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© 2019 by Chris Cander

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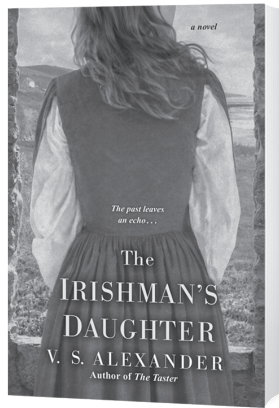
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PROLOGUE

And bring back the features that joy used to wear
Long, long be my heart with such memories fill'd—
Thomas Moore (1779–1852)

SEPTEMBER 1845

The boggy lane to Lear House had been tamped to a hard surface by years of use by people, carriages, horses, and donkeys. The path veered down from the high hill above Broadhaven Bay to the crescent curve of land that abutted the water. Gulls soared silently on the winds over Rinroe Point, the narrow promontory that thrust into the bay. The home stood like an imposing gray fortress rising up from the land, surrounded by checkered patches of tenant farms, as solid a manor house as there was in Ireland.

On a perfect day no country was more beautiful than Ireland, Daniel Quinn believed with all his heart, although he knew little of the world other than what he had been told. He dreamed of England and France on occasion and had seen etchings of those countries in books but, like others in his position, doubted he would ever travel from his native land. As he walked to Lear House, the brisk air skimming off the Atlantic fortified his lungs, cleared his brain. The crisp feel of it deep in his body eased the task of delivering unpleasant news.

Savoring the beautiful late September day, Daniel took his time. He expected Brian Walsh, the agent of Englishman Sir Thomas Blakely, to be at home, either in the manor or in the adjoining cottage where he and his family lived. If Brian couldn't be found, he would spend the night in the shed with the horses. It didn't matter—one way or the other Daniel would deliver what he had to say. He owed Brian the favor, for the man had been kind to him on many occasions.

Sir Thomas had inherited the estate through his English lineage. Lear House was bordered on its east and west sides by tenant farms. Rows of sod homes stood on the acreage that had been divided and then subdivided to accommodate the growing tenant population. Brian had once told Daniel that more than three hundred people made their living on Lear House lands.

Beyond the house to the north, the land rose in boggy hills that undulated across the landscape like waves. The higher a person climbed to the west, the more the wild Atlantic came into view. The hills ended at precipitous cliffs that stood as ancient guards against the sea. If one looked south from Lear House, the waters of Broadhaven Bay stretched out in a gentle half circle along the line of sand dunes. Lear House, on its solid foundation, had stood unfettered for a century, weathering Atlantic squalls and storms, political insurrections and any manner of upheaval cast upon it.

Daniel Quinn walked past the sod homes, many belching smoke from the hole in their roofs, capturing the eyes of some tenants working in the fields; and, finally, arrived at the rocky circular path that led up to the manor steps. He took off his broad-brimmed hat

at the door and lifted the iron knocker. It was a molded ram's head, heavy with age but coated with a sheen of animal oil to keep it from rusting. After no answer, he knocked again.

Soon, the door swung open in a measured gait. Brian, wearing gray breeches, a white shirt and red vest, stood before him. Recognizing his visitor, the agent's face brightened with a smile.

"Danny," Brian said, and extended his hand. "It's been so long since you've paid a visit. I was beginning to wonder if you were still in County Mayo."

Daniel returned the smile. "You'll not be rid of me so easily." He waited, hat in hand, for an invitation, but then looked down at his bare feet to see if they were fit to enter the house. They seemed passable: The rocks had scraped away the mud from his skin. He swiped at some of the dirt on the legs of his breeches.

"Oh, my manners," Brian said. "Please come in. I've no liquor to offer, but maybe a smoke will suit you."

"Just fine," Daniel said, patting his vest pocket where his pipe lay. "I appreciate your hospitality." The entrance to Lear House was light and airy with high plastered ceilings decorated with egg-and-dart molding. The sun's rays had shifted in the afternoon, but the foyer still glowed like a fire-lit room on a winter's night.

Brian led him to the large sitting room on the front of the house. "Now, let me find that tobacco. I was in need of a break from my bookkeeping."

Daniel sat while Brian disappeared down the hall. He looked through the wide windows at the green lawn with its unbroken vista to the bay. On either side of the manor, the fields were fractured by rectangular walls constructed of brush and stone. The tenant farmers lived on these plots. Verdant potato ridges, lush with green leaves, cut across their tracts. The homes shone black, mostly mud and stone, a few braced by wooden lintels. What luxury, Daniel thought. How wonderful it must be to live in your own home, no matter how modest. How sublime not to sleep on the dirt floor in the back of a public house or in a shed with livestock. Lear House, even the crude homes that surrounded it, were like castles compared to his usual

accommodations.

Brian reappeared with a pewter ashtray and a thick plug of tobacco, one that promised more than a night of good smoking. The agent lit Daniel's white pipe and then his own, a meerschaum with a dog's head bowl stained black from use.

"Always an honor to have Mayo's finest poet in the house," Brian said. "What news do you bring?"

Daniel didn't want to jump headfirst into what he dreaded, so he recounted versions of his various travels during the summer, including tales of nights in Newport, Mulranny, and Westport filled with too much liquor, tomfoolery, and song.

Brian, always up for good stories, listened intently while puffing his pipe, his hands planted on his thighs.

"How are your daughters?" Daniel asked, still avoiding his task. He could not delay much longer. The afternoon was growing short. Soon dusk would overtake the day and he would need shelter for the night.

"My dear Lucinda is spending the fall and winter in England tutoring three children—a family acquaintance of Sir Thomas." He puffed on his pipe. "My lovely Briana is either preparing supper at the cottage or sneaking off to see Rory Caulfield. Like most children, she thinks I have no eyes or ears." He laughed, and a stream of gray smoke spilled from his lips.

Daniel removed the pipe from his mouth and tapped the ashes into the tray. His forehead tensed. "I've come because I have an unpleasant matter to discuss."

Brian gave him a quizzical look. "An unpleasant matter?"

"I feel you should know what I've heard. By all accounts, it will affect the parish. As the biggest agent in the barony, and a friend, I came to you first."

Brian's gray eyes flickered in apprehension. "Go on. . . ."

"In Westport I met a man from France who was taken with my songs—a level-headed wanderer who touches neither drink nor tobacco—and he showed me a drawing." Daniel remembered the picture as clearly as the day he had seen it. "The Frenchman knew

a smattering of English and Irish and he described the flowing charcoal lines he had drawn. Black lumps of wilted leaves. Withered vines. Rot. Decay. It has happened in his homeland and has spread far—to England and beyond. A plague will soon be here.”

Brian leaned forward, pointing his pipe stem at him. “A plague! Surely, you don’t mean the sickness that visited Wallachia not so long ago.”

“No. It thrives upon the land—in fact, upon the crop that fills our very stomachs.”

“The tubers?” Brian asked.

“Yes. It turns them black as night, transforms them into a vile, stinking mush that neither man nor beast can eat.” Daniel read the look of mild concern on the landlord’s face.

“This man—the one who told you—you believe him?” Brian asked. “I’ve not heard of any plague upon the crop.” He returned the pipe to his lips. “Besides, there have been other blights on our land. We’ve survived them.”

“He had no reason to lie.”

Brian pointed to the window. “But you saw the fields. The crop is luxurious.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes, but this plague strikes overnight and spreads like fire. We can pray that the Frenchman is wrong.”

The manor door opened, and Briana strolled into the room. Many seasons had passed since Daniel had seen her. She was a young woman now, probably eighteen if his memory served him, with round, feminine features and long, dark brown hair. She was no longer the gangly adolescent he remembered from previous visits. A hint of recognition passed across her face. He remembered singing to her when she was a child on many nights before he had taken to his bed of straw behind the cottage, where he listened to the wind until he fell asleep under the stars. How peaceful the night, how calm the sleep.

“The poet.” Her youthful face brightened. “Won’t you dine with us?”

Brian nodded and looked out at the pink light slanting across the

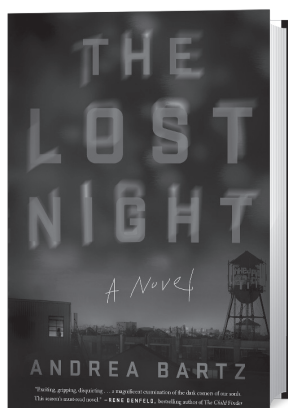
lawn. “The day is slipping away.”

“I won’t decline an invitation from such gracious company.” Daniel rose and kissed Briana’s hand.

He and Brian gathered their pipes and followed Briana out of Lear House into the dusk. Company was one thing, but the prospect of a good meal was another. He rubbed his suddenly growling stomach.

As Briana opened the cottage door, the rich, milky smell of potato stew wafted out the door. The sight of a table with oat bread on it, a turf fire with the steaming pot hung over it, was like heaven to him. He counted his blessings as Brian took his place across from him. Briana served the meal in heaping bowls, and they prayed over them.

He looked up after the prayer at their smiling faces and thought, if only this heaven would last.



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“A compulsively readable journey into the dark corners of memory.
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—Jo Piazza, bestselling coauthor of *The Knockoff*



LINDSEY

Fat chickens packed into factory farms, maggots wriggling like a thick white carpet, buffalo fumbling toward the edge of a cliff: all spacious situations compared to the New York City subway at 6:00 p.m. The doors slid apart, but I was stuck; my fellow commuters barely moved, and I bleated out apologies as I smashed against bodies, squeezing onto the platform right as the doors thudded closed again. I took a few steps and peered through the windows at the people still inside, crammed like stuffed animals at the bottom of a claw vending machine.

I was so tired. A feeling I had a lot these days. A part of me wanted to go straight home, heat up something frozen, and maybe

watch old, stupid reruns, but I'd been the one to suggest these plans. In a rare flare of nostalgia, I'd fired off the message, forgetting in the moment that I'd once sworn to myself that I'd never open up Pandora's box. It was almost as if boredom had made me reckless.

I pushed through the throng of commuters at the foot of the subway stairs. Outside, rain made its way through fabric and onto my ass, my knees, my feet. The feeling I'd been wrestling with all day grew, the panicky dread that swells before a first date. What if this reunion mucked up my last good memories from that single, singular year? When I reached the restaurant, an inoffensive bistro in boring Midtown West, a man snapped his umbrella closed in my face and for some reason I apologized to him, knee-jerk.

Inside, I was just pulling out a chair at our table when Sarah entered. She spotted me and waved, and I thought she looked exactly the same. She didn't, of course, and neither did I, a fact I only realized much later that night when I was clicking through old photos, tears rolling down my cheeks. At twenty-three we had that alienoid bone structure, big eyes and sunken cheeks caving into dewy little chins. Now, ten years later, we're old-young and round-faced and just human again.

Then we hugged, and maybe there was some chemical trigger, a smell or invisible pheromone, but the hug felt exactly like it did a decade ago. We relaxed and smiled at each other and thought maybe this would be fun.

"Lindsay, it's so good to see you," she said, dropping into her chair. "You look great."

"So do you!" I chirped. "I can't believe it's been ten years."

"I know, it's crazy." Sarah nodded, eyebrows up. "How have you been?"

"Really good! You know, keeping on. I was so happy to hear you moved back to New York." Once, for an article, I'd read a linguistics study on conversation patterns: In any duo, the lower-power person imitates the speech style of the alpha. I wondered who was following whom here.

"Yeah, I'm glad you reached out. When we found out my hus-

band was getting transferred here, I was like, ‘Wow, I don’t know that I know anyone in the city anymore.’”

“Your *husband*,” I said. “I can’t wait to meet him.” I’d looked him up on Facebook: He was annoyingly handsome. At least when friends paired up with unattractive people, I could blot at the jealousy with smugness.

“He’s great.” Sarah smiled and snapped open her menu, looking down. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No, no one special!” I said brightly. “So how is it being back in New York?”

She scrunched up her features, preparing some middle-of-the-road answer, when the waiter appeared to rattle off the specials. Sarah ordered a vodka martini, and after a moment’s hesitation, I asked for my usual seltzer with lime. I didn’t often miss drinking, but I knew I’d feel a pulse of envy when her conical glass arrived.

“Oh my gosh, is it okay if I drink?” she asked after the waiter disappeared.

“Of course! I’m totally fine. Otherwise I would have suggested meeting for tea.” She giggled and shrugged, and we both went back to reading our menus.

Christ, was this really Sarah? The same literary, witty, hard-partying friend I’d counted among my clique during that first wild year in New York? I’d messaged her the very day she announced on Facebook that she was moving back from St. Louis, forgetting in my sentimentality that things had ended pretty icily. And then I’d felt embarrassed, until a few weeks ago when she’d replied, apologetic, to set a date.

“It’s good to be back here, but weird,” she said finally. “So much has changed. It almost feels like coming to a new city. But what about you, you still love it?”

“I do,” I replied. “I mean, I’m really lucky to still have a job in magazines, and I’ve been living in the same place in Fort Greene for . . . five years now?” I took a deep sip and bubbles flooded my tongue.

“That’s great,” Sarah said. “That’s definitely a neighborhood I

want to check out.” She pushed her black hair behind her ears and a few silver streaks twinkled like tinsel.

“Well, if there’s any way I can be helpful as you guys look around, just let me know,” I said.

“Thanks, Lindsay. It’s tough because I want to find a place ASAP, but I also don’t want to end up somewhere terrible. Right now we’re living with Nate’s parents in Trenton.” She gave me a knowing look.

“You’re in Jersey?! Wow.”

“Right? I’m one of those people we totally hated back in the day.” We both chuckled.

“Do you keep in touch with anyone from back then?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I mean, just online, like with you. For a while, Alex and I would call or have a little email exchange around the anniversary. You know, raise a glass.” She sipped her drink. “Kevin doesn’t really update anything, so I’m pretty out-of-date on him. I think he and Alex keep in touch, so I get reports every once in a while. Last I heard, he and his husband owned a little music store in Nashville and he was, like, giving drum lessons.”

“Wait, Kevin’s *married*?”

She laughed. “You didn’t know that? Apparently he met this great guy, like, two seconds after he moved away. A pianist, I think.”

Of course—like everyone who moves away from New York. I smoothed a napkin on my lap. A *husband*: Kevin was still twenty-four in my mind, jumpy and juvenile. “When did he move again?”

“As soon as he’d finished his community service. That winter after . . . afterward.”

Her face darkened, but then the waiter reappeared and we politely placed our orders, Sarah nodding eagerly when he offered to bring another round. She asked me more about my work, and I learned a bit about the executive recruiting she’d been doing in St. Louis and how now the tables had turned and she had to get *herself* hired and the bar was set high when every headhunter is so good at the game, and my god, the irony. We giggled at the appropriate times. Twice she made a cute hand gesture, her little fists up near her chest like sock puppets, and she was Sarah Kwan again, Sarah Kwan

with the cool raspberry lipstick and an impossible crop top and a yard of thick glossy hair.

She didn't mention Edie again until we were finishing dessert, picking at a shared flourless chocolate cake. "It's crazy to think about how much has happened in ten years," she announced. "I was so glad to hear you wanted to get together. I thought about reaching out a few times over the years, but I just wasn't sure after . . . I mean, after how everything went down after Edie."

"That's exactly how I felt, to be honest," I said. "I know I just sort of . . . went MIA afterward. I mean, I guess we were all just grieving in our own way. We were *so* young. None of us were equipped to deal with it." She nodded and looked away, and I realized she wanted me to go on. "I always thought you had it worse than anyone, Sarah. Worse than *everyone*. I mean, you found her. God, I haven't thought about this in so long."

I'd done my crying and then I'd let Edie go, tucking the whole ordeal away so that it couldn't taint what came before. Now I recalled a nugget I'd learned from fact-checking a feature on an innocent man, condemned by poorly recalled witness testimony: When you pull up a memory, you're actually recalling the last time you remembered it—not the event itself. One day, one by one, we'd all stopped refreshing the memory. So I was surprised by how quickly the night came back to me now that I'd called it up. Now that Sarah was sitting across from me and talking about August 21, 2009, in dark, tenebrous terms.

It had been a Friday. A band had been rattling the windows in an apartment two floors up from Edie's place, and a bunch of us were standing around at the concert, drunk or pretending to be. The guitars and bass were so loud, I could feel the vibrations in my collarbone. I remember registering with a flapping concern that I was too drunk, then scurrying out to the street, where a random girl had helped me hail a taxi home. Edie hadn't been at the concert with us; Edie had been home alone, two floors down, crafting a brief suicide note and then pulling out the gun. Her time of death, we later learned, was while we were watching the band, their meandering

chords cloaking the single gunshot. The rest I knew from my friends' accounts, repeated so many times that I could see it: midnight, pitch black, Sarah hobbles into the apartment and flicks on the overhead lights, trying not to make too much noise in case Edie's already asleep. Her screams had rattled the whole building, shrill and sharp and with that beelike whine hovering descant just above her cries.

"I know, it was *awful*." She listed forward and I suddenly realized Sarah was drunk.

"You moved back home, right?" I'd always wondered if her parents had checked her into some kind of psych ward. I'd pulled away after a few weeks but continued to watch the amputated friend group from the relative safety of social media; Sarah had gone off the grid completely, deactivating her accounts and only reemerging a few years later with a new, smiling Facebook profile and friend requests all around.

"Yeah, my parents were pretty worried about me. I mean, I was acting like a lunatic, going all conspiracy theorist."

"What do you mean?"

A sheepish laugh. "You remember. I guess I just didn't want to believe my best friend could do that. She trusted me more than anyone, and I didn't like feeling like I'd failed her."

I sat up straighter. *Her* best friend? Who was she kidding?

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"You don't remember?" she continued. "I was running around insisting that Edie hadn't actually killed herself, that it must have been an accident or foul play or something. I know, it's ridiculous."

"Oh, wow, I didn't realize that." Sarah's flair for melodrama resurfaced in my memory like something emerging from the mist.

"It was just strange how different she seemed right before . . . at the end," she went on. "I mean, I lived with her, and we barely said more than two sentences to each other those last few weeks."

"Even less for me—we weren't speaking," I cut in. "And we were always *super* close."

Sarah ignored the one-up. "I was really caught up in that . . . that narrative. It wasn't healthy."

“I’m sorry, that must have been really tough for you, and I . . .” I zipped my thumb out, the universal sign for having gotten out of Dodge.

“Yeah, I understand. I feel like it’s all I was talking about back then, but maybe that’s just ’cause it was, like, consuming my mind.”

“What made you think it wasn’t a suicide?” I asked, a little too derisively.

“Oh my god, it was all stupid little things, in retrospect. There was the fact that I found her in her underwear—she was always so perfectly put-together, so that seemed weird.”

Right, but it was circumstantial. When we’d talked it out in those first shaken weeks, it had also seemed plausible that she wouldn’t have wanted to ruin any of the beautiful pieces in her closet; Edie had treated them like precious artifacts.

“And the gun stuff didn’t make sense to me: She was left-handed, but the gun was in her right hand, and the wound was on the right side of her face. Until a forensic expert explained to me that if she used two hands, she could’ve wound up slightly off-center and just, like, crumpled to either side.”

Jesus. She’d talked to a forensic expert? I watched as she slurped the last of her fourth martini.

“But I learned enough about criminology to figure out that there are a few loose ends in any investigation. Because that’s how life is.”

“ . . . Unraveling,” I supplied.

She smiled. “But yeah, my parents found me an awesome therapist, and she helped me face the facts. I guess we all turned out okay.”

“We did. And you shouldn’t feel bad about dealing with it however you needed to deal with it. We were all so immature and maybe didn’t know how to . . . ask for help.”

“You mean like Edie.”

I’d been thinking of myself, but sure, Edie, too. What with the debt and the depression and the suicide note on her laptop. The gun pressed against her temple.

“That was some heavy shit,” I said.

She poked at her cocktail napkin. “It’s still hard for me to believe sometimes. Like, we were at the top of our game. We were having the time of our lives.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. “Everyone glorifies their twenties, I guess, but for me that period was . . . It meant a lot.” I swallowed hard. “And then it ended. It’s nuts. Literally, we were dancing around to some stupid band just a few floors up while Edie was . . .”

Sarah narrowed her eyes. “Well, you weren’t.”

“What?”

“You weren’t at the concert.”



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haunting, evocative, and impossible to forget.”

—Christina Baker Kline, bestselling author of *Orphan Train*



Hidden in dense forests high in the Romanian mountains, where the winters were especially cold and long, were spruce trees that would be made into pianos: exquisite instruments famous for the warmth of their tone and beloved by the likes of Schumann and Liszt. One man alone knew how to choose them.

Once the leaves had fallen and snow blanketed the ground, Julius Blüthner made the trip from Leipzig by train and walked through the forest alone. Because of the elevation and the brutal cold, trees there grew very slowly. They stood straight and thick against the elements, their grain dense with rosin. Blüthner nodded to the young

trees as he passed, occasionally brushing their bark in greeting. He sought the older ones, whose branches he couldn't reach, whose diameters were so great he couldn't see if a bear were standing behind the trunk. He knocked them with his walking stick, and pressed his ear against them as his intuition dictated, listening for the music hidden inside. He heard it more clearly than any other piano maker, better even than Ignaz Bösendorfer and Carl Bechstein and Henry Steinway. When he found what he was listening for, he marked the tree with a scrap of red wool, which stood out bright against the snow.

Then the lumberjacks he'd hired cut down the trees he'd chosen. Watching closely, Blüthner could tell which were the finest specimens by how they fell. Only those with a minimum of seven annual rings per centimeter, all evenly spaced, would be carried out of the forest on sleds, then shipped back to Germany. And the finest among these would become the soundboards that beat like hearts inside his famous pianos.

As protection against splitting, the logs were kept wet until they reached the sawmill. There they were quarter-sawn to unlock the purest tones, then sawn and planed into uniform planks. The wood chips went into the furnaces to heat the mill and power the steam engines. Because of knots and other imperfections revealed in the cutting, many of the precious tonewood planks also ended up in the furnaces. What was kept was nearly perfect: white in color; light and flexible; the faint traces of the rings densely spaced and running parallel across the faces of the soundboard planks. These raw boards were stored for at least two years, covered and uncovered until their humidity dwindled to about fourteen percent.

When it was ready, the wood was transported by horse cart to the enormous Blüthner factory in the western quarter of Leipzig and laid out on racks near the ceiling in hot rooms for many months. But even then it wasn't ready to become an instrument. To ensure that the soundboard would someday conduct Blüthner's peerless golden tone, the wood had to dry out for another few years in the open air.

It was with reverence, then, in 1905, that an assistant *Klavier-*

baumeister selected a number of those carefully seasoned planks and glued them edge to edge to form a single board. He cut it to the proper shape and planed it to the proper thickness, flexible enough to vibrate but strong enough to push back against the pressure of more than two hundred strings. Once crafted, it was returned to those warmer rooms to dry further before thin ribs could be applied to its underside, perpendicular to the grain lines. Then the soundboard took on a small amount of moisture, enough to allow its top to swell into a gentle curve, upon which the bass and treble bridges would sit, their downward pressure meeting the apex of the opposing curve as if around a great barrel. The *Klavierbaumeister* admired his work: the impeccably matched parallels of the grain, the precise curvature of the crown. This particular soundboard would provide the heart for the factory's 66,825th piano.

The frame of the case was built by other craftsmen, its five back posts sturdy enough to bear the weight of the soundboard and the iron plate. The pinblock was cut and fitted. The agraffes were seated into the plate at a height that would determine the speaking length of the strings, which were then strung; tuning pins were hammered in, and the action set and fitted. Cold-pressed felt was layered thick onto the wooden hammers, thinning appropriately toward the delicate treble side. Dampers were installed next, along with the trapwork of pedals and levers, dowels and springs. The case was ebonized after the guts were in, requiring countless coats. The finishers' arm muscles bulged above their rolled-up shirtsleeves.

Next the instrument, nearly complete, was tuned, the tension of each of the 220 strings adjusted to the correct pitch. Then it was regulated, the touch and responsiveness of the action attended to until the motion of the fingers on the keys would be properly transferred to the hammers that struck the strings.

At last, after many years of effort by many expert hands, the piano was delivered to its final station for voicing. The *Meister* there lifted the linen blanket covering it and passed a hand over the shiny black top. Why should this piano be special? Each one was special, with its own soul and distinct personality. This one was substantial

but unassuming, mysterious but sincere. He let the linen drop onto the factory floor.

“What will you say to this world?” he asked the instrument.

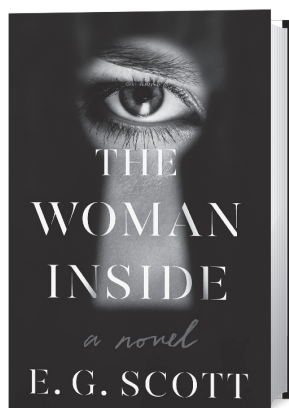
He shaped the hammers one by one, listening to every string, shaving and minutely aerating the felt again and again. He was like a diagnostician, knocking the nerves below a patient’s kneecap, measuring the response. The piano called out each time in compliant reply. *Hello, hello.*

“*Fertig,*” he said when the work was done. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, pushed the wisps of white hair away from his face. Standing back from the piano, he regarded this complete and brand-new entity that would be—after being played in properly—capable of incredible feats. The first few years were unpredictable, but over time it would open up and gather into itself a unique history. For now it was a perfect instrument, characterized only by its potential.

The *Meister* fluffed his apron as he sat down on the barrel he’d borrowed for a seat and, flexing his fingers, considered which piece to christen the piano with. Schubert, his favorite composer. He would play the rondo of his penultimate sonata, the big A Major; the opening melody was pretty, with a feeling of hopefulness and joy that preceded its more pensive, agitated development. This would be the perfect inauguration of the glistening black Blüthner No. 66,825.

“Listen!” he called out, but nobody could hear him above the factory’s ambient noise. “Here she is born!”

And he pressed his finger down on C-sharp, the first note of the rondo, listening hard, and it rang out to meet him with the innocence and power of a child’s first cry. Finding it as pure as he’d hoped, he began to play the rest of the sonata. He would send off this shining new piano with as much optimism as he could gather, knowing it would no longer be as vestal once it was touched by its future owners’ desperately human hands.



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two

PAUL

Before

MY WIFE AND I are different types of liars. It's one of the interesting things you learn after nearly two decades of marriage. I tend to get creative with the details. She, on the other hand, selectively omits.

Rebecca and I came to each other with roughly the same amount of damage. I suppose that for both of us, the lying comes down to

control, an attempt to manage our past by reconfiguring our present. This was explained to me as a child by the psychiatrist who was assigned to my case. I think I remember so clearly because I was desperate to make a good impression.

“Paul, you can call me Dr. A, okay?” Her smile warms me from the inside.

“Okay.”

“Paul, do you understand what happened to your parents?”

“Yes, Dr. A.”

“You understand that it was an accident? That it wasn’t your fault?”

“Yes, Dr. A.”

“Paul, look at me. It was nothing you did.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, sweetie.”

She wore a fine silver necklace with a small sapphire pendant that looked like an heirloom and matched her eyes. I remember the way it rested against her skin, accentuating the delicate lines of her cleavage. She was kind and put me at ease.

WE TELL OURSELVES lots of things. Lots of pleasant, hopeful lies.

When Rebecca and I were first married, man, were we crazy about each other. Just over the moon, two wild, wide-eyed kids. And what eyes she has. Sultry, smoky, sleepy yet savvy. I was defenseless against them. And we were hopelessly in love. It was beautiful. And stupid. And I believed then—I really believed—that we could see each other through anything. And in a way, I suppose we have.

Rebecca and I used to make love for what seemed like days on end. I’d get swallowed up by those eyes of hers as my mouth melted into her full lips and her dark, flowing hair swept across both of our faces.

“You love me?”

“Desperately, Madoo.”

“I need you so badly.”

“You’ve got me. You’ve got all of me.”

“Baby, I need you to fuck me.”

Time had a way of evaporating when we were tangled up in the sheets, or standing up in the shower, or finding creative uses for the secondhand furniture we’d accumulated. We even managed to find some kinky ways to utilize my small collection of neckties. Only when we’d pry ourselves apart in sated exhaustion did the world around us return to any semblance of order.

WHEN YOU’RE YOUNG and dangerous, everything is available to you. The world seems utterly gift wrapped. You have a beautiful young wife with a hot ass and a way with words that makes you feel a little weak, in a way that you can allow yourself to be. In a way that feels vulnerable, but you welcome that vulnerability. You let it in, because your relationship is solid. The bonds of marriage are impenetrable and protect you from the outside world.

Not that you really need any protection. Everything else is going beautifully. You have a thriving contracting business. People are racing to build new houses. You can barely keep up with the number of projects you’re juggling, but when you get thrown yet another, who are you to say no? You can do it. You’re the king. You can keep all of those plates spinning. You’re even able to make the time to dig, pour, and build the basement foundation and lay in the utilities for the dream home you’re designing for that gorgeous wife of yours. The one who’s killing it at work herself. And when you lay her down, and you’re on top of her, she looks at you like she’s on top of the world. And that makes you feel as if you are. And, after all, you are. You’re it. You’re the fucking man.

Then reality wallops you, and it feels like getting hit in the face with a sackful of nickels. The market crashes, construction halts, and you’re sitting there with your dick in your hand. The money dries up immediately, and suddenly you’ve got a dozen half-finished projects and no prospect of completion in sight. You’re no longer holding the sticks on which you were spinning all those plates. Through nothing other than bad luck and bad timing, you’re

completely screwed. You've got a ton of money out and nothing coming in. Your ambition has come back to haunt you.

And there's your ego, needling you. Your wife is understanding. She really is. She's supportive, she's compassionate, and she listens. But she can only listen to what you tell her, and you're not telling her everything, are you? You're not telling her what's really eating at your guts, the stuff that's keeping you up at night even as you lie as still as possible next to her so she thinks you're sleeping soundly. You don't want to burden her with all of that. Why would you need to? After all, you're the fucking man. At least, you were.

You've been slammed into a different reality, and it stings like hell. Your beautiful, charismatic wife, who could sell wool to a sheep, is absolutely cleaning up at her job—not to mention taking full advantage of the pharmaceutical perks. At some point it strikes you, in a morbidly funny sort of way, that there might just be a connection. The economy is in the tank, and people can't get medicated fast enough. Maybe fate does have a sense of humor.

You sit around the house, trying to figure out some way to revitalize your career. You scramble, you scratch, you reach out to whoever might take your call. You try to think of something. Anything. But you're looking at nothing. And all of those gaudy, glistening trophies on the mantelpiece? They're looking at you. Those testaments to your wife's sales numbers and general dominance in her field? They're looking down at you, judging you, pitying you. Asking themselves what kind of man you really are.

It takes a while to sink in, but the blow is no less harsh. Your wife is now handling shit. Because you no longer can. The woman you affectionately refer to as Madoo—your dove—has been left to take care of you, because you can't be a man anymore. You've never been one to wallow, but you're feeling pretty sorry for yourself now, aren't you? And it's grinding away at her, that's for sure. You find yourself feeling relieved that you decided against bringing kids into the equation.

She would never let on, but you can see it in her eyes. She's a little more tentative with you, as if she's addressing your pride first. She lets you take the initiative more, and it feels like a concession.

Whereas you two used to dance the dance fluidly, seamlessly, you can now feel her making a point of letting you lead. And when you do make love, she doesn't look you in the eyes the same way anymore, and you can barely bring yourself to look into hers. There's a rigidity that creeps into her body. She doesn't open up for you the way she used to, doesn't take you inside with the same abandon. It's as if you're drifting by each other.

You start to wonder what she's still doing with you, why she hasn't left yet. Her head is elsewhere, and you figure her eyes can't be far behind. It gets to the point where you're surprised at her having stayed, then disappointed in her weakness for doing so. Why wouldn't she just go? You would have. What's she waiting for?

You try to project the outward signs of a healthy, functional marriage: mutual respect, support, caring. And those things are still there. But something else has crept in, eroding the edges and eating away at the heart of your relationship. You feel it in your daily lives, and yet neither of you is able—or willing—to address it. And it certainly has put its stamp on your sex life. You're now at the point where you're not interested in making love with her anymore. You need something raw, more animalistic, to fill the need.

SHEILA WAS A MISTAKE. But I suppose things are only ever mistakes in hindsight. I never meant for it to happen, but it happened all the same. When we met, I was two years into my run of unemployment, still plotting my path back to success. My daily ritual of taking walks down to the bay with Duff both got me out of that prison of a house and helped focus my brain, bringing me closer to my next great idea, which was always just out of reach.

Sheila lived a few blocks away and would often be out walking her dog around the same time that Duff and I were stretching our legs. She wore her ash-blond hair in a loose bun and always looked effortlessly, casually put together. She was a few years younger and exuded an energy I found myself drawn to. I figured out her schedule, and after a few days of polite waves, I stopped to speak with her.

“Good morning.”

“Hi there. And who’s this big fella?”

“This is Duff.”

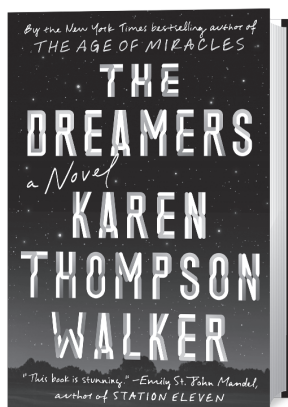
She leaned over to pet him, revealing a glimpse of lace trim where her bra crept out from the neckline of her shirt. “Hi, Duff! You’re a sweetheart, aren’t you? And who’s *this* big fella?” As she looked up at me, her liquid blue eyes cast a mischievous radiance.

“Paul. Duff here’s the smart one. I’m the big dumb animal of the pair.” I did my best to return her look.

She smirked, her lip gloss catching the sunlight. “Well, at least you’re not slobbering, Paul. Give yourself a little credit.” She held my eye for a long moment, then extended her hand. “Sheila. This is Molly.”

She had a warm, firm handshake. The dogs had finished sniffing each other, and as I bent down to pet her black Lab, I noticed Sheila cover her wedding ring with her right hand. At that moment, something shifted in me.

We’d do it at her place, while her husband was out of town and the dogs were running around in the yard. We did things that Rebecca and I hadn’t done in ages, and with a heat and intimacy I hadn’t felt in years. Sheila looked at me, touched me, made me feel about myself the way my wife used to. And so I let myself believe that Sheila meant more to me than she did. And for a while, I really was convinced.



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An ordinary town is transformed by a mysterious illness that triggers perpetual sleep in this mesmerizing novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Age of Miracles*.



1.

At first, they blame the air.

It's an old idea, a poison in the ether, a danger carried in by the wind. A strange haze is seen drifting through town on that first night, the night the trouble begins. It arrives like weather, or like smoke, some say later, but no one can locate any fire. Some blame the drought, which has been bleeding away the lake for years, and browning the air with dust.

Whatever this is, it comes over them quietly: a sudden drowsiness, a closing of the eyes. Most of the victims are found in their beds.

But there are some who will tell you that this sickness is not entirely new, that its cousins have sometimes visited ours. In certain letters from earlier centuries, you may find the occasional reference—decades apart—to a strange kind of slumber, a mysterious, persistent sleep.

In 1935, two children went to bed in a Dust Bowl cabin and did not wake for nine days. Some similar contagion once crept through a Mexican village—*El Niente*, they called it: “the Nothing.” And three thousand years before that, a Greek poet described a string of strange deaths in a village near the sea: they died, he wrote, as if overcome by sleep—or, according to a second translation: as if drowned in a dream.

This time, it starts at the college.

It starts with a girl leaving a party. She feels sick, she tells her friends, like a fever, she says, like the flu. And tired, too, as tired as she has ever felt in her life.

2.

The girl’s roommate, Mei, will later recall waking to the sound of the key turning in the lock. Mei will remember the squeak of the springs in the dark as her roommate—her name is Kara—climbs into the bunk above hers. She seems drunk, this girl, the way she moves so slowly from door to bed, but the room is dim, and—as usual—they do not speak.

In the morning, Mei sees that Kara has slept in her clothes. The narrow black heels of her boots are sticking out beneath the blankets of the upper bunk. But Mei has seen her do this once before. She is careful not to wake her as she dresses. She is quiet with her keys and with the door. Mei leaves only the lightest possible impression on this space—the comfort of not being seen.

This is California, Santa Lora, six weeks into Mei's freshman year.

Mei stays away from the room all day. She feels better this way, still stunned by how quickly it happened, how the friendships formed without her, a thick and sudden ice.

Each evening, Kara and the other girls on the floor stand in towels in the bathroom, blocking the sinks as they lean toward the mirrors to line their lips and eyes. Mei can hear them laughing from the desk in her room across the hall, their voices loud above the hum of the blow-dryers.

"It takes time to get to know people," her mother says over the phone. "Sometimes it takes years."

But there are certain stories that Mei has not told her mother. Like those boys who came to the door the first week of school. There was a bad smell in the hall, they'd said, and they'd tracked it to this room. "It's like something died in here," they'd said, walking in without asking, filling up the narrow room, flip-flops and board shorts, baseball caps low on their heads.

The boys got excited when they began to sniff around Mei's desk. "That's it," they'd said, pressing their hands to their noses. "It's gotta be something in there." They'd pointed to the bottom drawer. "What the hell do you have in there?"

It was her mother's dried cod, which had arrived in the company of three bars of dark chocolate and two lavender soaps.

"My mom makes it," she'd said. This is one of her mother's few inheritances from her own mother, Mei's grandmother, the only one in the family born in China and not San Diego. "It's fish."

She knows that these boys refer to her as *quiet girl*, as in *Hey, quiet girl, it's okay to talk*. She does not think of herself that way, as especially quiet, but there she was, as if under their sway: suddenly not talking.

"Jesus," said the one named Tom, who is taller than the others and plays basketball for the school team. He'd tied a red bandanna

around his face, like a worker in a Civil War hospital. “That is foul,” he said.

Every time she remembers it, that bandanna over his mouth, Mei’s face turns hot with the shame of it.

In the end, she dropped the bag of cod down the trash chute at the end of the hall, ten floors down, the scrape of plastic on tin, while the boys gathered around her to make sure.

“I didn’t know they’d be like that,” Kara said later. This is how she learned that Kara was the one who told the boys about a smell in the room, though she’d said nothing at all to Mei.

This is one of the reasons that Mei spends her afternoons at a campus café, where, on this particular day in October, she waits until she is sure her roommate and the other girls will be gone from the floor, their hair dryers quiet, their flat-irons cool, and the girls themselves enmeshed by then in the complicated rituals of their sororities. The boys, she hopes, will be at dinner.

But when Mei gets back to the floor that night, nine hours after she left it, she finds a note, written in red, on the whiteboard that hangs on their door. “We’re leaving,” it says. “Where are you?” These words—it is obvious—are meant for her roommate.

When Mei unlocks the door, she finds Kara still lying where she left her that morning, her body curled toward the wall in the top bunk, her black boots still protruding from the sheets.

“Kara?” she says softly. Outside, the sun is sinking. The sky is clear and turning pink. Mei switches on the overhead light. “Kara?” she says again.

But Kara does not wake. Not to the sound of Mei’s pleading, or to the louder voices of the two paramedics who soon detect—through her badly wrinkled dress—that she is breathing, at least, that she still has a pulse.

Kara sleeps through the screaming of the other girls as they see the way her head rolls back against the stretcher, the way her mouth hangs open, her brown hair falling loose across her face. She sleeps through the screeching of the crickets in the pine trees outside, and through the cool night air on her skin.

Mei stands barefoot on the sidewalk as the paramedics slide the stretcher into the bright bubble of the ambulance, a little roughly, thinks Mei. Be careful, she wants to say. And then the doors swing shut without her, leaving Mei alone in the street.

The paramedics will later report that the girl sleeps through the wail of the siren, too, and the flashing of the lights. She sleeps through the bumps of the potholed streets as the ambulance rushes toward St. Mary's, where, after several attempts, two doctors find that they cannot wake her, either.

On the other floors of the hospital that night, women labor while the girl sleeps. Babies are born while she sleeps. She sleeps while an old man dies in a distant room, an expected death—his family gathered, a chaplain.

She sleeps through sunrise, and she sleeps through sunset.

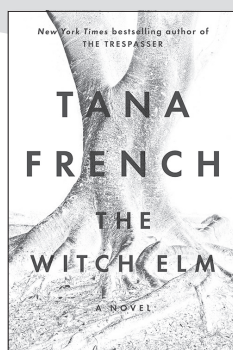
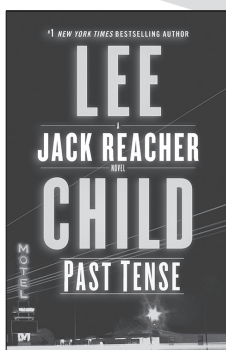
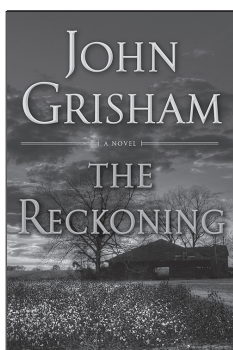
And yet, in those first few hours, the doctors can find nothing else wrong. She looks like an ordinary girl sleeping ordinary sleep.

There will be some confusion, later, about what happened to her there, how her heart could have slowed so much without setting off the monitors. But this much is known to be true: over the course of many hours, her shallow breaths turn gradually shallower.

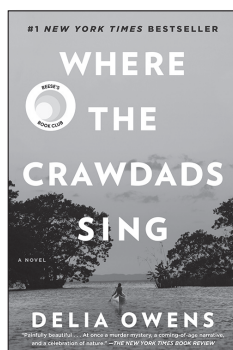
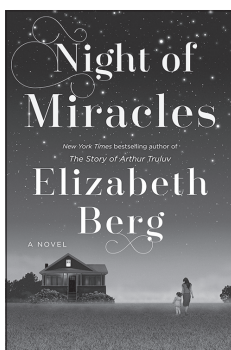
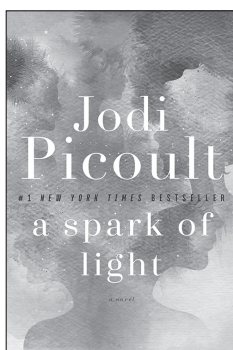
It is hard to say afterward why the final beats of her heart go unrecorded by those machines.

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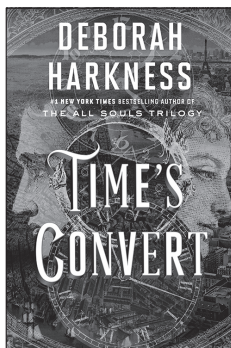
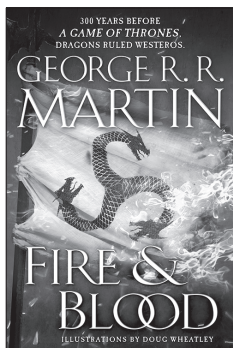
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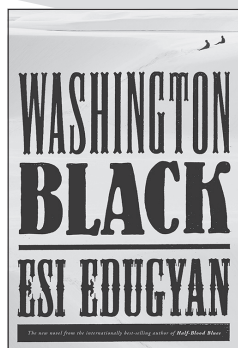
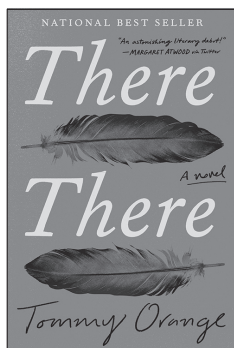
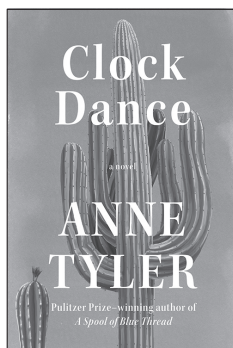
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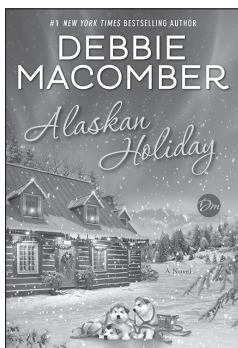
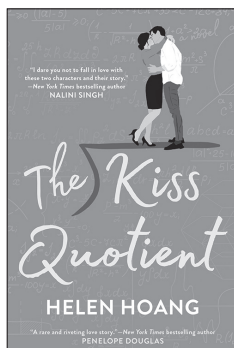
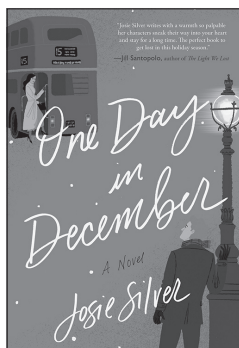
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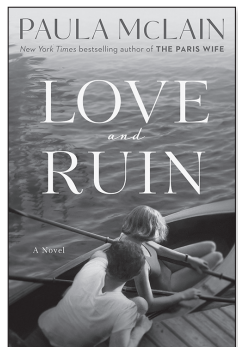
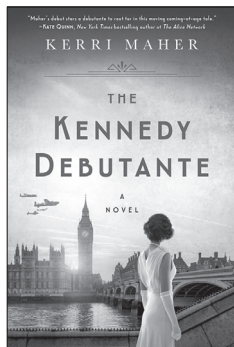
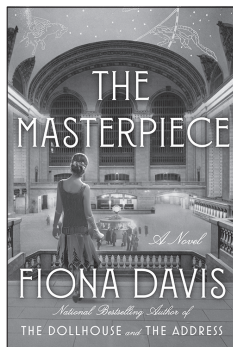
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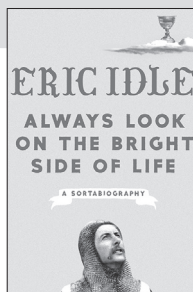
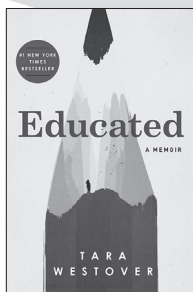
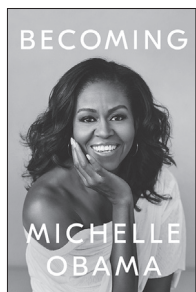


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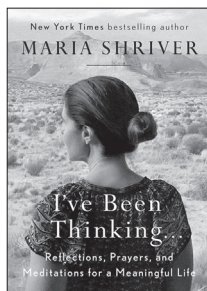
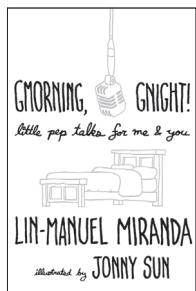


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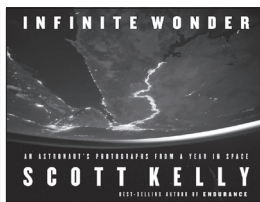
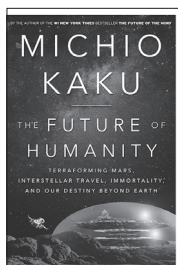
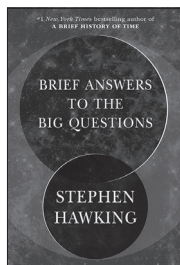
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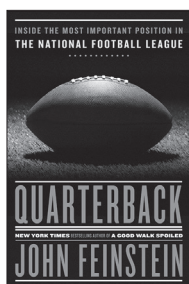
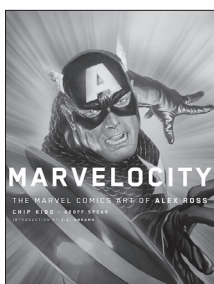
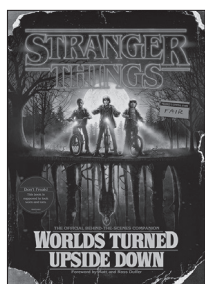
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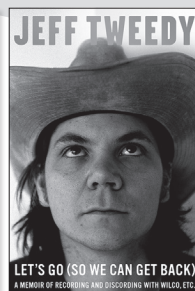
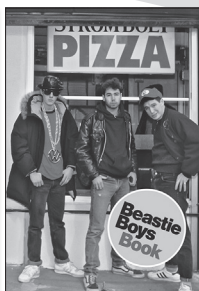
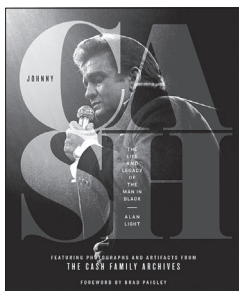
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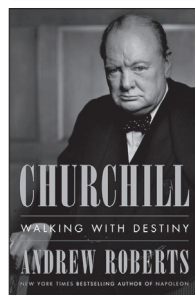
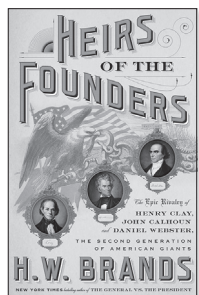
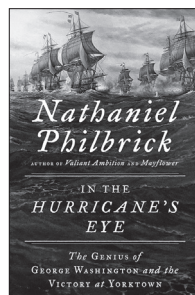
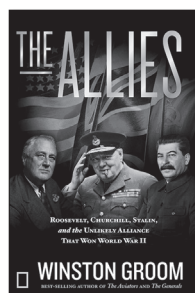
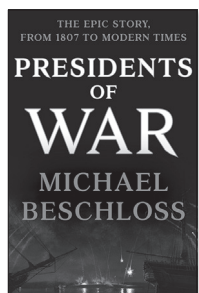
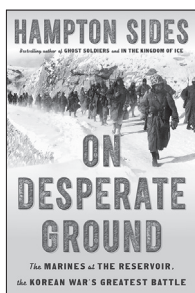
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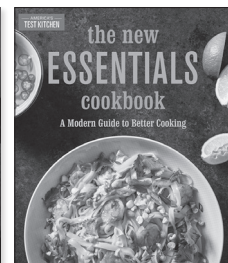
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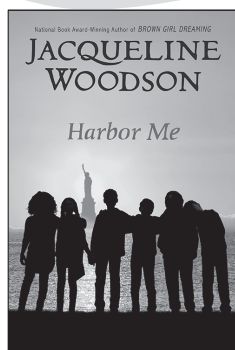
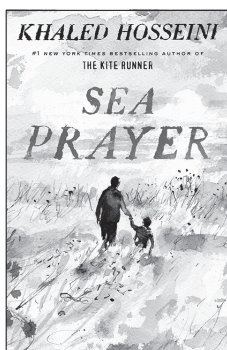
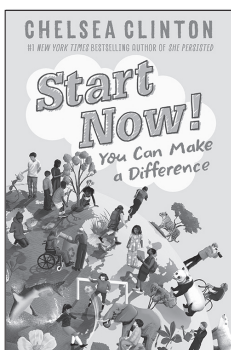


FOR CHEFS OF ALL SKILL LEVELS

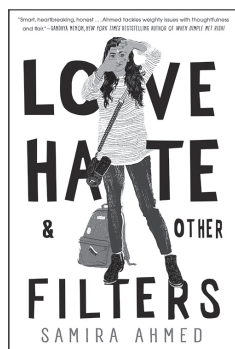
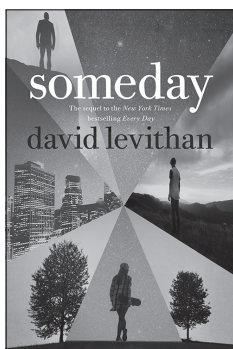
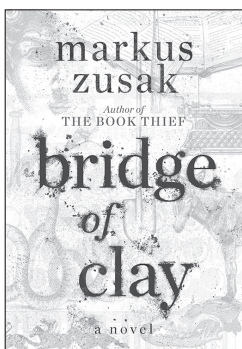


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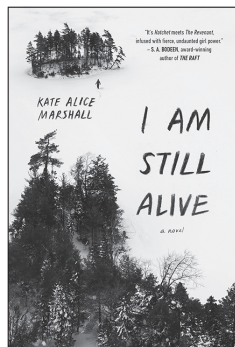
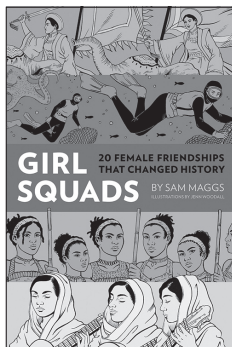
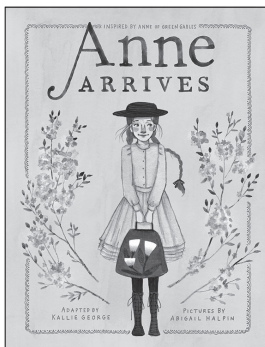
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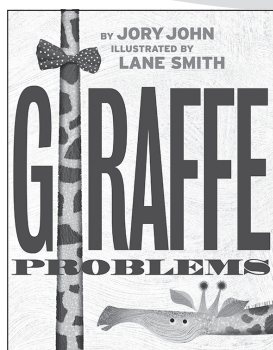
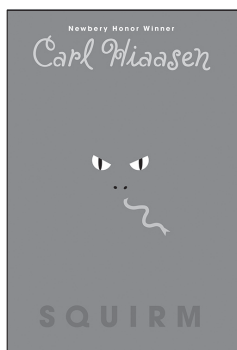
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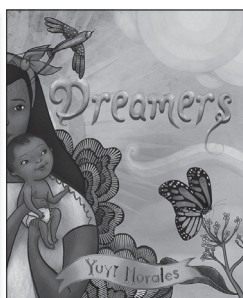
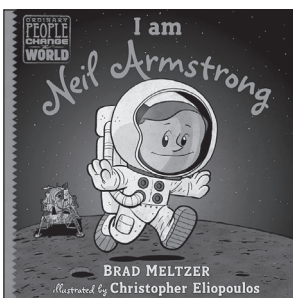
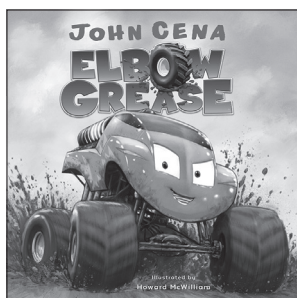
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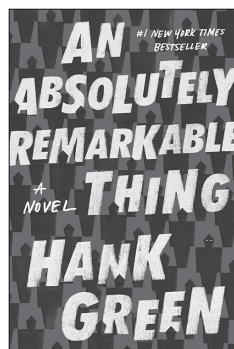
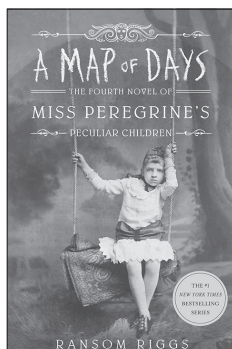
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ENCOURAGING STORIES FOR YOUNG READERS



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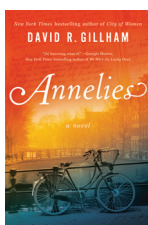


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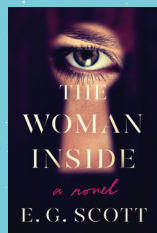
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