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**FICTION**  
SAMPLER







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## SPRING 2017 DEBUT FICTION SAMPLER

### *Table of Contents*

**Stay with Me**

by Ayobami Adebayo  
(Knopf, August 2017)

**The Space Between the Stars**

by Anne Corlett  
(Berkley, June 2017)

**Dead Letters: A Novel**

by Caite Dolan-Leach  
(Random House, February 2017)

**American War: A Novel**

by Omar El Akkad  
(Knopf, April 2017)

**Gilded Cage**

by Vic James  
(Del Rey, February 2017)

**Lola: A Novel**

by Melissa Scrivner Love  
(Crown, March 2017)

**The Shark Club**

by Ann Kidd Taylor  
(Viking, June 2017)

**Ten Dead Comedians: A Murder Mystery**

by Fred Van Lente  
(Quirk Books, July 2017)





*Stay with Me*

*a novel*

*Ayobami*

*Adebayo*



JOS, DECEMBER 2008

I must leave this city today and come to you. My bags are packed and the empty rooms remind me that I should have left a week ago. Musa, my driver, has slept at the security guard's post every night since last Friday, waiting for me to wake him up at dawn so we can set out on time. But my bags still sit in the living room, gathering dust.

I have given most of what I acquired here—furniture, electronic devices, even house fittings—to the stylists who worked in my salon. So, every night for a week now, I've tossed about on this bed without a television to shorten my insomniac hours.

There's a house waiting for me in Ife, right outside the university where you and I first met. I imagine it now, a house not unlike this one, its many rooms designed to nurture a big family: man, wife and many children. I was supposed to leave a day after my hairdryers were taken down. The plan was to spend a week setting up my new salon and furnishing the house. I wanted my new life in place before seeing you again.

It's not that I've become attached to this place. I will not miss the few friends I made, the people who do not know the woman I was before I came here, the men who over the years have thought they were in love with me. Once I leave, I probably won't even remember the one who asked me to be his wife. Nobody here

## STAY WITH ME

knows I'm still married to you. I only tell them a slice of the story: I was barren and my husband took another wife. No one has ever probed further, so I've never told them about my children.

I have wanted to leave since the three corporers in the National Youth Service programme were killed. I decided to shut down my salon and the jewellery shop before I even knew what I would do next, before the invitation to your father's funeral arrived like a map to show me the way. I have memorised the three young men's names and I know what each one studied at the university. My Olamide would have been about their age; she too would just have been leaving university about now. When I read about them, I think of her.

Akin, I often wonder if you think about her too.

Although sleep stays away, every night I shut my eyes and pieces of the life I left behind come back to me. I see the batik pillowcases in our bedroom, our neighbours and your family which, for a misguided period, I thought was also mine. I see you. Tonight I see the bedside lamp you gave me a few weeks after we got married. I could not sleep in the dark and you had nightmares if we left the fluorescent lights on. That lamp was your solution. You bought it without telling me you'd come up with a compromise, without asking me if I wanted a lamp. And as I stroked its bronze base and admired the tinted glass panels that formed its shade, you asked me what I would take out of the building if our house was burning. I didn't think about it before saying, *our baby*, even though we did not have children yet. *Something*, you said, *not someone*. But you seemed a little hurt that, when I thought it was someone, I did not consider rescuing you.

I drag myself out of bed and change out of my nightgown. I will not waste another minute. The questions you must answer, the ones I've choked on for over a decade, quicken my steps as I grab my handbag and go into the living room.

There are seventeen bags here, ready to be carried into my car. I stare at the bags, recalling the contents of each one. If this house was on fire, what would I take? I have to think about this because the first thing that occurs to me is *nothing*. I choose the overnight bag I'd planned to bring with me for the funeral and a leather pouch filled with gold jewellery. Musa can bring the rest of the bags to me another time.

This is it then—fifteen years here and, though my house is not on fire, all I'm taking is a bag of gold and a change of clothes. The things that matter are inside me, locked up below my breast as though in a grave, a place of permanence, my coffin-like treasure chest.

I step outside. The air is freezing and the black sky is turning purple in the horizon as the sun ascends. Musa is leaning against the car, cleaning his teeth with a stick. He spits into a cup as I approach and puts the chewing stick in his breast pocket. He opens the car door, we exchange greetings and I climb into the back seat.

Musa switches on the car radio and searches for stations. He settles for one that is starting the day's broadcast with a recording of the national anthem. The gateman waves goodbye as we drive out of the compound. The road stretches before us, shrouded in a darkness transitioning into dawn as it leads me back to you.

Even then, I could sense that they had come prepared for war. I could see them through the glass panes on the door. I could hear their chatter. They did not seem to notice that I had been standing on the other side of the door for almost a full minute. I wanted to leave them standing outside and go back upstairs to sleep. Maybe they would melt into pools of brown mud if they stayed long enough in the sun. Iya Martha's buttocks were so big that, if melted, they would have taken up all the space on the concrete steps that led up to our doorway.

Iya Martha was one of my four mothers; she had been my father's oldest wife. The man who came with her was Baba Lola, Akin's uncle. They both hunched their backs against the sun and wore determined frowns that made their faces repulsive. Yet, as soon as I opened the door, their conversation stopped and they broke into smiles. I could guess the first words that would come out of the woman's mouth. I knew it would be some lavish show of a bond that had never existed between us.

"Yejide, my precious daughter!" Iya Martha grinned, cupping my cheeks with moist and fleshy hands.

I grinned back and knelt to greet them. "Welcome, welcome. God must have woken up thinking of me today-o. That is why you are all here," I said, bending in a semi-kneel again after they

had come in and were seated in the sitting room.

They laughed.

“Where is your husband? Do we meet him at home?” Baba Lola asked, looking around the room as though I had stashed Akin under a chair.

“Yes, sir, he is upstairs. I’ll go and call him after I serve your drinks. What should I prepare for food? Pounded yam?”

The man glanced at my stepmother as though, while rehearsing for the drama that was about to unfold, he had not read this part of their script.

Iya Martha shook her head from side to side. “We cannot eat. Get your husband. We have important things to discuss with the two of you.”

I smiled, left the sitting-room area and headed for the staircase. I thought I knew what “important things” they had come to discuss. A number of my in-laws had been in our home previously to discuss the same issue. A discussion consisted of them talking and me listening while on my knees. At those times, Akin pretended to listen and jot notes while writing his to-do list for the next day. No one in the series of delegations could read or write and they were all in awe of those who could. They were impressed that Akin wrote down their words. And sometimes, if he stopped writing, the person speaking at the time would complain that Akin was disrespecting him or her by not noting anything down. My husband often planned his entire week during such visits, while I got terrible cramps in my legs.

The visits irritated Akin and he wanted to tell his relatives to mind their own business, but I would not allow it. The long discussions did give me leg cramps, but at least they made me feel I was part of his family. Until that afternoon, no one in my family had paid me that kind of visit since I’d got married.

As I went up the stairs, I knew that Iya Martha’s presence meant

## STAY WITH ME

some new point was about to be made. I did not need their advice. My home was fine without the important things they had to say. I did not want to hear Baba Lola's hoarse voice being forced out in between coughs or see another flash of Iya Martha's teeth.

I believed I had heard it all already anyway and I was sure my husband would feel the same way. I was surprised to find Akin awake. He worked six days a week and slept through most Sundays. But he was pacing the floor when I entered our room.

"You knew they would come today?" I searched his face for the familiar mix of horror and irritation that it wore any time a special delegation came visiting.

"They are here?" He stood still and clasped his hands behind his head. No horror, no irritation. The room began to feel stuffy.

"You knew they were coming? You didn't tell me?"

"Let's just go downstairs." He walked out of the room.

"Akin, what is going on? What is happening?" I called after him.

I sat down on the bed, held my head in my hands and tried to breathe. I stayed that way until I heard Akin's voice calling me. I went to join him in the sitting room downstairs. I wore a smile, not a big one that showed teeth, just a small lift at the corners of my mouth. The kind that said, *Even though you old people know nothing about my marriage, I am delighted, no, ecstatic, to hear all the important things you have to say about it. After all, I am a good wife.*

I did not notice her at first, even though she was perched on the edge of Iya Martha's chair. She was fair, pale yellow like the inside of an unripe mango. Her thin lips were covered with blood-red lipstick.

I leaned towards my husband. His body felt stiff and he did not put his arms around me and pull me close. I tried to figure out where the yellow woman had come from, wondering for a

wild minute if Iya Martha had kept her hidden under her wrapper when she came in.

“Our wife, our people say that when a man has a possession and it becomes two he does not become angry, right?” Baba Lola said.

I nodded and smiled.

“Well, our wife, this is your new wife. It is one child that calls another one into this world. Who knows, the king in heaven may answer your prayers because of this wife. Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too,” Baba Lola said.

Iya Martha nodded her agreement. “Yejide, my daughter, we have thought about and slept on this issue many times, your husband’s people and me. And your other mothers.”

I shut my eyes. I was about to wake up from the trance. When I opened my eyes, the mango-yellow woman was still there, a little blurry but still there. I was dazed.

I had expected them to talk about my childlessness. I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles, I-look-unto-God smiles—name all the fake smiles needed to get through an afternoon with a group of people who claim to want the best for you while poking at your open sore with a stick—and I had them ready. I was ready to listen to them tell me I must do something about my situation. I expected to hear about a new pastor I could visit; a new mountain where I could go to pray; or an old herbalist in a remote village or town whom I could consult. I was armed with smiles for my lips, an appropriate sheen of tears for my eyes and sniffles for my nose. I was prepared to lock up my hairdressing salon throughout the coming week and go in search of a miracle with my mother-in-law in tow. What I was not expecting was another smiling woman in the room, a yellow woman with a blood-red mouth who grinned like a new bride.

## STAY WITH ME

I wished my mother-in-law were there. She was the only woman I had ever called *Moomi*. I visited her more often than her son did. She had watched while my fresh perm was washed off into a flowing river by a priest whose theory was that I had been cursed by my mother before she died, minutes after giving birth to me. Moomi was there with me when I sat on a prayer mat for three days, chanting words that I didn't understand over and over until I fainted on the third day, cutting short what should have been a seven-day fast and vigil.

While I recovered in a ward at Wesley Guild Hospital, she held my hand and asked me to pray for strength. A good mother's life is hard, she said, a woman can be a bad wife but she must not be a bad mother. Moomi told me that before asking God to give me a child, I must ask for the grace to be able to suffer for that child. She said I wasn't ready to be a mother yet if I was fainting after three days of fasting.

I realised then that she had not fainted on the third day because she had probably gone on that kind of fast several times to appease God on behalf of her children. In that moment, the lines etched around Moomi's eyes and mouth became sinister, they began to mean more to me than signs of old age. I was torn. I wanted to be this thing that I never had. I wanted to be a mother, to have my eyes shine with secret joys and wisdom like Moomi's. Yet all her talk about suffering was terrifying.

"Her age is not even close to yours," Iya Martha leaned forward in her seat. "Because they appreciate you, Yejide, your husband's people know your value. They told me that they recognise that you are a good wife in your husband's house."

Baba Lola cleared his throat. "Yejide, I as a person, I want to praise you. I want to appreciate your efforts to make sure that our son leaves a child behind when he dies. This is why we know that you will not take this new wife like a rival. Her name is Funmilayo

and we know, we trust, that you will take her as your younger sister.”

“Your friend,” Iya Martha said.

“Your daughter,” Baba Lola said.

Iya Martha tapped Funmi on the back. “*Oya*, you go and greet your *iyale*.”

I shuddered when Iya Martha referred to me as Funmi’s *iyale*. The word crackled in my ears, *iyale*—*first* wife. It was a verdict that marked me as not woman enough for my husband.

Funmi came to sit beside me on the couch.

Baba Lola shook his head. “Funmi, kneel down. Twenty years after the train has started its journey, it will always meet the land ahead of it. Yejide is ahead of you in every way in this house.”

Funmi knelt down, placed her hands on my knees and smiled. My hands itched to slap the smile off her face.

I turned to look Akin in the eyes, hoping that somehow he was not part of the ambush. His gaze held mine in a silent plea. My already-stiff smile slipped. Rage closed its flaming hands around my heart. There was a pounding in my head, right between my eyes.

“Akin, you knew this?” I spoke in English, shutting out the two elders who spoke only Yoruba.

Akin said nothing; he scratched the bridge of his nose with a forefinger.

I looked around the room for something to focus on. The white lace curtains with blue trimmings, the grey couch, the matching rug that had a coffee stain that I had been trying to remove for over a year. The stain was too far off-centre to be covered by the table, too far from the edge to be concealed by the armchairs. Funmi wore a beige dress, the same shade as the coffee stain, the same shade as the blouse that I wore. Her hands were just below my knees, wrapped around my bare legs. I could not look past her

## STAY WITH ME

hands, past the long billowy sleeves of her dress. I could not look at her face.

“Yejide, pull her close.”

I was not sure who had just spoken. My head was hot, heating up, close to boiling point. Anyone could have said those words— Iya Martha, Baba Lola, God. I did not care.

I turned to my husband again. “Akin, you knew about this? You knew and could not tell me. You knew? You bloody bastard. After everything! You wretched bastard!”

Akin caught my hand before it landed on his cheek.

It was not the outrage in Iya Martha’s scream that stopped my words. It was the tender way Akin’s thumb stroked my palm. I looked away from his eyes.

“What is she saying?” Baba Lola asked the new wife for an interpretation.

“Yejide, please,” Akin squeezed my hand.

“She says he is a bastard,” Funmi translated in a whisper, as though the words were too hot and heavy for her mouth.

Iya Martha screamed and covered her face with her hands. I was not fooled by her display. I knew she was gloating inside. I was sure she would spend weeks repeating what she had seen to my father’s other wives.

“You must not abuse your husband, this child. No matter how things appear, he is still your husband. What more do you want him to do for you? Is it not because of you that he has found a flat for Funmi to stay in when he has a big duplex right here?” Iya Martha looked around the sitting room, spreading her palms to point out the big duplex in case I had missed her reference to the house for which I paid half of the rent every month. “You, this Yejide. You must be grateful to your husband.”

Iya Martha had stopped talking, but her mouth still hung open. If one moved close enough, that mouth oozed an unbearable

stench, like stale urine. Baba Lola had chosen a seat that was a safe distance from her.

I knew I was supposed to kneel down, bow my head like a schoolgirl being punished and say I was sorry for insulting my husband and his mother in one breath. They would have accepted my excuses—I could have said it was the devil, the weather, or that my new braids were too tight, made my head ache and forced me to disrespect my husband in front of them. My whole body was clenched like an arthritic hand and I just could not force it to make shapes that it did not want to make. So for the first time, I ignored an in-law's displeasure and stood up when I was expected to kneel. I felt taller as I rose to my full height.

“I will prepare the food,” I said, refusing to ask them again what they wanted to eat. Now that they had introduced Funmi, it was acceptable for Baba Lola and Iya Martha to have a meal. I was not ready to cook a separate meal for each person, so I served them what I wanted. I gave them bean pottage. I mixed the three-day-old beans I had been planning to throw in the bin with the freshly cooked pottage. Even though I was sure they would notice that the mixture tasted a little bad, I counted on the guilt Baba Lola was masking with outrage at my behaviour and the glee Iya Martha was hiding beneath her displays of dismay to keep them eating. In order to help the food down their throats, I knelt down to apologise to the two of them. Iya Martha smiled and said she would have refused to eat if I had gone on behaving like a street child. I apologised again and hugged the yellow woman for good measure; she smelled like coconut oil and vanilla. I drank from a bottle of malt as I watched them eat. I was disappointed that Akin refused to eat anything.

When they complained that they would have preferred pounded yam with vegetable stew and dry fish, I ignored Akin's look. On some other day I would have gone back to the kitchen

## STAY WITH ME

to pound yam. That afternoon, I wanted to tell them to get up and pound the yam if they really wanted pounded yam. I swallowed the words burning in my throat with gulps of malt and told them I could not pound because I had sprained my hand the day before.

“But you didn’t say that when we first got here,” Iya Martha scratched her chin. “You yourself offered to give us pounded yam.”

“She must have forgotten about the sprain. She was really in pain yesterday. I even considered taking her to the hospital,” Akin said, backing up my fairly obvious lie.

They shovelled the beans into their mouths like starving children, advising me to get the hand checked at the hospital. It was only Funmi who squeezed her mouth around the first mouthful of beans and looked at me with suspicion. Our eyes met and she smiled a wide red-rimmed smile.

After I cleared away the empty plates, Baba Lola explained that he had not been sure how long the visit would last, so he had not bothered to make any arrangements for the cab driver who had dropped them off to come back and pick them up. He assumed, the way relatives often do, that Akin would take responsibility for getting them back home.

Soon it was time for Akin to drop everyone off. As I saw them to his car, Akin jiggled his keys in his trouser pocket and asked if everyone was fine with the route he intended to take. He wanted to drop Baba Lola off on Ilaje Street and then drive Iya Martha all the way to Ife. I noticed that he did not say anything about where Funmi lived. After Iya Martha said the route my husband picked was the best option, Akin unlocked the car doors and got into the driver’s seat.

I stifled the urge to pull out Funmi’s *jheri* curls because she slipped into the front seat beside my husband and pushed the small cushion I always kept there to the floor. I clenched my fists as Akin

drove away, leaving me alone in the cloud of dust he had raised.



“WHAT DID YOU FEED them?” Akin shouted.

“Bridegroom, welcome back,” I said. I had just finished eating my dinner. I picked up the plates and headed for the kitchen.

“You know they all have diarrhoea now? I had to park by a bush for them to shit. A bush!” he said, following me into the kitchen.

“What is so unheard of about that? Do your relatives have toilets in their homes? Don’t they shit in bushes and on dunghills?” I yelled, slamming the plates in the metal sink. The sound of cracking china was followed by silence. One of the plates had cracked in the middle. I ran my finger over the broken surface. I felt it pierce me. My blood stained the jagged space in trickles.

“Yejide, try and understand. You know I am not going to hurt you,” he said.

“What language are you speaking? Hausa or Chinese? Me, I don’t understand you. Start speaking something I understand, Mr. Bridegroom.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“I will call you what I want. At least you are still my husband. Ah, but maybe you are not my husband again. Did I miss that news too? Should I switch on the radio or is it on television? In the newspaper?” I dumped the broken plate into the plastic dustbin that stood beside the sink. I turned to face him.

His forehead glistened with beads of sweat that ran down his cheeks and gathered at his chin. He was tapping a foot to some furious beat in his head. The muscles in his face moved to that same beat as he clenched and unclenched his jaw. “You called me a bastard in front of my uncle. You disrespected me.”

## STAY WITH ME

The anger in his voice shook me, outraged me. I had thought his vibrating body meant he was nervous—it usually did. I had hoped it meant he felt sorry, guilty. “You brought a new wife into this house and you are angry? When did you marry her? Last year? Last month? When did you plan to tell me? Eh? You this—”

“Don’t say it, woman, don’t say that word. You need a padlock on your mouth.”

“Well, since I don’t have that, I will say it, you bloody—”

His hand covered my mouth. “OK, I’m sorry. I was in a difficult situation. You know I won’t cheat on you, Yejide. You know I can’t, I can’t do that. I promise.” He laughed. It was a broken, pathetic sound.

I prised his hand away from my face. He held on to my hand, rubbing his palm against mine. I wanted to weep.

“You have another wife, you paid her bride price and prostrated in front of her family. I think you are already cheating.”

He placed my palm over his heart; it was beating fast. “This is not cheating on you; I don’t have a new wife. Trust me, it’s for the best. My mother won’t pressure you for children any more,” he whispered.

“Nonsense and rubbish.” I snatched my hand away and walked out of the kitchen.

“If it makes you feel better, Funmi couldn’t make it into the bush fast enough. She soiled her dress.”

I did not feel better. I would not feel better for a very long time. Already, I was coming undone, like a hastily tied scarf coming loose, on the ground before the owner is aware of it.

A  
NOVEL

THE  
SPACE  
BETWEEN  
THE  
STARS

ANNE CORLETT



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<<OTHER DISCLAIMERS>>

# CHAPTER ONE

SHE KNEW IT was the third day when she woke. Even in the twists and tangles of the fever, her sense of time had remained unbroken. More than unbroken. Whetted into a measure of such devastating accuracy that she'd wanted nothing more than to die quickly and be done with that merciless deathwatch count of her last hours. And dying *was* quicker, according to the infomercials that spiralled out from the central planets when the virus first took hold there. Most people were gone by halfway through the second day. If you were still lingering beyond that midpoint, chances were you'd still be there after the fever had burned itself out in a last vicious surge on the third day.

Jamie could taste blood in her mouth, bitter as old coins, and her back was aching with a dull, bed-bound creak of pain. But her bones were no longer splintering in some unseen vice, and there was none of the spiralling vertigo that had flung her about inside relentless nightmares. In the throes of the fever, skeletal horses had leered at her, and an organ-grinder who was nothing but teeth and hands had turned the handle faster and faster until it all blurred into nothingness.

Her senses were slowly coming back online. She could hear own her own ragged, uneven breathing, and she could smell the reek of sweat-stained sheets.

She was alive. That realisation brought no leap of joy or relief. There was a nag of unease working its way around the edges of her thoughts.

Survival was something she'd never dared hope for in those interminable days before the virus took hold on Soltaire, when there'd been nothing to do but wait for the inevitable to hit their planet too. The disease's long incubation period meant that it had already reached every corner of settled space before the first symptoms appeared on

the capital, Alegria. The messages from Alegria and the central worlds stopped a week or so before the sickness hit Soltaire. The infomercials had already given way to blunt emergency transmissions. As the days passed, the silences between them grew longer, the messages shorter, less coherent, as though the airwaves were fraying. But by then they knew what was coming. The virus was terminal in almost all cases.

*Ninety-nine point nine nine nine nine percent*, one of the ranch hands had said. Jamie didn't know where he'd got that figure, but it spread and became fact. That was the day they all stopped looking at each other. How many of them could hope to make it into a minority so staggeringly small? The odds were akin to launching a paper plane off the planet's surface and hoping to hit a target back on Earth.

*Nought point nought nought nought one percent.*

She felt stiff and brittle, like she'd snap if she moved. Her senses had turned on her. She could hear all the noises that her home wasn't making. The main house generator wasn't running, and there was no distant hum of machinery from the logging station over at the lake. She should have been able to hear the farmhands, calling to one another, or swearing at the cattle. Instead, all she could hear was the soft, barely-there swish of the station's turbine, and the squabbling of the immigrant sparrows in the trees behind the croft.

That was it. No human sound.

Survival was a one in a million chance. The virus was a near-perfect killing machine. Contagious as hell, it had a vicious little sting in its tail. It mutated with every re-infection. A single exposure was survivable—with luck—but it was as though it knew us. As the disease spread, people did what people always do. They clung and grabbed and mauled one another. They queued at the hospitals. They died in the waiting rooms. They clutched at their lovers and held onto their children. And the disease rampaged joyously, burning through thought and will, then flesh, and, at the very last, through bone—until there was nothing but dust, and no-one left to mourn over it.

*Dust to dust*, Jamie thought, rising slowly onto one elbow. The sun was slanting under the top edge of the window, illuminating the interior of the single-roomed croft that had been her home for the last three months. It was a standard settler's dwelling, flat-packed as part

of some colonist family's baggage allowance when the first ships made their way through the void.

Jamie's head was aching, and her mouth was so dry that she might as well have been dust herself.

Had she breathed them in? The dead? Were they inside her now, clinging to her throat, hoping for some chance word that might carry them back to an echo of life?

*Ninety-nine point nine nine nine nine percent.*

She yanked herself back from the fall that lay beyond that thought. It might be different here. They'd had some warning. And they didn't live crushed up close against each other, like on the central worlds.

But . . . the silence.

Something snagged in her throat, and she coughed, and then retched, doubling over.

*Water.*

The thought instantly became an urgent need, with enough force to tip her over the edge of the bed and into a sprawled half-crouch on the stone floor. She pushed herself upright, leaning hard on the bed, and then crossed the floor, moving with a club-footed awkwardness. When she reached the sink, she clung to it with both hands. The mirror in front of her was clouded and warped. The distortion had always unsettled her, with the way it caught her features and twisted them if she turned too quickly. But today the clouded surface was a relief. She didn't need a reflection to know how reduced she was. She felt shrunken, stretched too tight over her bones.

The tap sputtered, kicking out a little spurt that grew into a steady stream. She splashed at her face, the cold water forcing the shadows back to the edges of her mind, leaving nothing to hide that pitiless statistic.

*Ninety-nine point nine nine nine nine percent dead.*

Ten billion people scattered across space.

Nought point nought nought nought one percent of ten billion.

Ten thousand people should have survived.

Spread across how many populated worlds? Three hundred, or thereabouts. Thirty-three survivors per world. And a bit left over.

But she had a nagging sense that her maths was wrong.

When the answer struck her, she initially felt only a little *snick* of

satisfaction at figuring it out. All worlds were not created equal. Almost half the total human population lived on Earth and the capital planet cluster. There must be a couple of billion people on Alegria alone.

That meant two thousand survivors. Set against the ominous silence outside thecroft, that felt like a vast number, and she felt a flicker of relief.

But then there were all the fledgling colonies, right out on the edges of civilisation, some of them numbering only a few hundred people.

Soltaire fell somewhere between those two extremes. Its single land-mass was sizeable enough—about the size of Russia, she'd been told—but settlement had been slow. There were ten thousand people, or thereabouts, most of them clustered around the port, or over in Laketown. Then a few smaller townsteads, and a clutch of smallholdings, as well as the two main cattle breeding centres, at Gratton Ridge and here at Calgarth.

Ten thousand people,

All the heat seemed to drain out of her body.

Nought point nought one.

Not even a whole person. There shouldn't have been enough of her left to do the maths.

A cramp stabbed through her stomach and up into the space beneath her ribs, doubling her over.

*Breathe.*

It was just an estimate. Maybe other people had done what she'd done, and locked themselves away the second they'd felt that first itch in their throat. But then it hadn't been hard for her to follow the emergency advice. There was no-one depending on her, no-one wanting her close. But if she'd still been with Daniel, would one of them have given in and crawled to the other, seeking warmth and comfort and the reassurance of another heart beating near theirs?

*Daniel.*

His name slammed into her, and she put her hands to her head, waiting for the reverberations of that thought to stop, so that she could start feeling something.

Nothing.

*Daniel*, she thought, more deliberately this time. The man with whom she'd spent the last thirteen years. The man she'd loved.

Still loved.

Maybe.

No.

That was a distraction she didn't need right now.

She stood up straight, moving slowly and carefully as though the air might shatter at an incautious movement, and reached for the towel hanging beside the sink. It was a threadbare rag of a thing that looked as if it had been here since the first settlers, but towels were just one of the things she'd forgotten when she left Alegria. She'd arrived with just a handful of clothes and essentials, plus a few personal bits and pieces. Daniel had taken it as a good sign. *Your stuff is all where you left it*, he'd told her, in one of his mails. *Whenever you want it*.

*Whenever you want me*. That's what he'd really been saying.

*I want you now*.

The thought caught her by surprise. She'd turned that question over and over in her mind since she'd been out here, in an endless inverted *he loves me, he loves me not*. She'd analysed every memory, replayed every argument, every tender moment, and she'd come up with a different answer every time.

Clearly she'd needed to wait until the world had ended before deciding that she did love him.

Loved him, wanted him. It was the same thing, wasn't it? A pull, a stretching of the tether that started with the other person and ended somewhere deep in your chest. She'd felt that tug when they'd talked on the long-distance airwave at the port. When was that? Three weeks ago? The conversation was stilted and artificial. Even though he'd shuttled out to the capital cluster's long-range station, the time delay was so marked that while she was speaking, the mouth of his cracked doppelgänger was still moving to the echo of his last remark, as though he was talking over her. He was going to Earth for a few weeks, he told her. Work. He just wanted her to know. In case . . .

That *in case* had been left hanging between them. That was when she felt that tug. It wasn't strong enough to make her say what she knew he hoped she'd say. But when he asked if they could talk again when he got back, she agreed. She'd even found a smile for him as

they said goodbye, although it hadn't quite felt like it fitted, and she didn't know if he'd seen it before the connection was severed.

He'd been heading for Earth.

Four billion people on Earth. Four thousand survivors.

What were the chances of them both making it? She felt suddenly weak and couldn't work it out. Panic was starting to swirl up inside her chest.

*Breathe.*

She walked over to the cupboard. Underwear, a pair of jeans. She pulled them on. No t-shirts.

The washing line. She'd been hanging out laundry when the first spasms had sent her to her knees, and then, by slow increments, to the medicine drawer.

She stood still. Until she went outside, this could all just be a game of *what if?*

*Nought point nought nought nought one.*

"Shut up." Her voice sounded thin and rusty, and she swore, another harsh scrape of sound, then opened the door.

The sun was high overhead, the sky its usual denim blue, fading to smokey marl at the horizon. Outside the croft a half-line of washing swayed in the breeze. At one end, a bed sheet trailed from a single peg, the line sagging under its weight. The laundry basket was on its side, her clothes streaked and crumpled in the dirt.

She realised she'd instinctively wrapped the towel around her before stepping outside, just as though one of the farmhands might wander by with a casual wolf-whistle.

*Little things*, she thought. It was too easy to forget, to fall back into past habits, with all the tiny, insignificant things just waiting to trip you up.

She kept the towel clamped against her sides until she'd unpegged a grey t-shirt, and pulled it over her head. Her boots were abandoned by the door, as usual, and she sat to lace them up.

The birds had scattered over to the boundary fence, their quarrel muted by distance. The turbine turned quietly, and the cattle grumbled from the barn. She stood up, stretching her cramped limbs, forcing herself to look around. The main house was still and silent and she turned away, towards the open land beyond the station fences. A

couple of faint scraps of cloud drifted over the hills, carrying a vague promise of rain.

Her thoughts were spiralling out, beyond the simple fact of the warm breeze and clear sun. This world had long growing seasons, regular rainfall, a simple infrastructure. It would be an easy enough place to survive, if surviving became all there was.

*No.*

The door of the main house was closed, but the curtains were open. Someone could be looking out right now. Or perhaps someone had heard her. Maybe they were stumbling to the window right now.

But she didn't move.

There was a rumble from the barn. If the Calgarth herd had been milkers, they'd have been protesting their swollen neglect long and loud. But these were breeders, and their complaints were probably focused on being barn-bound and out of feed. If those basic needs were met, they wouldn't be troubled by the decimation of the human world.

She turned away from those empty windows, and walked down to the barn, swinging back the bar that kept the cattle from the yard. She found the herd outside, gathered in the shade of the back wall, near a trough of greenish water and a pile of fodder spilled from an upended bin. The scattered feed spoke of someone using their last strength to make sure the herd had enough to last until . . . for a while.

Her heart felt small and hard, as if her illness had turned it into something other than flesh. She hadn't spent much time with Jim Cranwell, who ran the farm, despite being his resident veterinarian, but he'd always been courteous. She'd had more to do with his grandchildren, who'd run in and out of the barn, clambering between stalls and treating the cattle like oversized pets. At first she'd wished they would leave her alone. She found their constant questions distracting, and she veered between patronising, over-simplified answers and curt, too-adult responses. But she'd got used to their presence, even playing the odd game with them, although she always tired of it before they did.

She'd have to go round the station and prop all the gates open. There was a stream near the boundary fence, so they'd have water. She wasn't sure what to do about the bulls. If she left them roaming

free they'd fight, but if she kept them separate, there'd be no new calves. What happened when there was no prospect of anything beyond this generation? What happened when . . .

She gripped the edge of the doorframe, her breath growing ragged. There'd be other people who'd beaten the odds. She had to find them. Until she did, these thoughts would keep piling up until she was crushed beneath them.

She stood for a moment, breathing slowly, trying to think about nothing but the blue of the sky and the curve of the hills. Then she turned and walked, slowly and heavily, towards the silent house.

*It's summer and a girl runs down a path towards a beach. The sun hangs low in a clear blue sky, like every memory of every summer evening there ever was.*

*Her stepmother comes to the gate and calls to her.*

*Jamie. Jamie. Take your sisters with you.*

*She hates the way her stepmother always says sisters, not half-sisters, as though she's trying to re-write history, so that there was only ever the way things are now.*

*Jamie's the one who feels like a half. She's felt like that for years now. Ever since the night her mother drank one glass too many and let an old secret come spilling out, about the scar on Jamie's chest. She'd always thought it looked like a zip-fastener, running breastbone to navel, as though someone had opened her up and scooped something out.*

*It was a simple enough procedure. That's what the doctors had said. Just some cartilage to snip away.*

*Jamie often wondered what her mother saw when she looked at her daughter. Her living child, or her two-for-the-price-of-one babies, who'd been wheeled away to come back as one-alone? She kept telling the story, probing at the choice they'd made, like it was a rotten tooth. And every time she told it she cried and clutched at her remaining child.*

*You know I love you. Don't you? Don't you? You're all I've got left.*

*But all Jamie heard was that she'd taken too much. She'd come into the world with someone holding onto her, and that almost-self had been sliced away, leaving her with more than her fair share.*

*Her stepmother calls to her again. But Jamie keeps running, down to where the wet sand fades into the shallows. The water is almost*

*still, the weight of the coming night already damping down the waves. She pulls off her shoes, steps barefoot into the sea. It's cold, but she's done this many times before. She knows the first chill will soon fall away. She walks out beyond the shallows, her light summer clothes clinging to her. When she's deep enough, she tucks her knees underneath her and kicks out into the slow press of the tide.*

*When she grows tired, she leans back, sculling gently, counting stars. She'll stay here until the cold has soaked right into her bones, forcing her back to shore. Then she'll carry her shoes back up the beach and along the path to the house. Her stepmother will see her from the kitchen window, and she'll come out, holding a towel she's warmed on the Aga. And Jamie will sit at the kitchen table, listening as the older woman tries to find the right words, the ones that will break open the brittle shell of her step-daughter's silence.*

*But Jamie is fastened up tight, her zip pulled safely over her heart, and she'll never let anything dangerous slip out again.*

## CHAPTER TWO

JAMIE HESITATED BEFORE pushing the front door open.

“Hello?”

Her voice cracked. She swallowed and tried again.

“Mr Cranwell?” That sounded childishly formal. “Jim?”

The kitchen was tidier than usual. His daughter used to invite her in for a cup of tea sometimes.

“Cathy?”

Even the washing-up had been cleared away. An image flared in her head. Cathy, leaning heavily on the kitchen side, drying cups and stacking them slowly away, refusing to acknowledge the pointlessness of the task. One cupboard door was ajar, with a broken dish nearby. Maybe she'd crawled to her bed, like Jamie had. But Cathy's bed wouldn't have been empty. She would have climbed in and wrapped her arms around her children, breathing in their contagion, not knowing any other way of being.

Jamie walked down the hallway to a white-painted door. It opened onto a bright, airy room with doors opening onto the grass behind the house. Dust flecks drifted in the slanting sunlight.

*Dust.*

The sheets were grey with it, the covers tipped into a tangle on the floor.

There wasn't much. Not when you thought of the measure of a person.

*Three people.*

You'd have there'd be more heft to a human life.

Jamie stood for a moment, watching the slow play of light and dust, then stepped backwards into the corridor and closed the door behind her.

Upstairs, she checked each door until she found a bare-boarded room, furnished with just a bed and a chest of drawers. There was a cross on the wall and a sprawl of abandoned clothes on the floor, topped with Jim Cranwell's belt, the one his grandchildren had bought him, with the buckle shaped like a running horse.

The covers were drawn up, almost as though the bed had been made, and the pillow was dusted with grey.

Back outside, Jamie leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. There was a pushiness to the sun's warmth.

*Come on, come on. Things to do, things to know.*

When she opened her eyes, her gaze fell on one the crofts down beyond the barn. She stared at it for a moment, and then pushed herself upright and set off across the yard.

Her circuit of the station took longer than it should have done. The virus had diminished her. She checked the six crofts, as well as the dorm that housed the younger farmhands. Some were as tidy as the main house, while others bore signs of an occupant who'd done everything they could not to go quietly into the night. But there were no signs of life, and everywhere she went, she saw dust motes drifting in the uncaring sunlight.

When she was done she went back to her own croft. Her skin felt dry and scuffed, and she found herself rubbing at her palms, as though that dust was clinging to her skin.

Suddenly she was on her knees, folded over, forehead pressed to the floor as though she was praying. Which way did Muslims pray? Towards Mecca. How did they know which way that was, all these millions of miles away?

Her thoughts were twisting tighter and tighter until there was nowhere to go but to the place she'd been trying to avoid. She shouldn't be alive. Somehow the little world had got lucky. Was there any realistic chance that its luck had held more than once? And if not . . .

*No.*

There were other worlds. There'd be other survivors.

But the statistics were wrong here. What if they were wrong elsewhere? Her thoughts unwound again, spinning out beyond the walls of the croft, beyond the skies, out into the endlessness of space. An

empty universe, with just one pinpoint of life, curled and numb on a dusty floor.

She fought for control. She knew there were survivors. The emergency messages had been clear.

*Terminal in almost all cases.*

*Almost.* A lot of life could fit into that one small word.

It all came down to the central worlds. Two thousand survivors. Enough for searches, for rescue missions.

But what if they thought two thousand was enough?

Her hope was strung on elastic, slackening, then snapping tight again.

If no-one came, what then? How did it work, being alone, day-in, day-out?

You wouldn't speak. There'd be no-one to talk to. You wouldn't touch anyone and no-one would touch you. No-one would stroke your hair, or tap you on the shoulder and say *hey, I thought that was you*. No sex. No-one inside you but you, and yet that somehow feeling too full, too crowded, with no room to breathe.

Jamie curled tighter.

*Stop.*

Her heart was beating a tempo it couldn't sustain without shaking her apart. And she couldn't break apart because there was no-one to put her back together again. If she broke, then her pieces would blow away on the wind, like the others. Dust to dust and . . .

*Stopstopstopstopstop.*

She'd survived. There'd be others. There would.

That thought was a handhold in the shifting swell of panic, tiny and fragile, but just enough for that tight knot inside her to unwind a little.

*There'll be others.*

She stayed bent over for a long moment, and only when she was sure her legs would support her did she climb slowly to her feet.

She stripped off her clothes, and walked over to the corner cubicle to pull the shower lever. The water was cold, but she closed her eyes and tipped her head back, letting it run over her face and neck, and down the line of the long, pale scar towards her stomach, which still had the faintest suggestion of a swell from her lost pregnancy.

Once she was done, she dressed and went back outside, over to the boundary fence. The horizon was blurred with the faintest suggestion of a heat-haze, but she could just make out the distant outline of the turbines that served the port and its surrounding settlements. They were still turning, ghost-pale against the bleached blue sky.

What if there were other people out there staring at their own empty skies? Each of them trapped in their own lonely skin on their own lonely world. Perhaps they'd take a leap of evolution and learn to send their thoughts across the void.

*Hello. I'm here. I'm alone.*

Jamie caught herself on the edge of making a sound that could have been a cough of laughter, or a sob, or any number of incoherent things in between.

*I need space*, she'd told Daniel, ignoring the sour clang of the cliché. She hadn't just been talking about their relationship. Wherever you went, there were always too many people trying to squeeze into that piece of the world. On Soltaire there'd been room to breathe, with no-one pushing her to explain the exact shape and tone of each breath.

*Be careful what you wish for.*

Perhaps if she wished again, the turbines would falter, then start turning backwards, unwinding it all. Someone would say *oh no, that wasn't supposed to happen*, and they'd take it back.

But the great shadow-arms kept turning.

---

BACK inside the croft Jamie moved around, touching things. Her ancient screen stayed a speckled, dull grey when she pressed the button. No electricity. When she picked up her comm-pager from the bedside table, the battery light was flashing, but there was still enough power to light the screen when she tapped it. One word appeared.

*Message*

Her hand jerked so hard that she almost lost her grip on the device. She tightened her fingers around it, and when she unpeeled them again, those blocky letters were still squatting there. When she tapped them with her fingertip, they gave way to a couple of lines of text.

*Central Time 15.7.10—18.42*

*Duration 15 seconds*

There followed a long jumble of incomprehensible data, marking

the trail of comm satellites that had bounced the message across the void of space.

Her hands were shaking. Fifteenth of July. Less than two days ago. Soltaire was remote. The central worlds had gone silent several days before the virus took hold here.

She touched the screen lightly, as though that might use less power. The pager spat out a crackle of static, which gave way to a high-pitched whine as the message ticker moved across the screen.

*. . . eleven twelve thirteen . . .*

Another burst of static, wrapped around something that might have been a human voice, like a faded ghost in the machine.

Then nothing.

She hit the replay button. Again, the seconds counted down, and again, the static flared, carrying with it that tantalising hint of a voice. Then the pager went dark.

“No. *Fuck.*”

She smacked the device with her palm, but the screen stayed blank. Panic scraped at the inside of her ribs. If she could just listen one more time she might be able to figure it out. She might be able to. . . .

*Stop.*

She drew a deep breath. There’d been nothing there. And it didn’t matter. The simple existence of the message was the point. It had been sent two days ago, long after the disease had completed its rampage through all but the most outlying worlds. Someone else was alive. And in all the vastness of space, she could only think of one person who would be trying to contact her.

Daniel. He was alive.

The room lurched around her.

A memory surfaced. She’d taken him home with her once. It was three years ago, after her father died. She hadn’t wanted to go to back for the funeral, but Daniel had pushed and pushed until she gave in and booked them places on one of the fast clippers. It hadn’t been as hard as she’d feared. The service was simple and understated, and she’d managed to hug her stepmother and half-sisters and make the right noises, without too much of their shared history gaping between them.

They’d only stayed in Northumberland for a couple of nights, but

Daniel had been taken with the place, and they'd been easier together than they had in a long while. On the second evening they'd walked on the long, crescent-shaped beach at Belsley, watching the sun sink beyond the headland. He'd made a comment about it being a reasonable place to sit out a zombie apocalypse—an old joke of theirs—and she'd laughed and agreed.

*It's a plan.* He smiled at her. *If the world ends, we'll meet back here. Whoever arrives first can write their name on the sand so the other one knows they're here.*

*Okay,* she said, *but make sure it's above the tide-line.* When he kissed her, she leaned into him, thinking that maybe they'd make it after all.

Jamie drew another ragged breath in. He'd been heading to Earth when they'd last spoken. That old promise had been spoken in jest, but he'd remember. He remembered everything. But she was stranded here, with light years of space between them and no way of crossing it. A sudden rush of vertigo tipped the floor beneath her feet, and she bent over, wrapping her arms across her body, waiting for the world to steady. There had to be a way. She could go to the port. There might be other survivors. There would be.

Other people. A ship. Someone might know how to fly it. Someone could learn. She could learn. They'd get off the planet, head to Earth, to Northumberland, to Daniel.

Her thoughts were tumbling over one another with a buoyancy she didn't want to examine too closely.

They'd get to Earth and Daniel would be waiting for her. She'd look at him and be sure for the first time. He'd be alive and she'd be alive and that would mean something. It *had* to mean something.

She looked around thecroft, her pulse beating an urgent tattoo.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

Her old rucksack was stuffed at the back of the cupboard. It was a tattered, canvas thing that had once belonged to her grandfather. Jamie had taken it on school camping trips, along with his heavy, oilskin-backed sea blanket, that was folded in the bottom of the bag now. It had taken up a fair chunk of her baggage allowance when she left Earth, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to leave it behind.

She grabbed the rucksack, stuffing some clothes inside, before heading out of the croft.

Down in the field the cattle ambled behind her as she opened the three gates that would give them access to the stream and the best grazing. She hesitated over the gates to the bulls' enclosures, but eventually propped them open too.

The station's battered off-roader was missing from its place behind the barn. Her gaze fell on the paddocks to the side of the house. She couldn't see the three scrubby cattle ponies, but when she whistled, Conrad lifted his greying head, and wandered over to nose at her pocket. The swaybacked roan had endured years of little feet drumming at his sides, and he had an air of world-weary patience. Jamie rubbed his neck, her breath snagging on the sudden lump in her throat.

The cattle, the birds, their presence hadn't made a dent in her sense of *alone*. But Conrad was different. She knew him; his name, his quirks and foibles, and seeing him here gave her a pang of emotion that fell somewhere between relief and despair.

Conrad made no objection to being tacked up—beyond a token exhalation that meant she had to set her shoulder against his side and dig him with her elbow to get the girth tightened.

“Sort yourself out.”

He shoved her hard with his head, leaving green-tinged slobber down her side.

Jamie tightened her rucksack across her shoulders and pulled herself into the saddle.

“Come on, then,” she said, clicking her tongue to push him into a rolling plod.

---

THE spaceport was a couple of hours away. Conrad settled into a steady enough pace once he realised he was in it for the duration. Jamie even broke a clunky canter out of him at one point, although she couldn't persuade to him maintain it. She still had that *hurry hurry* beating inside her head, but she knew Conrad wouldn't *be* hurried. His hoofbeats were hypnotic, and by the time Jamie realised she was counting them, she was already well into the hundreds.

Counting kept the other thoughts at bay. She'd been so sure when she'd set off, but the closer she got to the port, the more that *nought*

*point nought nought nought one* shouldered its way in. How could she expect to find survivors, with those desperate odds?

It was mid-afternoon when she arrived. Her mouth was dust-dry, and there was a dull throb at the back of her head. When she'd been here before the port had been one great clatter of noise from the shipyards and trade depot, but today the stillness was unnerving. At least at Calgarth there'd been a backdrop of sound, as the non-human world went about its business. But there was no birdsong here, the silence broken only by the scrape of an open door, swinging in the breeze.

She dismounted in the square and Conrad wandered over to the scrub of grass in front of the store. He wouldn't need tethering. Give him a patch of unfamiliar green and he'd be happy for hours, like a gourmand sampling some new fare.

Jamie walked over to the open gate of the shipyard.

The concrete landing site was empty. No ships in port.

It didn't matter. It didn't. There could be ships up there, just waiting for a signal.

There was a speaker system mounted outside the yard office. She remembered it shrilling on the day of her arrival, loud enough for most of the settlement to hear.

Inside the scruffy little office she found a microphone on the desk, and when she flicked the main switch a red light came on. The electricity was working then.

"Hello?" Her voice was thin and uncertain. "If anyone's here, I'm at the shipyard." She paused, then added "My name is Jamie," as though that might sway some undecided listener. She repeated the message a couple of times, then replaced the microphone, before heading back outside and round the corner to the comms station.

When she'd come here after that last mail from Daniel, the Portmaster himself had set up the call. She hadn't watched what he did, not sure she wanted to be here at all. The public booth still smelled the same now; sawdust mixed with a whiff of cleaning fluid. The chipboard walls had holes drilled for wires, and the stool was bolted to the floor. A couple of the fastenings were loose and the seat tipped under her weight as she sat down.

When she flicked the biggest switch, a few lights came on, and something began to click beneath the counter. She tried another switch,

and the display flickered with a few darts of static. She turned the tuning dial slowly back and forth in the hope of catching something, but the screen stayed stubbornly dark.

She pressed the microphone button anyway.

“If anyone can hear this, I’m on Soltaire. At the port. My name is Jamie Allenby and I’m a veterinary scientist at Calgarth.”

She paused, conscious of her flat, monotone delivery. But was an impassioned plea for aid any more likely to be answered than a matter-of-fact message? Was it about deserving rescue? Earning it?

She took a deep breath before continuing. “I don’t know if there are any other survivors here. If there’s anyone out there, this is Jamie Allenby at the port on Soltaire.”

It felt like there was more she should be saying, but she didn’t even know if the message was transmitting. She left the console switched on, and sat there for a moment, as though there might be an instant reply.

*Got your message, be there soon, pip pip, over and out.*

She’d sat like this after speaking to Daniel. Well, he’d done most of the talking. But she’d listened, as hard as she could through the static and the lag, for the things that must be there, hidden in the cracks. The things that would mean there was a way back to him.

When she thought of Daniel as a whole, she couldn’t make up her mind if she missed him. But if she broke him down into small, specific things, she felt a little nip of something. The conspiratorial smile he flicked at her when someone they didn’t like said something particularly stupid. The sound of his homecoming routine—shoes carefully removed inside the door, then thrown, unceremoniously into the hall cupboard. The way he made toast for her—soft and buttery, and much tastier than when she did it herself.

Shaking the memory away, Jamie turned off the console, and walked out of the booth.

---

BACK outside, she looked along the street towards the bar where she’d waited the day she’d arrived. Cranwell had been late, and she’d found a table in the corner, away from the serious business of drinking going on at the bar. She’d surprised herself by ordering a fruit juice. She’d been drinking more alcohol than before she lost the baby. It dulled

the sharp edges of the world, muffling the constant questions and platitudes. She knew the reason well enough, but she hadn't expected that need to fall away so sharply when she left Alegria.

Now she could feel that old craving tightening around her. The sharp taste of alcohol on her tongue. The slow-creeping haze, blurring sense and memory.

The bar was a scruffy-looking establishment, with peeling window-frames and a couple of letters missing from the sign above the door. Inside it was tidy enough, but there was a layer of dust on the floorboards.

It would be so easy to go round behind the counter, pour a measure of whisky and throw it down her throat. But once she started she wouldn't stop, and there was no-one here to pick her up off the floor, no-one to get her into bed and hold onto her as the world pitched and span.

She was suddenly bone-tired. Her whole body felt heavy, and she wanted to slide down onto the floor, close her eyes and never move again.

The whisky would help.

*No.*

With a wrench of will, she turned her back on the bar and headed back outside.

The port was sinking into night, the last dregs of sunlight draining away behind the horizon, and the first pinpoints of starlight just breaking through. Soltaire's twin moons were facing off across the sky, one a bare sliver, the other swelling close to full. They were always out of time with one another, one waxing as the other waned. They kept to their own corners of the night sky, never meeting, never reaching a consensus.

The port's distinctive scent of oil and soldered steel was sinking into the background as the chalky smell of night won out. Funny how the darkness smelled the same everywhere. She could have been anywhere in the universe, anywhere at all.

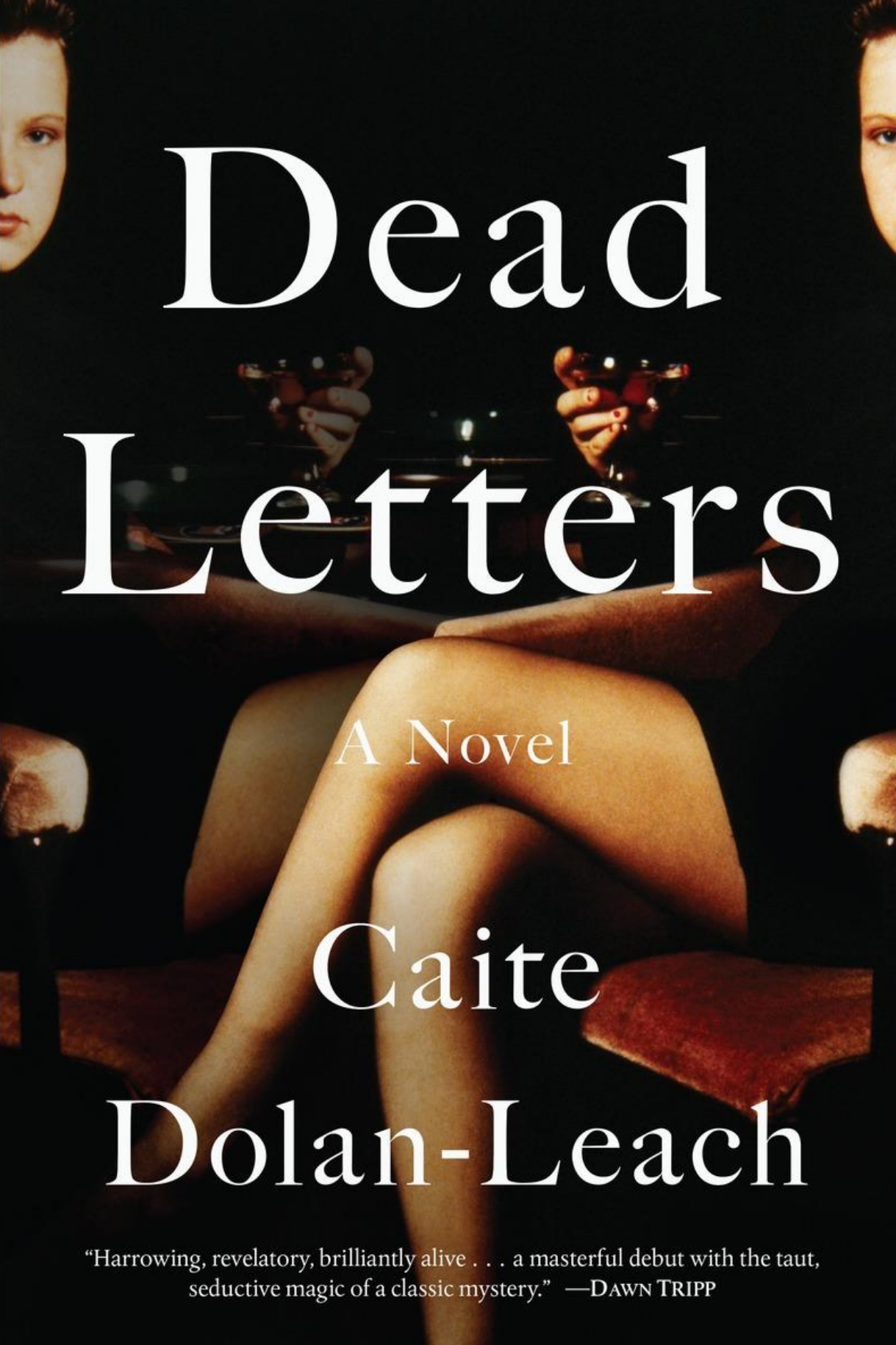
One of the guesthouses was unlocked, and she found an empty room, made up for someone who'd never arrived. It didn't feel as intrusive as sleeping in someone's own bed. There were no remnants of human life here.

No dust.

As soon as she lay down, she felt herself tipping down towards sleep. The darkness that rose up to meet her was deep and viscous, and she just had time for a flash of fear and a sharp stab of a thought, before the world slid away.

*Alone.*





# Dead Letters

A Novel

Caitie

Dolan-Leach

"Harrowing, revelatory, brilliantly alive . . . a masterful debut with the taut, seductive magic of a classic mystery." —DAWN TRIPP

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*Book design by Dana Leigh Blanchette*

From this, one can make a deduction which is quite certainly the ultimate truth of jigsaw puzzles: despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzlemaker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other.

—Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*

*Un dessein si funeste, s'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.*

Atreus might not stoop to such a gruesome plot, but Thyestes sure would.

—Crébillon, *Atrée et Thyeste*, quoted by  
Edgar Allan Poe in “The Purloined Letter”



# 1

**A** born creator of myths, my sister always liked to tell the story of how we were misnamed. She was proud of it, as though she, as a tiny blue infant, had bent kismet to her will and appropriated the name that was supposed to be mine. My parents were trying to be clever (before they lost the ability to be anything other than utterly miserable), and our names were meant to be part of our self-constructed, quirky family mythology. *A* to *Z*, Ava and Zelda. The first-born would be *A* for Ava, and the second-born would be *Z* for Zelda, and together we would be the whole alphabet for my deluded and briefly optimistic parents, both of whom were located unimpressively in the middle: *M* for Marlon and *N* for Nadine. My father was himself named for a film star, and with his usual shortsighted narcissism he sought to create some sort of large-looming legacy for his burgeoning small family. Burgeon we would not.

Born second, I was destined for the end of the alphabet. But my sister was Zelda from her first screaming breath, wild and indomitable until her final immolation. A careless nurse handed my father the babies in the wrong order, so that his second-born was indelicately plopped into his arms first, and I was christened Ava. I say “christened” purely as a casual description; my mother would have thor-

oughly lost her shit had any question of formal baptism been raised. My parents were good pagans, even if they weren't much good at anything else.

Clearly delighted with this strange twist, my father insisted that we keep our misnomers; he said that the family Antipova would turn even the alphabet on its head. My mother, predictably, lay surly and despairing in her bed, counting down the seconds until her first gin and tonic in eight months. Even now, I can't really blame her.

The seatbelt light dings, and I unbuckle in order to root around in my bag for my iPad. I've read the email so many times I have it memorized, but I still feel a compulsion to stare at the words on the shimmering screen.

To: littlea@gmail.com  
From: noconnor@gmail.com  
June 21, 2016 at 3:04 AM

Ava, honestly the whole point of you having a cellphone is so that I can call you in an emergency. Which this is. If you'd pick up your goddamn phone, I wouldn't have to tell you by EMAIL that your sister is dead. There was some type of fire following one your sisters drunken binges, and apparently, she didn't make it out. If you leave paris tomorrow, you might make it time for the service.

I can't really tell whether the misspellings are because a) Mom is drunk, b) she never really learned to type ("I'm not a fucking secretary. I didn't become a feminist so I could end up tapping out correspondence"), or c) the dementia is affecting her orthography. My money is on all three. I've never seen Nadine Antipova, née O'Connor, greet any kind of news, either good or bad, without a quart of gin in the wings. The death of a daughter, especially that of her preferred daughter, has probably rattled even her. My guess is that she was al-

ready three sheets to the wind when they told her, and she wasn't able to get through to me on my cell because she either couldn't remember the number or misdialed it. She would have had to toddle upstairs to the decrepit old MacBook gathering dust on what used to be my father's desk. She would have lowered herself into the rickety office chair and squinted at the glare of the screen. After several frustrating minutes and false starts (and probably another slug of gin), she would have located Firefox and found her way to Gmail, if she didn't try her old and defunct Hotmail account first. She probably would have sworn viciously at the screen when asked for her password. Nadine would consider the computer's request for her to remember a specific detail as personally malicious, a couched taunt regarding her slipping faculties.

She would have tried to type something in, and the password would have been pre-populated, because Zelda had, in her own inconsistent and careless way, tried to make our mother's grim life a little easier. And then, drunk, aggravated, angry, and frightened, my mother wrote me a bitchy email to tell me that my twin sister had burned to death. And if that's how she told *me*, I can only imagine how my father found out.

My first thought on reading the letter was that Zelda would have appreciated that death: This was exactly how she would have chosen it. It was a fitting end for someone named after Mrs. Fitzgerald, who died, raving, when a fire destroyed the sanatorium where she had been locked away for a good chunk of her life. How Bertha Rochester dies, in rather similar circumstances. As children, we played Joan of Arc, and Zelda built elaborate pyres for straw dolls decorated as the teenage martyr (Zelda was Joan; I was always cast as the nefarious English inquisitors). Death by fire was the right death for visionaries and madwomen, and Zelda was both. My dark double.

But then, because I know my sister, I read between the lines.

The whole thing was so very Zelda. Too Zelda. When I finally reached my mother on the phone, she slurrily told me that the barn had caught fire with Zelda trapped inside. The barn out back that Zelda had transformed into her escape hatch when she could no lon-

ger stomach being in the house with our ailing, flailing mother. I knew she liked to retreat to the apartment on the second floor, to stare out the window and chain-smoke and drink and write me emails. The fire investigators seemed to believe that she passed out with a cigarette (*Classic, Zelda!*) and the wood of the barn and all the books she kept up there caught fire in the dry heat of the June day. Burned alive on the summer solstice. With the charred remnants in plain sight of half the windows in the house, where my mother can't help being reminded of Zelda, even with her brain half rotted and her liver more than half pickled. My sister couldn't have contrived a more appropriate death if she had planned it herself. Indeed.

The drinks trolley rolls by, blithely smashing into the knees of the long-limbed. Compact and travel-sized, I have plenty of space, even in the cramped and ever-diminishing airline seats. I secure myself a bland Bloody Mary in a plastic cup, wondering for the dozenth time about the name of this precious, life-giving elixir—related to the gory bride we conjured in mirrors as girls?

I swirl the viscous tomato juice among too many ice cubes and not nearly enough vodka, sipping through the tiny red straw. I love these thin mixing straws. I love their parsimony. I'm trying very hard not to think about what I'm leaving and where I'm heading. Traveling this way across the Atlantic has always seemed cruel; you leave Europe at breakfast and arrive in the United States in time for brunch, exhausted and ready for happy hour and dinner. The sun moves backward in the sky. You face your bushy-tailed friends and relatives having been awake for fifteen strenuous hours, having spent those hours exiled in the no-place of airports and airplanes. Forever returning to Ithaca. Or Ithaka. I will be collected from the tiny airport and brought to my childhood home, fifty yards from where my twin sister is supposed to have crackled and sizzled just a few days earlier—all before dinner. I wonder if the wreckage is still smoldering. Does wreckage ever do anything else? We have been twenty-five for nearly one month.

I will walk into the house, instantly accosted by the smell, the smell of childhood, my home. I will walk upstairs, to my mother's room. If

it's even one minute after five (and it likely will be, by the time I make it all the way upstate), she will be drunk or headed that way, and I will sit with her and pour each of us a hefty glass of wine. We will not discuss Zelda; we never do. Eventually (and this will not take as long as "eventually") she will say something devastating, cruel, something I can't really brush off, and I will leave her. If I'm feeling vindictive, I will take the wine with me, so that she will have to carefully make her way downstairs for another bottle, risking cracked hips and the possible humiliation of failure.

I'll walk outside with that bottle of wine, and I will look at blackened timbers of that barn. I will scrutinize that dark heap of ashes. And then I will start trying to unravel my sister's mystery, and I will find her, wherever she is hiding. *Come out, come out, wherever you are. What game are you playing, Zelda?* She has always been so bad with rules.

To: littlea@gmail.com

From: zazazelda@gmail.com

September 5, 2014 at 8:36 PM

Darling Sister, Monozygotic Co-leaser of the Womb,

Well, is Paris all and everything? Does it glimmer the incandescent sparkle of mythology and overrepresentation? I'm betting yes to both, at least as far as you're concerned. Let me guess what you've been up to: You landed, disposed of your baggage, and went immediately for a triumphant stroll along the Seine—you know how you always must be near water in moments of jubilation, a genetic gift from our maternal forebears, beach striders all—you strode, nay, frolicked along those hallowed banks until your blisters popped, and then, because you are our mother's daughter, you promptly sought out some sort of cold alcoholic beverage. And, because it is very important to you to blend in with the locals but also to feel historically rooted in "authenticity," I bet that drink was . . . Lillet! Or, very possibly, Champagne,

but I would put money on the chance that both shame and frugality prevented you from slapping down sixty or seventy euros for an entire bottle of the bubbly. I'm betting you sipped your Lillet, tried out your perfectly acceptable French, basked in your escape, pretended you didn't want anything else to drink, and bought that Champagne from some charming "authentic" wine store on your way home to the tiny shoe box you will be living in until you get this Francophilia out of your system (or until you squander Dad's hush money and must retreat home). All the while resolutely not thinking of what happened before you left us. Why you left us. I'm right, Ava, *n'est-ce pas*?

Well, I'm very happy that you're fulfilling your dreams and whatnot, even if it did mean forsaking your beloved twin sister, whom you left languishing in the hammock with a touch of the vapors at the thought of bearing sole responsibility for our matriarch. I know you always say that she prefers me, but GOOD GOD, you should see how she's moping around without you. I really think she thought that you were bluffing, that you weren't serious about this whole graduate degree thing and were all along planning to settle in with her out at the homestead, to mop her brow and hold her hand as she trembles through the daily DTs, slowly losing all sense of self. Oh, but her bug-eyes when your suitcase came down the stairs! She can't remember much, but she remembers THAT betrayal. Jilted, she kept waiting for weeks in quivering, agonized suspense, disbelieving that she could be abandoned with such a flimsy explanation!

I'm not trying to guilt you (I would never! Not. Ever. Not after everything that happened . . .) but am instead attempting to sketch a portrait of how life will proceed hereabouts in your absence. I'm going to stay in the trailer (I will! No one can force me out! Not even that damned bat) rather than move back to the house on the vineyard. Mom's in iffy shape, true, but I'm planning to be there every day, as you know, and she's still lucid enough to

manage in the nights. I think. The Airstream is less than a mile away, in any case—I should be able to see the plumes of smoke rising if she burns down the house, ha ha! I've considered hiring someone to stay with her a bit and take care of the more unsavory activities (diapers are just around the corner, really), but I'm reluctant to dip into the dwindling Antipova/O'Connor pot o' gold. Barring some sort of harvest miracle with the grapevines, I think the years of a profit-yielding Silenus Vineyard might be behind us, Ava. Seriously. But at least the failing entrepreneurial venture gives me the illusion of a profession, which is very useful at the few grown-up cocktail parties I attend, and almost nowhere else. And it ostensibly gives me somewhere to be. And obviously keeps me in wine. No wonder the proto-satyr Our Debauched Father was so enthused by the prospect of running a vineyard. He was not entirely foolish, that man.

Well, I've been rambling—I'm sitting and typing on this antique laptop, here on Dad's old desk. I've been trying to teach Mom, but she can barely remember to pull up her undies after she pisses (better than the other way round, I suppose!), so I imagine I'm mostly trying to entertain myself. When I finish, I will have to go collect Mother from her sun throne and tempt her with just enough booze to get her inside without a battle. Time to rip off the Band-Aid. I'm sure you have some Brie and baguette to feast on—but remember, not too much! Never! If she were (t)here, our mother would remind you that she recently noticed a slight wobble in your upper arm, and at your age, you can't afford to overindulge. The irony.

In all seriousness, I miss you madly. Surely you WERE joking about this whole graduate degree thing?! And surely we can start talking again?

Eternal love from your adoring twin,  
Z is for Zelda

Several hours, another flight, and another tinny Bloody Mary later, I stare through the tiny airplane window at the swath of lakes stretched out below. The engines are so loud that my jaw and temples ache. When the plane tilts for its final approach into the Ithaca airport, I can see all the Finger Lakes in a row, a glistening, outstretched claw catching at the late-afternoon sun. I am, of course, late; the immigration lines in Philly took hours, my bag was the last on the carousel, and I missed my connecting flight. And the next flight to Ithaca was canceled, which happens fifty percent of the time. More often in winter. The airport broke me, spiritually; microwaved Sysco food and eight-dollar beers make it impossible to relax, everything else aside. Food and drink are my only sources of true and deep (if conflicted) pleasure. In that I resemble my father. I am actually grateful to be in this noisy plane, circling above the lakes like toothpaste circling the drain. Spiraling down.

I wonder again whether it was a mistake to come alone. Nico offered, in his tender Gallic way, in bed last night. Tentative and generous, as always. This place would rip him to shreds. He would be baffled and caught off guard by such wanton cruelty. He would politely try to drink the wine, but his glass would stay half full all night. He's not a snob, but he is French. And above all else, Nico is well-mannered; he would be completely out to sea amid my friends and family, who would be too busy chewing one another to pieces to bother with Continental pleasantries. I'd love to have him with me, to know that at the end of each brutal day he would be waiting upstairs in my fluffy, too-white bedroom, waiting to comfort and console me after the most recent onslaught. At that thought, my stomach does a little flip, doubting my decision to leave him behind. I told him that if I have to stay longer than a couple of weeks, he can come visit then. More incentive for me to get the hell off Silenus Vineyard, and away from Seneca Lake. As if I needed the additional encouragement.

The wheels touch down, and I look grimly toward the airport win-

dows. I wonder if my father will actually show up to fetch me, as he has promised to do. I can already taste the sharp, acidic local Pinot Grigio that my mother keeps in the fridge, and I realize how badly I want it.

My father, Marlon, is entrenched outside the airport, napping on one of the benches. His straw fedora is pulled down over his eyes, and I have a feeling that he's been here like this for a while. I nudge his feet to wake him, and his eyes open sloppily beneath the hat.

"Little A!" he coos, sitting upright. He's wearing all linen, his shirt and pants elegantly rumpled. His sharp green eyes are not so sharp right now. I haven't seen my father in more than two years, but he looks more or less the same. His dark hair is maybe lighter, the lines around his eyes a bit deeper, but he's still the effortlessly debonair rake he has always been. And, as always, at the sight of his smile, I feel incredibly tempted to forgive him for his shortcomings, his abandonment. My mother spent a decade and a half forgiving this man, and she is not a forgiving person. I marvel at his magnetism and wish I had inherited that, instead of his green eyes and fondness for comestibles.

He leaps up as soon as his eyes focus on me, surprisingly buoyant for someone who has lost a child. But I know he will be chipper and all smiles, performing for me. Wanting to be liked. He's about to scoop me up in a big hug when he seems to recollect himself, remembers how things are between us. He is still slender, though I can detect the beginnings of a paunch beneath the creamy linen shirt when I give him a slight, distant hug, encumbered by my carry-on. He squeezes me, tightly.

"Hi, Daddy. Glad you could make it." I really do try not to inflect this with sarcasm, but it can't be helped. He pretends not to notice. My father loathes conflict. Probably why he prefers his second family to his first.

"A, I'm so, so sorry. God, I can't imagine . . ." He grabs my shoulders and peers intently at my face. I realize that I might cry, in spite of myself, and I gently shuck him off. His face is lined: the tragic patriarch, kingdom in ruins, daughter dead.

“I know, Dad. It’s . . . okay. Let’s head over the hill.” Old family joke. As in: “We’re all over the hill out in Hector.” Less funny now to be sure, and doubtless only to degrade with the years. Much like our family. “I’m sure Mom is . . .” I’m not quite sure how to finish the sentence. I’m sure Mom is a mess, I’m sure she’s already had at least one bottle of Pinot Grigio, given how late I am, I’m sure that there is going to be a scene of remarkable nastiness when Marlon turns up at the house. He makes a show of gallantly taking my suitcase from me and heads toward the parking lot. Effortlessly, he hoists the bag over his shoulder, an easy demonstration of masculinity.

“You didn’t bring much with you, A.”

“I packed in a hurry. Besides, I still have a bunch of stuff at the house. And I can always wear Zelda’s.”

He flinches visibly and refuses to meet my eyes. Nico balked, too, when I said this last night as I was flinging random clothes into my suitcase, while he perched in nervous concern on the edge of my bed, clearly worried for my sanity. I can see why it might be something of a faux pas to don my sister’s outlandish clothes and flit through the house looking just like her mere days after her death, an alarming corporeal poltergeist. But I always wear Zelda’s things. It would be a concession to her scheme if now I didn’t.

“Have you spoken to your mother?” Marlon asks.

“Briefly, on the phone last night. She was pretty disoriented, so I didn’t get much out of her.”

“Has she been doing . . . okay?”

“What, haven’t you called her?”

“I tried, Little A. She hung straight up on me.” He pauses. “Can’t say I blame her. Must be hell.”

“I don’t really know how she is, Dad. I don’t talk to her all that often. She’s been very . . . angry since I left for France, and Zelda said she has fewer and fewer good days.”

“Listen, kiddo, I’m . . . sorry that you have to deal with this. Her. It’s not fair. On top of everything . . .” Marlon seems unsure how to continue. This is as close as I will get to an apology from him. He’s

very good at apologies. You realize only later that he has accepted responsibility for exactly nothing.

“Let’s not talk about it, Dad. I’d like to . . . just enjoy the sunshine.” We’ve reached the car, which he optimistically parked in the pickup and drop-off area. He has a ticket, which I’m sure he will not pay. This part of the world has yet to adopt the post-9/11 attitude typical to transit areas in the rest of the country, and airport security rather lackadaisically enforces its modest anti-terror protocol. In New York City, Marlon’s car would have been towed and he’d be in police custody by now. But here in Ithaca, just a ticket.

He has rented a flashy convertible, of course. My dad likes to travel in style, regardless of finances, seemliness, tact. He tends to think of any economic restriction as a dead-letter issue, a rule that does not apply to him.

“Nice ride,” I say. He grins mischievously as we load my bags and ourselves into the car and speed off. I hope he’s okay to drive. I haven’t driven in two years and don’t even have a driver’s license, but I might still be the better choice if he’s drunk. He seems reasonably coordinated, though, and once we’re on the other side of the city, we’ll coast along traffic-free dirt roads, kicking up dust and free to veer across the graded surface as much as we like. I relax as we speed down Route 13, Cayuga Lake on our right.

“So so so. Paris! How the hell is it, squirt?”

“About what you’d expect, Dad.” I shrug.

“C’mon, it’s one of the greatest cities in the world! That’s all you have to say about it?”

“It’s far away from Silenus. Even farther than California.”

He ignores the frosty tone in my voice. He is buoyant, but I can hear the strain in his throat as he tries to be cheerful for me. “Always so lighthearted, Little A,” he teases. “Levity, oy vey.” He whistles a tune as we drive through the city, the breeze ruffling his thick black hair, which isn’t curly like ours but, rather, wavy. When we learned that curly hair was a recessive gene, Zelda and I started speculating about our heritage. But there are too many other stamps of Marlon’s

paternity on our genes, and we abandoned the possibility of filial mystery as an exercise in wishful thinking. The letters of our DNA signify our origins, even if they can't inscribe our futures.

"What did you do while you were waiting for me?" I ask, though I know the answer. I'm wondering if he'll lie.

"I stopped in to see some old friends, and we went out for a bite to eat."

"Oh? Where did you go?"

"Uh, what's that place downtown called? With the cheap margaritas?"

"Viva."

"Yeah, very average Mexican food." He grins. "But it's the only place open between two P.M. and dinner in this one-horse town."

"The only place with a bar, you mean," I say, half-teasing.

He smiles again. "I'd forgotten how charmingly . . . sedate it is 'round these parts." He signals with his blinker, and we ride silently for a moment or two.

"How is your 'old friend,' Dad?" I ask. He blinks. He's a very good liar, and I can tell he's considering whether to lie now. But I'm betting he'll come clean. Because I'm older now. Because my twin sister just died. My twin sister, who, incidentally, inherited this particular talent for deception.

"Sharon, you mean?" he says.

"Who else?"

"She's okay," he says uncertainly. We've never had a real conversation about the woman he was fucking during my middle school years. I've wondered more than once whether he knows that Zelda and I knew. Our mother certainly did.

"That's good. Do you still see her often?"

"No," he says softly. "It's been years."

"And how is the third wife? Maria?"

"She's well. The girls are well too. Six and eight, if you can believe that! Scrappy little things. I'll show you the pictures on my phone,

later.” He pauses. “Blaze is a bit of a terror, and Bianca sometimes reminds me of you, when you were little. She’s so . . . neat.”

“Napa is treating you well, then?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s pretty great! The vineyard’s doing really well—we were in *Wine Spectator* last month.” I know. We own a vineyard, too, and have had a subscription to *Wine Spectator* since 1995. Which he knows; he insisted on the subscription, and left us with the bill. “You should come out and visit, while you’re back in the States. I know Maria wants to see you girls.” We both flinch at his use of the present tense, the plural.

“Maybe. I need to get back to Paris kind of soon, though.”

“It’s summer, Little A! Live a bit! You never relax. Your studies can wait until fall, surely.” He nudges me with his elbow, annoyingly.

I nod. “Sort of, I guess. I’m working on my dissertation now, though, so I’m busy. I’m interested in the intersection of Edgar Allan Poe and the OuLiPo movement, their shared emphasis on formal constraint—”

“Poe never struck me as particularly restrained,” Marlon interrupts, presumably thinking himself to be clever.

“Not restraint. *Constraint*. Specifically, I’m interested in lipograms and pangrams. I’ve got a theory that while both are obviously important for OuLiPo texts, they might appear unconsciously in Poe’s works. So far I’ve focused mainly on alliteration and repetition, and because Poe’s work is explicitly invested in the unconscious—”

“A pangram—that’s like ‘the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog’?” Marlon interjects. I expect he’s trying to impress me.

“That’s the idea. So far I’ve been working on this one essay he wrote on poetry—”

“It sounds really erudite, Little A, and I can’t wait to talk about it more. But can’t you take a break? It’s summer, and, well, your sister . . .”

I capitulate. Marlon is not remotely interested in what I spend my days thinking about.

“Yeah, well, Zelda was the relaxed one. I was the responsible one.”

“You still are, sweetie,” he says, trying to be comforting.

“No, I’m the only one now.” I suddenly feel like my mother, nastily baiting this man into feeling like shit. “I’m sorry, Dad. I’m just not . . . sure . . .” I trail off, watching in the mirror as Ithaca disappears behind us and we head up the highway on the other side of the lake.

“It’s okay, kiddo. You say whatever you have to.” He pats my knee. I realize that since greeting me, my father hasn’t looked at me once. As if he can’t. I root in my oversized bag for my sunglasses and put them on, in case I start to cry. But as I gaze out at the dazzling spray of too-green leaves and the shimmering water, I suspect that I’m not going to.

## 2

**B**rutally jet-lagged and insufficiently buoyed by Bloody Marys, I can't keep my eyes open and doze off somewhere on the dirt roads that will take us across the narrow, rugged span between the lakes, and I wake up just as we hit the top of the hill overlooking Seneca. The view is spectacular, with the sun about to set on the west side, and my breath catches a little, as it does every single time I make this drive. This is the longest I've been away from home: twenty-one months. I glance over at Marlon, and though he has his sunglasses on, I think he's been crying. Weeping, even. I'm startled and distressed by this—his charming, fun-loving façade so rarely cracks, and when it does, I feel as though my world is being unmade. Maybe Marlon knows this, because as he sees me waking up, he instantly transforms, flashing me one of his brilliant, toothy smiles. I know that he loved living here, loved our subpar vineyard. Even loved my mother and us girls. But his love for us is tempered by years of discord and cruelty, whereas the love he feels for this modest patch of ground is unadulterated. I smile back at him, because in spite of myself, I've missed it too.

The car skates over the dirt roads as we descend lower and lower, closer to the lakefront. There are fields of grapes all around us, and the pleasant hum of billions of insects thrums in whirring cadence.

The temperature drops suddenly in mysterious swaths of air, and goosebumps ripple on my forearms and thighs as we whip through them, warm cold warm. I can smell cold water.

Silenus Vineyard is up on the hill, with acres of vines stretching out below the tasting room, which is fronted by a rustic deck looking out at the water, scattered with a few picturesque barrels for ambience. It doesn't have much of a yield, and the wine is barely mediocre, even for the Finger Lakes.

I peer as closely as I can at the grapes as we drive by to see what Zelda has been up to in the last twenty-one months. It's hard for me to imagine my unpredictable and self-indulgent sister tilling the land like a good farmer, but she's managed to keep the place from total destitution, basically on her own. I wonder if *he* has been here, if *he* has been living in the Airstream trailer with her, if *he* is the one who organizes the spring trellising and the autumn harvest. I have to assume so; Zelda has never cared much for schedules, and I can easily picture her frittering away all of May and June drinking Pimm's cocktails on the deck and swearing that she'll move the catch wires tomorrow. Unless she really commits to doing something, and then she is an unholy terror. A terrier. I know I will have to see him soon, maybe today, and I squirm, thinking of what I'll say.

My father clears his throat awkwardly.

"You know, it's the weirdest thing," he begins. "I think I must be losing it." He pauses. "It's just that while I was at the bar . . ." He shakes his head, his waves of hair bouncing fetchingly. He doesn't go on.

"What?" I prompt.

"It's silly."

"What is?"

"I thought I saw your sister." I keep my face as blank as possible. "Or you, of course. But she walked like Zelda. I don't know, all loose." Marlon chuckles at himself. "Ridiculous, right?"

"Grief does funny things to your head," I answer, trying to betray

nothing. Did Zelda intend for him to see her? Is she in Ithaca? Or California? I lean back in the seat, thinking about my sister. Thinking about whether she would even bother to toy with Marlon. After he left, it was almost like he stopped existing for her. Whereas I pined.

Dad pulls into the long, steep driveway that leads to the tasting room and the house snuggled next door. Nadine and Marlon built the house after they built the tasting room and the new cellar, solidifying what the real priorities were going to be. A place to drink, *then* a place to live. My mother, with her exacting, nitpicky taste, designed the house with an architect friend from the city, and each window, molding, and corner mirrors her love of right angles, modernism, abstraction. It is not a warm, cozy house. And next to the house is the barn.

The blackened shell of that barn appears as Dad crunches into the gravel parking area. The view is partly obscured by the house, but I can see charred timber poking up from the ground. I catch a glimpse of yellow tape cordoning off a large chunk of our lawn. A police car is parked near the rubble, and someone official is rootling around the periphery, looking fiercely intent and professional. My hands suddenly start to tremble and I don't want to get out of the car. *Zelda, what the fuck did you do?*

Dad wordlessly takes both of our suitcases from the trunk, and I realize in a vague panic that he's planning to stay here, under the same roof as Mom. He seems shaken, and I'm actually relieved to see his equanimity at least a little disrupted. His first-born child is, after all, presumably smoking in the wreckage of the barn he built himself, that one aching long summer when my mother couldn't bear his presence in the house. Her house. Dad is resolutely not looking at the barn as we go inside. Or at me.

"Mom?" I call uncertainly, trying to guess where she'll be. The sun is setting, and I wonder whether she will have gone ahead and eaten without us. I don't know if Betsy, our lumpy, matronly neighbor, will still be here; I called her after I got off the phone with my mother and asked if she could go over to the house, make sure Mom had some

food and didn't stumble down the stairs. Betsy was all comforting murmurs and practical country clearheadedness on the phone; she knew of course, had seen the fire from her house, just a mile away. She'd already been over and had just come home to pick up a frozen casserole when I called. She wanted to tell me the whole story, but I had been desperate to get off the phone, to slink into bed with Nico and let him mumble to me in his accented English.

"Betsy?" I call.

"Upstairs!" someone, presumably Betsy, answers. Dad sets the suitcases down by the door and looks around skittishly. I can see him summing up what has changed in this house. The medical-looking banister railing. The locks on certain cabinets in the kitchen. My mother's favorite print, a Barnett Newman reproduction that used to hang in the hallway, gone. Zelda, in a blind fury, tore it down and threw it into the lake during a particularly violent argument, before the dementia was diagnosed, while Mom's moods were still inexplicably abrupt. I can tell that Marlon does not want to go upstairs.

"I'm, uh, gonna look around for a minute, use the bathroom. I'll bring us up a bottle and some glasses in a minute," he says uncomfortably, scuttling away from the staircase and my mother's silent, spider-like presence upstairs. "Maybe it would be a good idea to warn her that I'm here, kiddo. She, uh, might not be all that happy to see me."

I nod. I know he'll go straight to the liquor cabinet once I'm out of sight, but he'll be disappointed to find a combination lock barring his entry. Zelda informed me in one of her chatty emails, with a gleefully vindictive tone, that she installed it after my mother nearly OD'd on Scotch last year. Apparently, Nadine forgot that she had already been drinking wine and popping sedatives all day and almost boxed her liver with a bottle of Glenmorangie. Marlon will just have to rustle up something with a lower alcohol content from the fridge.

I skip upstairs, feeling the familiar grooves of the wooden stairs beneath my feet. I have instinctively taken off my shoes; my mother loathes the presence of footwear in her once-pristine Zen paradise.

She could be driven to apoplectic rage by someone sitting in the living room with boots on their feet. The house is definitely dirtier than it was during my childhood; I suspect Zelda fired the housekeeper I'd hired from Craigslist before leaving for Paris. I feel grit and dust accumulating on the soles of my bare feet, and as I touch the banister, a layer of grime coats my fingertips in a seamless transfer. But the stairs are the same beneath me and I feel each creak in my body with intense recognition.

Mom and Betsy are outside, on the balcony that opens from the library. Betsy has her back turned to the barn, but my mother is facing it full-on, glaring belligerently at the scar in our lawn, zigzagged with crime-scene tape.

"Hi, Betsy, thanks so much for this," I say, preparing myself for the inevitable hug as Betsy lurches out of her chair to greet me. "Really, you're a lifesaver." I wonder at my choice of words, but Betsy smooches me to her breasts with a squeeze.

"Oh, Ava, I'm so sorry about—about your sister!" She instantly begins to cry, her substantial chest heaving up and down, her brown doe eyes watering. I pat her shoulder, trying to create a crevasse of space between our bodies. Her sweat moistens my shirt.

"Thanks. I'm so grateful you were here." I pause. "Hi, Mom." I lean in to kiss her cheek, interrupting her stare toward the barn. "How are you?"

"Goddamnit, Zelda, what the fuck did you do to the barn? How many fucking times do I have to tell you not to smoke up there?"

I flinch, knowing I should have expected to be confused with my sister. "Mom, it's me, Ava," I say patiently. "I just got here, I flew from Paris?"

"Very cute, Zelda. God, you're exactly the same as when you were four, always trying to hide behind your sister whenever you screwed something up. I'm not an idiot, nor am I insane. I expect you to deal with that"—she gestures imperiously toward the barn—"immediately. And with none of your usual dramatic *bullshit*, please."

I glance at Betsy, who is unable to tear her eyes from this scene. The rapt rubbernecking of good neighbors. I turn to her.

“Betsy, thanks again for everything. I know she can’t have been easy the last day or two. And thank you for calling the fire department. Who knows . . . what could have happened.”

“Oh, Ava!” Betsy carries on huffing and puffing without skipping a beat. “It was so terrifying, the whole barn just lit up like that! I rushed over as quickly as I could but—your sister!”

“Zelda, I need more wine,” Nadine says sharply, interrupting Betsy’s whimpers. I ignore her.

“How are your kids, Betsy?” I ask.

“Kids? Mine? Oh, they’re okay, I guess,” she titters. “Rebecca just started working as a dental assistant, actually. And you remember Cody?” she says, fishing. Yes, I do. Cody was one of the irredeemable assholes who graduated with me. I’d love to tell Betsy how he used to follow the one openly gay kid in our school around, whispering “Fag-got” and smacking his ass.

“Yup. How is he?”

“He lives in San Francisco now. With one of his college room-mates,” she announces proudly. I suppress a giggle. That’s perfect.

“Zelda, for Christ’s sake,” Nadine interjects.

“I’ll deal with her now, Betsy,” I say. A gentle dismissal. She seems grateful.

“No, no, of course, Ava. It was no problem. Anything I can do, really. I’ll stop by tomorrow with more food.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say quickly. “Really, you don’t.”

“No, no trouble. I’ll check up on you then. Nadine’s already eaten, and there’s more casserole in the fridge.” That should make it easy not to eat. She dabs at her tears with the collar of her oversized batik-print muumuu. “At least I got her to eat this time. Last time I was here, she wouldn’t touch a thing.”

“Thanks, Betsy. Oh, and Marlon’s downstairs—you can say hello on your way out.”

Betsy's face tightens perceptibly—she's one of the few people who isn't taken in by my father's charm; she has a long memory and can't forgive Marlon for the way he left. It makes me want to like her more.

"I will, of course. And, Ava? My sincere condolences," she says earnestly and hugs me again. She bobs her head and waddles through the glass doors, trundling her way downstairs. I flop into the Adirondack chair she has vacated, glad that it faces the tasting room, though it is unpleasantly warm from her body.

"You look pretty good, Mom. All considered."

"Don't take that tone with me, Ava," she says.

I smile widely. "So you did know."

"As I said, doll, I'm not insane. Not entirely. I just despise that woman, with all her clucking and sanctimonious . . . good-naturedness." Mom has to pause for the right word, but I can tell she's lucid-ish. "She's thick as a plank and doesn't have the good grace to realize it. I've been listening to her prattle for the last twenty-four hours about how it's going to be fine, you'll be here soon, et cetera." She rolls her eyes in exasperation. "I came out here and parked in front of the barn, hoping that it would scare her off. But she's *got to do the right thing*. God, and that casserole . . ." She shudders theatrically.

"What happened, Momma?" I ask.

"How the hell should I know? I slept through the whole thing. Goddamn drugs your sister gave me." Mom takes a slug from the wineglass in her hand, which trembles as she clutches the stem. Reflexively, I look around for the bottle, to gauge how much she's had. She catches me looking.

"Jesus, you're worse than your sister. At least she has the manners not to make me drink alone. You haven't ended up in AA, have you, Little AA?" She's sneering, making fun of my father's nickname for me, and goading me into drinking with her. I know it, and it doesn't change the fact that I want to.

"Dad's on his way up with glasses and a bottle," I say casually, and enjoy watching her flinch.

“Marlon is here? The big fish that got away?” She tries for a light-hearted tone, but I can hear the anxiety in her warbling voice. She touches her face in instinctive, irrepressible self-consciousness, the gesture of a woman who knows she doesn’t look good.

“Got in this morning. Surely you must have known he would come home for his daughter’s funeral.”

“Yes, I gathered he would. Surprised he didn’t bring that new ball and chain of his.”

“Maria is hardly new, Mom. They’ve been married almost eight years.”

“Maria? I thought her name was Lorette.”

“That was my girlfriend when we met, Nadine,” my father says from the doorway. He’s studying her with a strange expression on his face; I can’t remember the last time they saw each other, but I know she has to look shocking. She is so thin.

“Oh, of course, I remember,” Mom says automatically. I know she doesn’t, but she will work very hard to convince us otherwise.

“You could be forgiven for forgetting. The relationship was very brief,” I snipe. Nadine snorts. Dad holds up a bottle of sparkling wine and three Champagne flutes with a slightly sheepish look on his face. The glasses hang suspended between his fingers, clinking magically. I love that sound.

“There’s only sparkling in the fridge,” he apologizes. I nod, giving him permission. He puts the glasses down on the deck railing and deftly divests the bottle of its wire cap and cork with a practiced series of movements. All three of us cringe at the jubilant sound, and Mom and Dad both flick their eyes toward the barn, as though that Pavlovian signal will summon Zelda, perhaps even from beyond the grave. Champagne is her favorite drink, of course. Though this is obviously a sparkling wine, made in our own cellar. Dad pours our delicately burbling wine into flutes and distributes them, my mother first, then me. I lift my glass defiantly.

“Well, family. Cheers.” They both look at me blankly, and I turn my head toward the lake, draining my glass in a hearty gulp.

To: littlea@gmail.com  
From: zazazelda@gmail.com  
Subject: Mademoiselle Pout  
October 1, 2014 at 12:45 AM

Dearest Begrudgeful, Silent Sister,

Don't you think this a little silly, Ava? You really are milking the whole thing quite atrociously, as though we were still in high school. I mean, yes, it all goes back to high school, so perhaps you get SOME leeway for behaving like a hormonal hot mess, but surely with our blossoming maturity you can LET IT GO? If it makes any difference, I'll get rid of him; just say the word.

In other (frankly more interesting) news, our mother is a psycho. And a lush. Last night I had to scrape her out of the field, raving and half clothed, drinking a bottle of that atrocious Faux-jolais Nouveau that Dad insisted we try to manufacture, in spite of the fact that it always tastes like grapy horse piss. And yet, out of some dark-seated nostalgia, Nadine insists on reproducing it every year, as though *this* vintage will be drinkable. It's like she thinks if she could just produce a bottle that was even a little palatable, Marlon would reappear, and she could sit on the deck and watch him work the fields, as ever. Her very own *contadino*.

Anyway, last night she was yelping and sobbing, insisting that she wanted to return to the earth or somesuch. I think she was trying to make it down to the lake, quite possibly to throw herself in. One of these days I may just let her. But as it was, I gave her some of her "medicine" (what a useful euphemism for heavy-duty sedatives!) and dragged her back to bed, the whole while listening to her screech like a demented banshee. You can bet I poured myself a substantial tumbler of the good stuff. I'm not just being selfish: Her wee pills give her a respite, as well as me!

Autumn has really dug in its heels; the leaves are leached of their chlorophyll and are whirligigging their way to the ground at an alarming rate. And Paris? I Googled photos of Les Tuileries to

see what it looks like (that's where we wanted to live when we were little, right? Though I can only assume you live *near* the garden, rather than in a fairy fortress within it, as previously planned), and it does seem very picturesque. Still, hard to beat the view from Silenus. The harvest was brutal; another year or two of this and I'll be dribbling into my Riesling like Momma. We'll see what we get out of it. I'm guessing it will be more of the same.

But really, are you planning to not talk to me for the rest of forever? Or just until you wind up in bed with a chain-smoking, shrugging Parisian? Really, Ava, it's not that big a deal, what happened. I'm over it. He's over it. Weirdly, I find myself washing and changing your sheets on a regular basis. I barely even wash my own. What do you think that's about?

Your repentant, embryonic other half,  
Z is for Zelda

I bundle Nadine into bed, though I don't lock the door behind her—Zelda wrote that she has started sleepwalking lately, but I can't bring myself to lock her in. What if there's another fire? After setting Marlon up in the guest room, I creep outside with a flashlight. Everything still smells of smoke, and I head toward the barn's remains. It's still warm; summers have been getting hotter and hotter here, though many of our die-hard Republican neighbors still refuse to comment on why this might be. Zelda speculated about what it would do for the grapes ("Did you know French Champagne growers are buying up real estate in the south of England? They're predicting that the growing conditions will be more Champagne-esque than Champagne in twenty years! Do you think we'll be, like, the next Chianti?"). I'm barefoot, so I make my way gingerly across the lawn, avoiding bits of burnt wood and other debris. I scan the flashlight over the area and finally squat down a few yards from where the barn doors would have been. There's a small yellow flag poked into the burnt wood and ash.

Shutting my eyes, I can see the structure perfectly; I imagine sliding open the heavy doors, padding my way across the cement floor where we kept all sorts of menacing farm equipment, and climbing up the steep ladder rungs to the loft.

Marlon built the barn with some rustic fantasy of cramming the loft full of hay, keeping a few goats and sheep downstairs in the quaint mangers he constructed. But he left before we ever acquired either hay or critters to feed with it, and the barn became ad hoc storage for the ancient tractor and backup steel wine drums and random bits of equipment that weren't used often. Zelda colonized the upstairs as her own stately pleasure den, insisting on loading books and furniture up through the hay chute in her teenage stubbornness. She had a few cast-off futons up there, a big worktable, some chairs, lots of ironic art (mainly featuring baby farm animals) that she had picked up at the Salvation Army in Ithaca. Even in her teens, she'd felt trapped in the house with our mother and had hidden out here whenever they fought. Used to watching her abandon projects, I observed her rehabilitation of the barn with surprise. It seemed terrifically unlike her.

As high school ended, she began to invite people over to what she had started calling the Bacchus Barn (Zelda names everything). My mother would grit her teeth in passive-aggressive fury, staring out the window at the lights in the barn, the sound of music keeping us awake well into the night. Nadine never knew what to do with Zelda. Or this property.

We had a collective story about how Silenus came to be, cobbled together from four different people with radically different narrative designs. The gist of it, the median account of that particular yarn, is this: My mother's money paid for Silenus, though it was my father's vision. Marlon was not the sort of man my mother usually went for; she liked very Waspy men, men who had been to law school and golfed on the weekends. Men who knew how to tie a variety of knots and always specified "Tanqueray" when they ordered a martini. Marlon Antipova, perennially relaxed and pathologically easygoing, all sun-weathered and full of vim, was the antithesis of what she always

thought she had wanted in a partner. But when Nadine's mother died after a lengthy, debilitating illness (Parkinson's), leaving her an orphan, she pulled up stakes and moved to New York. At thirty-two, she had to decide what to do with herself and her money. When Marlon sauntered into that bar in the Village where she sat slurping gin and tonics and avoiding the silent, carpeted apartment she had rented on the Upper West Side, she saw escape, from herself and her past. She launched herself without blinking into a haphazard life with the adventurous Florida-born wanderer.

My father was never a practical person, but he had aspirations: a dangerous combination. He gave an impressive impersonation of a vagabond bohemian, all the while zealously keeping his quiet ambitions just behind that convincing veneer of exceptional recklessness. I've spent quite a bit of time imagining that scene, so pivotal in our family story. A time when they wanted each other, when the future hadn't barreled disastrously into their plans. Zelda and I used to tell the story to each other, handing off the narrative like a *cadavre exquis*.

I would always start: Marlon's pickup pulled onto the graveled shoulder that would someday be the bottom of our driveway. The lake spread out below him and my mother, and Marlon crunched the truck to a halt as they neared the dusty For Sale sign drummed into the ground. A telephone number was written out in Sharpie ink, with no area code in front of the seven digits. Locals only, the sign was subtly suggesting.

"Is this your grand surprise, then?" Nadine asked him, trying not to sound either disappointed or eager. She sought to remain impassive, to never betray what went on behind those cool blue eyes of hers. To neither lose her temper (as she was prone to do) nor reveal her excitement, her happiness, which was a new experience for her. Having spent the last few years watching her parents' unsightly decline, she was free now, for the first time since early childhood. Still young(ish), with some money and self-determination, she could do whatever she

pleased. And what pleased her most was this sly, smooth man with a ponytail and an easy smile. How strange that he would choose her, with her stiff manners and the tight kernel of anger she carried with her. That he would go rapping, rapping on her apartment door at all hours of the night, and saunter into her bedroom with a bottle of bourbon and the southern drawl that he revealed, seemingly only for her, for moments of intense intimacy beneath her expensive down comforter. She had never allowed anyone so fully into her life, her inner world, and sometimes she would stare at Marlon in disbelief that he wanted her.

Zelda would take over then, to explain our father: Marlon always pretended not to notice these guardedly fond moments but felt more confident in her attachment to him whenever he caught that intense, shrewd gaze. This woman was everything he wasn't, everything he aspired to. She ordered drinks without looking at the menu—she knew what she wanted and was not particularly worried about price. There was never any question of whether she could afford it, whether the bill would arrive and she would come up short. Marlon had left behind a number of threatening business partners and outstanding debts (monetary and otherwise) in the swampy town of his childhood and had disappeared into the anonymous horde of penniless musicians here in New York out of necessity. He imagined a future where he would sit and look out at his own land. He had learned a word, years ago, *pedigree*, that he would sometimes, after five or six drinks, slosh around on his tongue. Nadine, who kept herself aloof and separate, and so rarely allowed him to know what went on in that inscrutable head of hers, was classy in a way that Marlon found hopelessly erotic. Her pale Irish skin reminded him of marble, and her ramrod posture of a statue. So different from the bronze, wiry girls he had tussled with as a young man, in smoky dive bars and tropical rainstorms.

“It *is* grand, isn't it?” He allowed a strand of black hair to fall across his face as he leaned across the cab toward her. “C'mon, you. Hop on out. I'll give you the tour.” Nadine obliged, and Marlon snatched a picnic basket from the bed of the borrowed truck. With his other

hand, he led her down into the field, tall with alfalfa and wildflowers. “They’re selling the whole property,” he finally said, watching Nadine’s face carefully as she assessed everything. He had learned not to push her too quickly or too hard; when she felt cornered, she balked, like some trapped wild animal. Nadine simply nodded her head, her eyes measuring each blade of grass with that sharpness he had come to expect. He spread out the picnic blanket and sprawled on it, popping the cork on the bottle of Champagne he had brought. It fizzed warmly, and they both leaned in to lap up the bubbly spill as it ran down the edge of the bottle.

“Just thought you might want to take a look. You’ve been talking about leaving the city so much lately,” Marlon said with a shrug. “A nice getaway, anyway.”

“It’s beautiful. It’s so nice to breathe the fresh air,” Nadine agreed. “So this place is what, a farm?” She was careful not to appear too interested, but she couldn’t help feeling nervous excitement at the sense of possibility. Some quiet voice that she hadn’t heard for years kept suggesting a new beginning. She didn’t examine this prompt too closely; she would inspect it later, when she was away from Marlon and could think properly, without all the noise and hormonal interference his presence created in her.

I would interrupt here, derailing Zelda’s artful dialogue. She could perfectly capture our parents’ voices, a born impersonator. But I liked the history of the wine, and of the ground that it came from.

“I was thinking a vineyard, actually.”

“What, here? In New York?” Nadine arched her eyebrows skeptically.

“I know, I know, it seems weird. But there’s this Ukrainian guy who brought some *viniifera* grapes over from Europe, and they’ve done very well. Some other guys are trying it now, and I don’t know, I have this feeling that the region could get pretty valuable.” Marlon shrugged, sipping his cup of Champagne. “Just a hunch.”

“A hunch, huh?” Nadine smiled slyly. “I’m not a complete ninny,

you know. I figure you're the kind of guy who likes to financially reinforce his hunches."

Marlon glanced at her in surprise. He thought he'd managed to conceal his proclivity for putting his money where his mouth was.

"I like risk," he said lightly. "And I'm about to take another." He drew a deep breath. "The real reason I wanted to bring you here. I've been thinking." He paused to stare at Nadine. "I want to marry you. I want to run away with you and give you babies and spend the rest of our lives naked and drunk." Without breaking eye contact, he unbuttoned the first three buttons of her shirt, then stopped, his hand poised at the open collar, near her throat. Nadine's face registered only stillness. She waited long enough that Marlon began to wonder if he hadn't drastically overplayed his hand. But finally, she covered his hand with her palm and slid both inside her shirt.

"Fine. But we'll talk about those babies later."

Needless to say, whatever conversations they later had about those babies, nothing stuck. I've never known if Zelda and I were accidents; at least we both knew that whatever our status, desirable or planned, we were on equal footing. Either we were both wanted or neither was. Perhaps Nadine had unconsciously hoped for kids and grown careless with her contraceptives. Or maybe Marlon had worked his insidious magic until she relented. Our father said we were wanted, "beginning to end, *A to Z*," always with a playful grin. Nadine had said that it was a moot point.

By the time we were born, the reality of the vineyard's disappointing prospects was becoming clearer, and our parents were just beginning to swat nastily at each other, like house cats cooped up too long indoors. We often wondered, as I imagine many children do, whether we were the cause of our parents' eventual rupture. If they had been different people, a better team, things might have gone differently. This was early days for modern Finger Lakes winemaking, and Mar-

lon's selection was actually prescient; property prices went up over the next decade, and plots of land like ours were hotly coveted by ambitious investors and hotheaded fools alike. But Nadine and Marlon fought each other viciously on every petty decision. Soon, Silenus transformed from a prospector's fortune to a time-consuming forfeiture while Zelda and I ran feral and barefoot in the fields, gnawing on unripe grapes and making gowns from the sickly vines as our family and its investments tumbled down around us in molting shudders of decay.

I open my eyes and look at the wreckage. I scan the rubble for any sign of the tractor, which probably would have been in the barn two nights ago. As I suspected, I don't see it anywhere, and no matter how hot the fire, there should still be something left. Zelda loved that tractor; of course she wouldn't let it burn. I get up and walk slowly around the perimeter of the burn, letting the flashlight dance over it. A dull, menacing heat still radiates from the ground. Bats swoop in a leathery rush, hunting. I'm looking for a sign, a message from my sister about what happened here. I don't for a second believe that she's actually dead. *Come out, Zaza. Time to face your sister.*

### 3

Completely irreconcilable with what I've consumed, I wake up the next morning feeling surprisingly un-hungover. My bedroom is dazzling in the high summer sun, still way too white. The walls are white, the bedspread is white, the curtains are gauzy and white, and there's a white sheepskin rug just next to my bed. I chose the color scheme in contradistinction to Zelda's bohemian-gypsy vibe across the hall; her room is all purples, reds, blues, and golds, fringed shawls, dull lighting. I hear raised voices in the kitchen and grab a cream kimono from my closet. I haven't unpacked yet. I'm reluctant to do so; I slept in one of my prim nighties from high school.

As I walk down the stairs, I can hear my mother's shrill voice.

"I don't care who you think you are, who you say you are, I saw you! I saw you in the cabinets, stealing. You've been taking my things while I slept, and I want you out!"

"Calm down, Nadia, it's me, Marlon." I hear my father say her pet name in his very best conciliatory tone, though with a small note of panic. My mother is having none of it. Never did.

"Fuck you and your lies. Get out. I'm calling the police." She sounds scared. I walk into the kitchen, yawning. It is surreal to see

both my parents here, surrounded by the walnut cabinets they built together, bickering as though it's still 2003.

"Morning, Dad, Mom," I say, heading straight for the coffee-maker.

"Zelda, get this man out of here. He was stealing my jam from the cupboard!"

"It's Ava, Mom. And that's my dad, Marlon?"

"Like hell it is. My ex-husband is dead."

"Not just yet, Nadine," my dad says with an edge. But his snark is bravado. He looks genuinely harrowed. He glances back and forth between me and Nadine, clearly unsure what to do.

"Zelda, I will count to three!"

"I'm not four years old. And I'm not Zelda. Are you screwing with me again today, Mom?" I study her more closely. She actually looks terrified, and her expression makes me hesitate. I don't think she's faking to get a rise out of us.

"I want Zelda!" she wails, and my stomach clenches.

So do I.

Nadine's going to pieces now, mumbling quietly to herself.

"Zelda . . . is already outside," I lie, starting the coffeepot. "Why don't we just go back upstairs for a bit? I have some medicine for you." I lead her back toward the stairway. Marlon stands there, almost paralyzed. Nadine's hands are shaking, and she seems suddenly frail, flimsy. Her shoulders stick out like wings, and she feels somehow light, as though she's evaporating in front of us. I give her a sedative and put her back in bed. I know this is not a long-term solution; I'll have to work out a system later. This time, I lock the door.

Downstairs, I pause in front of the bathroom. I hear barely controlled sobs behind the door. My father. I hesitate, tempted to knock but unsure what to say. Instead I go to the kitchen and start breakfast.

When he joins me at the table, he is again smiling and light, determined to put me at ease. I don't know what to say to him, so I say nothing. We eat some of Betsy's bread and one of Zelda's bizarre jams from the cupboard. This one seems to be peach curry. It is not a total

failure as a condiment, but it is weird. Marlon doesn't look good; either he stayed up drinking or he couldn't fall asleep. Possibly both. We barely speak over breakfast. I can tell he is truly rattled by Nadine's outburst, and I have no desire to discuss it with him. As I'm putting the dishes in the sink, I clear my throat.

"I think I'm going to drive to the police station in Watkins Glen. I'd like to learn more about the fire," I say flatly. "See if there's anything they need from us to investigate the, uh, accident." I really don't want him to invite himself along, which he seems to sense. "Do you think you could look after Nadine for a little while? I know that's not ideal, but . . ." I trail off. Marlon nods cooperatively, though I imagine he can't be excited about this. "We'll have to do something about the funeral. I know you called some people already, and I'll try to find some of Zelda's friends. I don't know if we need to worry about the announcement."

Marlon is still nodding along as though he knows all this, but I'm sure he hasn't thought of it. I'm pretty sure he thinks that birthdays and funerals and dishes and housework are all magically arranged by some sort of domestic deity who oversees life's practical considerations. He always looked confused when there weren't clean towels in the bathroom or when the kitchen counters grew sticky and fly-infested after someone had spilled honey on the wood. As though he thought something had suddenly begun malfunctioning, rather than just continuing along its natural entropic path, unimpeded by the feminine forces that typically stood in its way.

"Listen, I'll text you a list of what all needs to be done. And Nadine should be quiet for a few hours. Just feed her some of Betsy's casserole." I can't help wrinkling my nose in snobby reluctance at the suggestion. If she weren't half out of her mind, my mother would never contemplate a tuna casserole, regardless of circumstances. "And give her the meds in her pill dispenser once she's eaten. And don't let her start drinking until at least four. Though I should be back by then." Marlon nods mechanically. "Thanks, Dad. It's good to see you, even . . ." I turn to leave the room, scooping the car keys up as I go.

“Ava?” he asks gently. I stop. “Do you think there’s something a little . . . off about this?” He looks reluctant to even be suggesting it.

“I don’t know. Zelda was in a weird place. I . . . don’t know what to think,” I concede. I’m not about to say that I think Zelda might be holed up somewhere with one of her crazy friends, laughing at all of us and cooing over her escape. I know that would sound crazy to him, like denial. Yet the combination of Zelda’s letters the last few months and the bizarre neatness of all this feels too much like one of my sister’s elaborate plots. But if she *is* up to something, she wouldn’t want Marlon to know. After he left us cold, she’d want him in the dark. Strange, that I should still be attentive to her wants, that I should give a flying fuck after everything that’s happened, but . . . what can I say. I’m loyal to my twin, even if I haven’t spoken to her for nearly two years.

I bob my head at Marlon and walk out the door, carrying one of Zelda’s bags. There are two vehicles in the drive, and I reflect that maybe I should have asked Marlon to borrow his fancy rental, rather than drive my mother’s (now my sister’s) unreliable pickup. Zelda’s bedraggled, antique jalopy, which sits decaying in torpid disrepair, slowly oxidizing in the upstate moisture, was a point of acquisitive pride for my jackdaw sibling. Having long coveted the truck, she had finally prized it from my mother following an eye-exam coup that left Nadine humiliated and without a license; she had no choice but to transfer the title to the gloating Zelda, who made a point of inappropriately revving the engine and briskly ramming the body into the deep culverts that ran alongside the fields, battering the suspension and brutalizing the alignment.

Watkins Glen is only seven or eight miles from here, though, and Zelda drove the goddamn thing all over the vineyard every day. Besides, I’m home now. I can’t be cruising around in a flashy convertible. That would just be asking to get pulled over. Zelda’s the driver. As an afterthought, I dig around in the glove compartment and pull out her driver’s license. Can’t hurt.

The drive is relaxing, and I feel better the farther I get from my own nest of crazies. I try very hard not to think about how I'm going to keep it together for the next few weeks. I'm good at repression (as Zelda loves to point out), and this task is surprisingly easy. I find a pack of Zelda's cigarettes on the tattered seat of the truck and light an American Spirit, the smell of Zelda filling up the small cab. Frankly, there's no way she can be dead. I would feel it, would know with the cells of my body, which are so entwined with hers.

Watkins Glen is sleepy, and the truck putters along until I pull up in front of the police station. American flags billow from every storefront and porch, in a show of patriotism that is almost shocking after my time in France. I wonder vaguely if I should have called ahead to the station—I don't know what the protocol for this is. I'm already regretting the cigarette, which makes me feel nauseous and light-headed. I find gum in the glove compartment ("Because you never know when you'll have to talk to a cop shit-faced, Little A!") and get out of the truck. I half-expect to see people I know on the streets; even though I've been in town for only twelve hours, it feels weird that I haven't seen anyone.

The air-conditioning in the police station is turned up unjustifiably high (very upstate New York), and no one is at the reception desk. I wander around the reception area, exploring before anyone shows up. I like to find the corners of rooms, see what brochures are moldering in the rack on a cluttered side table, peer down empty hallways, locate the bathroom. I'm a snoop. I'm just leafing through a pile of crisis-hotline fliers when a cop wanders in. He seems surprised to see me. I can't imagine that the Watkins Glen police have much to do: Make sure people are staying on the trails on the gorge hikes, check boat permits, rescue kittens, wait for NASCAR weekend. I wouldn't think that many citizens are burned alive in their homes in this backwoods municipality.

"My name's Ava Antipova," I say, jauntily sticking out my hand. The cop flinches.

"I know. You . . . look like your sister."

"Oh, you know—knew Zelda?"

"Yeah, I, uh, wrote up the report. I was the responding officer, after the fire department. Officer Roberts."

"Good. Then you're the man I need," I say, smiling brightly. "You may have noticed that my mother is not exactly . . . with it. I'd really like a more reliable account of what happened, what the report says."

"Um, yeah, of course. I'm sorry I have to ask, but do you have ID? I'm only allowed to release details to the family and, well . . ."

I nod sympathetically, hunting in my bag. I'm ninety percent sure I don't have my passport with me, which is my only government-issued ID.

"Um, I don't have a driver's license"—shit, hope he doesn't ask how I got here—"and I seem to have left my passport . . . but I do have a Metro card with my photo and birthday? I live in France," I explain. He looks uncomfortable. Is he kidding? "I'm obviously Zelda's twin," I point out. "If you have a picture, you could compare . . ."

"Of course, ma'am. I mean, that won't be necessary. Of course." He fumbles awkwardly through a heap of papers. "Would you like to hear what I wrote up in the report?"

"That'd be super." He clears his throat and prepares to read aloud to me. I barely suppress a snort. Really?

"I responded to a phone call from the Antipova residence at just before one A.M. on the night of June 20. Watkins Glen Fire Department had already arrived on the scene, and they were putting out the flames. A Mrs. Betsy Kline had alerted them to the fire from her own residence and then rushed immediately to the Antipova residence, where she discovered that Mrs. Antipova—"

"O'Connor. *Ms.* O'Connor," I correct.

"Uh, okay, Mrs. O'Connor was found to be sedated, in her bed, sleeping. Apparently she has some, uh, health issues?" He looks up at me.

"Quite."

"Well, the FD was eventually successful in putting out the flames,

but it came to light that Miss Zelda Antipova was suspected to be in the structure when the fire began, according to Mrs.—O'Connor's statement."

"You got Nadine awake? With all those sedatives?" I say, surprised. Zelda always joked that she gave Mom horse tranquilizers and Nadine would barely breathe for ten hours.

"Yes, after some effort. She was, uh . . . uncooperative at first."

"I'll bet. But she said Zelda was in the barn?"

"Yes, but her statements seemed a little, well, unreliable." He looks embarrassed to be telling me that my mother can't be trusted, as though it's news. "Mrs. Kline told us that Miss Antipova typically spent the night in an Airstream trailer about half a mile away, so I went to investigate. No one was there, but I did find a cellphone belonging to the deceased. I mean, Zelda. Miss Antipova." The cop turns a pretty shade of pink. I can't believe how young he seems. "The last text messages on June 20 were with someone named Jason. They made plans to meet at the barn at eleven that night. It appears the fire started just before midnight, leading us to believe . . ."

"That Zelda was there. Jason who?" I ask. I don't recognize the name.

"It didn't say on her phone—he was just Jason. We called the number back but got no response, no voicemail activated. We've requested registration info from the phone company, but it will take a few days."

"So is Zelda . . . officially dead?"

The cop squirms. "No, ma'am, not officially. But I'm not gonna lie—it seems very possible. Right now we're running her cards, license, and plates, to see if she turns up anywhere. We've called in some specialists, and we share a coroner with Montour Falls, so we'll get him out here. We're obviously looking for, um . . ."

"Bones or something," I finish. Good luck, Sparky. "Anyway, I don't want to have a funeral without a death certificate. It would be unseemly," I say, and the poor kid looks stricken. "Thank you, Officer, for answering my questions. You'll keep me posted?"

He bobs his head at me, clearly relieved that the conversation is over, and I turn to leave.

“Ma’am?” he says tentatively as my hands reach for the door. I face him, one eyebrow raised. “There’s just one other thing that, uh—well, we’re still looking into one more thing.” He swallows. “It’s just that the barn doors were—well, they were chained shut. From the outside.”

April 30, 2016 at 3:12 PM

Dear Pouty, Crabby, Puerile Twin,

And so we finish year two of your stubborn radio silence. Okay, Ava. I get it. I’ll do my time, keep on writing you, wait for you to shake off your huff. Let you have your temper tantrum so that you can save face. It’s fine, I don’t mind; I’ve always been less proud than you. I don’t mind admitting that I MISS YOU and that I’M GOING CRAZY WITHOUT YOU. Do you think that will soften your brittle crustacean shell? Will it weaken your resolve to maintain this transatlantic muteness? I don’t know. You were a soft touch when we were girls, but maybe you’ve toughened up, ensconced yourself in some sort of emotional fortress. I remember you crying pitifully when we saw a homeless man begging in Watkins Glen. He was a raggedy-ass specimen, too tan and wilted, with his cardboard sign entreating us to HELP because HE WAS A VETERAN. As though his life was inherently more valuable because he had the bad luck (or, even worse, the misguided desire) to end up in the military. Oh, but you were moved! You tugged our father’s hand, pleaded with your very best Tender Ava eyes, and he gave you ten dollars to hand to the man. A testament to both our father’s complete inability to deny you anything and his endless profligacy in all things financial. The man chews through cash the same way he devours imported cheese (the two behavior patterns may be related). You gave the old vet the ten

bucks along with your tattered spare change. And later, when we went for ice cream and you had no money, I bought you one.

But now you've seen something of the world, and perhaps you're less fragile, more cynical. Maybe. I'd put money on not, though. Bet you're still dropping euro coins into the hats of amputee hucksters who will unfold their hidden limbs at the end of the day and traipse off to the nearest bottle shop, living proof that the performance of suffering is worth money. A lesson our mother learned young. These days, however, it is a woefully unprofitable adventure, for her at least. I imagine the begging industry is still going strong. But Nadine seems to have run up against some empty coffers, and she's not taking it all that well.

I fear that Silenus may be going under, dearest Ava. I know it won't be too surprising to you, but perversely, I hope it keeps you up at night. I certainly toss and turn a bit these long dark evenings, before giving in to temptation and chasing some of Nadine's fancy tranqs (tranks? How would you spell it?) with a glass of Scotch. Then I sleep like the dead; I wouldn't wake up if I caught on fire, lolz! Bad for my hepatic well-being, but it's the only way I can get spreadsheets of collapsing finances out of my brain. I'm getting ready for the spring bloom (mind that moisture!), but I know that this year might be the last, that if this season doesn't go well, we're fucked. Not what you want to hear. Or maybe you don't care.

Your increasingly desperate twin,  
Z is for Zelda

I leave the cop station with a feeling that resembles vindication. I knew something was going on, knew there had to be. *But what, Zaza? What could this possibly achieve?* I drive too fast, which is obviously a terrible decision, since getting pulled over will mean more than a speed-

ing ticket for me. But I'm racing, and before I realize I have made the decision to go there, I'm pulling down the driveway where Zelda keeps her battered Airstream. She has so many places to run to, when she's running from our mother. But all within the confines of the family estate. Zelda holds her ground—I'm the one who flees.

The trailer rests on a cobbled-together deck that Zelda built herself the summer we graduated high school. I could see her jaw growing tighter and tighter as that summer waned, and I, naïvely, thought she was nervous about starting college. We were both going to live at home, but I had gotten into Cornell and Zelda was headed to a community college in Ithaca; her grades the past two years had been appalling, and she hadn't even bothered to apply to Cornell. I thought she was scared of growing up, that she wouldn't be at home outside her circle of wild high school friends. But she was really afraid of losing her sway over me.

That whole summer she toiled away on the elevated plywood deck, eyeing me warily as I sat in a ragged lawn chair doing my summer reading. She circled me like a predatory cat, and I was blissfully unaware of her prowling, happily absorbed as I was in my stack of books (and the carafe filled with spiked lemonade that we replenished lavishly throughout the day, growing more heavy-handed with the vodka as the sun drew lower in the sky). I was happy, elated, caught up in my academic fantasies, while Zelda was growing increasingly anxious to devise a scheme that would keep me caught up in her drama. And boy, did she achieve that, though I wouldn't know it for several years.

The door to the Airstream is ominously ajar. I slam the truck's door and hop up the semi-sanded steps, an image flashing before me of Zelda with her orbital sander, cursing these steps. "Our fucking paterfamilias had to go and destroy the belt sander while he was wasted, and now I'm trying to sand the steps with this rinky-dink piece of shit." She furiously lit a cigarette and stared malevolently at the off-kilter stairs. I looked up from *Lolita* and laughed at her, standing there in her cutoff shorts, engineer boots, and bikini top. Gypsy hair, wild corkscrews shooting off from her head, and her dark tan made her

eyes look terrifying. I had slathered on coats of SPF 50 all summer long, and Zelda's newly tawny skin successfully marked the two of us as distinct beings. That summer, we looked different. I washed my hair religiously, combing and straightening it so that it looked tame and silky, while Zelda's raven hair was just short of dreadlocked glory. Her eyeliner was dark and messy, while I wore just a smidge of sedately hued eye shadow. All our lives, we had embraced our spooky similarity, opting for the same haircut, same makeup. Different clothes, always, but clothes can be swapped, inducing all kinds of Shakespearean identity mishaps. Not that summer, though. She had giggled right back at me and flopped onto the deck chair next to mine.

"Fuck this foolishness," she declared. "We'll all just have to deal with the splinters and drag them around as reminders of benevolent neglect. Mine and Marlon's both. How does it go, something something beam in the eye?"

"You're proposing that we all suffer through beams in our feet?"

"If that's what it takes!"

"You're drunk," I point out.

"Judge not lest . . ."

"And you're mixing your biblical references."

"Yes, but they all address hypocrisy. So there. Take that. Come swimming with me, please. You're sweaty."

"Always telling me what I am," I mock-complain.

"No, I usually leave that to you, boss lady." I let her tug me away from my book and we ran down to the dock, close in step, our feet moving in pace. I imagine that if you saw us from the side we would have looked like one body moving together. Fillies in dressage. Running with her, I felt whole, as though I was what I was meant to be. In the water, we splashed happily until Wyatt showed up with beverage reinforcements and joined us, to romp in a cozy haze of vodka. And happiness.

I enter the Airstream and my breath is nearly sucked out of me. It smells so much like Zelda that it physically slams into me. *I don't think you're dead, Zaza. But God, I've missed you.* I've been pretending for the

past two years that I can live without her, that I don't miss her with a visceral, embodied ache, all the time. Pretending that what happened severs the phantom umbilical cord that has tethered us together for more than two decades. As I look around the trailer, every cranny of it steeped in Zelda, I realize that I've been fucking kidding myself. I want my sister so bad it hurts. And I realize, suddenly, that that's what she's been trying to do. This entire scheme—the fire, her supposed death—is a little show, a spectacle for my benefit. She'd had enough of my punishment, and this is her saying: *You can't ignore me, Ava, you can't live without me. You can't get away from Silenus, you can never leave ME.*

Scarves, fabric, textiles, prints cover all the walls. I can see at least three of Zelda's colorful kimonos draped on various surfaces. The bed is rumpled, unmade, and I sit down on it, holding a pillow to my face, breathing in her scent. There's a lump in my throat that I'm working very hard to dislodge. Maybe I've overreacted, these past two years. Could I have been blowing it out of proportion? It was a betrayal, yes. And what happened afterward doesn't even bear dwelling on. But maybe . . . Then I realize that Zelda is manipulating me without having to say a single word, and I toss her pillow across the room in frustration.

The pillow takes out a lamp on its way, and I lean my head back, annoyed, unsure why I've come to the trailer after all. Just to feel close to Zelda? No, to figure out what game she's playing. We're playing. Who on earth is Jason? And the locked barn doors? I suspect her of staging everything, but why let the police think it's murder? If she was going to fake her own death, she'd only be making everything more complicated by leaving clues suggesting that it was not accidental. Why risk alerting the cops that all is not as it seems? My recent fixation on Poe immediately makes me think: locked-room mystery. As though she knows how this would tantalize me.

I get up and pad around the trailer, looking at Zelda's artifacts. A bizarre ceramic sculpture here, a spent candle toppled onto its side next to a pile of sketch notebooks carelessly scattered on the table. Good way to start a fire. The trailer is cluttered with years of Zelda's

accumulated disarray. I pick up a dish full of sad-looking apples and chuck them into the garbage. I'm straightening stacks of books and moving glasses to the kitchen sink before I even realize what I'm doing. Tidying up after Zelda, like always. I stop in exasperation and almost storm out of the Airstream, fed up with myself and with my sister, filled with that itchy combination of fatigue and anxiety that my entire family produces in me. An allergic reaction for which antihistamines can do nothing. I want a drink.

But as I prepare to walk out the door, I pause and look in Zelda's favorite "secret place." Our whole lives, she's been obsessed with secrets, and as a girl, she liked to squirrel away notes, money, tiny treasures in hiding places all over the vineyard. I double back to the bed and lean down along the side. The carpet is loose in this corner, and I peel it back, revealing a small hole. Zelda systematically used these secret places after the first time our mother called the cops on her and she got busted, at fifteen, with a dime bag in her pocket and a quarter ounce in her bedroom (one hundred hours of community service, probation). I remember her fishing a baggie of pills out of this corner during my first semester of college. She always told me that I knew where all her secret places were, that I was the only one who knew all of them. I believed her for years.

My fingers curve around something cold and rectangular, and I pull an iPhone out of the hole. Zelda's real phone. I wonder briefly what phone the cops found. What she intended them to find. The battery is low—it's probably been in there for at least two days—but I can still turn it on. Password protected. I try her old PIN for her bank cards; she used to have only one PIN for everything, because she claimed she couldn't be bothered to buy into some paranoid fantasy that there were people out to steal her identity or scoop the twenty-three dollars from her savings account. It doesn't work.

I'm busy frowning at the screen, thinking, when I hear someone pull up outside. I stand up and peer out from the mismatched curtains. I know that truck. My mouth dries up and my heart is suddenly clamoring to get out of my chest. I can't tear myself away as the door

swings open and a familiar body stretches out from the driver's seat, unfurling long legs. I walk numbly to the Airstream's door, realizing that it's here, the conversation I have resolutely avoided for two years. It's going to happen. I'm tempted to hide, to evade, but I'm in a fucking trailer with exactly three feet of room to maneuver, and I know it's time. I slide the phone into my pocket, and I swing the door open, trying desperately to look composed.

"Hey there, Wyatt." His face freezes, and his whole body tenses at the sight of me in the doorway. "You look like you've seen a ghost."



AMERICAN  
WAR

A  
NOVEL

OMAR EL AKKAD

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK  
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

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**The one you must punish is the one who punishes you.**

—*Kitab al-Aghani (The Book of Songs)*

**Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds  
round about are against her; come ye, assemble all the  
beasts of the field, come to devour.**

—*Jeremiah 12:9*

# The United States, circa 2075



# The Free Southern State, circa 2075



## PROLOGUE

**W**hen I was young, I collected postcards. I kept them in a shoebox under my bed in the orphanage. Later, when I moved into my first home in New Anchorage, I stored the shoebox at the bottom of an old oil drum in my crumbling toolshed. Having spent most of my life studying the history of war, I found some sense of balance in collecting snapshots of the world that was, idealized and serene.

Sometimes I thought about getting rid of the oil drum. I worried someone, a colleague from the university perhaps, would see it and think it a kind of petulant political statement, like the occasional secessionist flag or gutted muscle car outside houses in the old Red country—impotent trinkets of rebellion, touchstones of a ruined and ruinous past. I am, after all, a Southerner by birth. And even though I arrived in neutral country at the age of six and never spoke to anyone about my life before then, I couldn't rule out the possibility that some of my colleagues secretly believed I still had a little bit of rebel Red in my blood.

My favorite postcards are from the 2030s and 2040s, the last decades before the planet turned on the country and the country turned on itself. They featured pictures of the great ocean beaches before rising waters took them; images of the Southwest before it turned to embers; photographs of the Midwestern plains, endless and empty under bluest sky, before the Inland Exodus filled them with the coastal displaced. A visual reminder of America as it existed in the first half of the twenty-first century: soaring, roaring, oblivious.

I remember the first postcard I bought. It was a photo of old Anchorage. The city's waterfront is thick with fresh snowfall, the water speckled with shelves of ice, the sun low-strung behind the mountains.

I was six years old when I saw my first real Alaskan sunset. I stood on the deck of the smuggler's skiff, a sun-bitten Georgia boy, a refugee. I remember feeling the strange white flakes on my eyelashes, the involuntary rattle of my teeth—feeling, for the first time in my life, cold. I

## AMERICAN WAR

saw near the tops of the mountains that frozen yolk suspended in the sky and thought I had reached the very terminus of the living world. The very end of movement.



I BELONG TO WHAT they call the Miraculous Generation: those born in the years between the start of the Second American Civil War in 2074 and its end in 2093. Some extend the definition further, including those born during the decade-long plague that followed the end of the war. This country has a long history of defining its generations by the conflicts that should have killed them, and my generation is no exception. We are the few who escaped the wrath of the homicide bombers and the warring Birds; the few who were spirited into well-stocked cellars or tornado shelters before the Reunification Plague spread across the continent. The few who were just plain lucky.

I've spent my professional career studying this country's bloody war with itself. I've written academic papers and magazine articles, headlined myriad symposiums and workshops. I've studied all the surviving source documents: congressional reports, oral histories, harrowing testimony of the plague's survivors. I've reconstructed the infamous events of Reunification Day, when one of the South's last remaining rebels managed to sneak into the Union capital and unleash the sickness that cast the country into a decade of death. It is estimated that eleven million people died in the war, and almost ten times that number in the plague that followed.

I've received countless letters from readers and critics taking issue with all manner of historical minutiae—whether the rebels were really responsible for a particular homicide bombing; whether the Massacre at Such-and-Such really was as bad as the Southern propagandists claim. My files contain hundreds of such correspondences, all variations on the same theme: that I, a coddled New Anchorage Northerner, a neutral country elite who'd never seen a day of real fighting, don't know the first thing about the war.

But there are things I know that nobody else knows. I know because she told me. And my knowing makes me complicit.



NOW, AS I NEAR the end of my life, I've been inspecting the accumulated miscellanea of my youth. Recently I found that first postcard I bought. It's been more than a hundred years since its photograph was taken; all but the sea and the mountains are gone. New Anchorage, a sprawl of low buildings and affluent suburbs nestled at the foot of the hills, has moved further inland over the years. The docks where I once arrived as a disoriented war orphan have been raised and reinforced time and time again. And where once there stood wharfs of knotted wood, there are now modular platforms, designed to be dismantled and relocated quickly. Fierce storms come without warning.

Sometimes I stroll along the New Anchorage waterfront, past the wharf and the harbor. It's the closest I can come now to my original arrival point in the neutral country without renting a scavenger's boat. My doctor says it's good to walk regularly and that I should try to keep doing so as long as it doesn't cause me pain. I suspect this is the sort of harmless pabulum he feeds all his terminal patients, those who long ago graduated from "This will help" to "This can't hurt."

It's a strange thing to be dying. For so long I thought the end of my life would come suddenly, when the plague found its way north to the neutral country, or the Red rebelled once more and we were plunged into another bout of fratricide. Instead, I've been sentenced to that most ordinary of deaths, an overabundance of malfunctioning cells. I read once that a moderately ravenous cancer is, in a pragmatic sense, a decent way to die—not so prolonged as to entail years of suffering, but affording enough time that one might have a chance to make the necessary arrangements, to say what needs to be said.



IT HASN'T SNOWED in years, but every now and then in late January we'll get a fractal of frost crawling up the windows. On those days I like to go out to the waterfront and watch my breath hang in the air. I feel unburdened. I am no longer afraid.

I stand at the edge of the boardwalk and watch the water. I think of all the things it has taken, and all that was taken from me. Sometimes I stare out at the sea for hours, well past dark, until I am elsewhere in time and elsewhere in place: back in the battered Red country where I was born.

## AMERICAN WAR

And that's when I see her again, rising out of the water. She is exactly as I remember her, a hulking bronzed body, her back lined with ashen scars, each one a testimony to the torture she was made to endure, the secret crimes committed against her. She rises, a flesh monolith reborn from the severed belly of the Savannah. And I am a child again, yet to be taken from my parents and my home, yet to be betrayed. I am back home by the riverbank and I am happy and I still love her. My secret is I still love her.

This isn't a story about war. It's about ruin.

I

April, 2075  
St. James, Louisiana

## CHAPTER ONE

**I** was happy then.

☆ ☆ ☆

THE SUN BROKE THROUGH a pilgrimage of clouds and cast its unblinking eye upon the Mississippi Sea.

The coastal waters were brown and still. The sea's mouth opened wide over ruined marshland, and every year grew wider, the water picking away at the silt and sand and clay, until the old riverside plantations and plastics factories and marine railways became unstable. Before the buildings slid into the water for good, they were stripped of their usable parts by the delta's last holdout residents. The water swallowed the land. To the southeast, the once glorious city of New Orleans became a well within the walls of its levees. The baptismal rites of a new America.

A little girl, six years old, sat on the porch of her family's home under a clapboard awning. She held a plastic container of honey, which was made in the shape of a bear. From the top of its head golden liquid slid out onto the cheap pine floorboard.

The girl poured the honey into the wood's deep knots and watched the serpentine manner in which the liquid took to the contours of its new surroundings. This is her earliest memory, the moment she begins.

And this is how, in those moments when the bitterness subsides, I choose to remember her. A child.

I wish I had known her then, in those years when she was still unbroken.

"Sara Chestnut, what do you think you're doing?" said the girl's mother, standing behind her near the door of the shipping container in which the Chestnuts made their home. "What did I tell you about wasting what's not yours to waste?"

"Sorry, Mama."

"Did you work to buy that honey, hmm? No, I didn't think you did.

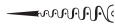
## AMERICAN WAR

Go get your sister and get your butt to breakfast before your daddy leaves.”

“OK, Mama,” the girl said, handing back the half-empty container. She ducked past her mother, who patted dirt from the seat of her fleur-de-lis dress.

Her name was Sara T. Chestnut but she called herself Sarat. The latter was born of a misunderstanding at the schoolhouse earlier that year. The new kindergarten teacher accidentally read the girl’s middle initial as the last letter of her first name—*Sarat*. To the little girl’s ears, the new name had a bite to it. Sara ended with an impotent exhale, a fading *ahh* that disappeared into the air. *Sarat* snapped shut like a bear trap. A few months later, the school shut down, most of the teachers and students forced northward by the encroaching war. But the name stuck.

*Sarat.*



A HUNDRED FEET from the western riverbank, the Chestnuts lived in a corrugated steel container salvaged from a nearby shipyard. Wedges of steel plating anchored to cement blocks below the ground held the home in place. At the corners, a brown rust crept slowly outward, incubated in ceaseless humidity.

A lattice of old-fashioned solar panels lined the entirety of the roof, save for one corner occupied by a rainwater tank. A tarp rested near the panels. When storms approached, the tarp was pulled over the roof with ropes tied to its ends and laced through hooks. By guiding the rainfall away from the panels to the tank and, when it overflowed, toward the land and river below, the family was able to collect drinking water and defend their home from rust and decay.

Sometimes, during winter storms, the family took shelter on the porch, where the awning sagged and leaked, but spared them the unbearable acoustics of the shipping container under heavy rain, which sounded like the bowl of a calypso drum.

In the summer, when their house felt like a steel kiln, the family spent much of their time outdoors. It was during this extended season, which burned from March through mid-December, that Sarat, her fraternal twin, Dana, and her older brother, Simon, experienced their

purest instances of childhood joy. Under the distant watch of their parents, the children would fill buckets of water from the river and use them to drench the clay embankment until it became a slide. Entire afternoons and evenings were spent this way: the children careening down the greased earth into the river and climbing back up with the aid of a knotted rope; squealing with delight on the way down, their backsides leaving deep grooves in the clay.

In a coop behind the house the family kept an emaciated clutch of chickens. They were loud and moved nervously, their feathers dirty and brown. When they were fed and the weather was not too hot, they produced eggs. In other times, if they were on the edge of revolt or death, they were preemptively slaughtered, their necks pinned down between the nails in a nearby stump.

The shipping container was segmented by standing clapboards. Benjamin and Martina Chestnut lived in the back of the home. Simon and the twins shared the middle third, living in a peace that grew more and more uneasy as Simon neared his ninth birthday and the girls their seventh.

In the final third of the home there was a small kitchen table of sand-colored plywood, smeared and notched from years of heavy use. Near the table a pine pantry and jelly cabinet held sweet potatoes, rice, bags of chips and sugar cereal, pecans, flour, and pebbles of grain milled from the sorghum fields that separated the Chestnuts from their nearest neighbor. In a compact fridge that burdened the solar panels, the family kept milk and butter and cans of old Coke.

By the front door, a statue from the days of Benjamin's childhood kept vigil. It was the Virgin of Guadalupe, cast in ceramic, her hands pressed against each other, her head lowered in prayer. A beaded bouquet of yellow tickseed and white water lilies lay at her feet, alongside a melted, magnolia-scented candle. When the flowers died and hardened the children were sent out to the fields to find more.

Sarat skipped past the statue, looking for her sister. She found her in the back of the house, standing on her parents' bed, inspecting with steel concentration her reflection in the oval vanity mirror. She had taken one of her mother's house dresses, a simple sleeveless tunic whose violet color held despite countless washings. The little girl wore the top half of the dress, which covered the entirety of her frame; the

## AMERICAN WAR

rest of the garment slid limply off the bed and onto the floor. She had applied, far too generously, her mother's cherry red lipstick—the jewel of the simple makeup set her mother owned but rarely used. Despite employing utmost delicacy, Dana could not keep within the lines of her small pink lips, and looked now as though she'd hastily eaten a strawberry pie.

“Come play with me,” Sarat said, confounded by what her twin was doing.

Dana turned to her sister, annoyed. “I’m busy,” she said.

“But I’m bored.”

“I’m being a lady!”

Dana returned to her mirror, trying to wipe some of the lipstick with the back of her hand.

“Mama says we have to go have breakfast with Daddy now.”

“OK, oh-*kay*,” Dana said. “Not a moment peace in this house,” she added, misquoting a thing she’d heard her mother say on occasion.

Sarat was the second-born girl, five and a half minutes behind her sister. And although she’d been told by her parents that both she and Dana were made of the same flesh, Dana was her father’s girl, with his easygoing wit and sincere smile. Sarat was made of her mother: stubborn, hard, undaunted by calamity. They were twins but they were not alike. Sarat often heard her mother use the word *tomboy* to describe her. God gave me two children at once, she said, but only girl enough for one.



FOR A FEW MINUTES, after Dana had left, Sarat remained in her parents’ room. She observed with some confusion the thing her sister had smeared all over her lips. Unlike the river and the bush and the beasts and birds of the natural world, the lipstick did not interest her; it held no promise of adventure. She knew it only as a prop in her twin sister’s ongoing obsession with adulthood. Why Dana wished so desperately to join the ranks of the fully grown, Sarat could not understand.

Dana emerged from the house, still draped in her mother’s clothes.

“Didn’t I tell you not to go opening my dresser?” Martina said.

“Sorry, Mama.”

“Don’t sorry me—and pull it up, you’re dragging dirt everywhere.” Martina pulled the dress off her daughter. “I send your sister in to get you, and now you’re out here looking like a mess, and she’s inside probably doing the same.”

“She can’t put makeup on,” said Dana. “She’s ugly.”

Martina knelt down and grabbed her daughter by the shoulders. “Don’t ever say that, you hear me? Don’t ever call her ugly, don’t ever say a bad word about her. She’s your sister. She’s a beautiful girl.”

Dana lowered her head and pouted. Martina cupped her jaw and lifted her head back up.

“Listen to me,” she said. “You go back inside and you tell her. You tell her she’s a beautiful girl.”

Dana stomped back inside the house. She found her sister putting her mother’s lipstick back in the makeup box.

“You’re a beautiful girl,” Dana said, and stormed out of the room.

For a moment, Sarat stood dumbstruck. She was a child still and the purpose of a lie eluded her. She couldn’t yet fathom that someone would say something if they didn’t believe it. She smiled.



OUTSIDE, Martina cooked breakfast on a heavy firewood stove. On the plates and in the bowls there were hard biscuits and sorghum cereal and fried eggs and imitation pepper bacon cooked till crisp in its own fat.

In her slumping cheeks and dark-circled eyes, Martina’s thirty-nine years were plainly visible—more so than in the face of her husband, although he was five years her senior and the two of them had lived half their lives together. She was wide around her midsection but not obese, with an organic rural fitness that made her able, when it was necessary, to lift heavy loads and walk long distances. Unlike her husband, who had sneaked into the country from Mexico as a child back when the flow of migrants still moved northward, she was not an immigrant. She was born into the place she lived.

“Breakfast!” Martina shouted, wiping the sweat from her brow with a ragged dish towel. “Get over here now, all of you. I won’t say it again.”

Benjamin emerged from behind the house, freshly shaven and showed in the family’s outdoor stall.

## AMERICAN WAR

“Hurry up and eat before he gets here,” Martina said.

“It’s all right, relax,” her husband replied. “When’s he ever been on time?”

“Where’s your good tie?”

“It’s not a job interview, just a work permit. I’m only going to a government office; no different than the post office.”

“When was the last time people killed one another to get something from a post office?”

Benjamin sat at the table in the yard. He was a lean man with a lean face, his near-touching brows anchoring a smooth, large forehead made larger by setting baldness at the temples. He was at all times clean-shaven, save for a thin black mustache his wife worried made him look unseemly.

He kissed Sarat on the forehead and, when he saw his other daughter, her face smeared with red, kissed her too.

“Your girls been at it again,” Martina said. “Won’t learn manners, won’t do what they’re told.”

Benjamin shook his head at Dana with mock disapproval, then he leaned close to her ear.

“I think it looks good on you,” he whispered.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Dana whispered back.

The family assembled around the table. Martina called out for Simon and soon he came around the front porch, carrying in his hands the recently sawed bottom half of the family’s ten-rung ladder.

Seeing the look on his mother’s face, the eight-year-old blurted, “Dad asked me to do it.”

Martina turned to her husband, who bit happily into the bacon and drank the sour, grainy coffee. It was rancid stuff from the ration packs, designed to keep soldiers awake.

“Don’t look at me like that. Smith needs a ladder,” Benjamin said. “Got new shingles to put up; old ones have all gone to mush.”

“So you’re going to give him half of ours?”

“It’s a fair enough deal, considering he’s the one who knows the man at the permit office. Without him, we may as well try to shoot our way across the border.”

“He’s got enough money to buy himself a million ladders,” said Martina. “I thought you said he was doing us a favor.”

Benjamin chuckled. "A Northern work permit for half a ladder is still a favor."

Martina poured the last of her coffee in the dirt. "We need to get up and fix our roof just the same as the Smiths," she said.

"We don't need any more than a five-rung ladder to do it," Benjamin replied, "especially now that our own boy's grown tall and strong enough to get himself up there."

It was a point with which Simon vehemently agreed, promising his mother he'd climb up regularly to add chlorine to the tank and clean the bird droppings from the solar panels, just like his father did.

The family ate together. Benjamin, rail-thin his whole life, inhaled the bacon and eggs with shameless appetite. His son looked on, cataloguing his father's every minute ritual into an ironclad manual of what it means to be a man. Soon the boy too had wiped his plate clean.

The twins sipped orange juice from plastic cups and picked at their biscuits until their mother softened the bread with a smear of butter and apricot jam, and then they ate quietly, deep in guarded thought.

Martina watched her husband, her eyes still and silent, a look her children mistook for hardness but her husband knew to be just how she was.

Finally she said, "Don't tell them nothing about doing any work for the Free Southerners."

"It's no secret," Benjamin replied. "They know full well every man around these parts has done some work for the Free Southerners. Doesn't mean I picked up a rifle for them."

"But you don't have to say it. If you say it then they have to check one of the boxes on the form and take you into another room and ask you all kinds of other questions. And then in the end they won't give you a permit on account of security reasons or whatever they call it. Just say you work in the shirt factory. That's not a lie."

"Quit worrying so much," Benjamin said, leaning back in his seat and picking the stray meat from between his teeth. "They'll give us a permit. The North needs workers, we need work."

Simon interjected, "Why do we need to go to the North? We don't know anybody up there."

"They got jobs there," his mother replied. "They got schools there.

## AMERICAN WAR

You're always complaining about not having enough toys, enough friends, enough everything. Well, up there they have plenty."

"Connor says going to the North is for traitors. Says they should hang."

Sarat listened intently to the conversation, filing the strange new word in her mind. *Traitors*. It sounded exotic. A foreign tribe, perhaps.

"Don't talk like that," Martina said. "You going to listen to your mother or a ten-year-old boy?"

Simon looked down at his plate and mumbled, "Connor's dad told him."

They finished eating and retreated to the porch. Martina sat on the steps and cleaned the lipstick from her daughter's face with a wet dishrag, the girl squirming and whining. Simon smoothed the ends of the half-ladder with a sandpaper block, putting his whole weight into the job, until his father told him he didn't have to work it so hard.

Sarat returned to the scene of her morning experiment, poking at the congealed honey thick in the knots of the wood, enthralled by the amber liquid's viscosity. It fascinated her, how the thing so readily took the shape of its vessel. With her pinky she cracked the crust and tasted a dollop. She expected the honey to taste like wood, but it still tasted like itself.

Benjamin sat on a hickory chair, the weaves of its backrest frayed and peeling. He looked out at the brown, barren river and waited on his patron to arrive.

"Do you know what you're going to say to them, at the permit place?" Martina asked. "Have you thought it through?"

"I'll answer what they ask."

"You got your papers ready?"

"I got my papers ready."

Martina shook her head and cast an eye out for signs of an incoming boat. "Probably there won't even be any permits," she said. "Probably they'll do what they always do and turn us back. That's their way, don't give a damn about nobody south of the Mag line. It's like we aren't human, aren't animal even, like we're something else entirely. They'll just turn you back, I know it."

Benjamin shrugged. "Do you want me to go or not?"

"You know I do."

When she was done wiping the lipstick, Martina set to braiding Dana's hair. It came down in long smooth strands of the deepest black, unlike Sarat's, which although the same color, was unruly and revolted to fuzz in the humidity.

"You girls know what the best thing about the North is?" she asked.

"What?" Sarat replied.

"Well, you know how at night here it gets so hot you just can't take it, and you wake up with your sheets all damp with sweat?"

"I hate that," Dana said.

"Well when you get far enough north, it never gets hot that way. And in the winter, if you go really far north, they don't even have rain—they have little balls of ice that drop from the sky, and the ground gets all thick with it till you can't see the roads anymore, and the rivers get so cold they turn to solid rock you can walk on."

"That's silly," Dana said. In her mind, these were more of her parents' elaborate fairy tales, the hardening rivers and falling ice no different than the fish with whiskers that her father said once swam in great schools through the lifeless Mississippi back when it was just a river, or the ancient lizards buried in the deserts to the west, whose remains once powered the world. Dana didn't believe any of it.

But Sarat did. Sarat believed every word.

"It's true," Martina said. "Cool in the summer, cool in the winter. *Temperate*, they call it. And safe too. Kids out in the streets playing till late at night; you'll make friends your first day there."

Simon shook his head quietly. He knew that even as she talked to the twins, his mother was really addressing him. With everyone else she spoke directly, with no sentimentality or euphemism. But to her only son, whose inner mental workings she feared she would never learn to decipher, she passed messages through intermediaries in weak, obvious code. Simon hated it. Why couldn't she be like his father? he wondered. Why couldn't she simply say what she meant?



BY MID-AFTERNOON, Benjamin's ride had yet to appear. Soon Martina began to believe her husband had been forgotten. Or perhaps Benjamin's acquaintance had finally been caught in that old fossil-powered boat of his and had been arrested. It was true that the states

## AMERICAN WAR

surrounding the rebel Red—a cocoon formed by Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina—were deeply sympathetic to the cause of the Free Southern State. And even though residents of these states still required a permit to move north to the real heart of the Blue country, the states were officially members of the Union nonetheless, and a man caught using fossil fuel in these parts was still an outlaw.

She thought about how much easier it would be for everyone if all these would-be statelets were simply allowed to break free from the Union, to form their own miniature nations along the fault lines of region or creed or race or ideology. Everyone knew there had always been fissures: in the Northwest they were constantly threatening to declare the independence of the proud, pacifist Cascadia; below them, so much of California, Nevada, Arizona, and West Texas were already under the informal control of the Mexican forces, the map of that corner of the continent slowly reverting to what it was hundreds of years ago. In the Midwest the old-stock nativists harbored a barely restrained animosity toward the millions of coastal refugees who descended onto the middle of the country to escape rising seas and severe storms. And here, in the South, an entire region decided to wage war again, to sever itself from the Union, rather than stop using that illicit fuel responsible for so much of the country's misfortune.

Sometimes it seemed to Martina that there had never been a Union at all, that long ago some disinterested or opportunistic party had drawn lines on a map where previously there were none, and in the process created a single country fashioned from many different countries. How bad would it really be, she wondered, if the federal government in Columbus simply stopped wasting so much money and blood trying to hold the fractured continent together? Let the Southerners keep their outdated fuel, she thought, until they've pulled every last drop of it from the beaten ground.

Martina watched the river and waited for the boat to come. She saw Sarat near the water, inspecting a discarded shrimp net that had washed up onshore a few months earlier; the children had made from it a makeshift trap for river debris. The net collected all manner of strange treasure: an iron cross, a neck-rest from a barber's chair, a laminated picture of a long-shuttered leper colony, a small sign that read, "Please No Profanity In The Canteen."

Sarat inspected the soggy pages of a waterlogged book caught in the net. The book's title was *The Changing Earth*. Its cover featured a picture of a huge blue mountain of floating ice. She leafed gingerly through the pages, peeling them from one another. The book was filled with maps of the world, old and new. The new maps looked like the old ones, but with the edges of the land shaved off—whole islands gone, coastlines retreating into their continents. In the old maps America looked bigger.

She saw the shadow of her brother, Simon, standing behind her. "What is it?" he said, snatching at the book.

"None of your business," Sarat replied. "I found it first." She pulled the book away and hopped to her feet, ready to fight him for it if she had to.

"Whatever," Simon said. "I don't even want it, it's just a dumb book." But she could see him inspecting the open page.

"Do you even know what that is?" he asked.

"It's maps," Sarat said. "I know what maps are."

Simon pointed to a corner of the page where the blue of water seemed to overwhelm a few thin shreds of land on the southern edge of the continent.

"That's us, stupid," he said. "That's where we live."

Sarat looked at the place on the map where Simon pointed. It looked wholly abstract, in no way reminiscent of her home.

"You see all that water?" Simon said. "That all used to be land, and now it's gone." He pointed back in the direction of their house. "And one day this'll all be water too. We'll have to get out of here or else we'll drown."

Sarat saw the faint smirk on her brother's face and knew instantly he was trying to scare her. She wondered why he seemed so obsessed with such tricks, why he so often tried to say things in the hopes of making her react in some fearful or foolish way. He was almost three years older than her, and a boy—a different species altogether. But still she sensed in her brother a kind of insecurity, as though trying to scare her was not some cruel way to pass the time, but a vital means of proving something to himself. She wondered if all boys were like this, their meanness a self-defense.

And anyway, she knew he was a liar. The water would never eat their

## AMERICAN WAR

home. Maybe the rest of Louisiana, maybe the rest of the world, but never *their* home. Their home would remain on dry land, because that was the way it had always been.



AROUND DUSK, Benjamin's acquaintance, Alder Smith, arrived. He was five hours late. His plywood fishing skiff bobbed softly on the parting water, its outboard motor gurgling and coughing fumes. It was an archaic thing, but still faster and nimbler than the Sea-Toks, whose feeble, solar-fed motors barely beat the current.

It said something to own a vehicle that still ran on prohibition fuel; it spoke not only of accumulated wealth, but of connections, of status.

"Mornin'," Smith said as he ushered the boat to the foot of the Chestnuts' landing, throwing a loop of nylon around the docking pole. Like Benjamin, he was tall, but boasted broader shoulders and a full head of brown hair made copper by too much time in the sun. Before the war his father owned a dozen fossil car dealerships between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Those businesses were now long gone but the wealth they bore still lingered, and Smith lived a comfortable life on the other side of the river. Among the families that still dotted the flooded south of Louisiana and Mississippi, he was known as a facilitator, a man who had plenty of friends. He knew Free Southern State government men in Atlanta and the smugglers who ran the tunnels across the Mississippi-Arkansas line; he knew consuls in the federal offices that dotted the tamed and broken parts of the Union-aligned South. He even claimed to know the right-hand men of senators and congressmen in the federal capital in Columbus.

"Mornin'," Martina replied. "Come on up, we got some sandwiches left, coffee too."

"Thank you kindly, but we're already late. Come on, Ben. Blues don't like waiting."

Benjamin kissed his wife and children goodbye and stepped inside to kiss the feet of the ceramic Virgin. He descended to the river with great care so as to keep from slipping in the clay and dirtying his good pants. He carried with him his old leather briefcase and the half-ladder. His wife watched from the edge of the flat land.

“Dock south and walk into the city,” she told the men. “Don’t let any government people see that boat.”

Smith laughed and started the motor. “Don’t you worry,” he said. “This time next week you’ll be halfway to Chicago.”

“Just be good,” Martina said. “Be careful, I mean.”

The men pushed the skiff from the mud and pointed the hull north in the direction of Baton Rouge. The boat rumbled into the narrowing heart of the great brown river, twin spines of water rising and spreading in its wake.

## AMERICAN WAR

*Excerpted from:*

### **FEDERAL SYLLABUS GUIDELINES— HISTORY, MODULE EIGHT: THE SECOND CIVIL WAR**

#### **MODULE SUMMARY:**

The Second American Civil War took place between the years of 2074 and 2093. The war was fought between the Union and the secessionist states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina (as well as Texas, prior to the Mexican annexation). The primary cause of the war was Southern resistance to the Sustainable Future Act, a bill prohibiting the use of fossil fuels anywhere in the United States. The bill, championed by President Daniel Ki, was in part a response to decades of adverse climate effects, the waning economic importance of fossil fuels, and a deadly oil train derailment in Williston, North Dakota, in 2069.

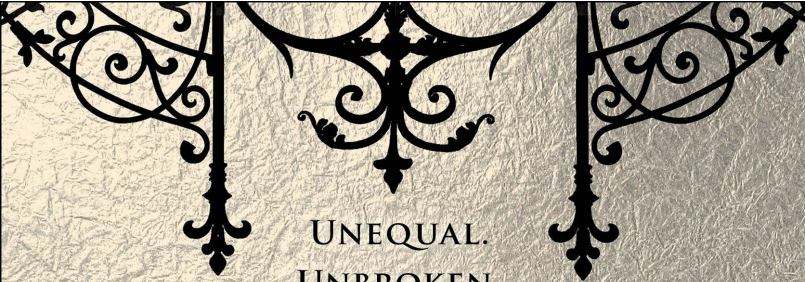
The war's key precipitating events include the assassination of President Ki by secessionist suicide bomber Julia Templestowe in Jackson, Mississippi, in December of 2073, and the deaths of Southern protesters in a shooting outside the Fort Jackson, South Carolina, military base in March of 2074.

The secessionist states (unified under the banner of "The Free Southern State") declared independence on October 1, 2074, the date often considered to mark the formal start of the war. Following a series of decisive Union military victories in the first five years of the war—primarily in East Texas and along the northern borders of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia ("The Mag")—the fighting largely subsided. However, rebel insurrectionist groups continued to engage in sporadic guerrilla violence for another half decade, aided in part by foreign agents and anti-American saboteurs. After a drawn-out negotiation process that was settled largely in the Union's favor, the war was set to formally conclude with the Reunification Day Ceremony in the federal capital of Columbus, Ohio, on July 3, 2093. On that day, a secessionist terrorist managed to

cross the border into Northern territory and release a biological agent (“The Reunification Plague”) that resulted in a nationwide epidemic. The effects of the plague, which claimed an estimated 110 million lives, was felt throughout much of the country for the next ten years. The identity of the terrorist responsible remains unknown.







UNEQUAL.  
UNBROKEN.

# GILDED CAGE



VIC JAMES

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Gilded Cage* by Vic James.

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## PROLOGUE

### LEAH

SHE HEARD THE MOTORBIKE FIRST, then the galloping horse—two distant points of noise in the darkness, converging on her as she ran.

Apart from her boots striking the ground, Leah wasn't making a sound, and neither was the baby she held close. But their pursuers didn't need to hear her to find them. The only place she could run to was Kyneston's perimeter wall, and the only hope of escape once she got there was the infant bundled in her arms: her daughter, Libby.

The moon was covered and revealed by high, rapid clouds, but the faint radiance of the wall shone steadily along the horizon. It was like the streak of hallway light beneath a bedroom door, comforting children waking from nightmares.

Was that what her life at Kyneston had become: a nightmare? It had once seemed to fulfil all of her dreams.

The roar of the bike engine was closer now and the thudding hooves had fallen behind. Her pursuers could only be Gavar and Jenner. Both were way off to the left, bearing down in a line that headed straight for her. But Leah had reached the wall first.

She slumped against it for a moment's relief. One hand rested on the ancient masonry as she dragged in a breath. The wall felt cool beneath her fingers. It was slick with moisture and furred with moss, jarring with the illusion of warmth from the unnaturally glowing brickwork. But that was the power of Skill for you. There was nothing natural about this place or the people that lived here.

Time to go.

"Please, my darling. Please," Leah whispered to her child, pulling aside the edge of the blanket she'd knitted and kissing Libby's silky head.

The baby fussed as Leah gently untangled an arm and took her small hand. Chest heaving with terror as much as exertion, Leah leant on the wall and pressed her baby's palm to it.

Where the tiny fingers touched the weatherbeaten brick, a greater brightness bloomed beneath them. As Leah watched, the luminescence spread, flowing through the mortar between the bricks. It was weak, but visible nonetheless. And—there!—the light jumped and climbed upward, stronger now, becoming firmer, sharper. It took on outlines: an upright, then an arch. The gate.

From the darkness nearby came a mechanical snarl. The motorbike engine being choked off then dying.

Then another sound broke into the night: a leisurely handclap. Leah recoiled as if it had been an actual slap.

Someone was waiting there. And as the tall, slender figure stepped into the spilling light she saw that—of course—it was him. Silyen. The youngest of the three Jardine brothers, but not the least. He brought them into

Kyneston, all those doing their days, and it was his Skill that kept them here on his family's estate. How could she have imagined he'd let her escape?

The slow applause stopped. One of the boy's narrow, nailbitten hands gestured at the vaulting ironwork.

"Be my guest," Silyen said, as if inviting mother and child in for tea. "I won't try and stop you. I'm rather fascinated to see what little Libby is capable of. You know I have...certain theories."

Leah's heart was pounding. He was the last one of them that she'd trust: the very last. Still, she had to take the offered chance, even if it was no more than a cat momentarily lifting its paw off a mouse's back.

She studied his face as if moonlight and Skill-light might reveal the truth of his intentions. And as Silyen met her eye for perhaps the very first time, Leah thought she glimpsed something. Was it curiosity? He wanted to see if Libby could open the gate. If she could, maybe he would let them both through. Purely for the satisfaction of seeing it—and just perhaps to spite his eldest brother.

"Thank you," she said, in little more than a whisper. "*Sapere aude?*"

"'Dare to know' indeed. You dare, and I will know."

Silyen smiled. Leah knew better than to mistake it for compassion or kindness.

She stepped forward and pressed Libby's hand to the faintly outlined gate, and beneath the baby's sticky fingers it blazed. Like molten metal flooding a casting mould, it bloomed with brilliant life: an efflorescence of ironwork, leaves and fantastical birds, all topped with the entwined

'J' and 'P'. It looked exactly as it had that day, four years before, when Leah arrived at Kyneston and it had swung open to admit her. Just as it had looked, no doubt, hundreds of years ago when it was first created.

But the gate remained shut. In desperation, Leah grabbed one of the wrought iron vines and pulled with all her strength. Libby began to wail loudly. But the din no longer mattered, Leah thought with dull hopelessness. They wouldn't be leaving Kyneston estate tonight.

"Ah, how interesting," Silyen murmured. "Your child—that is, my brother's child—has the blood to wake the gate, but not the Skill to command it. Unless, perhaps, she's trying to tell you she doesn't want to leave her family."

"You're not Libby's family," Leah spat, roused to fury by her fear, hugging her baby more tightly. Her fingers cramped from struggling with the unyielding metal. "Not Gavar, not any of y..."

A shot rang out and Leah fell to the ground crying aloud. Pain raced through her body as fast and bright as the light through the gate.

Gavar walked over unhurriedly and stood above her where she lay, tears leaking from her eyes. She had once loved this man: Kyneston's Heir, Libby's father. The gun was in his hand.

"I warned you," Gavar Jardine said. "No-one steals what's mine."

Leah didn't look at him. She turned her head, resting her cheek against the cold ground, and fixed her gaze instead on the blanketed bundle lying a few feet away. Libby was howling with hurt and outrage. Leah's heart

yearned to touch and soothe her daughter, but for some reason her arm no longer had the strength to reach even that short distance.

Hooves clattered to a halt nearby. A horse whickered and two booted heels hit the ground. And here came Jenner, the middle brother. The only one who might intend good, but who was powerless to act on those intentions.

“What are you doing, Gavar?” he shouted. “She’s not some animal you can just shoot. Is she hurt?”

As if in answer, Leah let out a keening sound that died in an airless gasp. Jenner hurried to kneel beside her and she felt him wipe the tears from her eyes. His fingers were gentle against her face.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “So sorry.”

In the dimness that gathered around her, which the shining gate did nothing to dispel, she saw Gavar tuck his gun beneath his coat before bending low and gathering up their daughter.

Silyen walked past, back towards the great house. As he went, Gavar turned his back and hunched over Libby protectively. Leah could only hope he would be a kinder father than he had been a lover.

“Silyen!” she heard Jenner call. He sounded distant, as if he stood in the Kyneston Pale calling across the lake, although she could still feel his palm cradling her cheek. “Silyen, wait! Can’t you do anything?”

“You know how it works,” came the response, so faint that Leah wondered if she imagined it. “No-one can bring back the dead. Not even me.”

“She’s not...”

But maybe Jenner trailed off. And Gavar had surely hushed Libby. And the gate must have faded away, its Skill-light extinguished, because everything went quiet and dark.

# ONE

## LUKE

IT WAS AN UNUSUALLY HOT WEEKEND in mid-June and sweat pooled along Luke Hadley's spine as he lay on his stomach on a blanket in the front garden. He was staring blankly at a spread of textbooks. The screaming was distracting, and had been going on for a while now.

If it had been Abigail trying to revise, Daisy and her pals would never have been allowed to make such a racket. But Mum had inexplicably gone into overdrive for Daisy's birthday, which had turned into the Party of the Century. Luke's little sis and her friends were careering round behind the house shrieking at the tops of their voices, while some unforgivably awful C-pop boyband blared through the living room window.

Luke stuffed his earbuds in as deep as they'd go without rupturing anything, and turned up the volume on his own music. It didn't work. The catchy beat of 'Happy Panda' was backed by the delirious vocals of 10-year-old girls massacring the Chinese language. Moaning, he let his face fall forwards onto the books spread out on the grass in front of him. He knew who he'd be blaming when he failed History and Citizenship.

Beside him, her own exams long since completed, Abi was lost in one of her favourite trashy novels. Luke gave it the side-eye and cringed at the title: ‘Her Master’s Slave’. She was nearly finished, and had another pastel-covered horror lined up. ‘The Heir’s Temptation’. How someone as smart as his big sister could read such rubbish was beyond him.

Still, at least it kept her distracted. Uncharacteristically, Abi hadn’t nagged him once about revision, even though this term’s tests were the most important until he finished school in two years’ time. He turned back to the mock exam paper. The words swam before his eyes.

“Describe the Equal Revolution of 1642 and explain how it led to the Slavedays Compact. Analyse the role of (i) Charles I, the Last King (ii) Lycus Parva the Regicide, and (iii) Cadmus Parva-Jardine, the Pure-in-Heart.”

Luke grunted in disgust and rolled onto his back. Those stupid Equal names seemed designed to confuse. And who really cared why the slavedays had begun, hundreds of years ago? All that mattered was that they’d never ended. Everyone in Britain—except their Skilled aristocratic masters—still had to give up a decade of their life, labouring in the grim slavetowns that shadowed every major city.

Movement caught his eye and he sat up, scenting distraction. A stranger had walked up the driveway and was peering through the windows of Dad’s car. This wasn’t unusual. Luke jumped up and went over.

“Brilliant, isn’t it?” he told the guy. “It’s an Austin-Healey, more than fifty years old. My Dad restored it—he’s a mechanic—and I helped. It took us more than a year.

I could probably do most of it myself now, he's taught me so much."

"Is that right? Well, I reckon you'll be sorry to see it go, then."

"See it go?" Luke was nonplussed. "It's not going anywhere."

"Eh? But this is the address in the advert."

"Can I help?" Abi had appeared at Luke's shoulder. She nudged him gently. "You get back to your revision, little bro. I'll handle this."

Luke was about to tell her not to bother, that the man had made a mistake, when a stampede of small girls hurtled around the house and thundered toward them.

"Daisy!" Abi yelled, repressively. "You're not to play round the front. I don't want anyone tearing into the road and getting run over."

Daisy trotted over to join them. She wore a large orange badge with a sparkly '10' on it, and a sash across her chest bearing the words 'Birthday Girl.'

"Honestly." Daisy folded her arms. "It was only for a minute, Abi."

The man who'd come about the car was looking at Daisy intently. He'd better not be some kind of pervert.

"Birthday girl, is it?" he said, reading the sash. "You're 10? I see..."

His face went funny for a moment, with some expression Luke couldn't work out. Then he looked at the three of them standing there. It wasn't a threatening look, but it made Luke put his arm round his little sis and draw her closer.

“Tell you what,” the man said. “I’ll give your dad a call some other time. You enjoy your party, young lady. Have your fun while you can.”

He nodded at Daisy, then turned and ambled off down the driveway.

“Weird,” said Daisy, expansively. Then she gave a warwhoop and led her pals in a prancing, cheering conga back round the rear of the house.

‘Weird’ was the word, Luke thought. In fact, the entire day had felt not quite right.

But it wasn’t until he lay awake in bed that night that it all came together. Selling the car. The fuss over Daisy’s birthday. The suspicious absence of nagging over his own exam revision.

When he heard hushed conversation floating up from the kitchen, and padded downstairs to find his parents and Abi sat at the table studying paperwork, Luke knew he was right.

“When were you planning on telling me and Daisy?” he said from the doorway, deriving a grim satisfaction from their confusion. “At least you let the poor kid blow out the candles on her cake before your big reveal. ‘Happy Birthday, darling. Mummy and Daddy have a surprise: they’re abandoning you to do their slavedays.’”

The three of them looked back at him in silence. On the tabletop, Dad’s hand reached for Mum’s. Parental solidarity—never a good sign.

“So what’s the plan? That Abi’s going to look after me and Daisy? How will she do that when she’s at med school?”

“Sit down, Luke.”

Dad was an easygoing man, but his voice was unusually firm. That was the first alarm.

Then as he stepped into the room Luke noticed the documents Abi was hastily shuffling into a pile. A suspiciously large pile. The uppermost sheet bore Daisy's date of birth.

Understanding slid into Luke's brain and lodged its sharp point there.

"It's not just you, is it?" he croaked. "It's all of us. Now that Daisy's turned ten, it's legal. You're taking us with you. We're all going to do our slavedays."

He could hardly say the last word. It stole the breath from his chest.

In an instant, the slavedays had gone from being a dull exam question, to the next decade of Luke's life. Ripped away from everyone and everything he knew. Sent to Manchester's filthy, unforgiving slavetown, Millmoor.

"You know what they say." Luke was unsure whether he was berating his parents or begging them. "'Do your slavedays too old, you'll never get through them. Do your slavedays too young, you'll never get over them.' What part of that don't you understand? Nobody does days at my age, let alone Daisy's."

"It's not a decision your mother and I have taken lightly," Dad replied, keeping his voice steady.

"We only want the best for you all," Mum said. "And we believe this is it. You're too young to appreciate it now, but life is different for those who've done their days. It gives you opportunities—better opportunities than your father and I had."

Luke knew what she meant. You weren't a full citizen until you'd completed your slavedays, and only citizens could hold certain jobs, own a house, or travel abroad. But jobs and houses were unimaginably far off, and ten years of servitude in exchange for a few weeks of foreign holidays didn't seem much of a trade.

His parents' reasonableness knifed Luke with betrayal. This wasn't something his parents just got to choose, like new curtains for the living room. This was Luke's life. About which they'd made a huge decision without consulting him.

Though they had, apparently, consulted Abi.

"As she's eighteen," Dad said, following Luke's gaze, "Abigail is of age to make up her own mind. And obviously your mum and I are delighted that she's decided to come with us. In fact, she's done rather more than that."

Dad put his arm round Abi's shoulders and squeezed proudly. What had the girl-wonder done now?

"Are you serious?" Luke asked his sister. "You've been offered a place at three different medical schools, and you're turning them down to spend the next decade saying *nin-hao* every five minutes in Millmoor's Bank of China call centre? Or maybe they'll put you in the textiles factory. Or the meat-packing plant."

"Cool it, little bro," Abi said. "I've deferred my offers. And I'm not going to Millmoor. None of us are. Do what Dad says: sit down, and I'll explain."

Still furious, but desperate to know how you could do days without going to Millmoor, Luke complied. And he listened with a mixture of admiration and horror as Abi told him what she'd done.

It was insane. It was terrifying.

It was still slavedays, and because he was under 18 it wasn't like Luke had a choice one way or the other. His parents could take him wherever they wanted.

But at least they weren't taking him to the hellhole that was Millmoor.

Mum and Dad told Daisy the next morning, and she accepted the news with a stoicism that made Luke ashamed. For the first time he allowed himself to think that maybe his parents' plan was the right one, and that they'd all get through their days just fine, as a family.

A few days later, once it had all sunk in, he told his best friend, Simon. Si let out a low whistle at the big reveal.

"There's a department within the Labour Allocation Bureau called Estates Services, where the Equals go for their house-slaves," Luke said. "Abi made an application for us there. We're being sent to Kyneston."

"Even I've heard of Kyneston." Si was incredulous. "That's the Jardines. The top of the lot. Lord Jardine is the scary dude who was Chancellor when we were little. What on earth do they want you for?"

"I've no idea," Luke admitted.

The paperwork had detailed roles for Mum, Dad and Abi: as the Estate nurse, Kyneston's vehicle mechanic, and something secretarial. But no assignment was specified for Luke and Daisy—presumably because they were minors, Abi explained. They might not have a particular job, but simply do tasks on an as-needed basis.

Luke had caught himself imagining what those things could be. Scrubbing the mansion's gold-plated toilets,

perhaps. Or how about waiting on the Equals at dinner, hair combed and white gloves on, spooning peas from a silver tureen? None of it appealed.

“And Daisy,” Si continued. “What use do the Jardines have for a kid that little? What use have they got for a nurse, come to that. I thought the Equals used their Skill to heal themselves.”

Luke thought the same, but Abi, ever willing to clarify and correct, pointed out that nobody really knew what the Equals could do with their Skill, which was why it was particularly exciting to be going to an estate. Daisy had nodded so hard in agreement it was a wonder her head didn't fall off. Luke doubted even the Equals could fix that.

With twelve days to go, the bloke who'd turned up asking about the car came back. Luke watched his father hand over the keys and had to turn away, blinking. He was not going to start crying over a car, of all things.

But he knew it wasn't the vehicle he was mourning, so much as what it represented. Bye-bye, driving lessons in the autumn. So long, independence. Won't be seeing you in a hurry, best years of my life.

Abi tried to cheer him up, but a few days later it was his turn to see her silhouetted in the kitchen doorway, her head bowed and shoulders shaking. She held a torn envelope in her hand. It was her exam results. He'd forgotten all about them.

At first he thought she hadn't achieved the grades she hoped for. But when he hugged her, Abi showed him the slip of paper. Perfect marks, granting her admission to every university to which she'd applied. Luke realised

then how much his big sister was giving up by coming with them.

Departure Day minus two was open house for friends and family to say their farewells, and Mum and Dad threw a subdued party that evening. Luke spent the day hunkered down with the console and his favourite games, because there'd be no more of those either, where they were going. (How did slaves entertain themselves at Kyneston—playing charades round the piano? Or maybe there was no down time. Maybe you worked until you dropped, then slept, then got up and did it all over again, every day for a decade.)

Then the day itself arrived, sunny and beautiful—of course.

Luke sat on the garden wall, watching his family going about its last bits of business. Mum had emptied the fridge and gone round to the neighbours with an offering of leftovers. Dad was dropping off a final box of essentials with a friend a few streets away, who would take it to the storage depot to join the rest of the family's possessions.

The girls sunbathed on the grass, Daisy pestering her sister with questions and repeating back the answers.

“Lord Whittam Jardine, Lady Thalia, Heir Gavar,” Daisy parroted. “Jenner. And I can't remember that last one. His name's too silly.”

“You're halfway there,” said Abi, smiling. “It's *Sillyun*. He's the youngest, somewhere between me and Luke. There's no Jardine as little as you. And it's *Jardeen* and *Kye-neston*, like ‘eye’. They won't want to hear our northern vowels down south.”

Daisy rolled her eyes and threw herself back down on the grass. Abi stretched out her long legs and tucked the bottom of her t-shirt underneath her bra to catch some sun. Luke devoutly hoped she wouldn't be doing that at Kyneston.

"I'm gonna miss that fit sister of yours," Si said in Luke's ear, startling him. Luke turned to look at his friend, who'd come to see him off. "You make sure your lords and masters don't go getting any funny ideas about their entitlements."

"I dunno," Luke muttered. "You've seen the books she reads. I reckon it might be them that need protecting."

Simon laughed. They exchanged an awkward shoulder-bump and backslap, but Luke stayed sitting on the wall, Si standing on the pavement.

"I hear the Equal girls are hot," he said, elbowing Luke.

"Got that on good authority, have you?"

"Hey, at least you'll get to see them. At Millmoor my Uncle Jim says all the workplaces are single sex, so the only women you hang out with are your own family. It's a right dump, that place."

Si spat expressively. "Jimmy got back from there a few weeks ago. We've not told anyone yet, because he's not leaving the house and doesn't want folk coming round. He's a broken man. I mean, literally. He was in an accident and now his arm—"

Simon folded up one elbow and flapped his wrist. The effect was ridiculous, but Luke didn't feel like laughing.

"He got hit by a forklift, or something. He's not said much about it. In fact, he hardly says anything at all. He's

my da's little brother but he looks about ten years older. Nah, I'm staying out of Millmoor as long as I can, and I reckon you've scored a right cushy number."

Si looked up and down the street. Looked anywhere but at Luke.

His best friend had run out of things to say, Luke realised. They'd hung out together for nearly twelve years, playing, pranking and copying homework off each other since their first week at primary school. And all that ended here.

"Don't go thinking those Equals are folk like us," Si said, with one last effort at conversation. "They're not. They're freaks. I still remember our field-trip to that parliament of theirs, that House of Light. The guide banging on about what a masterpiece it was, all built by Skill, but it gave me the creeps. You remember those windows? Dunno what was going on inside, but it didn't look like 'inside' any place I've ever seen. Yeah, you watch yourself. And that sister of yours."

Si managed a half-hearted wink at Abi, and Luke cringed. His friend was a complete liability.

Luke wouldn't see him for an entire decade.

Abi wouldn't hear Si's innuendo ever again, because he'd probably be married with kids by the time they all made it back to Manchester. He'd have a job. New friends. He'd be making his way in the world. Everything that made up Luke's universe right now would be gone, fast-forwarded ten years, while Luke himself stayed still.

The unfairness of it all made him suddenly, violently, furious and Luke smashed his hand down on the wall so

hard he took the skin off his palm. As he yelped, Si finally looked at him, and Luke saw pity in his eyes.

“Awright, then,” Si said. “I’ll be off. You have a quick ten years.”

Luke watched him go, the last part of his old life, walking away round the corner and out of sight.

Then because there was nothing else left to do, he went and joined his sisters, stretching out on the lawn in the sun. Daisy lolled against him, her head resting heavily on his ribs as he breathed in and out. He closed his eyes and listened to the noise of the TV from the house on the other side; the rumble of traffic from the main road; bird-song; Mum telling Dad that she wasn’t sure whether she’d packed enough sandwiches for the five-hour journey to Kyneston.

Something small crawled out of the grass and crept across his neck until he swatted it. Luke wondered if he could sleep away the next ten years, like someone in a fairy tale, and wake to find that his days were over and done.

Then Dad’s voice, officious, and Mum saying “Get up, kids. It’s time.”

The Jardines hadn’t sent a chauffeur-driven Rolls for them, of course. Just a plain old silver-grey saloon car. Dad was showing their papers to its driver, a woman whose sweater was embroidered with the labour bureau’s initials.

“Five of you?” the lady was saying, frowning at the documents. “I’ve only got four names here.”

Mum stepped forward, wearing her most reassuring face.

“Well our youngest, Daisy, wasn’t quite ten when we did the paperwork, but she is now, which is probably...”

“Daisy? Nope, I’ve got her down.” The woman read from the top sheet on her clipboard. “HADLEY, Steven, Jacqueline, Abigail and Daisy. Collection: 11am from 28 Hawthornden Road, Manchester. Destination: Kyneston estate, Hampshire.”

“What?”

Mum snatched the clipboard, Abi craning over her shoulder to look at it.

Anxiety and a mad kind of hope knotted their fingers in Luke’s guts and pulled in opposite directions. The paperwork had been botched up. He had a reprieve. Maybe he wouldn’t have to do his days at all.

Another vehicle turned into the street, a bulky black minivan with an insignia blazoned across the bonnet. They all knew that symbol, and the words curled underneath: *Labore et honore*. Millmoor’s town motto.

“Ah, my colleagues,” said the woman, visibly relieved. “I’m sure they’ll be able to clarify.”

“Look,” hissed Abi, pointing to something in the papers.

The van pulled up in front of the house and a thickset man, hair buzzed almost to his scalp, got out. He wasn’t wearing the LAB outfit, but something that looked more like a police uniform. A truncheon hung from a utility belt at his waist and knocked against his leg as he walked over.

“Luke Hadley?” he said, stopping in front of Luke. “Guess that’s you, sonny. Grab your bag, we’ve got another four to pick up.”

“What does this mean?” Abi asked the LAB woman, thrusting the clipboard under her face.

Several sheets were curled back and Luke recognised the face in the photo now uppermost as his own. The page was scored by a thick red line, with two words stamped across it.

“What does it mean?” The woman laughed nervously. “Well, ‘Surplus: reassign,’ explains itself, surely? Kyneston estate has been unable to find any useful activity for your brother, so his file was returned to us for reassignment. As an unqualified solo male, there’s really only one option.”

Anxiety had won the tug-of-war, and was hauling Luke’s guts out length by length, helped along by fear. He wasn’t needed at Kyneston. They were taking him to Millmoor.

“No,” he said, backing away. “No, there’s been a mistake. We’re a family.”

Dad stepped protectively in front of him.

“My son comes with us.”

“The paperwork says otherwise,” the LAB woman piped up.

“Stuff your paperwork,” Mum snarled.

And then it all happened horribly quickly. When the uniformed guy from Millmoor reached round Dad to grab Luke’s arm, Dad swung a fist at his face. It connected with the man’s jaw and he swore, stumbling backwards, his hands scrabbling at his belt.

They all saw the truncheon come down and Daisy screamed. The baton whacked Dad round the side of the head and he fell to his knees on the driveway, groaning. Blood trickled from his temple, reddening the little patch where his hair was going grey. Mum gasped and knelt beside him, checking the injury.

“You animal,” she yelled. “Blunt force trauma can kill if the brain swells.”

Daisy burst into tears. Luke wrapped his arms round her, pressing her face against his side and holding her tight.

“I’ll report you,” said Abi, jabbing a finger at the Millmoor man. She peered at the name emblazoned on his uniform. “Who do you think you are, Mr Kessler? You can’t just assault people.”

“How right you are, young lady.” Kessler’s lips drew back across a wide, teeth-filled grin. “But I’m afraid that as of 11am”—he checked his watch ostentatiously, rotating his wrist outwards so they could all see the dial, which showed 11:07—“you all began your slavedays and entered a state of legal non-personhood. You are now chattels of the state. To explain for the little one here, that means that you are no longer ‘people’ and have no rights at all. *At. All.*”

Abi gasped and Mum made a low moan, pressing her hand to her mouth.

“Yes,” the man continued, with that thin-lipped smile. “People don’t tend to think about that when they’re making their arrangements. Particularly not when they think they’re something special, too good to slave alongside the rest of us. So you have a choice.”

His hand went to the belt and unclipped something. It looked like a child’s drawing of a gun: blocky and intimidating.

“This fires 50,000 volts and can incapacitate each one of you. Then we load you into the car, along with your bags. You four in there, and you”—he pointed to Luke,

then to the van—"in there. Or you can all just get in the correct vehicle. Simple."

You could appeal these sorts of things, couldn't you?

Abi had got them all into Kyneston. She'd be able to get him out of Millmoor. Of course she would. She'd wear down the labour bureau by force of paperwork alone.

Luke couldn't let anyone else in his family get hurt.

He loosened his arms from around Daisy and gave her a gentle push away.

"Luke, no!" his little sis yelled, trying to cling more tightly.

"Here's what we'll do, Dozy," Luke told her, kneeling down and wiping the tears from her cheeks. "I'm going to Millmoor. You are going to Kyneston, where you'll be so super-special-amazing that when you tell them you've got a brother who's even more awesome, who somehow got left behind, they will send their private jet to come and fetch me. You understand?"

Daisy looked too traumatised to speak, but she nodded.

"Mum, Dad, don't worry." Dad made a choking noise and Mum broke out in noisy sobs as he embraced them both. "It's just for now."

He couldn't keep up this act much longer. If he didn't get in that van quickly, he'd completely lose it. He felt empty inside, just bitter black terror washing around like dregs in the bottom of his stomach.

"I'll see you all soon," he said, with a confidence he didn't feel.

Then he picked up his duffel bag and turned toward the minivan.

“Aren’t you the little hero,” sneered Kessler, slamming open the vehicle side. “I’m weeping here. Get in, Hadley E-1031, and let’s get going.”

The baton hit Luke hard between the shoulder blades and he sprawled forward. He had the presence of mind to pull up his feet before the door banged shut, then was thrown back against the seat legs as the van pulled away.

Face down on the filthy vehicle floor, pressed against strangers’ stinking boots, Luke didn’t see how anything could be more awful than what had just happened.

Millmoor would prove him wrong.

## TWO

### SILYEN

EARLY SEPTEMBER SUNLIGHT STREAMED through the oriel window of Kyneston's Small Solar, throwing a thick golden cloth over the breakfast table. It turned the silverware arrayed in front of Silyen Jardine into a constellation of stars. The fruit bowl in the centre, a dazzling sun, was piled high with pears. They were freshly cut from the trees in Aunt Euterpe's garden. He pulled the dish toward him and selected a russet-and-green specimen.

With a sharp, ivory-handled knife he cut into the pear. It was ripe and he watched the juice bleed out onto the plate before wiping his fingers.

Before he even reached for his coffee cup, the footman who stood one pace behind and to his left was pouring a steaming black stream into it from a burnished pot. Gavar, his eldest brother, may once have blacked a house-slave's eye for bringing him burnt toast, but the staff was quickest of all to serve the Young Master. Silyen found this fact gratifying. That it incensed Gavar was a bonus.

As usual, however, Silyen and his mother Lady Thalia were the only people in the Small Solar at this hour. As was also customary, there were at least half a dozen slaves

going to and fro with the breakfast things. He watched them absently. So much bustle, all of it so unnecessary.

And today Mama was adding yet more to their number.

“An entire family?” he said, sensing that some comment was expected of him. “Really?”

Staffing was Jenner’s domain. Their mother believed it was important to give his middle brother a sense of usefulness and value within the family. Silyen suspected that Jenner knew all too well how his family truly regarded him. He’d have to be stupid not to, as well as Skillless.

Across the table, Mama was nibbling a brioche as she leafed through some sheets bearing the Labour Allocation Bureau letterhead.

“The woman is the reason the bureau sent us their papers. She’s a nurse with extensive experience of long-term care, so she’ll take over looking after your aunt. The man is handy with vehicles and restores classic cars, so he can fix up some of those wrecks your father and Gavar insist on collecting. And they’re just starting their days, not coming from one of the worktowns, so they won’t”—she paused, searching for the right phrase—“won’t have picked up any faulty notions.”

“Won’t have learned to hate us, you mean.” Silyen looked at his mother with dark eyes just like hers, from under the dark curling hair that was also characteristic of his maternal ancestors, the Parvas. “You said it was a family, so what about the children?”

Lady Thalia waved dismissively, causing one of the maids to step forward for instructions before realising her mistake and stepping back again. The slaves that trailed

around after the Jardines performed this tiresome dance of servility many times daily.

“Well, there’s a clever girl of eighteen. Jenner’s been asking for extra help in the Family Office, so I’m assigning her to him.”

“Eighteen? Are you going to tell them what happened to the last girl who came to Kyneston at eighteen to do her days?”

His mother’s immaculate make-up hid any rising colour, but Silyen saw the documents flutter in her hand.

“You shouldn’t speak like that. I could cry right now when I think of that poor girl. Such a terrible accident—and for it to have been your brother that shot her. He’s still distraught. I believe he loved her very much, foolish infatuation though it was. That dear little baby without a mother or a family.”

Silyen’s lips twitched. It was just as well Gavar wasn’t present to hear that disavowal of his child. The infant had grudgingly been permitted the Jardine surname—there was no denying her parentage, after all. Her shock of copper-coloured hair proclaimed her clear kinship to Gavar and their father, Whittam. But the child had no other privileges of blood.

“I’m thinking these nice people could look after it,” his mother continued.

Ordinarily, Silyen took a lively interest in his eldest brother’s illegitimate child. Though slave-born bastards weren’t unheard of among the great families, they were usually cast out along with with the offending mother. Fortunately, Leah’s death had prevented that from hap-

pening with little Libby, giving Silyen the opportunity to study her at close quarters.

As the child wasn't born to two Equal parents, the laws of heredity deemed she would be Skillless. But you never knew. Silyen was intrigued by what had happened at the gate the night Leah had tried to run. And curious things had happened at Kyneston before—like Jenner's lack of Skill, despite his parents' impeccable pedigree.

Libby's childcare arrangements, however, interested Silyen rather less. He had other things on his mind today.

Soon, the Chancellor would arrive at Kyneston: Winterbourne Zelston himself. Zelston was coming to visit Mama's sister, to whom he had been engaged in their youth. They still were engaged, presumably, as Zelston was both too in love and too guilty to break it off. But Aunt Euterpe was in no position to walk down the aisle. For the last twenty-five years she had been in no position to do anything at all, apart from breathe and sleep.

Well, Silyen had some news about that to share. Zelston would find this visit memorable.

Impatience burned within him. His leg was jiggling beneath the table and he pressed his palm down on his knee to still it. On days like this Silyen could feel his Skill thrumming through him, seeking an outlet. Channelling Skill was akin to playing the violin. That moment when the string's vibrations burst forth as music: exquisite, irresistible music. He ached to use it.

He didn't understand how his family could go through life seemingly untroubled by this constant need. Did not understand how Jenner, without Skill, could bear to live at all.

“They look like honest, dependable people,” Mother was saying, dabbing crumbs from her mouth without smearing her lipstick. “They arrive around four o’clock, so you’ll be needed. Jenner will get them settled in. Here, take a look.”

She slid a photograph across the polished walnut expanse of the breakfast table. It showed five people on a windswept English beach. A middle-aged man with receding hair and a proud smile had his arm around a trim woman in a zip-up top. In front of them stood a small girl, freckled and pulling a face at the camera. Flanking the trio were two older children. There was a tall girl with long sandy hair twisted in a plait, caught in the act of deciding whether or not to smile, and a blond boy, embarrassed and grinning.

The older girl didn’t look like Gavar’s type, which was a relief. The boy earned a second glance. He appeared to be around Silyen’s age, which raised interesting possibilities.

“How old is the son?”

“Nearly seventeen, I think. But he’s not coming. I simply couldn’t think of a thing he could usefully do. And, you know, boys of that age can be so difficult and disruptive. Not you, though, my darling. Never you.”

Lady Thalia raised her tiny teacup in a salute to her favourite son—albeit there wasn’t much competition. Silyen smiled back serenely. It was frustrating, though, that the boy was not coming. Perhaps one of his sisters would prove suitable, instead.

“I can’t imagine there’s anything the youngest can usefully do, either.”

“I quite agree. But Jenner insisted. He wanted the whole family, said we couldn’t split up parents and children. So I met him halfway and said we’d take the little girl, but not the boy. He still wasn’t happy, but he knows my word is final. I worry that because of the way he is, he identifies overly much with these sorts of people. It’s not something your father and I wish to encourage.”

Jenner’s unfortunate deficiency and his inappropriate sympathy for the commoners were another well-worn topic of conversation, so Silyen transferred his attention back to the pear on his plate. Its dissection was almost complete when the doorbell jangled from the hallway beyond, horribly echoed by a strangled howl.

Great-Aunt Hypatia must have brought her pet. As Silyen listened, the howl gave way to low whining. It would be a mercy to kill the creature one of these days—though it might be more amusing to set it free.

“That’ll be the Chancellor and your great-aunt,” said Lady Thalia, quickly checking her appearance in a silver cream jug before rising. “Your father’s got her down to talk about Gavar’s wedding. When she heard Winterbourne was coming here too, she invited herself into his state car for the journey. Only Hypatia would cadge a lift from the most powerful man in the land.”

Their visitors waited just inside Kyneston’s carved oak door. Chancellor Winterbourne Zelston cut a stately figure, while Great-Aunt Hypatia was resplendent in fox furs, every one from an animal she’d hunted herself. A third filthy shape lay between them, its thin sides heaving. It scratched occasionally, as if at fleas, though more

likely at the sores that badged its protruding ribs. Its nails were untrimmed and curled under, snagging the drugget flooring.

“Milord Chancellor,” Lady Thalia said, dropping a curtsy.

As the Chancellor nodded acknowledgement, sunlight from the vast windows of the Great Hall caught the beads ornamenting the neat cornrows of his hair, casting bright spangles across Kyneston’s walls. Silyen suspected the man had long cultivated the art of positioning himself for such effects.

Zelston clasped Lady Thalia’s hand, platinum rings gleaming on his dark fingers. An immaculate starched white cuff peeped out beneath the rich black fabric of his coat. His dress suggested a man of absolutes. But his politics were less clear-cut. Father, the previous incumbent of the Chancellor’s Chair, would issue frequent dinner table diatribes on its current occupant’s shortcomings.

“It’s an honour to be back at Kyneston,” Zelston murmured. “I regret that parliamentary business has kept me away so long. I have missed my visits.”

“And my sister Euterpe has missed you,” Mama replied. “I am sure of it, though we cannot truly know. Please do go through to her.”

The Chancellor wasted no time. He issued a clipped “Good day” to Great-Aunt Hypatia, then strode toward the inner recesses of the house. Silyen pushed off from the wall to follow him, stepping carefully over the quivering creature. He gave his great-aunt her customary greeting, which is to say none at all.

The Chancellor needed no directions as they passed through the wide passageway lined with Jardine and Parva family portraits. He had been visiting Kyneston since before Silyen was born.

At the end of the passage were two doors. The left revealed a plainly-painted room containing an ebony piano, a spinet, and shelves packed with scores. Silyen's music room, where he practised rather more than music.

Zelston, of course, ignored it. He reached for the familiar handle of the second, closed door then paused and turned. Against his dark skin, the man's eyes appeared bloodshot. Had he wept, when he'd read Silyen's letter?

"If you have lied to me," Zelston said, hoarsely, "I will break you."

Silyen suppressed a smirk. This was more like it.

The Chancellor's eyes searched his face, looking for—what? Fear? Indignation? Falsity? Silyen was silent, inviting him to take a good look. Zelston grunted then opened the door.

Almost nothing in Aunt Euterpe's chamber had changed during Silyen's lifetime—including the woman who occupied it. She lay in the wide white bed, her long hair brushed out across the pillows. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was steady and even.

The room's latticed windows were kept latched open. They overlooked a small formal garden. The tops of tall hollyhocks and bobbing agapanthus brushed the sill, and wisteria wound around the casement as if trying to pull the great house down. Beyond was the orchard. Pear trees were espaliered against the red brick wall, limbs spread as carefully as those of a knifethrower's assistant.

A side table held an array of bottles and a porcelain ewer and basin. Beside the table was a single straight-backed chair. Zelston lowered himself heavily into it, as if his body were the most burdensome thing in the world. The covers were drawn up to the sleeper's chest, and one nightgowned arm lay on top of the bedcovers. As Silyen watched, the Chancellor seized the exposed pale hand between both of his and held it tighter than any nurse would have permitted.

"You received my letter, then," he told Zelston's bowed head. "You know what I'm offering. And you know my price."

"Your price is too high," the Chancellor replied, not releasing Aunt Euterpe's hand. "We have nothing to discuss."

The man's vehemence told Silyen everything he needed to know.

"Oh please," he said, mildly, walking round the bed to stand in Zelston's line of sight. "There's nothing you wouldn't give for this, and we both know it."

"It'd cost me my position," said the Chancellor, condescending to meet Silyen's gaze. "Did your father put you up to this? He can't take the Chancellorship a second time, you know."

Silyen shrugged. "Which is the greater tragedy: a lost career or a lost love? You strike me as a better man than that. I'm sure my aunt thought so."

The room was still. The only sound was a buzzing, then the audible knock of a pollen-drugged bee against the windowpane.

“She’s lain like this for 25 years,” said Zelston. “Since the day Orpen Mote burned to the ground. I’ve tried to bring her out of it; your mother has tried, and even your father. Those most Skilled at mindwork have attempted it, and failed. And you stand there, a 17-year-old boy, and tell me that you can do it. Why should I believe you?”

“Because I’ve been where she is. All I need do is lead her back.”

“And where is she?”

“You know that.” Silyen smiled. It was his mother’s smile—which meant that it was Aunt Euterpe’s, too, given the close family resemblance. Zelston must hate that. “She’s right where you left her.”

Zelston surged from the chair, which fell to the ground with a bang loud enough to wake the dead—though not, of course, the woman in the bed. He grabbed the worn velvet lapels of Silyen’s riding jacket, which was an unanticipated development. Silyen heard the fabric tear. He was overdue a new jacket anyway. The Chancellor’s breath was hot on his face.

“You are vile,” the man spat. “Monstrous child of a monstrous father.”

Zelston thrust Silyen back against the casement, and the rattle of his skull hitting the leaded glass sent birds startling from the trees.

“I’m the only one who can give you your heart’s desire,” said Silyen, annoyed at how reedy his voice sounded, though a man’s fist around your windpipe would do that. “And I don’t ask for much in return.”

The Chancellor made a noise of revulsion and released his grip. As Silyen straightened his ripped collar with dignity, the older man spoke.

“The Chancellor’s Proposal allows me, each year, to set one new law before our Parliament for discussion at the three Great Debates. And you ask that this year, I abuse that prerogative by proposing the abolition of the slavedays, the foundation of our country’s social order. I know that a handful among our Equals believe that the days are somehow wrong, and not merely the natural order of things. But I would never have thought you one of them.

“You must know that such a Proposal would never pass. Not even your own father and brother would vote for it. Them least of all. And such a Proposal wouldn’t merely ruin me—it risks ruining the country. If word gets out to the commoners, who knows what might happen? It could shatter Britain’s peace.

“I will give you anything within my power. I can have one of the childless appoint you their Heir. As Heir of an estate, then Lord, you’d have a seat of your own in Parliament and a shot at the Chancellorship one day—something you’ll never achieve as Lord Jardine’s third son. But this makes no sense. No sense at all.”

Silyen looked at the man in front of him. Zelston’s dark face was shiny with sweat, his immaculate white silk cravat askew. It was remarkable how much emotion the Chancellor was displaying. Was that a politician’s habit, all for show? Or were some people really subject to such constant storms of feeling? Gavar was, Silyen supposed. It must be exhausting.

He gestured to the overturned chair by the bedside and it flipped back onto four legs. Gratifyingly, Zelston took the cue and sat down. The Chancellor bowed his head and ran his fingers along his knotted braids. His posture suggested prayer. Though praying for what, to whom, Silyen couldn't imagine.

“Here's a question for you, Chancellor: What is Skill?”

He knew that Zelston had been a lawyer. This was before his elder sister's early death elevated him from spare to Heir, at which point an unsuspected political ambition revealed itself. Lawyers liked questions—and even more, they liked supplying smart answers.

Zelston looked up warily from between his fingers and obliged. He used the pedantic formulas crafted by scholars centuries ago.

“It's an ability, origin unknown, manifesting in a very small fraction of the population and passed down through our bloodlines. Some talents are universal, such as the restoration of self and others—that is, healing. Other abilities, such as alteration, compulsion and perception, manifest in differing degrees from person to person.”

“Magic, you could say?” Silyen offered.

He watched the Chancellor wince. It was an unfashionable word, but Silyen thought it a good one. How dry and ill-defined those traditional categories were! Skill was not a parcelling-up of small talents. It was a radiance that lit the veins of every Equal.

But he needed to speak to the Chancellor in a language the man understood: that of politics.

“Perhaps you could say that Skill is what separates us”—he pointed to himself and Zelston—“from them.”

He indicated the window, beyond which two garden slaves were grumbling about apple weevils. “But tell me this: When was the last time you used your Skill, beyond healing a papercut when opening a letter, or exercising a little persuasion in political matters? When did you last use your Skill to actually do anything?”

“We have slaves to do things,” Zelston said, dismissively. “The whole purpose of the slavedays is to free us to govern. And you want to dismantle it?”

“But many countries are governed by commoners: France, where the people rose up against the Skilled aristocracy and slaughtered them in the streets of Paris. Or China, where our kind retired to mountain monasteries long ago. Or the Union States of America, which deems us enemy aliens and bars us from their ‘land of the free,’ though their cousins in the Confederate States live as we do. Government is not what defines us, Chancellor. Nor is power. Nor wealth. Skill is what defines us. The slavedays have made us forget that.”

Zelston stared at him, then rubbed his eyes. He showed all the signs of a man about to give in. Despite his fine words about the country’s peace, he was going to toss it all away for a chance to regain the lost love of his youth. It was almost admirable, if one were inclined to admire such things. Silyen was not.

“And you think this Proposal will somehow remind us?”

“I think it will help,” Silyen said.

Which was true, as far as it went.

Zelston let his hooded gaze drop to Aunt Euterpe’s face; reached out and stroked her hair.

“Very well. I will lay this Proposal before parliament. We will debate it at Esterby Castle, and then at Gren-delsham. And when the Third Debate comes to Kyneston in the Spring, you will keep your side of the bargain. Euterpe will be restored to me before I call the vote. Which will go against you. Now get out of my sight.”

Silyen dropped a shallow bow and couldn't resist a taunting knock of bootheels as he came to attention. He turned before he left the room:

“Oh, Milord Chancellor? You couldn't have laid a finger on me just now, if I had not permitted it.”

He shut the door behind him. Silyen went into the adjacent music room. Only the piano would suffice right now—would be big enough and loud enough to drown out just a little of the endless roar of his Skill inside him.

He folded back the instrument lid. As he poised his fingers over the keyboard he heard in the next room, quietly, Chancellor Winterborne Zelston begin to cry.



A NOVEL



MELISSA SCRIVNER LOVE



ONE  
**HEAT**

Lola stands across the craggy square of backyard she shares with Garcia. He mans the grill, rusted tongs and Corona with lime in hand, making the center of a cluster of men, their biceps bare and beaded with sweat, Crenshaw Six tattoos evident in their standard uniform of wife-beaters and torn cargo pants. If Lola were alone with Garcia, she would take her turn over the smoking meat, too, but as afternoon transforms Huntington Park from light to shadow, Lola stays away from the heat. Her place now is at the center of a cluster of women, their necks craning toward any high-pitched squeak that might be gossip, each one standing with a single hip cocked, as if at any second someone might place a sleeping child there for comfort.

Kim speaks loudest, her voice loose change clinking on delicate glass.

“Chicas gotta be buzzin’ around, like we don’t know what game they runnin’. I were you, Lola, I’d tell that bitch to stay the fuck away from my man.”

Lola’s eyes find a younger girl, no more than seventeen, weaving too close to the men, Garcia in particular. Lola can’t blame her. The entire neighborhood is aware of Garcia’s chosen profession.

In Huntington Park, a ghetto suburb of Los Angeles just east of

South Central, a legit man has two choices: landscaping for off-the-books Westside white cash, or sweating through twelve-hour shifts at a factory in Vernon. The lucky factory bodies get Sara Lee; the unlucky are stuck with the fat-rendering plants, where they operate gleaming metal machines that dissolve flesh and bone to liquid.

Garcia does not make his living either way, because he is not a legit man. He is the leader of the Crenshaw Six. Everyone at this barbecue could recite the corners the gang controls, from the retirement home off Gage and State to the middle-school crossing at Marconi. Despite this knowledge, no one is willing to risk a good rack of ribs and a cold Corona over a few moral scruples. Drugs are an understandable, if not respectable, way to make a living in the ghettos of Los Angeles, and the Crenshaw Six members have their own rules—no selling to kids, no soliciting to old folks unless they're in pain. The gang's code keeps the community appeased, and everyone, those who make their living legally and those who rely on committing felonies to survive, coexists. Everyone likes ribs, Lola had told Garcia when she first brought up the idea of throwing a party.

Garcia didn't want to host this barbecue. He was tired from work, business being good, though neither one of them would ever use that expression for fear of the inevitable fall from success. Their tiny nugget of South Central Los Angeles—or so they consider it, even though they've just missed the eastern border—with its strip mall Laundromats, grease-slicked taquerias, and glass-fronted bail bond offices, is no Wall Street. There are no second chances, no getting back on one's feet. Nobody here has enough time for a comeback. Instead of minimum sentences at white-collar resorts, people here get bullets to the head, either victims of circumstance or mere collateral damage. The success stories are few and far between, and they never last.

Still, Lola had told Garcia they should spend a little of their extra cash, show their neighbors a good time. Like normal people who've had some good fortune—dole out free food and beer, generate some goodwill and community spirit. She had won what never

became an argument, Garcia shrugging and saying, “I’ll buy the meat.”

Now, watching the younger girl scout her man, Lola feels a surge of something she can’t name. Someone wants what she, Lola, has. Garcia, aside from a passing glance at tits and ass, ignores the girl. The other men follow suit, sizing her up, approving her, then continuing to talk what Lola assumes is business, although she can’t hear over her circle of women, squawking about who’s packed on pounds and which neighborhood nail salons overcharge.

Lola nods agreement—she’ll never go back to Oasis Nails—then continues to watch the men. Jorge, a round-faced banger in baggy jeans, his ball cap turned backward, texts on one of the Crenshaw Six’s jailbroken iPhones. Because the phones don’t connect to any mainstream network, Jorge is free to say what he wants. Marcos, a wiry, hardened man with sunken black eyes, sneaks an undercooked rib from the grill and tears into it with pointy teeth. At his feet, Valentine, the pit bull Lola stole from a fighting ring a year ago, waits for a stray piece of flesh. The dog, Lola’s baby girl, is the sole female allowed around the grill. Valentine must have recognized an outsider in Marcos, the only member of the Crenshaw Six to have done time, six years in federal max when he was arrested on his eighteenth birthday. Marcos has been out over three years. Still, he eats when there is food, sleeps when there is a chair, fucks when a girl presents herself, as this girl is doing now. Lola guesses Marcos is eating first because he, like the other men, knows the girl will be there whenever he decides to acknowledge her. The ribs, however, will disappear into hungry neighborhood mouths as soon as Garcia transfers them from grill to platter.

Lola wants to pull the prowling girl aside, tell her if she wants to try to screw one of these bangers, fine, but stalking back and forth like a wannabe ghetto runway model is not the way.

“Girl knows to go after the leader,” Kim interrupts, catching Lola staring.

“She’s nothing,” Lola says.

“He’s been got before, is all,” Kim says, because before Garcia

was Lola's, he belonged to Kim. "Bet if Carlos were here, she'd be after him, too. Women like that, they always want the man in charge."

The women around them freeze, knowing Kim's words are meant to wound Lola, who has dated two gang leaders in quick succession. But all Lola feels is a quick drop of her heart, thinking of Carlos, Kim's older brother, who was the leader of the Crenshaw Six before he was murdered three years ago. Back then Carlos was Lola's man, and Garcia was Kim's. The Crenshaw Six was the Crenshaw Four, with only Carlos, Garcia, Jorge, and Marcos as members. Under Carlos's reign, the gang didn't control any corners, instead relying on sticking up other gangs over shitty coffee tables used to cut coke and heroin. It should have surprised no one that Carlos wound up shot in the face, dumped in the Angeles National Forest along with countless other bodies not expected to be missed.

Kim misses Carlos, though, calling the cops once a month for updates on his as-of-yet unsolved case. Lola feels for Kim. Carlos was charismatic, buoyant, beloved by the neighborhood, Lola included. Yet Kim is the only one who doesn't seem to realize the cops aren't going to do shit to find out who killed some brown ghetto Robin Hood.

"Carlos were here, he'd have burned the meat 'cause he'd be off talking to everyone," Lola says now, diffusing the tension and scattering titters of laughter through the ladies of the neighborhood.

"Or eating my chocolate cake." Kim puffs up, never missing a chance to bring up the one recipe she has that's renowned in their twenty square blocks of Los Angeles.

"You bring some of that today, Kim?" a neighborhood woman asks.

"Damn right I did," Kim says to a resounding chorus of "that's rights" and "shit yeahs." Kim discusses the dessert she brought to the barbecue with the same intensity she used when discussing the girl trolling Garcia. "Not as good as Lola's," Kim adds, as if making the best chocolate cake in the neighborhood is all Lola needs to keep her happy in her little backyard of barrio heaven.

Lola hears awkward murmurs from the other women, each of them split somewhere between protests and agreement. They don't want to insult Kim or Lola, but they know Kim makes a better cake.

"I always use your recipe," Lola says to Kim, smoothing over the moment.

"Oh." Kim blushes, or maybe she's just wearing too much makeup. "Well, you got better things to do, don't you? College and all."

Lola attended two night classes at East Los Angeles Community College before Carlos died. This fact has somehow cemented her as a college girl, despite her dropping out after her former boyfriend's murder, and the term is not necessarily a compliment. Here in Huntington Park, "college girl" means Lola dared to want more. She knows none of these women has a clue what she does all day. Lola doesn't mind. She prefers the periphery, where she can move without notice.

"Must be why you haven't gotten around to pulling the weeds around the flower bed," Kim continues, gesturing with her bloodred press-on nails to a patch of dirt Lola has never bothered to tend.

"That was Carlos's thing," Lola says, because when he was alive, the backyard of this rental house used to burst with sunflowers. Garcia doesn't know how to plant, and Lola doesn't know how to tend, so together they keep the grass clipped and, for the most part, stay on the concrete that borders the back of the house.

"Yeah," Kim agrees. "Garcia got one of those black thumbs, kills every green thing he touches," she explains to the other women, reminding them she once shared a home with Lola's man.

Lola steals another glance at Garcia now, only to find him looking back at her. They smile at each other—a simple, shy smile, even after three years together. She wonders if tragedy would change her feelings toward him. She wonders when they will be tested, if the day will come when they look at each other and think, *Who the fuck is that person I thought I knew?*

"What's up?" Lola hears the unmistakable half grin in the voice of her baby brother, Hector, who has emerged from her kitchen

with a can of salt and a bag of limes. Either item could be for the meat or for the beer, but his question is, without a doubt, directed at the ghetto girl.

“Nothing. Hungry,” the girl purrs.

The other men give Hector smacking pats on the back and grunts of approval. He is one of them, a fact Lola had to make peace with years ago. Hector has been her baby brother since she was eight years old, and Maria Vasquez ended up queasy and pregnant from one of the nameless men who rotated out of their house every couple of weeks. No one knows Hector’s father’s identity, which is fine with Lola. He is her brother, even if they don’t share a father. Lola knows her own father’s first name—Enrique—but since he left two months after her birth, she tells herself she doesn’t care enough to remember his last.

Now, Lola feels a glimmer of hope that eighteen-year-old Hector might settle down with someone from the neighborhood, someone close to his age, someone who would keep him near her, Lola. Then Lola sees the look her baby brother shoots at her, wanting to make sure his sister is watching, and she realizes his flirting is all for show. Hector has a girl in the wrong part of town, and he knows Lola doesn’t approve of her. In his own way, Hector is trying to console Lola by flirting with this neighborhood skank. The realization both angers and touches Lola.

“Your brother’s puttin’ on a show,” Kim remarks.

Lola is fine with Kim crying over Carlos’s flower bed and reminding the neighborhood Lola’s man used to fuck her. Kim is not allowed to comment on Lola’s baby brother, Lola decides now, her face flushing. She needs an escape.

She spots the Amaros ducking through the chain-link fence, the husband and wife pair moving with bowed heads. They are middle-aged, which here means early forties, with crinkled potato chip skin and eyes sunk too deep in their faces. They are old before their time, people outside South Central would say, but here they just are.

“Gonna say hi to the Amaros,” Lola gives her excuse to Kim and the other women.

“Tacos,” Juan Amaro says in greeting, and, on cue, his wife,

Juanita, holds up a large foil pan. The Amaros are the only guests to have brought a disposable dish. They own a combination bodega and taco stand, getting all their supplies below cost from a shady distant cousin. Everyone else will have to wait while Lola soaks their respective glass dishes in warm, soapy water and gives them back, streaked with residual cheese scabs from their neighbors' casseroles and potluck enchiladas, but the Amaros can make a quick escape.

Lola reaches for the tacos as she smiles her welcome.

"Chicken, beef, and pork. There wasn't any good fish today," Juanita Amaro says, an apology present in her soft voice.

"Don't need it, with all this," Lola says.

"Told her not to worry about it," Juan mutters, and Juanita bows her head deeper, eyes on her feet. They're only a few miles from the Pacific, but it might as well be a world—all the good stuff goes to the Westside, where celebrity chefs in Venice, Santa Monica, and Malibu pluck the finest from the day's catch.

"I'll take these to the kitchen," Lola says. She sees a shadow at the corner of Juanita Amaro's skirt. Big brown eyes emerge from behind the cotton, and there is the Amaros' granddaughter. Lola has only seen the girl, whose name she can't remember now, once or twice before, perched on a corner stool in her grandparents' bodega, punching numbers into an old dead adding machine.

"Lucy, greet your hostess." Juanita nudges her granddaughter forward, but Lucy clings to the woman's cotton skirt.

Lucy. That's the girl's name. Lucy belongs to the Amaros' junkie daughter, Rosie, who appeared in Huntington Park last month, Lucy in tow, after years in Bakersfield doing God knows what to score her fix.

A sticky sheen that could be sweat or old milk or remnants of today's lunch coats Lucy's cheeks and forehead. Someone has taken the trouble to give the little girl's face a cursory wipe, but the job was so poorly executed it has served only to smear an even layer of the sticky substance over Lucy's cheeks and tiny button nose.

"Hola, Lucy," Lola tries. She doesn't know if Lucy prefers English or Spanish.

Lucy stares up at Lola.

“Lucy, what do you say?” Juanita prods her granddaughter, a weathered hand, bony fingered, tightening on Lucy’s shoulder.

Lola doesn’t like to see Juanita Amaro’s claw sinking into her granddaughter’s shoulder, prodding Lucy to give attention or affection, so she throws her head in the direction of the house. “Wanna help me in the kitchen?”

Lucy looks up at her grandmother, unsure of how to answer.

“Yes, she does,” Juanita says, her claw of a finger poking Lucy forward, toward Lola.

“Yes,” Lucy repeats, too loud, but the noise of the party doesn’t stop as the little girl follows Lola, picking her way through trodden grass and weeds sprouting from dry drought dirt, the yard of a family with no landscaper, even though there are plenty who live in the neighborhood.

In the kitchen, more women—older than the ones gathered outside with their vodka cranberries and bloodred press-on nails—bustle. In here, the women are thicker from ass to earring. They speak only Spanish, as if it’s some secret code Lola and the younger ones don’t understand.

“No, it was his ex-girlfriend’s mother’s cousin—” Lola catches from one of the women.

“Lottie’s girl?”

“No, Lottie was dead by then. You remember her husband? The one with the hammer toe?”

“Ohhhhh. . . .” A chorus of collective remembrance fills the tiny kitchen, where maternal bodies touch hip to hip. Their symphony is composed of deeper voices than that of the younger women outside. In here, it’s a cacophony of decades-old cigarettes and fucking and family—followed by the clapping of Lola’s rusting oven door as one of the thick women opens it. Something steaming hot and smelling of melted queso emerges, encased in a glass dish Lola recognizes as her own. The women ignore Lola, even though it is her kitchen. They have co-opted it for themselves, with no explanation, and they never asked permission to use either her appliances or her dishes.

Lola knows it is because they believe they know better than her how to use them. They are right.

“Lola,” another one coos. Veronica, her mother’s oldest friend, approaches with a wet paper towel.

“What’s that for?” Lola asks.

“Lipstick,” Veronica explains.

“What lipstick?”

Veronica kisses Lola with hot pink lips, then dabs at the stain she’s left on Lola’s cheek. The women laugh, shrill ringing that fills the room, heating it up more than the open oven alone.

“Veronica,” Lola says, soft, but the other women catch the chiding tone in her voice and turn on her. Lola is not supposed to speak this way to Veronica, her elder.

She changes the subject. “Where’s Kim’s chocolate cake? People’re asking for it.”

“Kim made the cake?” Veronica asks. “I thought you were going to.”

The room is so quiet Lola can hear the drippy faucet Garcia promised to fix. The hippy-ass women all face her, waiting.

“Other stuff to do.” Lola shrugs. “But the guys want it.”

The room snaps back into motion, ringed and bare fingers wringing, all with a task—find Kim’s cake, where is Kim’s cake, the men want it. Lola can’t hear the words, just the voices, low hums and hems and questions. She weaves through the warm bodies to Lucy, catching the little girl yawning in the stifling oven heat.

“Are you tired?” she asks the little girl.

Lucy tries to stifle a second yawn as she shakes her head. Lola catches the little girl’s fleeting glance outside, to the circle of men surrounding the smoldering grill.

Lola thinks of her own junkie mother, of the men she introduced Lola to, of the things Lola had to do for these men at night so that Maria Vasquez could score her own fix. Lola thinks of all the sleep she lost losing her innocence.

Now, Lola lowers herself to Lucy’s level and speaks so only the two of them can hear. “Are you scared of the men out there?”

Lucy hesitates, and Lola keeps her distance, not touching the girl, but staying down here with her. After a few seconds, Lucy nods.

“I understand,” Lola says. “Would you like a safe place to sleep?”

Lucy stares at Lola, licking her lips, wanting to say yes.

“I can show you how to lock the door,” Lola says. “You can follow me if you like, or you can stay here. Either way, I won’t be upset.”

Lola rises, slow, so as not to frighten Lucy. She leaves the kitchen and heads down the narrow hallway where three doors creak open to bedrooms.

The room Lola enters is plain white—white walls, white ceiling fan, buzzing white air conditioner percolating in the window, white bars outside it. Lola doesn’t know who it’s for—guests? But no one ever comes to stay with her and Garcia. The room belongs in an institution, one where patients need their minds wiped clean. Maybe it is perfect for Lucy, who looks like she didn’t sleep last night. Lola wishes it were just Lucy hearing her mother shoot up in the next room keeping the little girl awake, but Lucy’s look outside to the men hints at something more sinister.

Lola stops these thoughts. There is no point. She is not Lucy’s mother. There is nothing she can do to save this child.

She hears a floorboard creak and turns to find Lucy, staring at the lock on the white door.

“Here,” Lola says. “Let me show you.”

Lola helps Lucy practice with the lock. “Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey,” Lola repeats as Lucy locks to the right, unlocks to the left. She can’t remember where she learned the saying, but she likes sharing it with Lucy now. She may not be able to save this child, but she can give Lucy an hour’s reprieve in this white room, so that is what she does. She lowers the dusty blinds. Lola turns out the lights, even though outside the sinking sun is still too bright, the shadow-streaked sky still too blue. Lucy needs dull—grays and whites. Lola wishes she had a teddy bear for the little girl to squeeze. If Lucy is dealing with what Lola thinks, though, a locked bedroom door will give her more comfort than any teddy bear.

Lola shuts the bedroom door behind her and waits in the hall-

way until she hears the padding of little feet, then the click of the lock. The walls are so thin she can hear Lucy sigh as she sinks into clean sheets.

Lola will wait outside the door until the little girl has had enough time to fall asleep. The women's voices in the kitchen dull to a buzz. The changing light outside shifts the shadows in the house. No one will look for her here.

The sharp knock at the front door interrupts Lola's respite. The women's kitchen chatter silences quick as a blaring television switched off.

The only people who knock on front doors in this neighborhood are cops who've exchanged their battering rams for bad news.

From the hallway, Lola can see through the master bedroom's small square of window to the backyard. Garcia is still charring meat, sporting the same smile he wore half an hour ago. No one outside heard the knock. They are still living in a party.

When Lola opens the door, her breath catches in her tiny cavern of a chest. The man standing there is not a cop. He is Mexican, not Mexican American, like everyone else here. He wears a tailored suit and steel-toed boots. Lola searches his face for a bead of sweat but comes up empty. She has never met him, but she knows his name. Everyone in this neighborhood does. They call him *El Coleccionista*, the Collector.

"Hola," she says, tucking an ankle behind a calf and tilting her chin down, playing dumb. Luckily, Lola spent the first twenty-three years of her life, until she met Garcia, figuring out how to make sure men didn't feel threatened by her. It is a skill that has served her better than any chocolate cake recipe ever will.

"Garcia," *El Coleccionista* says.

"Out back," Lola responds, planning to dart ahead, pretending a tour of the house, ending with the master bedroom, so she can signal to her man.

But *El Coleccionista* doesn't wait for an invitation. He steps forward, and Lola steps to the side, losing the game of chicken her guest wasn't playing.

Lola follows him into the kitchen, where the now-silent older

women are not so good at playing dumb. They, too, know this man's identity, and they are too stunned to see him here, in the chipping yellow paint and burnt-out fluorescence of Lola's kitchen, to hide that knowledge. Lola hears only the vent over the stove blowing its constant neutral air and the click of Garcia's boss's boots on her linoleum, which is gleaming clean but bent up at the corners.

The man on her heels, his breath so close she can smell his most recent mint, once led the cartel crew that invaded a small Mexican town, taking out dozens of civilians in under twenty minutes—doctors, lawyers, cops, housewives, children, criminals—all because one citizen was harboring a witness against the Los Liones cartel. That guy, the witness, El Coleccionista spared, only to draw and quarter him with four Honda Civics the next day. Even that small car could tear a man limb from limb in less time than it took the cartel to mow down dozens of the would-be witness's innocent neighbors. But El Coleccionista made sure his death took over half an hour, and he recorded the man's screams.

El Coleccionista gave a copy of the death to Garcia the day they started working together—a preemptive warning. The Crenshaw Six were allowed to work their six corners in Huntington Park with cartel shit, and the cartel would even throw in a few extra corners for good measure, but the Crenshaw Six better cut them in on the profits. And they better not fuck it up.

Lola needs to warn Garcia. El Coleccionista's boots move in a calm one, two rhythm across her kitchen floor. Lola takes off, ducking between padded female bodies that reek of perfume and grease, taking the long way outside, through the laundry room, where Garcia's boxers thunk and click in the dryer. She rounds the house, breathless, and Garcia sees her face. *He's here*, she mouths, and Garcia is the only one who sees her.

Everyone else has turned to watch El Coleccionista taking the cement steps down from the kitchen door, never breaking the rhythm of his stride. One, two, one, two.

The entire yard quiets, the neighborhood stills. Somewhere in the distance, a bird tweets, and then the neighbor from two streets over starts his shitty car to a booming backfire. No one jumps. They

are all staring at El Coleccionista. Everyone has only seen his picture, or they know him from his clothes. No one here dresses like that.

“Garcia,” El Coleccionista says. Lola can’t be sure if he has an accent, since this is the only word she’s heard him say.

Garcia hands his beer to Lola, who has migrated to the spot behind his right shoulder. It’s her place. An automatic safe zone. The beer is sweating—Garcia wasn’t drinking it. He doesn’t drink much, and beer has never been his choice. He has only been pretending at playing house this whole time. So has she.

She hopes Garcia’s boss isn’t here to kill them all. Still, Lola doesn’t feel fear. This Mexican thug wants the little lady scared, and she plays it that way. She holds Garcia’s beer and makes sure not to look directly at his boss. But she knows his secret—El Coleccionista is middle management.

She wishes only that Los Liones had sent someone higher up. El Coleccionista doles out messages and punishments. He doesn’t call the shots.

“Inside,” El Coleccionista says. Slight accent. Lola has no accent in English or Spanish. The thought comforts her as Garcia follows the man into the house. She can hear the scatter of thick older women on her aging linoleum, then they all break into the backyard, hands still wringing, hens running out of a fox-invaded coop.

After Carlos’s murder three years ago, the Crenshaw Six transitioned from stickup crew with no turf to call their own to bona fide gang with six corners no one else would touch because of their proximity to schools and police stations and nursing homes. The cartel has probably always supplied the product the Crenshaw Six peddles, but until recently, the gang was too low in the pecking order to know more than the identity of their loser tweaker of a middleman, Benny, who carried an empty pistol and an eye twitch everywhere he went.

Then, two months ago, El Coleccionista sought out Garcia, the small-time South Central dealer, because the LAPD had seized one of Darrel King’s warehouses. The cartel wanted to keep product flowing to its dedicated customers, and they couldn’t do that

when Darrel, their largest dealer, was out of commission. Would Garcia be willing to do his part and take on a few more corners to keep his neighborhood flush with quality smack?

It was the break the Crenshaw Six needed. Perhaps El Coleccionista has stopped in this evening to give Garcia a friendly employee evaluation. Lola knows that isn't it, though. Garcia has stuck to the cartel's terms, allowing Crenshaw Six soldiers to sell the cartel's product only on the additional corners Los Liones gave them. Even with the added turf, the Crenshaw Six controls only a molecular sliver of Los Liones's middleman Darrel's fifty-one point zero eight square miles of South Central pie. Garcia has followed the Crenshaw Six's own principles, including never selling to kids, as well as the cartel's only declaration—turn a profit. He hasn't tried for a power grab. He has worked hard and humble, and the thought makes Lola swell with what she imagines is pride.

As the guests cluck and spit and swig more alcohol, faces paling, voices silent, Lola is sure she knows why El Coleccionista is here.

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling  
author of TRAVELING WITH POMEGRANATES

ANN KIDD TAYLOR

Three stylized swimmer silhouettes in black and orange are integrated into the title. One swimmer is positioned to the left of the word 'The', another is to the right of 'Shark', and a third is positioned below the 'C' in 'Club'.

The  
Shark  
Club

A Novel

A white silhouette of a wave crest is located at the bottom of the cover, partially overlapping the teal background.



## One

**T**ucking away a long strand of hair that floated in front of my scuba mask, I kicked through the blue-green waters of Bimini on the last day of my research term, keeping watch for Sylvia, a five-foot, four-year-old lemon shark I'd named for oceanographer Sylvia Earle. The shards of sunlight that pierced the water earlier had started to wane, leaving the surface brushed with shadows, and I glanced nervously at Nicholas, my dive partner, then checked my watch. We should have seen her by now. Just beyond her juvenile years, Sylvia had begun venturing outside the protective nursery mangroves where she was born, a habit that worried me, but one I also admired.

Back on the small island off southwest Florida where I lived and worked as a marine scientist, they called me Maeve, the shark whisperer. It implied I could somehow get close to these apex predators, even tame them, which was, of course, a fatal kind of lunacy. The nickname had caught on even here at the Marine Field Lab in Bimini, where I'd spent the last six months tagging lemon sharks with passive integrated transponders, then tracking, collecting DNA on, photographing, and cataloguing them morning, noon, and night. I'd monitored close to a hundred of them, but Sylvia was the one I'd grown fond of.

She had a funny habit of scooping up small bits of fish left behind after she'd bitten and gulped them down, as if she couldn't stand for anything to go to waste. Her frugality not only amused me, it endeared her to me. I liked the way she rested on the bottom after the other lemons swam off, claiming a little extra lounge time for herself. Lazy girl. I could usually identify her before I found the scar on her second dorsal, shaped like an upside-down checkmark. She had often swum closer to me than was comfortable, though I knew that theoretically lemons were generally nonaggressive, and it was probably my imagination and not my science that gave me the odd feeling she recognized me as well.

"You two are simpatico," Nicholas had once remarked. He was only half joking.

It was June 12, 2006, my thirtieth birthday. I should have been back in my small room packing or cooking one of those god-awful cake mixes in the communal kitchen to pass around to the other scientists after dinner to at least acknowledge the occasion, but I hadn't wanted to leave Bimini without a farewell dive. Tomorrow morning, Nicholas and I would be on a short, chartered flight to Miami. From there, he would head to Sarasota and his stingrays. Originally from Twickenham, England, he'd come to the United States as a student fifteen years ago and, after a stint in London, ended up in Sarasota at the prestigious Southwest Florida Aquarium. He'd recently become their youngest director of Ray Research at thirty-five. He'd been here at the Field Lab for a ten-month sabbatical—longer than any of us; I could only imagine how eager the aquarium would be to have him back. Me, I would go back to the Gulf Marine Conservancy on Palermo and to my grandmother Perri's hotel, perched beside the Gulf of Mexico.

The Hotel of the Muses, where I'd grown up and where I still lived, was not your typical hotel on Palermo. While the rest of them were predictably nautical—seascapes over the beds, captain's wheels

in the restaurants, aquariums in the lobbies—my grandmother’s high-brow resort was overrun with books. Her hotel held readings and book talks in the lobby and had its own lending-library system with a trolley that went room to room along with the housekeeping cart. Every one of the eighty-two rooms was dedicated to an author whose work Perri admired—Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Octavio Paz, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Henry David Thoreau . . . The *Tampa Bay Times* had called it “the real buried treasure on the Gulf coast, a library hotel on Ecstasy.” By summer’s end I would leave all that “ecstasy” once again for whale shark research in Mozambique.

Whenever my research terms ended, everything I’d put aside and ignored—especially Daniel—inevitably returned, rushing in like tidewater to retake the shore. Already I could feel the past washing up: the last, stubborn image of Daniel the day we’d said good-bye, his back framed by the glare of Miami sun on the window, and then all the silence that followed. The memory returned more mercilessly this time. *Thirty*. What was it about that age? All the clocks ticked louder.

Swimming farther from the cobalt-blue bottom of our boat, Nicholas and I came upon a shower of tiny silver minnows glinting like nickels as they darted in unison. Earlier, a redmouth grouper had found Nicholas and me to be objects of fascination, drawn by the bubbles drifting from our tanks, coming so close I could see the inside of its mouth glowing orange. Among fish, as among humans, there seemed to be two basic schools: the venturesome and the cautious.

Nicholas pointed to a pair of southern stingrays sailing by like a scene from *Swan Lake*. The vibration of their wings rushed toward me, reverberating the way all sounds did beneath the sea, blurred and muffled, a strange, slow-motion percussion. Nicholas felt about rays, especially spotted eagle and giant mantas, the way I felt about sharks, and he snapped a picture just before they vanished.

Holding up his palm, he motioned for me to stop, and I thought for a moment he’d spotted the lemons, but he shook his head and

shrugged, a signal for “the sharks aren’t coming, our air is running out.” After working together the last six months, we’d become adept at one another’s body cues. I cocked my head to the side and held up five fingers. *Another few minutes?*

He gave me a thumbs-up and pointed to a crop of sea fans on the ocean floor. *Okay, but let’s hang here.*

I nodded. I was going to miss him, and that was a surprise. It was always a surprise to miss someone other than Daniel.

As I drifted over the waving garden of fuchsia and pink fans, I watched a green moray eel partially lured out of its rocky home, while a diligent cleaner shrimp worked its magic on the eel’s head. The eel looked ancient—wrinkled, scarred, and oddly serene. It was possible the two of us were the same age. Its mouth gaped open, then closed, over and over. “Ommms” only the sea creatures could hear.

When I used to imagine my life at thirty, I envisioned myself doing just what I was doing now, studying sharks. But I’d pictured myself as a mother, too, teaching my child to swim in the Gulf. Buckled up to his chin inside a life vest, my little boy would frogkick beneath clear, spearmint water. Sometimes the child was a girl, locks of wet, dark hair stuck to her cheeks. After swimming I imagined we would walk back to a small house with an orange tree in front, the branches drooping with fat, ripe fruit. I would shake the branches, then poke my thumb into the top of an orange like my dad had done for me. Sometimes he would carve out the top of it with his pocketknife, then etch an *M* for Maeve on the side. I always thought I would do the same for my little girl. She would drink from the orange like a cup. Daniel would be waiting for us in the kitchen, shuffling a pan of porcini mushrooms on the stove.

So far that dreamed-of future hadn’t arrived. Maybe it still would—it’s not like my thirties put me out of the running to be a mother. But at some point, if it was still just me and the sharks (thank God for the sharks), perhaps I would put the whole family thing to rest. I could be

Aunt Maeve to any children my twin brother, Robin, might one day have, and I would marry the sea. A lot of people, including Robin, would say I already had.

If Sylvia was anywhere around she already knew Nicholas and I were here. In limited light, her eyes became stronger, and her sense of smell was ten thousand times better than mine. Rows of sensory cells running along each side of her body would already have detected changes in water pressure and sent the message to her brain. As she drew closer, she would use receptors around her head and snout to pick up the electrical field emitted from my heartbeat and brain activity, a kind of GPS that allowed sharks to cross oceans by following the Earth's magnetic field. Whereas Nicholas and I were reduced to hand signals and air tanks, Sylvia was magnificently equipped.

Suddenly the eel withdrew into its nook, jerking quickly like a snapped rubber band. I tensed, alert to the fish darting frantically upward. I turned a slow pirouette, noticing Nicholas doing the same, aware of how small we seemed in the vastness of the Atlantic. Taking a few measured breaths, I listened to the crackle in my regulator and stared into the distance, where the water settled into a trio of shades like a Rothko painting—indigo, violet, and near the surface, pale green.

The shark emerged through the swathes of color, its tail waving back and forth with the hypnotic swing of a pocket watch. I placed a vertical hand atop my head, our signal for shark, doing so almost simultaneously with Nicholas.

As the shark neared, I spotted the scar on its second dorsal fin, the scuffed-up snout. Sylvia.

She wasn't alone. A second, then a third shark appeared behind her—Captain and Jacques, two other lemons in my research.

Nicholas and I watched them without moving. How many times had I been suspended beneath the water just like this as a shark approached? But it always felt like the first time. Sylvia swam toward

me, part ballerina, part stealth missile. My adrenaline spiked, and I caught myself holding my breath. It had only been for a second, but even rookies knew that departing from the steady rhythm of inhaling and exhaling was a bad idea and could cause a dangerous expansion of air pressure in the lungs while ascending. Unraveling the knot of air in my throat, I slowly exhaled and began to photograph her long, elegant body, her skin the color of sandpaper. As she passed me, though, the hand holding my camera fell to my side, and I did something I'd never done before. I swam alongside her.

Trailing a respectful distance beside her pectoral fins, I could feel the sheer force of her in the water. The sound her movement made was like thunder coming from far away, yet I felt it shuddering against me. I swam instinctively, not thinking, floating in a half-dreamed place, and what came to me was the quote stenciled on the wall in room 202 of my grandmother's hotel—the Keats Room: "Love is my religion. I could die for that." The sea, its creatures, its sharks—they were my religion. I could die for that.

Sylvia turned and seemed to regard me with interest, and observing her sudden awareness of me was like waking. Though I felt a kinship with her, I couldn't forget for a second she could be provoked into aggression. I drew up, letting her swim away, flattening a hand over my breastbone as she was swallowed into the blue-gray gloom.

Electrified, I kicked my fins.

When I turned toward Nicholas, he was clasping the handles of his camera, and his face mirrored my own. The way his lips stretched into a smile around his regulator reflected my own exuberance.

## Two

**W**hen people ask me why I love sharks I tell them it's because I was bitten by one when I was twelve. Statistically speaking, the coconut palms around the hotel had posed more of a danger to me than the sharks cruising the Gulf. Coconuts dropped like torpedoes around there, so it was stranger than strange that I was not concussed by a coconut, but instead, bitten by a shark—a species over four hundred million years old, older than humans, dinosaurs, and trees. It was a blacktip, *Carcharhinus limbatus*, the shark known for breaching out of the water and spinning in midair while feeding on fish near the surface. The bite resulted in a thirteen-inch scar, thirty-three stitches, and an obsession with sharks.

Robin, responding in true twin fashion, became the counterbalance to my morbid fascination, developing a fear of sharks bordering on revilement. I didn't begrudge Perri sending me back to Dr. Marion, a child psychiatrist over in Naples, I still don't, but I did wonder how Robin's hating sharks was viewed as perfectly normal and my loving them was considered detrimental.

If you were hit by a car, would you become a mechanic? Robin used to ask. If you were struck on the head with a rock, would you become a geologist? What about falling off a roof? Would that turn you into a roofer? If you were trampled by a horse, would you become

a jockey? His list of catastrophes and careers became an ongoing joke, the kind that weren't really jokes at all. He'd never gotten over almost losing me, and after what had happened to our parents, I couldn't blame him.

I used to fantasize that if Mom and Dad had been alive, they would've downplayed Perri's and Robin's worries over my becoming a sharkophile.

My English professor father, Perri's son through and through, had loved books more than Perri did, if such a thing was possible, and two small volumes of his poetry had been published. He had been the opposite of our sky-minded, engineer mother, whose head had been firmly planted in the clouds, while his had been perpetually bent over books by Keats, Shelley, and Byron.

Mom had had her private pilot's license for two years when the accident happened. Surprising Dad with a weekend in Key West for his birthday, she'd chartered a 1980 Piper, filing a flight plan and arranging for Perri to pick up six-year-old Robin and me at our house in Jupiter, Florida. Their plane had crashed into the Everglades before we'd even arrived at the hotel, before we'd raced through the lobby, up the stairs, arguing over who got the bed by the window, before we'd yanked on our bathing suits and tore down to the beach, giddy over the hundreds of Florida fighting conchs that had washed ashore overnight, squealing whenever some gooey part of the snail oozed onto our palms.

It had taken an airboat to reach their bodies. The National Transportation Safety Board reported Mom had encountered a thunderstorm wind shear. For a while, the sight of a small plane droning overhead, even the mention of an airboat would summon the scene of my parents strapped in their seats, dead, stuck in the muck with the alligators. Gradually, the image stopped haunting me. I can picture them now as they'd been before the accident: Dad, reading poems to us at the kitchen table that were fathoms over our heads. And

Mom, routinely dragging us outside on clear nights in a semifailed effort to teach us the constellations, lying beside us on the lanai by the pool calling out Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Orion's Belt.

After their funerals, Perri had sold our Jupiter house with the lanai where we'd named Mom's stars and the kitchen table where we'd listened to Dad's poetry, and she'd brought us to Palermo to live with her in the Hotel of the Muses. Perri commandeered four rooms on the second floor, knocked out the walls, and reconstructed it into an apartment for the three of us. "It will be an adventure. Like the Swiss Family Robinson," she'd said, rousing herself for the sake of two sad little kids. Night after night, we crawled into her bed, where she read us the Johann David Wyss story, followed by *Peter Pan*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Secret Garden*, and a trove of other classics.

Losing Mom and Dad devastated both of us, but we had grieved very differently. Robin's grief had been quiet and hidden, only screaming out of him unconsciously in his sleep, while mine had been open and expressive. In over her head and desperate to help us, Perri had put us into the capable hands of Dr. Marion. That was my first go-round with therapy; years later when I found myself back in his office after the shark bite, I already knew the drill.

Robin and I spent hours sitting side by side on Dr. Marion's green sofa, Robin in silence, refusing to draw the pictures that were supposed to help us express our feelings. The more he withdrew, the more I talked of alligators circling our parents' plane, of their caskets closed tight. And the more elaborate my drawings became. Sometimes it seemed everything that would go wrong with Robin began with those drawings. One in particular roiled up from a dark corner inside of me. While Robin watched, I had pulled crayons from the jumbo box and begun by creating the same horror scene as usual—a tangle of green jungle, black sky, brown water streaked with red, a gray airplane half immersed, and beneath the water, two broken stick figures.

“You sure you don’t want to draw, too?” Dr. Marion asked Robin, holding out a blue crayon. “It can be anything you want. How about your room? What does that look like?”

Robin glared at him, arms folded over his six-year-old chest, then took the crayon. He might have actually drawn something that day—the stuffed frog on his bed, the *Empire Strikes Back* poster on the wall, the baseball cards on the bulletin board—but he was distracted by the surprising addition of a third tiny stick figure I was drawing beside the other two.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

I scribbled a mess of red on the little body.

“*Who is it?*” Robin said, and I heard the frantic tone, but still, I didn’t answer him.

“Do you want to tell us?” Dr. Marion asked me. “You don’t have to, but your brother . . . he’s interested.”

“It’s me,” I said, the picture starting to distort through my tears. “I don’t want to be here if they’re not here.”

“You want to die, too?” Robin’s voice sounded small and faraway, and then he began to cry, terrible gulping sobs, the first tears he’d shed since our parents’ deaths. His whole body shook, and seeing what I’d caused, I began to sob with him. I knew even then, I didn’t mean what I’d said. I didn’t *really* wish I’d been in the plane, but wishing it seemed the only way to convey the power of my distress, to communicate how much I missed Mom and Dad.

Dr. Marion told us it was okay to cry, but that seemed to backfire on him as the tears and wails went on and on. In the end he summoned Perri from the waiting room. She squeezed between us on the sofa, gathering us against her. When the outburst was finally over, Dr. Marion tried to help Robin understand what I’d meant, but I don’t think Robin ever understood. My confession landed on him like a betrayal, like a brutal rejection. After that we saw Dr. Marion separately. I never knew what happened in Robin’s sessions. Revealing my

awful wish that day was the beginning of mending myself. My grief morphed from excruciating sadness into a kind of resignation, and finally into peace. Perri became my greatest solace and closest confidante. But the plummeting planes in Robin's nightmares continued, though our parents were no longer in them; now, it was only me. He would bolt awake shrieking my name, once so loudly a hotel guest called the front desk. Terrified by his screams, I would crawl into bed with him and grip his hand beneath the covers. "I thought you were dead, too," he would whimper.

The following year his night terrors ceased, giving way to all sorts of misbehavior and acting out—biting and shoving classmates at our new elementary school, mouthing off to the teacher, and once lashing out at Perri when she ordered him to clean his room, yelling, "Don't tell me what to do. You're not my mother."

In time, he returned to something resembling normalcy. He, Daniel, and I formed our alliance, hanging out on the beach and roaming the hotel. I have a memory of Robin doing his Rocky Balboa impression for hotel guests, one of his many budding charismas, but his grief never seemed to heal, not really, and he never became comfortable talking about Mom and Dad, as if his mind just couldn't go there.

Troublemaking would be his go-to method of expressing his grief, and I believe writing must have been an outlet for it, too. He did both, on and off, with great aptitude.

I'd never stopped feeling bad about that drawing, never stopped feeling responsible.

Perri liked to say that some kids just had swing sets in their backyards, but we had the Gulf of Mexico. The island and every living thing swimming in the Gulf became my Eden. And Daniel, he became my Eden, too.

Daniel's mother, Van, worked at the hotel reception desk when she wasn't teaching ballet. Daniel was always at loose ends in the hotel, lugging his skateboard around, occasionally rolling across the marble

floors in the lobby. Almost a full year older than Robin and I, Daniel was the first friend we made on Palermo. It didn't take long for the three of us to become inseparable. His father had been the high school baseball coach on the island, and from all appearances, a reasonably good father. Until he left one day, simply disappearing from Daniel's life, a cataclysm that he rarely talked about. Robin, Daniel, and I shared fatherlessness—whether from abandonment or death—like some tragic glue that cemented us in ways none of us really understood. Constantly mistaken for our older sibling, he had a mess of dark hair like us that the sun leached to golden brown. Robin liked being confused for Daniel's brother, but I never wanted to be Daniel's sister.



The shark attacked on July 30, 1988, early in the morning, when the air was hazed with mist and the beach deserted. Daniel and I had wandered to the water's edge to investigate a washed-up horseshoe crab, when I spotted a brown-and-white-striped osprey feather nearly a foot long floating on the waves ten or so yards out. Maybe I wanted to impress Daniel with how audacious and unfettered I could be; maybe I just wanted that magnificent feather; but I waded out in my shorts and T-shirt until the water lapped a cold circle around my waist.

"What are you doing?" said Daniel, gaping at me from the shoreline.

"Are you worried about getting a little water on your shorts?" I teased, plucking the feather off the surface and using it to wave him in.

Grinning, he treaded out to where I stood, lifting his arms and bare shoulders to stave off the chill. He swiped the feather from my hand and stuck it in the band of my ponytail. "There," he said.

I reached back, feeling for it, aware of how close he stood to me, his shoulders peppered with freckles, his skin caramelized brown,

his eyes the color of a blue tang fish. Leaning up, I kissed him, jolted at how he kissed me back, at the salt air on his lips. For a moment I felt dizzy, like the world I'd wakened in had fallen away, and I had become someone else. It thrilled me and it scared me.

"I think I'll love you forever," I said.

Daniel glanced back toward the beach, where Robin and Perri were beginning to set up lounge chairs beneath the chickee huts that studded the sand in front of the hotel. "Me, too," he said.

Suddenly, he pitched forward in the water like he'd been struck behind the knees. "What was *that*?" he said. I thought he was trying to scare me, but whatever had bumped into Daniel then collided into me. I lost my balance and dropped beneath the water as an unfathomable force attached to my leg. I held my breath and flapped my arms, trying to fly right out of the water like the diving seabirds I often watched splash up into the air. I could see it very clearly, the top of the shark's gray head, its teeth clamped into my leg, the fin's black tip, the tail ruddering back and forth.

It was noisy under the water, sounds and vibrations whipping off both our bodies. Blood coursed from my leg like a can of teargas going off. Nothing at all went through my head, only a primal, ferocious instinct to live.

Stretching my neck toward the surface, I glimpsed one of the shark's eyes—a small, black, unblinking night. I felt certain the shark regretted sinking its teeth into me, or did that thought come later? Its eye disappeared under a lid that closed from the bottom up, and then as suddenly as the commotion had begun, it all ceased.

The shark let go of my leg and swam off. I had no idea why. Now I know it was exhibiting classic hit-and-run behavior: a bump, a single bite, and then a retreat when it realizes its prey is not food, but a case of mistaken identity.

The bite had been oddly painless at first, but then a searing sensation

ripped through my leg. I wanted air. I needed air. Breaking the surface, I gasped and tried to stand, but my right leg was useless. I floated on my back using my left foot to push against the ocean floor.

Panting frantically, I couldn't raise a single sound from my throat. Water sealed my ears. I thought I heard someone yell, "Maeve! Maeve!" Daniel grabbed me under my arms and began pulling me to shore, running backward.

"A shark bit me and swam away," I said as calmly as if I'd suffered a jellyfish sting.

Daniel shouted for Perri, his voice hoarse with terror. Water rushed into my nostrils, filling them with salt sting, causing me to choke, but the pain in my leg had dwindled to a strange burning sensation from my hip to my toes.

Daniel laid me on the sand. I gazed at him bent over at the waist with his hands on his knees, his eyes filmed with water. "A shark bit me and swam away," I said again.

Struggling onto my elbows, I stared at my leg. The back of my calf was ripped open, ragged and bloody like a science class dissection gone horribly wrong. I flopped back onto the beach as Perri reached us, morphing into one of those women you hear about who become superhero strong and unflinchingly clearheaded in times of crisis, lifting cars off children and barking orders like General Patton. "Robin, run to the hotel. Call 911. Daniel, get towels!"

A little border of darkness began to close in around everything. I shut my eyes to make it go away. Perri pushed a web of hair off my face. "Maeve, honey, open your eyes."

I concentrated on a V of pelicans that glided across the high blue dome of sky overhead, their wings unmoving, all of them ready to turn at once if their leader changed course.

Daniel dropped a stack of towels in the sand, and Perri twisted one and tied it tightly around my thigh. Her bobbed hair was swinging

across her face in a white blur. “We’ve got to stop this bleeding,” she said, her voice starting to take on more urgency.

As Perri applied pressure against the wound, the dull burn in my leg erupted again into a blaze of exquisite pain. I rolled my head to the side as a terrible keening sound filled my throat. I began to flail.

Robin dropped beside me, his face blanched and terrified. He put his mouth by my ear. “You’re okay.” He went on repeating it. “You’re okay. You’re okay.”

Perri hovered over me, blocking out the sun. She shouted at the crowd that was beginning to gather, “Somebody give me a belt!” She lashed it above my knee. “You’re going to be all right,” she said. “Take a deep breath. Come on.” She nodded at me and I sucked the air like I was drowning. “There you go. Slow down. That’s good.”

Perri placed her hand on my chest, and something inside of me unclenched. I felt safe.

“Let’s get her warm,” she said, and instantly a coral-colored canopy snapped open above me and the hotel emblem, an oyster shell with a small pearl-like book inside stitched in navy, fluttered down.

Searching for Daniel, I pressed my cheek against the sand and saw him a few feet away. “The shark pulled her under,” he was saying to Perri. “I tried to get to her. It was all so fast. I—I couldn’t get to her.”

“How long was she under the water?” Perri asked.

“I don’t know. Five seconds? Ten?”

It had felt so much longer.

Much later, Daniel and I would talk about what that day was like for him, how the Gulf had never felt as deep or endless as when I vanished beneath it, how he’d looked underwater for me, afraid of what he might see in the water muddled with a storm of blood and upturned sand.

In the seconds before I lost consciousness, he turned and looked

at me, and I saw he was holding the osprey feather that had come loose from my hair.



I think Perri feared I'd become infatuated with my attacker, the black-tip, but Dr. Marion assured her that while what I was experiencing was unusual, it was harmless. I sat beside her in his office one day, staring into my lap, looking up to see her gazing at me sympathetically. She decided right then to no longer worry about the jars of saltwater I hoarded under my bed, the medicine cups I filled with shark teeth, the pictures of shark eyes I drew and tacked to the wall. That same evening, I overheard her explaining to Robin that the doctor wasn't worried about me and he shouldn't be either. He tried, eventually venturing into the Gulf with me, but he kept inventing reasons we should cut it short. He never lost his dread that something in the water would take away what was left of his family.

Perri would continue to send me to Dr. Marion. At twelve, I had a million hashed and unhashed thoughts. Flashbacks about my parents' crashed plane. Ambivalence about Robin and me living in a hotel, which really was like the Swiss Family Robinson, and which my friends thought strange, how I wished sometimes for a normal house. I confided that I hated the scar that jagged across my calf, but I forgave the shark, who was just being a shark. I told him about Daniel, who saved me. Daniel, whom I loved.

I was fourteen when I visited Dr. Marion for the last time. We were having one of those August tropical storms that blows up quickly around Palermo. Rain was slashing sideways against the windows of his office with flashes of lightning in the distance. When I jumped at a sudden clap of thunder, he asked if I was afraid of storms.

"No, not storms," I said.

He laid his pen down on his tablet. "What then?" he asked.

“Everyone already thinks I’m crazy. I don’t want you to think I’m crazy, too.”

“I won’t think you’re crazy, Maeve. I’ve never thought you were crazy.”

Moments passed while I stayed silent, terrified of saying it. The words were burning a hole in my throat, and for the first time I felt like keeping them in would feel worse than letting them out. “Well,” I said. “I—I want to know everything about sharks. I want to study them when I grow up, to really understand them. Know what they’re like. I check out books all the time about Jacques Cousteau and being a marine biologist. That’s what I want, but I’m afraid my grandmother will tell me I can’t. I’m scared it would come between me and Robin. That Daniel and my friends will think . . . you know, that I’m weird or something.”

I stopped, feeling like I might cry. I sat there listening to the rain, waiting for Dr. Marion to say something, but he waited, too.

“I’m not stupid,” I told him. “I know what the shark could’ve done to me that day, but it didn’t. It let me go. It could’ve ripped me to shreds, but it let me go. This year I got to be in a play at school, and my class went to the Edison Museum, and I read Anne Frank’s diary—all things I loved. But I’ve never felt about anything the way I feel about sharks.”

“And how *do* you feel about sharks?”

My longing to answer this question, to say it out loud, was so intense that a flood of feelings hit me at once and the tears I’d been holding inside let loose.

“I know it’s weird,” I said, shoving them off my cheeks. “But happy. When I think about sharks, I feel happy.”

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Jacques Cousteau seems like a happy guy. I bet Eugenie Clark is happy. Have you heard of Eugenie Clark up in Sarasota?”

I shook my head.

“They call her the Shark Lady because of her research with sharks. She trained them. Got them to ring bells. Can you believe that? And then there’s Sylvia Earle—she’s from Florida, too. Ever heard of her?”

“No.”

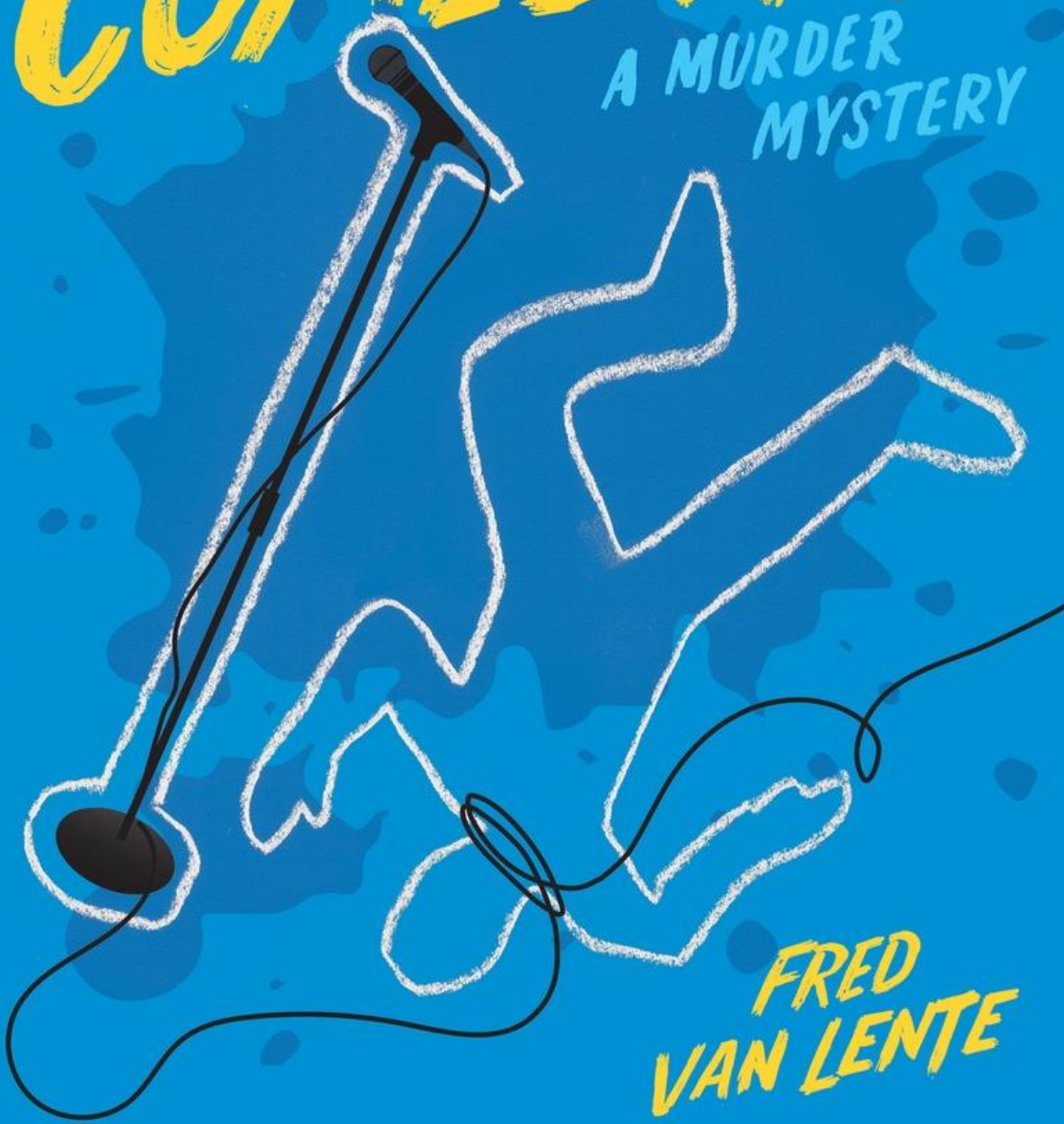
“She just happens to be the only person ever to walk solo on the ocean floor. A quarter mile down. She’s known as Her Deepness. You should look them up.”

“I will,” I said, and it felt like something in my chest was opening. A clamshell.

“I don’t know much more about oceanographers than that, but I do know this. Whatever makes you feel alive, you ought to pay attention to it. If it makes you happy, it’s worth following.”

# TEN DEAD COMEDIANS

A MURDER  
MYSTERY



FRED  
VAN LENTE

This is a work of fiction. All names, places, and characters are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

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**TEN DEAD  
COMEDIANS**

**FRED VAN LENTE**



**QUIRK BOOKS**  
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# CHAPTER ONE

## I

A bleep, a boop, a shudder, a swoosh, and there it was, on each one of their phones:

Hey there Funny Person.

Steve Gordon didn't see it at first.

He had a good excuse, though.

He was dying.

Steve had died before, of course. He knew how. At the Laugh Shack in Portland, Maine, in front of that bachelorette party. At that open mic in Des Moines, when he was first starting out. At his *SNL* audition, after his career was basically already over.

Dying on stage, in the middle of a set, was something every stand-up experienced. It was as inevitable and as unavoidable as bad weather. The pros distinguished themselves from the wannabes by not buckling under the weight of the dead room, of the surly crowd, of their own (hopefully temporary) suckitude.

But tonight felt different.

Tonight Steve felt like he was running out of lives.

“Hey, thanks everybody for that great welcome. Are you ready to be the best Finance Department we can be?”

Bifocals, bad ties, and pantsuits peered at him from the audience of the Chicago Improv Underground. The theater used to be a strip club, and still retained the vague air of being somewhat ashamed of itself, with its low ceiling and bad lighting and support beams blocking sightlines from a third of the seats. Like every other performer, Steve had to memorize the location of the ancient lump of blue putty covering the hole in the floor where the stripper pole had been sawed off, to avoid tripping or stubbing his toe on it.

The tumbledown surroundings were part of the act—they helped to draw herds of accountants of the Whatever Co. from the glass tomb of their conference room down the concrete staircase beneath the Aldi supermarket for this quarter’s team-building seminar.

This ritualized descent into the underworld was all part of the initiation process. The staircase was flanked by black and white photos of the famous before they were famous, fresh-faced and poor, honing their skills on the Underground stage before their careers began to flourish on *Saturday Night Live*, *Mad TV*, and *The Daily Show*. By the time the audience arrived in the black box theater and took their broken-down, lumpy seats, they understood they were ensconced in the loam of celebrity: the Improv Underground was the rich, dark soil from which impossible dreams were raised.

Or, in Steve’s case, the pure earth to which he had returned.

In the stairwell Before pictures, the audience had seen him looking twenty years younger. Now, as Steve faced them, one eye on the floor to avoid the ex-stripper-pole bump, they were looking at the After:

“All right folks, for our first team-building exercise, I’m going to hunt you for sport, so if you could all line up against the far wall and get your panda costumes? What? No? C’mon, being hunted builds character! Man *is* the most dangerous game.

“No, you can tell I’m joshing. Tonight we’re gonna have fun improvising sketches, just like we used to do on *What Just Happened?* Teddy, could you come up here on stage? Teddy is the manager of Improv Underground. He’s a professional funnyman like me, which means he’s an amateur degenerate.

“So we’ll make up a comedy scene right here in front of you. Now somebody give me a place. Any place. Doesn’t matter where. No wrong answers here. The one word you can’t use in improv is ‘no.’”

“Auschwitz!” blurted out a middle-aged CPA in the back row.

Steve blinked.

“Oooo . . . okay? Auschwitz. Sure! Now can somebody give me a profession?”

“Rodeo clown!” yelled the Executive Senior Vice-President of Something in the front.

Steve swallowed.

“No,” he said.

“You said that was the one thing you couldn’t say!” the ESVPoS exclaimed with a near-audible *harumph*.

“No, I said that was the one thing *you* couldn’t say,” Steve said. And, looking at Teddy’s face when he said it, and the face of the executive’s assistant sitting next to him when he said it, he knew instantly he *shouldn’t* have said it, because this guy hadn’t been told no by anybody still with a job since 1998.

At that moment Steve thought maybe he really was dying. The

spark that had animated his existence since he was a kid was dying out, that desire to make people laugh, to book that next gig, to not punch an audience member in the face. What was it all for, the bad food and cancelled flights? He could go back to law school like his mother always wanted. At his age, it would be a sitcom waiting to happen. Or he could flip burgers.

Flipping burgers was sounding better and better by the second.

His phone vibrated again. Steve ignored Teddy's look, a look that said "Oh no you will not check your damn phone while you're in the middle of a gig, you pitiful sketch-show has-been" and turned his back on the audience.

"Just a second," Steve said. "I'll be right back."

He pulled out the phone out and read:

## II

You don't know who I am, but you MIGHT know who I work for.

"Do you need to take that?" the middle-aged reporter from the *Christian Science Monitor* asked Zoe Schwartz when her phone made another sad trombone *wah wah* sound.

"Nah," Zoe said, ignoring the notification, "what was the question again?"

The reporter checked her pad and said:

"Will you ever stop making jokes about your vagina?"

Without missing a beat, Zoe said, "Why would I want to stop making jokes about my vagina? It's literally my funniest body part."

She stood and reached down to hike up her skirt. “You wanna see?”

“No, uh, that’s all right—”

“No, seriously, it’s a scream.” She pulled the hem almost but not quite to her panty line. “You want to get your camera ready? I’m a blonde, and let me tell you, the curtains *do* match the drapes.”

“No! Thank you, Zoe! I think I’ve got all we need!”

The reporter leapt up and fled from the ballroom press junket in the Brooklyn Bridge Marriott. Zoe had spent close to six hours sitting in a canvas director’s chair in front of a large cardboard standee of herself as a parade of reporters, bloggers, and TV crews came in to ask the same five questions about her upcoming Netflix special over and over again while a bored publicist giggled at her phone in the corner. Zoe was cranky and bored. Judging from the chipper beats of ’80s pop throbbing from the wall behind her, it seemed pretty obvious that everyone at the wedding reception in the ballroom next door was having a way better time than she was.

Her next victims were a camera crew from the cable station NY1. Zoe’s bedraggled salt-and-pepper terrier mix, who had laid dutifully at her feet throughout the whole junket, barked protectively at the sound guy as he clipped a lavalier mic to the shoulder strap of her dress.

“Quiet, Asshole,” she said to the tiny mutt. She smiled at NY1’s painfully handsome entertainment reporter, what’s-his-name, Square-Jaw. “Not you. Him.”

“I know, I watched the early screener of your special. He used to be named Bandit . . .”

“ . . . then I got to know him better, yeah.”

“Are we ready? Great. Zoe, can you start? Even greater. So, we’re here with funny lady Zoe Schwartz. Zoe, it’s great to see you. Your

second Netflix special is called *Laughs Like a Girl*. Do you have a theory as to why some people think don't girls are funny?"

Zoe struggled to maintain her smile. By her count this was the seventh time she had been asked that question in one day. Oftentimes while riding the Carousel of Interviews she was tempted to give the exact same answers to the same questions to see if anyone would notice, but professional pride kept her in check. A lot of people had sunk money and work into her Netflix special, and she was terrified of letting them down. This mixture of duty and fear cleaved through her exhaustion and hunger and cleared the way for an original response to the what's-your-theory-girls-no-funny question:

"Is stupidity a theory? Because usually it's the right one."

"Do you want to hear my theory?" Before she had a chance to respond, Square-Jaw said, "You know how so many of the metaphors of comedy are about violence? If you do really well in a set, you *killed*. You *slaughtered* the audience. If you do really badly on stage, you *bombed*. So much of it is wrapped up in this macho B.S. I can see how women can feel shut out."

"I don't know, it's been my experience that a pretty girl cracking dirty jokes is a turn-on for most guys."

"It seems to work for you."

"You think I'm pretty? Aww."

Apparently, Square-Jaw had predetermined his hard-hitting line of questioning, and now he refused to deviate from the script: "But you've never felt excluded around male comedians, backstage or anywhere else?"

Zoe barely repressed a sigh. Did Chris Rock or Louis C.K. or, God help us, TJ Martinez ever have to answer questions like, What is it like to be a Boy Comedian? Why are there no Men-in-Stand-Up

roundtable interviews and think pieces like “Penises: What’s Their Deal, Really?”

She thought of bringing up one particular incident, in one network dressing room not so long ago, but she also knew that if she did it would become all this interview was about, all the next three hundred interviews of her life would be about.

Her stomach growled loudly in the silence. Asshole looked up, startled, to see if there was another dog around. Zoe hadn’t eaten anything since the early morning, when she grabbed a chocolate croissant from the continental breakfast as she ran out of the hotel lobby.

The stuttering beats of the A-ha classic “Take on Me” pulsed from the adjacent wall, reminding her that there was still joy to be found in this world.

Her phone made the *wah wah* noise, indicating another text had arrived, and the little mutt jumped up to all fours and started barking. Zoe rolled her eyes apologetically. “Uh-oh, I’m afraid *someone* needs to do his dirty doggie business.”

Square-Jaw furrowed his neatly plucked brow. “Oh—I mean, we’re almost done. Maybe we could ask the publicist—”

“This will take only a second, I’m sorry. I can’t let Asshole out of my sight. He’s a support dog. Whenever I have the urge to drunk-dial my ex, he bites me.”

She took Asshole’s leash in her hand and let him lead her out into the hallway. They crossed into the next ballroom where many lumpy humans in tuxedos and gowns were doing the Electric Slide. Head held high, Zoe Schwartz marched across the dance floor to the row of steam trays for the Bernstein-Kaufman wedding and helped herself to some rice pilaf, broccolini, and black cod.

When the father of the bride looked cockeyed at her she lied, “I’m the comedian, I’m on after cake.”

She was having so much fun picking up Asshole and dancing to “You Spin Me Round (Like a Record)” with the eight-year-old flower girls, she forgot to look at her new texts until the song ended:

### III

Ha ha, jk. You know exactly who I work for: Dustin Walker.

Dante Dupree propped himself up on his elbows on his hotel bed and squinted at his phone. A very large tribal drummer had taken up residence inside his skull and was pounding out the infectious jungle rhythms one usually associated with sacrifices to Kong. In between these throbbing beats what remained of his mind parsed out the meaning of the name “Dustin Walker,” right after the meaning of “jk,” “exactly,” “work,” and “ha.”

Dustin Walker. *Dustin Walker* is texting me? *The* Dustin Walker? He’s still alive?

Had he even *met* Dustin Walker? Dante felt certain he would have remembered that. But on the other hand, he couldn’t remember a lot of things. That must have been quite a night at the club. The *club* club, that is, where he went with the honeys who hung around after his set at the tiny comedy club in Rochester, New York, named, in a stunning burst of creativity, the Comedy Club.

He sort of remembered that he had tied one on not three days ago, so he swore he was going to take it easy on the tasty beverages

for the foreseeable future.

Tell that to his eyes, which were now so stinging and shrunken as to tumble out of his sockets. Or his mouth, which tasted like he had sucked off a glue gun.

He tried to swallow, found that he was unable to, and looked around the room in the predawn gloom. The usual anonymous limbo of a hotel room sharpened into focus around him: door, latch, peephole, laminated evacuation instructions, flat-screen, bureau, table, lamp, armchair.

He had a bad case of “the fuzzies,” as the grandmother who raised him had called them. You spent your whole life trying to tame the fuzzies by bringing them into focus. So you were a fool if you went out of your way to make things fuzzier than they already were.

Then something else in the bed moved along with him, and that brought the fuzzies into sharp, immediate clarity.

He held his breath and pulled back the bedspread. There was a woman—wait, no, *women*, one black-haired and white, the other blonde-haired and black, lying by his side. They were not the women he had gone to the club with.

God damn. What was the point of doing all this awesome freaky shit if you never could remember it well enough to get a good story out of it? Or at least work it into a tight five minutes on Conan or *2nite*?

A shouted conversation blundered into his memory:

“Do you screw as fast as you talk?”

“Girl, my mouth don’t stop moving for an hour and a half. Just like my act.”

But did that actually happen at the club last night, or was that just a bit he made up in his head? With guys like him, you never could

be sure what was real and what was a fuzzy.

He looked around the hotel room again, which, after a few minutes of careful study, he at last realized was not his own.

He got up, naked, and walked over to the window, inspired to investigate something he had noticed before but had been subconsciously trying to ignore: a Tim Hortons sign blazed on a donut place across the highway. Atop the flagpole in the parking lot flapped a red maple leaf on a white field.

“Am I in Canada?” he asked.

The white girl turned away from him and muttered, “Shut the hell up, eh?”

#### IV

Dustin asked me to contact you about doing a project with him.

The headset-wearing stage manager had to cue Oliver Rees again because he was looking right through her. Goosebumps covered his entire nearly naked hairless body.

A PA snatched the phone out of his hand and replaced it with an oversized mallet before he could stop her, and look at his lock screen again and make sure he hadn't imagined what he had just read.

Just beyond the wings, his warm-up man, Kenny Kinny, was on-stage gearing up for his closer, the one about getting his car stuck at the airport, thereby combining two great comedy subjects into one perfect joke. It was so hard to find an opening act that wasn't blue,

*eff this and g-d that and I want to ess in your mouth.*

Kenny would ess when he heard this. Dustin Effing Walker's mounting a comeback? An HBO special? A streaming web series? Whatever it is, he wants *my* help?

After all these years, after all the sold-out tours, the Emmy-winning specials, his Grammy, the IMAX documentary, packing the same theater in the Bellagio for months straight, tickets going for four figures on StubHub, none of it mattered to Oliver's peers. They still wouldn't let him play their reindeer games. They made fun of him at roasts that weren't even about him.

Yeah, I get it, you hate prop comedy. How original. Have you seen my house on Painted Feather Way? Would you like to count the bathrooms?

No, seriously, would you please count them, I forgot how many there are, *that's how many there are.*

Boom! Kenny dropped his closer, and the two thousand strong in the former Cirque du Soleil theater erupted with laughter.

The stage manager and Ollie exchanged thumbs-up. He reached out with his free hand and another PA put another rubber mallet in it. He made sure his shoulders were straight and his spine was relaxed and his chi was flowing properly down through his legs and out his toes.

Ollie was one of the most successful performers of his generation, but Dustin Walker could bring him the only thing he lacked:

Dignity.

Kenny yelled:

“Give it up, fellow seekers of the RadicalYes! It's time for a peace-and playdate with . . . *Orange Baby Man!*”

Ollie somersaulted onto the stage with wide staring eyes and a

manic grin. He was the exact same color as a traffic cone. He even had a bright white stripe around his nether regions in the form of a diaper.

Giant multicolored whoopee cushions rose from the floor to meet Orange Baby Man. He beat “My Heart Will Go On” out on them in fart noises with his mallets.

The crowd rose to its feet as one.

## V

He would like to extend to you an invitation to join him, me, and a select group of collaborators of equal stature for a long weekend of creation

When she read that, Janet Kahn screamed:

“Elena! Elena, God damn it! Elena, get in here!”

“Ms. Kahn, please . . .” murmured her plastic surgeon, Dr. Shamdasani, and not for the first time. For the past twenty minutes he had been trying to get her to set her phone down so that his anesthesiologist could step in, but the insult comic still known as the Shotgun remained a raging dynamo of invective even while lying in an operating room at Cedars-Sinai.

“Look at your creepy serial killer smile, Dr. S. It never wavers. You dipping into your own stash? Sticking your lips with the Botox? You auditioning for the villain in the next Batman movie? *Elena!*”

“Right here, Ms. Kahn,” her personal assistant Elena said. She had been standing just inside the door the whole time.

“Jesus Christ! Don’t do that! You already made it across the border, you can stop sneaking around. Wear high heels once in a while so I can hear you coming. I’ll hold off Immigration long enough so you can stomp away.”

Elena had been born to second-generation Brazilian Americans in Framingham, Massachusetts, twenty-two years ago. She was the fourth personal assistant to work for the Real Queen of Mean that year. The placement agency swore to Elena that the real Real Queen of Mean was nothing like her insult comedy act.

It took two hours on the job for Elena to realize that this was quite true.

The real Janet Kahn was much worse.

“How did whoever this is get my private number? Did you give it to her? If it was you I’m gonna strangle you with your own fallopian tubes.”

“Who . . . ?”

Lady Put-Down shoved the phone in Elena’s face. She took it and scrolled through the text messages thus far.

Elena frowned:

“Who’s Dustin Walker?”

“Christ on a crutch, are you serious? What are they teaching in public schools these days? Your generation can rank every member of One Direction by penis size but you don’t know Dustin Walker? He’s one of the few legends in this business who hasn’t been carried out in a doubly-ply Hefty bag. Yet. That’s why I’m in this chair, right Dr. S? You’re gonna make sure I live forever?”

“I shall do my very best, Ms. Kahn.”

“Look at you, grinning and nodding, grinning and nodding. They should give you out on bobblehead day at Dodger Stadium.”

Elena turned to leave. “I will find out whoever’s calling and make sure they do not contact you again—”

“What? No! That’s not what I said. The short bus just drop you off? Listen! Find out who gave them my number. Then I’ll know if the offer is on the up and up. Which I hope it is. Because the idea of it doesn’t, entirely, you know, suck.”

Elena left the room trembling in awe at the nicest thing she had ever heard Janet Kahn say about anybody. She instantly looked up Dustin Walker on IMDb as soon as she got to the waiting area.

“Besides, Dusty’s spread will be a grand place to recuperate from you using my face as a hibachi grill, ain’t that right, Doc?”

“Perhaps, Ms. Kahn, if you ever give me your kind permission to perform the rhytidectomy . . . ?”

“Oh, you *can* get pissed, Doc, I can hear it in your voice. Real human emotion. I like this side of you. Yeah, okay, do your worst. I don’t expect you to make me a 10, but I am tired of throwing up on my bathroom mirror every morning.”

## VI

for a long weekend of creation at the house he’s got on a small island off Saint Martin. Yes, that’s the Caribbean. Sand, sun, and jokes. What’s not to love?

TJ Martinez put down his big-ass Desert Eagle handgun and picked up his phone to make sure he had read that right.

Saint Martin? That was one of those island countries with no

extradition treaties, right? Where the brothers had a revolution and kicked out the white man and made sure he'd never come back except by paying through the nose at high-end luxury hotels? That sounded nice. Particularly now. Things were getting way too heavy on the home front for his liking. He could hear punks stumbling about in the bushes outside his big-ass mansion right now.

TJ had been playing *Call of Duty* in his silk bathrobe and Michael Kors boxer shorts with the sound jacked all the way up on his headphones. The walls of his man-pit were reinforced by framed platinum records and photos of the guests he had on during his twenty years hosting *2nite*. There were five presidents, forty-two Grammys, thirty-eight Oscars, and eight Nobel Prizes among them.

He threw off his headset when shadows passed across the shutters on the big bay window. There were definitely creepers creeping around in his shit. Somebody jiggled the bulletproof panels from the outside.

He hadn't always bunkered down like a wounded animal. But after he retired from *2nite*, after a decade and a half of the daily grind of a nightly variety show, after all the articles on his significance, after Miley Cyrus jumped out of his farewell cake on the last show in pasties, he woke up the next morning feeling like Rip God-Damn Winkle.

What *was* this new world, with everyone at DEFCON 5 twenty-four seven, losing their minds at every little thing. He used That Word in a tweet once—once!—and that's all it took for planet Earth to start screaming for his blood. All his awards, all those how-will-we-live-without-him think pieces, all forgotten in an instant.

Does TJ Martinez need that nonsense? Hell no. I got nothing left to prove. Not since I was seventeen years old, back when they

stopped kicking my ass for my mouth and started giving me cash money for it instead.

TJ shut off the TV and padded over to the front door with the Desert Eagle. He could hear voices arguing in whispers on the other side. He quietly undid each of the six dead bolts so he could catch the mofos with their drawers around their ankles. He didn't have any security cameras in his big-ass mansion, because Anonymous or WikiLeaks could hack into those and he didn't want anyone posting videos of him jerking off onto MySpace or whatever. That ain't right. He didn't have an alarm system, either. That just begged *la polizia* to show up unannounced claiming that the system gave them a false signal and do you mind if we have a look around your property since we're here anyway oh look at all this heroin we found for some reason. No, thank you.

Before *2nite* TJ had starred with that crazy white boy Dusty Walker on *What Just Happened?* They had been thick as thieves back in the day, scoring coke together and destroying any pussy that had the bad sense to blunder into the orbit of their insanity.

He hadn't talked to Dusty for years and years since they did that movie together, the one about the guy who married a cat. It was a piece of garbage but it paid for Dusty's sweet crib in the islands. Might be good to see him.

Might be even better to lie low for a while.

Because he was about to straight-up murder some fools.

He grabbed the knob and threw the door open.

## VII

The only potential sticky wicket is that the dates are kind of already locked in—Aug. 8–11—so hopefully that'll work with your schedule.

Once Ruby Ng read this, she stifled a cry. By this point she had spent a solid twenty minutes creeping around TJ Martinez's bushes trying to find a window to look through that wasn't covered with bulletproof shutters.

Ever since the ex-*2nite* host had tweeted That Word, then deleted it eighteen thousand retweets too late, then set a land-speed record for deleting every single one of his online accounts, Ruby burned with the desire to get him on her podcast, *Comedy Ambush*, ranked #44 overall on iTunes, #2 in interview/humor (watch your ass, Marc Maron). But it looked like Martinez had gone full-on Colonel Kurtz. His mansion was locked down to survive a zombie attack, bunker-buster bomb, and/or the Rapture.

Lucky for her he had left his front gate open.

Normally, Ruby would have turned off the notifications on her phone, so as to not interfere with its microphone attachment and Bluetooth connection to the small video camera mounted on her Kaiser Wilhelm bicycle helmet. But any remaining thoughts of leaping out of the bushes and strafing TJ Martinez with an impromptu interview about his privilege flew out her ears as soon as she looked at her phone and the text hit her between the eyes.

ZOMG Dustin Walker THE Dustin Walker wants to work with me.

Ruby popped out of Martinez's bushes and walked across his front lawn, dialing rapidly. Where did he see my stand-up? YouTube?

Must have been YouTube, since none of the phallogentric gatekeepers of Hollywood had the cojones to put her on the air.

When her fiancée, Yvette, answered, Ruby blurted out, “I’ve got great news,” and read the Walker message back verbatim.

Yvette screamed:

“Oh my God, honey! That’s wonderful! That’s amazing! I’m so happy for you. Except . . . you know. For that last part.”

“What? Why?”

“You . . . you *do* have plans that weekend.”

“Not anymore I don’t!”

She could feel the bubbling hot magma of Yvette’s unleashed fury surging through the phone. “What—what are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about?”

“*Dammit Ruby our wedding is that weekend!*”

Ruby blinked.

“Oh.”

She blinked again.

“Oh yeah.”

She blinked a third time.

“Well.”

After an awkward pause:

“Guess we’ll have to reschedule, then.”

“No—no, we are not rescheduling our wedding! We’ll lose our deposit at the aquarium!”

“I’ll make it up to you, baby.”

“Make it up to me? How can you make it up to me? How can you pay me back? You haven’t had a positive net income since we started dating!” An estate tax lawyer, Yvette was definitively the sugar mommy in the relationship. “When will Yogi Gomes find another

time to leave his ashram? That's the best ten-date window for a wedding between Tauruses! *Do you have any idea how hard it is to rent doves, for Christ's sake?*"

"I swear, I'll figure out a way. 'Vette! This job is a slam-dunk game-changer!"

Yvette burst into tears.

"The most special day of our lives together is a slam-dunk game-changer! What about that?"

The veins in Ruby's neck started popping out. "I don't think you understand what an opportunity this is, not just for my career personally, but to increase the non-accommodationist queer presence in mainstream American comedy! I thought you believed in the revolution of representation! *What about the revolution, Yvette?*"

At that moment, TJ Martinez burst out of his front door, waving a handgun at Ruby as big as her head, screaming, "I'LL SHOW YOU A REVOLUTION!"

"Gottagotalklaterloveyahon!" Ruby Ng sprinted out of the gate and toward her recumbent bike chained to a lamppost down the block as fast as her unshaved legs could carry her.

## VIII

Anyway, drop me a ring or a text back if you're interested—Dustin would absolutely loooooove to work with you.

Fascinating, William Griffith thought when he read the series of texts in full. He had never met Dustin Walker, or heard anything

but a track or two of his most famous album (*Can't Help Himself*), but that was not unusual. William was not familiar with most of his fellow practitioners in the art of observational monologuing.

“Mr. Griffith, if you’ll allow me, I’d like to show you this piece. M.Vallier suspected you might find it right, as they say, up your alley.”

“Yes, of course, Dominique. Lead on.”

Dominique led William across the high-rise gallery offering spectacular floor-to-ceiling vistas of the Arc de Triomphe and Champs-Élysées. Normally the gallery was closed on Monday, to all collectors not named William Griffith. He had to red-eye back to JFK to tape Fallon on Tuesday, so arrangements had been made.

William looked at the mixed-media work for some time, then asked:

“Whose vagina is that?”

Dominique said:

“The artist’s mother’s.”

William nodded:

“Ah, yes. Of course. They make the most exquisite sound when they brush against one another.”

“The colored glass vaginas are hand-blown, ironically enough, by the artist’s mother. This is why M.Vallier has called it ‘The Birth Call.’ Instead of—”

“‘The Birth *Caul*,’ of course. Droll. A pun. Very daring in the art world.”

Dominique gave him a hungry, expectant look:

“So, do you think you might be interested—”

Just then William’s phone tinkled again, the sound of a fork tapping a Champagne flute. When he read the text, he felt a pang of disappointment. It was from his manager, Jessica, and not another

flattering message from the Dustin Walker people:

Hey Billy sorry but the Phoenix guys are really on my ass about the promos can you just call in that number and give them 1 or 2 takes real quick thx xoxoxoxoxoxox

“Pardon me, darling, I need to make a call. May I . . . ?”

“Please, use my office. Over there.”

William went into the small side room and closed the door. He dialed the number in Jessica’s text and when the recorder beeped on the other end he let out a rebel yell:

“Hey there, this is Billy the Contractor and you’re listening to KTEA, Kay-Tee, Phoenix’s real place for real talk for real Americans! Remember to hold your fire ’til you see the whites of their panties! Fix ’er uuuuuuuup!”

He waited a beat.

Then he said:

“You know what criminals call gun-free zones? *Target practice!* You know that, KTEA knows that, and Billy the Contractor knows it too! You can’t see I’m open-carrying on the radio, but you straight-up know I am! Fix ’er uuuuuuuup!”

Beat.

“How many liberals does it take to screw in a light bulb? Who knows, none of ’em have worked a day in their lives! This is Billy the Contractor tellin’ Real America to set their dial to KTEA, Phoenix’s radio home of Hannity and Limbaugh! Fix ’er uuuuuuuup!”

Dominique’s face was blank with shock when he stepped back out of the office. She must have heard every word he said.

And she must have been more familiar with his bank account

than with his act.

That was true of most of his fellow travelers. He decided he was going to take the Dustin Walker people up on their offer. He had been paddling around in his own little pond by himself for far too long.

William handed the stunned Dominique his black Amex and said:

“M.Vallier knows me far too well. This piece would look exquisite next to the pool at my guesthouse. I’ll take it.”

## IX

Hope to see you there!

Best,

Meredith Ladipo

Assistant to Dustin Walker & Funny-Person-in-Training

*“You’re fired, Steve!”*

Teddy’s words were drowned out by the metal stage door crashing shut in the alley behind Improv Underground, where illegal immigrants in white aprons pitched giant garbage bags of rotting produce from Aldi into blue plastic Dumpsters. Steve Gordon had dashed out as soon as he read the last part of the message, leaving his accountant students slack-jawed in amazement.

As soon as Dusty’s name appeared on his lock screen he had to grab the stage-right curtain to keep from falling over. He hadn’t heard from Dusty in years. Years. He assumed Dusty still hated his guts because of . . . well, you know. But now, after all his pitch meet-

ings to stone-faced producers, after all the pilots not picked up, after the sink into the dreary sameness of improv classes and infomercial hosting . . . Dusty wanted to see him again? This was destiny calling, wasn't it?

This was salvation.

Steve wasn't halfway to the alley before he pulled up Meredith Ladipo's contact details from her message and dialed her number: 310 area code. Los Angeles.

By the fifth ring his panic mounted, but then a woman answered: "Hey there, Funny Person." A young voice with a British accent, brimming with the confidence of the extremely good-looking.

"Yeah, hi, this is Steve Gordon—"

"I know."

"And, this is Meredith?"

"I hope so, I'm wearing her underwear."

"Ha. *Real Genius*, nice. So, hey, Meredith—"

"Hey."

"I've only got one question, which is—"

"No."

"No what?"

"No, it's not a joke. It's a genuine offer."

"Oh, thank God!" Steve blurted out, and Meredith laughed:

"It's all right, most of the others have had the exact same reaction."

The others?

"Well, sure, sounds like fun, send the details, I'll look them over, and we'll go from there."

"You still with ICM?"

"I . . . think so?" Steve chuckled. "It's been a while since I've spo-

ken to anyone over there. My agent may have died from lack of interest. I just, uh—I was wondering . . .”

“Yes?”

“Is Dusty around? Can you put him on? It’s been so long since I’ve spoken to him.”

“Dust . . . ? Oh. That’s brilliant you call him that. No, I’m in L.A., crossing t’s and dotting i’s. Dustin’s already at the island. The cell reception there’s rubbish, we communicate through Skype mostly. I’ll let him know you want to touch base, maybe he’ll find the time to raise the port before you arrive on the island.”

Steve took a deep breath, exhaled:

“I . . . this is . . . wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” Meredith Ladipo said.

## X

And he did.

In the end, they all did.

When God almighty walks down on a beam of light and asks for your help, what the hell else are you going to say?

And that was just what their host was counting on.

# Dustin Walker

## Filmography

<b>Actor</b> (55 credits)	▼
<b>Writer</b> (15 credits)	▼
<b>Producer</b> (19 credits)	▼
<b>Director</b> (1 credit)	▼

## Known For

### **Can't Help Myself** (1988)

As Himself

Filed concert version of Walker's multiplatinum Grammy-winning comedy album.

### **What Just Happened?** (TV series, 1990–1994)

As Various

Funnymen Dustin Walker, TJ Martinez, Steve "Gordo" Gordon, and surprise guest stars improvise comedy sketches based on suggestions from the audience and inspired by current events.

### **Help! I Married a Cat** (1995)

As Jerry Russell

Shallow ladies' man learns the true meaning of love when his eccentric aunt's will stipulates that in order to inherit her fortune, he has to wed her ill-tempered calico, Miss Puffytail.

### **Help! I Married a Cat 2** (1998)

As Jerry Russell

Jerry and Miss Puffytail must contend with a bigoted senator (Christopher Walken) fighting to pass a constitutional amendment banning interspecies marriage and a gold-digging neighbor (Fran Drescher) in this sequel to the box-office smash.

**Help! I Married a Cat 3: The Claws Come Out** (2000)

As Jerry Russell

Miss Puffytail schemes to ruin a growing relationship between Jerry and her pretty new vet (Jennifer Aniston).

**Help! I Married a Cat 4: Divorce, Feline-Style** (2003)

As Jerry Russell

A jive-talking tomcat (voice: Martin Lawrence) seeks to sabotage the marriage of Jerry and Miss Puffytail so he can collect her millions.

**King Lear** (2004)

As the Fool

Kenneth Branagh's attempt to relocate Shakespeare's classic tragedy about a misguided ruler (Derek Jacobi) and his three daughters to 1920s gangsterland Chicago was an ambitious critical and commercial failure.

**The Adventures of Cosmic Carson** (2005)

As Cosmic Carson

A roguish space trucker and his sentient fart sidekick (voice: Gilbert Gottfried) must protect a nymphomaniac princess (Chyna) from intergalactic loan sharks. One of the most expensive box office bombs of all time.

**Dandy Waller, Your Destiny Awaits You** (2008)

As Dandy Waller

Dustin Walker's semiautobiographical directorial debut about a suicidal stand-up reviewing his life before leaping from the Golden Gate Bridge was described by the *New York Times* as "less a feature-length film than a cry for help from a comedian who was briefly one of Hollywood's most bankable stars."

**Help! I Married a Cat: The New Litter** (2009)

As Jerry Russell

Jerry's son (Zac Efron) has to marry one of Sir Toms-A-Lot and Miss Puffytail's kittens for financial reward in this failed attempt to reboot the blockbuster franchise.

—IMDb.com



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