's an early start. I'll sleep in the spare room so I don't wake you." He pauses. "I'll set up an appointment with Dr. Crawford."

Without another word, he turns and goes into the living room. She can't stand the thought of another insufferable hour with Dr. Crawford, a woman who doesn't care or understand. She asks Jess questions she can't answer. "*What makes you want to hurt yourself? What do you think will happen if you continue to be this self-destructive?*" Jess recognizes the threat implicit in the seemingly innocent question.

She hears the television turn on and the sound of football. Patrick knows she hates football. He's telling her: Stay away. I don't want to be near you right now.

She doesn't blame him. She doesn't want to be near herself right now, either.

* * *

She goes to bed. She watches television in their bedroom, some true-crime documentary, but the overblown drama doesn't provide the distraction from her own life that she hoped it would. After a while she hears Patrick clean his teeth, then close the door to the front bedroom. She wonders if she should go and say goodnight, apologize again, then decides against it. An apology means "Sorry, and I'll try not to do it again." Useless words, when she knows they're not true.

She turns the television off, plunging the room into darkness.

She lies in the black, counting slowly as she breathes in and out. Her daughter is silent next door, and she can't hear any movement from Patrick in the spare bedroom. Slowly she drops off to sleep.

* * *

As night takes over, a hand slowly pushes the mail slot open. Liquid is poured through the door into the hallway; it runs across the tiles, soaking the mat. Then something else follows: a lit match.

It falls to the floor, and with a whoosh the fire ignites.

Hampshire Chronicle

July 15, 1994

ANIMAL KILLER STILL AT LARGE—12 CATS KNIFED

A sadistic pet killer is on the rampage, estimated to have killed eight cats and injured a further four in the last two months. Other animals may have also been targeted, the RSPCA claim, citing two dogs and four rabbits that have gone missing in the same time period.

Mother of two, Michelle Smith, says her kids are “traumatized” after they returned home on Friday to find their pet cat, Stimpy, dead and disemboweled on their front porch. Anonymous sources from the police have also shared instances where pets have been found skinned, possibly while they were alive, although this has yet to be confirmed.

The RSPCA and Hampshire Constabulary are working together to find the killer, and ask any members of the public noticing suspicious behavior to call 101.

They advise any pet owners in the area to keep all animals indoors until the offender has been apprehended.

C H A P T E R

2

THE GLASS GLOWS red and orange, flames lighting up the windows, turning the inside to black. Smoke claws up the walls, gray fingers reaching skyward.

With an almost silent surge across the carpet, the fire grasps at curtains, furniture—anything in its wake. Glass cracks with the heat, dark wisps creep up the stairs, skulking under doors.

It steals into her nose. The coughing wakes her, the lack of oxygen forcing her to take sharp breaths. Jess opens her eyes. It is nearly pitch black, but she can see a fog lurking at the edges of the ceiling. It hovers, a malingering specter, thick and intimidating. She coughs again, feeling her lungs starting to clog.

Suddenly, through her daze, her consciousness clicks into action. She jumps out of bed, dressed only in her oversized T-shirt, and goes to the door. The handle is cold, and she slowly opens it into the hallway.

The entire first-floor landing is filled with smoke. Instinctively, she drops to her knees, her heart racing as she crawls across the carpet. She glances down the stairs, recoiling from what she sees.

The front door is obscured; the whole of the hallway is filled with flames. A lake of fire licks at the edge of the stairwell. The crackling terrifies her, eclipsing every other sound. And then she realizes. The smoke alarms. She looks upward through the gray, staring at the redundant white discs on the ceiling. Why aren't they going off? Why haven't they woken Patrick or Alice?

The thought of her family boosts her into action. She screams her husband's name over and over, choking, coughing, as she crawls across

the hallway floor, feeling the heat of the flames behind her. She pulls the door open to her daughter's room, rushing over and trying to shake Alice awake. The smoke is thicker in here, almost filling the room to the floor. She knows they don't have much time. But Alice doesn't move, her eyes staying closed, her breathing labored.

The porch is below the window in the spare bedroom, where Patrick is sleeping. She looks back, praying her husband has already made his escape. There is no way they can get there. The hallway floor is now a blanket of flames, red and yellow arching to the ceiling. She can feel the heat, the carpet starting to melt under her knees.

Jess kicks the door closed, frantically trying to think of an alternative way out as she pulls her unconscious daughter into her arms. She drops as low as she can to the floor and edges to the window.

It's a two-story drop to the garden. She knows the minute she opens the window, the gust of oxygen will add fuel to the flames, and she peers through the blackening glass. The lawn is below them, but still. With a freezing frost it could be as hard as concrete.

But stay here, and both of them will almost certainly die.

Coughing uncontrollably now, she pushes the window open. The fresh air is soothing to her lungs, but instantly she hears the roar of the fire gain strength behind her.

Awkwardly, Alice still in her arms, she pulls herself up onto the windowsill. Her legs dangle out into nothing. She looks at her daughter's face. She can't tell if Alice is breathing, and panic takes over.

She looks down into the dark.

And jumps.

Her body crumples as she hits the ground, and she collapses onto the cold grass, Alice on top of her. She feels her head hit something hard: the edge of the concrete patio. The adrenaline makes her shake, and she looks up at her house. Every window is lit up, bright red and yellow dancing behind. The living-room bay next to them has smashed, blown outward by the ferocity of the blaze.

She tries to move, but her head spins. She's dizzy, nauseous, and she lies back on the grass, taking deep gulps of air.

She hears sirens, sees flashing blue lights in the road. People arrive. A man dressed in reflective yellow stands next to her, calling for medical assistance on his radio. She sees ladders, her house swarming with motion.

Her daughter is pulled out of her arms. She grabs at air.

"Where are you taking her?" she gasps as she watches Alice being carried away. A paramedic appears at her side.

“Your daughter’s safe now. We’ll get her to the General—you won’t be far behind.” Jess feels his hands all over her, checking for injuries. “I’ll give you something to take away the pain,” he says.

“I don’t . . .” she starts, but she’s too tired to argue as the needle is thrust into her arm.

A fireman stands over her.

“Who else is in the house?” he shouts.

“Patrick,” she mutters. “My husband. Front bedroom.”

The message is relayed, and she lies back on the grass. The paramedic is trying to talk to her, but she can’t hear him. She thinks of nothing but her daughter.

A mask is put over her face, a rigid collar fastened around her neck.

She feels the grass in her hair, the damp seeping into her T-shirt. The heat from the fire is replaced by a cold wind as they roll her one way, then the other, onto a stretcher.

Her brain can’t catch up with what just happened: the fire, the speed with which it spread, the flames destroying her house. She wants Patrick. Every part of her wills Alice to be okay. Take me, she thinks. Take everything from me, except my daughter.

The emotion overwhelms her, and she starts sobbing, her tears making clean lines in the black soot on her face. She is carried into an ambulance. A paramedic stays next to her as they head toward the hospital, sirens blaring, and he takes one of her hands in his.

“We’ll be there soon,” he says. His face is kind. Understanding. “Do you need anything else for the pain?”

“No,” she whispers. Everything is numb, she thinks. Her whole world is numb.

Disorientation

A Novel



Elaine Hsieh Chou

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The night before Operation John Smith, Part II, Ingrid drove to her parents' house in search of her lucky rabbit's foot. They lived an hour away in the claustrophobic suburb of Putterville, in the same house where Ingrid had suffered through puberty: a periwinkle one-story with two bedrooms and a eucalyptus tree crowning the front yard.

During their first year in Massachusetts, her parents had stayed with one of her mother's cousins. But after Ingrid was born, the one-bedroom apartment shrank exponentially and, because the cousin was expecting a baby of her own, would only continue to shrink. So her father returned to Taipei to continue working and sending them money while Ingrid's mother worked part-time and studied for her associate's degree at a community college.

Ingrid was ten when Bowen—"Bo"—moved permanently back to the US. By that time, she had grown accustomed to her fatherless state. Instead

of eliciting excitement, his visits puzzled her, as she never understood why he reappeared and disappeared like a vacuum salesman while her friends' fathers stayed put year-round. Bo was not a loquacious man, which exacerbated the intrinsically awkward nature of the visits—him nodding and smiling at Ingrid as she fidgeted on the sofa, unsure of where to look. Though he was determined to make up for lost time, Bo found talking to his preteen daughter more strenuous than learning a new language in a new country. Instead, he defaulted to communicating with her via articles (usually about space, dinosaurs or old presidents), highlighting interesting passages in hopes of discussing them. The tradition continued to this day, by email, though the articles focused on adult matters now, like “Five Foods Beneficial to Anti-Inflammation” and “Neat Tricks on How to Save Money on Your Next Gas Bill.”

Ingrid's mother, Jing—“Jean”—was a quick-witted, brisk woman. Unable to sit still for long, she was always finding excuses to fix things that weren't broken, to dust when nothing needed dusting, to cook when no one was hungry. As a mother, she was indulgent (she never cared if Ingrid watched “unsuitable” TV shows or if she stayed up late reading or if she earned less than stellar grades), but raising her alone, Jean was always preoccupied with her own studies and then with working overtime. Ingrid was babysat by the mothers of children in her same grade until Jean discovered public school daycare. Then, when she entered middle school, Jean determined she was old enough to walk home by herself. On the rare occasions they spent one-on-one time together, Ingrid was so worried she wouldn't be entertaining enough for her restless mother, she became paralyzed and couldn't say much. To relatives who commented on her unsociable behavior, her mother explained she was just shy (but she wasn't shy, Ingrid wanted to protest).

By the time she entered high school, she was fully immersed in all its petty dramas and daily betrayals—scenes that composed her “real life.” Her “home life” was the backstage area where she ate, showered and slept; her parents, extras who occasionally wandered through a scene.

And so, at age twenty-nine, Ingrid did not know her parents very well.

She parked beside the eucalyptus tree, fished in her bag for her house key and found her parents in the living room, their faces basking in the ultramarine light of a *Jeopardy!* episode. Jean and Bo were now retired and passed the time watching game shows, jogging and temporarily acquiring new hobbies, everything from basket weaving to cultivating yogurt. But their greatest, most singular hobby, Ingrid knew, was hoarding—an immigrant’s tic. Although her thesis was in want of evidence, she hypothesized relocating to a new country were predicated on never letting go of anything from the old one or, for that matter, anything in the new one. She therefore concluded hoarding was a stubborn resistance to assimilation. After all, growing up, her friends’ houses were immaculately tidy, with matching soaps and toilet seat covers. Even their clutter, if it existed, was banished into neat, labeled bins. That was the ideal suburban American house: harmoniously sterile. By contrast, her parents’ decorating scheme could only be characterized as: clashing. Lots of clashing.

“Hi, Mom, hi, Dad.”

“Ingrid?” her dad asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Did you eat already?” her mom joined in. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. Yes, I already ate. No, I’m not really hungry.”

Jean looked disappointed.

A minute later, Ingrid held a plate stacked with fruit—crispy Asian pears, sliced oranges, kyoho grapes.

“I just came over to pick something up,” she said, discreetly setting down the plate and heading to her old bedroom. Her parents nodded, distracted by the return of their show from commercial break. In the hallway, she squeezed past piles of Taiwanese newspapers dating as far back as her birth, a row of coat stands, a precarious stack of Frisbees, CDs wedged into a shoe shelf.

Ingrid had never bothered to redecorate her room after she moved out for college. The actors and bands she’d once idolized towered down from the walls, their hairstyles and clothes embarrassingly outdated but now,

extraordinarily, back in fashion. The shelves displayed certificates, plastic gold trophies and blue ribbons, the kind passed out to everyone just for participating. Her old quilted bedspread was camouflaged with storage bins, while cardboard boxes took up the little real estate available on the floor. Ingrid flipped open a box: expired coupons and appliance manuals. Another: dried-up pens and Lego pieces. She opened the closet in dismay to find more unfamiliar cardboard boxes. She heaved them out one by one, hunting for a shoebox plastered in rhinestones and stickers, and eventually found it hidden behind a shopping bag stuffed with Lunar New Year decorations.

She shunted aside a storage bin and sat cross-legged on her bed with the shoebox in her lap. Most of her K–12 life could be found inside. She had safeguarded all sorts of trinkets whose importance escaped her now: intricately folded notes, raffle tickets, thread bracelets, a mood ring, a cherry-scented marker, a miniature sand art bottle.

Childhood. Ingrid didn't care to remember it. And what was there to say that hadn't been said before? She had grown up in a white neighborhood. She had not had any Asian friends, despite her father's platonic matchmaking attempts with the straight-A daughter of his coworker. At school, she ignored the few other Asian students in her grade as though they were invisible. She pined after the boys all the girls in her grade pined after—sandy haired and hazel eyed, careless and cruel. Her best friends were named Britney, Amber and Megan. They were best friends with their mothers, who allowed temporary tattoos and midriff-baring tops. She worshipped these girls, and so it follows did their bidding, performed for them when they asked, remembered what they laughed the hardest at (an invented character named Ying Ying who worked at a nail salon), learned to make quips before anyone else could make them, because then it wasn't mean, not if she said it first, not if she laughed the hardest out of everyone.

In those years, what Ingrid wanted most was to pass. She swore she would die if forced to wear the hand-me-downs from her cousins in

Taiwan, printed with cutesy cartoon animals and ungrammatical English. After her vision worsened in sixth grade, she threw a tantrum in the doctor's waiting room to forgo eyeglasses for contacts. Above all, she would not look like what people expected her to look like.

She styled her hair the same way, in little twists held back with butterfly clips, wore the same lip gloss discreetly slipped into her pocket at a drugstore, rubbed her skin with the same cucumber-melon-scented lotion and really, in certain moments, she felt just like them, she *was* just like them, how she walked and talked was just like how they walked and talked, who could tell them apart, especially when they interlinked their arms, traded friendship necklaces, spit on their hands and pinky swore to be best friends forever and ever?

But inevitably, people could and did tell them apart. Often it was a joke, or an aside, or a teacher's comment, or a TV segment, or something commanded during a game ("you have to be the Yellow Ranger" when her heart had been set on the Pink Ranger), and the facade's shiny shell would splinter. Sometimes it was as simple as getting ready in a friend's bathroom, their eyes locking in the mirror for a split second, the visual such a resounding indictment of difference, she had to look away for fear of crying. Sometimes it was unsticking the label from a new pencil box, slapping the MADE IN TAIWAN oval on Ingrid's arm and howling.

And then there was the time in fourth grade when Austin Krantz filched a piece of floss from the trash and held it up to Ingrid's eyes, declaring, "Now you're blind," and all her friends acted like it was the funniest joke they'd ever heard. Or the time they displayed various objects in her peripheral vision, astonished each time she correctly identified an object given "how flat" her face was. Or that other time in P.E. when the boys made "kung fu" noises at the precise moment she hit the ball and they joined in and so what could she do but join in, too?

When her friends asked her to "do Ying Ying" afterwards, she somehow found it less funny—though she still made sure to laugh the hardest out of everyone.

But they were also writing her notes signed with a million Xs and Os, calling her on the phone to talk nonstop for six hours, telling her secrets they swore they had never told anyone, brushing and braiding her hair, their fingers gentle and careful, buying her the exact pair of earrings she had wanted from the mall for her birthday, saying “love you” so easily and naturally like they meant it, and maybe they did, and maybe that’s what made it harder to unknot their cruelty from their kindness, especially when the two were so lovingly laced together. And she loved these girls back, these strawberry and dirty blond girls with hair on their arms that shone golden in the sun, freckles on their noses, eyes that held a dozen different shades of blue and green in a single iris. She thought they were perfect, and for someone like them to love her, even half the time, had to mean something about the kind of person she was.

What had been her childhood, really, other than a 24/7 performance? She was always looking at herself outside of herself, measuring the pitch of her voice, the loudness of her laugh, the sway in her walk, how she chewed her gum, what to do with her gangly arms, careful, careful on the pronunciation of her *l*’s and *r*’s—she would never stumble over these letters like Jacky Ma, who was mercilessly teased by everyone.

Her existence had been a constant containment of any unchecked or residual chinkiness—this inescapable disease that leaked from her body, face, skin.

None of this is new; most of it is predictable; is it still interesting? When something true is repeated too often, its truth is diluted.

Childhood: tolerated alone, her parents wholly unaware of the microscopic nicks and scrapes she sustained each day.

She fitted the lid back on the shoebox, relieved to lock the past into its rightful place. Unlike her colleagues who delighted in sharing old photos online, Ingrid had zero desire to dredge up her former selves. And what would be the point? Whatever issues she had all those years ago had certainly and unmistakably resolved themselves now, at age twenty-nine.

Ingrid cupped the lucky rabbit’s foot in her palm, which, like her, had

aged: a little more shriveled and gruesome, a little less vibrantly blue. She ran her thumb over its once soft, now stiff fur.

INGRID'S AND EUNICE'S breaths left frosty trails in the air. A few houses on Smith's street were already strung up with Christmas lights, bright multicolored winks in the night sky.

The reconnaissance phase of their mission had lasted two weeks. Eunice took it upon herself to contact Clark Thompson, author of *Xiao-Wen Chou: A Noble Life*, to ask if he'd ever come across a man named John Smith, but his number in the phone book had been disconnected and his publisher never returned her emails. Meanwhile, Ingrid met with the head of the Gender and Queer Studies department, attended an LGBTQ+ Allies meeting and read the article "The Violence of Outing Someone Without Their Consent." Everyone maintained there was no way to "tell" if someone was gay, and that this notion in itself was harmful, and Ingrid trusted them, *of course* she did, but what else could "love / forsaken and forbidden / evades me / once more / yet still / I yearn" possibly mean?

Reconnaissance was followed by another week of intensive planning and staking out. Neither of them had seen Chou again. As for Smith, he left the house sparingly. From what they gathered, his usual haunts were limited to the supermarket, the gym, the library and occasionally a nearby coffee shop. The night they saw him leave in his minivan, outfitted in running shoes and a baseball cap, a gym bag slung over his shoulder, they knew they had at least an hour.

In the backseat, Ingrid and Eunice wriggled into their all-black clothing. They accessorized their outfits with black ski masks, since Alex had advised them that one, an expensive house in an expensive neighborhood would likely have security cameras and two, they couldn't shed any DNA-heavy hairs. Ingrid's other accessory was a headlamp, although the only available one at the store was for children: bright purple with glow-in-the-dark hippos, which killed the sleek Catwoman look Eunice had planned.

After much debate, including a dramatic interlude of Ingrid begging “please, please, *please* don’t make me go in there alone,” Eunice insisted on waiting in the driver’s seat, should Smith come back earlier than expected.

They sat quietly for a moment, each ticking off a mental checklist.

“Are you ready?” Eunice asked.

Ingrid did not feel ready. Every bone in her body was humming at high frequency. She nodded yes in case speaking resulted in projectile vomiting onto the dashboard.

Eunice squeezed her arm. “You got this.”

She opened the car door, darted towards the side gate, then lifted up the hinge as she’d seen Smith do. The backyard looked unused: a brand-new BBQ set, a patio table and chairs, their striped cushions stacked under a plastic sheet.

She tried the back door: locked as expected. Having picked Eunice’s front door at least thirty times now, she made quick work of it, her motions fluid and reflexive. The process was more difficult at night, the icy cold chilling her gloved fingers, but when the last pin fell into place, she turned the doorknob and smiled—she was in.

She willed her eyes to adjust to the blue-tinged darkness, hoping to avoid use of the headlamp unless absolutely necessary. She looked around: she had landed in a kitchen, silent except for the purr of the refrigerator and the clank of the ice machine. She considered checking all the cabinetry for Chou, but surely that would be going overboard. Should she call out his name? No, she didn’t want to frighten him off. What was that lemony smell? She inhaled sharply: Pine-Sol.

Enough dawdling, Ingrid scolded herself. She slipped on surgical cotton shoe covers, then examined the lower floor first. In addition to the kitchen was an office with a computer desk and chair, plus a living room, dining room, half bathroom and laundry room. She poked her head in the garage, just to be sure. No trace of Chou. The house was clean, too clean, as though whoever lived there had only recently moved in. Even the

furniture—generic, mismatched—gave off an air of temporary convenience.

She headed upstairs. The house felt gloomier up here, the blinds drawn, the air recycled and stale. She felt for the lucky rabbit's foot in her pocket as she toured the four bedrooms, two of them completely empty, the third stocked with unopened cardboard boxes. "That's odd," she murmured. She went into an eerily bare bathroom, went back out. She had seen Chou in one of the front bedrooms. The only one she hadn't yet inspected: two French doors leading presumably to the master bedroom.

An enormous bed monopolized the middle of the floor. On the right nightstand were a box of tissues, some pill bottles, a watch and a framed photograph: a family portrait featuring two parents and a child. The boy boasted buckteeth; the parents, feathered hair. Smith's family, she guessed. Curiously, the left nightstand was bare.

Past the bed was a walk-in closet and, beyond it, an expansive bathroom. Ingrid switched on her headlamp and examined the closet first: pressed shirts, ties, belts, sweaters. The shaft of light swept across something shiny. She edged closer. In the back, behind a wool coat, hung a changshan woven from black silk with gold and royal blue detailing. She fingered the slippery fabric, her heartbeat drumming madly. *Chou lives in this house.*

She wandered, trancelike, to the bathroom. A Jacuzzi bathtub and a double-headed shower, two toilets, two sinks and a long vanity table with a Hollywood-style lightbulb mirror.

Ingrid went towards the latter, intrigued by its cluttered surface. As her headlamp illuminated the objects, confusion spread through her. Various wigs nested on foam head stands: one short black one, a longer black one, a gray-black one, followed by a pure gray one. Strange, she thought. She bent over the table. Liquid black eyeliner pens. An assortment of brushes. Bottles of foundation. Concealer pots. Cakes of powder foundation and setting powder. Was Smith also keeping a woman hostage? But where? Her eyes traveled slowly up to the attic before she clamped them shut—oh, why had Eunice made her come alone?

"A wry and unexpectedly tender story of finding the family we need when we least expect it. Perfect for fans of *Olive Kitteridge*."—Eleanor Brown, author of *The Weird Sisters*

housebreaking

a novel

colleen hubbard



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Chapter Eleven

DEL HAD WORK BUT NO JOB. A TIMELINE BUT NO BOSS. NO PAY-check, but a payout at the end of her project. Given all this, and that her eventual move would most likely lead to another temp job in another office with frosted glass and a minifridge, she made an executive decision to operate with no regard to time.

There were only three clocks in the house: one alarm clock in each bedroom and a small antique clock that sat on the mantel in the living room. In addition, she had a semifunctioning Keith Haring Swatch that Tym had given her as a birthday present two years earlier. Time pressed in on her and her deadline of March first felt too close.

The first day of the move, she woke late. Her watch showed that it was just past eleven a.m. She crossed out the day on the pocket calendar they'd given her free with purchase at the feed store, then fixed oatmeal on the camp stove. She sprinkled salt on top and ate it out of the pot with a wooden spoon before burying her Swatch in the deepest part of her dad's army bag and then putting on her coat and gloves.

Outside the air was chilled and growing colder. The sky was the color of a tarnished spoon, a fogged gray that looked like it could be scraped off with a fingernail. She piled tarps into her arms and carried them over to her land on the other side of the pond. Laid end to end, the blue tarps covered nearly the entire site. She pinned the corners with rocks, but despite this the tarps lifted in the wind, making a heavy rumble that reminded her of being at sea on a long journey, although she had never been at sea on a long journey. The sense of nostalgia pulled at her, and she wondered if it reminded her of a movie about the sea, or a dream in which she was at sea. She stepped on a corner and weighed it down with a larger rock. *Now, Voyager? The Poseidon Adventure?* No. *Jaws* maybe. Did *Jaws* have any sailboats? Yes, the scene with the kids. Another corner lifted and cracked. She couldn't think of another ocean movie. Ants crawled across the tarp, storm-tossed by the wind. She moved aside so they could get where they were going. Returning to the house, she pulled the alarm clocks out of the wall sockets, then ferried them, cords dangling, to the tarp along with the wooden mantel clock. She dumped all the clocks in the furthest corner. Goodbye, time. She would work from when she woke up until there wasn't any light. She looked up. The Pleiades appeared faintly in the sky. Afternoon already? She had taken too long to get ready. She'd need to get a move on tomorrow.

She carried from the living room a pile of afghans, boxes of jigsaw puzzles, and a green music box filled with plastic jewelry. With the lid opened, a ballerina in pale blue tulle spun slowly as the box tinkled out the tune of the sugar plum fairy

song from *The Nutcracker*. She closed the lid and placed the box under an afghan.

Would Tym call her? No, he couldn't. She didn't have a phone. She couldn't afford to set up service for the one in the house. If she got a cell phone, she was certain that other people would get the number, too, and then there would be something else she needed to avoid. She wanted to go through life completely unnoticed, below level, submarine. If she kept calling him, eventually Tym would pick up and tell her all the gossip. Some of Marcus's clients at the gym were minor local celebrities, like the married news anchor who offered to give the trainers blow jobs in the bathroom. Maybe Tym quit the photo-processing desk or their landlords, the Verdiccis, were finally revealed to be a Russian crime syndicate, as they had long suspected. Had their friend Maury died? What was Tym watching on TV? She had missed his Halloween favorites, the old VHS copies of *Black Narcissus* and *The Innocents* that would one day be chewed up in the machine and need to be stolen from somewhere else. Tym called the tape of *The Innocents* his "Little Darling" and only allowed it to be played once a year, on Halloween itself, when he had, on occasion, dressed up as Deborah Kerr in a nun's habit.

Back at the house, her childhood bedroom maintained its strange, airless quality. She sat on the bed and bounced for a minute, watching the top of her head appear and disappear in the mirror on top of the bureau. Then she pulled out the flat storage containers from under the bed. One of the containers let off the smell of mold as she began to unseal it. Inside she

found a set of My Little Ponys blooming with gray spots on their soft plastic bodies.

What kind of girl had she been? There were the sporty girls, the pretty ones, the popular ones, the girls who liked horses. Girls who read, girls who danced, girls who never left the sides of their mothers, girls who went to church every weekend and sang in the choir, girls who hiked and knew every bird and rock. Girls who were good at crafts, girls who were terrible at school. The math girls, the social studies girls, the piano girls. Girls who knew how to braid hair, play cat's cradle, limbo, smile. Del was not any of those girls. She stroked a blue pony's mane and then snapped the container closed.

The other container had some of her clothes from high school. She sorted through the folded tops, found an orange puffer vest, a thermal shirt, and some socks that she set aside, and then shoved the rest of the clothes back into the container. She carried each container across the pond.

Over the course of the afternoon, she moved most of her belongings from the room, taking the shortest path to her new land, which involved walking over the small wooden bridge her father had built over the creek. At first, she carefully reviewed each object before she threw it in the pile to be moved, but eventually she grew bored and irritable. There was simply too much to do. By the time she got to her chest of drawers, she was just dumping things on the ground. The bed she clawed apart with the back of a hammer and then hauled the wooden frame, piece by piece, onto the tarp. At twilight she dragged the single mattress, printed with pink flowers, toward her land.

Every twenty steps, she stopped to rest. The base of the mattress was soaked through with mud and dirt. She didn't care. It was hers and it was going. When her arms ached and her throat became sore from wheezing in the cold air, she repeated a word under her breath. *Mine mine mine*. She imagined Chuck's big red face when he arrived in March, ready for his triumph, and found the land bare. It was enough to bring a smile to her face.

When she reached the tarp, she pulled the mattress up on its side and then let it fall with a thud. Her knees sore, her hands raw with cold and splinters, she crawled on top of it and stared at the sky. Her breath formed an atmosphere above her.

The Pleiades were sharp and bright through the thin clouds. For her eighth birthday, her father had bought a used telescope kit and showed her the stars. He was into that sort of thing: little kits and projects, wooden boats, battlefield re-creations with tiny hand-painted tin men. He had a skittish energy and was always trying to learn how things worked or what they meant. She used the telescope a few times, then never again, so he donated it to the Goodwill. The Big Dipper, Venus, and the Pleiades were all that she could still identify. For a brief period he had been interested in mythology: his books from the mail subscription service were still on a shelf in the living room. She remembered of the Pleiades that they were sisters, turned into stars to escape someone who was chasing them. She could see her father's finger, stained with motor oil, pointing to a page in one of his books. Then as now, she couldn't muster any enthusiasm for it. The basic story seemed to be that families were messy, which she did not need to learn. She preferred her

grandmother's books about saints, whose lives were eccentric, brief, bloody, and much more interesting than anything she ever read at school.

She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself against the cold. She was doing it, despite what they'd said. It was not only possible, it was happening. Tomorrow she'd do the box spring and finish the rest of the room. Then she'd start on the living room, followed by the kitchen and the bathroom. Finally her parents' bedroom. A single snowflake drifted down from the sky and fell to rest on her cheek. She removed her glove and touched the spot where it melted against her skin.

Chapter Twelve

SHE LEFT THE CURTAINS DRAWN ON THE BACK WINDOW IN THE hope that when the sun rose it would wake her. When her eyes fluttered open, it was bright and still. She decided it was probably midmorning.

After brushing her teeth, she pissed, then as she lifted her shirt over her head to change her clothes, she caught a whiff of herself. The tap on the bath rattled when she turned it on and spat rust-colored water into the tub. She opened the drain, waited, and tried again. There remained a pinkish hue to the water, which was cold. She boiled a pot on her camp stove, brought it into the bathroom, and removed a folded peach-colored washcloth from the pile under the sink. Working quickly, she took off her clothes, wiped herself down with the wet washcloth, used another washcloth to lather an old bar of soap from the tub, and wiped herself down again. The soap smelled of candied violets. She had left the bathroom door open while she bathed. Why did it matter?

Wrapped in a towel, she explored her reflection in the oval

mirror above the sink and thought about her hair. It had been a while since she had combed it. It was dark, wavy, and thick, like her father's, and fell just to her shoulders. She removed her hair tie and touched the back, feeling the cloud of knots from where her head rested on the pillow at night. In the top drawer of the cabinet below the sink, she found the pair of scissors her mother had used to cut the family's hair. Del pulled her bangs taut and snipped across. The line was straight enough, ending just north of her eyebrows. She twisted the hair by her left ear and sliced again. The longest piece ended by her chin. She raised the scissors to cut another piece, when she sensed motion from the living room. She held her breath and peeped through the crack in the door. What could have gotten into the house? A raccoon? In the daytime? No, it was her imagination. She saw nothing at all. She opened the door wider, returned to the mirror, brought the scissors to her face again, and began to snip, when the mirror reflected a flash of motion behind the couch.

"Who is it? Who's there?" She ran into the living room, holding the knotted towel against her chest. Someone dashed out the back door. She followed but tripped over her backpack and fell to the ground. When she'd recovered from the fall and ran out the door, she saw someone being absorbed into the thicket of trees between her house and the old Francis farm down the street.

"Hey! You! Stop!" Del shouted. She got to the low stone wall at the edge of the property and stopped. She was barefoot, shivering, and dressed only in a towel. The person was gone.

"I saw you!" she continued. "I don't know who you are, but if you think you're going to fuck with me, think again!"

There was no movement in the trees. The person could still

be there, hiding, or could have cut through to the old Francis property, or gotten to the road. Was it her cousins? Mitch or Kevin? It would be just like them to try to spook her, throw her off. Well, fuck them. She was unspookable. Psychological warfare only worked on the malleable.

She paced for a while on her side of the wall, watching for any twitch of branches, and then turned back to the house. She latched both the back door and the front, then put her clothes in the bathroom with the door closed. In the living room, she inspected the items she expected to find there. What was missing? A bag of oatmeal was upset but unopened. The bag of kidney beans had spilled on the ground. Was the person looking through her stuff?

Returning to the bathroom mirror, she lifted the scissors and snipped. Her hair was fairly even, or even enough. She dressed, went out to the living room, and stood by the back door, where she could see the blue rectangle of overlaid tarps that delineated her land. Only the area furthest to the back of the plot was covered with the house interiors—she had plenty of space to go. She was pleased with her own progress. She turned to make some breakfast when her bare foot landed on something. She looked down. A kidney bean.

Chapter Thirteen

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS, SHE COMPLETED HER ROOM, FIRST dragging the box spring through the trench she'd created the day before with the mattress. On the final day, she lifted two boxes out of her closet, carried them to the back door, felt the ache of her arms, and left one behind. Each time she walked out of the back door, she locked it and glanced over to the stone wall before carrying her things to the other side of the pond.

Empty, the room appeared smaller than she had expected. She walked around the perimeter, letting her finger catch in the bumps and divots in the walls. At child height, the paint was marked with pencil. Most of the figures she couldn't make out. They were just lines. She went into the living room to rest.

She chucked some coal into the stove and was disappointed to see that the bag was two-thirds empty. She would need to use less coal or go to the feed and grain store every other week. It was only mid-November; certainly it would get much colder as the season moved on and the snow began. She clapped her hands to shake off the soot, then sat back on her heels and looked

around. Her father's army backpack had vomited over the floor. She could fold her clothes and put them in piles, but why? There was enough to do without keeping up appearances for no one's sake. She thought of herself as an animal hibernating for winter. This was her cave, or her woodpecker hole. Why not live like an animal? She fingered a knot in her uncombed hair.

"Why not?" she said out loud.

No one answered.

The pyramid of hot coal in the stove collapsed and sent up a drift of heat. It wasn't so bad here, anyways. She'd appreciate the niceties of modern life when she had them. Central heating. Lights. Water that wasn't pink from whatever sediment had seeped into the well or the pipes.

The gravel driveway crackled with the weight of a car. Del turned to see the flash of headlights come through the window. Footsteps approached, followed by a light tap on the door. She hadn't bothered with any candles, so the only light inside was from the coal stove. Could she pretend she was out? She remained motionless.

A knock came again, louder this time, followed by the rattle of the doorknob.

"I know you're in there!" Eleanor's voice said. "Are you going to leave an old lady outside in the cold?"

Del sighed, pushed herself up from the ground, and opened the door.

"Jesus, it stinks in here," Eleanor said. "And why's it so *dark*? What are you, a *bat*?"

Eleanor handed two bags to Del, who brought them to the couch.

“Voilà: chow,” Eleanor said. “All easy things. Low cal. You can just put them in the fridge and have them later.”

“There’s no electricity.”

Eleanor radiated dismay.

“I heard about you. That old piss-cup Chuck has told people all about your wild plan. It sounds insane.”

“I know.”

“It *is* insane.”

“Fine.”

Eleanor studied Del and finally laughed. “You know, you’re just like your mother. Stubborn. Stubbornness will kill you. It killed her.”

“Vodka and black ice and the tree in the Spiveys’ front yard killed her.”

Eleanor shook her head and laid out the contents of her bags. Two clamshells of iceberg lettuce salad with anemic tomato wedges. Three tins of sardines. Carrot soup in a tall glass jar. Weird-looking bread. A tall plastic cup of hard-boiled eggs with packets of salt and pepper taped to the side.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“You look like hell. You looked bad when I found you at the gas station that day. But somehow you look worse now.”

Del smiled. “You don’t like the haircut?”

“You look like Louise Brooks at a mental institution. In fact, I think Louise Brooks went to a mental institution. Or was she the prostitute?”

“Thanks. I’m flattered.”

“Kid, I told your mother I’d look after you. I haven’t done such a good job. I’m not good with the phone. Or the train, or

the bus. But now you're here and I can make good on my promise. Why stay? You're sitting in a house with no heat or electricity. There's a camp stove on the floor. I can't even begin to tell you how grim this all looks. Lepers have it better. At least they live in colonies."

"It's temporary."

"It can be even more temporary. Leave tomorrow. Just get out of town."

"Nah." Del popped open a salad container with her thumbs.

"Why? For this?" Eleanor gestured to the shabby room.

"Maybe. Maybe for revenge. Or something. I don't know. I guess I am stubborn. But that's fine. Sometimes stubbornness gets you what you want."

"You're a mystery wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a terrible haircut."

Del shrugged. "It'll grow out."

Eleanor shrugged off her mink coat and sat back on the couch. "Can a girl get a drink around here?"

Del opened her mother's liquor cabinet, which had originally belonged to her grandparents and was still stocked with very old liqueurs. There were ancient glass bottles with pebbled textures and green or blue liquid inside. The color of the liquid reminded her of advertisements for panty liners. Anything halfway decent was long gone.

She held up a bottle of curaçao. "Any interest?"

"Looks disgusting. I'll try it."

Del found two glasses in the kitchen while Eleanor tore open a can of sardines and used a plastic fork to smear them on a piece of low-calorie unleavened bread. The room smelled of

fish and smoke. Del lit two candles and shook out a five-hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle onto the coffee table. It was a balloon in midflight. The bands of color on the balloon made it easy to match pieces, so they started there first instead of the edges, which, Del's father had told her, was always the logical beginning point.

Eleanor was adept at finding matches, while Del found herself frustrated when the pieces she chose didn't click into place.

"Not there." Eleanor gestured to the other side of the orange band in the center of the balloon. "Other side. You just look at the shapes."

The curaçao, while blue, tasted surprisingly of oranges. Eleanor's teeth took on a grayish tinge at the second glass.

"This is disgusting," Eleanor said.

"I agree," Del said, and poured herself another.

When there was nothing to do but the sky, Eleanor put her coat on again and pressed the sleeve against her cheek.

"I feel that this is all a terrible mistake," she said, her voice too loud for a room that was silent except for the occasional crackle from the coal stove. "Now I've said my piece. I will not support you in your self-destruction. There are too many bodies buried around here. We don't need another, please and thank you."

"That's OK." Del picked up the central part of the puzzle, the part they'd finished, and watched as it folded and crumbled to pieces, which she swept into the box. She was never going to finish it on her own.

"You should pack up and go. That's my take."

"Thank you, Eleanor."

“Call me when you want a ride to the bus station. Or don’t call. Send a pigeon. Don’t leave without saying goodbye. You know where I live.”

“Thank you, Eleanor.”

They got to the door. Eleanor examined the room again, and Del saw her assessing the open liquor cabinet, the dying coal fire, the broken-up puzzle.

“I mean it. Get out of here.”

“Thank you, Eleanor.”

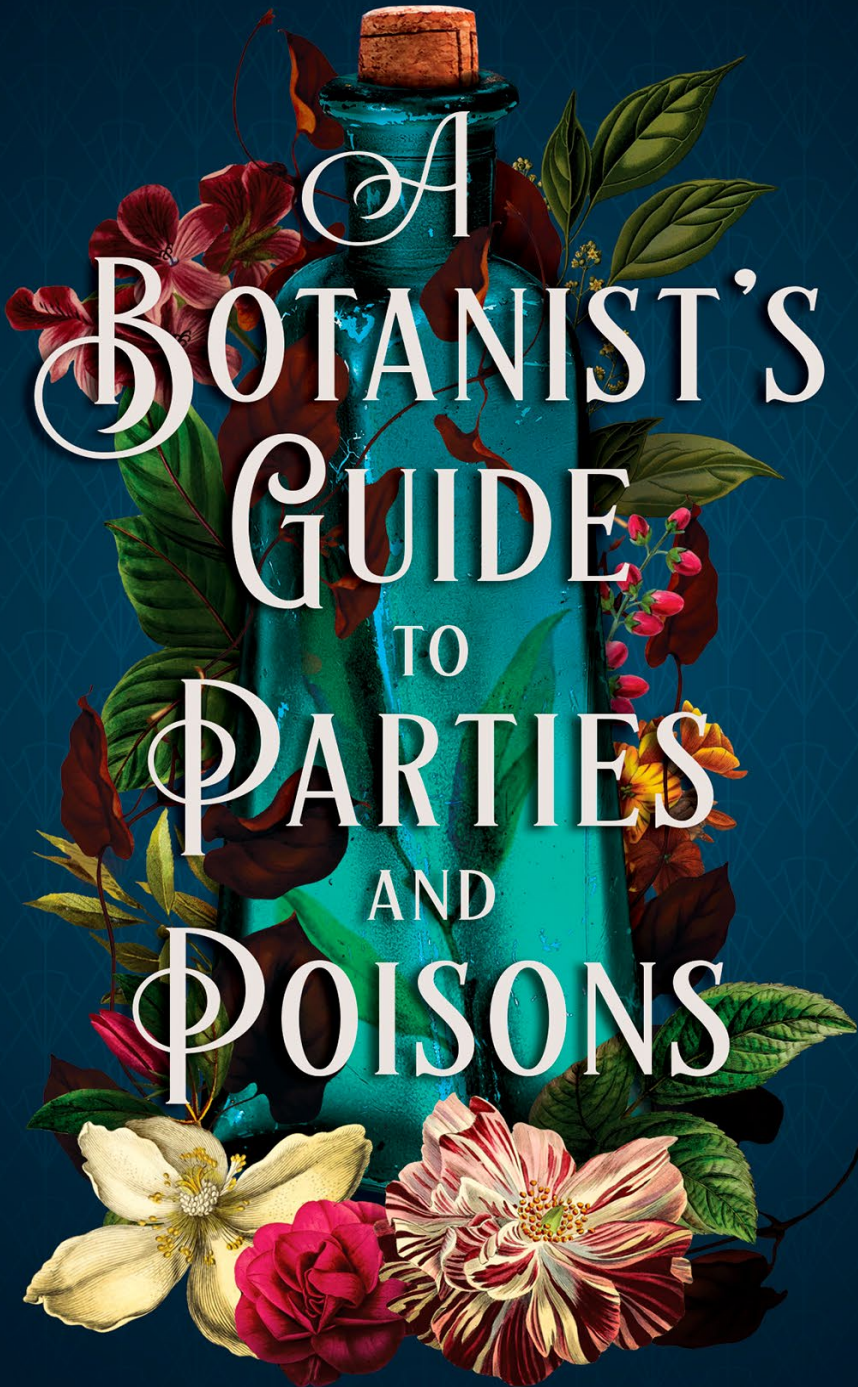
“Can I give you some advice?”

“No.”

“Too bad. There’s a difference between being sad about the things that have happened and deciding to dig your claws into it. I’m seventy-four years old. I have several failed marriages and no children. I have plenty to be sad about. But I don’t organize my whole life around it, and neither should you.”

Eleanor clasped her coat shut and walked out into the unlit driveway. Del held the door open until Eleanor’s car door closed and the headlights flooded the face of the house.

A SAFFRON EVERLEIGH MYSTERY



KATE KHAVARI

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

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CHAPTER 1

Light poured from the windows of the grand house, illuminating the front steps and graveled drive. The taxi rolled to a stop and Saffron emerged, then was led up the stairs by a liveried footman. A maid took her coat, and for a moment, Saffron stood in the doorway to the lavish sitting room, where about twenty people were gathered. The room was vast and cool despite a fire in the large marble hearth. With tall walls papered with green silk and countless pieces of highly polished heirloom furniture, it reminded her very much of her grandparents' house; it was the sort of place that was heaped with family treasures that were ignored by everyone but the maids.

A ripple of anxiety went through her as she looked at the large group, scanning the faces for the one she wanted to avoid. It was hardly necessary; if Dr. Berking were already here, she would hear his booming voice. Scolding herself for her cowardice, Saffron straightened her shoulders. There was little danger in a dinner party.

Saffron stepped forward and offered her name to the butler. A few curious faces turned to her as he announced her arrival in dignified tones, and an older man moved to greet her. He introduced himself as Sir Edward Leister.

Saffron smiled at her host and said, “I’m pleased to meet you, sir. I understand that you are in large part to thank for making the Amazonian expedition possible.”

Sir Edward waved off her comment. His dull eyes barely took her in as he replied, “Of course, I’m happy to share my funds with University College.” He spoke a little too loudly to be genuine.

Sir Edward guided her toward several members of the university’s staff with whom Saffron was already acquainted. Their inquisitive eyes swept over her. Those that knew her were probably surprised to see her in clothing not marred by soil or dust. Saffron smoothed a hand over the beaded dress. Although the deep cornflower blue, the precise color of her eyes, was understated, the shimmering beading was definitely flashier than anything Saffron would have normally worn. Her limited wardrobe no longer stocked gowns for such occasions, so her flatmate had borrowed the frock from another receptionist in her office. It fell straight from shoulder to below the knees, flattening her figure and leaving her arms bare. She and Elizabeth, her flatmate and oldest friend, had done their best to curl and pin Saffron’s brunette hair into a stylish arrangement, and unearthed their best set of silk evening gloves for the occasion.

A tall man with dark hair was looking at her with a serious expression. As their eyes met, he joined her.

“I’m Alexander Ashton,” he said. “We’re on the same floor in the North Wing. I believe you’re Dr. Maxwell’s assistant.”

The introduction was unnecessary, as it would be nearly impossible for any member of the close-knit biology department of University College London to be unknown to another. Not only that, but Saffron was the only woman currently employed by the department and had been the topic of unpleasant rumors lately.

As for Mr. Ashton, Saffron knew exactly who he was. Saffron remembered him from the beginning of her days as a student, another vaguely intimidating figure in the background as she

struggled to settle into her studies and then, in the past year, her work. People spoke of Alexander Ashton with respect, because he had completed his graduate courses in half the time others required, and had crossed the globe to complete studies in exotic locations. She hadn't heard much about his current research, either because the gossips had little interest in his work or because Mr. Ashton didn't bandy about his publications as others did.

Now, towering over her in a well-fitted dinner jacket, with his attention fixed on her, he was just as intimidating. Dark brows framed darker eyes, and his mouth was held firmly beneath a slightly curved nose. Compared to the other men in the room, his complexion stood out against the crisp white of his shirt, as if he'd recently come back from a holiday spent outdoors. The only part of his appearance that was less than tidy was the curl of his hair that his pomade fought against.

"Yes, I am Dr. Maxwell's research assistant," she said. Mr. Ashton took her offered hand, warming her gloved fingers with his. "Saffron Everleigh."

He looked at her blankly. "Your name is Saffron?"

Saffron sighed. Apparently the department gossips did not include her Christian name when they churned the rumor mill. "Yes, of course, how appropriate. A botanist named for a stigma and style of a flower. Very amusing," she said.

A smile threatened in the corners of Mr. Ashton's mouth. "I'm definitely not amused at all."

Unsure of his response, she smoothed a hand over her dress once more. "Yes, well, better than Buttercup or Azalea."

"Perhaps I should change my name to reflect my area of study too. *Brucella melitnesis* might do." He slipped his hands into his pockets and looked down at her thoughtfully. "*Bacillus cereus* sounds a little formal. *Leishmania donovani*, perhaps." Though he said it without inflection, there was a hint of mirth in his voice.

“*Leishmania Donovanii* would be perfect,” Saffron said, allowing herself a smile. “We might call you Donovan for short, and no one would be the wiser.”

“Considering that strain of *Leishmania* is a parasite that causes anemia and, in some cases, warty eruptions, I don’t think I’ll choose that one.”

Disgust warred with delight at Mr. Ashton’s deadpan delivery, and Saffron was almost sorry to see her mentor, Dr. Maxwell, enter the room alongside his friend, Dr. Aster.

Mr. Ashton leaned down to her ear as they drew near and murmured, “Dr. Aster, another aptly named botanist.”

She had said the same thing to Dr. Aster as a young girl during a rare visit to the university with her father, and she thought he still remembered her imprudent remark. Saffron stifled a laugh as the professors approached them.

Though the two men were similar in age, both being along the lines of ancient, they looked the opposite of each other. Maxwell’s fluff of flyaway hair and overgrown eyebrows made him look warm and grandfatherly, whereas Aster’s appearance was so polished and clean as to be severe, rather more like Saffron’s actual grandfather.

“Everleigh,” Maxwell said warmly, taking her hand.

Saffron smiled at the professor, not missing Mr. Ashton’s upticked brow at Maxwell referring to her by her surname. She loved it when he did; it made her feel as if she was just another member of the department rather than a novelty. “How was your trip, Professor?”

“Enjoyable as always, though one always forgets how exhausting it can be, entertaining children,” he replied in his breathless voice. “My grandchildren seem to think that I have as much energy as they do!”

Saffron turned to the other professor as Maxwell greeted Mr. Ashton. “Nice to see you, Dr. Aster.”

His gray eyes seemed to glint in disapproval, as usual. “Good evening.”

Maxwell scoffed lightly at him before saying, “Aster, you remember Alexander Ashton.” They shook hands. “Everleigh, you will be working with Mr. Ashton over the next few weeks to ensure he gets whatever materials he needs for the chlorophyll study. He is responsible for making preparations for botany since Chesterfield retired to see to his ailing brother.”

The sudden departure had left their small department scrambling, especially considering the expedition had been pulled together on such short notice. Nodding, she asked, “Are you on the expedition team, Mr. Ashton?”

“Not this time,” he replied. “Julian Ericson and Martin Gardiner will be collecting the samples for botany.”

The professors were absorbed in their own discussion of Dr. Maxwell’s fern collection, so Saffron, eager to hear more, said, “But you’ve gone on other expeditions, I believe. It must be fascinating to travel all over.”

“It can be.”

“What exactly do you study?”

“Bacteria.”

Unsure whether to be amused or annoyed at his sudden reticence, Saffron said, “I did gather that. What in particular?”

She thought she caught a flash of surprise in his expression before he replied, “I was developing a system of rapid identification of new bacteria. Because of my previous work with soil, they gave me botany when they divvied up each of the subdepartments for the expedition preparations.”

Now he was speaking in full sentences again, Saffron hoped to keep Mr. Ashton talking. She was here to hobnob with her colleagues and university higher-ups, but she did want to hear more about his experience in the department. “How did you come to work in biology? Or microbiology, rather.”

But dinner was announced a moment later. Her question went unanswered, as Dr. Maxwell offered her his arm and guided her into the impressive dining room, where a white-clad table heavily laden with silver and china shimmered in the candlelight.

Half of the table was filled with professors and researchers from the university, some with their wives, and the other half were administrators and benefactors of the university, like Sir Edward. Dr. Lawrence Henry, the man who was to lead the expedition team, sat at the center of the table. Next to him, an auburn-haired woman swatted his arm playfully. From where Saffron sat, it seemed that the woman had a great deal of skin on display, with only a bit of black silk with gold embroidery covering her shoulders and chest. She had a rather adoring look on her heavily made-up face. Saffron could understand the woman's fawning attention. Dr. Henry certainly cut a dashing figure for a history professor. Blue eyes shone from a tanned, rugged face, and his black dinner jacket stretched tight over his broad shoulders. If university rumors were to be believed, he often received such admiration from women young and old.

An elegant woman across the table seemed to be the exception. She was watching Dr. Henry and his dinner companion from the corner of her eye, black hair framing a slightly older face with sharp, dark eyes. The man she was speaking to, a professor of ecology, was talking on and on without noticing his audience was preoccupied. Given the withering look she gave the woman in black and Dr. Henry, Saffron guessed the older woman was Mrs. Henry.

Mr. Ashton was seated at the far end of the table, in conversation with a serious-looking young man. The man he spoke to could have been on the university's staff, though it was hard to be sure. Blond and pleasant-looking, he closely resembled the masses on campus.

Mr. Ashton noticed her looking at him and smiled slightly. Saffron briefly returned his smile and looked away. In her experience, it was best not to encourage her colleagues.

Dr. Berking had, at last, made his appearance, but sat far to the other end of the table, out of Saffron's sight. Saffron sat next to Dr. Maxwell, far down the table near Lady Agatha, Sir Edward's wife. Full of recent discoveries, plans for publications, and university news, the conversation surrounding her distracted her from Berking's odious presence. Saffron mostly listened, hungry for further details about the expedition and what the researchers would do while they were there. The trip had been announced just a month ago, giving the departments hardly any time to prepare.

Harry Snyder, Dr. Henry's assistant, was seated on her other side. With small brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, and thin lips that emphasized his large, impeccable teeth, he looked rather like a rodent. His demeanor, skittish and reticent, matched his mousy appearance.

"Mr. Snyder, will you be joining Dr. Henry on the expedition?" Saffron asked.

"Yes," Snyder replied, his eyes not leaving his plate.

"I understand Dr. Henry visited both India and Spain in the last few years. Have you accompanied him on previous expeditions?"

To this, Snyder only nodded, his black hair slick with pomade bobbing over his plate. Saffron considered her own plate of delicately cut roast beef, wondering if the meal was really that interesting or if Harry Snyder really didn't want to speak with her.

"What do you do for Dr. Henry while abroad?" she asked.

Snyder frowned at her from behind his glasses. "Assist him, of course."

Saffron sighed into her water glass. Dr. Maxwell was occupied in a conversation with another professor on her other side,

and so Saffron continued extracting answers from Snyder, like pulling sore teeth.

“For how long will the team be gone? I’ve heard it’s sure to be more than six weeks, but no longer than four months.”

Snyder glanced down the table to where Dr. Henry was still entertaining the woman in black. “The plan is to be in Brazil for five months, with two weeks of travel time on either end.”

Saffron raised a brow at the cagey way Snyder spoke and, matching his hushed voice, asked, “What sort of work requires the team to be gone for so long?”

He bit his lip, eyes darting down to Dr. Henry once again. “Five departments have representatives going, in addition to those who are going to complete data collection independently.”

Saffron was coming to enjoy taunting Snyder with her questions. He seemed to think it all a big secret, and Saffron loved uncovering secrets. She added, “Where, precisely, are you going in Brazil?”

Snyder looked torn. He patted his mouth with his napkin, then examined his wineglass as he said, “I don’t think I can . . . er, well, I shouldn’t say . . .” When it became clear Saffron would continue to look at him expectantly, her eyes wide and inviting, he cleared his throat. “We’ll be focused mostly on the mouth of the river and Marajó Island. Keeping close to civilization, that is.”

“Why is that, Mr. Snyder? Certainly a lot of exploration has already been done in that part of the world. Alexander Van Humboldt sent back nearly fifteen thousand species from his travels. And he was hardly the first nor the last to explore there.”

He looked mildly affronted, his hesitation to speak on the subject evaporating. “Not everything about an area can be learned in one go. Besides, if you’ve had the benefit of examining a map, you will find that Venezuela is quite a distance from Brazil.”

With patience she didn't feel, Saffron replied, "What I mean is that the Amazon, which extends far beyond the limits of Brazil, has been a focal point of exploration for hundreds of years. Has Dr. Henry been in contact with Percy Fawcett? His descriptions of the lost city of Z are fascinating. It sounds like a terrestrial Atlantis."

Snyder snorted. "Fawcett isn't a true academic. The things he claims to have seen are hardly worth contemplating. A dog with two noses? A snake the length of an autobus? I think not. Dr. Henry believes there is quite a bit about the *real* history and culture of the indigenous people in the area that has yet to be discovered." With a sneer, he added, "The animal and plant people can always find more to look at."

Snyder clearly didn't recognize her as one of the "plant people."

Dr. Maxwell turned toward their conversation and smiled wryly. "Yes, indeed. Thousands and thousands of organisms in every square meter of land over there. A most intriguing place. I'm sure Dr. Henry will find more than what he is looking for there."

These last words looked to taste a little sour to Maxwell, Saffron noted. His eyes lacked their usual softness, and he quickly turned back to his supper.

Snyder seemed to think this was the end of the conversation, which was fine with Saffron. As she ate bites of Waldorf salad, her eyes fell again on the woman she suspected to be Mrs. Henry. She was now looking down the table to the man Mr. Ashton had spoken to earlier. The man seemed to smirk back at her. Though no doubt a decade older than him, her returning look was sly, almost smiling.

Saffron realized Mr. Snyder was speaking to her again.

"I'm always so shocked by who wants to come on these grueling trips. Dr. Henry has to reject most applications just based on lack of experience in the field alone." He leaned closer to her,

near enough that Saffron could see the fingerprint marring the shine of his eyeglasses. “Although there are other considerations. Take Dr. Maxwell, next to you. Dr. Henry rejected his offer to join the expedition outright.”

Snyder shot a glance to her left at Dr. Maxwell, deep in conversation with a professor of mineralogy.

“Dr. *Maxwell*?” Saffron repeated, trying not to sound surprised. Dr. Maxwell surely hadn’t applied to go on the expedition. He was far too old to be traveling down a great river in the heat of the equator! She’d thought his comment about his wife declaring he couldn’t go was a joke.

“Oh yes,” Snyder said, stabbing his salad with his fork. “Dr. Henry was surprised when he said he intended to come along, and he tried to let him down easy. Poor man seemed fairly cut up, though.” Obviously, he didn’t know that she worked for the professor he was gossiping about. Nor did he seem to mind talking about the expedition now he wasn’t revealing their plans. Before she could say anything, he pressed on. “They had a rather dreadful row, I’m afraid. Dr. Maxwell told Dr. Henry that we’d be lucky to return from the expedition with all our men alive, with so many dangerous things lurking in the jungle. Animals and natives everywhere! Just waiting to creep up on you . . .” His enthusiasm seemed to fade slightly. Then he perked back up, saying, “But that’s why Dr. Henry insisted on leading the crew. His experience and skills will no doubt ensure our safety.”

Luckily, Snyder had little else to say to her the rest of the meal. Irritation and confusion dampened her appetite, and Saffron spent the rest of the meal wondering if she’d regret venturing out of her little corner of university life.



At dinner’s end, Saffron stood carefully to ensure that none of the embellishments on her borrowed dress were caught on

the chair, and followed the ladies to the drawing room. Electric lights glowed around the rose-red room, and a large fire had been constructed in the monolithic hearth to take the edge off the spring evening. Saffron chose a seat near the fire, not anticipating participating in the kind of conversation the other women were likely to share. Her grandmother had ruled such gatherings, always with a subtle but sharp barb ready to remind her that, given Saffron's interests, her conversation was not welcome. Considering she was among ladies of similar class now, she wasn't likely to be a great conversational partner. It had been years since she'd kept up with London gossip. She'd been far too willing to leave it behind when she'd began working in earnest toward her goal of becoming a botanist.

To her surprise, the hostess, Lady Agatha, brought her a cup of coffee. Her peach dress fluttered as she settled next to her. "My dear, I'm told you are Thomas Everleigh's daughter. How wonderful to meet you." She looked exactly like her grandmother's compatriots: women of taste and means who had preserved their beauty to the best of their ability, but in the end looked like wilted flowers in silk and pearls. "Your father used to join us quite often when he was a professor, you know. What a charming man."

"Oh, how nice," Saffron replied with a noncommittal smile. Though she heard such comments often enough, it was usually from fellow scholars who were familiar with his work. She doubted Lady Agatha knew much about plant pathology.

"And such a gentleman! A great pity that we lost him well before his time. Dr. Everleigh put his colleagues to shame, those that were not brought up quite the same." Lady Agatha gave Saffron a meaningful look. "I cannot imagine what it's come to, when the halls of a prestigious institution such as University College are open to just anyone."

To have her father's death commented on so casually, to hear her father's memory used to put others down, made Saffron's

insides roil. With saccharine sweetness, Saffron asked, “You mean those not brought up to have the same appreciation of academia?”

Lady Agatha’s frown was brief, covered by a brittle smile. “Of course, my dear.”

The hostess made a few more polite comments before joining a cluster of ladies on the other side of the room. Saffron watched her go with satisfaction.

Though he’d been raised in the upper class, thanks to her grandparents, Thomas Everleigh had all but rejected his status as heir to a viscountcy and taken up botany. His parents had indulged his studies, never thinking that he would make science into a profession. A life among the peerage hadn’t appealed to her father in the slightest, and that view had rubbed off on Saffron. She had been raised with a dual future in mind: her grandparents’ vision of a good marriage, and her parents’ hope that she would find her own way. So far, her way looked much like her father’s. She’d given up a lot to reach her goal, including the financial support of her grandparents, but she was reminded now of why she’d been so willing to turn her back on high society.

The woman who’d paid such attention to Dr. Henry during dinner sunk onto the couch next to Saffron. Black silk lavished with gold beading was held up by scant straps at her shoulders and gathered at her hips in a draping knot, mirroring the gold headband circling the crown of her meticulous russet waves. She was far more adorned than any of the other women and, despite heavily kohl around her hazel eyes and dark lipstick, was very young now that Saffron saw her up close. Her long red nails were wrapped about a cup of black coffee, and she wore an expression of practiced ennui. “Well, this is rather dull.”

Saffron waited for an introduction or some hint as to why this woman had chosen her to complain to, but none was forthcoming. Saffron took a sip of her coffee and tried to be objective

in her reply. “Yes, I suppose it is. I never saw the point in sending the men and women off separate ways after dinner. It’s not as though we digest differently.”

The woman gave her a curious look. “No, I don’t think that is the issue . . .” She set her untouched coffee on a table next to the couch and withdrew a cigarette and a lighter from within the recesses of her matching gold handbag. Her dark lipstick coated the end of the cigarette as she lit it. “Daddy was absolutely gutted that he couldn’t come, considering this dinner was meant to celebrate his contribution,” the woman drawled, “so he sent me to tend to his friends.”

That enigmatic statement wasn’t followed by further explanation. Saffron still had no idea who this woman was, though she was clearly wealthy if her father had contributed enough to warrant a dinner being thrown in his honor. Had Saffron not been included in the invitation so last minute, she might have known who she, and her father, were.

“What did Lady Agatha have to say? She’s a bit of a busybody.” Fingering her string of jet beads, the woman asked innocently, “Anything good?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Saffron said, wishing the half hour or so requisite time was up.

“Too bad. I hear even in small ponds like a university there can be interesting things going on.” She blew out a puff of smoke and looked meaningfully at Saffron. “You know, who does what and with whom.”

Saffron withheld a sigh. This was precisely why she hadn’t missed society. “I think most of us are more interested in our fields of study, actually.”

“Oh, you work at the university, do you?”

Saffron nodded, deciding it was time to figure out who this noxious woman was. “I’m Saffron Everleigh. I’m a research assistant.”

A slow smile spread over the woman's face. "Miss Everleigh? Well, then."

Saffron's spine straightened at the odd look the woman was giving her. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

The woman tapped ash from her cigarette into the crystal dish on the side table. "Eris Ermine. My father is Cedric Ermine."

Saffron vaguely recalled the name Ermine from her earlier days in London but couldn't remember anything specific. She gave Eris Ermine a polite smile and took another sip of coffee. To her relief, the gentlemen filed back in, carrying glasses of scotch or port, several puffing on cigars.

Miss Ermine sighed. "Never was one for the books, myself. But there are some values to working in academia." Her eyes followed Dr. Henry as he entered, drink in hand.

"Er, yes," Saffron agreed. "You know Dr. Henry? I believe he's heading up the expedition."

"Of course—he's a favorite of my father's." She spoke in a low voice, eyes still on the man in question. "I might have to change my tune, though, if what I've heard about the university is true. Seems like some of you academic lot tend to spend a lot of time *researching* each other." With that, she shot Saffron a sly smile and walked off toward Dr. Henry.

Saffron stared after her. What did that mean? Was that a reference to Dr. Berking? He'd said something nearly identical to her the last time she had spoken to him.

Saffron stood, deciding that it had been a mistake come to the dinner at all. Making connections simply wasn't worth it.

In a moment, Mr. Ashton was before her. "May I get you a drink, Miss Everleigh?"

She blinked at him, surprised by his offer. "No, thank you. Excuse me."

She'd just turned away to search out the lavatory when lumbering footsteps approached her. Her entire body tensed like it

was preparing to flee, as if running away was the answer for dealing with the man she knew was behind her. His voice cut through the clinking of glasses and loud conversation surrounding her.

“Ashton, glad to see you abandoned your pretty petri dishes and joined us!”

Dr. Berking’s voice was the equivalent of a series of bombs dropping across her evening. Mr. Ashton turned toward the professor, and Saffron, gritting her teeth, did the same. The department head was a head shorter than Mr. Ashton and round as a barrel. Dr. Berking had a robust head of graying red hair and small blue eyes, with a mouth that was almost always curled into a grin. Now, that grin was as slimy as one of Dr. Maxwell’s butterwort leaves and just as benignly predatory. Saffron looked away, hoping he’d ignore her.

“I bet you’re regretting your choice not to apply to join us on this adventure, aren’t you, Ashton?” Berking nodded, chuckling. His eyes slid to Saffron. “Why, you are looking delectable this evening, Miss Everleigh!”

Her face heating, Saffron kept her gaze on the floor. He wanted to see her squirm under his lascivious glare. If she ignored him—

Berking lowered his booming voice slightly. “But then again, you always look good enough to eat. And the right flavor too.”

Saffron’s eyes snapped to Berking’s jeering face, and she swallowed her gasp of rage. He wasn’t looking at her, but to Mr. Ashton, looking to share a laugh.

Before she could muster up words to defend herself, Mr. Ashton said sharply, “That’s quite enough, Dr. Berking.”

Humiliation burned her face, that Mr. Ashton had to not only hear Berking’s comments but defend her against them. If the floor could open up and swallow her, she’d have been eternally

grateful. Rather than sink into the carpet, Saffron stood stock-still as Berking put a large hand on her shoulder and chuckled. “Miss Everleigh knows I am the consummate joker, of course.”

He winked at Alexander and disappeared into the crowd.

Saffron managed to mumble, “Excuse me,” before slipping away.



Portrait

of

A Novel

A Thief

Grace D. Li



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WILL

State your name for the record, please.”

This was how things began: Boston on the cusp of fall, the Sackler Museum robbed of twenty-three pieces of priceless Chinese art. Even in the museum’s back room, dust catching the slant of golden, late-afternoon light, Will could hear the sirens. They sounded like a promise.

“Will Chen.”

“And what were you doing at the Sackler Museum, Mr. Chen?”

“I work here part-time. I’m studying art history at Harvard.”

“Did you see anything unusual before the theft?”

“No.”

“Describe what you saw during the incident. Any distinguishing features of the thieves, anything the security cameras might not have caught.”

“It all happened very fast. I looked up from my essay and the alarms were going off. When I ran into the exhibit, they were already leaving.

They had on ski masks, black clothes.” He hesitated, just for a moment. “I think they were speaking Chinese.”

For a moment, the only sound was the scratch of the detective’s pen against his notepad. “I see. Do you speak Chinese, Mr. Chen?”

“Yes, I—does it matter? I couldn’t really make out what they were saying. The alarms were going off at this point.”

“Of course. And do you know what they stole?”

Will thought back to the empty room. If he closed his eyes, he could fit the pieces back where they were supposed to go—a pair of jade tigers, a dragon vase. A jade cup with three crested bronze birds, mid-flight. “Not really. I’ve been gone all summer.”

The detective slid a sheet of paper across the table. “Can you read the title of this for me?”

It was a printout from the *Harvard Crimson*, from late August. Will swallowed hard. “‘What Is Ours Is Not Ours: Chinese Art and Western Imperialism.’”

“Did you write this?”

“Yes.”

The detective leaned forward, his fingertips touching. “Tell me if this sounds suspicious to you: A Chinese student writes an article about looted art, and a few weeks later, Harvard’s largest collection of Asian art is robbed. All the priceless pieces mentioned in the article—gone.”

Will leaned back in his chair. The golden light made the whole world feel like a painting, and he let his mind drift for a moment, thinking of the paper on Renaissance art that was due next week, the sculpture he still had to finish for his portfolio. “Not particularly.”

“And why is that?”

“I was born in the US, Detective . . .” Will looked for a badge, a name.

“Meyers.”

“Detective Meyers.”

“What is your—”

“I’m Chinese American,” Will said, lingering on the *American*. He adjusted the cuff of his button-down, imagining how his sister would handle this situation. “You said I was Chinese. But I was born and raised in the US, just like you, and I work part-time at the Sackler, and three weeks ago the *Crimson* published a paper I wrote for an art history class at Harvard. Last time I checked, none of those are crimes. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have homework to do.”

“This is procedure, Mr. Chen. I just have a few more questions, if you will—”

Will rose. It might have been a small thing, to be called Chinese instead of Chinese American, to have this detective who spoke in a Boston accent look at him as if this place, this museum, this *art* didn’t belong to him, but—it didn’t feel like a small thing. Not when he was at Harvard, this place of dreams, and he was so close to everything he had ever wanted.

It was his senior year, and the whole world felt on the verge of cracking open.

“I’ve told you everything I know,” he said, “and I know my rights. Next time you want to accuse me of something, go through my lawyer.”



In Eliot House, with his window open to the warm evening air and the distant sound of chatter in the courtyard, Will took a single jade tiger out of his pocket. The stone was cool, almost cold against his skin. It shone in the half-way light, the jade a pale, almost translucent green, with veins of reddish-brown at the tiger’s head and tail. Despite the centuries, the edges of the carving were sharp enough to cut.

Jade Tiger (one of a pair), the placard had read. *Date: 3rd century BCE. Culture: Chinese.*

He had one tiger; the thieves had the other. It had been almost too

easy to palm it, the glass between him and the art shattered in the theft. He traced a finger along the tiger's curved back, still a little in disbelief. He was sure it was worth hundreds of thousands, but that wasn't the important thing. The important thing was that it had been China's, and then it had been Harvard's, and now it was *his*.

He thought back to the paper he had written for class. *What is ours is not ours*. Who could determine what counted as theft when museums and countries and civilizations saw the spoils of conquest as rightfully earned?

From his coat pocket, a card fluttered to the floor.

Will reached for it, his breath catching in the stillness. For a moment, he was back at the Sackler, listening to the rapid, staccato Chinese of the thieves, their voices a counterpoint to the wail of the alarms. He had pressed himself against the wall, his heart pounding in his ears, and yet one of them had still brushed past him on the way out, so close it could almost be called deliberate.

The business card was a matte black, with the words *CHINA POLY* and an international phone number printed on the front in neat block letters. And below that, in a messy hand:

偷得不错。

Nice lift.

ALEX

When Alex Huang closed her eyes, she dreamed of Chinatown: the red lanterns strung along every storefront, the smell of fish markets and the rise and fall of Cantonese as buyers and sellers haggled. It had been three years since she had stood before the whole glazed ducks rotating in the restaurant's windows, flipped the sign from *CLOSED* to *OPEN* each morning at seven a.m. while her parents prepped the kitchen of Yi Hua Lou.

This was how things changed: slowly, and then all at once. An acceptance letter from MIT, a FAFSA application, a bus ride to Boston. Her younger siblings waving to her until she couldn't see them anymore. Holidays spent at school, in libraries or on friends' couches, summer internships on a different coast. A full-time offer from Google her junior fall. *Whenever you're ready*, the recruiter had said, but the sign-on bonus was more than her parents made in a year.

Within a month, Alex had moved to Silicon Valley.

The sun was setting in Mountain View, gold light pooling on her

living room floor. Had it really been less than a year? She could still remember stepping off the plane that first day, how the sky had been wide in a way she wasn't used to after years of living in New York City and then in Boston. She had thought, *This is the beginning of the rest of my life*. It had been just a little terrifying. Everything she knew, everyone she loved, left behind on another coast.

And so there was just this: a Friday evening and an empty apartment, to-go containers scattered across the dining table. Her laptop was open, her work for the night still not done—never done, really—but despite its hum, her chewing felt too loud in the stillness. Alex reached for her phone, just for something to do, scrolled through all the tasks still left for tonight, the unread messages in her family WeChat group, and—a missed call from Will Chen.

That last one was the most interesting. *You called?* she texted him.

A moment later, her phone began to ring.

“You are the only person who would rather call than text,” she said as a greeting.

“Hey, Alex. Good to hear from you too.” Will’s voice was low, liquid like honey, and she remembered briefly why she had thought, early on, that there was the possibility of *something*. “How long does it take to hack into a museum’s security system?”

Alex cast a glance at her program; it was still running. “You know that being a software engineer isn’t the same thing as being a hacker, right?”

“Alex Huang, I didn’t think there was anything you couldn’t do.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. Will was playing on her vanity, but—well, he wasn’t wrong. Alex opened her personal laptop, sliding her work laptop to the side. There were so many questions she could have asked, but already this was the most interesting thing to happen to her in a long time. She would let it play out. “I suppose it depends on the museum.”

“The Sackler? Let me send you the log-in info.”

In a few quick keystrokes, she had pulled up the museum intranet. “Sounds familiar.”

“Our first date,” Will supplied.

Alex laughed. “I should’ve known we wouldn’t work out the instant you suggested we go to an *art museum*.” They had met on Tinder, during the brief period when they were both new to college and the dating scene, had gone to the Sackler and then for coffee on an overcast New England afternoon. There had been a couple of dates after that, but nothing else, and after seeing the heartbreak Will tended to leave in his wake, she was relieved neither one of them had wanted more. Still, they had kept in touch after she had moved to California, Skyping on late nights when Will’s insomnia kept him up and Alex was afraid the loneliness would eat her alive, comparing younger siblings and the heavy weight of their parents’ expectations, the specific traumas of their pasts laid bare as the hours passed. She knew him well enough to know that they would never date again.

The Sackler’s video footage loaded on her screen. The museum was aglow, even though it was late on the East Coast, and on the cameras outside the museum, police lights spun red and blue over cobbled streets. She switched to another incognito tab and searched up *sackler museum + news*.

All the headlines told the same story: smashed glass and black ski masks, twenty-three stolen pieces of Chinese art. There had been three eyewitnesses but no leads. She narrowed her eyes at her phone. “Why didn’t you tell me there was a robbery?”

“Alex,” Will began. There was a catch in his voice.

“Were you there?”

He was silent for a long moment. “That’s why I’m calling.”

Alex closed her eyes, thinking of the day she had withdrawn from MIT. It had been fall, the leaves just beginning to change color, and the Charles River twisted like silver wire through downtown Boston. It had

felt like the beginning of something, like her whole life was unspooling. She had never described the feeling to Will, but she thought maybe he would recognize it. This evening, the Sackler's stolen art—what was this if not change?

A moment later, Alex had pulled up the footage from the night before. She shared her screen with him as she did, and together they watched the theft. Alex knew Will was watching the thieves, the elegance of their movements, the art that disappeared beneath their gloved hands, but she was watching Will. Will as he got up from his desk at the Sackler, as he ran into the other room. Will standing against the wall, his eyes wide behind his glasses and his dark hair tousled, looking for all the world like any other overwhelmed college kid save for the slight movement of his hand, the momentary glint of jade in his palm.

“Will Chen,” Alex said, very quietly, “what have you done?”

His voice, too, was soft. “I know, I know. There's more.”

So maybe she had been wrong. Maybe Will had been watching her after all.

The theft was almost over. As they left, one masked figure brushed very close to Will. She zoomed in on the still, but she couldn't tell what the thief was doing, if anything. “A business card,” Will said, and her phone lit up with an image. The words were in simplified Chinese, not traditional, but she could read it well enough. “And an invitation.”

“Are you going to take it?” Alex rewound to the moment Will stole the artifact, that telltale shine. Her fingers hovered over the keys. It would take very little to erase this footage. A half-second jump between one frame and the next, chalked up to a minor glitch in the system, the fallibility of tech. It was also definitely illegal.

“If I did, would you join me?”

Her work computer chimed. Her program was done running, and there was more to do. There always was. Alex knew she should say no, return to a Friday night programming in her Mountain View apartment,

the rest of her days, the rest of her life blurring together in the California sunshine. She had chosen this, after all. A steady paycheck and the slow upward climb to manager, lines of code in Java and Python and all the languages yet to come. It was the safe choice, the responsible one, the kind that she had spent her whole life making.

And yet—

Alex tipped her head back, thought of change. Three years ago, stepping onto MIT's campus for the first time. Leaving it behind before she was ready. And now—a museum of stolen art, security footage blinking on her computer.

Will's breathing was soft over the phone, and she remembered, too, that terrible first date, walking through the Sackler and then, afterward, the two of them drinking overpriced coffee and talking of dreams. They'd been freshmen then, still figuring out what it meant to go to the best universities in the country, to have so much possibility at their fingertips, but—it had all seemed within reach. His dreams. Hers. It had been so long since Alex had let herself think about what she wanted, separate from her family and her responsibilities, all that she owed the people in her life.

"Alex?" Will said, and it was a question, an offering, an open door.

In one swift, decisive motion, Alex pressed *delete*. "I'm in."

WILL

This late, Harvard was quiet, still, something out of a painting. Will would have done it in slow, sweeping brushstrokes, the sky curving around lamps that shone torch-bright. It was the kind of evening where the impossible felt close enough to touch, to taste. He took a deep, steadying breath.

What was real: the jade tiger in his palm, stolen from the Sackler just hours ago.

What was real: the future carved open.

He had made three calls tonight. The first, to the number on the back of the card, had taken him to an empty dial tone. Moments later, he had received a text message with a link to an Air China reservation under his name for five first-class tickets to Beijing.

The flight was a week from today.

The second call was to his sister. Irene had done all the things that he—skin humming, full of excitement and adrenaline and certainty that he would follow this adventure to its end—had not bothered to do. Over FaceTime, she had looked up the CEO of China Poly, its mission, all the

ways it had its fingers in foreign trade. He was not used to uncertainty from her, and yet when she was done, her voice was low, hesitant as she asked, *Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?*

The third call had been to Alex. Irene would have warned him to wait, to think this through, but he had always recognized in Alex all the parts of him he was afraid to look too closely at. She knew as well as he did—maybe better—what it was like to want more from the world than you were meant to have, to know that wanting wasn't always enough. They were both twenty-one by now, would turn twenty-two this year, and the future was so far from what either of them had once thought it would be. Still, with all that had happened today, he could almost believe they were eighteen again, young and ambitious and certain they could remake the world. He had never doubted that she would say yes.

Will cast a glance outside. The sun would rise in a few hours, turning the world gold and brilliant and new. If it had been any other weekend, he would've been at a finals club party, searching for something, *someone*, to make him feel, but instead there was a rental car and the long drive ahead of him, Will packing his things as the rest of Harvard slept. He thought back to his sister, asking him for certainty.

I'm sure, he had said. It might have been a lie. Ahead of him loomed job applications, the threat of graduation on the horizon, all that he'd thought he would become by now. And yet—when the Sackler had been robbed today, when the museum's alarms had kept pace with the pounding of his heart, Will hadn't felt fear. Instead there had been a heavy sort of inevitability to it, as if his whole life had brought him here, to a museum of Chinese art and the thieves who took it back.

What was real, if not this?

The fall air felt like a beginning, and Will slung his backpack over his shoulder, slipped his phone in his pocket. His mind went once more to his sister, the sharp, pleased edge to her smile. *Then there's a driver at Duke I think you should meet.*

LILY

The night was dark as an oil spill. Lily Wu drummed her fingers along the curve of her steering wheel, waiting for the darkness to change, for her world to change. The air tasted of cigarette smoke and cheap beer, and even with her windows up she could hear the steady thrum of the bass from the speakers that jutted into the Durham night. College students lined both sides of Main Street. Their gazes raked over her red Mustang, the Audi R8 next to her that gleamed a sleek, hungry silver.

Five seconds.

The boy in the Audi rolled down his window. Lily kept her gaze on the light, red and fluorescent in the summer dark. Returning to Duke always felt like stepping into an unfamiliar world, bright and glittering and false. This—the harsh glow of the stoplight, the steady hum of her car beneath her palms—was the only thing that felt real.

Four seconds.

“Winner take all?” he called.

Three seconds.

Lily's foot never left the gas. The window was open, just a crack, the night air warm and expectant against her skin.

One second.

"Winner take all," Lily agreed, and then the light changed.



It did not feel like it had been three years. Two, Lily supposed, since her junior year had barely begun, Durham cast in that late-summer gold of September. She still remembered the first time she had made the seventeen-hour drive from Galveston, Texas, to Durham, North Carolina. She had been in the driver's seat, as always, and her parents had taken rare time off work to make the trip with her. When they crossed the state line, out of Texas, out of this place she had spent her whole life, Lily had felt something in her open up. College, the future—for once, it did not feel so impossibly far away.

When they reached Durham at last, the sun was setting. The sky was a blur of red and gold and the deep, dark greens of those great Carolina trees. After she and her parents unloaded her suitcases in her new dorm room, they took the bus to West Campus to see the chapel for the first time. Her parents had lingered back, taking pictures of the chapel, the bus stop, their only daughter standing there with her head tilted up, but all Lily could see was the cotton candy sky and the sun against the stone, the way it cut into the sky like possibility.

No more, she had promised herself. No more street racing, no more near-death experiences. No more risk. Not when her parents were paying all they could and more for her education, when she would graduate over 100K in debt regardless. She'd be a good student, and an even better engineer.

It had seemed like an easy promise to make.

And then—a few days later, as she was walking out of Data

Structures and Algorithms, she had overheard two white boys talking about the Durham races. *It's worth watching*, one told the other. When she grabbed her car keys, her blood singing, she told herself she was just going to watch.

Even then, it had tasted like a lie.



Behind her, the Audi was a distant memory. Lily eased up on the gas, just for a moment, letting the other car draw a little closer. Up ahead, the finish line was marked with clean white chalk. She gave him one foot, then two—she wanted this victory to feel *earned*—and then she flew across the finish line, the Audi just a breath behind her.

Two years, and still some things stayed the same. The crowd spilled from the sidewalk to the street, streetlights shining fluorescent against bare skin. This was summer at its best, engine exhaust and the lingering traces of smoke, and Lily tipped her head back and breathed it in, smiling. The other driver was slow to leave his car, slower still to drop his keys in Lily's palm. But he did, and her fingers curled around it, the jagged edges cool and unfamiliar against her thumb.

That night, when the races were over and Durham was quiet once more, Lily went to claim her Audi R8. It shone silver in the darkness, and she thought of midnights in Galveston and the reflection of the moon against the waves, the shimmer of Texas roads under a high sun. She would sell it back to its owner later, do the same thing she always did, but for now she left her Mustang in the parking lot, let herself enjoy the warm evening air, the easy calm of the empty streets.

A stranger was leaning against Lily's new car, his hands tucked into the pockets of his coat, just a little too heavy for early fall in the Carolinas. "Congratulations," he said. There was something familiar about the

high arch of his cheekbones, the smile that flitted across his face like a promise. He was the kind of beautiful that made you want to look and keep looking. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

Lily tilted her head up to look at him, smiling despite herself. “Actually,” she said, “I think we have.”



It had been the easiest thing in the world to let Will Chen slide into the passenger seat of her new Audi, to press her foot on the gas until they were flying down an empty street, the trees casting long, hungry shadows against her sweeping headlights. Lily ran her fingers along the radio dials, the rearview mirror, getting acquainted with this car. Every year there were freshmen who’d learned of the races the same way she had, who’d heard her name and taken it as a challenge. The trick to it, then, was finding the one with the car she wanted most.

And then to wait.

The first year—her own freshman year—it had been a surprise. Victory had been strange and sweet on her tongue. Two years later, it felt different. Home was that house in Galveston, the ocean air rough against her skin, but sometimes, when she closed her eyes, she dreamed not of the sea but of the lights in Brightleaf Square, strung up like unknown constellations, Durham at night shimmering with possibility.

She glanced at Irene’s brother at the stoplight. His dark hair was tousled in a way that had to be deliberate, and the red, fluorescent light glanced off the angles of his face, the clean line of his jaw. He turned his glasses over in his hand, and she imagined the world as he saw it right now, a blur of green and black and flashing, silver lights.

They had met just once before, at orientation her freshman year at Duke. He had been starting his sophomore year at Harvard, had come

down to help Irene move in, and Lily vaguely remembered not wanting her parents to meet him. Will, with his Harvard education and perfect, lilting Chinese, was every Asian parent's dream.

Was she so different from the girl she had been? It might have been the years at Duke, sharpening her against them like a knife. There was a time when she would have felt nervous to have him in the car with her, to know he had watched her race with bright eyes and that slow, slow smile. Lily turned the radio down, soft enough that it was just background music, the bass keeping time with her heart. "What brings you to Duke?"

He slid his glasses back on, one corner of his mouth lifting in a wry smile. "Irene thought I should pay her a visit."

"You know she's in New York, right?"

"I do now."

Lily laughed. "This is Irene's world," she said. "The rest of us are just living in it."

To her surprise, Will laughed too, the sound low and endearing. "I won't argue with that." The light changed, and the Audi leapt forward. "You know, when Irene told me her roommate was at the Durham races, I wasn't expecting"—he swept his hand in a vague, nonsensical gesture—"this."

"What were you expecting?" Lily asked.

He didn't answer, but she knew it already. Lily was not the kind of girl who raced cars in the dark, who blew through lights, through life, so recklessly. She had spent her whole life trying not to be.

They pulled into Cook Out, the sign glowing fluorescent in the waiting dark, and Lily ordered for them both. Already this night felt like something out of a dream: dipping fries into an ice cream float at two a.m., the distant sound of laughter bubbling up like Cheerwine beneath a North Carolina sky. Lily leaned against the hood of the car, drinking in the starlight, the taste of vanilla on her tongue. Groups of other

college students were scattered across the small parking lot, the curb next to the drive-thru line, and Lily tried to imagine what they saw when they looked over: Will, his coat discarded and the sleeves of his button-down rolled up; Lily in jean shorts and a battered T-shirt, her brown hair tangled from years of salt air. A new car between them. She didn't know Will, not really, and yet it was easy enough to be here with him, the Durham night soft and full of some yet-unknown promise. "So you're an artist," she said, and though she hadn't meant it as a question, it came out as one.

He hesitated for a moment. "I'm an art history student. There's a difference."

"It doesn't sound that different to me," she said. If it had been elsewhere, she would have made a joke about the humanities. But somehow, beneath the moon and the neon lights, Will's face cast in stark relief—it didn't feel quite right.

"I study history," he said. "I don't make it."

It sounded like a lie. There was something in the brightness of his eyes, the hint of a smile on his lips, that told her he knew it too. She thought for a moment of how many hours the drive would have taken from Boston to Durham. His sister was elsewhere, and yet Will had come anyway, waited for her in the shimmering night. "Why did you come here, really?" Lily asked. It was that strange halfway time between summer and fall, and Durham hummed with change. Irene was in New York still, interviewing with some consulting firm she hated, both of them playing their parts of what was expected of their junior year.

Will tilted his head up. "Tell me how it started," he said.

"The racing?" Lily asked.

"Everything."

He was changing the subject, she knew. She found she didn't quite mind. When was the last time she had been asked something like this? Had she ever? "I grew up in a small town by the sea," she began, and she

was back home, the evening stretching slow as saltwater taffy, lights glancing off distant water. In the end, every child of immigrants had the same story. “At first, it felt like running away.”

There was just one main bridge over the island, white and scalloped and open to the sea. Every time she had driven over it, she had dreamed of never turning back. What was at home? The weight of her parents’ dreams, the judgment of that small town. The looming shape of her future, pressing down on her more with each passing year. Her parents never said that they expected more from her, but it was there in the air she breathed, the history held in her bones.

“And now?”

Even this late, the air was warm, and the metal of the car was cool against her bare skin. Lily crossed one leg over the other, her sneakers flashing white against the pavement. To everyone else at Duke, who had come from cities or the suburbs that spun out of them, Durham might have felt small, inconsequential. The world was vast and the town gleamed in miniature. But Lily looked up and saw the clouds, the way the Cook Out sign, neon, tinted the world red. It was almost three in the morning, and the drive-thru line was empty. For a moment, she could imagine they were the only people in the world. “I’m not sure yet,” she said. She was still running, after all this time. “I’m hoping it can be more.”

The moonlight cast long, searching shadows against Will’s skin. “Lily Wu,” he said, and when he said her name there was a weight to it, “I came here for you.”

"As poignant and perceptive as it is sexy and thrilling, the rare book that manages to be chilling, fun and profound all at once. A remarkable feat of imagination."

—NAIMA COSTER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *What's Mine and Yours*



NERUDA

ON

THE

PARK

A Novel

CLEYVIS NATERA

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CHAPTER ONE

Luz Guerrero

WHITE OUT, WASHED OUT

The sound of split wooden frames, shattered glass windows, and fractured brownstone woke her. Luz imagined a huge crash, her body hurling toward a windshield, or some other kind of hurt. Then, as silence followed, she burrowed deeper into her covers, relieved. It was only moments before her wind-chime alarm, before Mami handed her a cup of coffee and Papi looked on at her, so very proud. She left their apartment, ready. Today—the biggest day, the day that would set everything in motion.

Luz walked out into Nothar Park, where she watched a wrecking ball swing back and forth from a crane. She picked up part of a brick that had skittered out to the sidewalk, noting how close to her own skin tone it was, a color Eusebia, her mother, called *casi puro cafecito*. Hardly any milk there, she always said, with an edge of concern, finding it impossible to simply use the word *Black*. The crane's neck moved, and the metal rope swung the ball forward, striking again. The noise grew noticeably louder. The wall resisted. But the force of the pressure caused a crater where it hit, and from it, tiny lines extended like wrinkles.

This the sound that woke her.

The cold air was thick with mist. Luz turned away from the noise and rubble, making her way through Nothar Park toward the subway, intent on her destination and determined not to be distracted. Her boss, Raenna, had texted her late last night.

I got news to share, she wrote. Meet me at TSP before work. What's the big news? Luz responded.

Raenna hadn't texted back.

As Luz reached the stairs down to the subway, the escalating noise made her pause. The wrecking ball had finally broken through the stubborn wall—the fracturing now complete. Dust rose into the damp air rapidly, then hung softly above the trees.

Was Luz upset to witness the beginning of the destruction of her neighborhood? Nope. *Qué va*. She was focused on a rare moment of elation. Would today be the day she'd be offered junior partner? Of course it would. Over the last five years, she and her boss had had an agreement. The minute the promotion was a go, she'd be the first to know. She pushed forward.

Although Luz wasn't upset about the crashing wall, she did worry about her mother. Eusebia often looked onto that old, burnt-out tenement building and spoke about maybe putting together a community campaign to purchase the grounds—for a garden, no less. Luz and her father, Vladimir, remained mute to Mami's inquiries, hiding conspiring smiles behind cupped palms. They both knew how hard it would be, to pull that off. The obscene asking price for the shell—over ten million dollars. They thought it would remain as it had—abandoned, neglected, unwanted—since they arrived from the Dominican Republic twenty years ago. Who would bother?

Plus. Vladimir had cashed out his retirement investments, and Luz had contributed all her savings from the bonuses she'd gotten over the years, all to build Mami's dream home back in the Dominican Republic. Mami remained oblivious to their secret scheming. Just last week, Luz and her father pored over the pictures of the terrace overlooking the sea with the hole in the ground that would soon become an infinity pool. In just a few months, the house would be completed, her parents would retire and move back, and Luz would finally be able to live her own life. Move to Central Park West, that corner building on Seventy-ninth Street she'd had her eye on since she graduated law school.

It was ironic, really, that now that she was so close to finally leaving the neighborhood, change had reached it instead. A miracle it had

taken this long for the gentrification of New York to reach Nothar Park. The Lower East Side, Chelsea, Hell's Kitchen, Harlem, Washington Heights, and especially Brooklyn, washed out, white out, everything forever changed. At the firm where she practiced law as a junior associate, she had friends who'd moved into those same neighborhoods, awed at how amazing the space (actual space!) was—friends who just a few years back would have been too scared to walk down the street they now lived on. She knew what would happen when the neighborhood changed. Some of it good, some of it not good. Now here they were, at the cusp. Belowground, the turbulence of the train entering the station prompted her to hurry on. She put the neighborhood out of her mind. Her future life was waiting.

A BODY CAN SURVIVE GREAT PAIN

The Secret Place, a members-only restaurant in midtown Manhattan, wasn't listed in any online apps, didn't accept reservations. As she waited for Raenna to arrive, Luz noticed the dining room space as if for the first time. Every wall painted black, including the tall ceiling. The vases, in contrast, had an ombré gold tint and were filled with oversized tree branches sprouting yellow flowers. They enhanced Luz's feeling of pure light. She held fast to the edge of the table lest she float away. Luz tried to place the soothing, hip music flowing discreetly out of hidden speakers. Underground Portugal? Brazil?

She had often felt out of place. Just a few nights ago, at dinner with colleagues, they'd been served eel in a reduction of lime that made the flesh writhe. Nodding along with everyone else, she'd said it was delicious, while worrying that others could sense her growing discomfort and nausea. But not today.

Today, Luz ordered the expensive champagne, knowing it was ridiculous to do so at 8 A.M. Raenna would sigh at the impropriety, but find it charming nonetheless.

"Should I bring it now?" asked Henry, their usual server, with honey in his eyes, honey in his smile. Around them, bussers moved with the efficiency of those under constant threat of being fired, re-

moving sweaty water glasses from unoccupied tables and replacing them with fresh ones.

Luz shook her head. “Let’s wait until she gets here.”

She stood and went to the bathroom.

Looking in the mirror, she applied another coat of lipstick. She fixed a strand that had escaped her tight bun, pushed the pinchos further in place—wincing at how tight the hairpins were, how much they hurt. It was worth the pain. She practiced how she would stand in front of her peers when they made the announcement later—each associate would clap, while drilling her with their eyes, especially those who’d been waiting to hear it was their turn.

In the dimness of the bathroom, a familiar sadness neared at the thought of all the hours, all the work, all the sacrifice, her hand first up to volunteer on extra cases—spending every weekend in the office, getting home later and later every day. Not now, she thought, pushing that sadness away. Today, it insisted. In the mirror, on her face, the outline of that emptiness. Where did it come from?

Luz didn’t answer that question, was cautious to not ask it of herself a second time. Emptiness, she knew, was a human-sized shape inside each of us—you could fill it with slimming suits or sky-high heels; one way or another, it gets filled. Older women—Raenna and Mami—never spoke of such. They wanted her focused, relentless. From their lives to hers, the wrong corrected. But the emptiness remained, persisted.

“Diablo,” a loud voice said behind her, outside the frame of the mirror. She had to turn to see.

“Where’s the runway?” Angélica said. “You look like a model.”

Angélica, who lived in the basement apartment of her building, who’d been her best friend until Luz went away to college. At twenty-nine, Angélica’s round face was still exactly the same as when they were teenagers. Her blond hair in stark contrast with her dark eyes. Luz had given her the first dye when they were both fifteen, then immediately tried to talk her into going back to her natural brown hair. But Angélica loved it and said she’d never go back, twirling bangs over her forehead. Today, her hair tucked behind an ear showed the

scar on Angélica's forehead she'd always been so self-conscious of, the shape forever reminding Luz of a centipede.

"Are those red-bottom shoes?" Angélica said, grabbing hold of one of Luz's legs and lifting her foot off the ground.

Luz stumbled, caught herself against the vanity. She gently pushed Angélica's hand away, lifted her own foot, showed her the bottom. She had bought these shoes just last week, after she noticed Raenna had them. Hadn't even blinked twice at the price as she extended payment.

"Must be nice to be rich," Angélica said.

"They hurt, a lot," Luz said. She caught herself slouching and straightened up. "And please, I'm not rich. What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too," Angélica said.

"Sorry," Luz said. "I'm just surprised. How are you?"

Eusebia had said something about Angélica getting a new job. How Angélica's mom hoped she'd stick with this one for a while. Luz never thought her dizque friend would end up working in the place she had dinner several nights a week.

"All the people who eat here are jerks. You fit right in," Angélica said.

Luz shook her head. She took a step around Angélica, headed out the door, and held it as it closed so it would make no sound. Didn't bother with a fake goodbye. No one was going to take away this feeling of elation. Not today.

In the dining room, across the way, Raenna sat at her table. Their eyes locked, and instead of offering her usual warm smile, Raenna busied herself with her phone. Weird. Henry rushed across the room, holding a champagne bottle in one hand and two flutes expertly crossed at the stems in the other. Behind him, another server followed, carrying a bottle chiller and stand.

Her shoes were not designed for rushing across a room.

When she finally made it to the table, she knew the meeting wasn't about a promotion.

"You ordered champagne?"

Raenna's bone-straight hair was twice its natural volume because of the weave she'd had put in over the weekend. With those huge green eyes, pale skin, and tiny frame, no one would ever suspect where she was from. South Side of Chicago, she would volunteer, right after correcting their pronunciation (Ray-nuh). Luz knew it was code for people to understand she wasn't white, never mind what her fair skin, green eyes, and straight hair implied.

"What's the news?"

"Luz, let's sit together for a minute before we get to that."

"Why are we here, Rae?"

Raenna took a sip of the champagne. "Will you please bring orange juice," she said to Henry, who rushed away to the kitchen. To Luz she said, "Please sit."

Luz couldn't sit down. She reached for the glass. Took a sip of the champagne. She thought the more expensive champagne should be sweeter than this dry, tart thing.

Raenna raised the flute to her lips. When she put the glass down, it was empty. She stood up, and though Luz towered over her, her confidence made her appear bigger than her five-foot-two-inch height. There was a peplum on Raenna's blouse like petals of a white flower, unfurling. Her tailored pants elongated her legs. Same shoes Luz wore, only Raenna's were in taupe. Grooming, flawless. Clothes, always exquisite. Luz modeled her life after Raenna's.

Underneath the makeup, there were large dark circles around Raenna's eyes. There was pigment discoloration around her jawline spreading toward her ears; an accident involving a fire had left the scarred tissue much darker than the remainder of her skin. Green veins were visible all the way up to her forehead. Makeup covered it well but not fully. In spite of the scar, or maybe because of it, Raenna was stunning. The scar was a sign of fragility, yes, but also a testament to the fact a body can survive great pain. Luz had never worked up the courage to ask what happened.

"At some point today," Raenna said, "you will lose your job."

Luz sat down. She couldn't force any more of the bitter drink. She placed the glass on the table but missed. The glass fell on the floor.

"It didn't break," Henry said. As he reached their table, he placed

a carafe filled with orange juice between the two women. “That means it’s your lucky day.”

Raenna raised a hand, shook her head at Henry. Not now.

“What did you say?” Luz asked her.

Raenna’s lips were moving but Luz had a hard time understanding the words. Was she whispering? Mumbling? She had a bad habit of mumbling when her brain was moving fast. No, this was a slur. From one glass of champagne?

Then Raenna grew silent. Henry went away, and neither woman knew what to say. Henry returned moments later with a fresh basket of the most delicate croissants and a new flute. He made Luz a mimosa, then called Angélica over. She bent down to wipe the wet floor with a startlingly white cloth. Henry didn’t speak, and when Angélica made to say something, he held an index finger against his mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” Raenna said.

“I don’t understand,” Luz said. “What are you talking about?”

Luz grabbed a croissant, then put it back. Its warmth lingered on her hand. Angélica continued scrubbing the floor with exaggerated diligence.

“I think I need to hear you say it one more time.”

“It’s better if we focus on the future,” Raenna said. “I know this is shocking. I wish we had more time to let you absorb it, but we have to go soon.”

“I know,” Luz said. “Okay. I’m listening.”

Luz wasn’t listening. The blackness of the room contracted, and the room’s objects fell into sharp relief. The branches in the vases thickened, choking the space around them. She felt heat spreading upward under her clothes. Don’t cry, she commanded, don’t cry.

“It’s better if you resign,” Raenna said. “That’s why I’m telling you.”

“Is this a joke?” Luz asked.

Raenna touched her scar. Some of her makeup came off on her fingertips, exposing the rigid tissue underneath.

“I wish it was a joke,” she said, then, to Angélica, “I’m sure you got it.” She made a dismissive gesture.

Angélica reacted by slowing down, wrapping the cloth around two fingers and wiping the floor with renewed force. Henry cleared his throat at her.

“I just found out last night,” Raenna said. “They know I’m your mentor. That’s probably why they kept me out of it.”

“How could you find out last? I work for you.”

“You don’t work for me,” Raenna said sharply. “You work for the firm. You know the trouble I can get into for talking to you about this?” She caught herself, softened her tone. “I just wanted to warn you,” she said. “You should resign, that will make it easier to get another job. Don’t let them fire you.”

Henry cleared his throat at Angélica again, and she finally stood, satisfied. She looked right at Luz before she walked away, with a little smile that lifted the centipede’s belly. Did that mean she would tell Mami? Mami. Luz remembered the hole in the ground that would become a pool, overlooking a breathtaking view—all ocean and sky. During those long days at work, she’d imagined Mami and Papi sitting on the edge of that pool, lightly touching the surface of the water. She reminded herself, daily, how hard they’d worked, how much they deserved a break.

“This makes no sense,” Luz said.

“We’re just not making margin. Top-heavy.”

“So, get rid of associates?” Luz said.

“Not plural,” Raenna said. She poured herself more champagne, and her Adam’s apple slid up and down as she took a sip. “This is just you.”

“Oh,” Luz said. It was the smallest sound she’d ever uttered. The heat, now at her neck, threatened to set her face on fire. How could she be the only one?

“Why me? Everyone knows Duvall is on probation. There are, um, people who have made mistakes.”

Behind her eyes, pressure burned. How many times over the last year had she heard this or that associate talk about a missed statute of limitations?

Raenna opened her mouth as if to speak but shut it immediately.

She examined the bubbles in her glass. One after the other, in rapid succession, each rose to the surface, joined others in a necklace around the glass, then disappeared. Luz felt rage surfacing beneath the humiliation. She got up.

“Let’s just go,” she said. She thought about heading into the office, sitting at her neat desk. Doing the million things she was supposed to do until HR called her into a conference room. She decided she wouldn’t pay for the champagne. Raenna had a business account. No checks ever had to be signed.

Then she stopped. Raenna buttoned up her camel coat, held a small purse in the crook of her elbow.

“Did you try to stop it?”

“There was no stopping it.”

“Who picked me?”

“You think I’d do this to you?”

In private moments, away from the office, Raenna always told Luz the only way to change the world was to take it over, rip it out of the hands of those holding on for dear life. Nobody is going to give anything willingly, she would say. We have to take what belongs to us. It was hard to reconcile the person who said those words, most recently just last week, with the person who stood in front of her. She was hiding something from her. What was it?

“In my heart,” Raenna said, “I know you’re meant for better things.”

At the words, the tears fell. Raenna reached in her purse and took out a small cloth handkerchief and handed it over. Luz wiped her tears. Who even went around with cloth anything these days? she thought. Of course: Raenna, who was unlike anyone she’d ever known.

Raenna reached over, gave her a hug. Once Luz calmed down, Raenna told her again. It would be better if she quit.

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” Luz said. “Why would I quit?”

If Luz had been a wall in that old building being demolished in Nothar Park, Raenna would have seen the crater forming, followed by a line that cracked her skin. But she wasn’t a wall. The sound of

her own voice reminded Luz she was solid, so she went ahead, not waiting for Raenna to lead the way as she usually did. Nothing would break her down.

THE TONGUES

When she made her way up the subway stairs back in her neighborhood, it was late afternoon. Neighbors stood side by side around Nothar Park. Their commute home had been halted by these new machines. Tight faces peeked out from the windows of apartments all around the park as blinds were raised. Luz's face tightened as her eyes watered, stinging from the dust that spread as the wrecking ball continued its attack. She wove past neighbors.

She pretended nothing out of the ordinary had happened to her at work. She'd been doing the same pretending all day, from the moment she and Raenna arrived in the office, to the interminable day that extended to 4 P.M., when just as she'd grown sure Raenna had played a terrible prank on her, she was called into a conference room. And just as Raenna had forecasted, she'd been let go.

Now Luz turned in front of the eight-floor stone façade of 600 West. The Tongues, her mother's bingo-playing friends, stood outside. The triplets, identical with their white hair and matching eye-glass chains, kept most in line with the threat of exposure. Eusebia had nicknamed them the Tongues because of how much they liked to gossip.

"Buenas tardes," Luz said.

All three women turned to her, then back to the noise across the way.

"This look like a good afternoon to you?" one of them said, in Spanish.

Their jaws were hard-set, angry. Luz didn't bother responding. She'd never figured out why they disliked her so much. But she certainly had no time for their shade today. Instead, she turned her attention to the park. Trucks and cars and trees and people blocked the view. Even the land itself sloped in such a way that Luz and the Tongues were unable to see clearly. In front of them a group of vol-

unteers in matching bright green shirts were picking up garbage in the park. She tilted her head to get a better view and couldn't. She left the sisters.

On the way into the building, Luz slipped, and braced her fall with a hand against the brick wall. When she pulled her hand away, it was wet with a sticky white film. Disgusted, she brought it to her nose. It smelled clean, like powder. She wiped her hand against her suit, without thought, and then winced. She'd have to get the suit dry-cleaned.

The Tongues sucked their teeth at her. As always, they shook their heads, disapproving, as if they couldn't wait to put the word out, Radio Mil Informando, that they saw Luz wiping the neighborhood off her fancy lawyer clothes.

EACH BRICK, TRASH

Upstairs, Luz opened the door to her home. The long, dark hallway stretched in front of her. Her bedroom with the smells she loved—figs, vanilla, bitter orange, and the bed freshly made—was to her left. Her mother changed the sheets every Monday, for Tuesday was laundry day. Up ahead, to the right, the kitchen. Luz wanted so badly to go inside her room and lie on the bed, discarding all she'd brought from outside. To recapture the moment before Raenna showed up. She'd been about to float from that lightness. But if she went into her room first, it would be suspicious. She never changed out of her work clothes without saying hello.

Her mother was talking to someone on the phone, someone who'd obviously just described gringos painting a mural in the park. She was oblivious as Luz went farther into the apartment. There was the clank and clink of a pot being stirred—no doubt something delicious on the stove top. From the living room, children's laughter, high-pitched and continuous, accompanied cartoons on the television. Luz called out her mother's name. She didn't respond.

When Eusebia turned toward her, she let out the smallest of shrieks. Her hand went to her heart and her eyes widened so much Luz had to rush to her side and reassure her.

“It’s just me, Mami. Just me.”

Eusebia gave her a stern, serious look.

“What are you trying to do?” she yelled at Luz in Spanish. “Give me a heart attack?”

“Never,” Luz said, in English.

This is how they spoke to each other. Her mother had learned enough English to understand Luz, but her body had refused to speak it. The words themselves a trespass, an allergic reaction that thickened the tongue and made her accent impossible to understand. For her part, Luz had lost all but a bit of her Spanish—was unable to write it or read it.

Luz examined Mami’s face for a sign of knowing.

Her mother’s forehead took up a generous portion of her face, and that, coupled with those wide, large brown eyes, gave her a child-like quality. It was Eusebia’s mouth that made her appear womanly, one of the first things her father said he’d noticed about her. Her lips are perfect bows, thick and sensual, he always said, which made Luz wince. But when her mother smiled, as she did now taking Luz in, she’d be back to looking like a kid because of her tiny teeth, a few of which, both at the bottom and the top, here crowded together, there shifted stubbornly apart.

There it was, just love. Mami didn’t know what happened today.

Everyone said Luz was the spitting image of her mother, though her mother had a petite, hourglass figure, while Luz was small-breasted, statuesque. Her mother had that milky fair skin; Luz was dark. Over six feet tall, she’d inherited her height and skin color from her father. Braces had straightened her teeth, retainers kept them in line. For work, her hair was always pulled back in a tight bun; at home, she let her kinky curls free. With relief, she picked the pinchos out one by one, loosened the bun.

Kenya and Paris, Angélica’s twin daughters, rushed into the kitchen. Eusebia watched them occasionally, whenever their grandmother Isabel had super duties or running around to do. They held on to each of Luz’s legs, pulling her down for kisses. Luz put the purse on the back of a chair in the kitchen and kneeled down to give

them both hugs. Even though she didn't see the girls often, they were always so affectionate, so sweet. So different from their mother.

Eusebia turned her attention back to the stove, adjusting the flame on the three pots from high to low. Then she fixed her entire body on Luz.

"What are you doing home so early?" she asked, looking her all over.

Luz busied herself with the girls so that she didn't have to make direct eye contact with her mother. She touched their hair, told them how pretty they both looked. Called them by the wrong name on purpose to make them laugh. Asked them how old they were, knowing full well they'd just celebrated their fifth birthday. Both hands up, all fingers outstretched. Ten? she asked. They punched her chest with small fists.

"You're so silly," they said.

"A few lawyers got out of court early today," Luz said, which she figured wasn't untrue. "Won another big case. Everyone's been killing themselves, so they said take the rest of the day off."

Luz didn't usually lie to her mother. She had a very small window to make eye contact, otherwise Eusebia would know something weird was going on. So she did it, shrugging her shoulders in a nonchalant way, the entire time wondering why she didn't just say the truth. She'd lost her job for no good reason, through no fault of her own. And what did she have to show for all that hard work and dedication of the past five years? A laughable severance package, one paycheck for each year worked. At least they'd prorated the mid-year incentive bonus to account for a full six months of anticipated billable hours, even though it was late April. She fumed again, remembering how it had taken the entire business day for her to be called into the conference room—as if they couldn't help but milk a few more hours out of her. We strongly encourage you to review the documents with a lawyer before you sign, Laura, the HR director, had said. Stupidly, Luz had said she was fine, grabbed the pen to sign the severance documents on the spot, wanting to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. But Laura stopped her, hand over hand, and insisted that

she take the documents and read them over at home. Send them through the mail, Laura had said. Take your time reviewing them.

“You hungry?” her mother asked, left eyebrow slightly raised, as if she wasn’t quite convinced what Luz said was true. See, whenever Luz was worried about something, she couldn’t touch any food. But for some reason, at the thought of food, the space underneath her tongue filled with saliva and her stomach growled loud enough that it made her mother nod in appreciation. The girls hollered in delight, poking Luz in the belly.

“Guess that’s all the answer I need,” Eusebia said, satisfied. “Food will be ready in a few minutes. I’ve been calling you all day. Thought we were having an earthquake.”

It was Luz’s turn to raise a suspicious eyebrow. The girls went back to the living room, then started running in a circle from there to the front door, down the hall to the kitchen, and back to the living room.

“You better stop running or I’m going to beat you,” Eusebia yelled the next time their circle brought them to the kitchen. The girls ran on, unconvinced, unthreatened. Eusebia was incapable of the least amount of violence, even two five-year-olds knew that. “Fine then, no *habichuelas con dulce* for neither of you.”

The girls marched back to the living room. The threat of denying them that creamy, sweet treat was enough to still their bodies in front of the television. From outside, the noise of men yelling at each other carried across the park, penetrated the closed windows.

“Go on!” Eusebia said, pushing Luz to the fire escape. “Tell me what’s happening.”

“The fire escape is wet,” Luz whined. “It’s pretty nasty outside. I haven’t even changed.”

“Please,” Eusebia said.

Luz went into her bedroom. She avoided the pile of unopened packages by her closet as she changed out of her work clothes and into yoga pants, a thick hooded sweatshirt. What was in the pile? Shoes, purses, tailored suits? She had no memory of what the boxes held. Couldn’t remember what she’d spent. But as always, knew it was a lot. Should she return those packages? But wouldn’t that be admitting she was scared? Worried?

She hurried away, sat on the fire escape. They'd closed down the entire northern side of the park. There were trucks and dumpsters and many men working on the demolition of the old building. The twins started screaming that they wanted to go outside on the fire escape with Luz. Eusebia bribed them with food to quiet down.

"What's happening now?" Eusebia shouted from inside the apartment.

"The same thing that was happening five minutes ago," Luz said, feigning lightheartedness. "Only now there's, wait, let me count, ten more bricks inside the dumpster."

"Remind me to tell your dad if I go first you can't write my obituary."

"They have pills that can cure you, Mami," Luz said. Half a joke.

Her mother snorted. She stood on her usual spot, on the other side of the living room, as close as she was willing to get unless the window that led to the fire escape was shut, the blinds drawn, the metal accordion gate that led outside locked. Eusebia had come down with a mean case of vertigo the first time she looked out of that same window when they'd arrived from DR. Back home, Eusebia used to say, everything is on the ground floor, where it should be.

Up on the fire escape, looking around, Luz noted how little had changed in all the years they'd lived there. Nothar Park occupied an entire city block in width, two city blocks in length, and it had seemed enormous to Luz when she was a child. The brownstones around the park, converted into apartments, vibrated with loud merengue and bachata. There were groups of men on the street, speaking loudly enough for her to hear as they leaned against lampposts, gesticulating with their arms toward the biggest change to strike Nothar Park in decades—that old tenement building being destroyed without a thought. Every few minutes, there was a booming collapse. Luz's building, which dominated at eight stories, seemed a sponge, absorbing the tumult around it.

"You know," her mother yelled, returning to her corner in the living room, "this is all connected to those americanos in the park."

"Ma," Luz said. "You think the construction is connected to the volunteers?"

“I don’t think,” she said. “I know.”

The phone rang. By the tender way her mother’s hand touched the wall next to the phone, Luz could tell it was her father. Eusebia told him the world was coming to an end.

“They’re tearing down the old building,” she screamed over the construction into the phone.

Across the way, the volunteers had finished the mural. From the fire escape, Luz had a perfect view of the various oversized people holding hands painted in various shades of brown. Words swayed above their arms—*Amor, Familia, y Comunidad*. The vibrant colors stood out even more because it was such a dreary day. The few remaining volunteers were packing up the art supplies. A woman with a streak of bright blue in her blond hair made wide circles with one arm while an athletic-looking white man with startlingly black hair picked up paint buckets. For a brief moment, the man looked up, staring in Luz’s direction. He waved at her. She ignored him.

The old tenement building tugged at Luz. As teenagers, she, Angélica, and their friends from the block would get tipsy in there. They laughed and dreamed about the future—how one day they would all travel the world, move far, far away.

She touched the wet bars on either side of her legs. The metal bars of the fire escape flaked; layers of black paint peeled like brittle nails and gave way easily as she pulled at them, down to the corroded, rusty orange center. Those spots, finally free of years of coats of paint, looked like sores.

When she glanced up again, dusk had fallen, and the park was softly illuminated in streetlight.

“It’s never a good sign”—her mother kept going like there’d been no pause—“when the americanos are the ones doing the cleaning. You think this is a coincidence? Demolition and a park cleanup on the same day? I’m telling you they have their eye on pushing us out.”

Off the phone, she had inched just a step closer to the window.

“Ma,” Luz said, “we don’t know what they’re going to build. It might be good for the neighborhood. It doesn’t have to suck.”

Mami didn’t get it, how inconvenient it was where they lived. Any

time she wanted to do anything—go to the bank, go to the gym, go to a healthy food market, get a nice glass of wine, buy fresh flowers—she had to hail a cab or pay train fare. She told her that.

“You think that’s what we’d get in exchange?” Mami said, suddenly serious. “The world is a harsh place. Why do you think only Dominican people live here? We stay close to each other not just to belong, but to be safe.”

When they first arrived in this country, Eusebia had insisted Luz not forget their true home had been left behind, that this new place, with its hard ground and impossible language, was hostile. But over time, Eusebia had created an entire new world in it. Listening to her now, Luz marveled at the change, wondering exactly what it was about this place that had won her mother over.

Because Luz knew the truth about the way a city responds to a community of folks who may not even be eligible to vote, who didn’t have the know-how to demand change, even of the smallest kind. It was mirrored in schools, in garbage pickup times, in police response times. She didn’t want to get into a fight. Because that’s what would happen if she told her mother what she actually thought. She didn’t feel like she belonged here. There was hostility toward her, in the neighborhood, and she’d often felt like an outsider, especially when she went off to college. It only got worse after she graduated from law school.

Luz already knew how this story ended—the neon-colored storefronts that lined their side of the park with their loud-ass blinking lights would transform as if by magic—cue in yoga, juice bars, endless mimosa brunch places with lines out the door.

On the street level below, Christian, Angélica’s brother, walked with his head down toward the entrance of the building, backpack slung low over one shoulder, a plastic bag of groceries in hand. He was finishing his senior year of high school. He walked slow, like an old man, then turned in the direction everyone faced, toward the menacing, silent machines. He glanced up directly at her fire escape and, after a moment, waved at her. Startled, she managed a small wave. Did he often look up, searching for her? There had been a time

years ago, when he was a tween crushing on her, that he was like her shadow. He made his way out of her vision, into the building through the side door that led to the basement.

HOME

Eusebia placed a man-sized serving on a plate in front of Luz and waited for her reaction. The rice was a white mountain topped with pollo guisado, steamy with the sweet aroma of tomato sauce. On the side, in a small bowl, she placed black beans garnished with chopped raw cilantro. A single plate with all the fixings together would have been fine, but the way the food was presented was a reminder Eusebia considered her daughter king of this house. Luz smiled at her, winked with exaggeration at the pomposity of the display.

Satisfied, Eusebia went back to the kitchen and returned with a tall glass of water, a smaller plate topped with green salad, and a slice of ripe avocado. She turned around and went back to the kitchen, returned with a napkin.

“Mami, sit down, you’re making me dizzy.”

Eusebia sat down, eyes intent on Luz as she ate, nodding approvingly as her daughter shoved spoonful after spoonful in her mouth. The food so soothing. Luz closed her eyes against the pleasure of her mother’s talents. This was love, in her mouth, filling her body.

“Wow, Mami,” Luz said. “This is the best thing in the world.”

“There are better things,” Eusebia said. Wicked look, eyebrows up and down like a comedian. Luz understood immediately, even without the facial shenanigans.

“Ay, Mami!” Luz said. “You’re gross.”

Her mother never ate with Luz or Vladimir. She liked to watch them as they ate, and only served herself once they were finished and needed no second servings. She often put whatever was left in a small bowl and ate it standing in front of the sink. Luz had never given the practice much thought, either. Now she put her spoon down, drank the water in long gulps, and rested her eyes on the hollow space inside the cup. When she lifted her gaze, her mother’s face was tight with tension, searching.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked.

Luz shook her head. She turned the TV’s volume higher. Watched her mother’s profile as she stared at the screen. When was the last time she’d really looked at Eusebia?

On the television, the whale whose baby calf had died swam on. She’d been carrying him on her glossy head for weeks. Eusebia’s eyelids hung heavy. Luz wanted to ask her mother if her own life had turned out the way she wanted, if she would change any of it given the chance. But the question got stuck on the ridges at the roof of her mouth. As if the spell, that promise that kept both of them in place, would splinter were she to ask such a simple question.

Over at the china cabinet, her mother’s most treasured possessions. None of it china. Instead, the shelves held school pictures of Luz from every year since third grade, when she’d first arrived from DR, and all the plaques she’d been awarded and the medals in national colors that had hung from her neck. She was the star of photos that her mother insisted on to track her success. The only anomaly was her father’s old book of poems by Pablo Neruda.

Now was the time for truth.

Should she tell her now?

She’d remained here, with her parents, in this same apartment, when everyone her age had their own place. It wasn’t that unusual, around the neighborhood, to stay home until a woman got married, even in this day and age. But that wasn’t the reason Luz stayed behind. She’d been too embarrassed to tell those who dared ask the truth. She couldn’t pay for the shoes, the purses, and the suits, help her father out with the house on the mountain, and also afford to live on her own. She’d told herself it would just be a few years, to pay them back for all they’d done. They deserved a happy ending.

But there was more. She felt bad for her father—so often gone on police business—who looked more miserable as time went on. She felt bad for her mother, too, who had nothing else to do except take care of everyone.

“Something is wrong,” Eusebia insisted. “Why won’t you tell me?”

How to explain they’d both sacrificed so much for a purpose now gone?

Luz looked up at a painting on the wall. Vladimir had painted the picture as a present for both of them when they got to the USA. It depicted a peaceful, if somewhat cliché, campo scene. A man wearing a sombrero, with his back to the viewer, held a rope tied around the neck of a little donkey. Behind him, a road that forked, and because Vladimir hadn't fully mastered the art of perspective, the gorgeous little house, river, and trees that would have been impossible to see ahead of the campesino were right at the top of the canvas. It gave the entire painting an amateur, flat feeling. The home he'd painted was on a mountain in the countryside where Eusebia and Vladimir were born and fell in love as they grew up—the land where their new house was going up. She often wondered how he'd done it. What about the line, the softness of it, made her feel such melancholy? That campesino was happy to be home.

Eusebia extended her hand to Luz's cheek, caressing it, and gave her a quick peck on the forehead as she rose from the table, gathering the dirty plates.

"I'm here when you're ready," she said over a shoulder as she left the room.

From the kitchen, Luz heard the radio play a beautiful bolero from the Buena Vista Social Club. Mami sang along, off-key. Tomorrow, she thought. She'd tell her tomorrow for sure. She imagined the remains of her meal sliding off with the suds of the dishwashing liquid as her mother squeezed the sponge, imagined it all swirling down the drain to the accompaniment of such sad music. Did it matter to Luz, what was about to be lost? What already had been? Mami had asked her if she understood what was at stake. As if, already, Mami found Luz lacking because she'd been able to thrive in the face of their early loss. Home, she told herself, could be a place, a person, a feeling; at times, a profession, the end result of a long pursuit. A fluid thing, for sure, but precious. She did care about Nothar Park, just as she'd cared so deeply for her job. But wasn't the whole point of life to turn each loss into a win? If that was true, then what was the use of wasting time mourning?

The

**V I O L I N
C O N S P I R A C Y**

A Novel

B R E N D A N

S L O C U M B

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Chapter 1

Day 1: White Chucks, Size 10½

On the morning of the worst, most earth-shattering day of Ray McMillian's life, he ordered room service: scrambled eggs for two, one side of regular bacon (for Nicole), one side of vegan sausage (for him), one coffee (for Nicole), one orange juice (for him).

Later, he would try to second-guess those choices and a thousand others that, in hindsight, vibrated in his memory: What if he'd ordered French toast instead of eggs? What if grapefruit juice instead of orange? What if no juice at all?

Breakfast had materialized before he'd gotten out of the shower. He'd lost track of time, caught up in the fingering of the Tchaikovsky Concerto's triple-stops, and water sluiced down for ten minutes while he gaped at the tiny bar of hotel soap.

When he'd walked naked out of the bathroom, the aroma of bacon wreathed the suite. The breakfast tray was waiting on the tiny dining table, the dishes' lids still in place. "I didn't even hear them come in," he said. If only every morning room service could magically deliver eggs and sausage.

Nicole was curled up in one of the armchairs, watching CNN. She

twisted and untwisted a lock of auburn hair, the eighth-note tattoo above her wrist rhythmically flickering and disappearing. “You never hear anything.” Another bombing in Jerusalem, and a hurricane bearing down on Indonesia. “I have a confession,” she said, not looking away from the TV.

“What did you do this time?” She wasn’t looking at him, so he took a giant step forward and blocked her view of Indonesia. Gave her something else to look at.

“I stole five bucks from your wallet to tip her. Hope that was okay.” She eyed his nakedness. “You gonna eat like that?”

“Do I need clothes to eat?” He leered at her.

“This definitely works for me,” she said. “I was just trying to figure out if you were going to get dressed now or if you want to eat, or—”

“We need to be out of here within an hour. You need to finish packing.”

“I’m already packed,” she said. “You’re the snail in this race.”

Ray slid on underwear and a T-shirt, grabbed a plate of food, lay back on the messed-up bed. He propped the plate on his stomach.

Afterward, he relived all the other choices of the morning: cluelessly packing his suitcase, scouring the suite one more time, pulling up his roller bag’s handle. He slung the violin case over his right shoulder (should he have put it on the left?), gestured for Nicole to go first with her two roller bags. The door clicked shut behind them, sealing the suite—and what remained—inside.

Down the elevator, through the Saint Jacques lobby, checking out, tipping the doorman, who flagged down a cab for each of them: Nicole’s, first, to Penn Station. He hefted her suitcases into the trunk, leaving his own roller bag on the sidewalk, the violin case slung securely on his shoulder.

She turned to him, pressed her hand against his chest. Her warmth spread through his shirt, her touch like pizzicato—plucking violin strings with fingers he could feel shudder down his spine. “I meant to tell you,” she said, “when you’re playing the Mozart, I think you’re playing the second movement too fast. Just try taking it maybe two clicks slower? Really milk it.”

“You think? Because Ben Amundsen said to keep the tempo bright.”

“I know, but you play so much more passionately when it’s a little slower. Just a little. Try it, all right? For me?”

New York battered against them, cars zooming past, splashing last night’s rain onto the curb.

“Just come to Charlotte. Find a sub,” he said.

“You come to Erie,” she said.

“You know I have to practice—”

“You can practice just as easily in Erie.”

“I can’t. There’s Janice, there’s my space, you know I—”

She grabbed his head with both her hands, pulled him toward her, and leaned forward, so their foreheads touched.

He closed his eyes, breathed her in. “I’ll see you next week,” he said.

“You’ve got this. Rayquan McMillian, future Tchaikovsky Competition gold medalist. Just focus. Visualize it. You can totally do this, you know that? It’s going to happen.”

Another breath he could feel deep in his abdomen. He tilted forward to kiss her.

A voice from the cab: “Hey, buddy, you almost done there?”

Another moment ruined by New York City’s transportation system. Before he could kiss her, before he could even say “Call me when you get in,” she’d jumped into the back seat and the taxi door slammed and he stood there like an idiot as the car moved off into traffic.

But already the day was hammering at him, his taxi had rolled up, trunk popping open, and he was spilling into the back seat with the violin, his anxiety level rising again. He wanted to be through LaGuardia, back in Charlotte. This morning he hadn’t even practiced his music, so now he was itching to pick up his violin, assure himself that he could really make Tchaikovsky’s voice his own.

Only one month left until the competition began: the world’s most prestigious, most difficult classical music competition—judged by the top musicians in the world, as well as an online audience of

millions of listeners. Even if he practiced every day, fourteen hours a day, he didn't think he'd be ready. He resented wasting the time to fly home.

At the airport, he filed into the TSA PreCheck line. Had he only gone through regular security. Why had he been in such a hurry? He should have waited in the long queue. If he'd waited, the screener might have randomly pulled his suitcase aside or asked him to open the violin case. Someone would have noticed or asked; it was security, after all.

Instead he placed the roller bag on the conveyor belt, violin case behind it, and they sailed through the X-ray and he sailed through the body scan, oblivious.

Later, over and over, he replayed in his mind the next two hours: boarding Delta Flight 457, stowing his luggage (the violin case could manspread alone in the overhead bin), returning to Charlotte, home to his little house, the air musty and stale. He lay down on his bed for half an hour, grateful to be back, violin case on the floor next to him, where he always set it. He let the travel wash itself from his skin, into the air, felt himself getting centered. Getting focused, ready to play.

It was just after 2:00 p.m. on May 16 when he kicked himself off the bed. He stood up, took three strides across the room, picked up the violin case, and set it on his bureau.

He flicked open the left clasp, then the right, and the lid lifted back.

His violin was gone.

Inside sat a white tennis shoe: a Converse Chuck Taylor All-Star high-top canvas shoe, men's, size 10½.

Ray wore a size 12.

Poking out of the shoe's mouth like an obscene tongue: a sheet of white office paper, folded in thirds.

He unfolded it.

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Chapter 2

Day 1: Darkness

The next few hours were a blur, and all that he could remember afterward was how he'd repeatedly opened and closed the violin case. Every time he was absolutely certain—absolutely convinced—that if he opened the case one more time, this time—*this time*—the violin would be there, glowing, its tiger stripes shimmering like flames: because *how could it not be there?* Instead the obscenity of its empty mouth yawned back at him. Its barrenness was impossible, as if water were no longer wet.

He'd called the Charlotte police and none of it made sense: he was calling to say that the violin was stolen (but of course it wasn't stolen, it was right in its case where it belonged). The house was filled with uniforms and pale faces turning toward him and then they were taking the violin case away from him—how could they take it away from him?—and for moments at a time he forgot how to breathe, as if the air had suddenly become something difficult and foreign. He was talking to New York police and the FBI and then he was on another Delta plane back to New York and it was impossible: because the violin was not on his shoulder and was not within arm's reach and

he couldn't touch it. Its absence gaped on his back, where the case should have been slung.

The violin's absence was like nothing he'd ever felt before. He could tell you the exact pressure that he should feel—that he should be feeling—of it against his jaw, knew the flare of its ribs the way he knew the flare of his own. His thumb should rest against its neck right where the wood darkened at the seam. The smooth roundness of its back was lit with orange and gold and brown, but those were words and couldn't touch the reality of how the pattern rippled and called out to him in a voice that only he could hear. How could anyone say it was just a violin?

When he arrived back at the Saint Jacques, the hotel clerk—the skinny blonde who'd been so rude to him last year, so long ago, that first day—put him up in another suite on the same floor as his and Nicole's previous suite. The police were in his old room, but they wouldn't let him in. He wanted to show them exactly where he'd stood, where the violin case had rested, but the crime scene crew was dusting and measuring and keeping him out. It didn't matter. The room had already been sanitized for the next guest: all the irreplaceable, priceless forensic evidence vacuumed, Windex'd, bleached away.

He stood for a while outside the room, looking in, and then found himself back in this new alien suite. He had no violin case, which was just insane, because of course always near him was a violin case and a violin, inside. People—detectives, the hotel manager, the concierge, even Mike the doorman—would appear in the doorway to take Ray's fingerprints or to ask an apparently random question: Did he have it in the elevator? Was he sure the housekeeper left with the breakfast cart? Over and over he repeated his story, every detail: practicing the afternoon before; dinner, drinks; back to the hotel, sleep, shower; breakfast, orange juice; flight.

There were Delta Airlines representatives. There were agents from the FBI Art Crime Team—Ray hadn't known that an art crime team even existed. He couldn't keep anyone straight and didn't bother trying.

He tried not to snap at them: they were here to help. He tried to breathe but his ribs had been wrapped in piano wire. He tried to remain calm. He tried, very hard, not to cry.

“I’m telling you,” he kept telling them. “It was either my family or the Marks family. It had to be one of them. Go check them out.”

His words seemed to disappear into the air, to vanish unheard.

“We hear you, sir,” said a NYPD detective, a fit, muscled guy with cheekbones that looked sharp enough to puncture the skin. “I assure you we’re looking into it. We just want to get more information about your own movements. Yours and your girlfriend’s. When did you say she was coming back?”

When was Nicole coming back? Ray couldn’t remember. His hands were trying to hold on to something that wasn’t there. It was gone, of course it was gone. How could he have imagined that he could have kept it, that he was worthy?

Everything that everyone had ever thought about Ray—about people who looked like Ray—was now turning into reality with an inevitability that he almost welcomed, it was so expected. He was bringing their words to life. He was exactly what they said he was. Incompetent. Irresponsible. It was all true, true, true. He not only wasn’t good enough, but he’d never been good enough. He would always, now and forever, be the dumb nigger who lost the most important thing in his whole worthless life.

For hours he paced, roaming the bedroom and adjoining living room/kitchen/dining room, turning the television on and off, opening the door to ask the police officer outside if there’d been any news, if he could help. They’d taken his suitcase, taken the clothes he’d been wearing, and the T-shirt and jeans he now wore felt wrong, strange, not his.

Nicole called him again. Her flight was boarding in forty minutes; she’d been calling for an hour but he hadn’t picked up to talk. But suddenly the silence of the room hurt his ears and he was desperate to hear the sound of someone else’s voice—a voice saying something other than his own internal accusations. When her name flashed across the phone, he answered.

“Stop pacing,” she said to him.

“What are you—”

But she was talking over him. “Stop pacing. Sit down. Close your eyes. I’m here. Take a deep breath.”

He stood in the middle of the room, phone pressed tight to his ear. Tears burned as they slid down his cheeks, and he closed his eyes.

“Seriously. Sit down,” she said. “Listen to me. Take a deep breath.”

He sat, the mattress giving beneath him. He tried to breathe but his lungs no longer breathed air.

“You know, I really would have just come to Charlotte,” she said. “You didn’t have to do all this just to see me again. When you want something you really go for it, you know that?”

Despite himself he released a breath, a strangled guffaw, and suddenly the air was flowing into his lungs again. “Nicole, I—”

“It’s not your fault. You hear me? It’s not your fault.”

“It is, I—”

“It’s not. Nobody—nobody—could have taken better care of that fiddle. And you know what else? They’ll find it. You’re going to get it back. You will. I absolutely believe it.”

The tears were coming soundlessly, his breathing ragged, and he closed his eyes against the world, now reduced to the exact size and shape of her voice.

“Who’s there with you?” she asked.

“What do you mean? A bunch of cops.”

“Did you call Janice? Your aunt? Is anyone else coming?”

“I called Janice. I didn’t call the others. I couldn’t talk to them.”

“Not even your aunt Rochelle?”

“Especially not Aunt Rochelle.”

“Why? You should give her a call.”

The one person in his fucked-up family—besides his grandmother, but he couldn’t even think of her—who had faith in him. “I can’t,” he said. *I can’t tell her that I lost it. I can’t tell her that I failed her, and everyone, and most of all, Grandma Nora.*

“Well, what does Janice say?”

“I don’t remember. No, she said she’s coming. I think she said she’s coming.”

“I talked to her, too. She’ll be there tomorrow morning.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“She told me that she was sure they’d find it,” Nicole said. “She said that people almost always get it back in a couple days. A week at most, she said. Remember Yo-Yo Ma got his cello back in a couple hours? He’d left it in a cab in New York City.”

“Oh,” he said. “Right.”

“I’ll be there in two hours, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Look, we’re boarding, I’ll be there soon. Just stay calm. It’s not your fault. Ask the police if there’s anything else you can do in the meantime. Get some food. Maybe one of the cops brought vegan doughnuts.”

“Haha,” he said without humor. They hung up.

The evening folded into night, and a blustery, beer-gutted guy in a suitcoat that didn’t begin to cover his paunch knocked and entered, introduced himself: Bill Soames, head of the FBI’s art crime unit. He led Ray through the same questions that the other cops had asked.

When was the last time Ray locked the case? He locked it only when the violin was out of his sight, and it hadn’t been out of his sight for days.

When was the last time Ray had actually seen the violin? A little after 6:00 p.m., between 6:05 and 6:15, when he’d finished practicing for the day. He’d slid the violin in its case before jumping into the shower and heading out for dinner.

Who else had access to the violin? Just Ray. And his girlfriend. Yeah, she was on her way back, she’d be here in an hour. And maybe some of the housekeeping staff, but he was always there when housekeepers came in.

Who had a motive to take it? Ray couldn’t help thinking, *Is this guy fucking high?* Everyone had a motive. Everyone. Did any of these cops even talk to each other? He’d already told this to at least four different detectives. And, meanwhile, the people who should be investigated—

the Marks family, for starters—were probably laughing their fat asses off, thinking they got away with it. “Black people are so dumb,” they were probably saying. For once, he agreed with them.

“Calm down,” the FBI guy said. Ray had already forgotten his name. “We’re looking into them. I know you’re upset. Just know we’re doing everything that we can do.”

Ray knew that whatever they were doing was not enough. If he couldn’t protect it, they sure couldn’t. For these cops, retrieving a missing violin was just part of the job—like finding a lost dog or a misplaced umbrella.

After the guy had left, Ray was too exhausted to even pace. He lay on the bed, hating himself.

Just before midnight Nicole returned and the police pulled her aside before she could do more than give him a hug. An hour later she returned to the room: her skin sticky, dark hair tousled and greasy. Neither showered: it was as if by showering they’d somehow be washing off some last trace of the violin. They lay together on top of the yellow satin hotel bedspread. Nicole held his hand as he stared up at the ceiling. It shone silver and gold in the midtown night.

At 3:07 a.m. he told her, “You know what? I’m rich.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When the insurance company pays out. But I guess I’m not that rich. Because of my family.”

“You still won’t be poor.” She squeezed his hand. “It’s not your fault. You need to know that. You did everything right.”

His own hand was suddenly sweaty and he pulled free, rubbed his eyes. “The Marks family is probably partying tonight. I bet they’re playing it right now. That fucking niece. What’s her name? Heather? Heidi?”

“It’s Holly, and, uh, the Marks family probably has about eighty FBI agents ransacking their house and bank accounts,” she said. “I doubt they’re partying. They’re definitely not getting any sleep tonight, either.”

“I hope they never sleep again.” He laughed, a harsh guffaw in the dark.

He imagined the violin dropped, damaged. He'd been entrusted with this instrument, this glowing talisman that possessed a sound unlike any other. His audiences drew in a collective breath when he played. Now he imagined it smashed under the wheels of a car, the shards of wood poking out like the feathers of a run-over bird.

He went over to the window, pulled the drapes fully closed. Now it was too dark, too stuffy, and he opened them again. The window looked out onto an air shaft.

"Have you even practiced today?" she told him.

"Are you fucking out of your mind? What am I going to practice with? The fucking bed?"

"Don't be so shortsighted. They're going to find it. In the meantime you still have a lot of work to do. That Mozart's not going to play itself."

"Nicole—"

"Ray. We've just got to find you another violin, just until yours is recovered. Unless you want to call and drop out of the competition? Nobody would blame you."

He looked over at her, a shadow lost in shadow. "You think I should?"

"Should what? Get another violin? Fuck yeah, you should. We're already in New York. Janice is coming. What's the name of the guy that did the appraisal? Mike?"

"Mischa Rowland."

"Yeah. He could help you find something. Just temporarily. They're going to find your violin."

He said nothing and she went on, "Ray, you're about to make history. But you can't do it if you don't do it, dumbass. Just get the violin so you have something to practice on while they're getting it back from Holly Marks. Let's call Mischa Rowland first thing tomorrow. We can do this."

"Can we talk about this in the morning?"

"Okay, but promise me that if your violin isn't back by ten a.m., we're standing on Mischa Rowland's doorstep when he opens up."

"I think he opens at nine."

“Ten’s fine. Let me sleep in a little, okay? It’s almost four now,” she said. “If I were you, I’d be saying, ‘You need to do this. This is a temporary setback. You’re one of the best young violinists in the country. Maybe the world. This won’t stop you. This is your best opportunity to show everybody who always said you couldn’t.’”

“But I—”

“Ray, there are no buts. This is it. This is your moment. You grab it. That violin is amazing but you’re even more amazing. And now you’re going to show everybody.”

“I’m going to win,” he said. “Even without the violin. How long will it take the insurance company to pay? Maybe I can get a message to the thieves, tell them I have the money and they can get it back to me early?”

“I have no idea,” she said, putting out her hand in the dark.

He took three steps toward her, reached out, grabbed the note, held on.

TRANSFER ON JULY 15 BETWEEN 12:00 PM EST–1:00 PM EST

“I want you to come with me,” he said.

“Of course,” she said. Her face was a smooth oval in the half-light. “I have a good ear for tone, and I think I know what will suit you.”

“No,” he said. The empty windows across from the air shaft gleamed at him, and he felt almost as if he were falling into them. “Not to get a violin. But I want you to do that, too. I mean to Moscow. I want you to come with me.”

“What?” She sat up. “Are you serious?”

“I’m very serious. I need you there with me. Especially after this. Will you come? Help a brother out?”

“But I have to play,” she said. He could tell from her voice that she was just going through the motions. Her grip tightened on his. “I can’t just take off three weeks from work—we’re doing that Sibelius retrospective, remember?”

“Nicole. You’re coming. We can do this together. I might not have a violin, but I have you.”

“I think the violin is worth more.”

“True. Maybe I can sell you in Russia and use the money to pay the ransom.”

She slid off the bed and slipped over to him, wrapped her arms around his back. Her face was cool against his cheek. “I’m sure I can probably get time off work.” He could feel her mind working, so close to his. “You’d probably have a lot of money left over, after you sell me.”

“Yeah, I’m planning on it. So you’ll come?”

“I’ve got to figure out flights.” Letting him go and sitting down on the bed, she pulled out her phone, compared various offerings.

With his eyes he traced the nape of her neck, the elegance of her finger as she scrolled across the screen. Her eighth-note tattoo flickered almost as if it were a melody. Even after the longest day in creation, she was still beautiful. How could she love someone as damaged as he was?

“There’s actually a flight from Erie that’s \$493, with a three-hour layover in Frankfurt,” she said.

He’d lost his violin and she was still with him. She still believed in him. How was this possible?

Ten minutes later, he lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. She kept thumbing her phone, whispering travel options that he only half heard. “This one goes through Rome. Oh, but that one has a twenty-four-hour layover. Want to spend a day in Rome?” One thing about Nicole: she loved to travel, but was stupidly cheap about it. She always looked for the cheapest routes.

Twenty minutes later she tucked the phone away. By 5:00 a.m. her breathing had grown deep and even. He lay there, holding her through the broken remainder of the night, until the ceiling’s silver warmed into dawn.

MEMPHIS



A NOVEL

TARA M.
STRINGFELLOW

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

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First Edition

CHAPTER 2

Miriam

1995

Blue mist clung to the mountains like a lace shawl. She'd figured they'd be gray—the Smokies. The blue of everything astounded her. She held up her right arm. The usual caramel of it was muted. All colors were unable to compete with the blue glory of these Tennessee mountains. She was home, or close to it. That morning, she thought she could smell Memphis—a waft of familiar perfume in a crowded restaurant. *We going make it*, she thought, *we going make it*. She locked the '92 Chevy Astro van with her two children and one husky bitch inside it.

“Wait here.”

Four brown eyes stared back, eyes that were hungry for an answer, for home. They reminded Miriam of lost soldiers.

She walked slowly toward the Exxon filling station. Hyper-aware of her surroundings. The only Black woman for miles, she knew. A mountain ridge crested like a tsunami before her. A blue

that would put any ocean to shame, she thought. *Almost home, Meer. Almost home.*

When she pushed open the door of the Exxon, a wind chime sang above her.

“Morning, little lady.”

“Morning.”

“What can I help you with?”

He smiled. A good sign, she thought. No malice up front. He was round, meaty but short. A second good sign. She could outrun him if need be. Keys in her back pocket. She could reach the van, her children, in a good fifteen seconds, max. Then pray the fuck-ing van would start. Pray. Throw it into first.

He wore his long silver hair swept back in a ponytail and stroked his peppered goatee when he cheerfully announced, “You’re my first customer this morning. Sure is early. Where you headed?”

“Memphis.”

He let out a whistle. “You know you got another ten hours solid? You reckon you up to it?”

“I will be. See, the AC keeps flickering. In and out. In and out. Wondered if you knew anything about cars.”

He let out another whistle. “Little lady, if it got four wheels, I ain’t even need a steering wheel to drive the thing. If washing machines came on wheels, I’d paint mine red and name her Long Tall Sally. The *only* thing I’m good at, my missus says. What kind of car?”

Miriam smiled. She couldn’t help herself. He had pronounced “washing” like there was an *r* somewhere in the middle. *Almost home*, she thought.

“A Chevy Astro. A ’92. Manual.”

“Little lady, you driving stick all the way to Memphis?”

She relaxed. This white man was all right. As far as white men can be all right. “Well, I prayed for wings, but the good Lord just laughed.”

“Well, no one’s here. Let’s go take a look at this testy girl. If

you want.” He put his hands up, palms forward. “Can’t promise anything. But I’ll sure as hell try for a little lady like you.”

Miriam’s neck tensed, the nerves there expanding, contracting.

He eased off the stool he was perched atop, letting out small groans with every small shift of weight. He pointed a meaty index toward the door. “Ladies first.”

The mountains had turned into a silvery moonstone color that made Miriam pause as she turned.

“It’s a sight, ain’t it? And after all these years, I can’t get used to it. Mountains. How did they even come to be? Sometimes I sit in that shop all day wondering. Don’t make no sense to me how a fella can question the existence of God waking up to mountains like that every morning. All the proof I need. Got any kids?” He aimed his thick finger toward a curtain in the van suddenly fluttering closed. Those pairs of brown eyes, observing all.

Miriam nodded. “Husband, too. We’re meeting him in Memphis. There’s a naval base there.” The lie was a SweeTart in her mouth.

“Your man is military, then?”

“An officer and a gentleman.” She almost laughed at herself. Then almost raised her hand to her left brow, still tender, covered in cheap Maybelline foundation not her shade because no drug-store ever carried her shade. She nodded at the hood of the white van. So big her kids called it “the White House.” So irksome she’d christened it “the Reagans.”

“Can you fix it?”

He was in the innards of the van now. She peered over his hulking frame. Then—

She didn’t hear the gentle creaking of the passenger-side door opening, just a crack, or the tiny pitter-patter of feet. But she did hear the growl.

Wolf was three feet away, Mya right behind her. Her youngest daughter. Mya stood on legs not seven years old. Wolf, the color of snow atop the Smokies, keeled low and flashed white teeth and pink gums bespeckled with black.

The white man turned. Looked aghast.

“Wolf, get back in the car. Mya, you, too.” Miriam held her brown arm straight, pointing at the passenger door.

“Woman, you got a Noah’s Ark full.”

“Who he, Mama? Where is Daddy?” Mya asked.

“Come on.” Miriam saw Joan poke her tiny head out the side window.

“My. Wolf. Come. *Now*.”

Miriam would have smiled if Mya’s question hadn’t sent the muscles in her neck into an entirely new level of tension. Joan’s tone was sharp. Mya obeyed her older sister. Wolf backed away, never taking her eyes off the white man. Suspicious. Protective. A snarl was forming in the jowls. Mya followed, though Miriam could tell she did so reluctantly.

The white man turned back toward the van’s innards. “See this here? This is the vacuum valve. See these holes? All I got to do is put some duct tape on them. Between meat and God, the only thing man needs is duct tape. Saved the crew of *Apollo Thirteen*, did you know? Your man a pilot?”

“If I could be that lucky. Have that man stationed in space instead of Memphis.” The sweet sour candy taste in her mouth had dissolved. Miriam was taken aback by the truth she told.

The white man paused in his work. Folded his arms into an Indian crisscross and settled against the van. “My missus got Alzheimer’s. Get so she don’t even know who she is. Calling out for me in the night. *What am I? What am I?* I’ve loved that woman for thirty years. Not all of them good. But together. Together. I reckon if she was on Mars, I’d hot-rig that there truck to get me there.” He sighed. “Come on, look here, see this? Toggle it like this if it goes out again.”

Ten minutes later, Miriam was back in the driver’s seat, pulling out of the station, a palm up in thanks to the stranger. Her daughters’ four tiny brown palms pressed against the windows in thanks. He raised an arm, saluted.

The air conditioner on full blast. The girls could breathe again.

Wolf stopped her panting, curled up around Mya's feet and slept. The tension of the encounter behind her, Miriam found herself wiping away tears with the back of her forearm. Trying to hide her sniffles. But she knew her girls knew. Understood the impact of the fatherless journey they were taking. Her voice cracked when she said, barely audible above Al Green, "We're almost there, y'all. We're almost there."

She thought about where they might stop to get lunch. Hopefully, there'd be a place in an hour or two where they could get something to go. She'd rather stop in somewhere and eat there, but Joan had been refusing to eat inside most restaurants. The mustard. She wouldn't go near the thing. And she refused to say more or go inside. Would just sit in the car with Wolf and wait.

Miriam let her mind drift back to the day before. The yard had been full. Armoires and chests and jade elephants, a vast assortment of Japanese geisha woodblocks, and a cast-iron slave stove any Southern woman would be proud to make biscuits in covered the green.

The neighbors. Miriam remembered the shock and awe in their eyes, their open mouths, their hands cupped to hide their dismay. Everything she owned out on display. A butter churner with a pearl handle was going for twenty. As if Miriam herself lay splayed out in the yard in an open kimono, bare-breasted and utterly spent.

The neighbors—especially the women, Miriam recalled—shook their heads. She knew they were thinking about the ball the night before. Who wouldn't have remembered when Miriam showed up wearing a gold sequined dress with bloodred high-heeled shoes? She was certain they thought it was all because Jax had made major.

The neighbors' necks crooked this way and that, and like hungry pigeons, they searched for the major. But he was nowhere in sight. Just his children. The girls. Mya, tiny, smaller than Wolf, hollering on top of a vanity that they'd let go for only ten.

And then there was the Shelby. Resting like some black beast

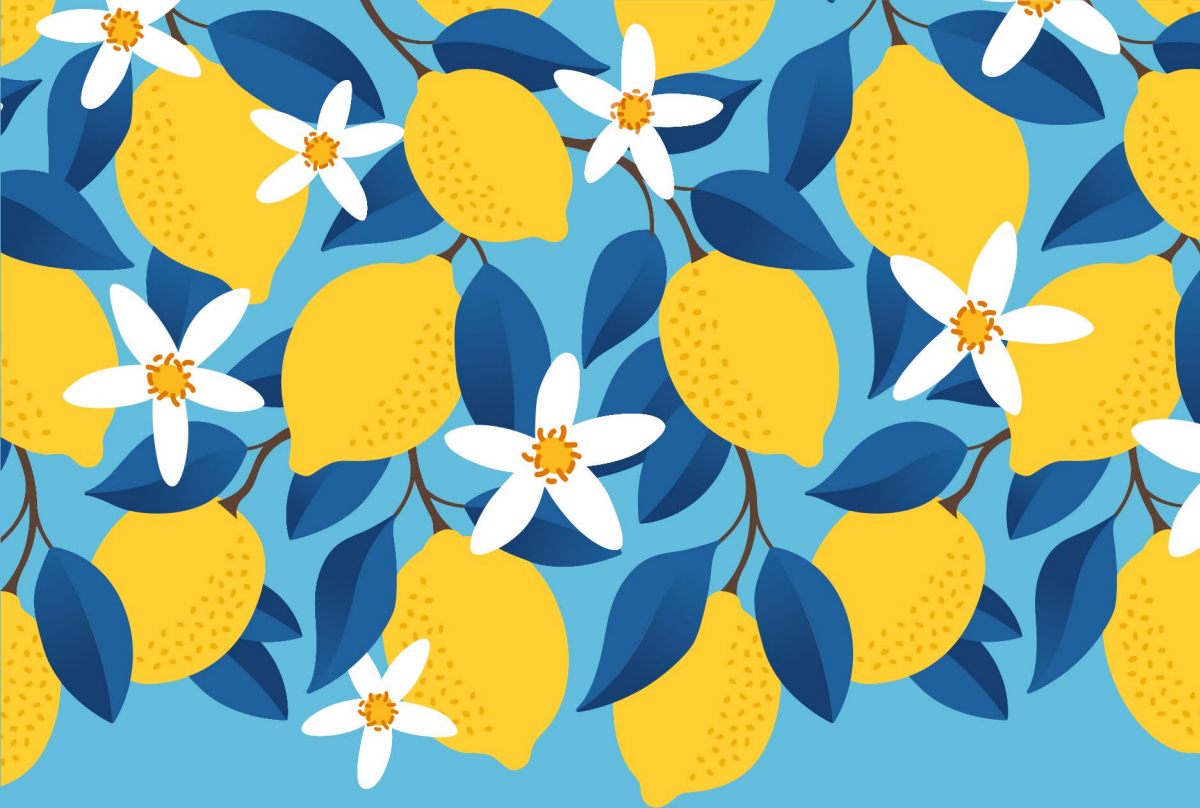
at the very foot of the yard. The entire base, from general to private first class, knew Jax loved that black panther as much as, if not more than, the Corps. More than the china or the furniture or Jax's absence, it was the sign in the window of the '69 Mustang that proclaimed that Miriam and Jax's storm of a marriage was finally over. In bold block letters the same shade as Miriam's blush rose lipstick, the sign simply read, FREE.

The van's AC broke again just outside Sugar Tree, Tennessee. Miriam parked the Chevy in a lonely rest stop shaded by an ancient hickory. Thrust her arms deep into the entrails of the van and fixed it herself, the hickory over her head heavy in green bloom.

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