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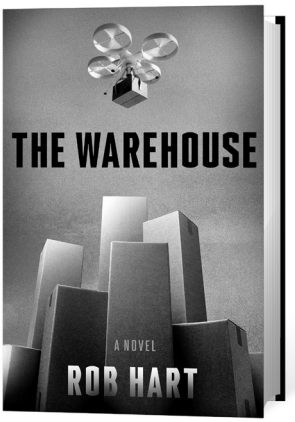

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GIBSON

Well, I'm dying!

A lot of men make it to the end of their life and they don't know they've reached it. Just the lights go off one day. Here I am with a deadline.

I don't have time to write a book about my life, like everyone has been telling me I should, so this'll have to do. A blog seems pretty fitting, doesn't it? I haven't been sleeping much lately, so this gives me something to keep myself occupied at night.

Anyway, sleep is for people who lack ambition.

At least there'll be some kind of written record. I want you to hear it from me, rather than from someone looking for a buck, making educated guesses. From my line of work, I can tell you: guesses are rarely educated.

I hope it's a good story because I feel like I've lived a pretty good life.

You might be thinking: Mr. Wells, you are worth $304.9 billion, which makes you the richest man in America, and the fourth-richest person on God's green earth, so of course you've lived a good life.

But, friend, that ain't the point.

Or, more important, one thing has nothing to do with the other.

Here's the real truth: I met the most beautiful woman in the world and convinced her to marry me before I had a penny to my name. Together we raised a little girl who grew up blessed, yes, but has been taught to appreciate the value of a dollar. She says *please* and *thank you* and she means it.

I've seen the sun rise and set. I've seen parts of the world my daddy never even heard of. I've met three presidents and respectfully told them all how they could do their job better—and they listened. I bowled a perfect game at my local bowling alley and my name is still up on that wall to this day.

There's been some tough stuff mixed in, but sitting here right now, my dogs resting at my feet, my wife, Molly, asleep in the next room, my little girl, Claire, safe and secure in her future, it's easy to feel like I can be satisfied with the things I've accomplished.

It's with great humility I say Cloud has been the kind of accomplishment I can be proud of. It's the kind of accomplishment most men don't get to make. The freedoms of my childhood disappeared so long ago, it's like you can barely remember them. Used to be earning a living and settling down somewhere wasn't so hard. After a while it became a luxury, and finally, a fantasy.

As Cloud grew, I realized it could be more than a store. It could be a solution. It could provide relief to this great nation.

Remind people of the meaning of the word *prosperity*.

And it did.

We gave people jobs. We gave people access to affordable goods and health care. We've generated billions of dollars in tax revenue. We've led the charge in cutting carbon emissions, developing standards and technology that will save this planet.

We did that by concentrating on the only thing that matters in this life: family.

I've got my family at home and my family at work. Two different families I love with all my heart, and I will be sad to leave them behind.

The doc tells me I've got a year, and he's a pretty good doctor so I trust what he says. And I know the news is going to come out pretty soon, so I figure I might as well be the one to tell you.

Stage-four pancreatic cancer. Stage four means the cancer has spread to other parts of my body. Specifically, my spine, lungs, and liver. There's no stage five.

Here's the thing about the pancreas: it's hidden way back in your abdomen. For a lot of people, by the time you find out something's wrong, it's like fire across a dry field. Too late to do much about it.

When the doc told me, he put on that stern voice and placed his hand on my arm. And I'm thinking, Here we go. Time for some bad news. So he tells me what's wrong and my first question, swear to truth, was: "What the hell does a pancreas even *do*?"

He laughed, and I laughed, which helped lighten the mood a bit. Which was good because it took a hard turn after that. In case you were wondering, the pancreas helps digest food and regulate blood sugar. Now I know.

I got one year left. So starting tomorrow morning my wife and I are hitting the road. I'm going to visit as many MotherClouds in the contiguous United States as I possibly can.

I want to say thank you. There's no way I can shake the hand of every person who works in every MotherCloud, but I'm going to damn well try. That sounds a lot nicer than sitting at home and waiting to die.

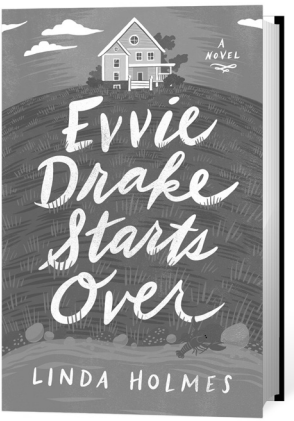
Just like always, I'll be traveling by bus. Flying is for the birds. And anyway, have you seen how much it costs to fly nowadays?

It's going to take some time, and as the tour winds on, I suspect I'll be a bit more tired. Maybe even a little depressed, because despite my sunny disposition, it's hard for a man to be told he's going to die and then just carry on. But I've been the recipient of a lot of love and goodwill in my life, and I have to do what I can. Otherwise, I'm just going to sit and mope every day for the next year or so, and we can't have that. Molly would sooner smother me just to get it over with!

It's been about a week now that I've known, but something about writing it down makes it so much more real. No taking it back now.

Anyway. Enough of that. I'm going to walk the dogs. Could do with some fresh air. If you see my bus driving by, give it a wave. That always makes me feel pretty good, when people do that.

Thanks for reading, and I'll speak to you soon.



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First

Go now, or you'll never go, Evvie warned herself.

She didn't want to be there when he got home from work. It was cowardly, yes, but she didn't relish the whole *thing* it would turn into, the whole *mess*. He'd say, not unreasonably, that leaving with no warning at all was a little dramatic. After all this time, he would wonder, why now? He wouldn't know that, today exactly, Evvie had been with him for half her life. She'd figured it out on the back of a grocery receipt a few months earlier, and then she had

circled this date on their wall calendar in red. He'd walked by it over and over and never once asked her about it. If she let the day pass, she thought she might start to disappear, cell by cell, bone by bone, replaced by someone who looked like her but wasn't.

She popped the trunk of her Honda and stuffed a fat envelope of cash into the glove compartment. This part might be silly. She didn't think Tim would cancel the credit cards or close the accounts. But her life had a lot of "just in case" in it, and she needed money just in case she didn't know him as well as she thought. It wouldn't be the first time she'd stumbled while trying to predict him.

She went into the house and opened the hall closet. She pulled down the worn, hard-sided blue suitcase with the stickers all over it—PARIS, LONDON. It was light, and it rattled from inside as she made her way down the porch steps and pushed it into the backseat of the car. The sounds of her feet on the driveway pavement tempted her to smile.

There was more to retrieve from the house, but she slid into the front seat and closed the door, leaning back against the headrest with her eyes closed. *Holy shit, I'm really going.* In a few hours, she would be in some chain hotel with scratchy bedspreads and a ragtag cable lineup. She would buy a bottle of wine, or a box of it, and she'd lie dead center in the king-sized bed and drink and wiggle her toes and read for as long as she wanted. But then she began to wonder what she would do tomorrow, and there wasn't time for that, so she took a deep breath and got out of the car to get the rest of her things. She was walking up the driveway when her phone rang.

The ringtone always startled her a little bit—a metallic arpeggio that sounded like an electric harp. The call was from the hospital in Camden where Tim sometimes saw patients. She didn't want to talk to him, but she needed to know if he would be home early.

"Hello?"

"May I speak to Eveleth Drake?"

It was not Tim.

"This is Evvie."

"Mrs. Drake, my name is Colleen Marshall, I'm a nurse at Camden Hospital. I'm calling because Dr. Drake was brought into our ER about half an hour ago. He's been in a car accident."

A thump in Evvie's heart traveled out to her fingertips. For one tenth of one second, she wanted to tell the nurse to call Tim's parents, because she was just leaving him.

"Oh my God," she said instead. "Is he all right?"

The pause was so long she could hear a doctor being paged in the background. "He's badly hurt. You should come in just as soon as you can. Do you know where we're located?"

"Yes," she choked out. "I'll be there in, ah . . . probably twenty minutes."

Evvie's hands shook as she tapped out a text to Andy. *Tim was in a car accident. Bad. Camden Hospital. Can you tell my dad?*

She turned her key in the ignition and pulled out of her driveway, heading toward Camden. She later figured, from her phone and all the paperwork, that he probably died while she was waiting at the stoplight at Chisholm Street, a block from the church where they got married.

One

EVVIE LAY AWAKE on the floor in the dark. More specifically, on the floor of the empty little apartment that jutted awkwardly from the back of her house into the yard. She was there because, upstairs in her own bed, she'd had another dream where Tim was still alive.

Evvie's Scandinavian grandmother had claimed that young women dream about the husbands they want, old women dream about the husbands they wanted, and only the luckiest women, for a moment in the middle, dream about the husbands they've got. But even accounting for the narrow ambitions this formulation allowed, Evvie's dreams about Tim were not what her nana had in mind.

He was always angry at her for leaving. *Do you see what happened?* he would say, again and again. He'd felt so close this time that she'd dreamed his cinnamon-gum breath and the little vein on his forehead, and she was afraid if she turned over and went back to sleep, he'd still be there. So she'd thrown off the blankets and made her way down to the first floor of the house that had always been too big and was *much* too big now. Descending the wide curved staircase still felt like transgressing, like sneaking down to the front desk of a hotel late at night to ask for extra towels. She'd stopped in the kitchen to put on a pot of water for tea, come directly into the apartment, and stretched out on her back to wait.

When they'd first bought the house—when *he'd* first bought the house—they'd planned to rent out the apartment. But they never got around to it, so Evvie had painted it her favorite shade of

peacock blue and used it like a treehouse: *KEEP OUT*. It was still her favorite place in the house and would remain so, unless Tim's ghost started haunting it just to say he'd noticed a few little bubbles in the paint, and it would really look better if she did it over.

Nice, she'd thought to herself when that thought first intruded. *Welcome to Maine's most ghoulish comedy club. Here is a little joke about how my husband's ghost is kind of an asshole. And about how I am a monster.*

It was a little after four in the morning. Flat on her back in her T-shirt and boxers, she took rhythmic breaths, trying to slow the pounding in her temples and belly and wrists. The house felt empty of air and was totally silent except for the clock that had ticked out *pick-a-pick-a* for thirty-five years, first in her parents' kitchen and now in hers. In the dark apartment, she felt so little of anything, except the prickle of the carpet on her skin, that it was like not being anywhere at all. It was like lying directly on top of the earth.

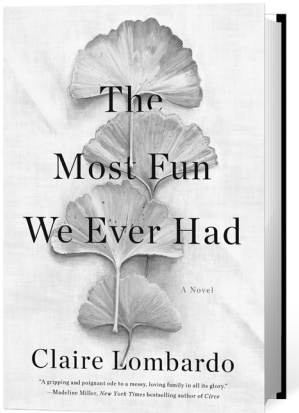
Evvie thought from time to time about moving in here. Someone else could have the house, that big kitchen and the bedrooms upstairs, the carved banister and the slick staircase where she'd once slipped and gotten a deep purple bruise on her hip. She could live here, stretched out on her back in the dark, thinking all her worst thoughts, eating peanut butter sandwiches and listening to the radio like the power was out forever.

The kettle whistled from the kitchen, so she stood and went to turn it off. She took down one of the two public-radio fundraising mugs from the cabinet, leaving behind the one with the thin coat of dust on its upturned bottom. The tag on her chamomile teabag said, *There is no trouble that a good cup of tea can't solve.* It sounded like what a gentleman on *Downton Abbey* would say right before his wife got an impacted tooth and elegantly perished in bed.

Blowing ripples in her tea, Evvie went into the living room

where there was somewhere to sit and curled up on the deep-green love seat. There was a *Sports Illustrated* addressed to Tim sticking out of the pile of mail on the coffee table, and she paged through it by the wedge of light from the kitchen: the winding down of baseball season, the gearing up of football season, an update on a college gymnast who was quitting to be a doctor, and a profile of a Yankees pitcher who woke up one day and couldn't pitch anymore. That last one was under a fat all-caps headline: "HOW TO BECOME A HEAD CASE." "Way ahead of you," she muttered, and stuck the magazine at the bottom of the pile.

By the clock on the cable box, it was 4:23 A.M. She closed her eyes. It had been almost a year since Tim died, and she still couldn't do anything at all sometimes, because she was so consumed by not missing him. She could fill up whole rooms with how it felt to be the only person who knew that she barely loved him when she'd listened to him snoring lightly on the last night he was alive. *Monster, monster,* she thought. *Monster, monster*.



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THE OFFSPRING

April 15, 2000
Sixteen years earlier

Other people overwhelmed her. Strange, perhaps, for a woman who'd added four beings to the universe of her own reluctant volition, but a fact nonetheless: Marilyn rued the inconvenient presence of bodies, bodies beyond her control, her understanding; bodies beyond her favor. She rued them now, from her shielded spot beneath the ginkgo tree, where she was hiding from her guests. She'd always had that knack for entertaining, but it drained her, fully, time and time again, decades of her father's wealthy clients

and her husband's humorless colleagues; of her children's temperamental friends; of her transitory neighbors and ever-shifting roster of customers. And yet, today: a hundred-odd near strangers in her backyard, humans in motion, staying in motion, formally clad; tipsy celebrants of the union of her eldest daughter, Wendy, people who were her responsibility for this evening, when she already had so much on her plate—not literally, for she'd neglected to take advantage of the farm-fresh menu spread over three extra-long card tables, but elementally—four girls for whose presences she was biologically and socially responsible, polka-dotting the lawn in their summer pastels. The fruits of her womb, implanted repeatedly by the sweetness of her husband, who was currently nowhere to be found. She'd fallen into motherhood without intent, producing a series of daughters with varying shades of hair and varying degrees of unease. She, Marilyn Sorenson, née Connolly—a resilient product of money and tragedy, from dubious socioemotional Irish-Catholic lineage but now, for all intents and purposes, as functional as they come: an admirably natural head of dirty-blond hair, marginally conversant in both literary criticism and the lives of her children, wearing a fitted forest green sheath that exposed the athletic curve of her calves and the freckled landscape of her shoulders. People kept referring to her with great drama as the *mother of the bride*, and she was trying to act the part, trying to pretend that she wasn't focused almost exclusively on the well-being of her children, none of whom, that particular evening, seemed to be thriving.

Maybe normalcy skipped a generation, like baldness. Violet, her second-born, a striking brunette in silk chiffon, had uncharacteristically reeked of booze since breakfast. Wendy was always cause for concern, despite seeming less beleaguered today, owing either to the fact that she'd just married a man who had bank accounts in the Caymans or to the fact that this man was, as she vocally professed, "the love of her life." And Grace and Liza, nine years apart but both maladjusted, the former a shy, stunted soon-

to-be second-grader and the latter about to friendlessly finish her sophomore year of high school. How could you grow people inside your own body, sprout them from your own extant materials, and suddenly be unable to recognize them?

Normalcy: it bore a second look, sociologically speaking.

Gracie had found her beneath the ginkgo. Her youngest was almost seven, an insufferable age, aeons from leaving the household, still childish enough that she'd tried to slip into their bed in the middle of the previous night, which wouldn't have been *that* big of a deal had her parents been clothed at the time. Anxiety did something to Marilyn, always had, drew her magnetically to the animal comfort of her husband.

"Sweetheart, why don't you go find—" She hesitated. The only other children at the wedding were toddlers and she didn't specifically want to encourage Grace's already-burgeoning antisocial love of dogs by suggesting that she go play with Goethe, but she wanted a moment to herself, just a few seconds to breathe in the cooling air of early evening. "Go find Daddy, love."

"I *can't* find him," Grace said, the hint of a baby voice blunting her vowels.

"Well, look harder." She bent to kiss her daughter's hair. "I need a minute, Goose."

. . .

Grace moved off. She'd already checked on Wendy. Already swung on the porch swing with Liza until her sister had been distracted by a boy wearing sneakers with his wedding suit; already convinced Violet to share four sips of champagne from her fancy glass flute. She was out of people to check on.

It was strange to have to share her parents with others this weekend, to have her sisters back around the house on Fair Oaks. Her father sometimes called her the "only only-child in the world who has three sisters." She resented, slightly, her sisters homing in on her territory. She soothed herself as she always did, with the

company of Goethe, curling up with him beneath the purple flower bushes and running her hand through his bristly fur, the part of his butt that looked like it had been permed.

Liza felt a little bad, seeing her younger sister finding solace in the dog while she herself was finding solace inside a stranger's mouth, but the groomsman emanated a smoky vapor of whiskey and arugula and he was doing something with his fingers to the inside of her thigh that made her turn her head away, deciding that Grace could fend for herself, that it wasn't possible to learn that skill too early.

"Tell me about you," the groomsman said, his knuckles grazing the lacy insignificance of the thong she'd worn in the hopes of exactly such an occasion.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. It came out sounding kind of hostile. She'd not quite mastered being flirtatious.

"There's four of you?" he asked. "What's that like?"

"It's a vast hormonal hellscape. A marathon of instability and hair products."

He smiled, confused, and she leaned forward boldly and kissed him.

Violet had never been quite so drunk, sitting slumped, alone, at one of the tables, from which she supposed she'd driven the other guests. The previous night came to her in fizzy episodic sunbursts: the bar that used to be a bowling alley; her blue-eyed companion with his double-jointed elbows, the athletic clasp of his thighs, the back of his mother's station wagon; how she'd made sounds she did not recognize at first as coming from her own throat, porn star sounds, primal groans. How he came first—she'd later felt him dripping out of her, when they climbed back into the front seat—and then made her, with a deft attention to detail, come as well, for

the first time in her life. And how she'd made him drop her a block away from her parents' house lest Wendy be still awake.

She watched Wendy, wearing sweetheart-neck Gucci at her backyard wedding to an old-money academic, being spun in circles by her new husband to "You Can't Hurry Love." Her sister had, for the first time, surpassed her, success-wise. She was blithe and beautiful and twirling in circles while Violet was drunk past the point of physical comfort, gnawing at a full loaf of catered focaccia, rubbing the oil on the underside of her skirt. But she felt herself smiling a little at Wendy, at oblivious Wendy getting grass stains on her satin train. Imagined going over to her sister and whispering in her ear, *You'd die if you knew where I was last night.*

Wendy watched as Miles, throwing an apologetic smile at her over his shoulder, was pulled away from her by his toddler cousin, their ringbearer, who had solicited his accompaniment to the cake table.

"There's some good daddy training happening over there," someone said, taking her by the elbow. It was a guest from Miles's side, possibly someone's real estate broker, a silicone goblin of a woman. The people on the lawn at present were probably collectively worth more than the GDP of a midsize country. "It's good you're so young. Plenty of time to flesh out the family tree."

It seemed a crass thing to say for a variety of reasons, so Wendy responded in kind: "Who says I want to split up my share among a bunch of kids?"

The woman looked horrified, but Wendy and Miles lived for these jokes, were allowed to *make* these jokes because neither of them gave a fuck if people thought Wendy was a gold digger; all that mattered was what they knew to be true, which was that she'd never loved another person as fiercely as she did Miles Eisenberg, and he, by some grand cosmic miracle, loved her back. She was an *Eisenberg* now. In the top thirty, at least, of the wealthiest families in Chicago. She could fuck with whomever she wanted.

"It's my plan to outlive everyone and spend my days reveling in a disgusting level of opulence," she said. And she rose from her seat and went to straighten her new husband's tie.

The trees, David noted, were burgeoning that day, big prodigious leaves making dancing shadows across the grass, which they'd tried to keep the dog off of for the sake of aesthetic preservation, David and Marilyn rising early in the mornings and pulling on raincoats over their pajamas to walk him instead of just opening the back door like they normally did. He watched as the rented tables and chairs wore their grooves into the pristine lawn, legs melon-balling the expensively fertilized sod in a way that made his gut churn. Goethe was now roaming around the yard like a recently released convict, traversing the verdant grounds with the proprietary confidence of a horticulturist. David took a breath of damp air—was rain coming? It might make the guests leave sooner—and marveled over the sheer number of people that could accumulate in a lifetime, the number of faces in his yard that he didn't recognize. He thought of Wendy as a toddler, when they lived in Iowa, creeping onto the porch where he and Marilyn rocked together in the rickety cedar swing, fitting herself neatly between them and murmuring, already drifting back to sleep, *You're my friends.* He was nearly overcome, standing there, feeling as out-of-place as he had a quarter of a century ago, before they'd married, a chilly December night when Marilyn had lain against his chest beneath the ginkgo. He did a visual sweep, eyes blurring the sea of pale spring colors until he found his wife, a tiny ballast of forest green: hiding beneath that very same ginkgo. He slipped along the fence until he came to her, and reached out an imploring hand to the small of her back. She leaned instinctively into it.

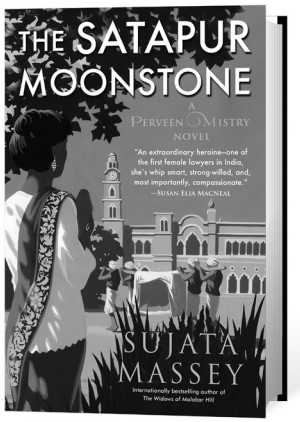
"Come with me," he said, and led her around the trunk, into the shade, where he pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair.

"Sweetheart," she said, worried. "What is it?"

He pressed his face into the crook of her neck, breathing in the faint dry warmth of her scent, lilacs and Irish Spring. "I missed you," he said into her clavicle.

"Oh, love." She tightened her embrace, tilted his chin until he met her eyes. He kissed her mouth, and then her cheekbone and her forehead and the inlet of her jaw where he could feel her pulse, and then her mouth again. She was smiling, lips a flushed feverish plum, and then she was kissing him back, the periphery blurring away. The thing that would always mean more than everything else: the goldish warmth of his wife, the heat of their mutual desperation; two bodies finding solace in the only way they knew how, through the language of lips, his hands along her spine, her spine against the tree trunk, the resultant quiet that occurred when they came together, until she pulled away, smiled up at him and said, "Just don't let the girls catch us," before she buried herself once again against him.

But of course they saw. All four of the girls watched their parents from disparate vantage points across the lawn, each alerted initially to their absence from the reception by that pull, a vestigial holdover from childhood, seeking the cognitive comfort that came from the knowing, the geolocation, the proximity of those who'd created you, those who would always feel beholden to you, no matter what; each of their four daughters paused what she was doing in order to watch them, the shining unfathomable orb of their parents, two people who emanated more love than it seemed like the universe would sanction.



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1

THE RIDING RING

Perveen Mistry sighed, adjusting her hat on her sweating brow. It was six-thirty in the morning and already eighty-two degrees. Cantering around the riding ring at the Royal Western India Turf Club, never quite keeping up with her friend Alice, was vigorous exercise.

Alice Hobson-Jones was cantering on a large bay, Kumar, who had been born from racing stock. He'd wound up as an exercise horse because his stature was a few hands too short for the racetrack. Still, Kumar was a prince of a horse, and since Alice was

almost six feet tall, their union dominated the ring.

Perveen, five feet three inches, had been delighted to be assigned a female pony, which she had assumed would be gentler. Dolly was so short Perveen had been able to swing herself over the saddle without being propped up by the grooms, an awkward ritual she'd had to repeat most of the times she'd ridden. However, the little horse was hardly amenable to the directions Perveen tapped out with her feet. She was no horsewoman, and it seemed that Dolly sensed it.

Still, this horseback ride was less frightening than the times Perveen had ridden huge animals during house-party weekends Alice had brought her to in England. Now the shoe was on the other foot. Perveen had come home to practice law in Bombay, and Alice was on an extended visit trying to find a teaching position. In a city where the Mistrys had resided for almost 350 years, Perveen's family connections opened doors, and it looked likely that Alice would be hired as a lecturer in mathematics at Wilson College.

Alice had campaigned hard to get Perveen to awaken early enough to ride at six o'clock three times that week. At the outset, it had seemed like a pleasant idea. The rains had stopped, making the city navigable, although as the sun rose, it became a hot and windy place again.

As Perveen came around the ring, she noticed Alice's father, Sir David Hobson-Jones, standing at the edge. He was a Western India Turf Club trustee, despite the fact that he'd been in Bombay for only two years. That was the kind of thing that happened when one was part of the governor's ring of top three councillors.

Sir David smiled, making a sweeping gesture with his hand. Perveen trotted around the ring, concentrating on keeping her back straight. As she passed Sir David, he made the same gesture, only more vigorously.

He was calling her over.

She felt her stomach sink. Perhaps he'd come to say someone in the club had complained about an Indian rider; she was the only

one she'd seen.

Perveen hated to kick the filly, but this was the way she'd been taught to make horses move. Dolly ignored her. It was not until Perveen kicked a few more times that the horse reluctantly walked from the ring into the area near the gate where grooms waited to assist. A scrawny boy held the horse while she half-fell off. She was brushing her dusty hands on the sides of her split skirt when Sir David strolled up. He wore a sharp white suit that looked utterly unsuitable for riding.

"Good morning, Sir David. Did you ride earlier?" She tried to sound less shaken than she felt. If Perveen was going to be thrown out of the European-established club because of her race, she could not let the matter pass without protest. But Sir David didn't know she was a member of the Indian National Congress, an all-Indian group advocating for civil rights. He understood only that she was his daughter Alice's former classmate at Oxford, a young woman who was rising in Bombay's legal scene.

He shook his head. "I came for a quick breakfast before going over to the Secretariat. The eggs are very good here. Would you care to join me?"

So she wasn't being thrown out, which was good news. Still, she disliked the idea of going off without telling Alice.

"But I'm . . ." Perveen gestured at her riding clothing, which was not a sporty tweed habit like Alice wore but a light cotton jacket and a voluminous split skirt, the slightly outmoded garment her mother had presented her with as being suitable for an Indian woman doing something as outré as horseback riding.

"Don't give it another thought. People wear riding clothes on the veranda. I'll be the odd one out."

She still felt uneasy. "But Alice—"

"She'll know where to find us." Lowering his voice, the governor's chief councillor said, "I've business to discuss with you anyway, before she arrives."

Business was a welcome prospect for a Bombay lawyer who was well known but not as busy as she'd like. In the ladies' lounge, Perveen scrubbed the track's dust from her face and hands and brushed out her hair before fixing it up again in a coronet. She left off the pith helmet she'd been wearing, although its absence revealed a bright red line running straight across her forehead. Walking out to the veranda, she felt multiple pairs of English eyes on her. Was it because she'd been seen with Sir David, or was it the silly split skirt?

Sir David waved encouragingly at her, and this set off a chorus of whispers.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering you breakfast," he said. "You go straight to work after this, don't you?"

"I try to open up the office before eight," she said, putting on her best business voice. "It's the only time one can attack one's papers without interruption."

"Yes. As I mentioned, I may have a good prospect for Mistry Law."

She leaned forward so eagerly she almost knocked her empty teacup out of its saucer. "Does someone you know need a lawyer?"

A slender waiter in a crisp, high-necked jacket righted her cup and poured a golden stream of Darjeeling into it. Sir David smiled benevolently. "Yes. I do."

She looked at him hard. Was he in trouble at work? "Remember that I'm a solicitor. The Bombay court does not yet allow women advocates to approach the bench, but my father can—"

"That is irrelevant," he said, cutting off the rest of her explanation. "Have you heard of the Kolhapur Agency?"

She was surprised by the simple question. Spooning sugar into her cup, she said, "Certainly. It's the branch of the civil service that oversees Kolhapur State and falls under purview of Bombay Presidency."

"It's a bit more than that," he said. "The Kolhapur Agency has authority over twenty-five princely and feudal states in Western

India. The agency's officers are political agents and residents who maintain relationships between British India and these states."

Perveen was embarrassed she hadn't known how many states were overseen by the Kolhapur Agency. But why was he asking about it, anyway?

The young waiter came back with a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and kippers for each of them. The eggs looked fluffy, the toast appropriately buttered, but Perveen did not like kippers. She resolved to try one, out of courtesy to her host.

It was like that with the British. An Indian could not prosper without contact with them, but one did not have to become a Britisher in habits. As she shook green chilies over her eggs, she considered the picture that Sir David was painting. Although the British government had power over approximately 61 percent of the subcontinent, the rest of India was a patchwork of large and small states and landholdings ruled by Hindus, Muslims, and a few Sikhs. In exchange for being exempted from British rule, many royals paid tributes to the British, most often soldiers in the form of cash and crops. And as Sir David indicated, the states still had to cooperate with the desires of the political agents.

Sir David slid one of the kippers into his mouth, chewed with relish, and continued the conversation. "At the moment, the Agency is challenged. They've sent out a request for help finding a legal investigator to step in and assist with business in one of their northernmost states."

"How interesting," said Perveen, the wheels already turning as she thought about the suitable lawyers she might refer. "Tell me more. How long has the position been open? And how much time will the job take?"

"The matter came up at a meeting last week, and the others agreed with me that you are probably the only person in India who could do it."

Perveen almost lost her grip on her teacup but steadied herself. The hell if she'd be the one to work for Britain, which had kept

India under its elephant feet since the 1600s. But she had to be diplomatic. Carefully, she said, "I'm honored that you'd consider me for a government position, but I'd never leave my father's practice. He just promoted me to partner last month."

"Congratulations! But you do serve clients who are willing to pay a fair rate—isn't that the reason to have a firm?"

Perveen nodded warily.

"Rest assured this is a one-off job—it will probably take a week, with a little more billing time afterward when you're back in Bombay writing the report." He paused. "Have you tried a kipper yet? They're made from a local fish, not the usual Scottish herring."

A tiny, bony local fish that she considered bait, not good eating. Reluctantly, she put it in her mouth. As she chewed the unpleasant fish, she thought.

Things weren't especially busy at the office; she had a few contracts to finish, but the prospect of more than a week's work for a prestigious employer would please her father, Jamshedji Mistry, who saw the British as allies, not adversaries. Still, it was out of town, and he wouldn't like that. Working some eggs over the top of the rest of the kippers, which she was determined to avoid, Perveen said, "Kolhapur is more than three hundred miles from Bombay. Is that where I'd have to go?"

"Not quite that far. Have you heard of Satapur?"

"It's a minuscule state somewhere in the Sahyadri Mountains." Perveen remembered its shape, rather like a rabbit posed on hind legs, from her school geography book. "I don't know that I could point to it on a map or name its ruler."

"It's just forty square miles," he said. "And there isn't a royal sitting on the gaddi at the moment. His Majesty Mahendra Rao died two years ago from the cholera. His son, the maharaja Jiva Rao, is just ten years old."

Perveen tried to imagine the situation at hand. "So although Jiva Rao is already the maharaja in name, it will be at least eight

years till he takes power. Does his mother rule until then?"

"Women don't hold power in most princely states. Because Satapur's ruler is underage, the state's decisions are made by its prime minister and our political agent, who happens to reside at the circuit house on the border between Satapur and the hill station of Khandala."

"Running a princely state must be a challenge for a British political agent," Perveen said skeptically, "especially if he's not even living in the palace."

Sir David waved a dismissive hand. "A palace minister does the day-to-day, sending reports to Mr. Sandringham on all that transpires. And the prime minister, Prince Swaroop of Satapur, is the maharaja's uncle, so that's cozy."

Perveen took a bite of toast. Buttered toast was one thing the British did very well. "What can you tell me about the political agent?"

"Colin Wythe Sandringham has been at the post for about ten months. He is responsible for the well-being of the royal children and the late maharaja's widow."

"What children? You only mentioned Prince Jiva Rao."

"He has a little sister, but I don't know her name."

Perveen didn't like the way he had almost forgotten about the princess, nor that he had labeled the young maharaja's mother a widow, when she should have been called a queen. Pointedly, she asked, "What is the maharani's given name?"

"Mirabai." He pronounced the name slowly, in his Oxbridge accent. "At least she's not alone—the late Maharaja Mahendra Rao's mother, the dowager maharani, is still ruling the zenana. I don't recall her name."

Of course, she thought. Sir David was better than most English administrators—and he certainly had been respectful of her own professional accomplishments—but he seemed to share the common belief that the vast majority of Indian women were faceless, nameless, and passive.

He sipped his tea. "I think it's splendid the mother and daughter-in-law have each other for company. But according to Mr. Sandringham, a bitter dispute has arisen between the two maharanis about the prince's education."

This was a common enough problem, regardless of whether one had royal blood. In Perveen's own family, there had been disagreements about whether she should study law, as her father wished, or literature, which was her own choice. It hadn't been until she'd been out of school for years that she had realized practicing law could bring her a lot more excitement in life than analyzing novels.

Unaware of her thoughts, Sir David continued. "Maharaja Jiva Rao's mother wishes him to attend Ludgrove, where several other Indian princes are studying. But the grandmother, who still sees herself as superior to her daughter-in-law, doesn't want him to go."

Perveen had finished everything except the kippers. She wanted something sweet to take the edge off. She signaled the waiter. "Have you any guavas?"

He grimaced. "No good ones today, memsahib."

"Very well. I'll take another piece of toast." She turned back to Sir David. "Where in India is Prince Jiva Rao studying?"

"In the palace. He receives lessons from the Indian tutor who taught the last two generations of maharajas."

"I suppose he could be a good teacher. Certainly an experienced one," Perveen said, imagining this man would be over sixty.

"These are answers you could find out for us when you visit the palace. Mr. Sandringham paid a call in September, but he was not admitted due to the maharanis' custom of seclusion."

"Hindu maharanis often observe purdah," Perveen said. "If the agent is determined, he should return and ask to speak to each lady through a screen. That is common when purdah ladies are needed to testify in a court of law."

"Going back to try again has its problems. You see, Mr. Sandringham is a cripple," Sir David said bluntly.

"A cripple!" Perveen's eyes widened. She was quite surprised the British had put someone with a disability in a position of great responsibility and dispatched him far into the countryside. Probably he had a gigantic staff to assist him. How else could one manage?

"Others in the Kolhapur Agency suggested sending him again; however, I don't wish to compromise his health when the interview with purdah ladies could be accomplished with more ease by a woman lawyer."

Sir David remembered what she'd done in Malabar Hill at the beginning of the year. She felt a rush of gratitude, knowing how easily things could have gone another way. Few lawyers could help women in seclusion, and she'd been involved in just such a case. Women who observed purdah could not meet with men outside of their immediate families. Nodding, she said, "You wish me to get behind the curtain, interview both maharanis, and report my opinion on the maharaja's schooling."

"There's another aspect to the interview," Sir David said. "There are ongoing concerns about land improvement, such as bringing in railway lines, building dams, and so forth. What the maharanis and any other nobles in the palace think about these possibilities is valuable knowledge."

"It truly is an investigator's job." Perveen took a bite of toast and chewed slowly, allowing herself time to think. This sounded like a straightforward consulting assignment. And the twenty-five states included in the Kolhapur group were home to hundreds of royal women. If word slipped through their purdah screens that a lady lawyer stood ready to assist with their concerns, Mistry Law might receive a tremendous number of new clients.

But what was the financial value of the endeavor? Sir David might hope she'd perform the job at a discounted rate due to their connection. But the British government wouldn't get away with underpaying her the way they did Indians in general. They wanted her. She had power.

Pursing her lips, she said, "I'm trying to fathom how this job could be billed."

He answered promptly. "Twenty rupees a day—the salary of a district sub-inspector."

Not terrible, but nothing to boast to her father about. She shrugged.

"However, your traveling expenses would be on par with a commissioner's. All rail travel will be first class, and you'll be able to stay in rest bungalows for ICS officers as needed. There will either be some horseback riding or palanquin travel."

"A palanquin is one of those awful boxes on poles, isn't it?" She had a dislike of closed-in spaces.

"Sandringham suggested it. He says that part of the route is not easily negotiated by horses. Local men handle the palanquin, start to finish. And you'll enjoy the scenery as you travel."

She raised a cynical eyebrow.

"The Sahyadri Mountains are beautiful beyond compare. This month is post-rainy season. It is at least fifteen degrees cooler than Bombay." He finished with a flourish, reminding her of the hawkers near the Royal Bombay Yacht Club who proclaimed the splendor of the tourist boat ride out to Elephanta Island.

Gentle rains in the mountains sounded better than the hot winds of early October in Bombay, but she didn't want to seem too excited. "There's always a load of contract work at our office. Making twenty rupees sitting at my desk isn't hard to do in a day's time."

He was silent for a moment and then grunted. "Understood. I'm fairly sure I can persuade them to commit twenty-five rupees per day."

This was phenomenal. Keeping a poker face, she said, "Duly noted."

Her happy reverie was interrupted when Alice strode onto the veranda, showing no signs of having washed hands or face. "Hallo, Perveen! Here you are!"

"Sorry. Your father invited me to breakfast. I hope you weren't worried that I'd vanished."

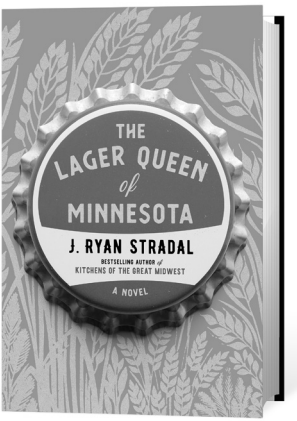
"Not at all. Has he convinced you to take the job yet?"

"What? You knew about it?" Perveen's gaze went from her friend to the smug-looking Sir David.

"Why else do you think we've been riding around the ring all week?" Alice yawned. "I've been refreshing your skills."

"How dare you trick me?" Perveen hooted with laughter. She was relieved and excited, but she didn't want Alice to keep secrets from her. "You're a dreadful excuse for a friend."

Alice grinned and said, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."



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Edith, 2003

It was July 5, 2003, and Edith Magnusson's day hadn't been too bad, so far. She'd just taken a strawberry-rhubarb pie from the oven, and was looking for her favorite tea towel, when she saw a grasshopper on the white trim of the windowsill. She didn't like the idea of it sitting there, vulnerable, so she gently poked at the bug with the handle of a wooden spoon. As she'd hoped, it leapt into the yard, and vanished into safety. She felt herself exhale.

Then, she felt terrible. Maybe it just wanted a little vacation somewhere different, and she came along and ruined everything. Edith, for one, never once had been anywhere different, or ever truly had a break of any kind. Then again, she'd never intended to take one. Things were pretty decent where she was, and she didn't ever see the point of bellyaching about the things she couldn't change, especially in a world that never once ran a want ad looking for a complainer.

After all, she had a good job at St. Anthony-Waterside Nursing Home six blocks from her rented two-bedroom rambler in the central Minnesota town of New Stockholm. Edith also had her husband, Stanley, who at that moment was in a Peterbilt somewhere in South Dakota. She had an adult son, Eugene, who was just starting out as an independent distributor for an interesting company called LifeWell, which apparently sold quality household products direct to customers at low prices. She also had an adult daughter, Colleen, who'd gone to college, and even though she had to drop out, had done OK for herself. She married a handyman named Mark, who was a kind man, even if he didn't go to church. They were raising Edith's sole grandchild, a smart, curious girl named Diana, who was somehow almost a teenager already.

If all this wasn't everything a person needed, she didn't know what would be. It was true that she missed the farm where she grew up, and missed her parents for one reason and her sister for another reason, but it was no use dwelling on people and things that were in the past.

Edith was only sixty-four years old, but if she died right then, she would've felt the most important things a Minnesotan, woman or man, can feel at the end of their lives. She'd done what she could, and she was of use. She helped.

But life wasn't done with her yet, and before long she'd come to regard everything that happened before July 5, 2003, like it was all

just a pleasant song in an elevator. When the music stopped, the doors opened, and the light first fell in, it was in the form of her boss, a man she liked, running down the hallway at work, smiling, shouting her name, and waving a piece of newspaper in the air like a child.

Edith had worked as a dietary aide in the nursing home's kitchen for thirty-seven years. Her coworkers were mostly hardworking, exhausted, and kind. The hallways smelled like baby powder sprinkled onto boiled green beans, which over the years had become kind of pleasant. Also, everyone agreed that the new boss, Brendan Fitzgerald, who had the benign charisma and calm authority of a TV meteorologist, was the best administrator they'd ever had. He also chain-smoked and only referred to residents by their room number, but at least he was always glad to see Edith, and that day he was the happiest she'd ever seen him since he won fifty bucks playing pull tabs.

Brendan, his slick black Reagan hair gleaming under the fluorescent lights, held out a copy of *Twin City Talker*, one of those hip newspapers for hip city people. Edith had flipped through an issue once, twenty years ago, and thought it was kind of different, so she never read it again. FOOD ISSUE, this cover read, and Brendan tore it open to a page somewhere in the middle.

"Did you hear about this?" he asked her.

She saw a list with the heading, BEST PIES.

1. Betty's Pies, Two Harbors
2. Keys Café and Bakery, St. Paul
3. St. Anthony-Waterside Nursing Home, New Stockholm

"Our nursing home has the third-best pie in Minnesota," he said,

shaking the paper for emphasis.

"Well, that's bizarre," Edith said.

"No, it's not. It's because of number eight's granddaughter. You've seen her here, with the pink hair," Brendan said, pointing to the name in the byline. "That's her. Ellen Jones. Staff food critic!"

"Neat. Well, I'd better get back to the kitchen," Edith said.

"I'm going to get it framed and put in the lobby," Brendan shouted. "That's something, Edith! Third-best pie, in the whole entire state!"

Edith had been baking her own pies at work since her first year there, when she noticed that the apple cobbler—purchased pre-made from a contracted vendor—came back in unusually high quantities, some completely untouched, most just one or two bites smaller, some with one bite missing and a moist chunk of the stuff elsewhere on the plate. One resident, a wonderful old stick-in-the-mud named Donald Gustafson, had sent it back with a note reading MAKE IT STOP.

When you see a man falling off a ladder above you, Edith believed, you don't envision your arms breaking. You just hold them out.

Had she known that this decision would one day, decades later, change everything she loved about her life, she still would have done it, because the kitchen at St. Anthony-Waterside was responsible for the last desserts that the residents would likely ever have. If it were up to her, the people in this building would at least have the texture, the taste, or even just the smells of homemade pie once or twice a week, as heaven weaned them from the senses of this world. It's the least a dang person can do.

And, as it turned out, it was indeed up to her. With the help of a few extra dollars from Brendan and the folks in charge before him (to help subsidize the ingredients) she'd been serving her homemade pies year-round for almost forty years now. Most residents felt that they were pretty decent, if a tad on the sweet side, not that they were

complaining.

Edith turned her back to Brendan. "Well, let's just hope it blows over."

"Let's hope it doesn't blow over! This is awesome! You should be proud!"

Brendan still wasn't married and didn't have kids, and as a man in his sixties, at least one of those two things probably was never going to happen, so more than ever, he lived for his job. This was only an unfortunate scenario for Edith when it made her life more complicated, like now.

Of course, Edith had been in the paper before. *The New Stockholm Explainer* ran pieces on Edith every eight years or so, with a headline that was something like PIE LADY STILL SERVING SLICES, along with a picture that always made her look confused and old. She didn't read the articles and never even kept copies for herself. When the phone rang at home around lunchtime the following day, she knew it would be Stanley, and she didn't even think she'd mention it to him.

The man on the other end of the phone wasn't Stanley, though, it was his boss, The Other Tom Clyde, and she decided that she wouldn't mention it to him either.

"Edith," Mr. Clyde said. "There's been an accident. Now, first, your husband's OK, he just has a concussion."

She knew he was OK. They'd been married for almost forty-four years exactly and she'd know it if he wasn't alive somewhere. They could have sent him to Pluto and she'd know if he made it. But she also knew that this could happen sometime, and soon.

"What did he do now, Mr. Clyde?"

"Well, he drove a truckload of frozen hamburgers into the front of a Hardee's in Sioux Falls. Normally they like their deliveries in the back, so I'm told." Mr. Clyde shared his cousin Big Tom Clyde's dry

sense of humor.

"Was anyone hurt?"

"No, thankfully. There's some trash cans and picnic tables that wished they hadn't met your husband's truck, but that's about it." Mr. Clyde sounded a little sad. "I gotta be honest, I think he's hauled his last load, ma'am."

"Well, send him on home," she told him, said good-bye, and hung up the phone.

It was noon, and outside, a basketball belonging to the neighbor kids tumbled into her yard, reminding her of high school. A mayfly beat its papery body against the screen door, delighted to be anywhere. And now, Edith was alone in her home kitchen, slicing fruit, and waiting for her life to change, once again.

The next day, she took Stanley to see Dr. Nebel. En route, Stanley proudly announced that he'd been to Dr. Nebel only once the last five years, as if his ignorance was proof of his perfect health. Only once, despite the fact that they were members of the same Elks Club. Who knows how they talked there, but in his small, simple office, Dr. Nebel did not BS around with her husband. "Early onset" was the only term he may have used purely out of kindness. While Stanley was sixty-five, it's always too early for something like this, for both of them. He'd miss the pride he'd felt in his ability to fix his own truck, he'd miss his CB handle—Charlie Brown, which he'd earned because of his perfectly round bald head—and he'd miss the smiling faces he'd gotten to know in places like Casper, Pierre, and Grand Junction.

Stanley would now be home every day, and although his Social Security wouldn't be nearly as much as his paycheck was, with some trimming, they'd get by, if no emergencies or surprises happened. They used to live next door to a fireman who said that he prayed

every night for tomorrow to be boring, and she knew exactly how he felt.

That evening at St. Anthony-Waterside, there were four guests in the dining room, about three more than usual for a weekday, but nothing alarming. It simply meant that she had to cut both of the pies she'd made into ten slices, which she hated to do.

Clarence Jones in #8 was one of the residents who had regular guests. His granddaughter Mandy, a pleasant young nurse who wore her scrubs all of the time, had brought her two-year-old son, Zach. With his big eyes and slick hair, he looked like a toddler version of Ugarte from *Casablanca*.

"Congrats on making the list in the *Talker*," Mandy said, even though it was her own little sister, Ellen, who wrote it.

"I'm relieved that nobody seems to have paid it any attention," Edith replied, and turned to Clarence, eager to change the subject. "Isn't it good to see your great-grandson?"

"The kid's a commie pinko," Clarence frowned. He was a tad less pleasant than most of the other residents, but God likes all kinds, and Edith sure tried to as well.

"My grandpa's just mad because he gave my son a bag of gumdrops, and Zach gave them all away already," said Mandy.

"These schmucks don't need 'em. And you know what else is a problem?" Clarence asked, now staring at Edith. "Your slices are getting too small. If I'm going to keep living, I want bigger servings of pie."

"Same," said Amelia Burch, who, at ninety-nine, was the oldest person in the entire county, and so far as Edith was aware, still ate everything, except for pork, white bread, and French fries.

"I'll see what I can do," Edith said, looking over the shining, empty dessert plates in the dining room.

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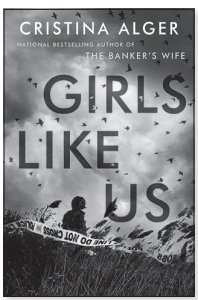
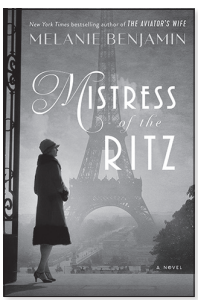
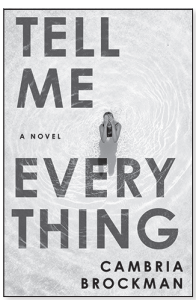
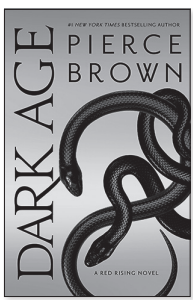
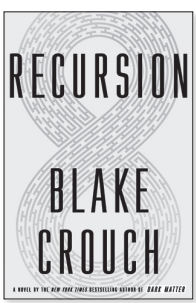
SWEET SUMMER READS

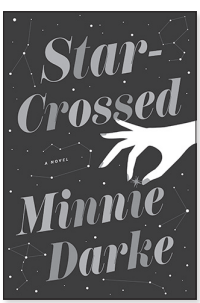


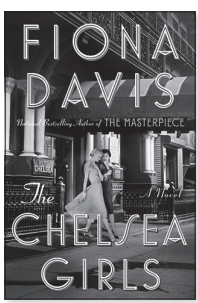


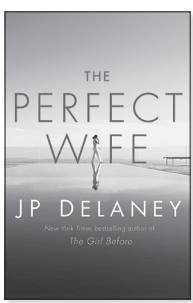


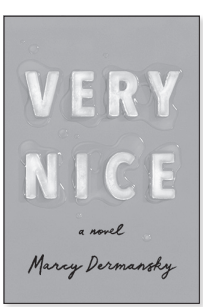


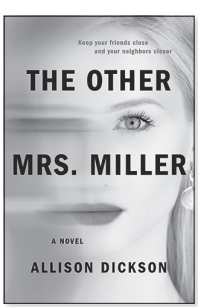


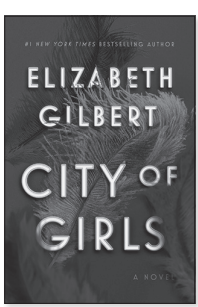


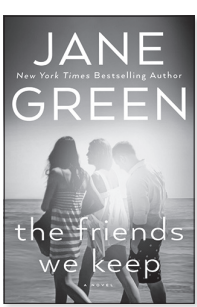












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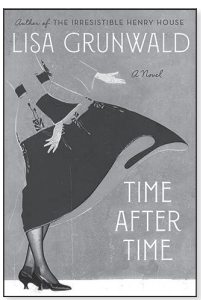

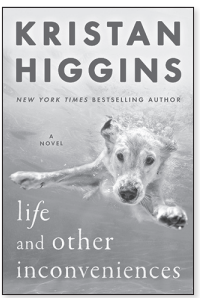

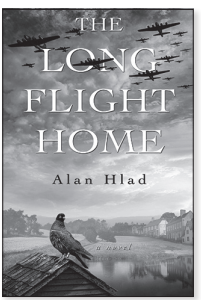

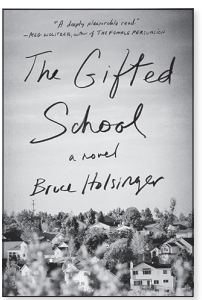

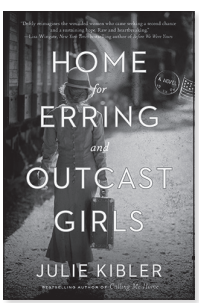

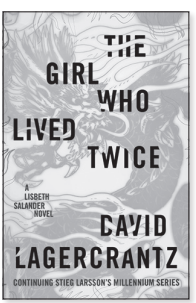

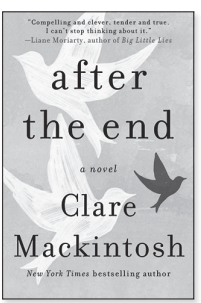

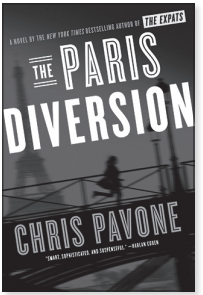

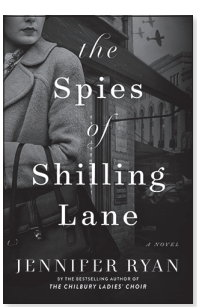

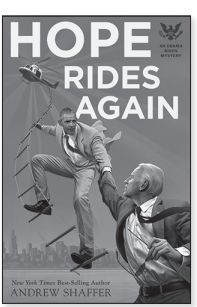

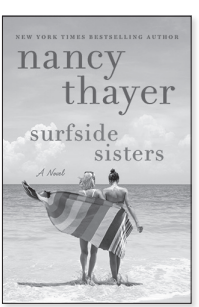

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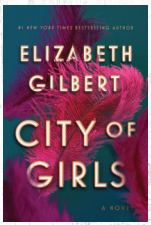

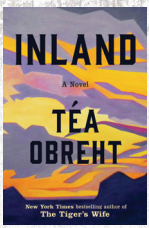

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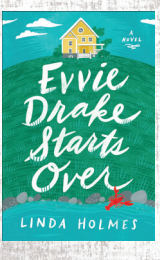

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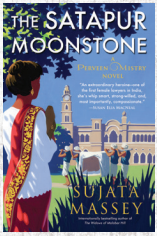

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