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— SUMMER 2022 —



What Will You Read Next?



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Excerpt from *The Lifestyle: A Novel*
© 2022 by Taylor Hahn

Excerpt from *The Accidental Pinup*
© 2022 by Danielle Jackson

Excerpt from *The Heart of the Deal: A Novel*
© 2022 by Lindsay MacMillan

Excerpt from *Aphrodite and the Duke: A Novel*
© 2022 by J. J. McAvoy

Excerpt from *Nora Goes Off Script*
© 2022 by Annabel Monaghan

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THE LIFESTYLE

A Novel

TAYLOR HAHN

AN ANCHOR BOOKS ORIGINAL, JUNE 2022

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Chapter 1

Georgina Wagman’s life was so good she felt bad about it. Not so bad she’d change anything but bad enough she’d made it her mission to help others reach their potential in love, career, and epicurean delights. So it was with the best of intentions that she ordered four boxes of the richest, crispiest cannoli in New York City for the junior associates working late on Friday night and hand-delivered them office to office. How could she have known they’d give everyone food poisoning—the Italian bakery was A-rated by the health department!—or that the thirtieth-floor restrooms were closed for cleaning? Building management should have waited until after hours for that. Everyone knows lawyers work through dinner.

Sweaty and groaning, the associates had scattered thirty minutes later—some to the privacy of their apartments, others to the stairwell in search of a restroom on a different floor—except one first-year associate named Meredith De Luca. When Georgina had stopped by Meredith’s office with the box of cannoli on display, she’d politely declined.

“I don’t have much of a sweet tooth,” she’d said.

“Only bad cannoli are too sweet,” Georgina had insisted.

“Anyway, I’m a vegan,” Meredith had said, and that put an end to that.

All of Georgina’s fellow partners at the law firm of Ryan, Dunn & Chandler LLP were assigned a junior associate to mentor, and Georgina had landed Meredith. While most of her colleagues fulfilled their obligation by begrudgingly taking their mentees to lunch on the firm credit card once a year after their performance reviews, Georgina considered herself a Sherpa leading Meredith on a treacherous expedition up Mount Everest. She’d framed Georgina Wagman’s Top 25 Tips for Being a Star Associate Without Missing Sleep and presented it to Meredith on her first day in a gift bag and tried not to be offended when she never hung it up. Meredith accepted her advice with grace, if not enthusiasm, but Georgina was determined their relationship would become more than a formality. If only Meredith would ask a question or two, seek her help and counsel, then she could prove her trustworthiness. But Meredith wore her red hair and tight black skirt suit like an electric fence, forcing everyone to keep out. She never attended firm happy hours or holiday parties, and she’d declined every one of Georgina’s thirty-seven lunch invitations. Was that Georgina’s fault for choosing the wrong restaurants? Now that she understood Meredith’s palate, she’d pick somewhere with salty vegetables on the menu.

If Meredith was hoping Georgina would eventually get the hint and stop trying to be her fairy godmother, she was wrong. So wrong. Georgina Wagman would not go down without a fight, especially when her intentions were good, which was always.

If only they’d been a little less good in this particular instance, Meredith De Luca wouldn’t have been the only associate to stay late in the office.

Chapter 2

Georgina looked up from her computer at a knock on her office door. Nathan smiled in his favorite gray suit and light pink tie. “I heard you tried to kill the junior associates,” he said.

Nathan was her partner in more than law. They’d met as first years—when Georgina was Meredith’s age—and married five years later. Last year, they’d both made partner. Nathan worked in the Corporate department, specifically Structured Finance. While she didn’t know per se what “structured finance” was, she had no problem faking it when she helped Nathan wine and dine clients. She’d memorized one *Wall Street Journal* article on solar energy securitization and found a way to work it into the conversation whenever someone mentioned the price of oil falling, which they always did. That was good enough. As long as she laughed at their jokes, those men didn’t care much what she had to say anyway.

She was a litigator. People assumed lawyers had a well-rounded practice of law, but they were wrong. Just as Nathan only spent his days “structuring finances,” her only focus was *advocating*—a fancy word for arguing. She advocated on conference calls, advocated over

email, advocated in briefs, and occasionally advocated to a judge, although that happened a lot more on TV than in real life, it turned out. She'd become a lawyer because of Ally McBeal. It was an embarrassing but true fact, like that hummus gave her very bad gas.

She covered her face. "Don't say that! They're going to sue me. Oh God, are they going to sue me?"

"They won't sue you," Nathan said. "They're afraid of you. Especially now that you tried to kill them."

"Stop saying that!"

"Relax." Nathan hitched up his pant legs and sat on the corner of her desk. "People get food poisoning. It happens."

"Not to me." She returned to her computer. "I'm googling remedies and bringing them to their apartments tomorrow morning. And I've got Dr. Frasier ready to make house calls if they need her."

"The junior associates are capable of buying their own Pepto Bismol," Nathan said. "And they do not want a partner showing up unannounced at their apartments, trust me."

Her fingers paused in their frantic search for the best nausea-quelling tea. He was probably right about that. They didn't like it when she stopped by their offices, always hastily stacking their messy papers and putting their shoes back on while she pretended not to notice. "I have to do something. I feel awful."

"Why don't you get them a special treat? Hmm." Nathan made a show of tapping his chin as he brainstormed options. "I don't know, maybe . . . a cannoli?"

She picked up a red pen and threw it at him.

"I know what to do," she said. "I'll give them a sick day."

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Lawyers work on Saturdays."

Nathan laughed and shook his head. "*You* work on Saturdays. Hey—" He checked his watch. "Aren't you late for something?"

“Shit!” She stood up so fast her chair fell backward. “I have drinks with a client. Want to be my wingman?”

“I can’t.”

As she stuffed her laptop and legal pad into her briefcase, Nathan righted her chair. He helped her into her red pea coat and kissed her hair.

She turned to smile up at him. His face was pale, square, and defined, like a sandstone sculpture carved with ninety-degree angles. Every woman at the firm agreed he was handsome, which they told Georgina often. She liked to hear it—it made her proud.

“But this client has no boundaries,” she said. “Maybe if you’re there, she won’t tell me everything about her sex life.”

“Wish I could help. I’m taking three guys from Morgan Stanley to the Knicks. You can fill me in on her sex life when we get home.”

“It’s better if I drink enough wine that I can’t remember the details.”

When Nathan grinned, two parentheses appeared in his smooth cheeks. “Do you tell her about our sex life?”

“I would love to, but it’s usually tough to get a word in edgewise.” Also, there wasn’t much to tell, but she didn’t want to hurt Nathan’s feelings. Their sex life was perfectly fine, thank you very much; it just didn’t inspire stories. She didn’t tell her friends about Swiffering the kitchen, did she? Not that sex with Nathan was like Swiffering the kitchen. If given the choice between those two things, she would definitely choose sex with Nathan. Or probably. Both were rewarding in their own way. She only meant sex with Nathan was a regularly occurring activity that was productive and enjoyable but not surprising enough to talk about. But frankly, she didn’t know a single married couple whose sex life was surprising, including her client, whose stories were not so much about having sex as they were about not having sex and the vibrators she used instead.

Georgina gave her surroundings the once-over to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. When she became partner, the firm gave her a sizable budget to decorate her fancy new office. She bought mauve-colored velvet chairs, an acrylic desk, a gold-framed print of Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist*, and a vintage Turkish rug in faded blue. Even though she'd made it her own, she felt like an imposter in there, astonished it belonged to her. That was how she felt about Nathan, too. He was too perfect. Her life was a beautiful glass ornament hanging by a thread, and somewhere scissors waited.

"You'd better go," he said.

"Right." She pecked his clean-shaven cheek and smelled the overpowering scent of Tide. Nathan used too much detergent, but at least he did his own laundry, unlike some husbands she knew—her best friend Norah's, in particular.

Unfortunately, Norah's marriage was the product of Georgina's matchmaking prowess. On their first day of law school at Fordham, Georgina sat beside Norah in the front row of property, having noticed her quiet beauty at orientation, which she seemed determined to hide under too-long bangs, oversize sweaters, and clunky Doc Martens. For the rest of the semester, Georgina observed her taking notes by hand while other students stared at the Internet. She left her textbook closed during class and finished the midterm an hour early.

Yet never once did she raise her hand.

Norah was exactly the type of project Georgina loved to collect, so she decided to become her best friend. She swore to inspire in Norah the one thing she needed—confidence. No, bigger than that—gusto. With a little help, Norah would rule the world.

But Norah was wasting her time dating a quiet guy named Felix, who wore a backpack and grandpa cardigans, and radiated intensity like heat waves from summer asphalt. He lived in the northeast corner of the library, hunched over a textbook with a stack of note

cards and a moat of crumpled granola bar wrappers, refusing to join the class at Professor Hops to rehash every exam until they were too drunk to remember the questions. While Felix was cute, with black hair he spiked slightly to the side with gel—not an atrocious hairstyle for 2005—and defined triceps peeking from beneath his short sleeves in hot weather, he was unworthy of Norah. She deserved someone compelling, someone who could make her laugh. Someone like Ari—a life-of-the-party college baseball player who looked like he’d accidentally wandered into torts on his way to an open casting call at the modeling agency. So when Ari asked to join Norah’s study group, Georgina invented the teensiest lie that Ari wanted to join because he liked her. Truthfully, she suspected Ari was failing. She’d never seen him crack a book. But who cared? There was a saying: people who get As in law school become judges, people who get Bs in law school become attorneys, and people who get Cs in law school become rich.

What Georgina hadn’t predicted was that Ari would impregnate Norah by the end of their first year, that Norah would drop out because they couldn’t afford two tuitions and a baby, and that twelve years of marriage later, Ari would still behave like a twenty-two-year-old whose greatest achievement was a grand slam in the 2002 College World Series, despite the fact that he now had three thriving, healthy children. Norah’s circumstances were drawn by Georgina’s hand, and she wished she could erase them, or at least rewrite them.

Ironically, Felix became Georgina’s second-closest friend after Norah left school. Once she’d gotten to know him—and convinced him to trade his backpack for a messenger bag—she swallowed her mistake like a dry, bitter pill. Felix’s outward intensity was the by-product of the immense pressure he put on himself to succeed, with an older brother already the top hepatologist in Los Angeles and Korean immigrant parents he couldn’t bear to disappoint. Felix was not unworthy. The world was unworthy of Felix.

His tenacity had paid off, securing him a job offer from the best corporate law firm in the world. He'd spent four years practicing in the Seoul office, where he spoke the language yet felt culturally American, and four more in the New York office, earning a quarter-million dollars a year and living in a luxury high-rise on Twenty-Third Street. But after eight straight 2,800-hour years, he'd confessed to having increasing panic attacks, terrified he'd die the next time his heart seized, his lungs emptied, and his brain drowned in static. One Tuesday, in a moment of clarity, he'd left for a sandwich and never went back. After putting his belongings in storage, he'd moved to Costa Rica for six months. Felix called it a breakdown, his mother called it a vacation, Georgina called it funemployment.

There, he'd met his girlfriend, Alina, who'd been attending a surf camp alone. They'd decided to move in together before they'd flown home. When Georgina had gently suggested they slow down, Felix insisted he needed to be with someone who lived life on her own terms and did whatever made her happy whenever the mood struck. He admired her free spirit and bravery. But when Felix started wearing Alina's personality like he'd worn his navy suits, Georgina worried he'd replaced old pressures with new ones. First, he'd forced himself into the role of ambitious, cutthroat corporate lawyer to please his family, and now he forced himself into the role of contrarian hipster to please Alina. That was his *modus operandi*. He'd once loved a playwright named Salmon, for whom he'd become a sober vegan cat person. Then there was Lindsay, a second-grade teacher from Louisville, who'd convinced him to take improv classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, and Georgina had to suffer through way too many amateur performances of "Scenes from a Hat" and "Weird Newscasters" with five-dollar PBRs from the booth in the back.

Improv was not the life that suited Felix, just as doing her hus-

band's laundry was not the life that suited Norah. Perhaps the life that suited them best was the one Georgina had destroyed.

In the elevator to the lobby of Georgina's office building, she requested an Uber, and it pulled to the curb on Seventh Avenue between Forty-Second and Forty-Third Streets just as she walked outside. Ubers were usually minutes away in Manhattan. It was too easy. She preferred things to be a challenge, found gratification in fixing problems—her own and everyone else's. In her marriage, she was the one who googled “why is my TV blue” and fiddled with the remote for an hour while Nathan told her to *just call someone*. Where was the fun in that?

The back seat smelled like cologne and old french fries, so she rolled down the window and held her face in the fall breeze, smiling at the neon lights of Times Square at night. If anyone asked her about working in Times Square, she'd scoff. Too crowded, too smelly, too noisy, no good food. But those lights still gave her a private little thrill. *I'm here*, she'd think. *This is my life*.

She was born in her parents' bed in a three-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to a nurturing father who adored her and a mother who was flighty but fun. As pot-smoking, war-protesting, peace-preaching 1970s hippies, they'd sent her to a cooperative neighborhood school where the parents took turns as the teachers, the cooks, and the principals. Sort of like a grocery store, except the vegetables were human children. Her mother served a yearlong shift as the school treasurer until she spent half the annual budget on a garden before any parents realized they'd never nominated someone to water the plants, which all died. None of the kids received grades until Georgina realized this would prevent her from competing for the city's best high schools and demanded them. She didn't have many friends after that.

After four years of memorizing textbooks at Eleanor Roosevelt

High School, four more years of memorizing heavier textbooks at UVA, and three more years of memorizing case briefs at Fordham, she'd graduated with a JD and a job offer at a real law firm that would pay her enough to cover her loans, live in a "one-bedroom" in the East Village—in other words, a three-hundred-square-foot cube with a plastic accordion partition separating the kitchen from the bed—and go out for dinner and drinks with Norah whenever she could escape her toddler. Georgina had felt like she'd stepped onto the set of a movie, and she was the leading lady.

She was the star student in the school of romance, too. At nine years old, Georgina was the least surprised person in the apartment when her parents divorced. It didn't take an advanced degree, or even an eighth-grade diploma, to see that they lived fundamentally incompatible lives. Her dad got home from his job as an insurance claims handler at Travelers at five fifteen on the dot and put his feet up with exactly one beer, a bag of tortilla chips, and his maps. He was an amateur cartographer who'd spent four thousand hours drawing North America by the time she finished fifth grade. But her mother preferred to start projects she didn't finish. Georgina couldn't remember all the times she'd come home to her mother repainting the kitchen until she'd get bored and go drink wine spritzers with Priscilla, the hair colorist and animal rights enthusiast who lived next door. Georgina would listen to them laughing through the walls while she finished painting the kitchen until well past her self-imposed bedtime. She loved her parents, she just . . . didn't want to be them.

Theirs was a passionate, explosive romance. Like a firework, it burned bright but extinguished fast. Engaged in three weeks, married in three more, and a baby within the year. Whereas other kids yelled, "Yuck!" whenever their parents kissed, Georgina was used to it. Her parents were always kissing, touching, giggling, and escaping to the bedroom. They agreed on one thing—their desire for each other—and nothing else. Not money, not work, not where to live, not

how to raise their child, not on who should be president. They didn't even agree on whether to pull the plug should either be in a horrible accident. When she'd started dating Nathan, that was one of her first questions.

"If you were hit by a bus and you were ninety-nine percent brain-dead, would you want your wife to pull the plug?" she'd asked him over a bowl of rigatoni at Union Square Cafe.

"Definitely," he'd said. "I wouldn't want my family spending their life savings just to keep me a vegetable."

She'd smiled and exhaled. That was her answer, too, and her father's. But her mother believed in miracles.

She'd studied her parents like Jane Goodall had her chimpanzees, spying on them with a Styrofoam cup pressed against the door as they argued, taking notes in her black-and-white composition book on which she'd written *SCIENCE EXPERIMENTS—TOP SECRET!!!* in purple gel pen. She would learn from their mistakes so as not to repeat them, because even though she didn't cry when they broke the news, or when her mom moved to North Carolina, or when she and her dad celebrated that first Thanksgiving alone, it hurt. Her parents had decided to get married, decided to have a baby, then decided to give up. It wasn't fair. It had felt like her interests didn't matter enough, like she didn't matter enough. And although she'd grown up and understood not everything in life was fair, the truth was she still felt that injustice at thirty-four. The memory of every message delivered from one parent to the next gave her a nervous pang in her gut. Every milestone in her life cleaved in half because her parents couldn't stand to share a single celebratory meal. Watching so many adults she respected fall in and out of love and marriage should have made her more empathetic to her parents, but it only made her more resolute. Divorce was perfectly fine for everyone else, but she knew better.

So she did the opposite of her parents in every possible way. She

turned her back on chemistry so intoxicating it made her drunk, ran from relationships that were too hot and cold. She dated for years, not weeks. On first dates, she grilled men like they were murder suspects while they sweated through their collared shirts under her unrelenting interrogation. What were their goals? How did they like to spend Saturdays? Were they morning people or night owls? Spenders or savers? Kids? How many? How often did they go to the dentist? How often did they expect sex? Were they haphazard dishwasher loaders? Would they want her to quit her career after becoming a mom? And so on. The ones who were only looking to hook up never made it to dessert. Through that strategy, she'd landed Nathan, who was perfect. Good intentions plus careful planning equaled guaranteed success.

With fifteen minutes until she'd meet her client in the West Village, she called Norah to rehash the cannoli fiasco. Norah had a habit of answering the phone by launching into the middle of a conversation, expecting Georgina to catch up. "*Scuba diving!*" Norah answered.

"Ari's going scuba diving?" she guessed. "Where?"

"Does it matter?" Norah asked. "He doesn't even know how to scuba!"

"You have the power to say no to this. You're his wife."

"Okay, Esther Perel," Norah said, and Georgina could hear her eye-roll. Norah and Ari's marriage had always been like driving on a winding road in bad weather. Their oldest daughter, Rachel, had grown from "spirited child" (Norah said that was code for *recalcitrant*) into a rebellious preteen with a glare that could stop a trained killer. Their middle son, Simon, had mild dyslexia and required therapies that strained their finances, and Hannah, their youngest, was deathly allergic to almost everything, which they'd learned the hard way when Ari fed her stone fruit before the pediatrician's chart said he was allowed to. Norah raised the kids full-time, so their lifestyle

was carefully budgeted to remain within Ari's salary. In one of the most expensive cities in the world, that wasn't easy. They'd recently moved to Jersey City to save money, but now they fought about commuting, too. Lately, life's challenges seemed to poison every one of their interactions, and Georgina wasn't sure they'd survive it—or whether they should.

Their problem was they had no reason to be together other than the kids. At least in the beginning, they'd had fun. Ari took Norah to rooftop parties in Bushwick and the five-dollar nosebleeds at Mets games, invited her tubing with floating coolers in Hudson Valley, and introduced her to the best tacos she'd ever had in Rockaway Beach. Maybe when two people had as much sex as they'd had, a pregnancy was inevitable. Norah, who hadn't lost her virginity until her senior year of college to someone called "Zephan" after a Model UN summit in Zurich, had become insatiable. Ari "knew what he was doing," Norah said, and while she didn't want to think about where he'd picked up his particular skills or how many times he'd practiced them, she was happy to reap the benefits of his hard work.

But they had no energy or privacy for sex anymore. At their therapist's recommendation, Norah and Ari had scheduled one hour for sex on Sunday and Thursday nights, but the first night, Hannah ran screaming into their room and puked all over the bed, and the second night, Rachel had started cooking a box of macaroni and cheese, but got distracted watching TikTok videos and ended up setting off the building's sprinkler system. Norah had to talk to the firefighters in ill-fitting lingerie she'd ordered on Amazon, and gave up after that.

"So why don't you say no?" Georgina asked.

"Because I'm picking my battles," Norah said.

"This seems like a good one to fight over."

"You don't have kids," Norah said. "You don't get it."

The day Norah found out she was pregnant, Georgina held her

while she sobbed for hours. It was terrifying, and she wasn't even the pregnant one. Would Ari leave, or would he help? How would Norah get money to support the baby? What would her parents say? They'd expected her to marry someone Indian and Hindu, but Ari was white and Jewish. "This is their worst nightmare," Norah had said with tears streaming down her cheeks. "They'll disown me." They hadn't, in the end. It was impossible not to be thankful for a baby as cute as Rachel, who'd been born with thick brown curls and a grumpy-old-man frown.

So Georgina didn't get it, she supposed, but it pained her to think of everything her best friend had lost that day.

"Anyway," Norah said, "when we got married, I promised him I'd never stifle his adventurous spirit. Don't you remember his annual treks to Myrtle Beach to support the local beer economy?"

Georgina forced a laugh, but she was sick with guilt. This was all her fault. Was it too late to right her wrong? No. It was never too late. Any problem could be fixed. These were exactly the circumstances when divorce made sense: they were two fundamentally incompatible people who'd had six months of nonstop hot sex, and it should have ended there, but Ari's super-sperm had other plans. Passion was never the basis for a long-term relationship—Georgina had learned that the hard way, and now so had Norah. Felix may not have been wild in bed, or outside of it, but he was selfless and loyal. If he and Norah were married with kids, he'd do anything to help her finish school, and he'd never go scuba diving unless it was an organized excursion on a Disney cruise with the whole family. Georgina decided then and there to try to get them back together. Sure, Alina and Ari would have to go, but nobody liked them anyway. Alina would prey on her next lost soul, and Ari would be happy spending the rest of his life picking up aspiring Broadway dancers on Tinder.

"Are we still meeting tomorrow?" Georgina asked.

“Yes,” Norah said. “Mama needs a bottle of wine.”

“What am I going to drink?”

“*Ha ha.*”

She promised to text in the morning and spent the rest of her Uber ride brainstorming how she could convince Felix to tag along without him discovering what she was up to.

Georgina’s client, Suzanne, waited at a bar on West Tenth called Casa Amici. A few minutes earlier, she’d sent Georgina a text message: *I ordered you a cocktail but I drank it. Where are you???*

Inside, the air was hot and thick. Georgina hung her scarf and coat on the communal hooks and pushed through crowded patrons until she spotted Suzanne in a bright purple pantsuit with an empty barstool beside her. “It’s taken!” Suzanne barked at a hopeful twenty-something in over-the-knee boots.

When she got close enough, Georgina touched her shoulder. “I am so, so sorry.”

Suzanne looked up from her phone. “I could fire you for this,” she said, but thankfully she was smiling.

“You will not believe what happened.” Georgina sat and pointed to Suzanne’s drink. “Can I have a sip of that?”

Suzanne nudged it closer. “Have it. I’ve got another one coming.”

“We’ve got this insane case going on. Everyone’s working around the clock. And I wanted to cheer up the associates after they had to cancel their Friday night plans, so I ordered them cannoli from Angelo’s in Little Italy—” She swigged what turned out to be a strong margarita. “Thanks, I needed that. Anyway, they all got food poisoning. How long have you been waiting?”

“Only fifteen minutes. How sick are we talking?”

Georgina grimaced. “Someone threw up in the copy room.”

“Yeesh. I hope you’ve got a good carpet cleaner.”

The Accidental Pinup



Things are heating up behind the camera.

a novel

Danielle Jackson

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ONE

This is going to be uncomfortable, but trust me, totally worth it.” Cassie coaxed Dana to arch her back higher, squeezing everything just so. “You look incredible.”

“It feels weird,” Dana said. “I’m starting to sweat.”

“Totally normal,” Cassie said. “Hold it, right there.” The angles were just right; the light streaming through the open windows cast just the right amount of shadows and ethereal glow. Dana’s naturally red curls glinted with gold undertones, and the lace chemise she wore was sheer enough to showcase the constellation of freckles across her unbelievably unblemished skin. Maybe it was the blush or the body shimmer placed just so, or the fact that Dana was sweating, but she was sparkling all over. A corny person would say she was glowing from within. And that’s exactly what Cassie wanted to capture.

She took in the entire scene for another moment, stepping back a few paces to admire her work. “We’re ready. You are ready. You’re a goddess.” The second she saw Dana’s eyes light up with the com-

pliment she gave her—which Cassie genuinely meant—Cassie pressed the shutter release. “Bingo.”

They shot for another thirty minutes. A seasoned pro, Dana was able to twist and exaggerate her body in exactly the way Cassie had envisioned for this photo shoot. Starting a new series was always daunting, but it was the first time in a while that she had a project of her own to work on. Not that she could complain about her boudoir photo shoot business—Buxom Boudoir—but Cassie longed for more time to do whatever she wanted. She was lucky that Dana, a plus-size model, had a new line of pinup-inspired lingerie, and luckier still that Dana was her very best friend in the whole world. Because working on the national ad campaign for Dana’s collection of sexy underthings was exactly the type of thing Cassie *wanted* to work on to take her career to the next level.

Beyond the pretty makeup and sexy lingerie, Cassie enjoyed her job the most when Dana stopped sucking everything in, exposing body rolls and dimpled legs, let out a sigh, and stuck out her tongue in exaggerated exhaustion. Cassie took a few more rapid shots until Dana flicked her off. And Cassie had a hunch that would be the shot they loved the most.

Cassie connected a USB cable from her trusty Canon EOS 5D camera to her laptop, giving the images a minute to upload. She gazed at Dana, who had pulled on a silky floral robe, the same one she and all the bridesmaids had worn the morning of Dana’s wedding. Cassie hadn’t seen Dana look so happy and relaxed and beautiful since that day until now. Knowing she was going to be a part of her best friend’s biggest dream—starting an all-inclusive lingerie line that was smashing the patriarchy one thong at a time—was beyond fulfilling. The early online support from Dana’s announce-

ment of her collaboration had been overwhelmingly positive, and Cassie knew her vision for her pinups with a twist would be well received.

“Jesus Christ, Dana,” Cassie said, focusing on the photos. “Your boobs are, quite frankly, the tits.”

Dana’s fair skin bloomed in a crimson flush. For someone who had spent most of her time in front of a camera scantily clad, she blushed so easily. “Thanks, doll face. I couldn’t have done half of that without you. Only you can get me in those positions.” She joined Cassie in front of the laptop screen as Cassie scrolled. Sure, there were a few duds here and there, but when the photos worked, they really worked. Cassie knew the angles of her best friend’s body better than anyone—except maybe Dana’s wife, Riki—and she knew the vibe she wanted to convey.

“Undies with caution tape emblazoned on the trim do require a certain panache,” Cassie teased. “And I think we got it. I cannot wait to see the underwear you designed on a model’s ass on the side of a bus.”

Dana’s collection, under the Luscious Lingerie brand, was called Dreamland. Everything was lacy and sheer, with gorgeous pastels and deep jewel tones, but just like in the middle of an incredible dream, there were random things that didn’t quite make sense—yellow caution tape trim, skulls and crossbones in the middle of lace patterns, hand outlines on the cups of bras. Not to mention the size range: everything from XXS to 6XL. Anyone and everyone who wanted pretty undergarments could find them in Dana’s Dreamland.

Dreamland came to Dana after she had spent years wearing plain, boring bras that offered the support her ample bosom needed, and she wanted to wear the sensationally sexy and vibrant designs

she saw fellow lingerie models wearing regularly. While they got to wear lacy, sheer, strappy teddies and playsuits, Dana—and similarly, Cassie—was confined to blasé basics.

When Luscious Lingerie burst on to the scene a few years earlier, they had made their mission to create lingerie and undergarments that made everyone look and feel supported and sexy, no matter what. And Dana wanted to model and design lingerie that looked and fit like a dream.

Cassie had spent many a night creating vision boards and scrolling through Pinterest to define what it really meant when something “fit like a dream.” Dana wanted everything to fit perfectly but also be brashly sexy and fun . . . which lingerie could absolutely *not* be when a body didn’t fit into what “traditional” sizing deemed appropriate. Dana’s Dreamland and Luscious Lingerie were taking the unconventional and necessary steps to make garments that could appeal to anyone who wanted to wear something vivacious and pretty.

And with the help of the Luscious Lingerie designers, adding cheeky touches like mesh cutouts, bright patterns, and the aforementioned caution tape bands, Dana’s idea of a quirky, off-kilter lingerie dreamscape went to the next level. Dana’s Dreamland line ranged from supportive bras and sheer panties in a variety of cuts to relaxed bralettes and cozy boy shorts, from plush robes to gauzy chemises and supremely sexy teddies—all made to fit and feel great on different body types.

“You know, I designed the caution undies with you in mind,” Dana said, gently poking Cassie’s side, knowing it made her squirm. “When was the last time anyone has been down there?”

“Ha ha, thanks for that,” Cassie said, rolling her eyes and swaying her ample hips. “Admittedly, it’s been a while, but I’m okay with

that. I've got a job to focus on and a few more projects in mind—plus BB is doing really well.”

“People love taking off their clothes and getting photographed,” Dana said, shimmying over to a privacy screen to change.

Buxom Boudoir was Cassie's dream come to life. A few years earlier, once Dana had started gaining traction through her social media following as a plus-size model and body-confidence advocate, she and Cassie had started their luxury boudoir/pinup photography studio in the heart of Chicago's River North neighborhood. Cassie had photographed Dana for as long as she'd been interested in photography—they had been best friends since middle school. Initially bonding as the first two girls in class to get boobs and attracting all the attention from dumb preteen boys, Cassie and Dana were each other's ride-or-die, BFF, sister from another mister, and so forth.

Starting her own photography business wasn't exactly what Cassie had planned, however. She knew that she was a great photographer, she had an interesting point of view, and people would be interested in what she wanted to show. But more doors closed than opened when an inexperienced, Black female photographer came knocking. Cassie was tired of the rejection and decided to combine her love of all things vintage into a full-service boudoir photography studio. It took some convincing, but with her parents as early financial backers, her meager savings from the various photographer jobs she did land—including copious amounts of engagement photos, weddings, and family portraits—and Dana's support as well, Buxom Boudoir (affectionately called *BB*) was born.

At first, it had been just Cassie and Dana—between the two of them, they could handle scheduling, styling, hair, makeup, set design, and, of course, the actual photography. But as clients started gravitating toward Cassie's professional and easygoing demeanor

and their following grew. They brought on Kit Featherton, a petite effervescent Brit who dressed entirely in prim pastels and barely wore any makeup herself, but who tackled makeup and hairstyles with gusto and flair. As whimsical as her name, Kit spent more time attending hair shows and beauty seminars and practicing techniques on willing clients (and not-so-willing coworkers) than anything else. Cassie admired Kit's devotion to learning as much as she could about how to care for and style a variety of different hair types, and she had become an indispensable part of the Buxom Boudoir team.

With the addition of Kit to the team, their popularity skyrocketed, and Cassie couldn't be happier. BB started to get some recognition from local businesses to do photo shoots for social media content, small-scale ad campaigns, marketing materials, and a Chicago bridal magazine had even hired the team a few times for editorial spreads. But best of all, BB was a boudoir studio run by a Black woman, with all-female employees, producing beautiful content that left their clients happy and empowered. Cassie was her own boss, had an incredible team, and wanted even more.

Bringing on Samantha Sawyer—a young, recently graduated marketing major with a photography minor—had been the icing on the cake. Sam's business acumen, social media savvy, and ability to aptly assist with photography equipment made up for her grumpy disposition. Youngest of them all, always bored, prickly on her best days and seething on her worst, Sam was painfully blunt, took no shit, and made the BB team complete. With Sam in place to concentrate on scheduling, check clients in, make sure everything was prepared, and help Cassie throughout shoots, Buxom Boudoir was a force to be reckoned with, and Cassie had more time to take on freelance shoots and daydream about her own more conceptual projects.

Several months ago, Buxom Boudoir found its new home when

they moved from a small storefront into a new, bigger loft space located on the top floor of an old warehouse that had been converted into workspaces. Cassie loved this studio because it had been a blank slate and they could do whatever they wanted to it. They had views of the skyline, natural light came in just right from virtually all sides, and there was enough room for everyone to have desks, a large area for shoots, and a spot they called the Glam Zone, which consisted of two salon chairs, mirrors for hair and makeup, and thrifted shelving repurposed for all of Kit's beauty products, curling irons, and bobby pins. Dana had clothing racks lining the makeshift walls of her "office," with options for the different types of photo shoots they did—sultry and sexy or cheeky and cheery. Their studio had become Cassie's sanctuary—she spent more time there than her own beloved apartment, which was within walking distance. She owned and ran a photography studio on her own terms, and she was finally saving money.

And yet, she still wanted more. Cassie had successfully carved out a niche in the boudoir scene, but she wanted to book national ad campaigns that were torn out of magazines to put on inspiration boards or were pinned thousands of times on Pinterest. She wanted the freedom to explore her own personal photography endeavors and work on high-concept artwork that she could show at galleries across the country. She wanted to use her platform and curate collections of artists she admired to boost up so they could find success, too. Which meant Cassie still had a long way to go, and art directing and photographing the campaign for Dana's line would be a clutch gig for her.

"I can't believe this is one of the last times I'll be photographing you like this for a while," Cassie said when Dana emerged from behind the partition. She looked gorgeously refreshed in a white bodycon dress that hugged every single curve, including the teeny

tiny bump only someone who spent a ton of time taking pictures of Dana in minimal clothing would notice.

Dana smiled, her hand immediately cradling her belly. To anyone else, she looked like her normally curvaceous self, but Cassie's best friend was finally, blissfully, eagerly on her way to motherhood. After years of trying to conceive and miscarrying until she was diagnosed with cervical insufficiency a condition that prevented some women from carrying pregnancies beyond the first trimester, Dana and her debonair wife, Riki, were finally going to have the baby they so desperately wanted. This time around they were armed with the knowledge of what they needed to do to carry this pregnancy to term. They had also spent months searching for a sperm donor whose background matched Riki's Japanese heritage, and they had recently found an anonymous donor through a local sperm bank.

But with her diagnosis, Dana would have to go on bed rest sooner rather than later, to keep that baby cooking for as long as possible. And as much as Dana wanted to star in her own lingerie line's campaign, she also knew how important this line would be to so many people and that it needed to move forward, which meant someone else would model in the ad campaign. Their timing may have been less than ideal, but Dana was determined to have it all and make things work from the safety of her cozy bed.

Which was why it was integral to the success of Dreamland that Cassie was in charge of the campaign. She had been a part of the process since the concept initially crept into Dana's mind—ethereal lingerie with a twisted edge. Dana trusted Cassie with her work and her life, and Cassie was ready for this giant step, art directing a well-known lingerie brand on a hotly anticipated body-inclusive lingerie line.

Amply bosomed herself—*36H, thank you very much*—Cassie

was full-figured and proud of it, but she understood the struggles of finding affordable, pretty, and fun lingerie. Dreamland was going to provide this to women of all sizes. Dana had worked countless hours on the prototypes, making sure someone with a negative A cup or an XXXL derriere could find the same negligee but cut to accommodate different body types.

“I’m just glad everything will be in your hands. But I will be watching,” Dana said, laughing a mock-evil laugh.

Cassie chuckled, knowing Dana would figure out some way to oversee every step of the process.

“The set I wore today is just the start and will be an awesome way to get my followers riled up. We should have samples of the full line soon, and once I approve those, we’ll be in full production, your shoots will be underway, and our campaign will finally happen.”

My shoots. Our campaign. Cassie’s chest swelled—she was proud and exhilarated to bring recognition and momentum to their career. Sam and Kit were also going to be on hand for styling and makeup, and their involvement with a national ad campaign for a popular lingerie brand would give them professional boosts, too.

“Have you heard from Luscious Lingerie lately?” Dana asked. “Rebecca something or another is handling all the marketing and should be in contact soon.”

“Aside from those initial emails you sent with me copied on them, I haven’t heard from her directly,” Cassie answered. “Anything I need to know before stuff ramps up?”

“Well, she mentioned having you come in and do a trial run at one of their studios. I guess the higher-ups want to see what you do with the prototypes and a model or two they had in mind for the full campaign.”

Dana’s fiery red hair was covering her face as she rummaged

through junk mail on the front desk. Cassie knew she was avoiding her gaze for a reason. Her heart started pounding as she dreaded whatever bomb Dana might drop next.

“You mean I have to go in and prove myself, don’t I?”

“No, Cassie. No. I told them, it’s you or no one at all.”

Cassie knew this was too good to be true, too easy. Every other step of the way to this point in her career had been a fight, and so was this. Except this time, Cassie was determined to make the most of it and come out of it with her goal in hand. More times than not, when she was up for a campaign on a larger scale or at the national level, Cassie was passed over for someone the company had worked with already. Having run her own business for close to five years now, she understood the appeal of going with an already trusted colleague and knowing what to expect in regard to their quality of work. But that didn’t mean that Cassie wasn’t willing to give people a chance or go out of her way to support other women and people of color who had been in her shoes, just starting out and looking for a break. Hell, Cassie was still at that point now—she knew the only reason she had this job was because her BFF was calling the shots. And she wasn’t going to let someone else walk in and take this away from her when it was so close.

“Out of curiosity, do they have another photographer in mind?”

Dana began shuffling through junk mail again, suddenly very interested in a local pizzeria’s menu, though Cassie knew she already had it memorized because they ordered from there pretty regularly.

“D?” Cassie asked, adding an edge to her tone. “Who is it?”

“Reid Montgomery,” Dana mumbled quickly. Cassie closed her eyes in frustration.

Reid Montgomery was like an eyelash that got stuck in Cassie’s

eye right after she had just drawn a perfect cat-eye flick, so she couldn't actually rub it out. She and Reid rarely ran into each other in person, but she knew his name well—they were constantly being compared. On a surface level, their aesthetics were alike—vintage, pinup, retro—and they often competed for similar jobs in the city. But Reid Montgomery utilized retro as a style, while Cassie made a point to use it with a wink and twist its message into something more powerful, or at least cheeky—Rosie the Riveter giving the middle finger instead of making a fist, a re-creation of *Bye Bye Birdie's* iconic phone scene but with smartphones, or a hiked-up skirt revealing not lacy underwear but full leg tattoos instead.

But she had to admit that Reid had a good eye for angles, cropping, and composition. And he was a white dude, so everyone automatically took him more seriously. He'd been Luscious Lingerie's go-to photographer for the last couple of years for virtually all of their major ad campaigns. They did editorial shoots throughout the year to include in catalogs and on their social media, and there were usually projects with special collections with other influencers and celebrities, like Dana's Dreamland line.

And now he was more than likely going to take this job away from her if she didn't perform to LL's expectations.

No way, lady. Don't count yourself out before it even starts, Cassie coached herself against that nagging, pessimistic voice in the back of her mind. Still, Reid Montgomery was the thorn in Cassie's professional side. Two months ago, Cassie had been passed over by *Chicago* magazine to do a relatively straightforward and tame cover shoot with the new mayor. They went with Reid Montgomery, of course, who gave them a perfectly fine set of photographs that would probably be used for years to come. In that same issue, Cassie had done a great photojournalistic set on Le Diner en Blanc.

A year earlier, Cassie had all but secured taking new photos at the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio for their brochures, on-line presence, and more, but at the last minute, they decided to go with, lo and behold, Reid Montgomery. Prior to all of that, when Cassie was still out there, submitting her work to agencies and applying for photographer positions day in and day out, she was constantly compared to Reid's aesthetic, told they already had a guy who did this type of work, and rejected.

And now here he was again.

Except this time, Reid would be the one wondering why he was looked over for someone else, someone better.

"Well, whatever. It's fine. Maybe he's the guy they want, but I'm the woman they need to run this campaign smoothly and make sure your skivvies look the absolute best they can," Cassie said, peppering herself up.

Dana would usually chime in with either an unprecedented level of enthusiasm or a loud, ridiculous whoop, but when Cassie looked up from her laptop, Cassie saw Dana was standing stock-still.

"Hey, D, what's going on?"

Dana suddenly hunched over, and a surprised groan erupted from her mouth. Cassie ran over to Dana as she slumped down, easing her to the nearby couch. Cassie put her hand on Dana's, which had gone straight to her lower stomach.

"Cassie, call Riki. Something's wrong."



Reid Montgomery's phone started vibrating as he pulled up to the State Street studio of a local TV news station. It wasn't his usual clientele, but after he photographed the mayor in *Chicago* magazine

earlier that year, he was suddenly the new guy all the local, strait-laced Chicago celebrities wanted to take their photos. Reid had made his mark in the photography world by mimicking poses and stylings of classic pinup photography. If he could spin something in a vintage way, he'd do it no matter what, even if the subject or model wasn't even remotely interested in the pinup aesthetic. It was just what he did. There were other photographers out there who made a lot of money from specifically doing this sort of thing for regular, everyday people, but Reid had gone after national ad campaigns from the start and had been successful. And that had worked to his benefit, because now he was the go-to rockabilly photographer with a reputation for getting the job done above and beyond expectation.

Or so he told himself.

There were times when he wanted to walk around and take photos just to take photos, and he was lucky that he could afford to take days off here and there and do whatever he liked. Not every photographer could, and he knew it was a privilege to work on his own terms and his own time.

Things had changed for him after working with Luscious Lingerie, a Chicago-based undergarment company that was always in the fashion world news because of their support of the body-confidence movement. It gave Reid an opportunity to collaborate with big-name influencers, and other clothing brands had taken notice. Surprisingly, so had someone at the mayor's office, because he was astounded when someone from *Chicago* magazine called him with a gig to photograph the city's new Latina mayor, who was tenacious and took no BS from anyone. The magazine cover made the rounds from morning-news programs to prominent placement in

convenience stores on every corner. Mayor Rodriguez looked powerful and charming and, most of all, important. Reid was still riding that high.

His buzzing phone brought Reid back to the present, standing outside the studio's side entrance to be let in for the photo shoot, but he ignored it. He had a full day ahead of him and had called in a couple of favors with some art galleries he'd shown work in over the last year to bring in an office assistant and intern to help out. He mainly worked solo, but the various teams of newscasters from different times during the day made this shoot more complicated. Luckily, everyone was already in hair and makeup, since most of them either had been on air or would be later in the day.

From the beginning, Reid had always felt alone. His entire life, he knew the only person he could rely on was himself. His parents had been aloof at best. Once he hit elementary school, Reid knew independence was a survival skill in his family. His parents generally felt like they had better things to do, were sporadically at home because of odd jobs, or spent time with their skeezy friends, and Reid often preferred it that way.

But when Reid was almost eleven and his younger brother, Russell, was born, he suddenly had this other person he had to make sure survived. From the outside, it might look like Reid raised Russ, but really, he just made sure the kid didn't kill himself by accident or get involved with something shady. Beyond that, Reid and Russ were never close.

His proclivity for solitude made it easy to focus on his career, get ahead in life, and save a ton of money. It also added to his overall bad-boy persona. He didn't love being labeled a devious rockabilly in the Chicago art scene, but he liked that he had an image people noticed, and he kept to it. Reid's perceived detachment kept expect-

tations low, and since he was good at his job, his clients kept coming back.

After a couple of hours of cheesy group shots of local reporters (who would all likely need their heavy makeup retouched in editing), he decided to take some candid shots while they milled about. He winked at the meteorologist and watched their cheeks immediately flush red. *Click*. He saw the sports and special segment reporters laughing with a camera guy over something on one of their phones. *Click*. One of the lead anchors set to retire later that year sat off to the side by himself, looking over notes. *Click*. These were the moments he wanted to capture more than anything. More than the bright lights and overstylized pinups hiking up their legs, more than the power stances against city backdrops. These fleeting moments no one paid attention to—that's what he wanted to see.

Scrolling through photos on his camera's monitor, Reid felt his phone buzz yet again. Without looking at it, he knew it was a text from Russ, who'd been relentlessly texting him for the past few days. A week ago, Russ had called him saying he had gotten into some gambling debt due to a few terrible hands at an underground poker match in Colorado—whatever that meant; Reid tried not to get too involved—and needed Reid to wire him some money. Which he had, and Reid assumed that would be the end of it. If this text was any indication, Reid anticipated a frantic, pleading phone call from his younger brother soon, and as usual, Reid would send him funds.

Just as he was going to read Russ's text, however, his phone genuinely rang. It was a call from Rebecca Barstow, the marketing manager for Luscious Lingerie. He had heard through the grapevine that a new special collection was coming soon, so he anticipated this call would be a new offer for a national ad campaign.

It was a hard job taking pictures of models in their underwear, but someone had to do it.

Ugh, he felt sleazy for even thinking it. To be honest, after spending two years as the lead photographer on many of LL's ads and some of their product merchandising shots, Reid had seen just about everything when it came to lingerie photography, and it had become another part of the job.

"Bec," he said, knowing she hated when he shortened her name. "How are you?"

"Reid, how many times do I have to ask you to call me Rebecca, my *actual* name?" she said. "What's your schedule like later this week?"

"Nothing that can't be rearranged for you, *Rebecca*."

"Charming. Great. I need you to come do some test shots for a new line. Local influencer, size inclusive, yada yada, you get the idea."

Reid could hear her typing on the other end of the call, like she was talking to him but was also doing three other things at the same time. Knowing Rebecca, she probably was.

"Cool, email me the details, and I'll be there. Any reason why there are test shots and you aren't just hiring me outright?"

"We have another photographer in the running, and she has ties to the designer. The execs would much rather go with you, but we're saving face because this line could really be big for LL. She's a model and influencer with a huge social media following and is exactly the type of creator we want in our special lineup."

"As long as it's my usual fee or higher, I'm game. I'll see you later this week."

"Sure thing. I'll keep you posted on what's going on with the other photographer, and we'll go from there," Rebecca responded,

the clack of her keyboard going quiet. “Maybe we could get drinks after . . .”

Reid knew it would come up eventually. He and Rebecca had hooked up a few times post-photo shoot. He tried not to make a habit out of sleeping with clients, but they worked together regularly, she was his main contact at LL outside of their accounting department, and she was cute. But he wasn’t really looking for anything aside from the very, *very* casual, and Reid didn’t want things to get messy. Luckily for him, neither did Rebecca.

“Yeah, maybe, we’ll see,” he said, trying for coy and not outright dismissive. He didn’t want anything to jeopardize his cushioned working relationship with LL.

Plus, this job was probably in his best interest right now. Knowing his brother, Reid fully expected to eventually answer Russ’s call or text and hear a plea for some kind of financial support. A few months ago, Russ needed help when he was selling CBD oil while he was in Maine, and before that it was protein powder in Vegas, then came the gambling trouble in Colorado. This time, who knew? Melatonin bedtime chocolate treats in Seattle? Maybe this time Reid wouldn’t even ask about whatever “quick moneymaking” scheme Russ was involved in; he’d just send the cash and get on with it. The last thing he needed right now was to get worked up or worse—actually worried.

When he ended the call with Rebecca, packed up his gear, and made the requisite rounds to everyone before he left for the day, he finally opened his messages on his phone and started to scroll through a litany of unclear, rambling texts from Russ. After his third reread, waiting for his rideshare, he finally gave up and called Russ.

“Hey, Reid, it’s about time.”

“What is it, Russ? What do you need now?”

“So, when was the last time you went to the house in Tinley Park?” Russ asked.

Reid hesitated; he couldn’t actually remember the last time he’d been home to the southern suburb they grew up in. Before he let guilt creep in, he answered, “It’s been a while, why do you ask?”

“It’s a complete shithole. The wallpaper is peeling, I’m pretty sure there’s water damage to the first-floor ceiling, and the basement smells like something died—”

“Russ, what are you talking about?” Reid was confused. Why did Russ care about the house? He was halfway across the country.

Unless . . .

“I’m home, big brother.”

“Why?” Reid blurted before he could stop himself. “How long have you been here? Does Dad know? Are either of them there?”

“Relax, Reid,” Russ said. “I’ve been here about a week, which you’d know if you responded to my texts or answered my calls.” He continued telling Reid about his journey from Denver and his lack-luster welcome back to Illinois.

“So, Dad’s cool with you staying at his house?” Reid asked.

Their father wasn’t going to let Russ stay there without some kind of benefit for himself. He may have been an absent parent, but Robert Montgomery was always on the lookout for a hustle. And knowing how eager Russ was to please their parents because he never got much attention as a kid, Reid feared their dad would take advantage of this situation.

“Yeah, that’s the thing,” Russ said, hesitating a beat before launching into a long-winded explanation to justify whatever it was their father demanded. “With Mom gone, no one is really here to handle bills and all that. So he said if I want to stay, I have to pay.

And you know I had to leave my last gig because of the whole poker thing, so . . .”

Reid rubbed between his eyebrows as Russ continued to come up with more reasons to drain his funds. Mortgage payments, utilities, food . . . The list of responsibilities their father had suddenly given his twenty-two-year-old brother seemed endless. And if the house was in such terrible disrepair after long stretches of vacancy, it probably needed work.

“Look, Russ, are you okay? You don’t have a bunch of hippie mobsters tracking you down, right?”

“Uh, I don’t think so.”

“All right, fine. And Dad is definitely downstate on the farm?” Their father had left his “city living” and supposedly worked on his cousin’s soybean farm, making a decent living. Without his family. And this was just the sort of thing he’d insist on if Russ wanted to stay at the house. “Have you heard from Mom?”

“Dad says he’s not coming back anytime soon, and I haven’t heard from Mom for almost a year.”

God, what assholes. Reid let a few moments pass before he talked himself out of doing the right thing.

“All right, I’ll help you with bills at the house in Tinley, but you have to work. Once you’re on your feet, you take over paying for everything, or you can leave again,” Reid said, realizing that offering to pay for these things was going to cost him. The extra cash from this Luscious Lingering job would definitely help out.

“I can do that,” Russ said.

Reid knew he’d have to babysit him and make sure he was holding up his end of the bargain.

As Reid listened to Russ drone on and on about how he’d built tiny houses from old train cars, Reid checked his email with his

brother on speakerphone. Looking at Rebecca's email, his eyes stopped on one name in particular—the other photographer in consideration for this ad campaign.

Cassandra Harris.

Hers was a name he had seen and heard more and more lately. Apparently, they had similar styles with a vintage edge, and she ran some kind of boudoir business as her main gig. Boutique photography was cute, but it wasn't exactly lucrative. What did he have to worry about?

Nothing, aside from his brother. Securing this LL job now would be ideal, knowing he'd have to clean up whatever his brother's mess would be this time.

“Reid? Are you still there?”

Closing his email, Reid turned his focus back to his brother.

The Heart of the Deal



LINDSAY
MACMILLAN

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

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CHAPTER ONE

QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS

Returning from a long Sunday in the office, Rae paused at the top of the stairs to catch her breath. She didn't want to show up out of breath to her own birthday party, particularly her quarter-century birthday party.

Dabbing her face with the sleeve of her suit jacket to mop up the sheen, she let herself into her apartment—the Perry Street Penthouse, as she and her roommate Ellen had rebranded their top-floor walk-up.

“Happy birthday!” Ellen shrieked from the kitchenette. She was slicing blocks of cheese with a plastic knife.

“I'm twenty-five, not eighty-five,” Rae said. “No need to shout.” But she was smiling. “Where's everyone else?”

Everyone else being the two friends from college she'd managed to hang on to through the real-world craze of the past few years. The Scramblettes, the foursome called themselves, after their joint culinary invention—a half omelet, half scrambled egg creation accidentally born from subpar flipping abilities. The spelling was inspired by the Rockettes to give it some New York flair.

“Sarah just texted that she’s getting on the subway,” Ellen said. “And you know how Mina is . . .”

Rae grunted. She’d hoped that midtwenties would be more punctual than early twenties, but apparently the Scramblettes were still the Scramblettes. “Why aren’t you wearing your robe?”

They’d agreed on a bathrobe theme—much more sophisticated than a pajama party, Rae thought, much more adult-ish.

“It’s over there,” Ellen said, pointing to the undersized couch, where an oversized robe was draped over the armrest. “Snatched it from the hotel during my business trip.”

“Very savvy,” Rae said, retrieving her own robe from her bedroom. The term *bedroom* was generous. To afford West Village rent, they’d inserted drywall to split the one bedroom into two. The wall stopped a foot short of the ceiling to comply with fire regulations.

Rae removed her bathrobe from one of the plastic hooks that held up most of her belongings, the ones that hadn’t already fallen to the floor. The landlord didn’t allow nails, and her closet didn’t fit anything beyond her black work pants and white collared shirts. In an attempt to mitigate the sexism rampant in investment banking, she dressed identically to the men. She thought the strategy might be working, though perhaps that was only because modern sexism was often too subtle for anyone—including her—to notice.

Online, the bathrobe had looked like a confident white, but it had turned out to be more of an indecisive eggshell. Still, better than the polka-dot one she’d been tempted by. Polka dots were early twenties, not midtwenties, not to mention that robe had been four dollars more expensive.

The glamorous stereotype of Wall Streeters dripping in money didn’t exactly apply to Rae. The investment bank she worked for had slashed salaries for junior employees to improve profit margins, and she had big student loans to pay off. Unlike most of her colleagues, she didn’t come from wealth and hadn’t gotten the job from nepotism. She’d hustled to get in, and she was going to keep hustling until

she got out. She made herself put ten percent of her salary into her “Poet’s Fund” every month—an idealistic pot that would let her quit her corporate job one day and pursue her writing dreams.

Ellen, too, was money conscious, determined to live frugally now so she could indulge in the lavish lifestyle she was destined for later on. It was one of the things that bonded them—gleefully finding ways to save a few dollars and rolling their eyes at other twentysomethings who spoke so cavalierly of private helicopter rides to the Hamptons.

Rae shed her corporate costume, slipped on the nearly soft fabric, and rejoined Ellen in the living room.

“Start in on this,” Ellen said, pouring her a coffee mug of rosé. The wine glasses were all chipped or sitting in murky sink water.

Rae had specifically requested rosé, as nothing articulated midtwenties elegance more than an accented vowel.

“And look how much cheese we have,” Ellen said, pointing to three plates stacked high with Brie, cheddar, Gorgonzola, and a few other varieties Rae didn’t even know the names of. “But can you believe it, I forgot crackers, so we’ll just have to eat it straight.”

If anyone else had forgotten the crackers in the cheese-and-crackers equation, Rae would’ve been annoyed, but this was just how Ellen was, focusing so much on the details that she overlooked the basics, and Rae loved her more for it. Ellen’s whimsy brought wings to Rae’s logic-driven life, and Ellen swore that Rae kept her from crashing. They worked like that, filling in each other’s gaps.

Rae took a swig of rosé, followed by a goopy chunk of Brie. “It’s a pretty good chaser,” she said approvingly.

“You don’t need a chaser for rosé.”

“At my age you do.”

Ellen was still only twenty-four.

Rae’s phone buzzed. Her heart palpitated—not a fluttering palpitation because a crush had texted but a plummeting palpitation because a boss had.

Decimal points don't match on pg. 62. Send thru updated version ASAP.

As an investment banking analyst in the Mergers & Acquisitions group, Rae's job was to prepare PowerPoints, spreadsheets, and financial models to assist the higher-ups as they wined and dined CEOs of big companies and pitched them on why they should buy other big companies to make even more money. If Rae's bank won the deal and facilitated the acquisition—which involved very little intellectual prowess and a whole lot of extravagant pageantry—they made a disgusting amount of money in fees, none of which trickled down to the sleep-deprived worker bees at the bottom. At its core, Rae's role was just to be everyone's personal bitch, accepting each menial request 24/7 with a cheerful “Will do!”

Rae began replying to the text, but Ellen snatched the phone away. “No work tonight,” she said.

“But—”

“The global economy isn't going to collapse if you don't fix a fucking decimal point.”

Ellen drowned Rae's protests with the Quarter Century Club playlist she'd made. The first song was well-selected—poppy without the sugar—and stirred a certain optimism in Rae.

Twenty-five was the year she'd finally be promoted, rising from Wall Street's bottom rung to its second-to-bottom rung. And it felt like a more low-key era when she could meet up with the Scramblettes for sushi on a Friday night and then be curled up in bed before the just-out-of-college crowd had even wiggled into their constricting miniskirts and stilettos.

Sure, it was more than a little disconcerting to compare her mid-twenties reality of fifteen-hour workdays and takeout meals for one to the married-with-a-dog-and-kid-on-the-way lifestyles of her friends back in her Indiana hometown, but at least in Manhattan she felt like she was moving. She wasn't exactly sure where all the motion was leading, but there was some sense of *forward*, and on good days, even *upward*.

Turning up the volume on the speaker, she and Ellen pranced around the apartment, twirling their robes for effect.

Many songs later, Sarah arrived, wearing an oversized sweatshirt rather than a robe. “It’s basically the same,” she said, when Rae asked why she hadn’t adhered to the theme.

“No,” Rae said, voice clipped. “Sweatshirts say, ‘I’m lazy and haven’t showered in days.’ Bathrobes say, ‘I’m effortlessly seductive and smell like fresh peaches.’”

“She’s right,” Ellen said, as the three of them formed a lopsided triangle on the floor, leaving room for Mina.

The couch wasn’t big enough to fit all four of them, even if they squished, and they preferred collectively suffering on the hardwood to relegating just one of them to the floor.

“I think twenty-five is going to be the year Rae meets the great love of her life,” Ellen proclaimed, topping off their mugs.

“Definitely,” Sarah agreed.

“No,” Rae said, bad mood about work spilling now into a bad mood about love. “I’m focusing on my career.”

“And you’re crushing it,” Ellen said, as she often did. “I just think it’s time to join the modern age and get a dating app.”

“I barely even get to see my friends,” Rae said, resenting her job for consuming her life and herself for letting it. “Why do I want to waste my time on complete strangers?”

“Everyone starts out as a stranger,” Sarah said.

Rae thought about how, when she’d first met her college boyfriend in that over-capacity, beer-soaked frat basement, he hadn’t felt like a stranger. She didn’t like it, how she still remembered the untainted beginning. They’d dated for a few years before he’d cheated on Rae with the girl Rae had been living with right after college. He’d spun the blame on her: “You’re in an exclusive relationship with your job!”

“It’s good to keep working your relationship muscle,” Ellen said. “So it doesn’t atrophy too much.”

“My relationship muscle is very strong, thank you,” Rae said, feeling a stab of betrayal at how Ellen was lecturing her about love, on her birthday no less.

“How many dates have you been on since you and Jake broke up?” Ellen asked. Ellen went on first dates just about every week. None of them had stuck yet.

“Plenty,” Rae said, though it wasn’t true. She hadn’t technically been on any dates since her breakup two years ago, not unless you counted the time she’d gotten drinks with a client—a networking event, she’d thought—and he’d ended up hitting on her.

Maybe it was recalling the way his hand had slid assertively up her thigh that night, or maybe it was the way she was now sitting on the floor eating blocks of cheese at her own birthday party, but something made her see her dating life in a new light—a very dim, very dark light that was flickering ominously, as if to warn her it was about to go out altogether.

Reminding herself that she had more important things to focus on than meeting guys, she tried to push back against the angst, but the angst pushed back with a mind of its own, like it was staging a coup on her own brain, a coup it had been planning for a long time now and had chosen tonight to execute, knowing how vulnerable she’d be to a quarter-life crisis.

The anxiety escalated into full-blown panic. She’d completed twenty-five laps around the sun and yet was still at square zero when it came to love. In trying to climb up the corporate ladder, she’d fallen completely off the romantic ladder.

Chugging the rest of her rosé, she reached for an unopened bottle of room-temperature Chardonnay. “Shit,” she said, yanking on the corkscrew. She still struggled to open wine bottles. She should’ve mastered more of these adult things by now, but she hadn’t, and in this moment, she was certain she never would. “I’m in a romantic recession.”

Ellen and Sarah rattled off a string of supposed-to-be-soothing words, but Rae’s screeching escalated as she kept tugging the cork,

which was shredding as it stayed stuck in the neck of the bottle. “A romantic recession!” she cried, latching on to the alliteration. “And my dad didn’t even send me a birthday card.” The negative spiral was all intertwined. “And I hate my mom’s boyfriend. And I’m going to be staring at pointless spreadsheets for the rest of my life and never write a single poem. And I’m going to die alone, surrounded by cats!” she concluded in crescendo.

“Well, then that’s not really alone, is it?” Sarah asked, trying to lighten the mood. “Since you’ll have the cats.”

Rae tried to glare, but her eyelids were too tired. The thought of work tomorrow made her want to simultaneously curl into a ball and teleport away, away, *away*.

A serrated blade of clarity woke her up. “I have to meet someone this year or it’s all over,” Rae announced, pivoting to her no-nonsense business voice.

“What do you mean?” Ellen said. “You’re still so young.”

“Twenty-five is just a baby in New York,” Sarah agreed. “People settle down way later here. There’s no rush.”

“Well, by Midwest standards I’m basically approaching old-maid territory,” Rae said. “And sorry to break it to you, but the biological clock doesn’t give a damn about New Yorkers’ enlightened lifestyles. Our eggs are still bleeding out every month.”

“Don’t say that,” Ellen said with a shudder as Sarah gagged at the graphic visual.

“It’s just the truth,” Rae said. “Think about it logically.” Usually her analytical mind could talk her out of overreacting, but this time it was doing the opposite. “Let’s work backwards with the math. Women’s biological clocks expire at thirty-five, so I need to have all my kids before then.” She’d seen too many stats about how the probability of pregnancy complications and birth defects increased after thirty-five, and she didn’t trust that she’d be one of the lucky ones.

“I want three kids, spaced at least two years apart, so that means I’ll have my third kid at thirty-five, my second at thirty-three, and

my first at thirty-one.” She was determined to create a big, boisterous family, the kind she’d always longed for as an only child.

“And I want to be married for a bit to build a solid foundation with my husband before our offspring take over our lives,” she went on. This part was particularly important. She’d done the math to figure out that she’d been conceived on her parents’ honeymoon, and she thought this might have been one of the key variables that had doomed them for divorce.

“So that means I’ve got to tie the knot *before I turn thirty.*” The big three-oh, only five years away, loomed large and menacing in her head and in her heart.

She paused for a breath. When it didn’t come, she plowed ahead anyway. “So married at twenty-nine, and build in a year for planning the wedding, so let’s say I get engaged at twenty-eight. And we’d want to live together for a year before getting engaged to validate compatibility, which puts me at twenty-seven, and we have to date two years before that to make sure we’re making rational decisions, not just swept up in the hormones. So that puts me at *twenty-five.*”

She shuddered, infuriated with herself because she hadn’t thought about this earlier, though she knew she had on some level—she’d just tried her best not to acknowledge it until it came bursting out tonight. “I need to meet my husband ASAP so I can get married before thirty, or it’s all over.”

Ellen and Sarah looked rattled, like Rae’s words struck too close to home, like they too were getting spooked by the cruel truths of womanhood and the shrinking pool of eggs.

“ASAP!” Rae repeated, with the same urgency with which her bosses were always requesting financial models for the deals she worked on.

The penthouse door opened. It was Mina, standing there in jeans and heeled boots, bathrobe nowhere in sight. “So sorry I’m late,” she said, panting from the six flights of stairs. “My Uber driver drove like

a grandpa.” She kicked off her shoes and joined them on the floor. “What’d I miss?”

Rae waited for the others to give away her meltdown, but Ellen just said, very casually, “We’re downloading a dating app for Rae to bail her out of her love slump.”

Mina clapped, like this was the best of all possible answers. “Scramblettes to the rescue!”

Rae gave up on the cork. She left the damaged bottle on the floor and lay down on the couch, mismatched socks dangling off the edge. She wrapped her robe tighter, sealing herself in. She felt like she’d been stuck in a calamitous scene from someone else’s memoir, only to turn the page and find out it was her own story, but someone else had written it for her.

Ellen perched herself on the armrest, stroking Rae’s hair. Rae didn’t get much physical touch these days, with the exception of firm handshakes at work and pointy elbows to the ribs on the subway, or on a good day, the grazing of a barista’s hand as he passed Rae the whipped cream-topped cappuccino that had become her daily breakfast.

“I need to close the marriage deal before I’m thirty,” she mumbled so only Ellen could hear. She spent all her time helping close deals at work, locking in mergers and acquisitions. Now it was time to lock in a husband.

“You don’t need to worry about marriage right now,” Ellen said, patting Rae’s head. “You just need to have some fun.”

But Rae wasn’t going to be dissuaded. It had all become horribly transparent. She could see her own future projected forward, out to three decimal points. If current trends continued, she’d become one of those old, bitter women who stuffed her empty life with expensive handbags . . . a sharp-elbowed, scowl-defaulting New Yorker who wasn’t just immune to frivolities like love, but truly above them.

The timeline was expiring fast. Getting married before thirty was an ambitious goal perhaps, but she was an ambitious person.

And it was the only way she could have it all—the stellar job and the stellar family. She couldn't wait until she rose in her career to find a husband. She had to find him now, or it would be too late.

The pressure of it all was paralyzing. She rolled over on the couch, put on her headphones, set a downer indie song on repeat, and handed Ellen her phone, trusting her to know what to do, or at least know more than she did herself.

Sometime later, Ellen tapped her shoulder until Rae took off her headphones.

“Are you okay with your profile?” Ellen asked.

Rae lowered her eyes to the screen Ellen was showing her. She cringed as she saw RAE, 25 on the top of the profile, followed by photos of her smiling stylishly at a party, smiling athletically on a mountaintop, smiling approachably with her golden retriever back in Indiana.

Rae nearly told Ellen to find some other photos—with angles that showed the true width of her nose or how pasty her skin had become from years of rarely seeing the sun except through office windows. But showing her flaws meant losing out to the filtered competition, so she kept quiet.

Underneath the pictures came the quick stats:

Height: 5'4"

Rae experienced another letdown upon realizing she had willfully entered a world so shallow that height was the first attribute listed.

Hometown: Meridian Hills, Indiana

She was technically from Pocksey, but apparently the Scramblettes didn't think that sounded alluring enough, so they'd opted for the town next door.

College: Columbia

That much was true, but she hated its Ivy League attitude. It sounded softer spoken aloud but looked prickly and pretentious written out.

Job: Finance

She was glad, at least, that they'd put "finance" rather than "investment banker." It was slightly less abrasive, though the nuance would probably be lost.

She scrolled to keep reading the rest of her summary, but there was nothing more. Just like that, Rae had boiled herself—all her past achievements and failures, current hobbies and routines, future ambitions and uncertainties—down to just another profile that guys would spend two seconds—three if she was lucky—glancing at before deciding whether to swipe "like" or "next."

It felt even worse than distilling herself into a one-page résumé.

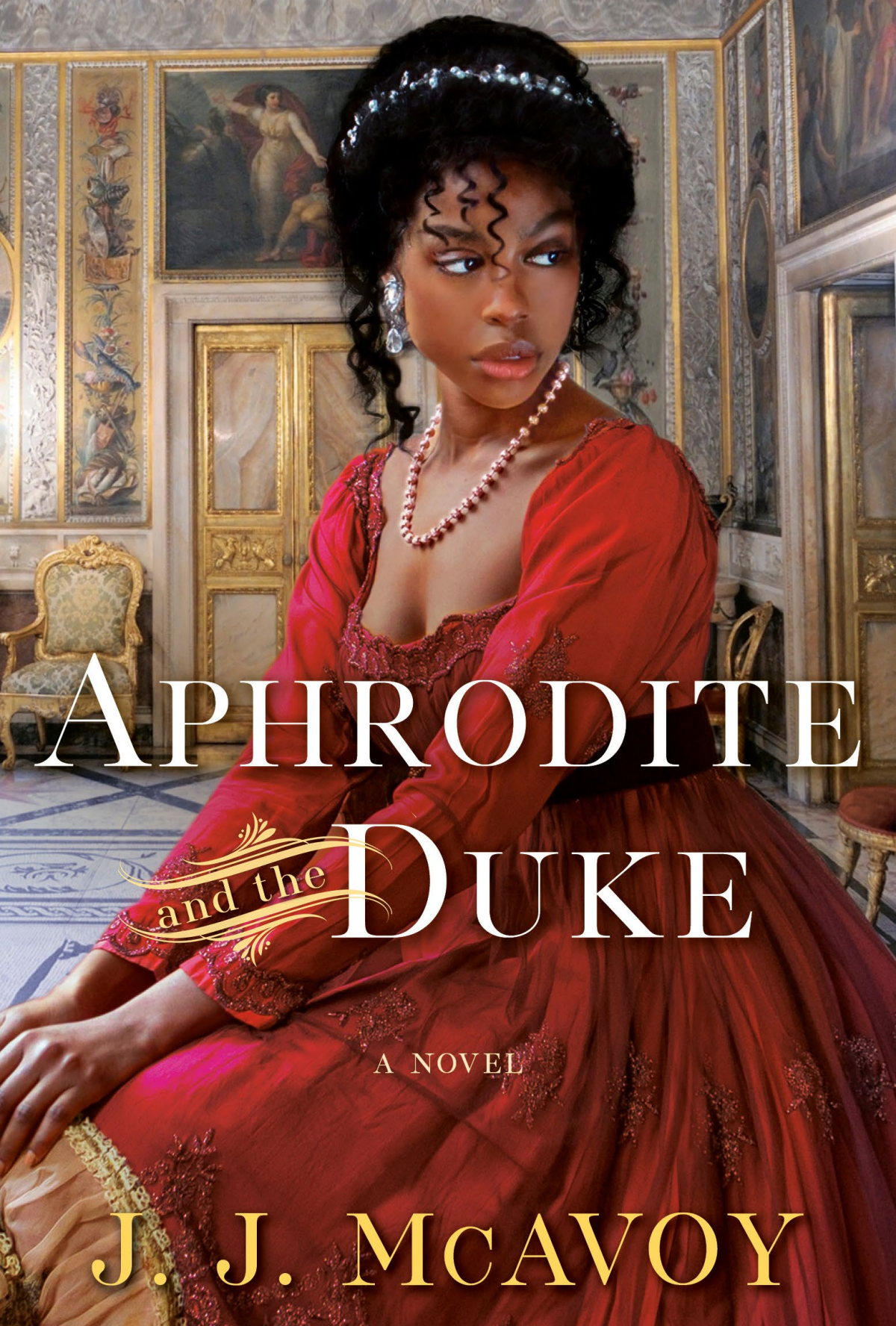
She could hear her Indiana friends: *Come on, Raelynn, you're better than this.* Everyone back home called her Raelynn. The Lynn had fallen off once she'd stepped foot on Columbia's campus in New York, seven years ago now. *Rae* was more city chic. But how much more of herself was she leaving behind as time went on?

She didn't have the emotional capacity to debate this now, so she turned the music up and whispered or shouted, she couldn't tell which, "Just publish it."

Publish. The verb she longed to hear in reference to her poetry, now more depressingly affixed to her dating life.

Sprawled horizontal, Rae lifted the mug to her lips. It seemed Ellen had filled it with red wine after cutting their losses on the bottle of white. The wine trickled onto her robe in tacky red polka dots, wiping out all the gains she'd thought she'd made in her adult life. Without sitting up, Rae kept slurping and began swiping for her soul mate.

She had five years—1,825 days, she calculated—to close the husband deal before her thirtieth birthday, and there was no time to procrastinate.



APHRODITE
and the DUKE

A NOVEL

J. J. McAVOY

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Aphrodite and the Duke is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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CHAPTER ONE

Aphrodite

My name is Aphrodite Du Bell.

Yes, truly. Aphrodite, as in the goddess of love and beauty. A name wholly magnificent, yet, to my mind, utterly cruel to give a child, for who could live up to such a grandiose mantle? Was it not daring all the world to measure a young lady's beauty not to her peers but to a goddess? If she did not meet the measure, she would be left to ridicule and mockery. Should she be blessed with extraordinary beauty, she would be cursed with the expectation of magnificence. Failing to meet that expectation would *also* herald ridicule and mockery. It is an unforgiving name, and I believed it was fated to bring forth some great tragedy, just as in the myths.

For all the stars in the sky, I could not fathom why Father and Mother had given me this burden. Even upon asking them, they had no remorse for their actions and thought themselves quite clever. So much so, they proceeded to name my three younger sisters after goddesses as well, though they were more fortunate than I with their names—Hathor, Devana, and Abena. If you were not as scholarly as my father—who had taught much to my mother in terms of Egyptian, Slavic, and West African mythology—you might be utterly unaware that those were the names of deities. So my sisters' burdens did not equal my own. And my two brothers, named after heroes, Damon and Hector, made off quite easily as well, though they were men, and such were their lives.

We were the six children of Lord Charles Du Bell, the Marquess of Monthermer, and Lady Deanna. To all the world that mattered, we were among the most prominent families, fortunate with title, wealth, wit, beauty, and of course, a loving home, which was Belclere Castle. With the exception of my elder brother, not one ill word could have been uttered about any one of us . . . until certain events came about in my life. After years of running away I was now in a carriage on my way back to London society.

“The man is a fiend, a wolf among men just like his father was,” my dear brother Damon complained.

“Careful, my dear, you shall wake her,” his soft-spoken new wife, Silva, said in reply, believing I had somehow managed to fall asleep. I could feel the pressure of their gaze upon me.

“We have only just succeeded in convincing her to return,” my brother whispered. Damon had many talents, but holding his tongue was never one of them. “Now sister’s letter says that beast will also return to London this season.”

They were speaking of *him*. Rather than betray any inner workings of my mind or heart, I kept my eyes closed.

“It is to be expected. Does he not have a sister due to come out as well?” Silva asked.

It *was* to be expected. As our sister Hathor and his sister, Verity, had now come of age, at eighteen.

“I may have forgotten, but surely our mother did not. She should have instructed Hathor to wait another year to spare us the reopening of this wound.”

How unfair that would have been to Hathor.

“Do you believe she did not know? The duke is a widower now,” Silva said.

“After the disgrace and humiliation he delivered to my family? He does not deserve even the poorest of women, let alone my sister. I will never allow it.”

“It is not you who would be called to allow it but your father. And should your mother wish it, your father will allow it.”

The sound that came from his chest was one of evident frustration. Again, his wife was right.

“If my mother arranged this on purpose...” He sighed heavily. “I am at a loss as to the state of her mind. How could she possibly forgive him?”

“Is she not his godmother?”

“Is my sister not her daughter?” he retorted angrily.

“Calm, my dear.”

Once more, they were silent and undoubtedly examining me to see if I had awakened. But I had become proficient in the art of feigning sleep. It was all in the breathing.

“He may be her godson, and his mother may have been her very best friend, but surely none of that can overcome the love of a mother for her daughter.” He spoke resolutely, so it was only natural that his wife agreed.

“Then, by your reasoning, it cannot have been done on purpose, so you can spare your jaw any further tension,” Silva replied. The soft laughter between them nearly made me break my act, as I wished to smile alongside them.

My brother Damon, though kind and sweet to his family, had had the reputation of a rake in society before he wed the young Miss Silva Farbridge, the only daughter of a baron. It came as a surprise to everyone, even my mother, who had an eye for these things. The many women he’d had dalliances with were rumored to be very handsome indeed. Miss Silva Farbridge, however,

was thought to be quite plain. She, a lady he had seemingly overlooked, and he, a lord that all were sure she did not like, until a few weeks ago when they became beside themselves in love. I was unaware of what had brought this love to fruition, and the two of them held that secret close. The only explanation they offered anyone was simply that their previous encounters had been misunderstandings. No one asked anything more, and they were quickly married, though I was desperately curious.

“Your sister is a great beauty. I am sure there will be callers in line at the door for her hand as well Hathor’s,” Silva said.

“Yes, it is good for her to return. My only fear is that she shall be led astray upon seeing him, and be hurt once more.”

“It has been four years. You believe she still thinks of him?”

“I do not know. Odite never lets any of us in on her true thoughts. The only thing we are all sure of is that she loved him. I can only pray that she has fully removed him from her heart.”

There was no doubt in my mind that my brother would do anything for me. Not just him, but my father, my mother, and my other siblings as well. They all loved and cared for me so very much and I wished not to worry them, but my thoughts would either shock them or cause them unease.

Often, I felt as though I were a rare and precious bird, trapped within a cage of gold, on exhibition for the world. It was my duty to appease my viewers, and truly, I did my best, but there were times when it was all so arduous. I wished to be free. And the only time in my memory I had felt such freedom was in my youth . . . with him, Evander.

Since my mother was his godmother, we were afforded many opportunities to speak with each other growing up. He frequented our home freely, though our encounters always took place

under the watchful eyes of my governess or lady's maids. Evander had the keen ability to see through all my acts. When my sisters had all but driven me mad, and I said nothing, allowing them their way, he knew I cursed them in my mind, and would walk by and say the curse for me to hear. When I wished to eat more at the table than what was becoming of a young lady, he would secretly have a dessert saved and left for me in my rooms. Books that had been withheld from ladies or amended for decency, he would lend me the full version.

And when I was sixteen, he made me this one promise: *When we are married, you will be free to be however you wish to be. I swear it.*

I had stared at him in awe and wished to marry him right then. But my family would not allow it. My mother said it was still far too young, despite knowing others my age who had married. We were of two great and noble houses, so all things had to be done in order and with the utmost care. She believed I must wait until the opportune time I did not think it would be a whole two years later. but once my mother was determined, there was no winning against her. I was mightily cross with her.

But finally, on the day of my coming out, as everyone else fluttered about nervous at being before the queen, I was calm. It was said that I looked like royalty and had been trained as such all my life. The truth of the matter was that my thoughts and emotions were elsewhere—on a future that I had assumed would begin with him. Several men called upon me the day after, but I gave no heed to any of them as I waited only for him.

I waited in my very best dress.

I waited until the sun went down, and my mother forced me to bed. The very next day, I waited again. For five days, I waited, confident that whatever held him would soon end, and he would appear before me. Until the sixth day came, and we got word of a wedding.

His wedding.

Taken aback and confused, I did not speak or eat that entire day. It was only when it had long been dark that agony ripped through me. I should have gone into the garden. I should have held my hands over my mouth. But all of me hurt so deeply and thoroughly that when I sobbed, it was as if I were dying. The sound of my grief woke the whole house. My mother stayed with me, which was wise, for I soon collapsed.

We returned to our country estate immediately to avoid the talk of the ton. I wished to never return to London, for it was the place where my dreams had died. When my family went down for the season, I always remained at Belclere Castle. Until now.

I wanted to refuse their demand that I return, but then my brother reminded me that my sister Hathor would have her special day ruined, as the talk would be unbearable.

I believed it would be unbearable either way. My return would cause a stir. My absence would also cause a stir, but at least in my absence, I could pretend to be ignorant of it. However, that would be selfish. And I had been selfish for four years, allowing my mother and sisters to face the ton without me.

All agreed it was time for me to move on, even me. But on to what?

I opened my eyes to the greenery of the world outside.

“And here I thought you intended to sleep the whole way,” my brother said.

“Forgive me, brother. Have I missed anything of interest?” When my gaze fell to him, there was a soft yet woeful smile on his face, as if I were a wounded animal that needed the lightest care.

“Of course not. I only jest. Though I do wonder how you manage to sleep with this jostling,” he replied just as the carriage shook violently. “Gently!” he called out to our driver.

“Beg your pardon, my lord. The road is not good this season,” he replied.

“Then why on earth did he take this road?” Damon frowned, looking at his wife, who just gave him a slight glance, but it was enough for him to hold his tongue.

“London fashion has changed since you were here last, Aphrodite. We must go to the modiste together to get you a new dress,” Silva said. I was not sure if it was the musings of my imagination, but she always seemed to become more rigid when she spoke to me. Perhaps she was still not accustomed to being part of our family.

“We are sisters now. You may call me Odite or Dite if you prefer,” I replied. “And yes, I will accompany you to the modiste, though I do not believe I will be in want of any dresses. I am sure my mother is more than prepared.”

“Hmm.” Damon chuckled, nodding in agreement before looking at his wife. “Knowing our mother, the modiste is already in our home, awaiting our arrival.”

“I fear Mother will not be pleased with how big I have gotten,” I said.

“Forgive me, but big where?” Silva laughed, her brown eyes looking me over.

“Her imagination.” Damon laughed along with her. “Sister, you must not aim to fit Mother’s standards of beauty. They do not exist in this world. You now embody the dream of almost all young ladies everywhere.”

“He is right.” Silva let out a deep breath. “If you are self-deprecating, what hope is there for the rest of us mere mortals?”

“You both hold me in too high regard,” I said. I did not seek to be self-deprecating, nor did I believe there was anything wrong with me. But my brother was correct—our mother’s standards were not achievable. She remained more unnerved by my aging than I did. The slightest growth or change in my appearance would not escape her eye.

“Odite, you are a Du Bell. High regard is the standard to which you are meant to be held.” Damon nodded as if his words were gospel. To him, I was sure they were. “Worry not, sister. Truly, I believe this season shall be one you will not forget. So long as you allow yourself to enjoy it.”

“Of course.” It was all I could bring myself to say in return, as I shifted my gaze to the trees and blue sky above. Then, without notice, the whole carriage shook with such force we were jostled out of place.

“By heavens! Driver!” Damon called out, grabbing hold of his wife.

“Forgive me, my lord. There is an accident ahead!” the driver called back.

“Oh dear,” Silva said as my brother checked out the window. “Is anyone hurt? Should we stop?”

“Drive on!” My brother’s voice roared like thunder and his fist clenched in rage, leaving us both perplexed at the change in his demeanor.

“Are you well?” I asked him.

“Quite,” he grumbled and kept his head high. “Do not look out the window. Women should not gaze upon such unsightly events.”

“Unsightly?” Silva giggled and moved to see. “What could possibly—”

“Silva,” he reprimanded, and she stilled. The carriage filled with silence, allowing us to hear the conversation outside.

“Your Grace, are you well?” one voice questioned.

“Yes.”

My breath caught at the sound of that voice. It could not be.

“Verity, are you injured?”

That was as sure a confirmation as any. My brother's gaze shifted to me, and I understood why he had shouted at the driver.

Remain calm, I directed myself, lifting my head high and following Damon's direction to not look out the window.

But the fact that our paths had already crossed when we had not even entered London yet was unsettling. Even worse was how my ears strained to hear his voice as we moved farther away from him.

Plato said love was a grave mental disease, and I feared returning to London would make me realize I was still quite ill.

ANNABEL
MONAGHAN

NORA

GOES

OFF

SCRIPT

"Irresistible—funny,
addictive, and
deliciously romantic."

—Rosie Walsh,
author of
THE LOVE OF
MY LIFE



PUTNAM
— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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CHAPTER 1



HOLLYWOOD'S COMING TODAY.

I'm not going to lose my house.

Those two thoughts surface in the same moment as the sun starts to brighten my room. I've been paid for my screenplay, and the bonus money for letting them film here will hit my bank account at noon. Good-bye unpaid real estate taxes. Good-bye credit card debt. And to think, Ben's saying good-bye to me has made it all possible. I don't know how this day could get any better. I hop out of bed, grab my heaviest morning sweater, and head downstairs. I pour my coffee and go out to the porch to watch the sunrise.

Whoever buys this house from me, I always think, will tear it down. It's over a hundred years old; everything's broken. There's a certain point in January when the wind blows right into the kitchen and we have to duct-tape a fleece blanket over the door frame. The floorboards droop; there are

only two bathrooms and they're both upstairs. Each bedroom has a closet designed to house six outfits, preferably for very small people. Ben had a list of house complaints he used to like to run through daily, and I could never shake the feeling that he was really complaining about me.

This house is a disaster, sure. But I fell in love with it when I first looked down the long windy path of the driveway. The magnolia trees that line either side touch in the middle, so that now, in April, you drive through a tunnel of pink flowers. When you emerge onto the main road it feels like you've been transported from one world to another, like a bride leaving the church. It feels like a treat going out for milk, and it feels like a treat coming home.

The house was built by a British doctor named George Faircloth who lived in Manhattan and came upstate to Laurel Ridge in the summer, which explains the complete lack of winterization. It was built to be enjoyed on a seventy-eight-degree day and primarily from the outside. I imagine his landscaping this property like a maestro, arranging the magnolias and the forsythia beneath them to announce the beginning of spring. After a long gray winter, these first pink and yellow blooms shout, "Something's happening!" By May they'll have gone green with the rest of the yard, a quiet before the peonies and hydrangea bloom.

I knew I'd do anything to live here when I saw the tea house in the back. It's a one-room structure the doctor had commissioned to honor the ritual of formal tea. Where the main house is flimsy white clapboard with peeling black shutters, the tea house is made of gray stone with a slate roof. It

has a small working fireplace and oak paneled walls. It's as if Dr. Faircloth reached over the pond and plucked it out of the English countryside. I distinctly remember hearing Ben use the word "shed" when we walked into it, and I ignored him the way you do when you're trying to stay married.

The first morning we woke up here, I got up at first light because we didn't have any curtains yet. I took my coffee to the front porch, and the sunrise was the surprise of my life. I'd never seen the house at six A.M. I didn't even know we were facing east. It was like a gift with purchase, a reward for loving this broken place.

I stand on the porch now, taking it in before the movie crew arrives. Pink ribbons, then orange creep up behind the wide-armed oak tree at the end of my lawn. The sun rises behind it differently every day. Some days it's a solid bar of sherbet that rolls up like movie credits and fills the sky. Some days the light dapples through the leaves in a muted gray. The oak won't have leaves for a few weeks, just tiny yellow and white blooms pollinating one another and promising a lawn full of acorns. My lawn is its best self in April, particularly in the morning when it's dew-kissed and catching the light. I don't know the science behind all of it, but I know the rhythm of this property like I know my own body. The sun will rise here every single day.

BY THE TIME I've gotten my kids up and fed and off to school, I've changed my clothes six times. I stand in front of the mirror in the same jeans and T-shirt I started with, and realize

the problem is my hair. The frizz isn't as bad as it's going to be in August, but it's still pretty intense. People in Hollywood have tamed hair, or if it's wild, it's been professionally disorganized. I dunk my head in my bathroom sink and then get to work blowing out my hair piece by piece, something I don't think I've done since my wedding day in my childhood bathroom with my bridesmaids crammed in behind me.

When my hair is straight, it's still only nine A.M. They're supposed to be here at ten, and I know that if I spend any more time in front of a mirror, I am going to overthink myself into a panic. I decide I look perfectly fine for a thirty-nine-year-old mother of two. And it's not like I'm auditioning for this movie; I wrote it. I decide to go into town and do some non-urgent errands. Maybe I'll get home after they've arrived so I can show up in an oh-hey-I-lost-track-of-time kind of way. I'll walk into the Hollywood version of my real-life drama in full swing, like it's some kind of sick surprise party.

I kill as much time as I can by dropping a pair of boots at the shoe repair and browsing the discount rack at the bookstore. I stop by the hardware store to chat with Mr. Mapleton about his hip surgery and to pick up the stack of crossword puzzles he saves me from his paper each week. By ten o'clock, I run out of things to do, so I know it's time to go home and see exactly what a movie crew looks like and what the consequences will be to my lawn.

I've misjudged, and they're late, so I'm back on the front porch watching their arrival. I grip the railing as the eighteen-wheelers barrel down my dirt driveway, dislodging the lowest magnolia blossoms and darkening the sky with startled birds.

For a second, my whole property looks like a Hitchcock movie.

I never saw this coming. I'm as surprised as anybody that *The Tea House* is being made into a real movie. The last movie I wrote was called *Kisses for Christmas*, an eighty-minute TV movie with well-timed breaks in the action to make room for the forty minutes of commercials. The one before that was *Hometown Hearts*, which is pretty much the same story, but it takes place in the fall. My superpower is methodically placing a man and woman in the same shiny town, populated by unusually happy people with maddeningly small problems. They bristle at first and then fall in love. It's all smiles until one of them leaves, but then comes back immediately after the commercial break. Every. Single. Time.

The Tea House is a departure from the formula and is definitely the best thing I've ever written. The first thing my agent, Jackie, said when she'd finished reading it was, "Are you okay?" I laughed because, sure, it did seem like I'd gone dark. The story runs deeper, with heavy doses of torture and introspection, and for sure the guy doesn't come back at the end. In the months after Ben left, I sold two fun, light scripts to The Romance Channel, but then this darker thing sort of spilled out of me. I'd tried to keep my personal life to myself after Ben left, but I guess some stories just want to be told.

"I mean this is great," she started. "But this is like a big film, not for The Romance Channel. If it's okay with you, I'm going to pitch this to major studios."

"That's going to be a major waste of your time," I said, pulling crabgrass in my front yard. "No one wants to watch

two hours of angst and abandonment. I swear I tried to perk it up at the end, but no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't stomach him walking back through the door."

"Nora. It hasn't even been a year."

"I know. So I need to get back to what I do best. Do whatever you want with this thing; I think maybe I just needed to get it off my chest. Everything okay with your mom?"

"She's fine. Give me a couple of weeks on this. This script is a game changer."

As the first truck stops in front of my house, nine of its eighteen wheels on my grass, I realize that the game has indeed changed. I hold on to the porch railing for support as two more trucks start unloading cameras, lighting, furniture, people.

A pink-haired young woman with a clipboard and a smile approaches me. "Hey, you must be Nora. Don't freak out. Cuz I'd be totally freaking out. I'm Weezie, Leo's assistant."

"Hi. Not freaking out. I can replant the grass." I reach out to shake her free hand.

Another woman, closer to my age in a black jumpsuit, approaches. "I'm Meredith Cohen, executive producer."

"Nora Hamilton, homeowner," I manage, still hanging on to the porch railing. "And writer," I add, because I'm awkward.

"Listen," Meredith says. "We're a lot. Hell, just Leo's a lot these days. We're going to make a lot of noise and a big mess, and then we'll clean it all up and be out of your hair in two days. Three, tops."

"That's fine; it's what I expected. I've never seen a movie

shoot before, kind of exciting.” A red pickup truck pulls completely onto the grass, towing a silver Airstream trailer. “What’s that?”

Weezie turns and laughs. “Oh, here he is. Of course, that’s Leo. We’re all staying at the Breezeport Hilton; he doesn’t stay at Hiltons.” She rolls her eyes and smiles again, like it’s mildly annoying but also adorable that this guy is wrecking my lawn.

“Leo Vance is going to sleep in that thing? In my front yard?”

“It can’t be avoided. He’s quirky. But he’s got a bathroom in there and we have a honeywagon coming for everyone else. So don’t worry about your house.”

The Airstream door opens and out steps a forty-year-old, shoeless superstar. His jeans hang too low and his gray T-shirt is torn in two places. His hair needs a trim, and he’s way too handsome to play Ben. But then again, Naomi Sanchez is playing me. He squints up at the sky as he gets his bearings, as if he’s emerging from the dark after twenty-four hours. It’s eleven A.M. and we’re only a ninety-minute drive from New York City.

Leo Vance is the highest paid leading man in Hollywood. I know this because I’ve been googling him for three days. He has homes in Manhattan, Bel Air, and Cap d’Antibes. He owns a share of an NBA franchise. No kids, never married. A Libra. He’s originally from New Jersey and has a brother.

I’ve seen every one of Leo’s movies, which isn’t really a credit to him. I’ve seen a lot of movies. He’s a good actor, and he’s most famous for his smoldering stare. I have to say, it’s a

little over the top. In his first film, *Sycamore Nights*, he gave his co-star Aileen Bennett a series of white-hot smolders that got him named Sexiest Man Alive that year. I guess it became his signature move, so he kept it up film after film, even when it was entirely unnecessary. Like in *Battle for the Home Front*, he's telling his newly pregnant wife that he has to go away to war, and he's smoldering. Or in *Class Action*, he's giving a commencement speech at a military academy and smoldering all over everyone's parents and grandparents. And don't get me started on *African Rose*. A refugee center with a wild malaria outbreak is no place to smolder. Leo Vance seems prone to the inappropriate oozing of sex appeal.

When the smolder is turned off, he has an impressive range of smiles that are unique to each film. They range from timid to maniacal, and I've always admired the way he can keep each one consistent throughout an entire film. I'm curious to see what smile he'll invent for *The Tea House*. What smile would he imagine Ben having? I can't even remember the last time I saw Ben smile.

Leo Vance is walking toward my porch, and I brace myself for an introduction. Perfection on the screen, scruffy in real life. He is going to be transformed into a man with a lot of issues who ends up walking away from the woman he built a life with. Leave it to Ben to be maddening enough to make me finally write something worthwhile. I smile at the irony of Ben actually helping out after all.

Leo brushes past me on the porch like I'm not there, then stops and takes a step back. "You're missing a dimple," he says.

“The other one’s inside,” I say.

He nods and walks into my house like he owns the place. Not much of a meet cute.

MEETING THE DIRECTOR, Martin Cox, is as intimidating as I anticipated. Weezie’s gone in after Leo, so he finds Meredith and me on the porch. “You must be Nora.” He’s not tall but he’s big, and I can’t decide if he’s physically big or if it’s his presence that takes up a lot of space.

I shake his hand and try not to say anything else. If I start talking, I’ll tell him what I thought of the final scene in *Alabaster* and why I think he was robbed of an Oscar. I’ll tell him that the lighting alone in *The Woman Beneath* was sublime. Mainly to avoid using the word “sublime,” I keep my mouth shut.

“So, can we see it?” he asks. I lead Meredith and Martin behind my house to where the tea house sits at the entrance to the woods. There is no path to it, just lawn, so that a consequence of visiting the tea house is almost always wet shoes. I’d left the big oak door open, as is my habit, because with the door open, you can see straight through the steel windows on the back wall into the mouth of the forest. It gives me the feeling of endless possibility.

The tea house is a sacred space to me. The space in which I have been able to preserve myself by writing. And, unlike the main house, it is airtight against the elements. I imagine the Faircloths approaching the tea house as I do, anticipating

a fire in the fireplace and a table lain with tea and treats. I imagine lovers meeting here for hushed conversation and first kisses. Ben had always wanted to use it for storage.

It may have come down to that, for all I know. My belief that the last thing the world needs is more storage versus Ben's belief that he needed a third motorcycle. Among the many consolations around his leaving are that he took most of his stuff with him, and he didn't ask for the kids.

The tea house plays prominently in the breakup of our marriage, which is what earned it the title role. Ben resented the time I spent out there; he resented the work I did. He resented the fact that I'd been paying our bills for the past ten years. Which made two of us, actually. The more competent I became at taking care of our family, the more he despised me. The more he despised me, the harder I worked to make things right. Me writing in the tea house was a mirror he didn't want to look into. That's how it goes in the movie. In real life, I don't know, maybe he left because he just wanted more storage. Ben wanted more of just about everything.

Now, as we approach, I hear Martin catch his breath. "It's otherworldly," he says. "The photo doesn't do it justice."

I smile and keep walking. "Well, it's certainly from another time. This is where I write."

It's warm for April, and the slate roof glistens in the sun from last night's rain. Two giant hydrangea bushes flank the door. They're getting their first leaves now, hopeful celery-colored things, but soon they'll be bursting with cerulean blue blooms the size of my head. "If you could have waited

until July, you would have seen these in bloom,” I say to no one, because Martin has already walked inside.

“This is absolutely perfect,” he says, running his hands over the paneled walls. He pulls out a walkie-talkie. “I’m back in the tea house. Bring the linens for the daybed, I’m going to need three o’clock sunshine coming through the back window. And a mop. Make sure Leo and Naomi are in makeup.”

Meredith gives me a little wink, presumably to make me feel better about the mop comment. I give her a shrug, what do I care? “Okay, so I’ll get out of your way, let me know if you need anything.”

I GO BACK into my house, relieved to find it empty. Outside every window, there is activity—a catering truck, a woman chasing Leo Vance with a spray bottle. From the largest trailer emerges Naomi Sanchez, somehow all legs in a frumpy house-dress. I assume she’s dressed up as how Martin imagined me. I first saw Naomi Sanchez in *Hustler’s Revenge* when she was about twenty-five. There was a scene where she discovered she’d been double-crossed that was shot so tight that her whole face filled the screen. Where are her pores, I’d wondered. At thirty-two, she is still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

I text Kate: Leo Vance was in my house. Naomi Sanchez is exquisite.

Kate: Dying.

I’m having a hard time figuring out what I should be doing. I mean I’m inside my house which isn’t a writing-working

space. Inside my house is a mom-ing space. The kitchen is still a mess from breakfast, and it occurs to me that Leo Vance has seen my pancake spatter and has smelled my bacon grease. I'm mildly agitated that he's been in here as I start to clean. There will have to be boundaries of some sort. I don't want to walk in here tomorrow and find him smoldering at my dishwasher.

I call my sister, and her nanny, Leonora, answers. "She's out with her friends," she says. Penny and her husband, Rick, live in Manhattan and East Hampton and are frequently featured in *Town & Country* wearing the right things with the right people. This is the first time in my life I'm doing something cooler than Penny, so I leave a message. "Please tell her I called and that Naomi Sanchez and Leo Vance are in my driveway." Leonora squeals, and I am satisfied.

Once my kitchen is clean, I try to think of what I'd normally be doing. It's Wednesday, and on Wednesdays we eat meatloaf. Of course! I take a pound of ground turkey out of the freezer and place it on the counter. This doesn't take as long as I'd hoped.

I WATCH THROUGH the corner window in my sunroom. They're filming the scene where I tell Ben that it might help if we both had a steady paycheck. It was the day he lumped me in with all the other people who don't have the vision to believe in his dreams. I was a drone, a robot, a slave to convention. I'm pretty sure it was the last straw. I imagine my words coming out of Naomi's perfect mouth, and I start to

think maybe this film was cast all wrong. How is Leo Vance going to be able to be as dismissive as Ben was when he's looking at a woman like that? It seems like people as beautiful as the two of them might have been able to work things out. No man's going to walk away from Naomi Sanchez.

I've been watching the filming for an hour when I realize it's time to go get my kids. I open my garage to find three guys smoking in my driveway. They drop their cigarettes and extinguish them with their shoes and move to the side and wave me out, like I'm in some kind of valet-parking situation. I have no choice but to drive up onto my own grass to get around the trucks and onto the dirt portion of my driveway that takes me to the main road.

It feels good to put the chaos behind me and drive out into Laurel Ridge where nothing ever changes. Ben bought into this town because he was literally out of choices. He wanted a big life in the city—Penny's life, to be exact. But when that proved to be too expensive, he wanted a big house in a commutable suburb. That was impossible too. As I got more and more pregnant with Arthur and it became clear that our walk-up studio apartment would never contain us, we were in a race against the clock. We had twenty thousand dollars to put down on a three-hundred-thousand-dollar house, and a three-hundred-thousand-dollar house was a lot farther from the city than Ben had imagined.

Ben told his friends that we bought a teardown in the sticks as an investment. It's an up-and-coming town, he told them, which I always thought was funny because this town's motto should be: *We Are Neither Up Nor Coming*. It's a

town that agonizes over progress of any kind, secretly fantasizing that it was the model for Main Street at Disneyland. There's an architectural review board and a planning commission whose sole purpose is to keep people like Ben from making Laurel Ridge less quaint.

We have six or seven shops that have been in Laurel Ridge since the beginning of time. These shop owners enjoy a cult-like loyalty from their patrons. Laurel Ridge is a place where you'll always be able to buy a hammer from a guy you know and a bowl of homemade ice cream scooped by a teenager. A handful of other businesses pop up and collapse as people come from Manhattan to sell us designer vitamins and personalized dog cookies. They rarely last a year.

At the end of town is Laurel Ridge Elementary. I park and find my friends among a group of parents on the playground, like this is just some normal day.

"OMG spill it," says Jenna. She's standing under the basketball hoop with Kate.

"What?" I say, trying to be casual. "Just hanging with Leo and Naomi, whatever."

"Is he cute? Does he give you that look?" Kate asks.

"Yes and no. Absolutely cute and he's barely looked at me."

"So, the hair's a waste?" Jenna's referring to the fact that I've blown out my hair.

"Yeah, that was a little overboard," I admit. "If you saw Naomi Sanchez in person you'd understand why he wasn't so focused on me."

"Hey, Nora." Molly Richter approaches us. "Looking good, nice hair." Molly's that classic bitch you knew in

middle school who never snapped out of it. We have to be nice to her because she's head of the PTA and seems to have the authority to randomly assign volunteer positions. We steer clear of Molly Richter like people used to steer clear of the draft.

"I hear you're playing Hollywood this week," she goes on.

"I am." It's important when talking to Molly that you don't offer any additional information or ask any follow-up questions.

"Well, cute. Don't forget that *Oliver Twist* rehearsals are next Wednesday after school and you've signed up to watch the kids backstage."

"How could I forget? It's all Arthur talks about." And I've shown my hand. I should never have blown out my hair. Kate gasps, like I'm sinking into quicksand and she has no rope to throw me.

"Oh, is Arthur interested in a big part?" Molly doesn't give me a chance to respond. "That's great! Because I was going to name you play chairman, and if he's going to be so involved, you'll be there anyway. Perfect." She jots something down in her Columbo-style notebook as she turns on her heel and walks away.

Jenna is laughing. "You're so screwed."

"Yeah, I hate to say it, but you are," Kate says. "If you say no, not that she even gave you a chance, she'll make sure Arthur's a tree or a stone or something." Tryouts were today, so I'm hoping it's too late for Molly to wield her power and blackball my ten-year-old. Arthur is in the middle of another round of spring sports disasters, and this play is a lifeline.

“I know. And it’s fine. If Arthur gets a part, I’ll get people to help.”

“No one wants to help,” says Jenna.

“Then I’ll do whatever it is. This is literally everything to Arthur. It’s the first thing I’ve seen him excited about since Ben left.”

I don’t usually mention Ben. Not because it’s too painful, but because I almost never think about him. I’ve created an awkward silence though, and it seems to work to my benefit.

“We’ll help,” they say.

“You guys are the best.” The bell rings and dozens of children pour out of the school. Arthur runs over to us, dumps his backpack at my feet, and chases a bunch of kids to the jungle gym. I’m not sure what this means about how his audition went.

Bernadette, the eight-year-old boss of my family, barrels over to me and slams me with a hug. “Did he say anything about your hair?”

“He did not; I should have worn yours.” I smooth my hands over Bernadette’s brown curls. They seem straight out of *The Little Rascals*, like old-fashioned hair.

“Let’s go,” she commands. “They’re leaving in three hours.”

“They’ll be back tomorrow,” I say. Bernadette looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Okay, fine.” I call to Arthur, and he drags his body across the blacktop.

“Seriously? It’s only three-fifteen. Does weirdo need to get home to stare at the movie stars?” Arthur wiggles his fingers, failing to seem menacing.

“How was the audition?” I ask.

“I got it.” Arthur gives me a half smile that tells me he doesn’t want me to make a scene on the playground.

I pick up his backpack. “Let’s get out of here before I do something embarrassing.”

BERNADETTE IS OUT of her mind as we round the last curve of our driveway. Arthur is committed to trying to seem like he’s too cool for the biggest stars in Hollywood. They’d be lucky to meet him, he seems to want us to think. He’s got a major role in *Oliver Twist* after all. “Mom, she’s so embarrassing. Everyone at recess and lunch was asking me about this movie. We’re like freaks in town.”

We pass the Airstream trailer and two eighteen-wheelers before we can even see our garage. A table with pastries and sandwiches blocks my way. I roll down the passenger window and indicate the garage. A young man in a red trucker hat happily agrees to move his operation onto my porch, but not before giving each of my kids a donut.

“This is epic,” says Bernadette.

“It’s a donut,” says Arthur.

I close the garage door before we’re even out of the car, happy to be back in my cocoon. Everything outside feels infested with noise and tires and people making decisions who are not me. When I get upstairs, I’ll pull all of the curtains. There will be homework, dinner, *Wheel of Fortune*, bed. Their contract says they have to leave by six.

As we climb the stairs into the kitchen, Bernadette goes

into overdrive. “Did you meet Naomi? Is she as pretty as she was in *The Mariner’s Wife*? Is Leo here yet? Is he tall or not? Frannie says he’s short and stands on a box when they . . .” She stops when we get to the top of the stairs and sees Leo sitting at our kitchen counter. She’s probably out of breath anyway.

Leo stands slowly, rolling up to his full height of about six feet two inches. He gives Bernadette a stern look. “I am not short, young lady.” Bernadette smiles and blushes and covers her face all in a single instant.

“Ha! There it is!” Leo motions to her with his beer. Which is my in-case-Kate-and-Mickey-stop-by beer, I notice.

“What?” Arthur asks, a little alarmed.

“The missing dimple. I’ve been looking all over the house for it. Your mom’s missing dimple is right there on your sister’s cheek.” Bernadette can’t stop smiling, and Arthur rolls his eyes.

I realize that I haven’t moved since we came up from the garage. I’m frozen with a half a donut in my hand. “Yes, well done. That’s where I keep it.”

Leo goes back to his beer, and after a silence that seems to only be uncomfortable for me, I say, “So, I’m Nora. I’m the writer, and this is my house.”

“Leo.”

“I’m Bernadette, and this is Arthur.”

“Cheers.”

“Are you supposed to be in here?” asks Arthur.

“I filmed my bit for today, now they’re doing a few scenes with Naomi alone. Dark stuff, this film.”

“Well, yes. I was in a mood.”

“She’s in a better mood now,” offers Bernadette.

“Yes. And we need to get started with homework,” I say.

“I’ll just be a little longer. My trailer is hot and I was working on this crossword.” He indicates the crossword that I’d been saving for tonight. It’s Wednesday, and that’s my favorite crossword day, not too easy and not too hard. My kids know this and look at me in tandem, neither seeming like they could predict what comes next.

“Well, okay,” I say. Lawn, beer, crossword. I’m keeping score.

I stand by the sink, donut in hand, watching the three of them. Leo working my puzzle. My kids pulling folders out of their backpacks, trying to act normal. Bernadette needs markers; Leo hands her some. She watches him as she colors. Arthur has a sheet of fractions he needs to do within a minute, so he pulls up the stopwatch on his phone. I watch this incongruous threesome, a scene out of I don’t know what.

“So, what do you usually do now?” Leo breaks the silence.

“Oh, I start dinner.” Grateful for the reminder, I begin to move around the kitchen. I ditch the donut, wipe the counter, open the fridge. The ground turkey has defrosted on the counter so I just need an egg. I place the turkey in a bowl and crack the egg into it.

“Dear God, what are you doing?” asks Leo. Where other people get his famous smolder, I get the scrunched-up look of disgust.

“It’s meatloaf Wednesday,” Bernadette tells him.

“That can’t be right,” he says, mesmerized.

I chop an onion and add it. I throw in some bread crumbs. Leo cannot take his eyes off my bowl. “That is truly the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen.” And then as I begin to mix it with my hands. “I stand corrected.” My kids laugh.

Weezie comes looking for him at about five o’clock and doesn’t seem too surprised to find him tipsy. “Come on, let’s get you back into makeup. We need to reshoot a few things before dark.”

Leo makes what I can only call the agony face, the face my kids make when I tell them we’re having fish for dinner. “No. Please. Don’t tell me there’s more.”

“Of course there’s more. We have one, maybe two days left here before we wrap.”

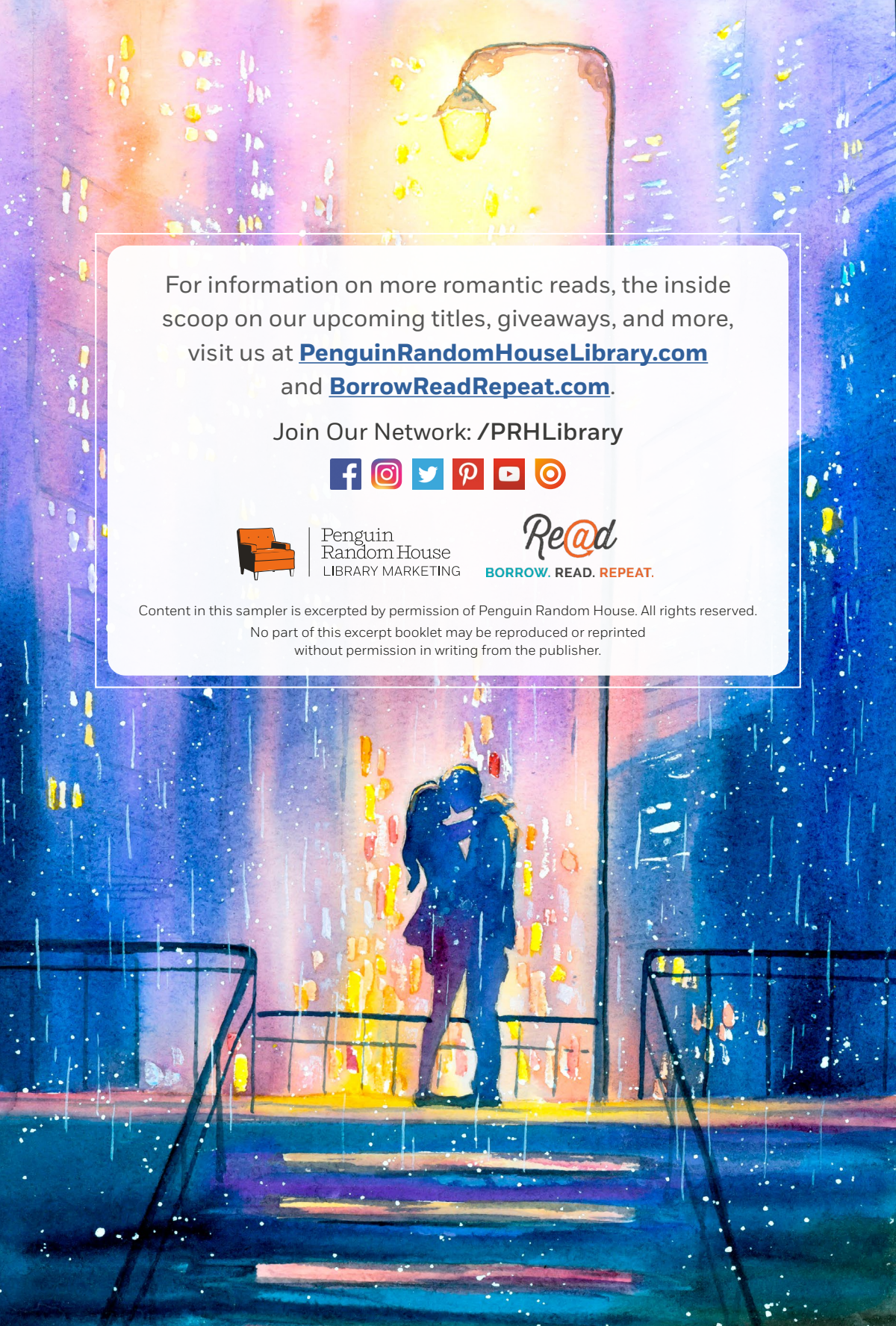
Leo clutches his beer. “But it’s so depressing. You guys, your mom is so depressing. I just can’t take it.”

“She’s actually fun,” Arthur says. “And the rest of her movies are kinda dumb but with super happy endings.”

“He’s right,” I admit. “Dumb and happy. This was kind of a one-off, sorry.”

He studies his empty beer bottle. “Can’t he just come back? Like have an epiphany or something and come back?”

Arthur hides his face by pretending to review his fractions. Ben having an epiphany would be a salve to Arthur’s open wound. “He’s not coming back,” I say.



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