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DEBUT FICTION SAMPLER

What Will You Read Next?

SOCIAL CREATURE

A NOVEL

TARA ISABELLA BURTON

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First Edition

1

THE FIRST PARTY LAVINIA TAKES LOUISE TO, she makes Louise wear one of her dresses.

"I found it on the street," Lavinia says. "It's from the twenties."

Maybe it is.

"Someone just left it there. Can you believe it?"

Louise can't.

"They probably just thought it was trash." She puckers her lips. She puts on lipstick. "And *that* is the problem with people. Nobody understands what things *mean*."

Lavinia fiddles with Louise's collar. Lavinia ties the sash around Louise's waist.

"Anyway, the second I saw it—Christ! I wanted to—oh, I just wanted to *genuflect,* you know? Kiss the ground—do Catholics kiss the ground, or is that just sailors? Anyway, I wanted to put my mouth right there on the sidewalk on somebody's chewed gum and say, like, *thank you, God, for making the world make sense today.*"

Lavinia puts powder on Louise's cheeks. Lavinia adds rouge. Lavinia keeps talking.

"Like—it's all so fucking *perfect,* right? Like—somebody's grandmother or whoever dies in some random brownstone in the East Village nobody's even visited in twenty years and they dump all her shit out into the street and then at sunset—here I am walking across East Ninth Street and I find it. This old woman and I who have never met

have these two beautiful, poetic, nights ninety years apart, wearing the exact same dress—oh, Louise, can't you just *smell* it?"

Lavinia shoves the lace in Louise's face.

"You could fall in love," says Lavinia, "wearing a dress like that."

Louise inhales.

"So you know what I did?"

Lavinia gives Louise a beauty mark with her eyebrow pencil.

"I stripped down to my underwear—no, that's a lie; I took my bra off, too. I took off everything and I put on the dress and I left my other one in the street and I walked all night, wearing it, all the way back to the Upper East Side."

Lavinia does Louise's buttons.

Now Lavinia is laughing. "Stick with me long enough," she says, "and I promise—things will just *happen* to you. Like they happen to me."

Lavinia does Louise's hair. At first she tries to do it, like she's done her own: savagely and exuberantly tendriled. But Louise's hair is too flat, and too straight, and so instead Lavinia braids it into a tight, neat bun.

Lavinia puts her hands on Louise's cheek. She kisses her on the forehead.

She roars.

"God," says Lavinia. "You look so beautiful. I can't stand it. I want to kill you. Let's take a picture."

She takes out her phone. She makes it a mirror.

"Let's stand against the peacock feathers," Lavinia says. Louise does.

"Pose."

Louise doesn't know how.

"Oh, please." Lavinia waves the camera. "Everybody knows how to pose. Just, you know: Arch your back a little. Tilt your head. Pretend you're a silent film star. There. There—no, no, chin down. There."

Lavinia moves Louise's chin. She takes their photo.

"The last one's good," Lavinia says. "We look good. I'm posting

it." She turns the phone to Louise. "Which filter do you like?"

Louise doesn't recognize herself.

Her hair is sleek. Her lips are dark. Her cheekbones are high. She's wearing a flapper dress and she has cat's eyes and fake lashes and she looks like she's not even from this century. She looks like she's not even real.

"Let's go with Mayfair. It makes your cheekbones look shiny. Christ—look at you! Look. At. You. You're beautiful."

Lavinia has captioned the photo: alike in indignity.

Louise thinks this is very witty.

Louise thinks: *I am not myself.*

Thank God, Louise thinks. *Thank God.*

They cab it to Chelsea. Lavinia pays.

It's New Year's Eve. Louise has known Lavinia for ten days. They have been the best ten days of her life.

Days don't go like this for Louise.

Louise's days go like this:

She wakes up. She wishes she hasn't.

Chances are: Louise hasn't slept much. She works as a barista at this coffee shop that turns into a wine bar at night, and also writing for this e-commerce site called GlaZam that sells knockoff handbags, and also as an SAT tutor. She sets an alarm for at least three hours before she has to be anywhere, because she lives deep in Sunset Park, a twenty-minute walk from the R, in the same illegal and roach-infested sublet she's been in for almost eight years, and half the time the train breaks down. When they call her, once every couple of months, Louise's parents invariably ask her why she's so stubborn about moving; back to New Hampshire, say, where *that nice Virgil Bryce* is a manager at the local bookstore now, and he won't stop asking for her new number; Louise invariably hangs up.

She weighs herself. Louise weighs one hundred fourteen and a half pounds on a period day. She puts on her makeup very carefully.

She draws on her brows. She checks her roots. She checks her bank balance (sixty-four dollars, thirty-three cents). She covers up the flaws in her skin.

She looks in the mirror.

Today, she says—out loud (a therapist she had once told her that it's always better to say these things out loud)—*is the first day of the rest of your life.*

She makes herself smile. Her therapist told her to do that, too.

Louise walks the twenty minutes to the subway. She ignores the catcaller who asks her, every morning, how her pussy smells, even though he's the person in the world she interacts with most regularly. She spends the ride into Manhattan staring at her reflection in the darkened subway windows. Back when Louise was sure she was going to be a go-down-in-history-Great Writer she used to take a notebook and use the commute to write stories, but now she is too tired and also she probably will never be a writer; so she reads trashy *Misandry!* articles on her phone and sometimes watches people (Louise enjoys watching people; she finds it calming; when you spend a lot of time focusing on the things wrong with other people you worry less about everything wrong with you).

Louise goes to work as a barista, or at GlaZam, or to teach an SAT lesson.

She likes lessons best. When she speaks with her very carefully cultivated mid-Atlantic accent and puts her very carefully dyed blonde hair into a bun and alludes to the fact that she went to school in Devonshire, New Hampshire, she gets $80 an hour, plus the satisfaction of having fooled somebody. Now if Louise had actually gone to Devonshire Academy, the boarding prep school, and not just the public Devonshire High, she'd get $250, but the kind of parents who can pay $250 are more assiduous in checking these things.

Not that most people ever check these things. When Louise was sixteen, she took to leaving her house early and eating breakfast

and dinner at the Academy's dining hall. She made it a whole three months, watching people, before anybody noticed, and even then it was just her mother who found out, and grounded her, and by the time she was allowed out of the house again she'd started AIM-chatting Virgil Bryce, who didn't like it when she went anywhere without him.

Louise finishes work.

She looks in her phone-mirror, a few times, to make sure she's still there. She checks Tinder, even though she hardly responds to anybody she matches with. There was one guy who seemed really feminist online but turned out to practice relationship anarchy; and another who was really into kink in ways that she was never entirely sure were not abusive; and one guy who was really great, actually, but he ghosted her after two months. Sometimes Louise considers going out with somebody new, but this seems like just another thing to potentially fuck up.

Sometimes, if Louise has been paid cash that week, she goes to a really nice bar: on Clinton or Rivington, or on the Upper East Side.

She orders the nicest drink she can afford (Louise can't really afford to be drinking at all, but even Louise deserves nice things, sometimes). She sips her drink very, very slowly. If she doesn't eat dinner (and Louise never eats dinner) the alcohol will hit her harder, which is a relief, because when Louise gets drunk she forgets the invariable fact that she is going to fuck everything up one day, if she hasn't already, whether it's because she loses all her jobs at once and gets evicted or because she gains twenty pounds because she is too tired to exercise and then not even the catcaller will want to fuck her or because she'll get throat cancer from all the times she has made herself throw up all her food or because she will get another kind of even rarer and more obscure cancer from all the times she obsessively dyes her hair in a bathroom without ventilation or she will fuck up by unblocking Virgil Bryce on social media or else because

she will get into another relationship in which a man who seems nice on Tinder wants to save her, or else to choke her, and she will do whatever he says because the other, other way to fuck it all up is to die alone.

Louise waits until she sobers up (another very certain way to fuck up is to be a drunk woman alone in New York at night), and then she takes the subway home, and although Louise no longer writes in her notebook, if she is still tipsy enough to feel that the apocalypse is no longer imminent she tells herself that tomorrow, when she is that little bit less tired, she will write a story.

They say if you haven't made it in New York by thirty, you never will.

Louise is twenty-nine.

Lavinia is twenty-three.

This is how they meet:

Lavinia's sister, Cordelia, is sixteen. She's at boarding school in New Hampshire—not Devonshire Academy but its rival. She's home for Christmas break. Their parents live in Paris. Lavinia found one of Louise's SAT TUTOR? AVAILABLE NOW! flyers at the Corner Bookstore on Ninety-third and Madison, which has a free Christmas champagne reception Louise has been crashing for three years, even though she lives so far away, just to drink for free and watch rich, happy families be happy and rich.

"I'm afraid I don't know a damn thing," Lavinia says over the phone. "But Cordy's brilliant. And I know I'll corrupt her—unless somebody else is there to stop me. You know what I mean. A good influence. And anyway she's here for a whole week before she goes to Paris for Christmas and we've watched every single Ingmar Bergman DVD in the house and now I'm all out of ideas to keep her off the streets. I can pay. How much does a person pay for these things? You tell me."

"One fifty an hour," says Louise.

"Done."

"I'll start tonight," Louise says.

Lavinia lives in a floor-through brownstone apartment on Seventy-seventh Street between Park and Lex. When Louise arrives on the stoop, there is opera blaring from an open window, and Lavinia is singing along, off-key, and this is how Louise figures out that Lavinia lives on the second floor without even having to check the buzzer.

Lavinia has flowers in all of her window boxes. All of them are dead.

Lavinia answers the door in a sleeveless black dress made entirely of feathers. Her hair comes down to her waist. It is wild, and coarse, and she has not brushed it in days, but it is the hue of blonde Louise has spent many hours experimenting with drugstore dyes to achieve, and it is natural. She is not tall but she is thin (Louise tries to calculate exactly how thin, but the feathers get in the way), and she fixes her eyes on Louise with such intensity that Louise instinctively takes a step back: half-knocking into a vase filled with dead lilies.

Lavinia doesn't notice.

"Thank God you're here," she says.

Cordelia is sitting at the dining-room table. She is wearing her hair in one long thick braid, coiled and pinned. She doesn't look up from her book.

There are antique fans all over the walls. There is a gold-embroidered caftan hanging on a wall, and a powdered wig on the head of a mannequin whose features are drawn in lipstick, and there are several illustrated tarot cards—the High Priestess, the Tower, the Fool—in rusty art nouveau frames on all the surfaces in the room. The walls are all a regal, blinding blue, except for the moldings, which Lavinia has made gold.

Lavinia kisses Louise on both cheeks.

"Make sure she goes to bed by ten," she says, and leaves.

"She does that."

Cordelia finally looks up.

"She isn't really that oblivious," she says. "That's just her sense of humor. She thinks it's funny to tease me. And you."

Louise doesn't say anything.

"I'm sorry," says Cordelia. "I started studying already." Her smile twists at the edges.

She makes Louise a pot of tea.

"You can have chocolate-vanilla or you can have hazelnut-cinnamon-pear-cardamom," she says. "Vinny doesn't have any normal tea."

She serves it in an intricately patterned teapot ("It's from Uzbekistan," Cordelia says. Louise doesn't know whether this is a joke). She sets it down on a tray.

Cordelia forgets a teaspoon, although there is one in the sugar pot, but after the second cup Louise realizes if she stirs the tea it will wet the spoon and then ruin the sugar. If she keeps the spoon dry the sugar will not settle in the cup.

Louise sips her tea without any sugar in it. She briefly considers asking for another spoon, but the thought of doing this makes her nervous, and so Louise doesn't say anything at all.

They do SAT words: *What is the difference between lackluster, laconic, and lachrymose?* They do math: all the 3-4-5 triangles, surface areas of different shapes. Cordelia gets all the questions right.

"I'm going to Yale," Cordelia says, like that's a thing people just decide. "Then I'm going to a Pontifical University in Rome for my master's. I'm going to be a nun."

Then: "I'm sorry."

"For what."

"I'm trolling you. I shouldn't. I mean—I do want to be a nun. But even so."

"That's okay," says Louise.

She drinks another cup of sugarless hazelnut-cinnamon-pear-cardamom tea.

"I feel guilty," says Cordelia. "Keeping you here. I don't really need

a tutor. Don't feel bad—I mean, you're doing a very good job. Sorry. It's just—I know all this already." She shrugs. "Maybe Vinny really does want you to be my babysitter. Only—she won't be back by ten."

"That's okay," Louise says. "I trust you to make your own bedtime."

"That's not an issue." Cordelia smiles her strange half-smile again. "Vinny's the one with the cash."

Cordelia and Louise sit in silence on the sofa until six in the morning. Cordelia puts on a dressing gown covered in cat hair (there is no cat to be seen) and reads a paperback copy of John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua.* Louise reads clickbait articles from *Misandry!* on her phone.

She is very tired, but she also needs three hundred dollars more than she needs sleep.

Lavinia comes home at dawn, covered in feathers.

"I'm so terribly, *terribly* sorry," she exclaims. She trips over the threshold. "Of course, I'll pay you for the hours. Every hour. Every one."

She catches her skirt in the door. It rips.

"Christ."

Feathers slice the air as they fall.

"*All my pretty chickens,*" Lavinia cries. She gets on her hands and knees. "*All? What, all my pretty chickens and their dam.*"

"I'll get some water," Cordelia says.

"It's a bad omen." Lavinia has fallen over, now, laughing, with a black feather in her hand. "It means death!"

Louise grabs the trailing feathers from underneath the door.

"No, don't! Let them be!"

Lavinia grabs Louise's wrists; she pulls her in.

"It died a noble death." She hiccups. "This dress—it has been *felled in battle.*" Her hair fans out on the floor all the way to the steamer trunk she has made into a coffee table. "And what a battle! Oh—what's your name again?"

"Louise."

"Louise!" Lavinia yanks her wrist again, but joyfully. "Like Lou Salomé. [Louise doesn't know who that is.] Louise! I've had the most wonderful, wonderful night in the world. One of *those* nights. You know?"

Louise smiles politely.

"Don't you?"

Louise hesitates.

"I *believe* in things again, Louise!" Lavinia closes her eyes. "God. And glory. And love and fairy dust—God, I *love* this city."

Cordelia leaves a glass of water on the steamer trunk.

But Lavinia is scrambling to the sofa. She's beatific and dark with glitter, and light with different glitter, and Louise doesn't know what to do or say to make Lavinia like her but she is good at watching people and she knows what they need and so, like she always does, she finds an opening.

"I can fix that, you know."

Lavinia sits up. "Fix what?"

"It's just the hem. I can sew it back on. If you have a needle and thread."

"A needle and thread?" Lavinia looks at Cordelia.

"My room," says Cordelia.

"You can fix it?"

"I mean—unless you don't want me to."

"Don't want you to?" Lavinia gathers up her skirts. "*Lazarus, back from the dead.*" She piles them in her lap. "*I have come to tell thee!*" She flings back her arms. "Oh, I'm so—so!—sorry."

"Don't be," Louise says.

"I know—I know—you must think I'm ridiculous."

"I don't think you're ridiculous."

"Are you sure?"

Louise doesn't know what Lavinia wants her to say.

"I mean—"

Lavinia doesn't even wait.

"You're not judging me?"

"I'm not judging you."

"You're *sure*?"

Louise speaks very slowly. "Yes," she says. "I'm sure."

"It was just—it was only just a few of us. Me and Father Romylos and Gavin—Gavin's a narcissistic sociopath. He told me so, once. One of the nicest people in the world, but technically, a narcissistic sociopath. Anyway, we decided to see if you can break into the Botanic Garden. Apparently you can! Look!"

She shows Louise a photograph. Lavinia and an Orthodox priest and a bald man in a turtleneck are collapsing in a hedgerow.

"Father Romylos is the one in the cassock," she says.

"Are there even any flowers this time of year?" Cordelia has returned with a sewing kit. She hands it to Louise.

"It's my favorite thing in the world, breaking into places! It makes you feel so alive—to be somewhere you're not supposed to be. We got caught, once, had to pay an awful fine at the Central Park Zoo, but other than that! Oh—don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

Louise is sewing the hem. She hasn't even looked up.

"Like you think I'm horrible!"

"I don't," says Louise.

What she is thinking is this:

Lavinia isn't afraid of anything.

"I'm not drunk, you know," says Lavinia. She sways her hair—her long, coarse, wonderful hair—across Louise's shoulder. "I swear. Do you know what Baudelaire said?"

Louise puts another stitch in the hem.

"Baudelaire said that you should get drunk. On wine. On poetry. On virtue—as you choose. But get drunk."

"Vinny's drunk on virtue," says Cordelia.

Lavinia snorts. "It's only prosecco," she says. "Even Cordy drinks prosecco. Mother makes us."

"I abhor alcohol." Cordelia winks at Louise as she picks stray

feathers out of the couch cushions. "It's a vice."

"God, don't you just *hate* her?" Lavinia puts her feet on the steamer trunk. "I bet you don't even believe in God, do you, Cordy? She's kept it up a whole year—can you believe it? Before that she was vegan. And—oh, God, you're *brilliant*!"

She has seen the hem Louise has fixed for her.

"Are you a costumier? I have a friend who's a costumier. She makes eighteenth-century outfits every year for Carnevale in Venice."

"I'm not a costumier."

"But you can sew."

Louise shrugs. "Lots of people can sew."

"Nobody can sew. What else can you do?"

Louise is caught off guard by the question.

"Not a lot."

"Don't lie to me."

"What?"

"You're special. You have the mark of genius on your brow. I could tell—soon as I saw you. And you—you kept vigil with Cordy, didn't you? All night long. *That's* special."

Louise isn't special. She knows this. We know this. She just needs three hundred dollars.

"Are you an actress? You're pretty enough to be an actress."

"I'm not an actress." (Louise has never been pretty enough to be an actress.)

"An artist?"

"No."

"Then you're a writer!"

Louise hesitates.

She hesitates because you can't really call yourself a writer when you haven't written anything anyone else likes enough to publish; not when you haven't even written anything you like enough to even ask somebody to publish; not when there are so many failed writers to laugh at in this city. But she hesitates long enough before saying "no" that Lavinia seizes.

"I knew it!" She claps her hands. "I knew it! Of *course* you're a writer. You are a woman of *words.*" She scoops up the flash cards: *assuage, assert, assent.* "I shouldn't have doubted you."

"I mean—"

"What have you written?"

"Oh, you know—not a lot. Just a couple of stories and things."

"What are they about?"

Now Louise is fully afraid. "Oh, you know. New York. Girls in New York. The usual stuff. It's dumb."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Lavinia is staring up at her with those bright and blazing eyes. "New York is the greatest city in the world! Of *course* you want to write about it!"

Lavinia's hand is so tight on her wrists and Lavinia is staring at her so intently and blinking so innocently that Louise can't bring herself to let her down.

"You're right," Louise says. "I am a writer."

"I'm *never* wrong!" Lavinia crows. "Cordy says I have a sense about people—I always can sense if a person is going to be interesting. It's like telepathy, but for poetic qualities—it makes things *happen.*" She stretches like a cat along the sofa. "I'm a writer, too, you know. I mean—I'm working on a novel, right now. I'm on a sabbatical, actually."

"A sabbatical?"

"From school! That's why I'm here." She shrugs. "Living in squalor, you see. I've taken the year off to finish it. But my problem is I don't have any discipline. I'm not like Cordy. She's so smart." (Cordelia is back at her Newman and doesn't look up.) "Me, I just go to parties." She yawns, long and luxuriant. "Poor Louise," she says, so softly. "I've ruined your night."

The light streams in through the window.

"It's fine," Louise says, "you haven't."

"Your beautiful Friday night. Your beautiful winter Friday—right in the middle of the holiday season, too. You probably had plans. A Christmas party, right? Or a date."

"I didn't have a date."

"What did you plan, then? Before I smashed it all to pieces?"

Louise shrugs.

"I dunno. I was going to go home. Maybe watch some TV."

Truth is, Louise was planning to sleep. Sleep is the most seductive thing she can think of.

"But it's almost *New Year's Eve*!"

"I don't really go out, much."

"But this is *New York*!" Lavinia's eyes are so wide. "And we're in our *twenties*!"

It is expensive to go out. It takes so long to get home. You have to tip for everything. It's too cold. There are puddles in the subway stations. She can't afford a cab.

"Come with me," Lavinia says. "I'll take you to a party!"

"Now?"

"Of course not *now,* silly—what am I, crazy? There's a New Year's Eve party happening at the MacIntyre—it's going to be *wonderful.* It's going to be their best party yet. And I owe you! All those extra hours you stayed—I owe you interest."

"You owe her one-fifty an hour," says Cordelia, from the armchair. "Seven until" —she checks her wristwatch—"seven."

"Jesus fuck," says Lavinia, so violently Louise starts. "I gave all my cash to the busker. He was playing "New York, New York" outside the Bandshell. *We were very tired—we were very merry."*

She straightens up.

"Now you *have* to come," she says. "If I don't see you again, I won't be able to pay you for tonight."

She smiles so ecstatically.

"I owe you more than money," she says. "I owe you the most beautiful night of your life."

This is the first party Lavinia takes Louise to, and the best, and the one Louise will never stop trying to get back to. She goes in Lavinia's dress from the 1920s (it is actually a reproduction from the 1980s,

store-bought, but Louise doesn't know this), which she found on the street, because that is the kind of thing that happens to people like Lavinia Williams, all the time.

Now, the MacIntyre Hotel is not a hotel. It's kind of a warehouse and kind of a nightclub, and kind of a performance space, in Chelsea; there are a hundred or so rooms over six floors. Half of them are decorated like a haunted hotel from the Depression, but also there's a forest and a whole insane asylum on the top floor where Ophelia goes mad (they also perform *Hamlet,* but they do it without any words), and Louise hears that sometimes actors take you into secret bedrooms or chapels and kiss you on the cheek or on the forehead or on the mouth, but tickets are a hundred dollars each (and that's before you add the coat check, or the ten-dollar ticketing charge), and so Louise has never been herself to verify this.

Some nights, *those nights, one of those nights,* they do special themed costume parties in the space: all-night open-bar kiss-a-stranger-and-see parties where everybody dresses up and lurches through all the labyrinthine interconnected rooms, where every floor has its own sound system and even the bathtubs in the insane asylum are full of people making love.

Louise has never had one of those nights before.

Don't worry. She will.

Here is what's inside the MacIntyre, in the order Louise makes sense of it: red velvet, candles, ostrich feathers, champagne flutes, people with *Happy 2015* glasses, people taking selfies, a woman in a red backless sequined dress singing Peggy Lee's "Is That All There Is?," people taking selfies. Lavinia. A girl in a tuxedo. Marie Antoinette. Someone in a lion tamer uniform. Lavinia.

People in black tie. People who actually own black tie in black tie. People in corsets. People in lingerie. Lavinia.

A man in a cassock ("Don't tell him I told you, but he's actually defrocked"). A woman six feet tall wearing nothing but pasties and

feathers with the most grating and New York accent Louise has ever heard ("Her burlesque name is Athena Maidenhead. I don't know her real name"). A bald man in black skinny jeans and a turtleneck who is the only person there not in costume and who doesn't seem to notice ("That's Gavin. He keeps Excel spreadsheets of all the women he dates"). Lavinia.

Lavinia dancing. Lavinia drinking. Lavinia taking so many photographs, pulling Louise in with her, pulling her so close Louise can smell her perfume. It's made for Lavinia, Louise will learn one day soon, at a Chinese hole-in-the-wall over on East Fourth Street, and it smells like lavender and tobacco and fig and pear and everything beautiful in this world.

Peggy Lee sings the line *is that all there is to a fire?* and Louise downs a flute of champagne like it's a pickleback and then she starts to get nervous because when she drinks she stops concentrating as much on not fucking up, and when Louise stops concentrating is when she fucks up most; but Lavinia puts one hand on Louise's waist and uses the other to tilt a bottle of Bombay Sapphire straight into Louise's overflowing mouth, and even though Louise is not stupid and she is so good at watching people and she is so very careful—all the time she is so careful!—the intense pressure of Lavinia's hand on the small of her back makes her think that if the world is going to end, anyway, it might as well end tonight.

"Friends! Romans! Countrymen! Bring me more gin!"

Lavinia. Lavinia. Lavinia.

When Louise lived in New Hampshire, she often imagined that once in New York, she'd go to parties like this.

When she and Virgil Bryce would stand on the railroad bridge, and she would beg him to touch her breasts and he would finally, magnanimously agree, and they would talk about running away together (he wanted to live in Colorado and illustrate manga), and he would remind her how cruel the world was, she would try to explain to him that New York wasn't like anywhere else.

It didn't matter if you weren't that special, she'd say, or even if you weren't pretty, not even by the standards of Devonshire, New Hampshire, so long as you wanted it badly enough. The city would scoop you up and carry you skyward to all your vaulted aspirations; every single party on every single night in that whole, glistening, glaring city would make you feel like you were the only person in the world, and also the most special, and also the most loved.

You and I, of course, we know the truth.

We know how easy it is to fake it. All you need is to keep the lighting low; all you need are a couple of showgirls with cheap feathers superglued to the end of their corsets; all you need is to keep people drinking.

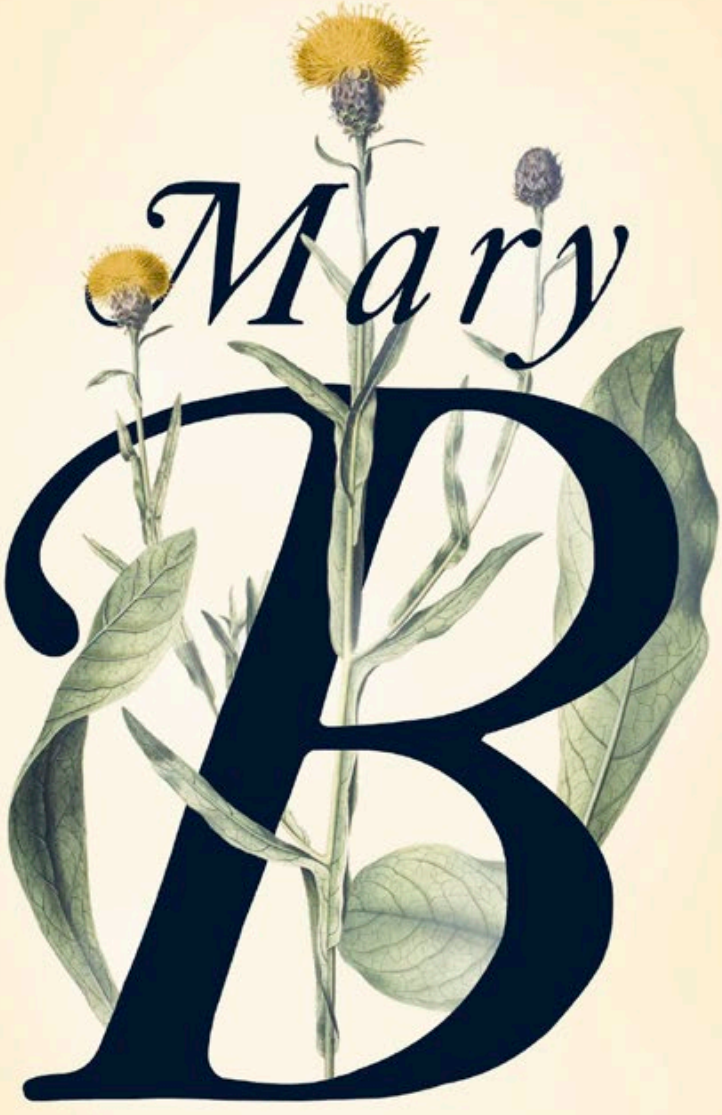
But girls like Louise don't know this. Not yet.

This is the happiest Louise has ever been.

AN UNTOLD STORY OF

Pride and Prejudice

Mary B



a novel

KATHERINE J. CHEN

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She certainly took a kind of parental interest in the beings whom she had created, and did not dismiss them from her thoughts when she had finished her last chapter. We have seen, in one of her letters, her personal affection for Darcy and Elizabeth. . . . In this traditionary way we learned that . . . Kitty Bennet was satisfactorily married to a clergyman near Pemberley, while Mary obtained nothing higher than one of her uncle Philips's clerks, and was content to be considered a star in the society of Meriton.

—from *A Memoir of Jane Austen* by James Edward Austen-Leigh, chapter X, "Observations on the Novels"

I was quiet, but I was not blind.

—Jane Austen (*Mansfield Park*)

PROLOGUE

A child does not grow up with the knowledge that she is plain or dull or a complete simpleton until the accident of some event should reveal these unfortunate truths. My eldest sister, Jane, did not know that she was Hertfordshire's answer to Helen of Troy until well into her adolescence. Walking out with the rest of her siblings in a new pink frock, she attracted the attention of two young men who had been wrestling and who suddenly stopped to gawp at her, like animals that have for the first time looked skyward and spotted the sun.

From a young age, Jane had been elevated by our mother to as high a rank of divinity among the common folk of Hertfordshire as false modesty would permit, while Papa never scrupled to show his preference for Lizzy, his second-born. In appearance, it is true Lizzy never possessed the natural elegance and mildness which blessed her sister. She preferred skipping to walking, dirt paths to paved roads, and the scent of wet earth to any fragrance that could be bottled. But what she lacked in conventional beauty was amply compensated for by an open and spirited temperament which rendered any conversation with her highly energetic and amusing.

It was therefore acknowledged, long before my younger sisters and I had any say in the matter, that beauty, goodness, and intelligence had disproportionately concentrated themselves in the two eldest and gone woefully amiss in the three following; namely, that I

had been touched with a plainness in appearance unrivaled throughout the whole country and Kitty and Lydia with a willful propensity to ignorance that exposed them continuously to ridicule without their ever becoming aware of the fact.

I will tell you the story of how I knew myself to be plain and therefore devoid of the one virtue which it behooves every woman to have above all else, if she possibly can. A plain woman, unless she is titled and independently wealthy, will always find herself in a position of extreme disadvantage to her more attractive peers, and the deficiency will haunt her until she reaches an age by which the condition of being withered and crippled will excuse her from her plainness. I can attest to the numerous petty prejudices she will suffer at the hands of individuals she has never wronged or even met before, like the butcher who, for the same money, would choose to save a better cut of meat for a more attractive patron or the surly housemaid who'd accept abuse from a beautiful mistress while resenting the same treatment from a plain one.

I discovered my plainness before I was fully a decade on this earth. The incident occurred in a small wilderness that formerly bordered my family's modest estate and which concealed all sight of the house once you'd fully entered it. Someone—probably Lizzy—proposed a game of chase, and it wasn't long before the wilderness shook with the peals of our laughter. Out of all of us, Lizzy was by far the best runner, for she had long arms and legs that reached uncannily far, and she could leap through a space no more than two feet wide without tearing any part of her dress. When she ran, her black boots clipped the earth as sharply as the cloven hooves of deer that spring, from birth, with unstudied elegance.

After the first few minutes of frenzied running, I began to tire of the noise and of the pain in my chest from being unable to catch my breath. Even as a child, I did not often avail myself of opportunities to study my reflection in the mirror, but I can well imagine what a sight I looked stumbling from tree to tree with my mouth hanging

open, trailed by an orb of gnats that formed a sort of mock halo around my head. My tongue tasted dry and bitter, like old leather that had begun to flake. I thought of calling Mrs. Hill to fetch me a glass of water. But Mrs. Hill wouldn't have heard me, not even if she were at that moment hanging the washing out to dry or beating the bedsheets with her stick.

Those who have tended to children or remember being young themselves will know the far range of a child's imagination. A mother or governess may leave a room for only a few moments before a child will believe he has been forsaken by all who love him. In silence, he may think he hears ghoulish cries; in innocent furnishings, frightening apparitions transpire to haunt him. At the bottom of a tall shrub, I quietly considered my fate. Should I fail to find my way back to the house, I was sure I would transform into a raving feral child. I envisioned myself kneeling at the mouth of a stream, lapping water like a dog. Soon I would know every tree and bush in this wood by their name and speak fluently the language of the swallow, the house martin, and the nightingale. I would sleep on a bed of moss and dress my wild, unkempt hair with the wings of butterflies and their midnight brethren. I would make rings of beetle shells and swallow eggs whole. Over time, my nails would turn as black as the earth from foraging. I'd mash elderberries with my hands and drink their pulp and sustain myself on turnips, mushrooms, and spider legs, all of which I'd consume on a slab of stone. Then, one morning, I'd discover that I'd forgotten my own name and the names of my sisters and my parents.

While brooding on these thoughts, I suddenly heard the papery rustle of leaves and spotted a slight figure advancing towards me at an alarming pace. The white dress identified this person as Lizzy. I sat up and straightened but didn't make any attempt to stand, much less run away.

As the distance closed between us, I watched her face weave in and out of shadows cast by overhanging foliage. Drops of scattered

sunlight glistened across her forehead, illuminating her eyes. I waited for her to look away or to laugh or to appear a little embarrassed at finding me, but her gaze was as concentrated and impassioned as that of the goddess Diana in the ecstasy of the hunt. With a single airy leap over a clump of dead leaves, Lizzy landed in front of me and placed a warm hand on the top of my head. Smiling now and seemingly restored to the cheerful disposition I'd always known, she said, "I've got you, Mary. You've lost."

If the game had ended then, that afternoon would have little to distinguish it in my memory beyond Kitty crying at the discovery of a torn sleeve. But when Lizzy helped me to my feet and we rejoined the others, we found that a sport of a different nature had begun in our absence.

After cornering Jane in a small hollow, our youngest sisters had commenced to celebrate their hard-won victory by throwing fistfuls of earth at her dress. As it had rained only that morning, the soil was wet and easy to shape, and they stamped and shouted and baited poor Jane, like two rosy-cheeked devils performing a ritualistic dance. Lydia, in particular, enjoyed the activity so much that all speech she uttered seemed an indecipherable jumble of giggles and screams.

In Lydia's defense, whatever scandals may now be associated with her name, she never possessed a deliberately malicious character. But years of indulgence from Mama and Aunt Philips, who both happened to find the senseless amiability with which Lydia approached all matters in life endearing, had emboldened her to say and to do whatever happened to take her fancy, with little concern for others' feelings and no thought to the consequences of her actions. Kitty, the elder by two years, witnessed our mother's affection for her younger sibling and, in seeking the same, imitated Lydia to the effacement of her own learning and otherwise colorless disposition.

I mention this because I've never doubted that the instigator of

this rather savage game was Lydia, who, in all probability, would view this childhood incident and eloping with a well-known rake with the same equanimity. It was also clear that whatever pleasure Jane might originally have derived from the jest had long expired. I'd never seen her face so red. One section of her hair had become loosed from its pinnings and had fallen over her shoulder. Her eyes glistened with unfallen tears. She raised her hands in front of her dress and begged them to stop, but their attacks only escalated. We arrived in time to watch Lydia press a fistful of mud against Jane's back while screaming to Kitty, who taunted Jane as though she were a bear in an arena: "Look, I got her! I got her!"

"What on earth?" Lizzy cried. And channeling something of the goddess I'd witnessed earlier, she lunged forward and grabbed Lydia, who was still laughing, by the shoulders and slapped her.

I took the opportunity to rush over to Jane and ask if she was all right.

"Mary, it's only a bit of fun," Kitty whined before Jane had any chance to answer. "Jane knows it's only a bit of fun."

"Kitty," I said in my bravest voice, "put that down." I'd noticed that Kitty had bunched another ball in her hands and was rolling it between her palms. She shook her head, unable to stop chortling, and took a step back.

"No," she said.

"Kitty," I repeated. I endeavored to speak with some authority, which was difficult as I stood at most an inch or two taller than she did. "This isn't funny anymore, so I'll ask you to please put that down at once." To show my purpose, I advanced and reached for Kitty's wrist, but before I could stop her, she released the missive she had been holding full into my face. Stunned, I stumbled backwards. Where there should have been only dirt and grass, something hard and sharp cut into me. I heard Jane cry out, her voice turning strangely hollow and distant. Instinctively, I touched the soft pocket

of flesh under my right eye, then held my hand in front of myself. The tips of my fingers shone a vibrant, dark red, and twin rivulets of blood oozed down the length of my palm. The ground tilted, and I might have fainted at that moment but for Jane calling my name and squeezing my hand, still moist with blood. In distress, she wiped her own forehead and left three marks above her eyebrow that made it look as though she had been cut herself. "Mary's hurt!" she shouted to Lizzy, pressing her handkerchief against my wound to stop the blood. "We have to get back to the house and tell Mama to call for the doctor!"

When our mother caught sight of Jane and me a few minutes later, she screamed, which sufficed to weaken my knees, and Papa was compelled to carry me into the sitting room. Once I'd been placed on the settee and a cushion lodged behind my back to prop me up, I was able to witness the movements of all the occupants of Longbourn from a vantage point of relative comfort. Mrs. Hill was sent to fetch a pitcher of water and left the room with as much urgency as her advanced age and persistent gout permitted. Lydia and Kitty sulked in a corner they deemed distant enough from the rest of the company to ensure their own security, while Lizzy reported to Papa the whole of what had taken place in the woods.

It very soon occurred to me, however, that far from being the sole object of pity and the recipient of such familial affection as I considered my due for having braved injury on behalf of an innocent sister, I had been, for the better part, forgotten. As Lizzy captivated Papa with the account of Lydia and Kitty's unruly behavior, Jane sat some few feet away from me at the table, though it was difficult to see more than a fraction of her face at any time. There were never less than three women around her: our mother; Aunt Philips, who had fortuitously been visiting when we burst through the door; Sarah, the housemaid; and Mrs. Hill, who though wholly

responsible for providing the pitcher of water, drank most of it herself in an excited state. I heard, from my seat, snippets of their conversation: Mama's insistence that we'd been attacked by an unknown assailant in the woods, Aunt Philips admonishing her sister for allowing us to go outdoors at all, Mrs. Hill entreating both women to calm themselves and take a cup of tea (which she wasn't, of course, prepared to make), and Sarah gently inquiring if Miss Jane's injuries were serious enough to warrant someone going to fetch the doctor. Jane's own protests remained unheard, and she was shushed for exerting herself unnecessarily. As for myself, I found the scene before me too diverting to interrupt and continued to press Jane's handkerchief to my face, both to quell the flow of blood and to stifle my laughter.

"Heaven help us if this should scar," Mama cried.

"But nothing's the matter with me," Jane replied. "I'm not hurt. It's Mary you should—"

"You have blood all over your forehead, my dear," Aunt Philips noted, clicking her tongue.

"And if it should scar, then we are all ruined," Mama said. "For who will want to take a wife whose face has been disfigured? Not even one as beautiful as yours, I daresay, though it pains me to confess it." Turning to Aunt Philips, she continued: "Am I not to be pitied, sister, for having children who live in such disregard for their mother's feelings, who would drive me to madness by cutting and scraping and burning themselves every time my back is turned, though my own health has always been exceptionally poor?"

"Your mother has certainly taken pains to raise you well, Jane. It is unkind to repay her efforts by running barbarically through the woods."

"Aunt Philips!" Jane could hardly keep herself from laughing, and, I confess, nor could I, though the pain beneath my eye worsened considerably when I smiled. "I promise you I am not hurt. It is

all Kitty's fault. She threw something at Mary, and Mary started to bleed. I took her hand and must have touched my own face afterwards. That is all."

It was Mrs. Hill who, to her credit, finally settled the matter by dipping her own handkerchief in the pitcher of water and dabbing Jane's forehead with it. In a matter of seconds, Jane's face had been restored to its original radiance, with not the smallest blemish or scratch to be detected, not even under the hawklike scrutiny of Mama and Aunt Philips, who alternated in inspecting Jane's face, turning her head left and right, then up and down, with a care more appropriate to handling one's best china.

Though she'd never admit it herself, a childless marriage and the general tedium which accompanied a life that boasted neither particular tragedy nor happy distinction had caused my aunt Philips to devote the majority of her energies to originating and circulating as many miniature dramas as possible to disturb the normal course of a day. She enjoyed hosting frequent parties at her home, as doing so kept her informed of all goings-on in the county and provided ample opportunity for her, in turn, to share updates on the latest dissolution of marriages, the futility of acquiring good help, and such other misfortunes as have been mankind's lot to suffer since our ancestors' first fall from grace. She prided herself on being able to name a vast network of friends she possessed owing to her good sense, unshakable principles, and intelligence. I have, in fact, witnessed on many occasions, whether at balls or at private dinners, the generosity of my aunt's memory in naming individuals of less than half an hour's acquaintance her intimate companions and within the first few moments of introduction entrusting virtual strangers with her ever-increasing knowledge of the private affairs of other people's households.

Her features having been restored to as near a state of indifference as could be expected in so short a time, Aunt Philips happened to turn from the table where her favorite niece and sister remained

sitting to where I lay, some few feet away. She started, as if seeing me for the first time. From an early age, I was aware that she noted little in me to entertain her and, therefore, felt entirely at liberty to ignore me whenever she wished. As she perceived the state I was in, however, a flicker of hope, even of gratitude, livened her expression. Her cheeks reddened. Her eyes gleamed, and she wetted her lips before opening her mouth and releasing a delighted and guttural moan.

"Oh, Mary," she shouted happily. "You're bleeding!"

The timbre of her exclamation was so shrill and so unexpectedly emitted that everyone was instantly roused to attention. Mama declared that if this continued for much longer, she would most certainly be dead before the day had ended. Lizzy urged Papa to call for the doctor, which the latter obeyed with more than usual alacrity, looking for, I suspect, any excuse to leave the noisy and crowded room. Mrs. Hill set down the pitcher she'd been holding, which was now empty and which, by the looks of it, she had no intention of refilling, lest an event of considerable import should occur in her absence. (She sent Sarah to refill it instead.) And Aunt Philips, continuing to gaze with enchanted horror at the cut under my right eye, insisted on holding my hand, which none of my weak protests could discourage, while Mama stood on the other side of the settee and proceeded to console me in her own way.

"Well," she said, "I never took you for a wild one, Mary. But if you have indeed protected Jane from being hurt, as she informs us is the case, then that is very well done, and you deserve to be commended for your act of bravery."

I might have failed to grasp the full meaning of Mama's words and taken them merely for the praise deserved had it not been for some comments exchanged shortly afterwards. We had been waiting some time for the arrival of the doctor, and I'd dropped off into a light and uneasy sleep. No one had thought to draw the curtains, and the sun remained full in my eyes, so that, tired as I was, I remained conscious of everyone's speech and movements—Lydia and

Kitty sulking watchfully in their corner; Mrs. Hill imbibing the water Sarah had brought, in large, noisy gulps. Over my recumbent body, Mama and Aunt Philips began to speak in hushed tones.

"Sister," Aunt Philips whispered, "it is lucky for you that Mary was hurt and not Jane."

Mama was quick to agree: "Of course I shall have a very strong word with Kitty later and tell her to have a care what she throws at her sisters, but it is very lucky. Very lucky indeed."

"Can you imagine if Jane were to suffer such an injury?" Aunt Philips's enthusiasm at the prospect was, I thought, poorly disguised, even by her standards.

"Though she is my child," Mama sighed, "it is just as well that this happened to Mary and not to the others. To be sure, they are none of them as beautiful as Jane, but the difference between Mary and her sisters is too marked for anyone to ignore."

"It pains me, too, sister, that all my nieces have not turned out as fine as the eldest, but perhaps Mary has other qualities which will make up for her outward deficiencies." Then she added, with considerably less conviction, "We must hope this is the case."

"It is unfortunate," my mother replied, "that these other qualities you mention are seldom admired by the opposite sex and, when appreciated, are taken note of only after a pleasantness of figure and complexion has already been ascertained. No, I wonder sometimes that Mary is so plain and what, in consequence, will become of her!"

The doctor arrived at this moment. He was a tall, thin man with gray whiskers and eyes of such pale blue they appeared almost white. Kneeling beside me, he removed his glasses with the delicacy of one accustomed to undertaking all tasks in an unhurried manner. I wish, among the jumble of insignificant details I have retained over the years, that I could remember his name, for I haven't forgotten the gentleness and civility with which he addressed me and which was, at the time, as alien to me as it was welcome. The room became very quiet and still. As he leaned over me, a part of his beard brushed my

arm, and its softness reminded me of the gentle swish of a cat's tail touching the back of one's hand. He asked me if I was in pain and studied the wound.

"Looks worse than it is," he said slowly, considering the cut from all angles before unfolding a cloth from his bag. "You must be more careful when you play with your sisters, especially outside, where it is easy to have an accident." He asked for water, and Sarah was forced once again to leave the room. Upon her return, he commenced with cleaning and dressing the cut. As the injury did not, in his opinion, warrant any further attention, he was soon finished with his task and rose to leave. Fastening his bag, he turned to me and said, "I'm afraid, my dear, that it is very easy for cuts on one's face to scar, and this may leave a lasting impression. The skin, unfortunately, is very delicate there, which is why you must be more careful in future."

And raising his voice by the smallest discernible volume possible, he added, "Take care not to scratch the cut when it is healing, as doing so will increase the likelihood of a scar."

Recalling Mama and Aunt Philips's earlier conversation, I considered for a moment before answering. "But will it make any difference?" I asked. "I mean, will it make any difference whether it scars or not on my face, as opposed to . . . Jane's?" Mama reddened and opened her mouth to protest, but our guest spoke first.

He looked at me strangely. "Of course it will, my dear," he said. "Of course it will. What a shame it would be for a pretty face like yours to scar, so you must do all you can not to touch or pick at the wound when it itches, eh?"

He patted my hand and, nodding slightly to the whole room, departed. No sooner did he leave than Mama began to chide me for making such foolish comments in front of the doctor, which she was certain would be imparted to all the patients he visited before the day was out. Aunt Philips then announced that I was tired and should be sent directly to bed. My father, the only other individual in the room besides my mother and aunt who was permitted to ex-

press an opinion, considered this a very good idea, and Jane and Lizzy were tasked with escorting me upstairs, in case I should have a fainting spell on the steps.

After I changed into a clean nightgown, Lizzy called me over to the dressing table. "I'll brush your hair before you go to bed," she said. I thanked her and fixed my gaze on the chipped corner of a lacquer jewelry box while her fingers removed the pins in my hair.

Jane glided over and kissed the top of my head from behind. "You were very brave today, Mary," she said, smiling. Our eyes met in the glass, and I looked from her to Lizzy, then back again. They began discussing a pair of embroidered slippers belonging to Jane that had gone missing from her room. Lizzy suggested that Kitty had a habit of borrowing things without permission, which made Jane laugh and explain that even if Kitty had taken her slippers, they could be of no use to her, being too big for her feet. When Jane smiled, her large, round eyes became sparkling crescent moons, and her mouth an instrument perfectly formed for the cheerful, elegant mirth she released into the world. In taking her beauty for granted, I had never thought to admire it. Now I found myself enraptured by the elements which, together, created a face that many would willingly think of in the vague and absent moments before falling asleep.

"There," Lizzy said. "All done." She set the brush on the table.

I stared at myself in the mirror and registered all the parts of my face, which in functionality at least seemed to be in good order. There was nothing that could be considered misshapen, and yet the sum total was such that I, as the proprietor of my own nose and mouth and cheekbones, could not look with satisfaction upon any part of my countenance. There surfaced in me a sense of wonderment that one could arrive in this world so wholly unadorned by even the slightest advantage of beauty. I felt racked with emotion, yet my eyes betrayed nothing and returned my gaze like two dark stones, hard and unfeeling. Though still a child, I already saw, un-

folding before me, a life lived ingratiatingly in the shadows, of sitting like an old gargoyle at dinner tables while, some few feet away, the living laughed and exchanged stories. I would have no stories to tell. No estates to run. No children to speak of. I would not be blessed with the holy rites of matrimony and would thus be compelled to live my years beholden to the loveliness of one or two older sisters, who would, by their charity, ensure that I always had food to eat and a roof over my head.

Thoughts can be as potent as wishes. That night, I dreamed I had returned alone to the woods outside Longbourn. Between the ghostly birches, there flickered a pale light, which moved towards me until it took the shape of a human figure. I saw at once who it was, having studied her likeness many times before, and dropped to my knees and bowed my head. She wore a blue cloak, the cloth of which was so fine it floated like a dewy mist over her white body. A ring of stars encircled her head, and when she moved, the stars quivered in their orb. Though her face was engulfed in light, I perceived that she smiled. She extended her hand to me, and, clasping it in my own, I pressed my mouth to her skin, which felt against my lips as cool and pure as the water of a fresh spring and which stilled the rapid beating of my heart. I felt I could never want for anything again, yet when she spoke, she asked what I desired most in the world. I raised my eyes to meet her gaze. But no sooner did I look upon her face than the light which she exuded overwhelmed me, and I was forced to turn away else I be struck blind.

"I wish," I said in a weak voice, "that I weren't so plain."

"Is that all, Mary?" she asked. "More than anything else, you desire to be beautiful?"

"Yes," I replied. "I wish I could be as beautiful as Jane, or even more beautiful. If I could, I would be the loveliest girl in Meryton."

"If that is what you really want, then you have only to wake up," she said, turning to leave, "and your wish will be granted." Trembling, I gathered the ends of her cloak and kissed them until the

threads slipped out of my hands. Though she moved slowly, it wasn't long before I lost sight of her, and she became again a single point of light. As I pressed my hand to the place where she had stood, a welcome darkness enfolded me, and for many hours afterwards, I was lost to all sensation of pain or happiness in a dreamless sleep.

It was late morning when I awoke. At once, I remembered the Holy Virgin's promise and bolted to the dressing table. With the tips of my fingers, I traced the cut under my eye, which was still tender and red. I observed myself in the mirror for as long as it took to realize there had been no change; in its absence remained only the humiliation of having expected, in defiance of all logic and reason, that some miraculous transformation could have taken place during the night.

Just then, the door opened and Jane came bursting through with a spray of heather in her hands. Tossing aside her bouquet, she made immediately for the window and stood full in the sun with her arms outstretched, as if to embrace the very air she breathed. She cried, addressing the window, "Oh, Mary, it's a wonderful morning. The weather hasn't been like this for ages." When I didn't answer, she looked over her shoulder at me. Though she was then but thirteen, it would be only a short time before the full potential of her slender figure was realized. And as for her face . . . From my seat across the room, I observed the delicate lines of her nose, the soft blush that entered her cheeks, as unobtrusive as the first touch of color in spring buds, the pleasing shape of her mouth as she asked how I'd slept. With new eyes, I marveled at the head of wondrous, golden hair washed in morning light which seemed, in that moment, an extension of the sun itself and of all things touched by heaven and by God that are put on this earth to be worshipped.

"Mary," Jane said, taking my hand as my vision blurred. "What is it? Are you crying?"

I shrugged and covered my eyes. Then, turning away from the mirror, I hung my head and wept.

"RAZOR-SHARP URBAN NOIR–VERY SPECIAL INDEED." –LEE CHILD

SIRENS

A NOVEL

JOSEPH KNOX

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First American Edition

"The past is now part of my future, the present is well out of hand."

—Joy Division, "Heart and Soul"

Afterward I went back on to the night shift. They'd never trust me in the daylight again. I spent my time responding to 4 a.m. emergency calls, walking up and down dead escalators and trying not to think. I'd been good at that once. I could hardly believe it, a few months later, when I saw my breath in the air again. Saw November coming back around.

"Shittin' it down," said Sutty, refusing to get out of the car. Sometimes it was hailstones and sometimes it was slush. Tonight it was sheet rain, catching the light and cleaning down the streets. They needed it. My partner handed me his newspaper and I got out of the car, holding it over my head as an umbrella.

We were responding to a call from the manager of a charity shop. I watched his mouth moving. He wanted me to shift along some homeless people sheltering in the building's doorway. It didn't make a lot of sense but, then again, I wasn't paying close attention. His nasal hairs were jet black and matted together, like the start of Hitler's mustache. I looked at the sleeping man and woman in the doorway, told him he was wasting police time, and walked back through the rain to the car.

I climbed inside and handed Sutty the wet newspaper, his punishment for not coming with me. He gave me a look and then turned to a dripping, folded-down page.

"See this?" he said, holding out the paper and gauging my reaction. "No way to die, that, is it?"

The picture was blurred with rain, the text too, but I recognized the girl. She'd been one of a group, one of three I'd known briefly, the previous year. The subheading said she'd been twenty-three years old when she died. Twenty-two when I knew her. I looked out the window, at November, coming back around. She was the last of them. Sutty leaned in, cleared his throat with a graveyard cough.

"Come on," he said. "What happened there, really?"

I looked at him steadily. "You're asking the wrong person."

All I knew was where it had started, a year before. The three strikes against me and all the reasons I couldn't say no. I couldn't have explained the girls, the women, who had briefly entered my life. Briefly changed it. He wouldn't have understood their laughs, their indignations, their secrets. For the rest of the night my eyes drifted to the people on the street, the girls, the women, and I felt like I was seeing the lives they wouldn't live.

I got home in the early hours of the morning, made myself a drink and sat down. I flicked around the radio stations until I couldn't put it off any longer. I reread the newspaper and let myself think about it properly for the first time in months.

"You're killing me," she'd said.

What had happened there, really?

1

The young couple crossed over to avoid me, and I heard the jingle of loose change in someone's pocket.

A street you see every day can look unfamiliar, lying face down on the ground, and it took me a minute to work out where I was. The pavement was frozen. Low-hanging fog blurred the air, and nothing could pass through it without being altered somehow. It threw the whole city out of focus, taking the shine out of another Friday night.

My left arm had gone numb and I rolled off it to check the time. The face of my watch was shattered. Assuming it had stopped when I hit the floor, assuming that had only been a few minutes ago, I still had over an hour. I could get into some dry clothes and be at the bar in plenty of time to see the handover. I felt my way up a wall and got to my feet. My face hurt and my brain felt like it had come loose, rattling around inside my skull, erasing pin numbers and names of childhood friends.

I watched the young couple disappear into the fog. In spite of social media, CCTV and the state, we still live in a world where you can disappear if you want to. Or even if you don't. It had been about a month since the story leaked.

A month since I'd gone missing.

I felt the back of my head where someone had just hit it, hard. My wallet was still in my pocket, so I hadn't been mugged. I'd been warned. There was no one else around but I could feel eyes all over me.

The street swayed and I held on to a lamp post to steady it. When I started to walk I went for long stretches with my eyes closed, not even thinking about bumping into things.

Turning a corner, I found myself on Back Piccadilly, immediately recognizing its exhausted red-bricks by their external fire escapes. These buildings wall in a narrow alley on both sides, making a claustrophobic throughway. The evening rain had caught the moonlight, and I started walking out of nostalgia as much as anything. There was

an all-night coffee shop at the other end, and I'd spent some time there in another life. It had been years since I stopped going, and the city had changed so much that I knew I wouldn't see any of the old faces.

I was a few steps into the alleyway when I heard a car start behind me. An engine growled into life, flexing its muscles before falling into a smooth rumble. Light flooded the narrow path and a crooked silhouette grew out from my feet.

Thinner than I remembered it.

I looked over my shoulder, into blinding high-beams. The car was idling at the alleyway's entrance. *Nothing to see here*. I turned and kept walking. I was halfway along when the beams shook. When they started following me.

The engine revved and the car moved closer. It sounded just two or three feet behind, and I knew then that I'd never really disappeared. I could feel the headlights, burning into my back. I didn't want to turn and look through them at the driver any more. I was afraid of who it might be.

I pressed myself into an alcove so the car could pass. It stayed where it was for a few seconds. Squinting into the light I saw a BMW, all gleaming black paint and chrome. I could feel the night in my lungs. The blood, singing through my veins. A window came down but I couldn't see inside.

"Detective Constable Waits?" said a man.

"Who's asking?"

I heard a woman's laughter from the passenger side.

"We're not asking, handsome. Get in."

2

The rain tapping against the windscreen was making faces at me. My veins felt threadbare and weak, and I sat in the back of the car trying to make a fist for my own amusement. I thought of the speed in my coat pocket.

"True what they say, then?" said the driver, reading my mind. He looked to be in his late forties. He had broad shoulders and weaved them like a middleweight each time he turned the wheel. He wore a fitted suit jacket, charcoal gray in color, which nearly matched the hair on his head. When he used the rear-view mirror it was casually, looking through me like I wasn't there. The woman was a dishwater blond with an efficient ponytail.

I didn't say anything.

In the back seat I felt the chill of my sodden clothes and clenched my jaw to keep from shivering. The only thing in the car that hadn't come straight from the showroom was a police scanner. It was turned right down. I could smell a designer vanilla perfume but didn't recognize the brand. It didn't match either of the people in the front seats, though. It smelled like money, like youth.

We were driving emphatically away from where I'd been. Out of the nightlife, the glare. Past the empty shops and the going-going-gone local businesses. The huge, vacant buildings. The dying high street.

"What's he want?" I said.

The man made eye contact in the mirror. "Didn't ask."

We pulled on to Deansgate.

Over a mile in length, Deansgate stretches from one side of the city to the other. In that space it does it all, from invite-only restaurants to down-and-out soup kitchens, with everything you can think of in between.

"Well, where is he?"

"Beetham Tower."

I must have sworn.

"Been there before have you?" said the woman.

The tallest building outside the capital, Beetham Tower had been one of several skyscrapers planned for the city. The idea was to expand further and further upward, each structure a few meters taller than the last, like some great, dull-metal graph, charting endless growth. Developers had decided they could make millions by mortgaging small, overpriced rooms to single men and women, our only commodity. But their heads had been in the clouds. When the economy came crashing down around them, the owners, investors and builders lost everything. The male suicide rate rose slightly and everyone else carried on.

Now, most of these derelict building sites are cannibalized for scrap. The others are left to rot, collecting rainwater in exposed foundations. Rusting like open sores in the ground. There were times during its three-year construction when it seemed that even Beetham Tower wouldn't be finished. It went up, though, in spite of everything, extended like a middle finger to the entire city.

We turned off Deansgate and pulled up to the tower's car port. A beaming valet dressed like Sinatra leaned into the window. He recognized our driver at first sight, stopped smiling and waved us on, down to the subterranean car park.

3

Beetham Tower is shared by a Hilton hotel, residential apartments and, right at the top, bespoke penthouse suites.

Although the structure itself is streamlined, the four-story annexe at its base is much broader. It has to be, containing as it does a ballroom, swimming pool, and the smiling sons and daughters of the top 2 percent. The walls of the lobby and lobby bar are made almost entirely from windowed glass. The design is such that, should someone accidentally look outside, all they'd see is their own reflection.

I had been here before.

The previous year, after a young woman crashed through a nineteenth-floor window and fell to her death. Dasa Ruzicka was an underage sex-worker from the Czech Republic. She had been trafficked through Europe when she was fourteen, having been sold by her father to a local trader. It was easy to take girls from these places because they went missing so often. Each one was camouflaged against a backdrop of habitual disappearance. But there was another, more elemental, reason she was taken.

Dasa had been beautiful, and not the emaciated version of it they throw around these days. She gave meaning back to the word. Her clear complexion had naturally lent itself to sex work because, in spite of all the sadness life could parade past it, she went on looking pure somehow. A recurring frustration of my job was that girls, women, were things to fuck and throw punches at. To throw through windows. I wondered what it said about us now, that graceful was the worst thing you could be.

I was sure Dasa couldn't have propelled herself through the window with such force. The hotel room she fell from had been empty, though. I kept guests and staff there for hours, questioning anyone whose key card might have allowed them access to the floor. When enough money had complained, a Detective Inspector was sent to

relieve me. I took him into an empty room on the nineteenth floor, tried to explain the situation.

When he still wouldn't listen I backed off toward the door, my eyes on the window. The city below. He realized what I was about to do and shouted at me to stop. I ran at the glass to see the look on his face as much as anything, but he managed to get in the way before I could hit it.

It was the second of three strikes against me that would eventually lead to front-page news. To my total disgrace. To my taking the only job left open to me.

Dasa's death went down as a suicide and stayed that way.

I hadn't been back to Beetham Tower since.

4

Detective Sergeant Conway," said the female officer, holding out herhand for me to shake.

Her colleague was talking to the receptionist while we waited in the lobby. By my estimation of a Special Branch officer, I would have called him overfamiliar. There was a roar of laughter from a group of men in tuxedos, entering through an enormous, ornate revolving door. They danced beneath a chandelier the size of a family car. I was wishing it down on them when I looked at DS Conway.

"What's his problem with you?" she said, nodding at her partner. The man turned from the desk, walking back toward us, and she fixed her posture like she hadn't given me a second thought.

The lift went endlessly up toward the penthouses, a part of the tower I had never been in before. The man used a key card that granted us access to these upper echelons. A muzak version of "My Heart Will Go On" ended, faded out, and then faded back in again at the start. Like everything else in the building, the lift was decked with mirrors and reflective steel.

I looked at my shoes.

We stopped on the forty-fifth floor and the doors opened with an affected whoosh. Before the mechanized schoolmistress voice of the lift could finish speaking, the man had taken me firmly by the arm.

We moved down a long, tastefully minimal hallway, leaving Detective Sergeant Conway behind. We passed two other apartments, the only others on this level, before coming to a stark black door. The man used his card to open it and directed me into the lounge area of a large, anonymous residence.

There had been a lot of talk in the press about these penthouses. Only the ultra-rich need apply. The suite itself wasn't quite worth it, but you weren't paying for that. You were paying to be five hundred

feet in the air. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to look down on millions of people or, if your head was big enough, have them look up at you.

The room was dark, lit ambiently by the neon city below. Three walls of the lounge area were made of huge panes of glass, offering a near-panoramic view.

"Take a seat," said the charcoal man. I stayed standing. "Fine. He'll be with you in a minute." With that, he turned on his heel and walked toward the door. He opened it just enough for a person to pass through and made sure that it closed quietly behind him.

Discretion.

As soon as it shut I went after him, my eye to the peephole. The hallway was completely deserted and I wondered if he could have moved that fast. For a second I thought he might have squatted down out of view, but the idea was too ridiculous.

"We're alone, Waits, if that's what you're wondering."

I turned to the voice. I could see the dark outline of a man against the glow of the city from outside.

"How'd you get the shiner?" he said, that unmistakable Oxbridge accent.

I touched my eye. "Right place at the right time."

"I thought Detective Kernick must have taken a dislike to you . . ."

"He did seem disappointed that someone beat him to it."

"That was the impression he gave me as well." The man stepped into the dim light and smiled. "I should introduce myself. David Rossiter, MP."

I crossed the room. He was a tall, commanding presence. In his mid-forties, wearing a tailored suit and projecting the warmth of a good politician. He gave the firm handshake of a man who meets people for a living, using both hands to cup mine. His skin was warm but his wedding ring was cold to the touch.

"Do take a seat," he said. I sat down and after a slight pause, so did he. "Interesting."

"What's that, Mr. Rossiter?"

"I motioned to the seat on my left, you chose the one on my right—and call me David." I smiled, feeling a dull ache across both my eyes. "You're probably wondering why I asked you here, Aidan."

"Very well then, Waits. Do you follow politics?"

"Only when I can't help it."

He smiled again. When he smiled, he looked directly at me, assuring me each time that I had amused him in some special way. I'd seen him on the covers of newspapers, giving war criminals the same look.

"I wouldn't want to presume you know who I am."

"You're David Rossiter, MP."

"And what do you know of my career?" he said, cradling the last word.

"Only what the papers say."

"You should know better than most not to believe what the papers say. *Disgraced* Detective Aidan Waits . . ."

I ignored him. "Your father was an MP and did all right out of it. You were more idealistic, though; when your brother went into front-line politics, you were still grifting it as a barrister. You married young and it worked. But I suppose a man would make it work with a vodka heiress."

The smile again.

"You got into politics at a funny time. The Tories had spent four years out of power, and another four after you joined. In spite of that you brought credibility to the old boys. Didn't toe the party line, spoke in favor of gay marriage, women's rights. Even immigration. Just the right kind of reckless to be a cabinet MP. It was no surprise when you were made Secretary of State for Justice, particularly with the law background. And I suppose it helps that you're a well-turned-out family man with two good-looking girls."

"You should write my biography," he said, the last word tailing off as he noticed that my hands were shaking. Without missing a beat, he stood and poured two large cognacs from a bar in the corner of the room.

"Thanks," I said, as he handed one of them to me.

"And where do you land, politically?" he asked, sitting back down.

"I'm still up in the air."

"An undecided?"

"Policy just seems too vague to solve the problems I come up against."

He took a drink, swilled the liquid round in his mouth for a second and then swallowed. "Save the world one person at a time?" I nodded. "There's probably some truth in that." He shifted in his seat. "So what if I were to tell you about one person? One person who desperately needs saving?"

"I'd tell you there are better people to do it than me."

"And I've already told you I don't believe what the papers say."

I took a drink. "I'd do what I could, but it's nothing that old charcoal down the hall couldn't manage. It's probably less."

He seemed to like that.

"In fact, Waits, you're the only person who can help me. What does the name Zain Carver mean to you?"

I didn't say anything.

"This morning," he went on, "I spoke to your superior. Terrific chap by the name of Parrs."

"Why am I only just hearing about it?"

"You've been living off the beaten track. It took Detective Kernick a few hours to find you."

"Well, I'm glad he was so discreet about it. That beamer blended right in."

"My apologies. Special Branch get too comfortable blending into affluent areas."

"And here's me blending into the bad ones."

"That's why you're here . . ."

"I can't talk to you about Carver until I've spoken to Superintendent Parrs."

Rossiter considered me for a moment then took a phone from his jacket pocket, holding it out for me to take.

"I'd rather you dialled," I said.

He smiled, scrolled through his address book and waited for an answer. As usual, Parrs picked up immediately.

"Have your man Waits here," said Rossiter into the mouthpiece. "Looks the part. Very authentic. Even accepted a drink on duty. Won't speak to me until he's spoken to you, though." He held the phone out again and I took it.

"Sir."

"*Waits*," said Superintendent Parrs. His Scottish accent was a low

growl. "You'll extend the Minister every courtesy. We'll speak tomorrow." The line went dead and I handed the phone back to Rossiter.

"Zain Carver," he said.

"Drug dealer."

"And what's he to you?"

"A weak link, if I'm lucky."

"It's your job to get close to him?"

"I have a feeling my job's about to change." He didn't say anything. "If Carver succeeds it's because he's a one-off. A businessman among thugs. It's my job to see if that's exploitable."

"Exploitable how?"

"Three ways, really. With the right pressure applied, he might inform against other dealers. He isn't the biggest or the brightest, but might topple someone who is. Alternatively, he might tell us which police officers are on his payroll. Most interestingly, he could just be a frontman."

"A frontman for what?"

"There might be a dozen people above him who we've never heard of."

"I'm curious, what do you get out of all this? I mean, your name's mud now . . ."

"My name wasn't much to begin with. Why am I here, Mr. Rossiter?"

He took another drink. I heard his teeth collide with the glass.

"What do you know about my daughter? My youngest, Isabelle."

"Pretty girl and pretty young. Eighteen, nineteen?"

"She's seventeen," he said. "And mixed up with this Carver character."

"She's a minor, then. Send a squad car round and bring her home."

"That was what Superintendent Parrs suggested. I'm afraid it may take a little more finesse." I could see thick spots of rain hitting the panes of glass surrounding us. For a few seconds I could distinguish every one of them, then they became heavier, faster, until the room was wrapped in a blur. I waited. "A well-read lad like you might remember when Isabelle was last in the news."

"She collapsed," I said. "Exhaustion."

He didn't move.

"Suicide attempt?"

He nodded. "Isabelle suffers from depression. Part of the inheritance from her mother's side. There've been other attempts, but none so forceful as the last. There was too much blood, too much disturbance to keep the papers out. So we gave them exhaustion." He was staring somewhere off to my right, reliving it all. "I went to the editors myself and begged them."

"I see," I said.

"Do you?" he returned, before moderating it into a different question. "Do you know the only thing worse than your daughter stabbing herself in the neck?" I shook my head. "Her waking up, coming home, and hating you for saving her life." He finished his drink. "She spoke to me, Waits. Said she understood her condition, understood there'd be black days. And said very calmly that this wasn't one of them. She was thinking clearly and couldn't forgive me for calling the ambulance."

"Takes a long fall for an MP's daughter to end up with a Zain Carver."

"Well a long fall's what she had," he said. "She got involved with them through a friend, I think. Far as I know, she's been living there at Fairview for a month."

"A month?" He didn't say anything. Fairview was the name of Zain Carver's home. A large Victorian property, south of the city in a young, student-dense area. It was infamous for its house parties, attracting everyone from university heartthrobs to local celebrities. "I don't know what Parrs told you, but my orders have been to stay on their periphery. I've seen cash handovers, drunk with low-level dealers—"

"And some job you're doing of that," he said. "As of today, your orders have changed. You're to cross the threshold. Get your hands dirty. Make contact with the main players."

"And your daughter?"

"I can't risk having her brought home by the police."

"With respect, sir, the papers listened once, they'll listen again. Anyway, what's a scandal next to getting her home?"

"Scandal?" he said. "I'd give up this job in a heartbeat if it brought her back." I believed him, but that should have been my warning. He talked about Isabelle like she was dead already. He composed himself. "I can't be the one that makes her hurt herself again. Understand?"

Perhaps if I could have seen his face clearly I would have, but we were shrouded in darkness.

I shrugged.

"You're a young man. Just wait. You'd do anything for your kids."

"What do you want me to do for yours?"

He stopped, as if he hadn't properly considered that yet. "Can you get close? Can you see that she's OK?"

"I could even ask her how she is."

"I'd really rather you didn't make direct contact."

"You're not exactly making this easy, Mr. Rossiter."

"I won't have my daughter brought home against her will. And certainly not by the police."

"She wouldn't know," I said. "Even Special Branch down the hall's having a hard time working it out." He didn't say anything. "Look, these are bad people."

"What kind of trouble do you think she's in with them? Sex?" The word cost him a lot.

"I don't know, I wouldn't think so. Carver considers himself a gent. A businessman."

"A good thing, surely?"

"Depends on your experience of businessmen. I'd say it's a dangerous thing. There are other ways a girl can be exploited, especially a girl with a name. There are other pushers in the city who'd have treated her badly. She'd have been back home and in counseling by now, however much she might hate you."

With effort, he ignored the slight. "But Zain Carver?"

"He's different. More likely to know who she really is. More likely to charm her. He sells Eight and—"

"Eight?"

"Heroin," I said. "H is the eighth letter of the alphabet. It's a decent brand name, but mainly it sounds more innocent on a street corner or in a club."

"Out of the question. Isabelle's had her problems, but she wouldn't use—"

"None of them would until they do. Anyway, it's a university town. The last few years, Carver's done all right with party drugs. Does he know she's your daughter?"

"It's possible." He swallowed. "Although she's generally ashamed of the fact."

"Even if he did, he'd be playing a dangerous game, not knowing you won't just have her dragged home."

"Hm," he said, playing idly with his wedding ring.

"Has she run away before?"

"Only to five-star hotels on my Amex."

"And do you have a picture of her to hand?"

Rossiter reached into his breast pocket. He produced a photograph and handed it over, cupping it with his free hand like a naked flame. Isabelle was a pale, pretty girl with dull blond hair and intelligent blue eyes. In the picture she was staring above where the camera would have been. At the person holding it, I thought.

"Look." He leaned forward. "I'm sorry about the crack I made, about you drinking with the dealers. You must be under a great deal of stress."

We sat in silence for a moment.

"Is there anything else you need from me?" he said.

"The name of the friend who introduced her to Carver?"

"I'm afraid I never met her."

"Her?"

"Him, them; whoever."

"Perhaps your wife—"

"Alexa's an unwell woman. She's not to be bothered."

"I see. And why are you so interested now?" He raised an eyebrow. "If Isabelle's been gone for a month?"

"Well spotted," he said, flexing his jaw. "You might as well know. I'm fighting a war on two fronts, Waits. Alexa also suffers from depression. We've been . . . strained now for some time. I'm afraid Isabelle got lost somewhere in the middle."

"How should I get in touch with you?"

He handed me an embossed business card. I ran my fingers over the raised letters.

"You'll get me on this number any time, day or night."

"Well, thanks for the drink. I'll be in touch."

I left him slouched on the sofa, looking worn out and bereft.

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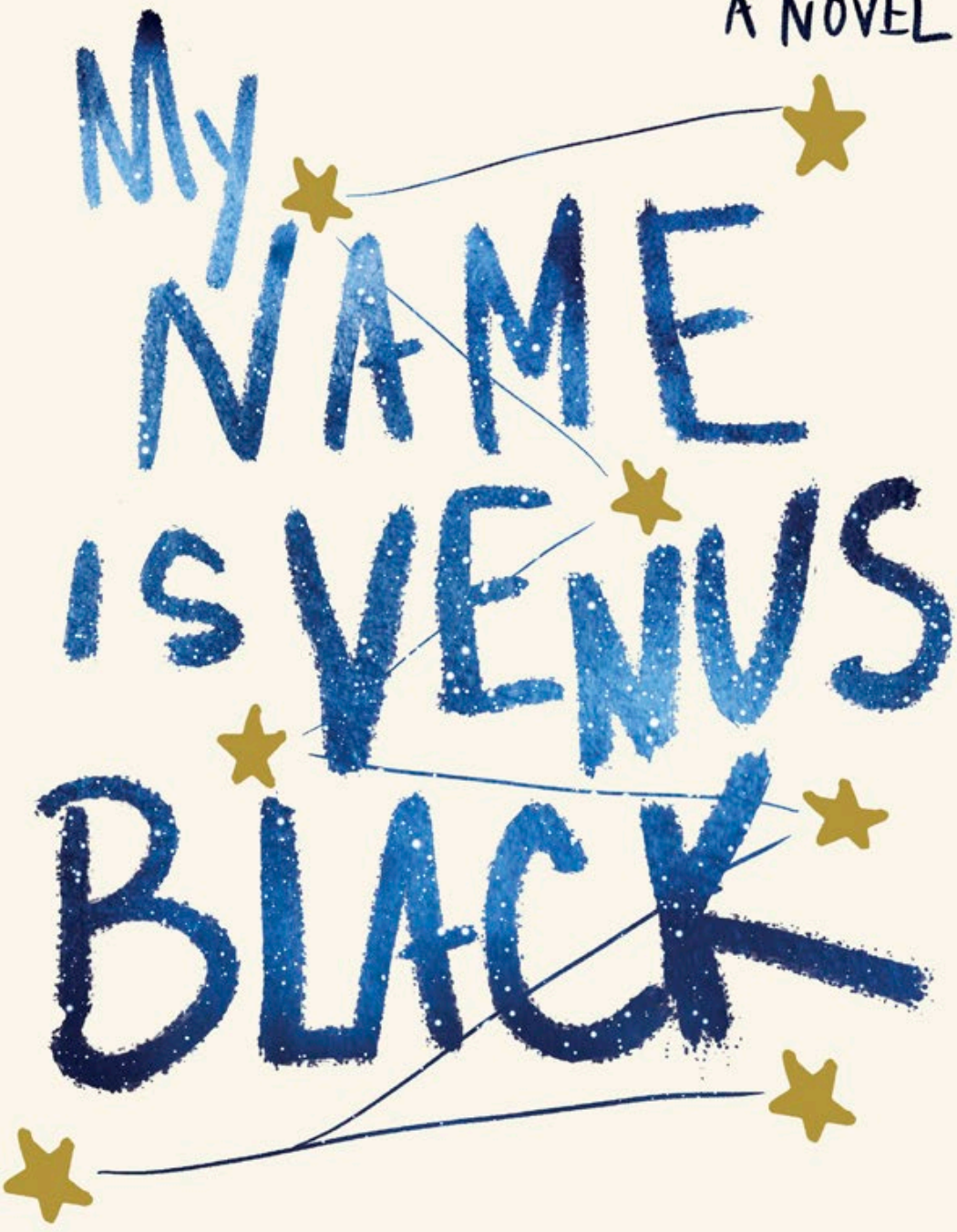
—New York Times bestselling author JAMIE FORD

A NOVEL



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1

I could swear I'm in some weird dream or movie, but that can't be true because the burning sensation between my legs is way too real. Now I know how babies feel when they don't get their diaper changed. I'm trying to hide what happened beneath my winter coat, but how long can I last?

A female cop and a cranky older detective in plain clothes are trying to interview me, but I'm sobbing so much it's not going well. They keep saying things like, "Calm down." "Take a deep breath." "We can't understand what you're saying."

But I can't calm down. A bubble of horror has enveloped my brain and left me hysterical.

I make it about five more minutes before pain trumps pride. "I think I wet my pants," I sputter, looking at the female officer.

She's blond and prettier than my idea of a woman cop. She stands up. "Let me take Venus for a few minutes," she says to the man. I don't get up until she is standing by my chair. I feel like a small child as she leads me to a ladies' room and tells me to wait inside for her.

The door locks behind me. I use one of the metal stalls, which remind me of the ones in my junior high. When I'm done, I go to the sink to wash. In the mirror, my face glistens with tears and mucus, my eyes are swollen half shut, and my hair is flying every-

where in an enormous black tangle. Then I remember I've been madly pulling at it.

Pretty soon, the female cop returns, holding a pair of blue pants that look like pajama bottoms with ties in the front. They're way too big, but it's a huge relief to get out of my soaked jeans.

When she leads me back to the interview room, calmer now, I see that Inez is seated off to the side. Has my mother been here the whole time? "I want her out of here," I say, trembling with anger. And then louder, "I want her out! She's the one you should arrest!"

Inez looks white as a sheet, like she's seen a ghost, which I guess isn't too far off. She exchanges whispers with the male cop and then leaves the room.

After she's gone, the police try again. They start out with easy questions about my friends at school. I try to cooperate. I admit what I did. But when they want to know details and *why,* I clam up. "I can't remember," I say.

"You mean you don't want to," says the old guy.

In the morning, I wake up at Denney Juvenile Justice Center. I've heard of plenty of kids getting sent here, but they were always rough, older, criminal types. The kind who dropped out of school, sold drugs to kids, or stabbed each other and stuff like that. The kind who scare me.

When I learned last night that I'd be locked up here, my knees shook like Mexican jumping beans. "I'm only thirteen," I pleaded. "I get straight A's! I've never gotten drunk, or smoked pot, or even skipped a class. At school I hang out with the smart girls' group." But even my biggest achievement—"Last year I was Citizen of the Week a record six times!"—didn't change anyone's mind about where I belonged.

At Denney, breakfast is served in a small cafeteria that reminds me of our school's. I go through the buffet line and then find the

table with the fewest people and try to send out a vibe that says, *Don't even think about sitting here.*

While I eat, random, bizarre details from last night flash in my mind. Like how good it felt when one of the cops gently laid his hand on my head as he guided me into his police car. For a second there, it seemed like he was rescuing me instead of arresting me. And this one: When the car I was riding in pulled away from our house on Rockefeller, I saw the garage door wide open, lit up like a giant TV and neighbors gathered around like someone should make popcorn.

I should be too upset to eat, but I'm starving. The toast is spread with what I'm pretty sure is real butter, not margarine. I wolf down the scrambled eggs even though they come in a square that leaks water.

While I eat, I wonder what my friends are thinking—or if they've heard what happened yet. Who is my best friend, Jackie, going to sit with at lunch today? I'm dying to call her, but I'm sure they won't let me.

Since I might be here for a while, I hope they'll let Jackie pick up all my assignments from school and bring them to me. I don't want to fall behind.

It hurts to think of my teachers, because I know they won't understand. Over the years, I've always been teacher's pet, and now I can just hear them saying, "Venus Black? But she was one of my favorite students! And always such a nice girl."

Inez would probably beg to differ with *nice*. She likes to remind me that *smart* isn't the same as *nice*. She also insists that I have two personalities, one for school, and one for at home. Every time she comes back from a parent-teacher conference, she tells me how surprised she was to hear what a pleasure I am to have in class.

So maybe I'm not a pleasure to have at home. But did she ever think there might be a reason for that?

. . .

After breakfast, a guard brings me to a room half-filled with toys. My mother is seated in one of two blue plastic chairs situated next to a messy desk.

Part of me wants to rush into her arms and plead with her to get me out of here. I want her to comfort me and tell me it will be all right. But a bigger part of me wants her to know how much I blame her for what happened.

She must feel the same way, because she doesn't get up or try to hug me. All she says is, "Venus."

"Inez," I say right back.

Before I sit down across from her, I make a big show of scooting my chair farther back from hers. Like she smells bad or something. Right off, I notice how horrible she looks. Her eyes are red and raw, and her face is all puffy like mashed potatoes. She's clutching a white hanky that belonged to her father back in Greece, which she knows I think is super gross. *It's the eighties! Who still uses a handkerchief?*

At first, she is all motherly and worried. She asks how they're treating me, if I'm okay, and if I got breakfast. For a second there, she's my old mom again, and her seemingly genuine concern threatens to crack my anger.

"Aren't you going to talk to me, Venus? Are you really just going to sit there?"

That's when I realize she's suggested a good strategy. Just because you put me in a room with Inez doesn't mean I have to talk to her. Which is something I never thought about before, how you can force people to do a lot of things, but speaking isn't one of them. You can't grab someone's jaw and move it up and down and make words come out.

Eventually I hear her say, "How could you do this, Venus?"

How can she even ask that? She already knows the answer. Clearly she's planning to act like she has no idea, so people won't realize how easily she could have stopped this.

I continue trying to block out her words, but it's hard to miss

when she refers to Raymond. She's trying to explain, trying to defend herself. "You didn't give me a chance, Venus."

What is she talking about? I gave her all the chance in the world. I manage to tune her out again for a while, until I can tell she's getting angry. "You better smarten up right now, young lady," she scolds. "Damn it. I can't help you if you won't talk to me."

It's a ridiculous thing to say, because she didn't help me when she could have. I glare at her, hoping she'll guess what I'm thinking, but she's looking down at her hands.

I used to think Inez was pretty, in a Cher sort of way. I was always jealous of her straight black hair because I hated my wild curls. When people said we looked alike, I thought that meant I was beautiful, like her. But now I know it only means we both have black hair, the same Greek nose, and the same darkish eyelids.

Sitting here watching Inez's mouth move, I notice she's been chewing on her lips again. Small pieces of flesh stick up like bits of plastic in her bright-orange lipstick. The lipstick flashes me back to when I was little and she'd ask the Avon lady for lots of those tiny white tubes of lipstick samples so I could play with them later. But that's a happy memory, so I squash it.

"Okay. Be that way, Venus," I hear her say. "That's fine if you're angry at me. But for your own sake, we need to discuss your defense."

I want to scream, My *defense? What is* your *defense?*

How does Leo do it? My little brother is so good at ignoring people that he should be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. But they'd probably disqualify him, because he has something wrong with him that makes it easy for him to pretend you're not there.

Leo is seven but acts more like he's three or four. He has what Inez calls "developmental issues," probably because he was born too early. My stepdad, Raymond, was super disappointed when Leo didn't turn into a regular little boy. But Leo's always just been

Leo to me. So what if he makes weird noises and doesn't want to be touched? He likes things to stay the same, and sometimes, he throws big tantrums. But really he's the sweetest thing, which is hard to believe when you think about where he came from.

When I trace my life back to make it so Inez never met or married Raymond, I always get stuck here. Because what would I do without Leo?

By this point, Inez is actually crying and pleading with me to talk to her. I'm not used to seeing her this way, and it makes me uncomfortable. It's like I have more power than she does. And in a way, it's true. Here I've gone and done the worst thing in my life and she can't even ground me.

No wonder she's so upset.

After a while, she stops crying and begins staring at me in this weird way. When she gathers her purse off the floor, I think she's getting ready to leave and I'm so relieved because it takes a lot of work not to talk to somebody.

Instead, she leans forward in her chair and whispers to me like it's a secret question, "Venus, are you even a little bit sorry for what you did?"

When I don't answer, she gets this frozen look on her face and makes a strange little gasping sound. Then she stumbles from the room like she's drunk or blind.

Or like she can't wait to get away from me.

Leo wakes up in a bed that is not his bed. The bedspread is the wrong color of green. Where is his blue bedspread? He can't stop seeing last night. His mother is crying. She makes him get in a strange truck with the lady called Shirley. He knows Shirley, but this time she has pink plastic things all over her head.

Soon the woman called Shirley comes into the room where Leo is, only now she looks different. The plastic things are gone and her hair is curly and the wrong yellow.

"Good morning, Leo!" she says too loud. "Remember me? From when I came to your house and babysat you."

"I want my mom," Leo says.

"Remember? She had an emergency and asked me to watch you for a while."

Leo doesn't know the word *emergency.* He ignores the lady and her talking until she asks if he needs the bathroom. He does. After he is done, he washes his hands like he's been taught. The towel is the wrong color. Shirley is waiting for him when he comes out.

He goes back to the room with the bed. So does the curly lady.

Leo asks, "Where is Venus? Where is my mom?"

He might have what his mother calls "a big tantrum." He had a big tantrum last night.

"I'm sorry, Leo," the lady says. "You will see your mom soon. She's going to stay here for a while, too. She'll sleep right out there in the living room on the couch. She's not here now, but she will be. And, look, she gave me some of your favorite things. See?" She points to the floor by the bed. Leo sees some of his toys. "Your mom even brought your blanket," she adds, holding out his purple blanket. He needs it to ride in a car or when he wants to be in his closet.

He takes the blanket, sits on the bed, and rocks while the lady keeps talking. He blocks out her voice. He puts his head between his knees because he hears the scary sounds from last night. The fire trucks hurt his ears. So many people were yelling and there were red feelings everywhere.

2

My cell has white cement walls, a plain metal cot, and a small wooden cupboard for clothes. Obviously, someone—a cop, or Inez?—has raided my dresser at home and picked out a small wardrobe for me. Seeing a bra and undies in the mix makes me angry. The thought of someone pawing through my drawers.

When I look for my shoes, I can only find a pair of ugly white sneakers with Velcro, like my little brother, Leo, wears, since he can't tie his shoes. They're the right size, so I put them on.

We're also given a notepad and a few pencils without erasers. I don't know why. Do they think I might want to write home like I'm away at summer camp?

It turns out they let you leave your cell during the day and hang out in what they call the common area, where there are couches, tables, and a TV. I plan to just stay in my room, though. I already know I don't want to make any friends in here.

But instead of sitting in my room all day, all of a sudden it's like I'm this important person with lots of meetings to attend. Everyone wants to talk to me—including a geezer guy with enormous nostrils who is my lawyer, a woman doctor named Barbara, and a young-looking caseworker who asks me to call him Officer Andy.

They all act the same. Just like the police, they start out really

friendly, asking about my boring life as if I'm the most fascinating person on earth. But when they start to ask about that night, I throw a white sheet over my brain so I can't see a thing. I'm like a child wearing a ghost costume with no holes cut out for eyes. "I can't remember," I tell them. And it's true.

After that, they stop being so nice.

On the morning of day three, I'm taken down a hall to a small courtroom where my lawyer, Mr. Dutton, makes me plead not guilty, even though I don't deny what they say I did. When the judge announces the charges, I have to stifle a nervous laugh. My lawyer glares at me, nostrils flaring.

But how can I help it if none of this seems real? A few days ago, I was hanging out by my school locker, gossiping about boys with my girlfriends. My biggest worry was how to talk Inez into buying me a new pair of Jordache jeans. Now I'm locked up with junior criminals, I've been labeled a violent offender, and my biggest worry is getting beat up.

No wonder the only time I don't feel like I'm dreaming is when I'm asleep.

And yet at night, when I do finally fall asleep, I get jolted awake by nightmares that leave my nightie and sheets soaked through with sweat. The bed's thin mattress has a plastic cover, probably in case I pee the bed, which of course I would never. But this is like *my entire body* is wetting itself.

After the nightmares, I visit the community bathroom down the hall and use cold water to splash my face and try to dry my body with paper towels. In the mirror my eyes look buggy and wild. I look like a deranged person. Like someone who could do what I did.

Back in my room, I change into regular clothes. I strip the wet sheets and try to sleep on just the plastic. While I lie there shivering, I remember how the planet Venus rotates backward as it orbits the sun, while Earth and most of the other planets rotate

forward, in the direction they're going. That's how I feel, like all of a sudden my life is turning in the opposite direction of where I want to go.

HERE'S WHAT I keep thinking. None of this would have happened if my father hadn't died when I was five. It was a freak factory accident, they said, where his belt buckle got caught on a piece of machinery. So if Joseph Black had only worn a different belt to work that day, he'd still be alive. And then Inez would never have taken a job tending bar at the Tyee Lanes. And she would never have met Raymond Miller the night he rolled six strikes in a row and strolled into the bar to celebrate.

In the coming years, Raymond loved to recount how he met Inez—leaving out the fact that my dad's body was barely in the ground. He'd linger on the bowling part of the story, and then he'd pat the cigarettes in his shirt pocket and joke that it was his "Lucky Strikes" that led him to Inez.

Now it's weird to think how it would have been better for everyone if only Raymond had been a little less lucky that night.

The morning after the strikes, Raymond showed up at our crummy place in the projects with flowers for Inez and Pop-Tarts for me. Being only five and having only seen Pop-Tarts on TV—to save money, Inez usually fed me gross hot cereal with powdered milk—I thought Pop-Tarts were amazing, like getting to eat candy for breakfast.

Over the next few weeks, Raymond kept it up, trying to buy us with small gifts. Things like a gold locket for Inez and a Skipper—Barbie's little sister—for me. I can't remember all the other presents, but I'm pretty sure it was the four-holed toaster—*four pieces of bread at a time!*—that sealed the deal for both of us. They got married six weeks later.

That's the problem with being just a kid. You let the littlest things impress you. You have no way of knowing that if this man marries your mother, the gifts will dry up, the Pop-Tarts will stop,

the Rainier beer will kick in, and you'll never feel at home in your own home again.

I still don't know Inez's excuse.

Just as soon as I was old enough, I came to hate Raymond with my whole heart, though I couldn't have explained why. At seven, I started biting and clawing and kicking if he tried to spank me. At eight, I made a rule that he couldn't hug me. I think I was nine when I began arranging the cereal boxes on the kitchen table to block my view of him sitting there smoking in the mornings while I ate my Lucky Charms.

After I started middle school, I began mocking him from across the dinner table. I'd copy the way his teeth clicked when he chewed. Or I would imitate his habit of jiggling his pinky finger in his left ear. That would set him off. But how could I help it if my ear just so happened to itch right after his?

Nine times out of ten, Inez took Raymond's side.

At least they never made me call Raymond "Dad." But, then, Inez never taught me to call her "Mom" or "Mommy," either. She swore it was a women's lib–type thing to do at the time—"preserving one's identity," as she put it. Later, she changed her mind and tried to change mine. But it was too late.

Now you couldn't pay me a million dollars to call her "Mom."

3

On the fourth day, I develop a new theory for how I ended up here. What if I never had a choice?

When I was in third grade, our teacher showed us a large wooden frame with fabric stapled over the top. She set it on a table and told us to roll marbles from one end to the other. Easy-peasy, of course. Then she put a heavy stone in the center and asked us to roll the marbles straight again. This time—*duh, Ralph*—they rolled toward the rock.

She was trying to show us how the pull of gravity inside a black hole is so powerful it sucks everything into it and nothing can escape, not even light. I'd been reading astronomy books since I was six, so this was old news to me. But I hadn't yet learned that smart kids shouldn't be show-offs, so I made sure everyone knew this.

Now the concept of black holes sparks a new idea. Up to now, as my life whirled by, I thought I could at least decide where I wanted to go, could choose my next step. But what if all along I was like that second marble and my destiny was like a black hole, sucking me toward recent events, and I was helpless to resist?

It seems like that should make me almost innocent.

Later that morning, when I try to explain this to Officer Andy, he totally doesn't get it. "You don't deny you're guilty, Venus," he says. "So what do you mean you might be innocent?"

"I mean, what if it was just my destiny and there's nothing I could have done to change it?"

"Well," he says. He removes his wire-frame glasses and rubs his eyes like I'm making him tired, when all I'm doing is sitting here. "Maybe that's true in some way," he offers. "I guess we all have a destiny. But it doesn't change the law. And the law says you have to take responsibility."

"Yeah," I agree, annoyed. "I get all that. But the point is, if it is a person's *destiny* to do something they normally would never do, why should they be punished the same as a bad person?"

"Because that's the law," he says.

I sigh heavily and gaze out Officer Andy's small office window at the big yard and the tall cyclone fence in the distance. It doesn't seem fair that my caseworker gets to leave here at the end of the day and I can't, when you can tell just looking at the two of us sitting here that he's not a better person than me.

What I want to tell him but don't is that I really, really want to go home. Most kids who go to Denney get out in a few weeks. Even days. I'm starting to think it will be longer for me.

The weird thing is, I kind of miss my mom. Not my mom now, since what happened is her fault. But I miss having a mom I don't *hate*. It feels like not having one at all.

Of course, I miss my friends, too. I wonder how they're going to treat me when I go back to school.

Thinking of my friends, I decide this is a good time to ask Officer Andy a question that's been burning in my mind. I try to sound casual. "So, hey," I say. "I was just wondering . . . do you think I can see a copy of the local paper? The one that came out right after . . . ?"

I know my story is all over the news, because I've overheard girls talking. And I'm worried about what photo they used. I hope they didn't use my seventh-grade school picture, which is super dorky. Jackie has some way better ones of me on her corkboard at home.

"I'm sorry, Venus," he says. "That's against the rules."

"Don't I have a right to read what people are saying about me?"

"That's just the way it works. Maybe your mother could show the paper to you."

I scowl, because he knows how I feel about her. "Can you at least please tell me what the paper *looked* like?"

"In case you're wondering, there was no picture of you," he says, and I'm embarrassed he guessed what I was worried about. "If I remember correctly," he says, "the *Herald* used a picture of your house with police cars out front. I don't know what the Seattle papers did."

"Oh," I say, thinking about how weird this is and yet strangely appropriate, too—since none of this would have happened if Raymond hadn't moved us to that exact house on Rockefeller.

By now, I realize, the police are probably talking to all my friends, and my teachers, too. They're probably asking questions about my relationship with Raymond or if I ever said I wanted to hurt him. I wonder if Jackie will tell them how I couldn't stand Raymond and if she'll act like she's not surprised by what I did.

None of my friends could ever understand why I hated my stepdad so much. They all thought Raymond was sweet just because he was always inviting them to sleep over or offering to drive us places, like to Davies Beach or to the roller rink or to the movies. Sometimes he'd offer to pay for everybody: "Shhh. Now, don't go telling Inez," he'd say.

Once, when I tried to explain to Jackie how Raymond gave me the creeps, Jackie defended him. "Okay, but what about that time after we were shooting cans in the woods and he stopped at Thirty-one Flavors *without us even asking*?"

Now I want to call up Jackie and yell, "See? You were wrong. I was right about Raymond all along!"

But I know I'll never make that call, because if my friends ever learn the truth about Raymond, they'll wish they'd never met me.

And besides, if I say, "I was right all along," it makes it sound like I knew all along when I really had no idea.

That's another thing that got me here. Nothing is as it appears. It's like that with space. Objects that look round might not be, and stars that look close to each other might be billions of miles apart. And it's the same with people. Only instead of standing too far away to see the truth, you're probably standing too close.

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PROLOGUE

THE GROUND WAS still shaking when the scientists at the University of Tehran realized that the earthquake would end in tragedy. The seismographs at the Institute of Geophysics had pinpointed the epicenter near the Dehshir Fault, under the small city of Sirjan in southeastern Iran. When it was over, the quake measured 8.4 on the Richter scale. Strong aftershocks buffeted the region for days, hampering rescue efforts and wreaking further destruction.

Initial estimates indicated more than twelve thousand dead. The injured were too numerous to count. Homes that weren't completely destroyed had been rendered structurally unsound. Collapsing buildings claimed additional victims as residents tried to rescue family members or salvage possessions. Those who hadn't been killed or hurt had lost friends and relatives, homes and livelihoods. Thousands

were still missing, and their chances of survival decreased with every passing hour.

Offers of assistance poured in from around the globe. Friend and foe alike volunteered money, manpower, and supplies to help the beleaguered residents rescue their loved ones and feed their families. A U.S. Navy ship exiting the Persian Gulf offered her heavy-lift helicopters to clear wreckage and transport the injured. Expert rescue teams from earthquake-prone Japan and Indonesia were standing by, ready to arrive in-country within twenty-four hours. In a rare sign of compassion and unity, every nation bordering the Persian Gulf pledged aid to their wounded neighbor, yet Iran turned them all away.

Publicly, the government stated that it had dealt with earthquakes since ancient times and had all the resources it needed. Indeed, Iran was one of the most seismically active countries in the world and was well equipped to perform search and rescue operations. But the real reason, what the government didn't mention, was that the most secret facility in its growing nuclear complex was just minutes outside the stricken city of Sirjan, and no foreigner was going anywhere near it.

ONE

"SPEEDBIRD 337, MAINTAIN heading one-one-five. Contact Tehran Defense Radar on 127.8. Good day."

Inside the cockpit, First Officer Edward Blake responded to the Turkish air traffic controller.

"Roger that, Ankara Center. Speedbird 337 maintain heading one-one-five. Switching to 127.8."

He glanced to his left and caught Captain Sam Allard's eyes for a moment before turning the VHF radio to the new frequency. The British Airways flight, radio call sign "Speedbird," was closing in on Iran's Flight Information Region and needed permission to enter Iranian airspace.

"Tehran Radar, this is Speedbird 337 heavy."

"Go ahead, Speedbird 337."

"Tehran Radar, Speedbird 337 with you at flight level three-niner-zero, estimate crossing your FIR at 15:20 hours."

"Roger, Speedbird 337, squawk 0413 and proceed as filed."

The radio fell silent while the Iranian controller verified the radar contact and flight plan that the British Airways pilots had filed before taking off from London.

In peaceful times, the flight would have followed the great circle route through Uzbekistan and Afghanistan before heading south below the Himalayas on its way to Singapore. For the past decade, however, hostilities in the area led most airlines to divert their jets to the south, over Iran. The detour added a few minutes and several thousand dollars to the cost of each flight, but it was safer than flying through a war zone.

"Speedbird 337, identified, cleared for entry. Contact Tehran Center on 133.4. Good day."

"Roger that, Radar, Speedbird 337 cleared for entry, switching to 133.4."

Captain Allard adjusted the autopilot and the six-hundred-twenty-ton Airbus A380 banked gently to the right before settling onto its new course. He scanned his instruments and cross-checked his flight computer. Underneath the wings of the Airbus, four Rolls-Royce Trent 970 engines were running smoothly, each delivering over eighty thousand pounds of thrust. The radio in the cockpit chirped sporadically as air traffic controllers directed the other planes in Sector Two around Tehran. Most of the flights were domestic, but Emirates, Air India, and other international carriers were not uncommon.

The long-haul flight was on schedule as Allard gazed out the cockpit windows. The late-day sun was starting to form shadows behind the mountains below. It was his first flight over Iran. It was more rugged and beautiful than he'd expected, but his reverie was interrupted by the copilot.

"Captain, we have a warning light on the number-three engine . . . Exhaust gas temperature is spiking and oil pressure is dropping quickly."

An automated voice in the cockpit called out another warning and a message flashed on the centralized aircraft monitor inside the cockpit. Captain Allard silenced the alarms. He was already looking at the engine data on his own monitors.

"I don't think we're going to be able to keep it running. Give me maximum continuous thrust on the good engines and let's run the engine shutdown checklist."

Blake made eye contact with his senior officer and took a deep breath. "Yes, sir, commencing in-flight shutdown on the number-three engine."

Blake pushed the button for the Fasten Seat Belt sign while Captain Allard switched to the air traffic control frequency on his headset.

"Tehran Center, Speedbird 337 requesting immediate clearance to flight level two-seven-zero. Our number-three engine has lost oil pressure and we're shutting it down."

The radio was quiet for a few long seconds. Allard and Blake shut down the malfunctioning engine and trimmed the aircraft's rudder to compensate for the off-center thrust.

"Speedbird 337, you are cleared to flight level two-seven-zero, understand number-three engine out. Are you declaring an emergency at this time?" asked the controller.

Allard looked at his copilot. "Take her down to two-seven-zero as soon as we hit driftdown speed."

"Center, 337 leaving flight level three-niner-zero for two-seven-zero. That's negative, repeat, negative on the emergency. We don't know the cause of the pressure loss yet but the other three engines are running smoothly."

"Roger, Speedbird 337. Confirm you are an A380?"

"That's affirmative, Center."

"Speedbird 337, nearest capable alternate airport is Esfahan, approximately sixty miles northwest of your position. Would you like vectors to the alternate?"

"Center, 337, negative on the alternate. We are proceeding on course, descending through flight level three-six-zero. We're going to look at restarting our number three once we reach engine-out altitude."

"Understood, Speedbird 337. Maintain heading one-two-five degrees, flight level two-seven-zero, and keep us advised of your status."

"Maintain heading one-two-five, Speedbird 337," confirmed Allard.

When the aircraft started its descent, most of the passengers felt a touch of weightlessness before their seat belts pulled them down. Flight attendants walked down the pitched aisles, waking the sleeping passengers and enforcing the seat-belt rule. Questions from the passengers were politely deflected despite the clearly elevated vigilance on the part of the crew.

Captain Allard picked up the handset for the internal public address system as the aircraft descended.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. You may have noticed that we've slowed down and descended over the past few minutes. Everything is fine. We'll soon be leveling off at twenty-seven thousand feet where we're going to stay for a bit. One of our engines was acting up so we decided to shut it down until we can correct the problem and get it restarted. The A380 is designed to fly quite well with only three engines and can get by with two if necessary. In the meantime, please listen to your flight attendants and remain in your seats. We will keep you apprised of the situation. Thank you."

The pilots spent a few minutes preparing to restart the idle engine but the warning lights flashed again. The mood in the cockpit remained businesslike despite the mounting problems.

Blake spoke calmly. "We've just lost Yellow hydraulic pressure."

The forces involved in moving the control surfaces on such a large aircraft were enormous. Without hydraulics to move the rudder, ailerons, and elevator, the pilots would be unable to maneuver the plane. The hydraulic systems were so critical that the A380 had two systems, Green and Yellow, to prevent a single failure from turning into a catastrophe.

"OK. What's Green system pressure and quantity?"

Blake was already looking at his monitor.

"Green is at 96 percent." He paused for a moment. "Make that 94 percent. Quantity is definitely falling. We may have a leak."

The pilots ran through a checklist to locate the cause of the problem. Years earlier, a Qantas Airways A380 had suffered a hydraulic failure after an engine exploded just after takeoff. The explosion had also been preceded by an oil-pressure loss. Only the skill of the crew, and much good luck, had allowed the aircraft to land safely.

The air traffic controller had just finished handling a domestic Iran Air flight when Blake switched his radio back to the air traffic control frequency.

"Tehran Center, Speedbird 337 . . ."

"Speedbird 337, this is Tehran Center, what is your status?"

"Center, our number three is still out, we've lost primary hydraulic pressure and are running on our secondary systems. Requesting vectors to the nearest capable alternate."

"Stand by, 337," ordered the controller before the radio went quiet.

A minute later, the controller returned. "Speedbird 337, turn left

heading three-one-zero and descend and maintain flight level one-eight-zero. Prepare for landing at Beheshti International."

Allard and Blake looked at each other. The captain smiled, then shook his head.

Blake keyed his microphone and calmly said, "Center, Speedbird 337. Unable to comply."

"Speedbird 337, this is Tehran Center . . . Please say again."

The radio was quiet.

"Speedbird 337, this is Tehran Center. Please acknowledge."

There was silence from the cockpit.

TWO

AREA CONTROL CENTER, Sector Two, was a cold, modern room dominated by computer monitors and communications equipment. The radio frequency handling Flight 337 was being broadcast over the loudspeakers and all eyes were on the air traffic controller working the flight. The veteran controller had worked planes with communications trouble, aircraft that had strayed off course, and even emergencies, but no one had ever disobeyed an instruction before. He looked over his shoulder for guidance from the sector chief.

"Why won't he divert to Beheshti?" shouted the chief.

The controller turned back to his monitor. Radar showed the British Airways flight continuing on course.

"They seem to be losing altitude and their course is oscillating."

"If they are going to avoid the restricted airspace, they must divert now. Raise them again," the chief ordered.

"Speedbird 337, this is Tehran Center. Come in."

For reasons of national security, safety, or even recreation, most countries have restricted airspace. Some parts of the sky are simply off-limits to aircraft that don't have permission to be there, and the airspace in front of the struggling Airbus was most definitely off-limits.

"Speedbird 337, this is Tehran Center. Do you copy?"

The chief became angrier as the seconds passed in silence. "I am willing to believe we have an aircraft in distress if they communicate and divert, but they cannot simply ignore us. We have to assume a possible Trojan horse. Alert Western Area Command. Tell them we have an unresponsive aircraft and an imminent violation of the airspace around Sirjan."

The turbulent politics of the Middle East had led Iran to put military officers or reservists in control of its civilian air traffic control centers, and the Trojan horse scenario was one that all of their air defense specialists had studied. With air traffic control radar unable to distinguish an A380 on a routine passenger flight from a B-52 bomber intent on attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, controllers could only establish an aircraft's bona fides by assessing the pilot's communication, behavior, and prefiled flight plan, all of which could be faked. This plane was already in central Iran and headed toward prohibited airspace, which was even more sensitive than restricted airspace. But the Iranians were ready.

With wars to its west and north, and unfriendly aircraft regularly patrolling the Persian Gulf to its south, Iran had fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles stationed throughout much of the country.

A technician in the air traffic control center picked up the third of several red phones on a console and spoke rapidly to the air force officer on the other end.

"Western Command, we have a foreign aircraft headed toward the Sirjan prohibited area, possible Trojan horse. Aircraft is one hundred and twenty nautical miles southeast of Esfahan, heading one-three-zero, twenty-five thousand feet . . . Aircraft has ignored instructions and is not answering its radio . . ." The technician listened for a minute. "I understand. One moment."

He held the phone at his side and pointed at the map on the computer screen in front of him as he spoke to the chief of center.

"In a few minutes they will exit the SAM net around Esfahan. If they continue on this course, they won't be within range of the S-200 battery at Bandar Abbas or the HAWK battery in Sirjan for another twenty-five minutes. They're flying through a hole in our defensive net. They'll be in Southern Sector before Western can scramble fighters or launch a missile."

The chief scowled. "Raise Southern Area Command right now. Do we have any interceptors in Kerman?"

The technician spoke into another of the red phones and relayed his conversation to the chief.

"Kerman is still not operational because of the earthquake. Southern can scramble two F-14s from Shiraz in ten minutes, but their radar is down. They're asking us what to do."

The chief studied the digital map on the screen of the controller in front of him. With his finger on the screen, he traced the probable course of the violator.

"Tell them to launch the fighters and alert the HAWK battery in Sirjan. We'll coordinate from here."

The technician relayed the orders and hung up the handset. He was a patriotic man, but he knew that the aircraft in question was almost certainly a civilian airliner with engine troubles. Shooting it down would kill the hundreds of passengers aboard. He stared at

the computer monitor in front of him, willing the giant Airbus to turn around.

The very real threat of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities ensured that its interceptors were kept on a high state of alert. The fighters based in Shiraz were American-made F-14As that had been sold to Iran before the 1979 revolution. Despite its age, the F-14 was still a formidable air superiority fighter, and it would make quick work of a commercial airliner. Each of the two fighters carried a pilot and a weapons officer. In the thirty-second briefing they were given before they jogged to the flight line, the four aviators were told only that a foreign aircraft had disobeyed instructions, ceased communications with air traffic control, and was flying into prohibited airspace. No mention was made that there might be passengers aboard or equipment troubles. The fighters were to intercept the aircraft and await further orders. Typically they would force the jet to land at an airfield away from the forbidden airspace, but the fighters carried live weapons and the pilots were well trained. They would follow the orders they were given.

At the Seventh Tactical Airbase outside Shiraz, the lead fighter throttled up and lit its afterburners, sending cones of flame erupting from the engines as it rocketed into the afternoon sky. When the second fighter was airborne and formed up with his lead, the pair banked hard left and turned to their intercept course. The planes' variable-aspect wings swept back to their high-speed positions and the fighters accelerated rapidly to just under Mach 1.5. They would cover the one hundred twenty-five miles to the Airbus in less than ten minutes. The big jet would be in missile range in less than five.

While the chief and the technician coordinated the intercept of the troubled airliner, the original controller tried repeatedly to raise

the British Airways flight. In addition to the established VHF radio frequency, he broadcasted over the 121.5 MHz emergency-use frequency, which all aircraft monitored. The Airbus was nonresponsive.

The controller addressed the chief again.

"Sir, the target aircraft is ninety miles from Sirjan but has slowed and lost altitude. Airspeed is down to two hundred twenty knots and altitude is erratic around flight level two-forty. Their troubles may be worsening."

"Then why are they not descending and diverting to Esfahan as ordered? They are strictly forbidden to enter this area."

The technician was on the phone again. "Sir, the fighters are fifty miles out and have the target on radar. Southern Command is not going to let that aircraft reach Sirjan."

The chief hesitated. Every muscle in his face was strained.

The technician wrote something on a strip of paper and handed it to his boss.

655

The chief scowled, then softened his expression. The two men had been just boys in 1988 when an American warship, the USS *Vincennes*, had shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Strait of Hormuz, killing all two hundred ninety people aboard. The men had experienced firsthand the suffering and rage that had consumed the nation in the wake of the disaster. The chief nodded slowly. He could not let it happen again.

"Give me the phone," he said. "Who is this?" he spoke calmly into the receiver.

Like all chiefs of center, he was also a senior reserve officer in the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force. He listened to the response and

replied, "This is Major Shabazz Farini of the IRIAF. Our target is most likely a British Airways A380 with mechanical issues. We had been speaking to it on civilian frequencies and tracking it normally until it developed engine trouble. Keep your weapons tight and confirm when you have visual identification of the aircraft. Understood?"

As he listened to the response, he stared at the map display as it showed the aircraft continuing on its southeast course. His breathing quickened and his face reddened.

"I understand it is a security threat, that is why *I* called *you*, but I also know that a bomber would not approach its target at two hundred and twenty knots. Do you think he's giving you time to catch up? Call me when you have visual confirmation of aircraft type!" The chief slammed the phone into its cradle.

The Iranian fighter jets slowed to five hundred knots as they approached the Airbus from its four o'clock position. The F-14s flew five hundred feet above the larger plane, giving the pilots a positive visual ID of the distinctive two-story aircraft. The fighters climbed to bleed off speed and turned hard left before rolling out on a new course behind and slightly above the passenger plane. The lead fighter moved to the left and accelerated until he was abreast of the larger plane's cockpit before descending to the Airbus's altitude. The afternoon sun made it hard for the fighter pilot to see into the passenger jet's cockpit, but he had flown to this side purposely, so the Airbus pilots could clearly see him. He accelerated again until he was a few hundred feet in front of the Airbus and rocked his wings. If the Airbus rocked its wings, it would be confirmation that the big jet was having communication problems and would follow the fighter.

But the Airbus did not rock its wings. It continued on course, slowly losing altitude. The lead F-14 pilot spoke to his commander and pulled another five hundred feet in front of the Airbus. He re-

leased three bright flares into the air. The flares were originally designed to act as decoys for heat-seeking missiles, but when used like this they were a universally understood warning to comply with instructions or face the use of force. The lead fighter banked gently to the left, indicating that the Airbus should follow, but the number-two fighter radioed his flight leader that the passenger jet was continuing on course. The leader relayed the sequence of events to his ground commander as he circled around behind the Airbus. He slotted in next to his wingman and took up firing position.

THREE

IN THE UPSTAIRS business class section of the giant Airbus, Zac Miller, a twenty-eight-year-old American technology consultant based in London, saw the fighter plane pull alongside. It was close enough for him to read the IRIAF markings under the cockpit and see the missiles slung beneath the wings.

An elderly Englishwoman in a Chanel suit sat next to Zac with pursed lips and a furrowed brow.

"It's all right," he said as he smiled at her. With an athletic build, dark wavy hair, and dark eyes, Zac used all of his natural charm to put the woman at ease. "They do this sometimes, just for practice."

The woman lowered her chin and looked at him sternly.

"Young man, my father flew Spitfires for the RAF in the Battle of Britain. I know when a fighter is 'practicing' and when it is not."

Zac raised his eyebrows and resumed looking out the window.

"But thank you anyway." The woman smiled and gave his hand a squeeze.

Nervousness filled the cabin as the other passengers watched the fighter jet hover outside their windows, but their anxiety turned to relief when the F-14 accelerated away. Their relief was severely misplaced.

THE IRANIAN AIR traffic controllers had been working frantically, but in vain, to raise the stricken aircraft on the radio. Finally, the speakers inside the control center came to life.

"Tehran Center, this is Speedbird 337."

The center erupted in cheers until the controllers remembered the tenuous situation they still had on their hands.

"Speedbird 337, why have you not answered your radio?"

"We've been a little busy up here." The control room was silent except for Captain Allard's crackly voice coming over the speakers. "Center, Speedbird 337 is declaring an emergency. We've lost our number-three engine, all primary hydraulics, and most of our electrical backup. We only have a few degrees of control surface movement. We need to put this aircraft on the ground at the nearest straight-in approach."

The chief pointed at the red phone and started shouting.

"Tell them we've reestablished contact with the aircraft. Tell them it has hydraulic and engine failures and we are working on an alternate airport. Tell them to call off those fighters!"

The technician relayed the information to the air force command center while the other controllers pondered the fate of the crippled Airbus. The gravity of the situation weighed on all of them.

The radio crackled again.

"Center, Speedbird 337. Our flight computer is telling us that Sirjan is our best bet. Requesting clearance for emergency landing at Sirjan."

"Speedbird 337, stand by . . ." said the controller.

The airport in Sirjan was at the center of the prohibited airspace. The controllers didn't know what was there, and they were not foolish enough to ask, though they often speculated among themselves. What they did know was that no Western aircraft had ever landed there.

The Iranian fighters were still shadowing the Airbus while their radios bristled with questions from their mission controller.

Yes, it was a clearly marked British Airways aircraft.

Yes, there were passengers in view, and all its lights were on.

Yes, the number-three engine appeared to be shut down.

But none of it mattered.

"Speedbird 337, clearance to Sirjan is denied. Turn right heading two-eight-zero and prepare for landing at Shiraz International."

"Center, we've got one engine out and almost no hydraulics. We're using engine thrust to turn, climb, and descend. We need a straight-in approach and we need it now. We have one hundred seventy-six souls on board and Sirjan is our only chance."

The air traffic controller looked to the chief for guidance. His body tensed as he weighed his options. He thought about national security, he thought about sovereign pride, and he thought about his career. But in the end, he decided that the lives of those aboard the wounded aircraft were worth the risks to the other three. He would not be responsible for another Flight 655. He nodded slowly to the controller working Flight 337.

"Speedbird 337, cleared to land, Sirjan runway one-four. Altimeter

setting 1006, runway elevation fifty-eight hundred feet. The airport is closed at this time, so expect no runway lights or communication with the tower. We will vector you in. As best you can, turn right heading one-six-five, descend, and maintain one-zero thousand feet."

The Airbus banked slowly to the right and settled onto its new heading as it descended toward ten thousand feet. Having made his decision, the chief began barking orders.

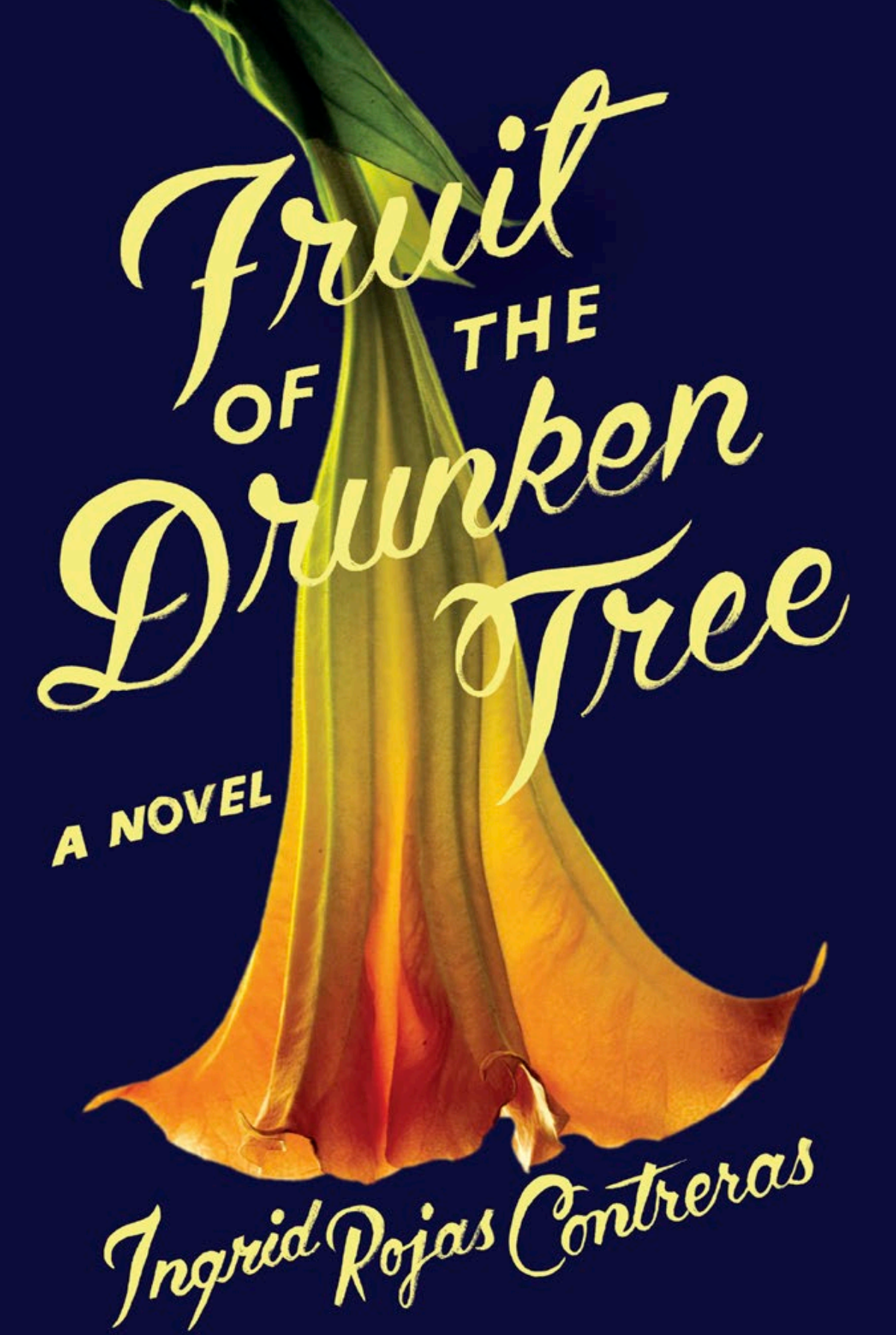
"Tell Southern Area Command to send the fighters home and stand down the SAMs at Sirjan. Tell them I have authorized the aircraft to land and I will take full responsibility for it." After a moment he added, "I'll call the garrison commander myself. That way, he'll know who to shoot first . . ."

To another controller he added, "Raise anyone you can at the airport. Make sure the runway is clear. Sound the crash alarm. Let them know they have less than ten minutes until an A380 comes in . . . God willing."

ON BOARD THE British Airways flight, the mood was tense as the cabin crew prepared for an emergency landing. Most of the passengers sat quietly and hoped that the next ten minutes of their lives would not be the last. Zac packed up his laptop and stuffed it under the seat in front of him. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to temper the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

When he opened his eyes the old woman was looking at him again.

"This is why I only fly British Airways. Their pilots are all former Royal Air Force officers. In twenty minutes we'll be safely on the ground."


Fruit
OF THE
Drunken
Tree
A NOVEL
Ingrid Rojas Contreras

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I.

The Photograph

She sits in a plastic chair in front of a brick wall, slouching. She is meek with her hair parted down the middle. There are almost no lips to be seen, but by the way she bares her teeth you can tell she is smiling. At first the smile seems flat but the more I study it, the more it seems careless and irresponsible. There is a bundle in her arms and a hole for the newborn's face, which comes out red and wrinkled like an old person's. I know it's a boy because of the blue ribbon woven into the blanket edge; then I stare at the man behind Petrona. He is afroed and striking, weighing his cursed hand on her shoulder. *I know what he's done,* and it turns my stomach but who am I to say whom Petrona should allow into a family portrait such as this?

On the back there's a date stamp of when the photo was printed—and because when I count back nine months it falls exactly on the month my family and I fled from Colombia and arrived in L.A., I turn back the photograph to look intently at the baby, to register every wrinkle and bulge around the dark hole of his gaping mouth, to decide whether he is crying or laughing, because I know exactly where and how he was conceived and that's how I lose track of time, thinking it was my fault that the girl Petrona was just fifteen when her belly was filled with bones, and when Mamá comes back from work, she does not yell (even though she sees the photograph, the envelope, the letter from Petrona all addressed to me)—no, Mamá sits down next to me like taking off so much weight, and together we are quiet and sorry on our dirty stoop on Vía Corona in East L.A., staring at that fucking photograph.

We were refugees when we arrived to the U.S. *You must be happy now that you're safe,* people said. They told us to strive for assimilation. The quicker we transformed into one of the many the better. But how could we choose? The U.S. was the land that saved us; Colombia was the land that saw us emerge.

There were mathematical principles to becoming an American: you had to know one hundred historical facts *(What was one reason for the Civil War? Who was the president during World War II?),* and you had to spend five uninterrupted years on North American soil. We memorized the facts, we stayed in place—but when I elevated my feet at night and my head found its pillow I wondered: of what country was I during those hours when my feet were in the air?

When we applied for citizenship, I rounded the hard edges of my accent and that was one tangible way in which I had changed. We heard nothing for a year. We grew thin. We understood how little we were worth, how small our claim in the world. We had no money after our application fee, and nowhere to go. Then, we received the summons for our interview, the final background check, the examination, the approval.

At the ceremony, they screened a video filled with eagles and artillery and all of us recited a pledge. We sang our new anthem and once it was done it was said we were American. The newest batch of Americans celebrated, but in the open courtyard, I let my head hang back. I watched the sway of palm trees knowing here was where I was supposed to think about the future, and how bright it might be, but instead all I could think of was Petrona, how I was fifteen like she had been the last time I saw her.

From Mamá's old agenda I got her address. But it wasn't a real address, just a set of directions Petrona had dictated to Mamá back when we lived in Bogotá: *Petrona Sánchez at the invasión between Street 7 and 48. Kilometer 56, the house past the lilac bush.* In our apartment, I locked myself in the bathroom and turned on the shower, and as the bathroom steamed I wrote the letter. I didn't know where to begin, so I followed the form I had learned in middle school:

Heading *(3 de Febrero del 2000, Chula Santiago, Los Angeles, Estados Unidos),* respectful greeting *(Querida Petrona),* body that uses easy and exact vocabulary *(Petrona, cómo estás? Cómo está tu familia?),* each new paragraph with first line indented (*Mi familia está bien. / Estoy leyendo* Don Quixote. */ Los Angeles es bonita, pero no tan bonita como Bogotá).* The closing line was next, but instead I wrote about what it was like to flee from Colombia; how we boarded a plane, Bogotá to Miami to Houston to L.A., how I prayed for no immigration officers to stop us and send us back, how I could not stop thinking about everything we had lost. When we first arrived to L.A. it was impossibly sunny and all I could smell was the salt from the ocean. *The smell of salt burned my nose when I breathed in.* I wrote paragraph after paragraph about salt, like I was crazy *(We washed our hands with salt to reverse bad luck. / Salt was the one thing Mamá bought when she was afraid to spend our money. / I read in a magazine that packaged salt has crushed animal bone in it, which disgusted me until I realized that so must the ocean's. Beach sand was part bones too).* In the end all the talk about salt came to feel like some type of code. *It's gotten so,* I wrote, *I can't even smell salt anymore.* It became my closing line, not because I meant it to be but because suddenly I had nothing more to say.

I never asked the one thing I wanted to know: *Petrona, when we left, where did you go?*

When Petrona's reply arrived, I tried to find hidden messages behind the ordinary information she volunteered: the nice weather, the newly paved road to her house in the invasión, the lettuces, the cabbages in season.

In the end it didn't matter her letter back to me was so ordinary, because all the answers I could ever hunger for were printed on that photograph, which she creased in half and placed in the folds of her letter before licking the envelope and pressing it shut, before handing the letter to the postman, before it traveled just like how I once did, Bogotá to Miami to Houston to L.A., before it arrived bringing with it all this wreckage to our doorstep.

2.

The Girl Petrona

The girl Petrona came to our home when I was seven and my sister Cassandra was nine. She was thirteen and had only gone through the third grade. She stood with a tattered brown suitcase at the gate of our three-story house in a yellow dress that dangled at her ankles. Her hair was short and her mouth was hanging open.

The garden yawned between us like an abyss. Cassandra and I gazed at the girl Petrona from behind the two left-most columns of our house. The white columns rose from the porch and supported the overhang of the second floor. The second floor stuck out like an overbite. It was a typical Bogotá house, made to look like the old colonials, white with wide windows and black iron bars and a clay roof with red-blue half-moon tiles. It was part of a row of identical houses linked one to the other by the sidewalls. I didn't know then why the girl Petrona looked at our house that way, but Cassandra and I gaped back at her with the same kind of awe. The girl Petrona lived in an invasión. There were invasiones in almost every tall hill in the city, government land taken over by the displaced and the poor. Mamá herself had grown up in an invasión—but not in Bogotá.

From behind her column Cassandra asked, "Did you see what she's wearing, Chula? That's a *boy* haircut she has." She widened her eyes behind her glasses. Cassandra's glasses took up a great deal of her face. They were pink-rimmed and oversized and magnified the pores on her cheeks. Mamá was waving at the girl Petrona from the

front door. She sprang forward into the garden, clicking her heels on the stepping-stones and bouncing her hair on her back.

The girl Petrona watched Mamá as she approached.

Mamá was a natural beauty. That's what other people said. Strange men on the street stopped her in order to pay compliments to the dramatic breadth of her eyebrows or the pull of her deep, brown eyes. Mamá didn't like going through pains for her beauty, but she woke up every morning to apply thick black liner to her eyes, and drove monthly to the salon to get her toenails done, arguing all the while that it was worth it, because her eyes were the well of her power and her small feet the mark of her innocence.

The night before the girl Petrona arrived Mamá made three stacks with her tarot cards on her breakfast table and asked, "Is the girl Petrona trustworthy?" She put the question in a number of ways with a variety of tones until she felt she was asking the question with one mind; then she picked the top card from the middle stack. She flipped the card over and laid it in front of her and saw that it was the Fool. Her hand froze in midair as she regarded the upside-down card. The card depicted a white man smiling caught in a half step looking dreamily to the sky, in one hand a white rose and over his shoulder a golden satchel. He wore leggings and boots and a princelike flouncy dress. At his feet a white dog leaped. The man wasn't looking, but he was about to fall off a cliff.

Mamá collected the stacks in her hands, reshuffling: "Well, we've been warned."

"Should we tell Papá?" I asked. Papá worked at an oil site far away in Sincelejo and I was never sure when he was due back for a visit. Mamá said Papá had to work far away because there were no jobs in Bogotá, but all I knew was that sometimes we told Papá about things, and sometimes we didn't.

Mamá laughed. "It's all the same anyway. *Any* girl you hire in this city will have ties to hooligans. Just look at Dolores down the block—*her* girl was part of a gang and they robbed Dolores's house, imagine: they didn't even leave the microwave." Mamá saw the worry on my face. Her eyeliner ran thickly and ticked up at the

corners. The tick wrinkled as she smiled. She dug her finger in my ribs. "You're too serious. Don't worry."

In the front garden Cassandra said from behind her column, "This girl Petrona won't last a month—look at her; she has the spirit of a mosquito." I blinked and saw that it was true. The girl Petrona shrank back as Mamá opened the gate.

Mamá always had bad luck with girls. The last girl, Julieta, was fired because Mamá had walked into the kitchen at the wrong time and saw Julieta form her mouth around a drop of spit, and as the girl Julieta looked up the spit plunged into Mamá's morning coffee. When Mamá demanded an explanation, the girl Julieta said, "Maybe the Señora's eyes are seeing things." A second later Mamá was throwing the girl Julieta's belongings on the street, and grabbing the girl Julieta by the collar saying, "Don't come back, Julieta, don't you bother coming back," pushing her out of the door and slamming it shut.

Mamá hired girls based on the urgency of their situation. She sought out girls employed at other houses and gave them our telephone number in case somebody they knew needed a job. Mamá heard sad stories of a family struck by illness, pregnancy, displaced by war, and even though we could only offer five thousand pesos per day, enough for some vegetables and rice at the market, many girls were interested in applying. I think Mamá was always hiring girls that reminded her of herself in her youth, but it never turned out how she wanted.

One girl had almost stolen Cassandra when she was a baby. Mamá didn't know her name; only that she was infertile, except how Mamá put it was that the girl was *barren like beach sand in a drought*. Most people we knew got kidnapped in the routine way: at the hands of guerrillas, held at ransom and then returned, or disappeared. The way Cassandra almost got kidnapped was a fun twist on an all too common story. There was a photograph of the infertile girl in question in our family album. She looked out from behind the slick of the plastic sheet with frizzy hair and a missing front tooth. Mamá said she kept the girl's photo in our album

because it was all part of our family history. Even the photos of Papá as a communist youth were there for anyone to see. He wore bell-bottom jeans and dark sunglasses. His teeth were clenched and his fist was in the air. He looked sophisticated, but Mamá said not to be fooled, because really Papá was as lost as Adam from the Bible would be on Mother's Day.

Ours was a kingdom of women, with Mamá at the head, perpetually trying to find a fourth like us, or a fourth like *her,* a younger version of Mamá, poor and eager to climb out of poverty, on whom Mamá could right the wrongs she herself had endured.

At the gate, Mamá extended her hand firmly to the girl Petrona. The girl Petrona was slow so Mamá scooped her hand in both of hers and moved it rigidly up and down. The girl Petrona's arm undulated free and loose like a wave. "How do you do?" Mamá said. The girl Petrona merely assented and locked her eyes on to the ground. Cassandra was right. This girl Petrona would not last a month. Mamá put an arm around the girl Petrona and led her into our garden, except instead of going up the stone steps to our front door they veered to the left. Together they walked toward the bed of flowers at the edge of the garden. They stopped in front of the tree closest to the gate and then Mamá pointed at the tree and whispered.

We called it el Borrachero, the Drunken Tree. Papá called it by its scientific name, *Brugmansia arborea alba,* but nobody ever knew what he was talking about. It was a tall tree with twisted limbs, big white flowers, and dark brown fruits. All of the tree, even the leaves, was filled with poison. The tree drooped half over our garden, half over the neighborhood sidewalk, releasing a honeyed scent like a seductive, expensive perfume.

Mamá touched one droopy, silky flower as she whispered to the girl Petrona, who watched the flower as it swung lightly on its stem. I guessed Mamá was giving her the same warnings I had received about the tree: not to pick up its flowers, not to sit underneath, not to stand by it too long, and most important, not to let the neighbors know we ourselves were afraid of it.

The Drunken Tree made our neighbors nervous.

Who's to say why Mamá decided to grow that tree in her garden? It may have been that long mean streak in her, or it may have been because she was always saying you couldn't trust anyone.

In the front garden Mamá lifted a fallen white flower from the ground, pinching it at its stem, and threw it over the gate. The girl Petrona followed the flight of the flower and her eyes lingered on it as it landed on the neighborhood sidewalk with its two o'clock shadow. Then the girl Petrona stared at her hands holding the suitcase.

Just after she planted the Drunken Tree, Mamá laughed like a witch and bit the side of her index finger, "The surprise they will get, all our curious neighbors who stop to spy in our windows!"

Mamá said nothing would happen to our neighbors, except if they dwelled for too long the perfume of the Drunken Tree would descend on them and make them a little dizzy, then their head would feel like a balloon, and after a long while they would want very badly to lie down right there on the sidewalk to take a little nap. Nothing too serious.

Once there was a seven-year-old girl who ate a flower.

"Supposedly," Mamá said then. "But do you know what I told them? I said maybe they should watch their young girl more closely, eh? Keep her from poking her dirty nose in my front yard."

For years the neighbors had pleaded with the Neighborhood Administration to make Mamá take her tree down. It was, after all, the tree whose flowers and fruit were used in burundanga and the date-rape drug. Apparently, the tree had the unique ability of taking people's free will. Cassandra said burundanga was where the idea of zombies came from. Burundanga was a native drink made out of Drunken Tree seeds. The drink had once been given to the servants and wives of Great Chiefs in Chibcha tribes, in order to bury them alive with the Great Dead Chief. The burundanga made the servants and wives dumb and obedient, and they willingly sat in a corner of the underground grave waiting, while the tribe sealed the exit and left them with food and water that would have been a sin to touch

(reserved as it was for use by the Great Chief in the afterworld). Many people used it in Bogotá—criminals, prostitutes, rapists. Most victims who reported being drugged with burundanga woke up with no memory of assisting in the looting of their apartments and bank accounts, opening their wallets and handing over everything, but that's exactly what they'd done.

Mamá, however, showed up at the Neighborhood Administration with a stack of research papers, a horticulturist, and a lawyer and because the fruit of the Drunken Tree was something the experts had little interest in, and because the small amount of research there was didn't agree on defining the seeds as poisonous or even a drug, the Administration decided to leave it alone.

There were many attempts to damage our Drunken Tree. Every few months we woke up to see out of our front windows that the branches hanging on the side of the gate over the sidewalk had once again been sawed off and left on the grass around the tree's trunk like dead limbs. Our Drunken Tree flourished nonetheless, persistently, with its provocative white flowers hanging about it like bells and the wind forever teasing out its intoxicating fragrance into the air.

Mamá was convinced la Soltera was behind the attempts. We called her that because she was forty years old and single and still lived with her old mother. La Soltera lived to our right and I often saw her wandering around in circles in her garden, wearing too much purple eye shadow and enveloped in a day-old-coffee-and-fresh-cigarette smell. I often put my ear to the wall we shared with la Soltera to hear what she did all day, but mostly what I heard was bickering and the television left on. Mamá said la Soltera was the only kind of woman with enough time on her hands to go attacking someone's tree. So in retaliation, when Mamá swept our front red-tile patio, she swept the dirt through the sides of the tall ceramic planters and the pines, *toward* the patio of la Soltera.

Back in the garden, Cassandra said, "Quick, Chula, before they see you!"

Cassandra shuffled her feet and slid her hands clockwise around

the column to remain hidden as Mamá and the girl Petrona came up the stone steps to the front door. I did the same, but kept my head out the side to watch. Mamá had her arm around the girl Petrona and the girl Petrona was staring down.

"These are my girls," Mamá said as they came to our red-tile patio. The girl Petrona did a curtsy, her long sandaled feet together and her knees out to both sides, stretching the lap of her dress like a tent. It was odd to see a girl six years older do a curtsy. Cassandra and I remained hidden behind the columns and stared back at her and said nothing. She looked at us, her eyes a spotlighted brown, nearly yellow. Then she cleared her throat, yellow dress to her ankles, tattered suitcase in hand.

"They're shy," Mamá said. "They'll get used to you."

They walked inside together, Mamá's voice fading slowly, like an outgoing train saying, "Here, let me show you your room."

Cassandra and I always felt strange when we had a new girl in our house, so we stayed in Mamá's bedroom and watched Mexican soap operas until they were over and then *Singin' in the Rain* on the English channel with subtitles.

The movie was interrupted twice an hour by a news flash. We were used to it, but Cassandra and I groaned all the same. I let my face stretch and droop against my hand, and the reporter talked about that mysterious ocean of acronyms that seemed to always be close at hand—FARC, ELN, DAS, AUC, ONU, INL. She spoke of things the acronyms had done to one another, but sometimes, the reporter spoke of one name. A simple name. First name, last name. *Pablo Escobar.* In that confused ocean of acronyms, the simple name was like a fish breaking the water, something I could hold on to and remember.

Then our movie would begin again. The singing would return, the yellow trench coats, the white rosy faces. North America seemed like such a clean, pleasant place. The rain was sleek on the black-tar street and the police were well-mannered and filled with principles. It was striking to see. Mamá always got out of tickets by batting her lashes, begging, and slipping policemen bills of

veinte-mil. The Colombian police were easily corrupted. So were the officials at the notaries and the court, whom Mamá always paid so she could be ushered to the head of the line and her applications put at the top of the stack. Cassandra held her nose in front of the television and spoke like Lina Lamont, the beautiful blond actress cursed with the horrible, nasal voice. She said, "And I cayn't stand 'im," and we giggled. She said it over and over until we quivered with laughter and we lay on our backs overcome.

3·

Mosquita Muerta

At our house Petrona received her first instructions in washing, ironing and mending, scrubbing the floors, cooking, making the beds, watering the plants, dusting, fluffing the pillows. Petrona didn't look thirteen, though that's what Mamá said. Her face was ashy and her eyes bitter-old. Her hair was cut short like a boy's and she wore a white apron with border lace like a fine tablecloth. She always had flushed cheeks and red knuckles.

Petrona left every day at six in the evening, but there was a room in the back of our house, past the indoor patio, that was all her own. There, when Cassandra and I got back from school, we would find Petrona, sitting on the bed and listening to the radio. We could see her plainly through the clear window of her bedroom. She sat motionless, hands clasped against her chest, the muffled sounds of men singing over soft guitars escaping from under the crack of her door.

Cassandra and I pressed our noses against her window. We watched Petrona as she rocked, but most of the time she remained very still sitting there, like a lifeless rag doll slumped against the wall. I wondered what Petrona thought about as she closed her eyes. I imagined that something hard was swelling from the inside of her, and if we left it alone, Petrona would turn to stone. At times I was sure it was beginning to happen because the light began glowing gray on her cheeks and her chest wasn't moving with her breath. To me, Petrona looked like one of those smooth plaster statues on display in private courtyards and public squares all over Bogotá—

Mamá said they were saints, but Papá said they were random people who had done something good and remarkable.

In our house Petrona wore a cloud of silence wherever she went. Her footsteps had no sound. She deliberately lifted and placed her feet one after the other on the carpet, inaudible like a cat. Then, the only noise announcing Petrona was the sloshing of soapy water, which she carried in a bright green bucket to the second floor, holding the handle with both hands, advancing one elephant step at a time.

I could hear her panting as she carried things up and down the house. She carried trays with food, mops, bags of clothes, boxes with toys, cleaners, disinfectants. When I heard the first murmurs of her panting, I left my half-done homework on the bed and stood at the door of the bedroom that I shared with Cassandra. It opened to the left at the top of the stairs. As I watched Petrona, she looked up at me and smiled weakly. Then she cleared her throat and went down the hall toward Mamá's bedroom.

I always imagined the silence in Petrona's throat like dry fur draping over her vocal cords, and when she cleared her throat, I imagined the fur shaking a little, then settling, smooth like hair on a fruit.

Petrona's silence made Mamá nervous.

Mamá put all her energy into making Petrona speak. Mamá shared countless stories about our family in the northeast, her childhood, her Indian grandmother, seeing ghosts, but Petrona never told stories of her own. Petrona only punctuated Mamá's stories with "Si, Señora Alma," "No, Señora Alma," and shook her head when she wanted to convey surprise or disbelief.

Cassandra and I were intrigued by Petrona's silence. We hung around to see if she talked with Mamá. We decided it was just like a street cat when a cajoling stranger offered a bowl of milk. We made it a point to count the syllables Petrona used each time she spoke. We pressed our fingertips to our thumbs and pronounced her syllables in our head. We counted obsessively and slowly we realized she never spoke more syllables than six. We started to think that maybe Petrona was a poet or maybe someone under a spell.

I didn't tell Cassandra that in a certain light Petrona looked to me like a statue, that when she was still and quiet the folds of her apron seemed to me to harden into the stone draperies of church saints. I knew Cassandra would find the idea ridiculous and she would laugh at me forever. Privately, I came up with saint names for Petrona. *Petrona, Our Lady of the Invasiones. Petrona, Patron Saint of Our Secret Girlhood.*

At night, when Petrona was gone, we looked for clues in her room. There were fashion magazines stacked next to her bed and a red lipstick standing erect on the windowsill. Her room smelled like laundry soap. On the white wall of the bathroom she had drawn little hearts by the toilet paper dispenser in black ink. The black hearts floated up in a smoky pattern until they disappeared behind a beehive painting Mamá had hung before Petrona arrived. I thought the black hearts were proof Petrona was a poet, but Cassandra said that the magazines and the lipstick weren't something a poet would own. None of the items seemed like they would belong to a saint either.

At home, Mamá watched Petrona closely. Her eyes hovered over Petrona like two bright-as-the-moon planets, deep with death. Cassandra and I sat on the floor with our homework on the coffee table. From time to time we glanced from our books and just over the top of the living room couch we could see Mamá smoking her cigarettes at the dining table and following Petrona with her eyes.

That meant she was looking for incriminating evidence. It happened the same way when Papá came home for vacation and she thought he was cheating on her. "His thing smelled like fish, it's not normal," she said while Cassandra and I stared at her wide-eyed. As Papá made breakfast, read the newspaper, played solitaire, Mamá followed him with her eyes and said, *"Sucio,"* under her breath, until one day she stopped doing it altogether, and I had to wonder how Papá had managed to convince Mamá to stop.

In the living room, I tried to keep my eyes on my math book, but as I looked at the numbers I couldn't understand them, and looking at them I only remembered Mamá's eyes, felt them, the darkly set eyes deep with death hovering over Petrona. Petrona felt them too,

and this made her run into things and topple over Mamá's pretty vases with the stick end of her feather duster.

Mamá petted her widow's peak. She drew a breath from her cigarette and said, "Petrona, how is your mother?" The white smoke of her cigarette climbed in a winding trail to the ceiling, where it widened in circles. Some of the smoke trailed out of Mamá's mouth. Petrona looked up. She looked shocked, then relieved. "Well, Señora, thanks," she said, the *s*'s in her words carrying the most volume and burying everything under their hiss. She slinked to the swinging door and sighed a long sigh before going into the kitchen.

If the tarot cards had called Petrona an upside-down Fool and Mamá didn't trust her, I wondered then how come Mamá didn't fire her. Instead she became the girl whose name bubbled up beneath our hours.

Staring at my math book in the living room, I thought it must have been Petrona's saintlike qualities that stilled Mamá's distrust.

Mamá put out her cigarette. "God knows how she survives the invasiones."

"Shh, Mamá." Cassandra stared at the still swinging door. "She'll hear you."

Mamá waved the air. "Hmph. Ella? Ella no es nada más que una mosquita muerta."

Because Mamá grew up in an invasión she prided herself in being openly combative, so people who pretended to be weak disgusted her. That was why she called any nonviolent person *a little dead fly,* someone whose life-strategy was playing dead while pretending to be highly insignificant. Other mosquitas muertas included our schoolteachers, our neighbors, the newscasters on the television, and the president.

Mamá yelled at the television, "Virgilio Barco thinks he's fooling this country with his little mosquita muerta act, but I know he's nothing but a snake! Who does he think he's fooling? 'He has no ties to Pablo Escobar'? I wasn't born yesterday."

When Papá was home, he too yelled at the television, except he said: "Are we mice or men, no me joda?"

I wanted to yell at the television like Mamá and Papá, but I had to learn how to properly do it. I gathered that being a mouse was better than being a mosquita muerta, and being a snake was better than being a man, because flies pretending to be dead could be crushed, mice were shy, and men were persecuted; but everybody always avoided snakes.

Mamá had been yelling increasingly at the television because of a man called Luis Carlos Galán. Galán was running for president and Mamá was a complete fanatic. She said that Colombia's future had finally arrived, and it had arrived in the most beautiful package possible. *Am I right, princesas?* We were watching the presidential debates in Mamá's bedroom.

Petrona sat on the floor. She didn't seem to have much of an opinion, which was fine because neither did I. I told Mamá Galán didn't seem to me to be different from any other man on the television and Mamá pretended to spit into the air, saying, "See this? This is what I think of what you just said." She clicked her thumb on a key on the remote until Galán's voice boomed in the bedroom, and then she raised her voice over the television, asking was I blind, was I not able to see how all politicians were salt statues compared to Galán?

Mamá was making a reference to the Bible—that much I knew. Cassandra and I went to a small Catholic school where a priest visited each year and told us the basic stories, but our knowledge of the Bible was spotty at best. I knew there had been a woman fleeing her burning town who had looked over her shoulder and God had pulverized her into a pile of salt—but I didn't know why she was punished, and I didn't get what that story had to do with politicians. It didn't matter anyway. Mamá was always coming up with weird metaphors. One time she said, "Trust is water in a glass; if you spill it, it's gone forever," as if she had never heard of mops or the cycle of

rain and evaporation. I liked what Papá said better—that Colombian presidents were all of them salados, all of them unlucky. I caught Petrona's eye and smiled, but she didn't respond. I made circles with my index finger at the side of my head and pointed at Mamá. Petrona pressed her lips together and looked away in a grin.

Papá was interested in the war like Mamá was interested in Galán. When he was home, he clipped articles about the civil conflict, turned up the volume when the news came on, and ran to the phone to gossip with his friends afterward. "Did you hear the latest?" He talked about the most recent political scandal and then exploded into accounts of the 1980s, which was his favorite decade in Colombian history.

That's how come I was interested in politics myself. Someday, I wanted to be just like Papá. Papá was like a walking encyclopedia. He boasted that he could name at least a third of the 128 paramilitary groups in Colombia: *the Begrimed, Black Eagle, Antimás, Alfa 83, the Crickets, Magdalena Cleansing, Menudo, Rambo* . . . He also said he knew some of the names of the groups within the death squadrons, the narco-paramilitary *(Death to Revolutionaries, Death to Kidnappers),* the regular guerrillas *(FARC, ELN),* but his specialty was the paramilitary. I tried hard to be like Papá, but no matter how much of an effort I made, I couldn't even grasp the simplest of concepts—what was the difference between the guerrillas and the paramilitary? What was a communist? Who was each group fighting?

Mamá wasn't ashamed to admit she knew nothing about politics. "Look at me," she yelled, winking, "I'm learning. Have you seen the way Galán fills his red shirt? I'll learn *all* the issues you want."

Cassandra shook her head, then Mamá said, "He is *all* a specimen, no?" Cassandra shushed her because she couldn't hear Galán's speech, but Mamá ignored Cassandra and begged the television, "Teach me to care, Galán, querido!"

Galán shook with vigor on the screen, yelling into a mob of microphones: *The only enemy I recognize is he who uses terror and violence to silence, intimidate, and assassinate the most important protagonists of our history!*

Mamá inched forward on her seat. "Isn't he beautiful when he says '*our* history'?"

Cassandra rolled her eyes.

Mamá's bedroom windows were completely covered in red half-tone posters of Galán. The very air in her room was tinged red from the light coming through the row of Galán faces—all of them turned up, frozen in mid-yell, his hair up in a tempest. I glanced at Petrona, who was now folding white napkins into triangles, and saw as her right eyebrow floated up and tensed a crease on her forehead.

I decided that presidential debates were tiresome.

I slipped underneath one poster and pressed my forehead against the window. I gazed down at the empty sidewalk and spied on the neighbors. To the right, la Soltera held a watering hose to her dying bed of flowers. To the left, small children flipped pails with dirt onto the ground. An old man was making his way across on the sidewalk. When he saw me, he leaned on his cane and stared. It only occurs to me now how symbolic it must have looked—a seven-year-old girl gazing out below a row of Galán faces, giant and feverish, trumpeting some kind of future.

I told Cassandra about Petrona's eyebrow going up during Galán's speech later when we were alone in our bedroom. Cassandra said it was too little to go on, but probably Petrona was *apolitical*. That's what people who didn't like Galán were called—that's what we learned from Cassandra's homeroom teacher, Profesor Tomás, who said if you didn't like Galán you were either apolitical or in a coma. When we told Mamá, she didn't question Cassandra's theory and explained that Petrona was apolitical because of her background. Mamá lowered her voice and told us that the girl who had recommended Petrona said that Petrona was the main breadwinner in her house. "Imagine, a thirteen-year-old—the *breadwinner* of a house." Mamá said that when you had that kind of responsibility, it was difficult to be interested in abstract things like politics.

Cassandra nodded. I didn't know whether to agree or disagree. What I knew was that I felt sorry for Petrona, so I told Cassandra it was in our best interest to get on Petrona's good side—because

not only did Petrona control the candy, she also had the power to cover for us if we did something wrong, and she could spit in our drinks and food without us knowing. So when Cassandra and I went to play in the park, we brought Petrona along. We thought Petrona would join us, but instead she sat alone in the swings, saying nothing, doing nothing. When we invited her to build a sand mountain, she said she was resting her feet, and when we grew tired and went to her side to make conversation, our efforts fell flat.

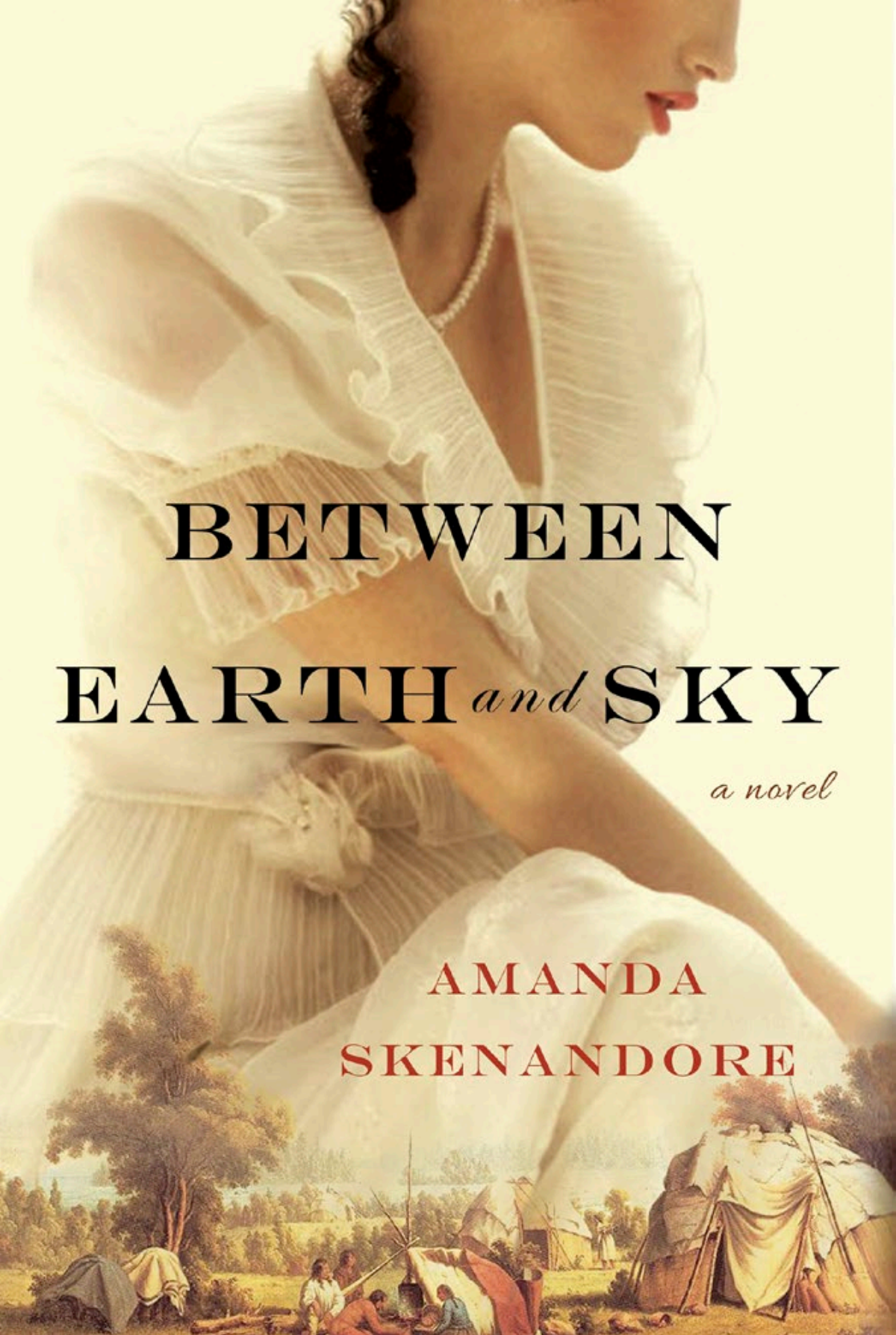
"What's your favorite color?" Cassandra said.

"Blue."

The silence after her one word was deafening. "Mine's purple," I said. "What's your favorite television show?" This was the conventional, two-step procedure for making friends, but Petrona blushed, and her eyes teared up, then became frosted in what seemed like anger. I didn't know what to do, so I ran away to climb a tree, and Cassandra followed. From far off, high in the branches we watched Petrona. Petrona rubbed the sleeve of her sweater on her nose. She sneezed. Cassandra said maybe Petrona didn't have a television. I shrugged.

We knew what it was like to feel different. There were kids who didn't play with us because their parents forbade it. There were rumors that Mamá had *Sold It*. One parent said, "Poor women don't rise from poverty with their wit *alone,*" and when we went to Mamá to tell her, Mamá had been so angry she fumed right into the park yelling at the top of her lungs that she had had *no* occasion to sell *anything*—*It* being made of gold, *It* bringing men to her feet before she could even *think* about lifting a finger to charge.

Cassandra knew what *It* was, but she wouldn't tell me, and the tightness of her face kept me from insisting. That was why Cassandra and I played alone. We chased each other around the swings, we played tag, we made castles in the sand pit and trampled them underfoot. We ignored the other children who skipped hand in hand and sat in tight circles, making believe Cassandra and I weren't even there.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SKENANDORE

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CHAPTER 1

Philadelphia, 1906

Her past arrived that morning on page ten, tucked between a cross-hatched cartoon of striking trolley workers and an advertisement for derby hats.

INDIAN MAN FACES GALLOWS FOR
MURDER OF FEDERAL AGENT

Alma held the newsprint up to the light and read the article twice, three times, as if the words might change upon closer inspection.

That name. She knew it as well as her own. Her lips moved around the syllables—yet familiar after all these years. The accompanying sound died in her mouth.

His face coalesced in her mind: broad cheekbones, tall forehead, coppery skin. His clever eyes once again met her own. But he was just a boy then, a youth when they'd parted. What of the man he'd become?

She drew in an overdue breath and shook her head. No, she could not picture him a killer. The journalist must have gotten it wrong. That sort of thing happened all the time. Had the paper used his real name—his Indian name—the name she'd breathed a million times, then she would know for sure.

Surely the other dailies had run the story, too, and with more detail. A different name, a different man. And if not? If it was him, what would knowing bring save more heartache?

She pushed away the paper and groped for her teacup. It slipped from her fingers and shattered atop its saucer. Hot tea bled into the tablecloth.

"You all right, Mrs. Mitchell? Heard a noise clear from—Your tea!" The maid scurried in and threw a towel over the shattered porcelain.

The clock sounded in the foyer, each chime beating in Alma's ear. She had a ladies' auxiliary meeting to sit through at nine. Later the Civic Club and a few laughterless games of euchre. Busyness, after all, was the best tonic for regret.

She stood, but her knees wavered. Her feet refused to move. More of that first day came back to her: wagon dust and smoke, cornbread and fire. The leather doll. She must know if it was him. "Edie, did we get the *Record* and the *Inquirer* this morning?"

"Your dress, ma'am. The tea's done spilt onto the lovely batiste. Best get it off before the stain sets."

She waved the maid off. "Never mind that. The papers?"

"I'll fetch 'em, ma'am. Along with some vinegar for that stain. But sit down, won't you? Your face has the air of the grave."

CHAPTER 2

Wisconsin, 1881

For the sixteenth time that day—she knew, for she'd counted—Alma searched the horizon. She wobbled atop her toes and craned her neck that she might see beyond the bend where the road disappeared into the forest. Empty.

She rocked back onto her heels and squeezed her eyes shut, listening for the pounding of hooves or cry of wagon wheels. A bird cawed from above. Leaves chattered. Pans clanked from the kitchen at the back of the schoolhouse. But nothing of her father, the wagons, and the Indians he promised to bring.

After another searching glance, she spun around and skipped toward the schoolhouse to see how far the hands on the grandfather clock had moved since last she'd checked.

"Alma!"

Not the sound she'd hoped to hear.

"Yes, Mama?"

"What did I tell you about running? Now you've gone and rumpled your dress."

Running and skipping were not the same thing, but the sharp look in her mother's eyes told her it was best to mind her tongue.

"Keep to your best behavior now," her mother said as she fussed over Alma's dress. "These children will look to you as an example."

"Yes, Mama."

"But don't be overly familiar either." She straightened the pearl brooch at Alma's collar. "They're Indians, after all."

Indians. Her mother spoke like it was a disease. Surely not. Her father wouldn't bring them here if that were so. Surely they could still be friends without Alma falling sick to whatever it was her mother feared.

Galloping horse hooves enlivened the quiet as a pair of wagons rounded the bend into view. Their iron-rimmed wheels ground over the gravel trail. Dust swirled amid the trees. She bounced on her heels and clapped her hands, willing the sweat-slickened horses to press their gait.

At last the wagons arrived, stopping in the boxy shadow of the great schoolhouse. Her father jumped down. Alma abandoned her mother and ran . . . er . . . skipped to his side. He picked her up and kissed her, his bushy mustache tickling her cheek. "Here they are, kitten, your new classmates."

Thirty-seven black-haired children huddled in the wagon beds. She counted each one twice, just to be sure. A smile readied on her face. She waited for her new friends to look her way, but they kept their heads down and gazes lowered, their knees drawn tight against their chests, as if the day were cold and cloudy, not sunny and fair.

Her father set her down and opened the back gates.

None of the Indians moved.

When he touched the shoulder of the nearest child, the boy shrank back as if stung.

"Come now, no one here will hurt you," her father said.

Why didn't they climb down? It couldn't be comfortable crowded in like that, nothing but scratchy hay to sit upon. Couldn't they smell the sweet cornbread Mrs. Simms had just finished baking? Alma looked beyond them at the schoolhouse. The freshly painted trim gleamed white and three stories' worth of windows sparkled with sunlight. Surely, they hadn't such grand buildings on their reservations.

Finally, a boy seated near the edge raised his head. Alma guessed him to be only a year or two older than she was. Loose strands of hair danced about his round face, catching the light with their glossy sheen. He pushed them behind his ears and glanced around the yard. She followed his gaze from the clapboard outbuildings, to the nearby

picnic spread, to the lawn and surrounding forest. Then his dark brown eyes fixed on her.

Alma forgot her smile. His stare reminded her of the fox she'd seen sniffing at the edge of the yard two days before. Intelligent. Cautious. Just as curious about her as she was of him.

The boy scooted across the wagon bed and dangled his legs over the edge. For the count of several seconds he sat there, undecided, his leather-clad feet swaying high above the grass.

Jump down, Alma breathed.

At last he did.

One by one the other children followed. The school's new teacher, Miss Wells, shepherded them toward the picnic table. Alma moved to join them, but her mother grabbed her hand. Despite the dusting of rouge she'd seen her apply that morning, her mother's face was in want of color. She stared at the new arrivals with the same pinched expression she brandished at stray dogs and street-side beggars.

"You said they would be clean and affable," she said to Alma's father.

"Wagon dust, Cora. They've only just arrived."

"Humph. Not a very impressive lot."

"Give them time."

"A millennium would not be long enough."

"We're their salvation." Her father's voice hummed with excitement. "Here they shall be reborn, civilized and good."

Alma kept her face lowered, tickling a dandelion with the toe of her boot. She knew better than to interrupt her parents' conversation but wished dearly they'd hurry up.

Her mother gestured around the yard. "Indians or not, how are we to raise a genteel young lady in this wildness?"

"Come now, La Crosse is only a few miles away."

"Provincial. Hardly fit to be called a city."

Her father squatted down. "What do you think, kitten?"

Alma glanced at the children corralled before the picnic table. "They're awfully funny looking."

"That's just on the outside. Inside they have the same potential as you or I."

"Really?"

"Yes," her father said at the same time her mother shook her head *no*.

Alma looked over again. It would be so nice to finally have friends her own age. "Let's keep them, Papa. Can we?"

Her father rose and took her hand. He offered his other to her mother. She didn't take it, but strode nonetheless beside them to join the others.

Standing before the picnic table, her father cleared his throat. "Almighty God, Creator and Preserver of the white man and the red man alike, we call upon Thee to bless the founding of this school and the children within its fold. Banish the wickedness from their souls and guide them toward lives of industry and righteousness. . . ."

As her father's gentle voice grew louder, full-throated like that of a ringmaster, Alma peeked at the new arrivals. A few children prayed as they should, hands clasped and heads downturned. The others wandered their gaze around the yard or stared wide-eyed at her father, whose outstretched arms had begun to vibrate along with the timbre of his voice.

Their skin was not really red, but varying shades of brown and copper. Many wore their hair long in braids or ribbon-wrapped ponytails that snaked down their backs.

The Indians she'd seen in her father's color-plate books were strange and fearsome: feathers splayed about their heads, bright bobbles adorning their chests, paint smudged across their cheeks. These children bore little resemblance to those drawings. Most wore pants and dresses similar to those good Christians wore. But whereas Alma's clothes had lace and ruffles, their outfits were ornamented with beads and brocade of astounding color—blues like the sky and the river, reds and yellows like the newly changed leaves. One boy had what looked like horse teeth sewed to his shirt. They jiggled as he shifted from one foot to the other. She reached out to touch one, to see if it were truly a tooth, but dropped her hand at her mother's sharp *ahem*.

". . . Finally, O Lord, bless this food before us. May it nourish our bodies as Thy word nourishes our souls. Hear these our prayers, we beseech Thee, in Christ's name. Amen."

Mrs. Simms bustled from the kitchen at the back of the schoolhouse. Smears of grease and crusts of dried food blotched her apron.

She distributed tin plates to the children and motioned with pride to the buffet. They hesitated, but once the first descended upon the food, the rest did likewise, clumping around the table despite the cook's efforts to form them into a line.

One boy with only a narrow patch of hair on the back of his head picked up a chunk of cornbread and brought it to his nose. After several sniffs, he bit off a small corner, then frowned and returned it to the tray. Another child dished out potato salad with his bare hand. A piece of fried chicken was passed and examined by several children before a small girl finally claimed it for her plate. Alma couldn't help but laugh. Didn't they have picnics where they came from?

A whistle cry cut short her giggles. The children froze.

"Halt!" her father cried, blowing his whistle again. "Order, children. Order."

He bustled among Indians, arranging them in a straight line. Alma skipped to the front and took a plate. "I'll show them, Papa."

She dished out small portions of each food, even the mushy-looking green beans—she was, after all, to set an example—and sat down on the unshorn grass a few paces off, carefully tucking her skirt around her.

The next boy in line was a head shorter than Alma. He wore a gray shirt and dark blue pants gartered at the knee. His hair hung loose down to his shoulders, and a nest-like cap of feathers topped his head.

When he turned with his plate of food, Alma grinned up at him and motioned to the grass beside her. He circled wide, plopping down cross-legged several yards away. The other children parted around her in similar fashion, spreading out in small clusters across the lawn. Few would meet her eye. None returned her smile.

Why didn't they want to sit with her? Did she have chicken grease on her face or smell of rotten egg? They were the ones who were strange, after all. She cast aside her half-eaten lunch while the Indians—after a great deal of picking and sniffing—devoured their food and returned for seconds.

After the picnic, a man arrived with a small satchel. A scowl lurked beneath his neatly trimmed mustache. He followed her father to a nearby chair and side table. With one eye still on the Indians, he reached into his satchel and withdrew several metal tools.

"Line up," her father said, and again blew his whistle.

The Indians looked at one another, then back at her father. No one moved.

He sighed and walked among the children, picking out several from the group and molding them into a line. Miss Wells took charge of the others, arranging them single file and marching them around toward the back of the house. The first group, led by her father, moved toward the man and his silver tools.

Alma scrambled to her feet and watched her father maneuver the first child into the chair. The bearded man picked up a pair of long scissors. Sunlight glinted off the tapering blades. He grabbed hold of the girl's long braids and, with two fluid snips, severed the black plaits from her head. The girl cried out and dived to the ground, scrambling toward her hair.

Alma gasped. Why would they cut away the girl's beautiful hair? Then she looked closer at her clothes—threadbare trousers and a button-down shirt. Not a girl. A boy.

Her father pulled the boy back into the chair and, with the help of the surly groundskeeper, Mr. Simms, held him in place while the barber combed and trimmed. All the while, the boy twisted and hollered.

Alma couldn't move. She knew a haircut didn't hurt, but the boy grimaced and fought as if it did. "Stop, you're—"

"Alma!" Her mother's voice cut across her own. "Come here this minute."

She tore her eyes from the boy and hurried to the edge of the schoolhouse, where her mother stood.

"They're stealing that boy's hair."

"You don't see good little white boys with long hair, do you?"

Alma glanced back toward the shining scissors. "But they're hurting him."

"Of course they're not. They're helping him. Less beast, more boy."

It didn't look like they were helping him. Her fingers found their way into her mouth and she gnawed at the soft skin around her nails.

"Stop that." Her mother slapped her hand. "Now come on."

At the back of the house, the Indian girls huddled near three large

basins filled with sudsy water. A large bonfire crackled at the edge of the yard. The falling sun hung just above the treetops, the color of a blood orange in the smoky air.

Miss Wells waded among the children, her sleeves rolled and a starched pinafore draped over her gown. She bent and pried off one of the girls' dress and leggings. The girl neither fought nor aided, but stood stock-still with the look of one too frightened to cry.

With puckered lips, Alma's mother tugged at the dress of another. The cook then prodded the naked Indians into the tin basins.

Alma watched, her frown deepening. "Why must they bathe outside?"

"Pestilence, my dear. Must you ask so many questions? Come, we need your help." Her mother held out the girl's clothes at arm's length. "There's an apron for you there by the steps. Put it on and collect these rags."

Pestilence? Alma didn't know the meaning, but her mother spoke as if the word itself tasted foul. She grabbed the apron and collected the clothes, examining each garment for some sign of this awful pestilence. When her arms were full, her mother nodded toward the bonfire.

"Burn them?" Alma looked down at the heap of bright cloth in her arms. "But they're so—"

"Filthy. Fleas, lice, who knows what else."

Though much of the fabric was patched and frayed, Alma saw only a few stains and smudges of dirt. Still, the thought of bugs crawling up her arms made her shiver, and she hurried the clothes across the yard.

At the fire's edge, she hesitated. Tall flames rose above her head. Heat bit at her cheeks. Was it fair to burn their colorful clothes? But then, they were getting new clothes, pretty black dresses to match her own; ones without holes, tatters, or pestilence. She cast the bundle of cotton and leather atop the logs and watched it singe and blacken. The smoke finally chased her away, but only after the shape and color of everything was lost.

When she returned, her mother was bent beside a young girl whose two front teeth were only halfway in, the very same as Alma's. The Indian wore a blouse, calf-length skirt, and leggings, all cut from

black broadcloth. Embroidered flowers wound across the fabric. In her arms, she clutched a small doll.

She looked from the doll to the girl's face. Brown eyes stared back, wide like a spooked pony's. Alma had imagined these children would be as excited as she about coming to the new school. But this—the whistle, the haircuts, the burning of their clothes? Would they still want to be her friends afterward?

Her mother yanked the Indian's blouse up and over her head and then pulled at the ties of her skirt. The girl's copper skin turned to goose flesh in the cool evening air. Her cheeks bloomed pink. She covered herself with her arms, clutching the doll in the crook of her elbow.

When Alma's mother reached for the doll, the Indian cowered back. With a huff, her mother pried it from her arms, ripping the seam along the doll's shoulder as she jerked it away. The girl cried and clawed after her treasure, as her mother tossed it to Alma.

"The doll, too?" Alma asked.

A withering look sent her shuffling toward the flames. Behind her, the girl continued to wail. When Alma reached the bonfire, she hesitated again. Singed silk ribbons fluttered among the embers. The charred remnants of a beaded moccasin glinted in the waning sunlight.

She looked over her shoulder. The girl stood naked, hugging her arms around her chest. Mrs. Simms unbound the girl's braid and doused her head with kerosene. Even at a distance, Alma could smell it. Her nose wrinkled and her arms tightened around the heap of clothes. But she could not look away.

Tears pooled in the Indian's eyes as a fine-toothed comb raked through her ebony hair. Her head arched back with each pass and the skin at her temples pulled taut. Once her hair lay smooth, the cook led her to one of the basins and heaved her in. She coughed and shivered when her head surfaced above the soapy water. Alma's throat grew tight.

After the bath, Mrs. Simms dried and dressed the girl—stockings, white chemise and drawers, black dress and boots—just like Alma.

But even though she was outfitted in new clothes, tears continued to run down the Indian's cheeks.

Alma looked at the doll. Soft fuzz, like the tips of lakeside cat-

tails, spilled from the tear in its seam. Its leather body and cloth dress were well worn. By now the logs at the edge of the flames smoldered red. A cold breeze ruffed the back of Alma's skirt, while the front ballooned with heat. Her heart lurched. After a backward glance at her mother, she hid the doll beneath the waistband of her apron before tossing everything else into the fire.

CHAPTER 3

Wisconsin, 1881

Alma's eyes wandered from her slate to the bank of windows lining the classroom wall. Outside, the Indians plodded across the yard in jumbled rows. A whistle sounded, followed by the groundskeeper's gravelly voice.

"Don't you Injuns know what a line is? Left foot forward, now. Stay in formation for criminy's sake!"

Alma choked back a giggle. She wasn't allowed to march. Only the wild and indolent need suffer such discipline. Or so her mother had said when Alma tried to join the Indians in the yard.

Another pipe from the whistle. "That ain't yer left!"

Her father's soft voice cut in. "That's enough drilling for this morning, Mr. Simms. It's their first day. Come inside, children. Time for lessons."

A thrill raced through Alma's body. Finally. She faced forward and sat up extra straight. President Arthur's beady eyes stared down at her from a large portrait above the blackboard, his plump face somber, feathery whiskers hanging from his jowls. Smaller paintings of Washington and Lincoln flanked him on either side. Red, white, and blue ribbons festooned the tops of all four walls like the scalloped hem of a ball gown.

Beneath the ribbons and austere portraits, Miss Wells stood at the blackboard, writing out a list of names—boys' names in one column, girls' in the other. She was much taller than Alma's mother, thin and angular, as if God had drawn her form with squares and rectangles

instead of soft ovals. Her script marched across the ebony surface, each letter perfectly formed, her bony fingers choking the chalk. Alma expected the stick to snap in two at any moment.

"Excuse me, Miss Wells. Don't the Indians already have names?"

The teacher did not turn around. "None fit to utter. Now back to your work, dear."

Alma glanced at her slate—blank save for the first few lines Miss Wells had tasked her to copy. Unlike the teacher's, her own lettering strayed and bunched, loose at the beginning and cramped near the edge.

Great sins require great repentance.

Do unto others as you would—

At the sound of footfalls in the adjacent hallway, she abandoned her lettering and looked toward the open doorway. Her toes wiggled inside her newly polished boots. A dour old governess had seen to her instruction back in Philadelphia, but never in a *real* classroom, never with *real* friends and classmates seated beside her.

Her father strode into the room. The Indian children shuffled in behind him, their haphazard line unraveling as they entered. His proud smile, the same one he'd sported yesterday, held despite the disorder. "I give them unto your care, Miss Wells." He beamed a moment longer, winked in Alma's direction, and then turned from the room.

"All right, children, take your seats," Miss Wells said. "Young men on this side; ladies over here."

The children stared blankly. Unruffled, the teacher steered the first few students to desks and the others followed. Their steps were clumsy, slow, as if burdened by their shiny new boots.

Alma scooted toward the far edge of her double-wide desk and grinned up at the approaching girls. They avoided her gaze, just as they had yesterday at the picnic, last night in the dormitory, and this morning in the dining hall, squeezing in three to a desk to avoid sitting beside her.

After all thirty-seven children had settled, the bench still loomed empty beside her. Begrudgingly, she returned to her lesson book, the water in her eyes blurring the text.

From the front of the room, Miss Wells addressed the class. She wore the same air of pride, of purpose, as Alma's father. But unlike

his, her voice was flat. “Good morning, students. Welcome to Stover School for Indians, your home for the coming years. Thanks to the beneficence of the United States Government, you have the opportunity to fully immerse yourselves in civilized culture and to wash away the sins of your former existence.”

Alma peeked at the other children as Miss Wells spoke. They didn’t look sinful. Most hung their heads, stealing sideways glances around the room. The girl directly in front of Alma pulled at the collar of her dress. Across the aisle, another squirmed in her seat and swung her legs beneath the desk. Many of the boys tugged and fingered their newly cropped hair. None gave any indication that they understood the school-ma’am’s lecture. But the teacher continued undeterred.

“We shall begin today by choosing Christian names.” Her thin lips parted in what Alma supposed was a smile, baring white, cock-eyed teeth. She gestured toward the blackboard with a ruler and then pointed the instrument at a girl in the front row. “You first. Come to the board and select a name.”

The girl shrank down in her seat until her nose was level with the desk. Miss Wells paid no mind. She grabbed the girl’s arm and led her to the blackboard.

Even from the back row, Alma could see the girl trembling. She gaped up at the blackboard, but made no motion toward the names. Several moments passed, each one adding weight to the silence. Finally, Miss Wells grasped the girl’s hand and uncoiled her index finger. Like a puppeteer, she guided the small finger toward the first name on the board.

“Mary. Good choice.”

The girl scurried back to her seat. Miss Wells followed, pulling a spool of thread and needle from her dress pocket. With a few quick stitches, she sewed the name *Mary* onto the back of the girl’s dress.

Alma frowned and cocked her head. Was this to help the other students learn the girl’s new name? But they couldn’t yet read. Papa had told her so. Maybe it was just for her, so she could learn her new friends’ names faster. Tomorrow she’d sew *Alma* on the back of her dress with her neatest stitching. That way, when the Indians did learn to read, they’d know her name right away.

After returning to her desk and jotting something in her ledger, Miss Wells pointed her ruler at the next pupil.

Alma watched the second girl rise. Her glossy hair lay coiled in a braid at the nape of her neck. The fabric at the front of her dress bunched in several places from misaligned buttons. She teetered to the blackboard, hands buried in the folds of her skirt. After a wide-eyed glance at Miss Wells, she pointed at the top name.

Alma bit down to stifle a giggle.

"Mary is already taken," the teacher said. She smiled again, close-lipped this time, the rest of her face strangely void of expression. "Choose another."

The girl dropped her hand and turned toward her desk. Before she could move, Miss Wells grabbed hold of her and spun her back to face the list of names. With trembling finger, the girl pointed again at the name *Mary*.

Without warning, Miss Wells raised her ruler and slapped the Indian's hand. The sharp sound of wood against skin ricocheted from wall to wall, reaching Alma before her eyes could fully make sense of what had happened. The entire class arched back in their seats. Whispers flooded the room.

"Silence, class," Miss Wells said, and turned back to the girl. "Now, my dear, select a *different* name."

The girl cradled her hand, a long red welt appearing atop her skin. Her dark eyes darted about the room. Her mouth hung agape. She looked confused, afraid, as if never before struck.

Alma's mouth went dry, the last of her giggles long dead in her throat. She scooted to the edge of her seat, watching the patience drain from Miss Wells's face with each passing second.

"Pick a name or I shall be forced—"

"She doesn't understand!" The words flew from Alma's mouth before she realized she was speaking.

The teacher's sharp gray eyes turned on her. "This does not concern you."

"If you just show—"

"Your father told me I'd see no trouble from you. Have I been misinformed? He'd be so disappointed."

Alma sank down in her seat. "No, ma'am." She dropped her eyes

back to her slate, but her heart continued to push against the walls of her chest.

At the front of the classroom, the Indian whimpered. Her boots shuffled back and forth atop the floorboards.

Again Miss Wells addressed the girl. Her voice, at once both sweet and menacing, made Alma's skin prickle. "You have one more opportunity to select a—"

Ignoring the niggling voice inside her head, Alma's feet found the floor and propelled her toward the blackboard.

"You look like an *Alice* to me," Alma said, pointing to the second name on the board and nodding.

After a moment, the girl raised her hand and gestured to the same name. "Awlis."

Alma smiled. "Al—"

Miss Wells's ruler smacked against the blackboard.

Alma jumped. Alice cringed.

"Return to your seat, Miss Alma."

"I only wanted to—"

"You're not to rise again until the lunch bell, and you shan't be joining the others at recess."

Her shoulders fell. What a nasty old ninny Miss Wells was for punishing her so when all she'd done was help. She trudged to her desk at the back of the room. Several sets of deep brown eyes followed her—curious, but otherwise cold. She picked up the heavy chalk to continue her lines, but could not pry her attention from the blackboard.

After her demonstration, the girls seemed to catch on. One after another, they shuffled up to the front of the room and, without pause, pointed to the name below the one previously selected. The girl Alma remembered from yesterday, the one with the doll, chose the name *Margaret*. Another girl, whom Alma guessed to be her age as well, selected *Rose*.

When all sixteen girls had picked new names, Miss Wells turned to the boys. Despite his shorn hair and new military-style suit, Alma recognized the first boy to rise by his bright, foxlike eyes. He crossed to the blackboard with the same pluck he'd shown climbing from the wagon. Mimicking the girl who had gone before him, his outstretched finger moved toward the next name on the list, *Ruth*.

Alma winced and waited for Miss Wells's ruler to rise. But the boy's hand stopped short. He dropped his arm and cocked his head.

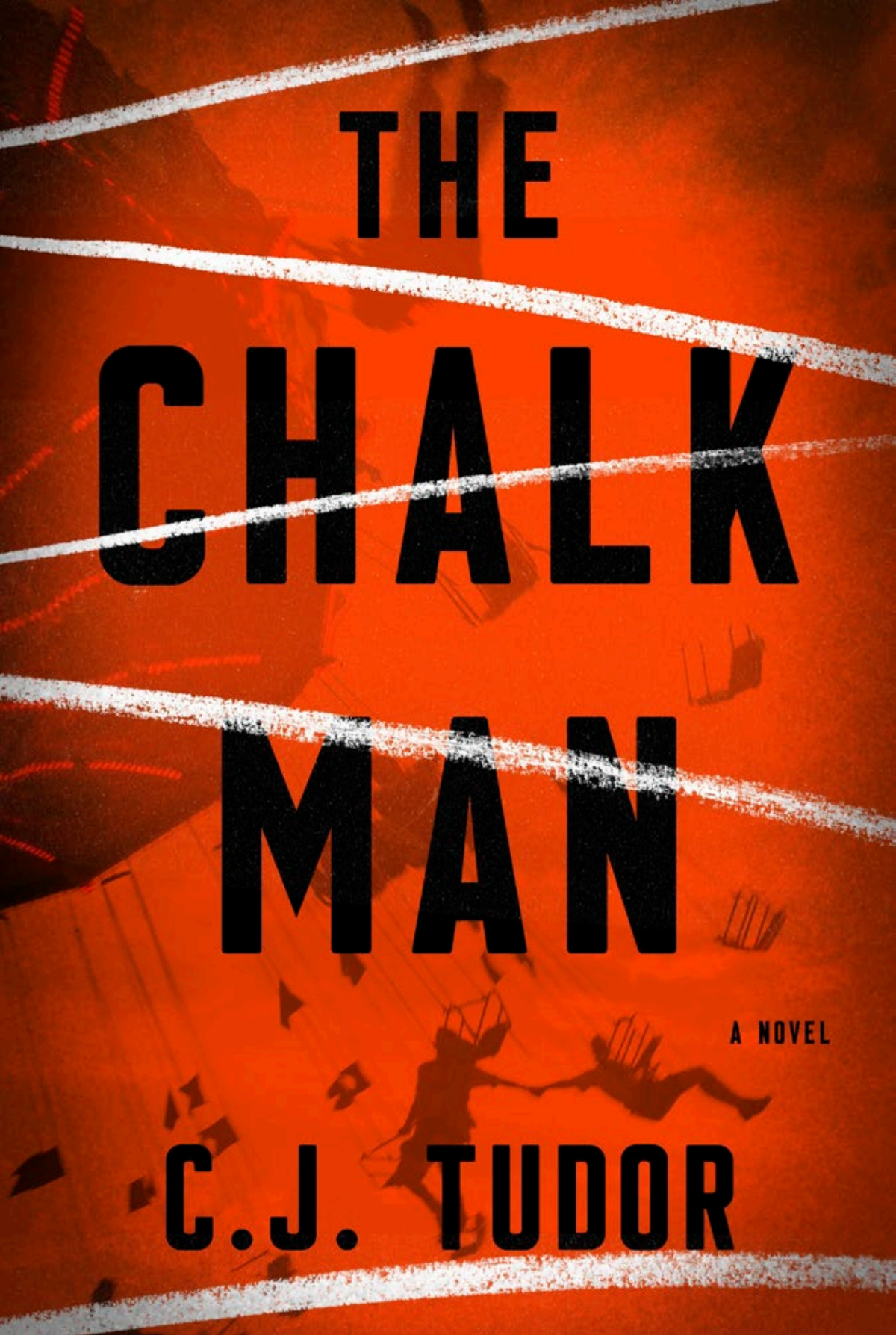
The grandfather clock sounded in the foyer, each clang echoing through the silence.

Alma teetered on the edge of her seat but dared move no farther.

Miss Wells turned the ruler over in her hand, its sharp edge scratching against her dry palm. Otherwise, she didn't move—not a blink, not a breath. Even her placid expression seemed chiseled in stone.

The boy's gaze cut sideways, eyeing the wooden stick, then back to the board. He swung his hand to the list of boys' names and pointed at the top one.

"Harry." Miss Wells laid aside her ruler and inked the name into her ledger.


THE
CHALK
MAN
A NOVEL
C.J. TUDOR

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Start at the beginning.

The problem was, none of us ever agreed on the exact beginning. Was it when Fat Gav got the bucket of chalks for his birthday? Was it when we started drawing the chalk figures or when they started to appear on their own? Was it the terrible accident? Or when they found the first body?

Any number of beginnings. Any of them, I guess, you could call the start. But really, I think it all began on the day of the fair. That's the day I remember most. Because of Waltzer Girl, obviously, but also because it was the day that everything stopped being normal.

If our world was a snow globe, it was the day some casual god came along, shook it hard and set it back down again. Even when the foam and flakes had settled, things weren't the way they were before. Not exactly. They might have looked the same through the glass but, on the inside, everything was different.

That was also the day I first met Mr. Halloran, so, as beginnings go, I suppose it's as good as any.

1986

"Going to be a storm today, Eddie."

My dad was fond of forecasting the weather in a deep, authoritative voice, like the people on the telly. He always said it with absolute certainty, even though he was usually wrong.

I glanced out of the window at the perfect blue sky, so bright blue you had to squint a little to look at it.

"Doesn't look like there'll be a storm, Dad," I said through a mouthful of cheese sandwich.

"That's because there isn't going to be one," Mum said, having entered the kitchen suddenly and silently, like some kind of ninja warrior. "The BBC says it's going to be hot and sunny all weekend . . . and don't speak with your mouth full, Eddie," she added.

"Hmmmm," Dad said, which was what he always said when he disagreed with Mum but didn't dare say she was wrong.

No one dared disagree with Mum. Mum was—and actually still is—kind of scary. She was tall, with short dark hair, and brown eyes that could bubble with fun or blaze almost black when she was angry (and, a bit like the Incredible Hulk, you didn't want to make her angry).

Mum was a doctor, but not a normal doctor who sewed on people's legs and gave you injections for stuff. Dad once told me she "helped women who were in trouble." He didn't say what kind of

trouble, but I supposed it had to be pretty bad if you needed a doctor.

Dad worked, too, but from home. He was a writer for magazines and newspapers. Not all of the time. Sometimes he would moan that no one wanted to give him any work or say, with a bitter laugh, "Just not my audience this month, Eddie."

As a kid, it didn't feel like he had a "proper job." Not for a dad. A dad should wear a suit and tie and go off to work in the mornings and come home in the evenings for tea. My dad went to work in the spare room and sat at a computer in his pyjamas and a T-shirt, sometimes without even brushing his hair.

My dad didn't look much like other dads either. He had a big, bushy beard and long hair he tied back in a ponytail. He wore cut-off jeans with holes in, even in winter, and faded T-shirts with the names of ancient bands on, like Led Zeppelin and The Who. Sometimes he wore sandals, too.

Fat Gav said my dad was a "frigging hippie." He was probably right. But back then, I took it as an insult, and I pushed him and he body-slammed me, and I staggered off home with some new bruises and a bloody nose.

We made up later, of course. Fat Gav could be a right penis-head—he was one of those fat kids who always have to be the loudest and most obnoxious, so as to put off the real bullies—but he was also one of my best friends and the most loyal and generous person I knew.

"You look after your friends, Eddie Munster," he once said to me solemnly. "Friends are everything."

Eddie Munster was my nickname. That was because my surname was Adams, like in *The Addams Family.* Of course, the kid in *The Addams Family* was called Pugsley, and Eddie Munster was out of *The Munsters,* but it made sense at the time and, in the way that nicknames do, it stuck.

Eddie Munster, Fat Gav, Metal Mickey (on account of the huge braces on his teeth), Hoppo (David Hopkins) and Nicky. That was our gang. Nicky didn't have a nickname because she was a girl, even

though she tried her best to pretend she wasn't. She swore like a boy, climbed trees like a boy and could fight almost as well as most boys. But she still looked like a girl. A really pretty girl, with long red hair and pale skin, sprinkled with lots of tiny brown freckles. Not that I had really noticed or anything.

We were all due to meet up that Saturday. We met most Saturdays and went round to each other's houses, or to the playground, or sometimes the woods. This Saturday was special, though, because of the fair. It came every year and set up on the park, near the river. This year was the first year we were being allowed to go on our own, without an adult to supervise.

We'd been looking forward to it for weeks, ever since the posters went up around town. There were going to be Dodgems and a Meteorite and a Pirate Ship and an Orbiter. It looked ace.

"So," I said, finishing my cheese sandwich as quickly as I could, "I said I'd meet the others outside the park at two?"

"Well, stick to the main roads walking down there," Mum said. "Don't go taking any shortcuts or talking to anybody you don't know."

"I won't."

I slid from my seat and headed to the door.

"And take your bumbag."

"*Oh, Muuuuum.*"

"You'll be going on rides. Your wallet could fall out of your pocket. Bumbag. No arguments."

I opened my mouth and shut it again. I could feel my cheeks burning. I hated the stupid bumbag. Fat tourists wore bumbags. It would *not* look cool in front of everyone, especially Nicky. But when Mum was like this, there really was no arguing.

"Fine."

It wasn't, but I could see the kitchen clock edging closer toward two and I needed to get going. I ran up the stairs, grabbed the stupid bumbag and put my money inside. A whole £5. A fortune. Then I charged back down again.

"See you later."

"Have fun."

There was no doubt in my mind I would. The sun was shining. I had on my favorite T-shirt and my Converse. I could already hear the faint *thump, thump* of the fairground music, and smell the burgers and candyfloss. Today was going to be perfect.

FAT GAV, HOPPO and Metal Mickey were already waiting by the gates when I arrived.

"Hey, Eddie Munster. Nice fanny pack!" Fat Gav yelled.

I blushed purple and gave him the finger. Hoppo and Metal Mickey both chortled at Fat Gav's joke. Then Hoppo, who was always the nicest, and the peacemaker, said to Fat Gav, "Least it doesn't look as gay as your shorts, penis-head."

Fat Gav grinned, grabbed his shorts at the hems and did this little dance, raising his chunky legs up high, like he was a ballerina. That was the thing with Fat Gav. You could never really insult him because he just didn't care. Or, at least, that's what he made everyone think.

"Anyway," I said, because despite Hoppo's deflection I still felt that the bumbag looked stupid, "I'm not wearing it."

I unclipped the belt, slipped my wallet into my shorts pocket and looked around. A thick hedge ran around the outside of the park. I stuffed the bumbag into the hedge so it couldn't be seen if you were walking past but not so far that I couldn't grab it again later.

"Sure you want to leave it there?" Hoppo asked.

"Yeah, what if your *mummy* finds out?" Metal Mickey said, in the snide, sing-song way he had.

Although he was part of our gang and Fat Gav's best friend, I'd never liked Metal Mickey much. There was a streak running through him that was as cold and ugly as the braces that ran around his mouth. But then, bearing in mind who his brother was, perhaps that wasn't really surprising.

"I don't care," I lied, with a shrug.

"Who does?" Fat Gav said impatiently. "Can we forget the frigging bag and get going? I want to get to the Orbiter first."

Metal Mickey and Hoppo started to move—we usually did what Fat Gav wanted. Probably because he was the largest and loudest.

"But Nicky's not here yet," I said.

"So what?" Metal Mickey said. "She's always late. Let's just go. She'll find us."

Metal Mickey was right. Nicky *was* always late. On the other hand, that wasn't the deal. We were all supposed to stick together. It wasn't safe at the fair on your own. Especially not for a girl.

"Let's give her five more minutes," I said.

"You *cannot* be serious!" Fat Gav exclaimed, doing his best—so pretty bad—John McEnroe impression.

Fat Gav did a lot of impressions. Mostly American. All so terrible they made us crease up with laughter.

Metal Mickey didn't laugh quite as hard as Hoppo and me. He didn't like it if he felt the gang was going against him. But anyway, it didn't matter because we had just about stopped laughing when a familiar voice said, "What's so funny?"

We turned. Nicky walked up the hill toward us. As always, I felt a weird kind of fluttering in my stomach at the sight of her. Like I was suddenly really hungry and felt a bit sick.

Her red hair was loose today, falling in a tangled jumble down her back, almost brushing the edges of her frayed denim shorts. She wore a yellow, sleeveless blouse. It had small blue flowers around the neck. I caught a glint of silver at her throat. A small cross on a chain. She had a large and heavy-looking hessian bag slung around her shoulders.

"You're late," Metal Mickey said. "We were waiting for you."

As if it had been his idea.

"What's in the bag?" Hoppo asked.

"My dad wants me to deliver this crap around the fair."

She pulled a leaflet from the bag and held it out.

Come to St. Thomas's Church and praise the Lord. It's the greatest thrill ride of all!

Nicky's dad was the vicar at our local church. I had never actually been to church—my mum and dad didn't do that type of stuff—but I'd seen him around town. He wore small, round glasses and his bald scalp was covered with freckles, like Nicky's nose. He always smiled and said hello, but I found him just a bit scary.

"Now that is a pile of *stinking* Buckaroo, my man," Fat Gav said.

"Stinking" or "flying Buckaroo" was another one of Fat Gav's favorite phrases, usually followed by saying "my man" in a really posh accent, for some reason.

"You're not really going to, are you?" I asked, suddenly envisioning the whole day being wasted, traipsing around with Nicky while she handed out her leaflets.

She gave me a look. It reminded me a bit of my mum.

"Of course I'm not, you *Joey,*" she said. "We'll just take some, scatter them around, like people have thrown them away, and then stuff the rest in a bin."

We all grinned. There's nothing better than doing something you shouldn't and getting one over on an adult while doing it.

We scattered the leaflets, dumped the bag and got down to business. The Orbiter (which really *was* ace), the Dodgems, where Fat Gav rammed me so hard I felt my spine crack. The Space Rockets (pretty exciting last year but now a bit boring), the Helter Skelter, the Meteorite and the Pirate Ship.

We ate hot dogs, and Fat Gav and Nicky tried to hook ducks and learned the hard way that a prize every time does not necessarily mean a prize you want, and came away laughing and throwing their crappy little stuffed animals at each other.

By this point, the afternoon was already getting away from us. The thrill and adrenalin were starting to fade, along with the growing realization that I probably only had enough cash left for two or maybe three more rides.

I reached into my pocket for my wallet. My heart leapfrogged into my mouth. It was gone.

"Shit!"

"What?" Hoppo asked.

"My wallet. I've lost it."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm frigging sure."

But I checked my other pocket just in case. Both empty. Crap.

"Well, where did you have it last?" Nicky asked.

I tried to think. I knew I'd had it after the last ride, because I checked. Plus, we bought hot dogs afterwards. I didn't have a go on the Hook a Duck so . . .

"The hot-dog stall."

The hot-dog stall was all the way across the fair, in the opposite direction to the Orbiter and the Meteorite.

"Shit," I said again.

"Come on," Hoppo said. "Let's go and look."

"What's the point?" Metal Mickey said. "Someone'll have picked it up by now."

"I could lend you some money," Fat Gav said. "But I haven't got much left."

I was pretty sure this was a lie. Fat Gav always had more money than the rest of us. Just like he always had the best toys and the newest, shiniest bike. His dad owned one of the local pubs, The Bull, and his mum was an Avon lady. Fat Gav was generous, but I also knew he *really* wanted to go on some more rides.

I shook my head anyway. "Thanks. It's okay."

It wasn't. I could feel tears burning behind my eyes. It wasn't just the lost money. It was feeling stupid, it was the spoilt day. It was knowing that Mum would be all annoyed and say, "I told you so."

"You lot go on," I said. "I'll go back and have a look. No point us all wasting our time."

"Cool," Metal Mickey said. "C'mon. Let's go."

They all shambled off. I could see they were relieved. It wasn't their money lost, or their day ruined. I started to trudge back across the fair, toward the hot-dog stall. It was right across from the Waltzers, so I used that as a marker. You couldn't really miss the old carnival ride. Right in the centre of the fairground.

Music blared out, distorted through the ancient speakers. Multicolored lights flashed and the riders screamed as the wooden carriages spun round and round, faster and faster on the revolving wooden carousel.

As I got closer, I started looking down, shuffling along more carefully, scanning the ground. Rubbish, hot-dog wrappers, no wallet. 'Course not. Metal Mickey was right. Someone would have picked it up and nicked my money.

I sighed and looked up. I spotted the Pale Man first. That wasn't his name, of course. I found out afterwards his name was Mr. Halloran and he was our new teacher.

It was hard to miss the Pale Man. He was very tall, for a start, and thin. He wore stonewashed jeans, a baggy white shirt and a big straw hat. He looked like this ancient seventies singer my mum liked. David Bowie.

The Pale Man stood near the hot-dog stall, drinking a blue slushy through a straw and watching the Waltzers. Well, I thought he was watching the Waltzers.

I found myself looking in the same direction, and that's when I saw the girl. I was still pissed off about my wallet but I was also a twelve-year-old boy with hormones just starting to bubble and simmer. Nights in my room weren't always spent reading comic books by torchlight under my bedcovers.

The girl was standing with a blonde friend I vaguely recognized from around town (her dad was a policeman or something), but my mind instantly dismissed her. It's a sad fact that beauty, real beauty, just eclipses everything and everyone around it. Blonde Friend was pretty, but Waltzer Girl—as I would always think of her, even after I learned her name—was properly beautiful. Tall and slim, with long, dark hair and even longer legs, so smooth and brown they gleamed in the sun. She wore a rara skirt, and a baggy vest with "Relax" scrawled on it over a fluorescent green bra top. She tucked her hair behind one ear and a gold hoop earring gleamed in the sun.

I'm slightly ashamed to say I didn't notice her face much at first,

but when she turned to talk to Blonde Friend I wasn't disappointed. It was heartachingly pretty, with full lips and tilted almond eyes.

And then it was gone.

One minute *she* was there, her *face* was there, the next there was this terrible, eardrum-wrenching noise, like some great beast had bellowed from the bowels of the earth. Later, I found out it was the sound of the slew ring on the ancient Waltzers" axis snapping after too much use and too little maintenance. I saw a flash of silver and her face, or half of it, was sheared away, leaving a gaping mass of gristle, bone and blood. So much blood.

Fractions of a second later, before I even had a chance to open my mouth to scream, something huge and purple and black came tearing past. There was a deafening crash—the loose Waltzer carriage smashing into the hot-dog stall in a hail of flying metal and splinters of wood—and more screaming and yelling as people dived out of the way. I found myself bowled over and knocked to the ground.

Other people fell on top of me. Someone's foot stamped down on my wrist. A knee clipped my head. A boot kicked me in the ribs. I yelped but somehow managed to bundle myself up and roll over. Then I yelped again. Waltzer Girl lay next to me. Mercifully, her hair had fallen over her face, but I recognized the T-shirt and fluorescent bra top, even though both were soaked through with blood. More blood ran down her leg. A second piece of sharp metal had sliced right through the bone, just below her knee. Her lower leg was barely hanging on, tethered only by stringy tendons.

I started to scramble away—she was obviously dead. I couldn't do anything—and that was when her hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

She turned her bloody, ravaged face toward me. Somewhere, within all the red, a single brown eye stared at me. The other rested limply on her ruined cheek.

"Help me," she rasped. "Help me."

I wanted to run. I wanted to scream and cry and be sick all at once. I might have done all three if another, large, firm hand hadn't

clamped down on my shoulder and a soft voice hadn't said, "It's okay. I know you're scared, but I need you to listen to me very carefully and do just what I say."

I turned. The Pale Man stared down at me. Only now did I realize that his face, beneath the wide-brimmed hat, was almost as white as his shirt. Even his eyes were a misty, translucent grey. He looked like a ghost, or a vampire, and under any other circumstances I would probably have been scared of him. But right now he was an adult, and I needed an adult to tell me what to do.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Ed—Eddie."

"Okay, Eddie. You hurt?"

I shook my head.

"Good. But this young lady *is,* so we need to help her, okay?"

I nodded.

"This is what I need you to do . . . hold her leg here, and hold on tight, really tight."

He took my hands and placed them around the girl's leg. It felt hot and slimy with blood.

"Got it?"

I nodded again. I could taste fear, bitter and metallic, on my tongue. I could feel blood seeping between my fingers, even though I was holding on really tight, as tightly as I could . . .

In the distance, a lot further away it seemed than the sounds actually were, I could hear music pounding and screams of enjoyment. The girl's screams had stopped. She lay motionless and quiet now, just the low rasp of her breathing, and even that was growing fainter.

"Eddie, you have to concentrate. Okay?"

"Okay."

I stared at the Pale Man. He unwound his belt from his jeans. It was a long belt, too long for his skinny waist, and it had extra holes in it where he had made it smaller. Funny, the weird things you notice at the crappiest moments. Like I noticed that Waltzer Girl's shoe had come off. A jelly shoe. Pink and sparkly. And I thought

how she probably wasn't going to need it again, what with her leg almost cut in two.

"You still with me, Eddie?"

"Yes."

"Good. Almost there. You're doing great, Eddie."

The Pale Man took the belt and wrapped it around the top of the girl's leg. He pulled hard, really hard. He was stronger than he looked. Almost straight away I could feel the gush of blood slowing.

He looked at me and nodded. "You can let go now. I've got it."

I took my hands away. Now the tension had gone, they started to shake. I wrapped them around my body, under my arms.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"I don't know. Hopefully, they can save her leg."

"What about her face?" I whispered.

He looked up at me, and something in those pale grey eyes stilled me. "Were you looking at her face before, Eddie?"

I opened my mouth, but I didn't know what to say, or understand why his voice didn't sound so friendly any more.

Then he looked away again and said quietly, "She'll live. That's the important thing."

And that was when a huge crack of thunder broke overhead and the first drops of rain started to fall.

I guess it was the first time I understood how things can change in an instant. All the stuff we take for granted can just be ripped away. Maybe that's why I took it. To hold on to something. To keep it safe. That's what I told myself anyway.

But like a lot of stuff we tell ourselves, that was probably just a pile of stinking Buckaroo.

THE LOCAL PAPER called us heroes. They got Mr. Halloran and me back together in the park and they took our photo.

Incredibly, the two people in the Waltzer carriage that broke loose suffered only broken bones, cuts and bruises. A few other

bystanders caught some nasty gashes that needed stitches, and there were a few more fractures and cracked ribs in the stampede to get out of the way.

Even Waltzer Girl (whose name was actually Elisa) lived. The doctors managed to reattach her leg and somehow save her eye. The papers called it a miracle. They didn't say so much about the rest of her face.

Gradually, as with all dramas and tragedies, interest in it started to fade. Fat Gav stopped cracking bad-taste jokes (mostly about being legless), and even Metal Mickey got bored of calling me "Hero Boy" and asking where I'd left my cape. Other news and gossip took its place. There was a car crash on the A36, and the cousin of one of the kids at school died, and then Marie Bishop, who was in the fifth year, got pregnant. So life, as it tends to, moved on.

I wasn't so bothered. I'd got a bit tired of the story myself. And I wasn't really the sort of kid who likes being the centre of attention. Plus, the less I talked about it, the less often I had to picture Waltzer Girl's missing face. The nightmares started to fade away. My secret trips to the laundry basket with soiled sheets became less frequent.

Mum asked me a couple of times if I wanted to visit Waltzer Girl in hospital. I always said no. I didn't want to see her again. Didn't want to look at her ruined face. Didn't want those brown eyes to stare at me accusingly: *I know you were going to run away, Eddie. Until Mr. Halloran grabbed you, you would have left me there to die.*

I think Mr. Halloran visited. A lot. I guess he had the time. He wasn't due to start teaching at our school until September. Apparently, he had decided to move into his rented cottage a few months early so he could settle into the town first.

I supposed it was a good idea. It gave everyone a chance to get used to seeing him around. Got all the questions out of the way before he stepped into the classroom:

What was wrong with his skin? He was an *albino,* the adults explained patiently. That meant he was missing something called a "pigment"

that made most people's skin a normal pink or brown color. *And his eyes?* Same thing. They were just missing pigment. *So, he wasn't a freak, or a monster or a ghost?* No. Just a normal man with a medical condition.

They were wrong. Mr. Halloran was many things, but normal was never one of them.

TELL THE MACHINE GOODNIGHT

A NOVEL

KATIE WILLIAMS

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BOOK DESIGN BY LUCIA BERNARD

1

The Happiness Machine

Apricity (archaic): the feeling of sun on one's skin in the winter

The machine said the man should eat tangerines. It listed two other recommendations as well, so three in total. A modest number, Pearl assured the man as she read out the list that had appeared on the screen before her: one, he should eat tangerines on a regular basis; two, he should work at a desk that received morning light; three, he should amputate the uppermost section of his right index finger.

The man—in his early thirties, by Pearl's guess, and pinkish around the eyes and nose in the way of white rabbits or rats—lifted his right hand before his face with wonder. Up came his left, too, and he used its palm to press experimentally on the top of his right index finger, the finger in question. *Is he going to cry?* Pearl wondered. Sometimes people cried when they heard their recommendations. The conference room they'd put her in had glass walls, open to the workpods on the other side. There was a switch on the wall to fog the glass, though; Pearl could flick it if the man started to cry.

"I know that last one seems a bit out of left field," she said.

"Right field, you mean," the man—Pearl glanced at her list for his name, one Melvin Waxler—joked, his lips drawing up to reveal overlong front teeth. Rabbitier still. "Get it?" He waved his hand. "Right hand. Right field."

Pearl smiled obligingly, but Mr. Waxler had eyes only for his finger. He pressed its tip once more.

"A modest recommendation," Pearl said, "compared to some others I've seen."

"Oh sure, I know that," Waxler said. "My downstairs neighbor sat for your machine once. It told him to cease all contact with his brother." He pressed on the finger again. "He and his brother didn't argue or anything. Had a good relationship actually, or so my neighbor said. Supportive. Brotherly." Pressed it. "But he did it. Cut the guy off. Stopped talking to him, full stop." Pressed it. "And it worked. He says he's happier now. Says he didn't have a clue his brother was making him *un*happy. His *twin* brother. *Identical* even. If I'm remembering." Clenched the hand into a fist. "But it turned out he was. Unhappy, that is. And the machine knew it, too."

"The recommendations can seem strange at first," Pearl began her spiel, memorized from the manual, "but we must keep in mind the Apricity machine uses a sophisticated metric, taking into account factors of which we're not consciously aware. The proof is borne out in the numbers. The Apricity system boasts a nearly one hundred percent approval rating. Ninety-nine point nine seven percent."

"And the point three percent?" The index finger popped up from Waxler's fist. It just wouldn't stay down.

"Aberrations."

Pearl allowed herself a glance at Mr. Waxler's fingertip, which appeared no different from the others on his hand but was its own aberration, according to Apricity. She imagined the fingertip popping off his hand like a cork from a bottle. When Pearl looked up again, she found that Waxler's gaze had shifted from his finger to her face. The two of them shared the small smile of strangers.

"You know what?" Waxler bent and straightened his finger. "I've never liked it much. This particular finger. It got slammed in a door when I was little, and ever since . . ." His lip drew up, revealing his teeth again, almost a wince.

"It pains you?"

"It doesn't hurt. It just feels . . . like it doesn't belong."

Pearl tapped a few commands into her screen and read what came back. "The surgical procedure carries minimal risk of infection and zero risk of mortality. Recovery time is negligible, a week, no more. And with a copy of your Apricity report—there, I've just sent that to you, HR, and your listed physician—your employer has agreed to cover all relevant costs."

Waxler's lip slid back down. "Hm. No reason not to then."

"No. No reason."

He thought a moment more. Pearl waited, careful to keep her expression neutral until he nodded the go-ahead. When he did, she tapped in the last command and, with a small burst of satisfaction, crossed his name from her list. *Melvin Waxler. Done.*

"I've also recommended that your workpod be reassigned to the eastern side of the building," she said, "near a window."

"Thank you. That'll be nice."

Pearl finished with the last prompt question, the one that would close the session and inch her closer to her quarterly bonus. "Mr. Waxler, would you say that you anticipate Apricity's recommendations will improve your overall life satisfaction?" This phrasing was from the updated training manual. The question used to be *Will Apricity make you happier?* but Legal had decided that the word *happier* was problematic.

"Seems like it could," Waxler said. "The finger thing might lower my typing speed." He shrugged. "But then there's more to life than typing speed."

"So . . . yes?"

"Sure. I mean, yes."

"Wonderful. Thank you for your time today."

Mr. Waxler rose to go, but then, as if struck by an impulse, he stopped and reached out for the Apricity 480, which sat on the table between them. Pearl had just last week been outfitted with the new model; sleeker than the Apricity 470 and smaller, too, the size of a deck of cards, the machine had fluted edges and a light gray casing that reflected a subtle sheen, like the smoke inside a fortune-teller's ball. Waxler's hand hovered over it.

"May I?" he said.

At Pearl's nod, he tapped the edge of the Apricity with the tip of the finger now scheduled to be amputated in—confirmations from both HR and the doctor's office had already arrived on Pearl's screen—a little over two weeks. Was it Pearl's imagination or did Mr. Waxler already stand a bit taller, as if an invisible yoke had

been lifted from his shoulders? Was the pink around his eyes and nose now matched by a healthy flush to the cheek?

Waxler paused in the doorway. "Can I ask one more thing?"

"Certainly."

"Does it have to be tangerines, or will any citrus do?"

PEARL HAD WORKED AS A TECHNICIAN for the Apricity Corporation's San Francisco office since 2026. Nine years. While her colleagues hopped to new job titles or start-ups, Pearl stayed on. Pearl liked staying on. This was how she'd lived her life. After graduating college, Pearl had stayed on at the first place that had hired her, working as a nocturnal executive assistant for brokers trading in the Asian markets. After having her son, she'd stayed on at home until he'd started school. After getting married to her college boyfriend, she'd stayed on as his wife, until Elliot had an affair and left her. Pearl was fine where she was, that's all. She liked her work, sitting with customers who had purchased one of Apricity's three-tiered Contentment Assessment Packages, collecting their samples, and talking them through the results.

Her current assignment was a typical one. The customer, the up-and-coming San Francisco marketing firm *!Huzzah!,* had purchased Apricity's Platinum Package in the wake of an employee death, or, as Pearl's boss had put it, "A very un-merry Christmas and to one a goodnight!" Hours after the holiday party, a *!Huzzah!* copywriter had committed suicide in the office lounge. The night cleaning service had found the poor woman, but hours too late.

Word of the death had made the rounds, of course, both its cause and its location. *!Huzzah!*'s February reports noted a decrease in worker productivity, an accompanying increase in complaints to HR. March's reports were grimmer still, April's abysmal.

So *!Huzzah!* turned to the Apricity Corporation and, through them, Pearl, who'd been brought into *!Huzzah!*'s office in SoMa to create a contentment plan for each of the firm's fifty-four employees. *Happiness is Apricity.* That was the slogan. Pearl wondered what the dead copywriter would think of it.

The Apricity assessment process itself was noninvasive. The only item that the machine needed to form its recommendations was a swab of skin cells from the inside of the cheek. This was Pearl's first task on a job, to hand out and collect back a cotton swab, swipe a hint of captured saliva across a computer chip, and then fit the loaded chip into a slot in the machine. The Apricity 480 took it from there, spelling out a personalized contentment plan in mere minutes. Pearl had always marveled at this: to think that the solution to one's happiness lay next to the residue of the bagel one had eaten for breakfast!

But it was true. Pearl had sat for Apricity herself and felt its effects. Though for most of Pearl's life unhappiness had only ever been a mild emotion, not a cloud overhead, as she'd heard others describe it, surely nothing like the fog of a depressive, none of this bad weather. Pearl's unhappiness was more like the wisp of smoke from a snuffed candle. A birthday candle at that. *Steady*, *stalwart*, *even-keeled*: these were the words that had been applied to her since childhood. And she supposed she looked the part: dark hair cropped

around her ears and neck in a tidy swimmer's cap; features pleasing but not too pretty; figure trim up top and round in the thighs and bottom, like one of those inflatable dolls that will rock back up after you punch it down. In fact, Pearl had been selected for her job as an Apricity technician because she possessed, as her boss had put it, "an aura of wooly contentment, like you have a blanket draped over your head."

"You rarely worry. You never despair," he'd gone on, while Pearl sat before him and tugged at the cuffs of the suit jacket she'd bought for the interview. "Your tears are drawn from the puddle, not the ocean. Are you happy right now? You are, aren't you?"

"I'm fine."

"You're fine! Yes!" he shouted at this revelation. "You store your happiness in a warehouse, not a coin pouch. It can be bought cheap!"

"Thank you?"

"You're very welcome. Look. This little guy likes you"—he'd indicated the Apricity 320 in prime position on his desk—"and that means I like you, too."

That interview had been nine years and sixteen Apricity models ago. Since then Pearl had suffered dozens more of her boss's vaguely insulting metaphors and had, more importantly, seen the Apricity system prove itself hundreds—no, *thousands* of times. While other tech companies shriveled into obsolescence or swelled into capitalistic behemoths, the Apricity Corporation, guided by its CEO and founder, Bradley Skrull, had stayed true to its mission. *Happiness is Apricity.* Yes, Pearl was a believer.

However, she was not so naïve as to expect that everyone else must share her belief. While Pearl's next appointment of the day went nearly as smoothly as Mr. Waxler's—the man barely blinked at the recommendation that he divorce his wife and hire a series of reputable sex workers to fulfill his carnal needs—the appointment after that went unexpectedly poorly. The subject was a middle-aged web designer, and though Apricity's recommendation seemed a minor one, to adopt a religious practice, and though Pearl pointed out that this could be interpreted as anything from Catholicism to Wicca, the woman stormed out of the room, shouting that Pearl wanted her to become weak minded, and that this would suit her employer's purposes quite well, wouldn't it, now? Pearl sent a request to HR to schedule a follow-up appointment for the next day. Usually these situations righted themselves after the subject had had time to contemplate. Sometimes Apricity confronted people with their secret selves, and, as Pearl had tried to explain to the shouting woman, such a passionate reaction, even if negative, was surely a sign of just this.

Still, Pearl arrived home deflated—the metaphorical blanket over her head feeling a bit threadbare—to find her apartment empty. Surprisingly, stunningly empty. She made a circuit of the rooms twice before acknowledging that Rhett had, for the first time since he'd come back from the clinic, left the house of his own volition. A shiver ran through her and gathered, buzzing, beneath each of her fingernails. She fumbled with her screen, pulling it from the depths of her pocket and unfolding it.

"Just got home," she spoke into it.

k, came the eventual reply.

"You're not here," she said. What she wanted to say: *Where the hell are you?*

fnshd hw wnt out came back.

"Be home in time for dinner."

The alert that her message had been sent and received sounded like her screen had heaved a deep mechanical sigh.

Her apartment was in the outer avenues of the city's Richmond District. You could walk to the ocean, could see a corner of it even, gray and tumbling, if you pressed your cheek against the bathroom window and peered left. Pearl pictured Rhett alone on the beach, walking into the surf. But no, she shouldn't think that way. Rhett's absence from the apartment was a good thing. It was possible—wasn't it?—that he'd gone out with friends from his old school. Maybe one of them had thought of him and decided to call him up. Maybe Josiah, who'd seemed the best of the bunch. He'd been the last of them to stop visiting, had written Rhett at the clinic, had once pointed to one of the dark bruises that had patterned Rhett's limbs and said, *Ouch*, so sadly and sweetly it was as if the bruise were on his own arm, the blood pooling under the surface of his own unmarked skin.

Pearl said it now, out loud, in her empty apartment.

"Ouch."

Speaking the word brought no pain.

To pass the hour until dinner, Pearl got out her latest modeling kit. The kits had been on Apricity's contentment plan for Pearl. She was nearly done with her latest, a trilobite from the Devonian

period. She fitted together the last plates of the skeleton, using a tiny screwdriver to turn the tinier screws hidden beneath each synthetic bone. This completed, she brushed a pebbled leathery material with a thin coat of glue and fitted the fabric snugly over the exoskeleton. She paused and assessed. Yes. The trilobite was shaping up nicely.

When it came to her models, Pearl didn't skimp or rush. She ordered high-end kits, the hard parts produced with exactitude by a 3-D printer, the soft parts grown in a brew of artfully spliced DNA. Once again, Apricity had been correct in its assessment. Pearl felt near enough to happiness in that moment when she sliced open the cellophane of a new kit and inhaled the sharp smell of its artifice.

Before the trilobite, she'd made a *Protea cynaroides*, common name king protea, the model of a plant that, as Rhett was quick to point out, wasn't actually extinct. She could have grown a real king protea in the kitchen window box, the one that got weak light from the alley. But Pearl didn't want a real king protea. Rather, she didn't want to grow a king protea. She wanted to build the plant piece by piece. She wanted to shape it with her own hands. She wanted to feel something grand and biblical: *See what I wrought?* The king protea had bloomed among the dinosaurs. Think of that! This blossom crushed under their ancient feet.

The Home Management System interrupted Pearl's focus, its soft librarian tones alerting her that Rhett had just entered the lobby. Pearl gathered her modeling materials—the miniature brushes, the tweezers with ends as fine as the hairs they placed, and the amber bottles of shellac and glue—so that all would be put away before

Rhett reached the apartment door. She didn't want Rhett to catch her at her hobby because she knew he'd smirk and needle her. *Dr. Frankenstein?* he'd announce in his flat tone, curiously like a PA system even when he wasn't imitating one. *Paging Dr. Frankenstein. Monster in critical condition. Monster code blue! Code blue! Stat!* And while Rhett's jibes didn't bother Pearl, she also didn't think it was especially good for him to be given opportunities to act unpleasant. He didn't need opportunities anyway. Her son was a self-starter when it came to unpleasantness. No, she hadn't thought that.

The sound of the front door, and a moment later, there Rhett was, each of the precious ninety-four pounds of his sixteen-year-old self. It had been cold outside, and she could smell the spring air coming off him, metallic, galvanized. Pearl looked for a flush in his cheeks like the one she'd seen in Mr. Waxler's, but Rhett's skin remained sallow; his visible cheekbones were a hard truth. Had he been losing weight again? She wouldn't ask. After all, Rhett had arrived in the kitchen without prompting, presumably to say hello. She wouldn't annoy him by asking him where he'd been or, to Rhett's mind the worst question of them all, the one word: *Hungry?*

Instead, Pearl pulled out a chair and was rewarded for her restraint when Rhett sat in it with a truculent dip of the head, as if acknowledging she'd scored a point on him. He pulled off his knit cap, his hair a fluff in its wake. Pearl resisted the impulse to brush it down with her hand, not because she needed him to be tidy but because she longed to touch him. Oh how he'd flinch if she reached anywhere near his head!

She got up to search the cupboards, announcing, "I had a horrible day."

She hadn't. It'd been, at worst, mildly taxing, but Rhett seemed relieved when Pearl complained about work, eager to hear about the secret strangeness of the people Apricity assessed. The company had a strict client confidentiality policy, authored by Bradley Skrull himself. So technically, contractually, Pearl wasn't supposed to talk about her Apricity sessions outside of the office, and certainly many of them weren't appropriate conversation for a teenage boy and his mother. However, Pearl had dismissed all such objections the moment she'd realized that other people's sadness was a balm for her son's own powerful and inexplicable misery. So she told Rhett about the man, earlier that day, who'd been unruffled by the suggestion that he exchange his wife for prostitutes, and she told him about the woman who'd shouted at her over the simple suggestion of exploring a religion. She didn't, however, tell him about Mr. Waxler's amputated finger, worried that Rhett would take to the idea of cutting off bits of himself. A finger weighed, what, at least a few ounces?

Rhett grinned as Pearl laid the office workers bare, a mean grin, his only grin. When he was little, he'd beamed generously and frequently, light shining through the gaps between his baby teeth. No. That was overstating it. It had simply seemed that way to Pearl, the brilliance of his little-boy smile. "Moff," he used to call her, and when she'd pointed at her chest and corrected, "Mom?" he'd repeated, "Moff." He'd called Elliot the typical "Dad" readily enough,

but "Moff" Pearl had remained. And she'd thought joyously, foolishly, that her son's love for her was so powerful that he'd felt the need to create an entirely new word with which to express it.

Pearl went about preparing Rhett's dinner, measuring out the chalky protein powder and mixing it into the viscous nutritional shake. *Sludge*, Rhett called the shakes. Even so, he drank them as promised, three times a day, an agreement made with the doctors at the clinic, his release dependent upon this and other agreements—*no excessive exercise, no diuretics, no induced vomiting.*

"I guess I have to accept that people won't always do what's best for them," Pearl said, meaning the woman who'd shouted at her, realizing only as she was setting the shake in front of her son that this comment could be construed as applying to him.

If Rhett felt a pinprick, he didn't react, just leaned forward and took a small sip of his sludge. Pearl had tried the nutritional shake herself once; it tasted grainy and falsely sweet, a saccharine paste. How could he choose to subsist on this? Pearl had tried to tempt Rhett with beautiful foods bought from the downtown farmers' markets and local corner bakeries, piling the bounty in a display on the kitchen counter—grapes fat as jewels, organic milk thick from the cow, croissants crackling with butter. This Rhett had looked at like it was the true sludge.

Many times, Pearl fought the impulse to tell her son that when she was his age, this "disease" was the affliction of teenage girls who'd read too many fashion magazines. *Why?* she wanted to shout. Why did he insist on doing this? It was a mystery, unsolvable,

because even after enduring hours of traditional therapy, Rhett refused to sit for Apricity. She'd asked him to do it only once, and it had resulted in a terrible fight, their worst ever.

"You want to jam something inside me again?" he'd shouted.

He was referring to the feeding tube, the one that—as he liked to remind her in their worst moments—she'd allowed the hospital to use on him. And it had been truly horrible when they'd done it, Rhett's thin arms batting wildly, weakly, at the nurses. They'd finally had to sedate him in order to get it in. Pearl had stood in the corner of the room, helpless, and followed the black discs of her son's pupils as they'd rolled up under his eyelids. After Pearl had called her own mother and sobbed into the phone like a child.

"'Jam something'?" she said. "Really now. It's not even a needle. It's a cotton swab against your cheek."

"It's an invasion. You know the word for that, don't you? Putting something inside someone against their will."

"Rhett." She sighed, though her heart was hammering. "It's not rape."

"Call it what you want, but I don't want it. I don't want your stupid machine."

"That's fine. You don't have to have it."

Even though he'd won the argument, Rhett had afterward closed his mouth against all food, all speech. A week later he'd been back in the clinic, his second stint there.

"School?" she asked him now.

She fixed her own dinner and began to eat it: a small bowl of

pasta, dressed with oil, mozzarella, tomato, and salt. Anything too rich or pungent on her plate and Rhett's nostrils flared and his upper lip curled in repulsion, as if she'd come to the table dressed in a negligee. So she ate simply in front of him, inoffensively. The ascetic diet had caused her to lose weight. Pearl's boss had remarked that she'd been looking good lately, "like one of those skinny horses. What are they called? The ones that run. The ones with the bones." Fine then. Pearl would lose weight if Rhett would gain it. An unspoken pact. An equilibrium. Sometimes Pearl would think back to when she was pregnant, when it was her body that fed her son. She'd told Rhett this once, in a moment of weakness—*When I was pregnant, my body fed you*—and at this comment he'd looked the most disgusted of all.

But this evening, Rhett seemed to be tolerating things: his nutritional shake, her pasta, her presence. In fact he was almost animated, telling her about an ancient culture he was studying for his anthropology class. Rhett took his classes online. He'd started when he was at the clinic and continued after he'd returned home, never going back to his quite nice, quite expensive private high school, paid for, it was worth noting, by the Apricity Corporation he disdained. These days, he rarely left the apartment.

"These people, they drilled holes in their skulls, tapped through them with chisels." There was fascination in Rhett's flat voice, a PA system announcing the world's wonders. "The skin grows back over and you live like that. A hole or two in your head. They believed it made it easier for divinity to get in. Hey!" He slammed

down his glass, fogged with the remnants of his shake. "Maybe you should suggest *that* religion to that angry lady. Tap a hole in her head! Gotta bring your chisel to work tomorrow."

"Good idea. Tonight I'll sharpen its point."

"No way." He grinned. "Leave it dull."

Pearl knew she must have looked startled because Rhett's grin snuffed out, and for a moment he seemed almost bewildered, lost. Pearl forced a laugh, but it was too late. Rhett pushed his glass to the center of the table and rose, muttering, "G'night," and seconds later came the decisive snick of his bedroom door.

Pearl sat for a moment before she made herself rise and clear the table, taking the glass last, for it would require scrubbing.

PEARL WAITED UNTIL an hour after the HMS noted Rhett's light clicking off before sneaking into his bedroom. She eased the closet door open to find the jeans and jacket he'd been wearing that day neatly folded on their shelf, an enviable behavior in one's child if it weren't another oddity, something teenage boys just didn't do. Pearl searched the clothing's pockets for a Muni ticket, a store receipt, some scrap to tell her where her son had been that afternoon. She'd already called Elliot to ask if Rhett had been with him, but Elliot was out of town, putting up an installation in some gallery (Minneapolis? Minnetonka? Mini-somewhere), and he'd said that Valeria, his now wife, would definitely have mentioned if Rhett had stopped by the house.

"He's still drinking his shakes, isn't he, dove?" Elliot had asked,

and when Pearl had affirmed that, yes, Rhett was still drinking his shakes, "Let the boy have his secrets then, as long as they're not food secrets, that's what I say. But, hey, I'll schedule something with him when I'm back next week. Poke around a bit. And you'll call me again if there's anything else? You know I want you to, right, dove?"

She'd said she knew; she'd said she would; she'd said goodnight; she hadn't said anything—she never said anything—about Elliot's use of her pet name, which he implemented perpetually and liberally, even in front of Valeria. Dove. It didn't pain Pearl, not much. She knew Elliot needed his affectations.

Ever since they'd met, back in college, Elliot and his cohort had been running around headlong, swooning and sobbing, backstabbing and catastrophizing, all of this drama supposedly necessary so that it could be regurgitated into art. Pearl had always suspected that Elliot's artist friends found her and her general studies major boring, but that was all right because she found them silly. They were still doing it, too—affairs and alliances, feuds and grudges long held—it was just that now they were older, which meant they were running around headlong with their little paunch bellies jiggling before them.

The pockets of Rhett's jeans were empty; so was the small trash basket beneath his desk. His screen, unfolded and set on its stand on the desk, was fingerprint locked, so she couldn't check that. Pearl stood over her son's bed in the dark and waited, as she had when he was an infant, her breasts filled and aching with milk at the sight of him. And so she'd stood again over these last two difficult years,

her chest still aching but now empty, until she was sure she could see the rise and fall of his breath under the blanket.

After Rhett's first time at the clinic, when treatment there hadn't been working, they'd taken him to this place Elliot had found, a converted Victorian out near the Presidio, where a team of elderly women treated the self-starvers by holding them. Simply holding them for hours. "Hug it out?" Rhett had scoffed when they'd told him what he must do. At that point, though, he'd been too weak to resist, too weak to sit upright without assistance. The "treatment" was private, parents weren't allowed to observe, but Pearl had met the woman, Una, who had been assigned to Rhett. Her arms were plump and liver-spotted with a fine mesh of lines at elbow and wrist, as if she wore her wrinkles like bracelets, like sleeves. Pearl held her politeness in front of her as a scrim to hide the sudden hatred that gripped her. She hated that woman, hated her sagging, capable arms. Pearl had sat here in this apartment, imagining Una, only twenty-two blocks away, holding her son, providing what Pearl should have been able to and somehow could not. Once Rhett had regained five pounds, Pearl had convinced Elliot that they should move him back to the clinic. There he'd lost the five pounds he'd gained and then two more, and though Elliot kept suggesting returning him to the Victorian, Pearl had remained firm in her refusal. "Those crackpots?" she said to Elliot, pretending this was her objection. "Those hippies? No." *No*, she repeated to herself. She would do anything for her Rhett, *had* done anything, but the thought of Una cradling her son, he gazing up softly—this was what Pearl couldn't bear. She would hold Una in

reserve, a last resort. After leaving the Victorian, Rhett was back in the hospital again and then the terrible feeding tube. But it had worked, eventually it had. Pearl had eked out her son's recovery pound by pound. Was that where Rhett had been this afternoon? Had he gone to see Una? Had he needed her arms?

A subtle shift of the bedcovers as Rhett's chest rose, and Pearl slipped out of the room. If she were to sit for Apricity again, she wondered if there'd be a new item listed on her contentment plan: Watch your son breathe. Though, in truth, this practice didn't make her happy so much as stave off a swell of desperation.