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# Summer 2020 Reading Sampler

— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

## [Destination Wedding: A Novel](#)

by *Diksha Basu* . . . . . 3

## [Playing Nice: A Novel](#)

by *J.P. Delaney* . . . . . 27

## [Sea Wife: A Novel](#)

by *Amity Gaige* . . . . . 47

## [The Girls Weekend: A Novel](#)

by *Jody Gehrman* . . . . . 77

## [The Year of the Witching](#)

by *Alexis Henderson* . . . . . 97

## [Leonard and Hungry Paul](#)

by *Ronan Hession* . . . . . 111

## [Love and Theft: A Novel](#)

by *Stan Parish* . . . . . 133

## [A Room Called Earth: A Novel](#)

by *Madeleine Ryan* . . . . . 153

## [The Smallest Lights in the Universe: A Memoir](#)

by *Sara Seager* . . . . . 167

## [One to Watch: A Novel](#)

by *Kate Stayman-London* . . . . . 175

## [Summer Sips & Snacks](#)

Recipes from *Tasty Pride*, *Tailgreat*, *La Buvette*, *Falastin*,  
*Friuli Food and Wine*, *Drink What You Want*, and  
*Easy Tiki* . . . . . 197



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*Diksha Basu*

AUTHOR OF *The Windfall*

A NOVEL



*Destination  
Wedding*

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

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**JFK Airport: Their Flight Is Delayed Due to  
Technical Reasons and Everyone Is Secretly  
Wishing Airlines Didn't Announce That and  
Make All the Passengers Nervous**

“ I CANNOT BELIEVE MY MOTHER IS HERE WITH HER BOYFRIEND and I'm here alone,” Tina Das said to her best friend, Marianne Laing, in the British Airways business-class lounge at JFK. Tina, in the hope that she would be able to sleep through the first leg of the flight to Heathrow, had rimless glasses on instead of her usual contacts. She never needed much makeup thanks to her thick eyebrows, which had been a liability when she was younger but were very fashionable now and gave her face all the drama it needed. She was wearing black North Face sweatpants that cinched at the ankle, a gray, long-sleeved T-shirt, and black-and-white Adidas sneakers. It was hot in the lounge so her Guess fur vest was hanging off the chair behind her.

A bowl full of nuts was on the table in between them. Tina picked up a handful while staring out of the window and tossed them all into her mouth and started chewing before she realized she had eaten several whole pistachios, with shells. The hard, cracked pieces pierced her mouth and she spat them out. A grumpy old man appeared out of nowhere with a broom and shook his head at her as he swept up the pistachio shells.

“I didn't know they had shells,” Tina said apologetically.

The man said nothing but kept looking at her as he swept, his broom knocking her foot aside.

“It isn’t my fault,” Tina said to him again but he didn’t respond.

The man walked away and Tina turned to Marianne and said, “At the price of these tickets, the nuts really shouldn’t have shells.”

Marianne was applying lip balm and laughing. She was so good at putting on makeup that it was hard to say whether or not she had any on, but the smattering of brown freckles across her nose was visible and, despite the fact that it was November, still had a velvety brownness they usually acquired over the summer because she had recently been to San Francisco for Tom’s college roommate’s wedding. Marianne was wearing similar sweatpants and a plain black long-sleeved T-shirt, and a red shawl was draped over the back of her chair.

“We’re like world-weary businesswomen who travel internationally twice a month and are just so over it,” Marianne said. “I feel like I should be impatiently clacking away on a laptop but I have no work to do this week and I bet Tom’s fast asleep.”

Marianne looked down at her phone and the itinerary that had been sent by the wedding planner.

“It feels like we’re going to have a lot of free time,” Marianne said. “There aren’t that many events listed here. I thought Indian weddings had days and days of events.”

“I think these days most people just pick and choose what parts they want to do. Shefali wanted to walk down the aisle in a white dress but my aunt put her foot down and said she could pick and choose what she wanted but she couldn’t change religions,” Tina said. “We’ll have time to explore the city, though.”

Marianne nodded as she cracked open a pistachio and ate it and played with the shells in one hand.

Their flight was two hours late so they were on glass number three of champagne and plate number two of mini sandwiches. Even on Tina’s decent income, these business-class tickets were prohibitively expensive. She had managed to book an economy flight using her own money and then used her miles to upgrade herself. Tina was the vice

president of development for Pixl, a streaming network for which she sought video content, a term she hated but a job that paid her enough to live alone in a two-bedroom apartment overlooking McCarren Park in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Her work was frustrating—ideas forever on the brink of becoming television shows but nothing concrete yet, nothing complete, nothing finished. Her enthusiasm for projects always waned as more people got involved and ideas gradually got altered and then shut down altogether.

At Pixl, Tina was in charge of finding content from India so she had been back a few times over the past five years. But it was always to either Delhi or Bombay, where she stayed at a Taj Hotel, took a car and driver everywhere, and partied with producers from all over in rooftop bars and seaside clubs that could have been anywhere in the world. And then she returned to New York City without having seen much of actual India.

Tina Das was conceived in India but born, nine months later, in Columbus, Ohio. Three months later, like her father, she held a coveted American passport. Her mother stubbornly held on to her Indian passport and Green Card. For the first eight years of her life, her parents took her to India every summer and they stayed with her aunt and uncle, the parents of Shefali, the bride, in New Delhi. In the eighth summer, her father got malaria and spent two weeks in Holy Family Hospital and decided, on the flight back, that he didn't want to return to India next year.

“Let's go to London next summer instead,” Tina remembered him saying on the flight back that year. He had lost weight and his belt was looped tightly around, his pants bunching at the waist. Back in Ohio, he bought new pants, without pleats, Tina had noticed, and the following summer they went to London, then they went to Ubud, then Stockholm, then Buenos Aires, then Tokyo, and even Colombo the year before Tina left for Yale, but never back to India. Her mother went once when her mother died in Calcutta, but that was all before the divorce.

Last year, Tina had come tantalizingly close to green lighting a re-

ality show that would have featured the best musical talent from around Asia and put them together with a Bollywood music producer to create a band. She had found a K-pop singer from Seoul, a dancer from Ho Chi Minh City, two beatboxing brothers from Sri Lanka, a drummer from Dharavi, the Bombay slum, and a female spoken-word artist from Lahore, but the project fizzled, and Tina had gone home frustrated and depressed and worried about her career. She was still upset that it hadn't moved forward and now all except Sid, the drummer, were committed to other projects. The K-pop singer had joined a reality television show in Singapore as a judge, the two beatboxing brothers had moved to Berlin, the spoken word artist was seven months pregnant and focusing on fashion design, and the dancer from Vietnam was performing with a cruise line in Halong Bay.

Tina felt bad about having let Sid down. Sid, with his easy confidence and priceless bright smile. Sid, who was tall and slim and had a rough beard and laughed easily during the audition and wore his pants baggy and who, back in New York, Tina thought about often—what his life was like in India, who his friends were, who his family was. He was immensely attractive—his confidence, his swagger, his inaccessibility—and he often crossed her mind. After his audition, he had lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat off his face and revealed a perfect set of abs and dark hair trailing into his boxers. Tina had shaken her head, laughed, and called a lunch break.

He had stayed in touch with her and checked in often to see if the show might get back on track and she never had any good news to give him. He had started working part-time as a personal trainer to make money while working on his music. But Tina knew that personal training was just enough money to survive, whereas the show would have allowed him to move his mother out of their slum and into a concrete apartment, and she felt awful that she had let him down. Honestly, he'd said "slum," but she wasn't quite sure what he'd meant. Was it one room in a slum? Was a slum by definition a room? A shack? She had marveled at the sheer size of the blue-tarp-covered expanses of Dharavi she had flown over while landing in Bombay, but she couldn't actually

visualize the homes within it. She didn't know how to ask and she didn't want to show up at his doorstep with a camera, even though that would obviously make for good television. Maybe this was why she was struggling to get her projects off the ground—reality television often felt too invasive for her.

When she told Sid she was going to be in Delhi for a week, he had immediately said he would come from Bombay to see her “just to touch base.” Tina was dreading seeing him on this trip, dreading looking into his handsome, eager eyes and telling him that there was still no show and no other talent. It was easy to feed Sid fake hope over email but she knew she would have to tell him the truth this week. She would put him in touch with everyone she knew in Bombay in case they wanted to hire a personal trainer, she decided; it was the least she could do for him.

Since she was meeting Sid, Tina could have tried to expense this trip as well but her boss, Rachel Sanders, knew the bride and knew Tina would not be doing any work. But maybe it was time to talk to Rachel about booking her business class for all her future work trips. Sheryl Sandberg said she should lean in, after all. Not that Tina had read the book but really the title told her everything she needed to know. Was Sheryl Sandberg still an appropriate role model or was that over now, Tina wondered. It was hard to keep up sometimes.

It was nearing 11 P.M. and the lounge was gradually emptying out and Marianne and Tina were the only ones sitting at the round tables close to the bar. A bored bartender was leaning behind the bar playing on his phone, and a few others, mostly men in business suits with laptops open in front of them, sat at the tables or on the large armchairs near the floor-to-ceiling windows that spread across the entire far wall. Across the lounge and the empty tables and dirty dishes and folded newspapers, in one corner near the food station, sat Tina's mother, Radha Das, and her boyfriend, David Smith. Tina's mother looked exactly like Tina was likely to look in twenty-five years—her hair, still thick, was in a low bun, carefully colored to hide any hints of gray, and she wore no makeup except a dark brown lipstick. She was slim and had a long neck and looked like she could be one of those “real women”

models for the Gap or Uniqlo, a younger Rekha maybe—her mother had that Bollywood glam even though she never watched any Bollywood films. David looked like he belonged in a catalog for eyeglasses or high-end sweaters, maybe Viagra—he was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, a black jacket on his carry-on suitcase next to him, and Tina could never get used to how all-American David looked. How on earth was her mother, her Indian mother, dating a man like this all of a sudden, Tina wondered. Not quite all of a sudden—two years—but Tina still wasn't used to it. David was the kind of man you took a hiking selfie with, maybe with a big golden dog included.

“Have you noticed that all mixed-race couples are forever taking hiking selfies? What’s that all about?” Tina asked Marianne. Marianne was white, as white as could be. Marianne and her blond hair and light blue eyes, but her last name—Laing—threw everyone off even though it was Scottish, and seemed to confuse Marianne herself.

For the last four years Marianne had worked in a test prep kitchen for *Five Senses* magazine. She worked with a team that developed and tested recipes, plated them, photographed them, named them, and wrote the recipes. She had initially been the one hired to write the recipes but now she largely focused on the plating and display of the dishes for shoots. Marianne had a confident aesthetic when it came to her work, and she always seemed to have a strong preference for exactly which way the asparagus should point. Her mother had dedicated the walls in one room of Marianne’s childhood home in Bethesda to a collage of pages from the magazine that featured Marianne’s work.

Marianne had grown up far more comfortably, with a swimming pool in her backyard and annual summer holidays at their home in Mallorca. Her father was one of the original creators of IMAX films and her mother was a columnist for the weekend section of the *Bethesda Herald*, and now her parents did little other than travel the world wearing pastel-colored linen.

Being blond and from Bethesda would have been so much easier than being brown and from Ohio, Tina thought.

“And it’s usually the brown person who posts the picture online

because you just know they wouldn't generally go hiking—no Indians go hiking—but the minute they go slightly uphill with a white person, they feel so fit and outdoorsy, they have to post pictures online,” Tina said.

“Are you being pissy about David coming to India?” Marianne asked. “Because you and I went hiking last summer and you took a thousand pictures.”

Tina looked over at David again. The worst part of this all was that Tina found him attractive. She looked away.

“He's like what I imagine Colin Wrisley turned into,” Tina said.

“You remember his last name? That was so long ago! He has three kids now and they all play lacrosse,” Marianne said.

“You played lacrosse that entire spring too! Didn't you even try out for Yale's team?”

Marianne shook her head and laughed. She had. She had fallen head over heels for Colin Wrisley and started playing lacrosse—she hated it and was terrible at it—and going to ice hockey games and wearing sports jerseys. That was sophomore year, and that summer he was hiking to Everest base camp, and Marianne said her goodbyes and left her jerseys at the Salvation Army in New Haven and returned to Bethesda and her books for the summer, and only ever saw Colin Wrisley again when they crossed paths in the hallway after her Monday-Wednesday class on women and literature in traditional China. In fact, she remembered, that was where she met Tony Wei, for whom she taught herself how to make soup dumplings. But that ended quickly when he said nothing could ever compare to the soup dumplings at Din Tai Fung, and her heart sank when she realized she had no idea what Din Tai Fung was, and since this was before iPhones she couldn't even excuse herself to the bathroom to google it quickly. And of course, on the heels of that, was Riyaz from Pakistan—the ultimate international romance, the one who still crossed her mind, the one for whom she had once, late at night, alone in her room, tried draping a scarf like a burqa, leaving nothing visible but her eyes.

Outside, the tarmac glistened black and she could see into the oval

windows of parked airplanes. A Singapore Airlines plane taxied slowly toward the runway.

“My father is on this flight too. He’s obviously avoiding the lounge,” Tina said. “My mother said David’s looking forward to going to India because he loves doing yoga. I really wish America had never discovered yoga.”

She was folding a page of today’s *New York Times* into an origami swan. Three smaller origami swans—one made from a napkin, one from a discarded boarding pass, and one from a *Time* magazine cover—lay on the table in front of her.

“Don’t you do yoga at that place across the street from you?” Marianne asked.

“I used to but I think I’m done,” Tina said. She also watched the Singapore Airlines plane reach the main runway and thought about all the people in the plane, jostling into position, not yet feeling cramped and annoyed and exhausted. She thought about the young families in the front row with their babies in their laps waiting for the bassinets, hoping the children would sleep through the flight. She thought of the couples off on holiday or returning home after a trip through America. Maybe an Indian family with two parents and two children in high school flying home to Singapore after visiting family in Rochester and going to Niagara Falls. Maybe the mother was flipping through the in-flight magazine to find a Bollywood film to watch.

Last week, at the end of her yoga class on North Eleventh Street, the slim Caucasian instructor ended the hour by sprinkling water on all the students and saying “It’s holy water, the way they do in Hinduism.” Tina opened her eyes—she wasn’t supposed to, they were supposed to be in relaxation mode. The teacher caught her eye and smiled and nodded slowly. Tina was used to this in yoga class and she sagely nodded at the instructor and offered her a gentle smile, letting the instructor bask in her Indianness. Then Tina did the same with all the other students who bowed to one another after class, their hands pressed together in namastes. She was certain that the other students lingered during their namaste with her and she felt like a fraud—

because not only did she barely speak Hindi, she struggled to even touch her toes—but still she went around nodding slowly at everyone as if she were Buddha himself.

A few months ago, after too many happy hour cocktails with Marianne, Tom, and her ex-boyfriend Andrew at the Pony Bar on the Upper East Side, Tina, surprising herself the most, suggested dinner at Saravana Bhavan.

“I could definitely go for a tomato-onion uttapam,” Tom said, pronouncing it with a hard *t*. Tina saw Marianne smile at him and touch his elbow. Tom buried his face into his brown cable-knit scarf and put his hands into his blazer pockets.

“As long as it’s not too spicy,” Andrew had said. “I don’t want to have to run to the bathroom.”

Tina felt her ears get hot with embarrassment—about Andrew and his inability to eat spicy food, but more, worse, about being Indian and having food that was associated with urgent trips to the bathroom. Marianne had grown up eating meat loaf, and her family had all-American traditions like breakfast for dinner every Sunday. Tina had tried suggesting that to her mother when she was home for winter break her sophomore year and her mother had said, “You’re too old to be so cutesy, darling. We’re having keema khichdi tonight. Now, open up the windows, I don’t want the onion to make things smell. And take all the jackets from the downstairs cupboard and put them on the guest bed. The smell of food just lingers and lingers and I won’t have us walking all over town smelling like the kitchen of that horrid Indian buffet restaurant.”

“WHEN WAS THE LAST time we went on a trip, just us?” Marianne asked, flipping through the same *Time* magazine, now without a cover. “Was it senior year to Cancun?”

“Unless you count that depressing New Year’s Eve we spent in Atlantic City,” Tina said.

“We are definitely not counting that,” Marianne said. “That was

when I nearly burned down our rental trying to make dumplings. Remember?”

“I do remember. And then we ended up having bologna on white bread for our New Year’s Eve dinner.”

“And New Year’s morning breakfast,” Marianne said. “What a disaster. I’m glad we’re doing this trip just us.”

“I’m so grateful,” Tina said. “Forget my mother and her boyfriend, I have you here and this is going to be fun.”

Marianne was watching Tina’s mother and David.

“I can see why you find him sexy,” Marianne said.

“I should never have told you that,” Tina said.

“It’s the dad-bod thing. I get it,” Marianne said.

“Maybe I should call him ‘Daddy.’” Tina said. She laughed. “Daddy David Smith.”

“You could be his hot young trophy wife. If you had kids, people in Williamsburg would mistake you for the nanny.”

“No, that’s taking it too far!” Tina said laughing, throwing a pistachio at Marianne. “I’d have to speak in really clear English to show I wasn’t the nanny.”

“And you would have to wear expensive workout clothes and always carry Starbucks.”

“And then all the other Lululemon mothers would feel guilty that they had assumed I was the nanny.”

“And they would all say, ‘Not that there’s anything wrong with being the nanny. My nanny saves my life,’” Marianne added.

“Like that mother who burst in to get the kids out of the interview with the BBC dad.”

“Yes!” Marianne said. “The one everyone assumed was the nanny because she was Asian.”

“I made the same assumption,” Tina admitted. “But then I read that she was the mother before Andrew, and when he said that he thought she was the nanny, I used that to start a fight with him and call him racist.”

“It’s a wonder you two lasted as long as you did,” Marianne said.

“Daddy David Smith,” Tina sighed.

Marianne looked over at them again. Radha and David both had reading glasses on and newspapers in their hands but it was clear that they weren’t actually reading. Seeing them made Marianne wonder if she should have put more pressure on Tom to come to Delhi with her. She had asked once in passing but followed it up by saying Tina didn’t think she was bringing Andrew. Then Tina and Andrew had broken up, putting the question to rest.

A few weeks ago, she’d shown him the glittery glass bangles she had bought in Jackson Heights for the wedding.

“You’re going to look so beautiful,” Tom had said. “You should have this trip with Tina. I’m sure she’ll appreciate that. But you will be on my mind constantly.”

She had rubbed her fingers together and said, “Damn it. Now there’s glitter everywhere.”

Tom had gone to the kitchen and brought back a wet paper towel and handed it to Marianne and said, “This will help with the glitter. Let’s go out for dinner tonight. We haven’t wasted money for fun in a long time.”

A little over twelve months ago, Marianne was sitting on the 6 train on the way to see her gynecologist on the Upper East Side and she was reading the previous week’s issue of the *New Yorker*. She looked up to see what stop they were passing when she saw a handsome black man right across from her reading the same issue. He looked up then too, perhaps sensing her gaze, and she lifted her magazine to him and smiled.

“I’m also always at least an issue behind,” the man who turned out to be Tom said. He had an earnest face, a little nerdy with his glasses and collared shirt and tidy slacks.

“I panic every single Tuesday when it arrives,” Marianne said.

At Grand Central the train emptied out and Tom crossed over to Marianne’s side of the train and said, “Have you ever submitted to the caption contest?”

“I have! Several times,” Marianne said. “Never made it.”

“I made it to the final three once,” Tom said.

“You’re like a celebrity,” Marianne said. “I’ve never met a real-life *New Yorker* cartoon-caption-contest finalist before.”

“We should exchange numbers. I’ll show you my entry sometime.”

At the gynecologist, Marianne asked to have an IUD put in.

Tom was from Newton, Massachusetts, which, she learned, was a lot like being from Bethesda but with different sports allegiances. His father was a professor of African-American studies at Tufts and his mother was a pediatric dentist, and Marianne’s parents had met them for brunch in Brooklyn one sunny weekend morning and everyone got along easily, perfectly, and the two fathers even discovered that they had taken flying lessons at the same flying club outside Westchester. It was all so perfect on paper, maybe too perfect, and in any case, Tom hadn’t even mentioned proposing and Marianne worried that he never would and she was starting to get itchy feet again, wondering if maybe she needed something more exotic, more exciting, and less familiar.

“HOW DO YOU MAKE these so quickly?” Marianne asked Tina as she picked up the origami swan made from the *Time* magazine cover. “I’m going to keep this.”

Tina took it out of her hands and thoughtlessly crushed it and said, “Don’t take that one. I’ll make you a better one.”

“Let’s get more free champagne,” Marianne said.

“Can you believe your mother is bringing David Smith?” Neel Das, Tina’s father said as he approached his daughter and her best friend at the bar getting refills on their champagne glasses. He put his bag down at the table where their things were and stood next to them at the bar. He had been wandering around the duty-free shops trying to avoid his wife—ex-wife—but since the flight was over two hours late, he had no option but to come to the lounge and face everyone.

“A champagne for me too, please,” he said to the man at the bar.

“It’s prosecco. But still good,” the man at the bar said. “Where are you folks flying to today?”

“India,” Marianne said. “Where are you from?”

“Mali,” the man said, as he popped the cork on the prosecco bottle and smiled at Marianne.

“I’ve always wanted to go,” Marianne said to him.

“You have?” Tina and the bartender asked her.

“Of course,” Marianne glared at her. “Timbuktu has always sounded so magical to me.”

The bartender laughed even though Marianne had not meant it as a joke.

“Look at how broad his chest is. Can you imagine how handsome he’ll look in Indian clothes?” Mr. Das asked, looking across the lounge at David.

He shook his head and took a sip of his drink. The three of them took their glasses and walked back to the table where they had been sitting and Mr. Das looked at the origami swans on the table.

“Why are you making the swans again?” he asked Tina. “Are you anxious? I read somewhere that most air crashes happen in the first three minutes after takeoff.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Tina said.

“I’ll believe you,” Marianne said. “Then I can relax after three minutes.”

“Exactly. I download three-minute-meditation apps for takeoff,” Mr. Das said. “But then I don’t use it and instead spend three minutes staring at the faces of the flight attendants and then I order a drink.”

Mr. Das picked up a handful of pistachios while looking around the lounge and tossed them into his mouth. He also sputtered as the shells hit his teeth and poked the inside of his mouth. He spat them out into a napkin.

“They could at least shell the nuts,” Mr. Das said.

“Why did you agree to be on the same flight?” Tina asked, placing her glass down. “And why are you wearing a turtleneck? Don’t they give you headaches?”

She picked up the remaining origami swans and crushed them all into a ball.

“Your mother booked my ticket as well and she thought it would be nice for all of us to be on the same flight and who am I to argue? I’m wearing a turtleneck because *Esquire* says it’s dignified and makes men look more intelligent,” Mr. Das said. He picked up the ball of crushed swans and tried separating them and pressing out the wrinkles. “He might look good but there’s no way a restaurant manager can afford a business class ticket to India, let alone one for her as well. But how on earth does his gray hair make him look so dignified?”

“Ma probably paid,” Tina said.

“Exactly,” Mr. Das said. “With my money.”

“You don’t pay alimony,” Tina said.

“Not my money exactly but family money, Tina,” Mr. Das said. “Your inheritance.”

“Why are you swinging your arm?” Tina asked, noticing her father swaying his right arm off the side of his chair.

He lifted his wrist to Tina and said, “Fitbit.”

He had bought a Fitbit last week but discovered that it tracked steps based on movement so he had been keeping his arm swinging even when he wasn’t walking in order to increase his step count. Figuring out how to maximize his step count while minimizing the number of actual steps he took was more challenging than just walking around endlessly. Maybe he would buy one of those mobiles they give infants to keep them occupied and attach his Fitbit to it. But that movement might be too smooth to register as steps. What he needed was one of those large clocks like his family used to have in Calcutta with a swinging pendulum.

“Marianne,” he said. “How have you been? Where is your skinny little husband? Tell him to come along. He can still hop on a flight tomorrow and be there for the fun parts.”

“Just boyfriend,” Marianne said. “Not husband. And I can’t imagine Shefali would be too happy about having to rethink the seating arrangements last minute.”

Tina and Mr. Das laughed.

“Marianne. Sometimes I genuinely forget how white you are,” Tina

said. “Seating arrangements? There’s going to be over a thousand people at this wedding. Nobody’s sitting anywhere.”

“You know, for our wedding, the invitation card said *You and your friends and family are invited to celebrate*. I didn’t recognize more than half of the guests at our wedding,” Mr. Das said. “Book that fellow a flight. I like him. Tina, that’s the kind of man you need to meet. Marriage material—isn’t that what your generation says?”

“I don’t need any kind of man, Papa,” Tina said. “Isn’t that how you raised me? Not to need a husband or a boyfriend.”

“Everyone has a boyfriend,” Mr. Das said, no longer listening. “Even your goddamn mother. Sorry, I meant, even your lovely mother. Not just his chest, even his shoulders are broad. Do you think he lifts weights?”

Mr. Das twisted around in his chair to look at his ex-wife and her boyfriend again. He raised his glass at them and smiled, and David waved energetically while Radha nodded gently in his direction. Mr. Das swiveled back around and had a large gulp of prosecco.

“You’re being awfully nice,” Tina said. “Are you seeing a therapist?”

“No therapists for me, Tina. Living with your mother all those years was enough. I’m sure her patients get a lot from her but I personally am sick of being analyzed. That’s for David Smith to deal with now.”

“Then why the sudden generosity, Uncle?” Marianne said.

“Marianne, I like that you call me Uncle. You’re an honorary Indian,” he said.

He pulled at his collar.

“It’s hot in here. Is anyone else hot? This turtleneck is giving me a headache. Do either of you have Tylenol in your purse?”

“It’s so hot in here,” Radha said to David at the opposite end of the lounge, near the big windows. She took off her Eileen Fisher black cardigan under which she was wearing a black, sleeveless tunic top over a pair of black leggings. While planning what to wear for the journey, she had googled “best travel outfits” and scrolled through a slide-

show of celebrities in airports. How did women travel in such tight jeans and high heels?

“How do I look?” she asked David. She hadn’t had her arms bare outside a beach or a bedroom in nearly two decades and the skin on her shoulder was wrinkled in a way no models in magazines ever wrinkle but it didn’t matter. Let young people waste time worrying about their bodies, their perfect bodies—she was happy with this one, wrinkles and all, especially sitting here right now drinking a glass of wine with David.

“Beautiful,” David said. “Better than anyone else in this entire airport.”

This was exactly why she could never trust David’s compliments. If she had asked Neel the same question, he would have looked at her, really looked at her, and said, “None of us can compete with the youngsters anymore but you look quite good for your age. I don’t know why you always complain about your upper arms—they’re only slightly big for your body.”

But David always took compliments too far—she knew perfectly well that she didn’t look better than young people, and by saying that she did, he undid the compliment. Never mind. The bare arms were not about him, they were about herself. It was what she told all her clients all the time—needing external validation is risky. She glanced quickly at her husband—ex-husband—sitting there talking to their daughter and her best friend. Why was Neel swinging one arm continuously? She noticed the Fitbit on his wrist. Right, his step count.

David, meanwhile, was flipping through a guidebook on India. On the cover there were three poor children smiling and showing teeth so white you’d think they belonged in Hollywood.

“Let’s go sit with Tina and the others,” Radha said to him.

“May we join you?” she asked as they approached Tina, Marianne, and Neel. How silly to be so formal with her own daughter and ex-husband.

“Of course,” Mr. Das said. “Come, come. Have a seat. Nice to see you, David Smith. Radha, I was just telling the girls here that I am fol-

lowing in your footsteps. I have met someone. Well, I have met someone over email and I am about to meet her in person.”

Tina drained the rest of her drink.

“Meera and Rakesh introduced me to this woman in East Delhi who runs a matchmaking agency for widows,” Mr. Das was saying. He turned to David and added, “Meera and Rakesh are Shefali’s parents, David Smith. Meera is my sister. They’re the ones paying for all of our rooms at the club. Yours as well. You probably know that. Anyway, this Mrs. Ray has clients all over Delhi and even the United States and I think maybe Singapore now. And she introduced me to Mrs. Sethi and we’ve been in touch over email these past few months.”

“I have to use the bathroom,” Tina said, and she got up and walked away from the group.

Now her father was going to start dating. And he was discussing it so openly. She stood near the bar and looked back toward her father, still alternately tugging at the neck of his turtleneck and swinging his arm, speaking to her mother and David.

“You aren’t a widow,” Radha said, slightly more softly, perhaps, than she had intended.

“Widower,” David said. “Male widows are called widowers. But there’s so few nobody even uses the right term for them.”

Mr. Das looked over at David and nodded. Smart man.

“He is correct,” Mr. Das said. He lifted his glass in appreciation and continued.

“And you are correct as well, Radha. I am not a widower; you aren’t dead. But there are so few male widowers that Mrs. Ray also works with male divorcés. Not female ones, though, so, Radha, you’re out of luck.”

“It sounds like a scam,” Radha said. “And I have David; I don’t need some strange matchmaker in East Delhi.”

“Of course,” Mr. Das said. “Anyway, this Mrs. Sethi seems absolutely lovely.”

Even though he was playing it cool now, Mr. Das had also been rather surprised when his sister suggested this. But the world was

changing, Mr. Das thought. He had been so embarrassed by the idea of divorce at first, thinking Indians didn't get divorced unless they were academics or artists, but clearly India had been changing behind his back if a widowed woman was running a matchmaking agency for widows and divorcés in Delhi.

Tina came back to the group with another drink and put her full glass down at the edge of the table that was filled with empty dishes and used cutlery and crumpled napkins. The woman clearing up plates and glasses came over to their group to collect the used dishes. She looked from Marianne to David and back to Marianne again and said, "Gosh, don't you look just like your father. Lovely."

"He isn't my father," Marianne said.

The woman ignored her, picked up the used plates and glasses, and said, "It's nice to see families traveling together. You have a nice trip."

"I suppose I do look a bit like you, David," Marianne said to break the silence.

"God this turtleneck is tight," Mr. Das said. "Radha, you were wise to wear a sleeveless top. It looks decent too."

"I really hope the flight isn't delayed much longer," Marianne said. "I'll go check."

She got up and walked toward the front desk to check the flight status. Poor Tina was going to have an exhausting week ahead. Marianne called Tom. He didn't answer. She checked the flight status—there were no further delays—and then tried again. He answered groggily, "What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to hear your voice once more before I left."

"That's nice," Tom said. He had fallen asleep with his light still on. He felt around his sheets to find his glasses and put them on and reached for his watch on the bedside table. "I miss you already."

"Did you turn the light off before you fell asleep?" Marianne asked.

"Of course not," Tom said. He leaned back against the wall and yawned.

"And put your glasses on the bedside table before you sleep. You're

going to break them in bed one of these days and you'll be really stranded," Marianne said. "Did you confirm your dental appointment for tomorrow?"

"I canceled it, actually," Tom said. "My mother is coming down for the day and she wants to see the Oculus."

"I can't believe a train station has become a tourist attraction," Marianne said.

"I can. It's beautiful architecture. You just take it for granted because it's in New York and not, I don't know, in Budapest somewhere," Tom said.

Marianne smiled.

"Get some sleep," she said. "And take your mother to Century 21 to shop after you see the Oculus."

"It's her favorite store in the city. Then she'll try to drag me to Nordstrom Rack and we'll argue and then feel guilty and have a cup of coffee together and talk about my sister's poor life choices in order to reconnect," Tom said. "Have a good flight, Marianne. I really do miss you already. I'm going to leave my light on to sleep because it just doesn't feel right to switch it off myself."

Marianne hung up the phone in time to see Mr. Das and David marching out of the lounge. Was a life partner supposed to be a window or a mirror? Marianne wondered.

"David Smith here says I should get a pair of wireless headphones," Mr. Das said. "Want to come along?"

Marianne waved at them to go ahead and she returned to Tina and her mother sitting alone together.

"Auntie, I like what you're wearing," Marianne said.

"Thank you, darling," Radha said.

"I wish I could just embrace my thighs and wear short skirts. Not that your arms need embracing. I mean your arms are really nice," Marianne said.

"Relax," Radha said. "I know what you mean. It's easier to embrace your imperfections once you're older. You girls—although it's

really very silly to call you girls now—you ladies are at a hard stage. It gets easier, I think. I'm glad you two decided not to bring your boyfriends along. This will be a nice trip for you."

"Andrew and I broke up. I told you. Remember? Anyway, I didn't think anyone was bringing boyfriends along. It's a really juvenile word," Tina said. "I'm going to go see what Papa is doing."

Radha thought of stopping her, of asking her to stay, but she knew there was no point. She and Neel had been divorced for nearly a decade and she had met David two years ago, but Tina still had her anger. She didn't seem to have the same anger toward her father, though, as he was preparing to go off and date some woman he barely knew. What was he trying to prove?

Tina was also thinking about what her father was trying to prove as she walked out near the entrance to the lounge and sat down on one of the chairs there. From here, when the sliding glass doors opened, she could look out at the main terminal and she could also look into the lounge. A woman in a dark blue skirt suit sat at the front desk, her blond hair pulled into a neat ponytail, the computer screen reflecting in her glasses. This part of the lounge was cold, near the door, and Tina pulled her jacket closed and leaned back into the chair. The woman at the front desk was probably younger than her, Tina thought. Suddenly, at thirty-two, it felt like the whole world was younger than her. The woman at the desk looked up and caught Tina's eyes and smiled. Tina smiled back.

She envied that woman, so sure of herself. This woman who knew exactly how to do her hair and wore neutral lipstick and came to JFK every day to work and probably went home to a comfortable apartment in Queens, maybe with a cat, and watched one episode of a television show while knitting a throw. She probably went to yoga classes and left actually feeling calmer.

It had been a while since Tina had done anything from beginning to end. Maybe she would teach herself knitting just to get the satisfaction of a finished product. All the television shows she developed went nowhere. She had picked a difficult career for someone who liked finished

products. Everything in television was forever in progress, pre-production, production, occasionally post-production, and then rarely, so rarely, actually on-screen. She didn't know the odds when she first started. Maybe she could run a marathon to accomplish something concrete but that seemed tiring.

The woman took off her glasses, leaned back, and said, "Where are you flying to today? Are you on the delayed flight to Heathrow?"

Tina nodded and said, "And on to New Delhi from there. My cousin's getting married."

"A big Indian wedding!" the woman said. "What fun. I've always wanted to go to India. I'm jealous."

The woman looked around at the empty lounge and continued, "I get jealous of everyone who comes through here. I've never even left America. Soon, I hope. Maybe for my honeymoon."

She held up her left hand and pointed at her ring.

"Congratulations," Tina said.

"Japan is where I really want to go, though. Have you ever been?"

Tina shook her head.

"My fiancé wants to go to South Africa but I'm pushing for Japan. My second choice is Brazil but he's been there once before so that probably won't happen. Compromise, right? That's what they say about marriage!"

She looked so happy. Tina said, "Congratulations again. I hope you make it to Japan soon," and walked out of the lounge.



New York Times bestselling author of  
THE GIRL BEFORE

J P DELANEY



playing  
NICE

A NOVEL

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# 1

## PETE

IT WAS JUST AN ordinary day.

If this were a color piece or a feature, the kind of thing I used to write on a daily basis, the editor would have rejected it just for that opening sentence. *Openers need to hook people, Pete*, she'd tell me, tossing my pages back at me across my desk. *Paint a picture, set a scene. Be dramatic. In travel journalism especially, you need a sense of place. Take me on a journey.*

So: It was just an ordinary day in Willesden Green, north London.

Because the fact is, before that knock on my door, it *was* just an ordinary day. An unusually nice one, admittedly. The sun was shining, the air was crisp and blue. There was still some snow on the ground, hiding in corners, but it had that soft sugary look snow gets when it's all but melted, and none of the kids streaming into the Acol Road Nursery and Preschool could be bothered to get their mittens wet trying to scoop it up for snowballs.

Actually, there was one small thing out of the ordinary. As I took Theo into the nursery, or rather followed him in—we'd given him a scooter for his second birthday, a chunky three-wheeler he was now inseparable from—I noticed three people, a woman and two men, on the other side of the road, watching us. The younger man was roughly my age, thirty or so. The other was in his fifties. Both wore dark suits with dark woolen coats over them, and the woman, a blonde, was wrapped up in a kind of fake-fur parka, the sort of thing you might see on a fashionable ski slope. They looked too smart for our part of London. But then I saw that the older man was holding a document case in his gloved hand. An estate agent, I guessed, showing some prospective buyers the local childcare facilities. The Jubilee Line goes all the way from our Tube station to Canary Wharf, and even the bankers have been priced out of West Hampstead these days.

Something about the younger man seemed familiar. But then I was distracted by Jane Tigman, whose son Zack was already starting to thrash and scream in her arms at the prospect of being left. She hadn't realized that the trick is to make sure they walk into nursery on their own rather than being carried, which simply makes the moment of separation more final. Then there was a note about World Book Day on the nursery door that hadn't been there yesterday—God, yet another costume I'd have to organize—and after that I had to separate Theo from his helmet, gloves, and coat, stuff the gloves deep enough into the coat pockets that they wouldn't fall out—I still hadn't gotten around to putting name tags on them—and help him hang the coat on his peg, deep among all the others, before crouching down to give him a final pep talk.

“Okay, big man. You going to play nicely today?”

He nodded, wide-eyed with sincerity. “Yef, Dad.”

“So no grabbing. And take turns. That's very important. Remember we said we'd take turns to choose lunch? So today it's your turn, and tomorrow it'll be mine. What do you want for lunch?”

“Booby smoovy,” he announced after a moment’s thought.

“Blueberry smoothie,” I repeated clearly. “Okay. I’ll make some before I pick you up. Have a good morning.”

I gave him a kiss and off he went, happy as a clam.

“Mr. Riley?”

I turned. It was Susy, the woman who ran the nursery. It looked as if she’d been waiting for Theo to go. “Can I have a word?” she added.

I snapped my fingers. “The sippy cup. I forgot. I’ll get another one today—”

“It isn’t about the sippy cup,” she interrupted. “Shall we talk in my office?”

“IT’S NOTHING TO WORRY about,” she said as we sat down, which of course instantly made me aware that it was definitely something to worry about. “It’s just that there was another incident yesterday. Theo hit one of the other children again.”

“Ah,” I said defensively. That was the third time this month. “Okay. It’s something we have been working on at home. According to the internet, it sometimes happens at this age if physical skills get ahead of verbal skills.” I smiled ruefully, to show that I wasn’t stupid enough to believe every parenting theory I read on the internet, but neither was I one of those entitled middle-class dads who thought that just because my son was now at nursery I wasn’t required to put any effort into being his parent anymore; or, even worse, was blind to the possibility of my little darling having any faults in the first place. “And of course, his speech *is* a little delayed. But I’d welcome any suggestions.”

Susy visibly relaxed. “Well, as you say, it is typical two-year-old stuff. I’m sure you know this, but it can help if you model the correct behavior. If he sees you getting cross or aggressive, he’ll come to believe that aggression is a legitimate response to stress. What about the TV programs he watches? I’m afraid even *Tom and*

*Jerry* may not be appropriate at this age, at least not until the hitting stage is over. And if you play any violent videogames yourself—”

“I don’t play videogames,” I said firmly. “Quite apart from anything else, I don’t have the time.”

“I’m sure. It’s just that we don’t always think about the consequences of things like that.” She smiled, but I could almost see the thought process behind her eyes. *Stay-at-home dad equals aggressive kid*. She wouldn’t have asked Jane Tigman if she played *Call of Duty*.

“And we’re working on sharing, too,” I added. “Taking turns who chooses what to have for lunch, that kind of thing.”

“Well, it certainly sounds as if you’re on top of it.” Susy got to her feet to show the discussion was over. “We’ll keep a close watch here, and let’s hope he grows out of it.”

Understandably, then, I wasn’t thinking about the wealthy-looking couple and their estate agent as I left the nursery. I was worrying about Theo, and why he was taking so long to learn to play nicely with the other kids. But I’m pretty sure, looking back, that by the time I reached the street, the three of them were nowhere to be seen.

**Case no. 12675/PU78B65: AFFIDAVIT UNDER OATH by D. Maguire.**

I, Donald Joseph Maguire, make oath and swear as follows:

1. I am the proprietor and chief investigator of Maguire Missing Persons, a London-based investigative agency which traces over two hundred individuals a year on behalf of our clients. We do not advertise. All our work comes by personal referral.
2. Prior to starting this business, I was a senior detective with the Metropolitan Police, a position I held for thirteen years, leaving with the rank of detective inspector.
3. Last August I was approached by Mr. Miles and Mrs. Lucy Lambert, of 17 Haydon Gardens, Highgate, N19 3JZ. They wished me to act for them in the matter of tracing their son.

# 3

## PETE

AT HOME, I TURNED on the coffee machine and opened my laptop. The coffee machine is a Jura, the laptop a top-of-the-line MacBook. They were the only two bits of kit I insisted on when Maddie and I started having the difficult conversations about which of us was going to stay home to look after Theo once her maternity leave was over. The idea was that I'd work from home part-time, at least when Theo got a place at nursery. Having a really good computer and a bean-to-cup coffeemaker made being a stay-at-home dad feel like a step up, a new opportunity, rather than a step down in my career.

Though actually I hate the phrase *stay-at-home dad*. It's a negative, passive construction, the absence of something. No one calls women in my position stay-at-home mums, do they? They're full-time mums, which immediately sounds more positive. Total mums, mums without compromise. *Stay-at-home dad* sounds

like you're too lazy or too agoraphobic to leave the house and get a proper job. Which is what many people secretly do think, actually. Or, in the case of Maddie's parents, not-so-secretly. Her father's an Australian businessman with political views slightly to the right of Genghis Khan, and he's made it clear he thinks I'm sponging off her. Though he'd probably phrase it, *The boy's a bloody bludger*.

There was breakfast to clear up, the recycling to sort, and toys to tidy away, but while the Jura whirred and spluttered—grinding beans, frothing milk—I threw in a load of washing and logged onto DadStuff.

Just seen a poster for World Book Day at my DS's nursery. 7 March. Aargh! Ideas? Really don't want to buy a ready-made costume at Sainos or the motherhood will judge me even more.

Within moments I had a reply. There's a hard core of about a hundred of us who stay online pretty much throughout the day, coming back to the forum in between our parenting duties. Once you got used to the cliquy jargon—*DS* or *DD* means “darling son” or “darling daughter,” *OP* means “original poster,” while *OH* is “other half” and *AIBU* is “am I being unreasonable?”—it was reassuring to be able to throw questions out there and see what others thought.

The mouse from The Gruffalo, mate. Brown shirt, white vest, some ears on an Alice band. Sorted.

That was Honker6. I typed back:

Er, Alice band? Your DDs might go for it but we don't even own one of those.

Greg87 wrote:

What about Peter Rabbit? Little blue jacket, paper ears on baseball hat, face-painted whiskers?

Greg being practical, as usual. *Nice one*, I replied, trying to remember if Peter Rabbit had ever been involved in any age-inappropriate violence that Susy the nursery head might disapprove of. You had to be careful with those Beatrix Potter books.

Then the doorbell rang, so I put my cappuccino down and went to answer it.

ON THE STEP WAS the group I'd seen outside the nursery. My first thought was that they must have made a mistake, because our house wasn't for sale. My second was that it wasn't the group from the nursery, not quite: The woman was no longer with them. So maybe they weren't house buyers, after all—they could be political canvassers, or even journalists. And my third thought, the one that immediately crowded all the others out of my head, was that, now that I saw him up close, the younger of the two men, the one roughly my age, was the spitting image of Theo.

He had dark hair that spilled over his forehead in an unruly comma, a prominent jaw, and deep-set blue eyes—the kind of dark, boyish looks that in Theo are heart-stoppingly cute but in adults always make me think of the word *saturnine*, without really knowing why. Almost six feet, chunky, broad-shouldered. An athlete's physique. There's a picture of the writer Ted Hughes as a young man, glowering at the camera with the same lock of hair falling over his right eye. This guy reminded me of that. A chiseled, granite face, but not unfriendly.

“Hello,” he said, without ado. “Can we come in?”

“Why?” I asked stupidly.

“It’s about your son,” he said patiently. “I really think this would be better done inside.”

“All right.” And his manner was so brisk and purposeful that I found myself stepping away from the door, even though I was now thinking, *Was it his child Theo hit? Am I about to get shouted at?*

“Er—coffee?” I said, leading the way into the lounge—which is to say, taking a few steps back. Like most people in our street, we’ve ripped out the walls downstairs to create one decent-sized room. The older man shook his head, but I saw the younger man glance at my cappuccino. “I make them fresh,” I added, thinking a pause for coffee might defuse the coming row a bit.

“Go on then.” There was an awkward wait while I frothed more milk.

“I’m Miles Lambert, by the way,” he added when I was done. “And this gentleman is Don Maguire.” He took the cup I offered him. “Thanks. Shall we sit down?”

I sat in the only armchair and Miles Lambert took the couch, carefully moving some toys out of the way as he did so. Don Maguire sat in my swivel desk chair. I saw him cast an admiring glance at my MacBook.

“There’s no easy way to do this,” Miles said when we were all seated. He leaned forward, lacing his fingers together like a rugby player about to take a penalty. “Look, if it was me, I’d want to be told straight, with no bullshit, so that’s what I’m going to do. But prepare yourself for a shock.” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry to have to tell you that Theo isn’t your son. He’s mine.”

I gaped at him. Thoughts crowded in on me. *That can’t be right*, followed by *So that’s why this man looks like Theo*. Disbelief, shell shock, horror, all paralyzed me. I’m not fast in a crisis, unfortunately; Maddie’s the one who thinks on her feet.

*Maddie*. Oh my God. Was this man telling me they had an affair? *Is that what this is? That I’m a—*

The word *cuckold*, with all its medieval ugliness, crashed into

my brain like a rock. Maddie and I have had our problems, we're like any couple in that regard, and there have been times over the last year or so when I've sensed her drawing away from me. But I've always put that down to the trauma of Theo's birth—

*Theo's birth. Think straight, Pete.* Theo was born just over two years ago. So it would have been two and a half years ago when this supposed affair happened. Which was nigh-on impossible. Maddie and I only came back from Australia, where we met, three years back.

I realized both Miles Lambert and Don Maguire were looking at me, waiting for me to react, and I still hadn't said anything. "What are you trying to tell me?" I said numbly.

Miles Lambert simply repeated, "Theo isn't your son. He's mine." His blue eyes held mine, concerned. "I'm sorry. I know it's a shock. Please, take your time."

It was Don Maguire who coughed and added, "You both have sons who were born prematurely, I understand, who were both separated from their mothers briefly when they were transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit at St. Alexander's. It's conceivable that, at some point during that process, the wrong tags were put on the wrong babies. That's our working theory, anyway."

*Double negative, the editor shouted at me. The wrong tags got put on the right babies, you cretin.* Which only goes to show that, at moments of crisis, you think the most bizarre things.

# 4

## PETE

“SO YOU THINK YOU have *our* son. Our birth son, that is.” In all this chaos, it was the one thing I could grasp.

Miles Lambert nodded. “David. We called him David.”

“And what . . .” *What happens now*, I wanted to ask, but my brain just wouldn’t go there. “How do you know? That the babies got switched, I mean?”

Miles indicated Don Maguire. “This man’s a private investigator. He finds missing people.”

“But how do you *know*?” I insisted.

“I took the liberty of removing an item with Theo’s DNA on it from his nursery,” Don Maguire said apologetically. “I very much regret having to do that, but we didn’t want to put you through the strain of this approach if there was any chance we could be wrong.” As he spoke he was removing something from a padded envelope. It was Theo’s sippy cup, the one the nursery told me had gotten lost.

“The tests came back yesterday,” Miles added. “There’s absolutely no doubt.”

Don Maguire placed the sippy cup on my desk carefully, as if it were fragile bone china. “We’d like to return this to you now, of course.”

“Jesus. *Jesus*. You tested my son’s DNA without my permission—”

“Well, technically *my* son. But yes, we apologize that was necessary,” Miles said.

*My son*. The words thudded in my head.

“This is a copy of the test results for you,” Don Maguire added, taking an envelope from his folder and placing it next to the cup. “As Mr. Lambert says, there really is no doubt. Theo is his biological son.”

*Theo*. I couldn’t comprehend what this might mean for him. I put my head in my hands.

“What are you suggesting we do about this?” I managed to ask. “What do you want to happen now?”

Again, it was Maguire who answered. “Please understand, Mr. Riley. Nothing specific is being suggested here. Cases like this are so rare, there’s very little precedent—legal precedent, I mean. There’s certainly no automatic requirement for the family courts to get involved. It’s best for the parents to work out a solution between themselves.”

“A *solution*?”

“Whether to swap back, or stay as you are.”

The words, so stark and binary, hung in the air.

“Like I said, it’s a shock,” Miles added apologetically. “It was for me and Lucy, too, but obviously we’ve had longer to absorb it. You don’t need to say anything right now. And of course, you should get your own advice.”

I stared at him. The way he said it made it clear he’d already consulted lawyers.

“We’re suing the hospital,” he added. “Not St. Alexander’s—the private one where Lucy gave birth. You may want to join our action, but . . . like I said, that’s all TBD. To Be Discussed. There’s no rush.”

My eye fell on some pieces of red Duplo by his foot. Only that morning, Theo had assembled them into a tommy gun that promptly fell apart under the force of his overenthusiastic shooting-down of my attempts to get him to clean his teeth. A wave of love for him washed over me. And terror, at the abyss that had just opened up beneath us.

“Would you like to see a picture of David?” Miles asked.

Unable to speak, I nodded. Miles took a photograph from an inside pocket and handed it to me. It showed a small boy sitting in a high chair. He had a fine-featured face, fair hair, light-brown eyes. I could see instantly that he looked a lot like Maddie.

“You can keep that, if you like,” he added. “And if I could take one of—of Theo . . .”

“Of course,” I heard myself say. I looked around, but all my pictures were on my phone. The exception was one that someone had sent us after a birthday party, which I’d stuck to the fridge with a magnet. Theo dressed up as a pirate, complete with an eyepatch, a tricorn hat, and a cardboard cutlass that was raised toward the camera, his eyes alive with mischief. I took it down and handed it to Miles.

“Thanks.” He studied it for a moment, his eyes softening. “And this is me,” he added briskly, handing me a business card. “Mobile and email. Get in touch when you’ve had a chance for it all to sink in, yes? And discussed it with Madelyn, of course. Absolutely no pressure, but—I’m here. We both are.” He glanced at Don Maguire, then clarified, “Me and Lucy, I mean. Don’s part in this is over, I guess.”

I looked down at the card. *Miles Lambert, Chief Executive Officer, Burton Investments*. An office address in central London.

Miles reached down and plucked a foam football from the floor, squeezing it in his hand experimentally. “Sportsman, is he?” he asked conversationally. “Can he catch this yet?”

“Most of the time he can. He’s quite advanced, physically. A bit *too* advanced, in some ways.”

Miles raised his eyebrows, and I explained. “He sometimes gets a bit physical with the other kids at nursery. It’s something we’re working on.”

“Does he, now? Well, I wouldn’t worry too much about that if I were you. I was the same at his age. It came in quite handy on the rugby pitch later. Didn’t hear anyone complaining then.” Something about the way he said it—fond, almost proprietary—made me realize that, despite the surreal calmness of this conversation, I wasn’t just making small talk with another dad at a party. I was talking to my son’s father. His *real* father. My world had just turned upside down, and nothing was ever going to be the same again.

“We should get you around,” Miles was saying. “Make some proper introductions. When you’ve had a chance to digest it all.”

I tried to reply, but the words wouldn’t come. There was an awkward moment when I thought I was going to break down. Miles affected not to notice. He raised the picture I’d given him. “Anyway, thanks for this. Lucy will be thrilled. Something to be going on with.”

He tucked the photo inside his suit jacket, then held out his hand. His handshake was dry and decisive. “And try not to worry. We’re all reasonable people. It’s a terrible thing that’s happened, but it’s how we handle it that matters now. I really believe we’ll figure out the best way forward. But for the time being, we’ll get out of your hair.”

Don Maguire shook my hand, too, and suddenly they were gone. Miles Lambert hadn’t touched his coffee. I poured it down the sink. The washing machine beeped and I went to pull it open. Automatically I pulled the wet things out. It was as if I was in a

kind of trance. On top of the pile was one of Theo's T-shirts—mustard yellow, with I'M TWO, WHAT'S YOUR EXCUSE? across the front. For a moment I could almost feel Theo's hot little body in my hands, the familiar shrug and wriggle of his tiny ribs as I hoisted him over my shoulder, the kick of his legs. Tears pricked my eyes and my chest heaved, but I knew I couldn't fall apart, not yet. I had to call Maddie.

**Case no. 12675/PU78B65: AFFIDAVIT UNDER OATH by D. Maguire, cntd.**

4. Together with my client, Miles Lambert, I visited Mr. Riley at home. There we served notice that the child he believed to be his son was in fact the son of my clients, and that, conversely, the child my clients were bringing up was believed to be Mr. Riley's.
5. Mr. Riley was understandably distressed by this news. At several points during the subsequent discussion he broke down in tears.
6. While he recovered his composure, I took the opportunity to make some observations of my surroundings. This was facilitated by the fact that it was a small space, the sitting room, playroom, kitchen, and dining room all being combined in the area in which we were sitting.
7. There were several indications that Mr. Riley was struggling to cope with his domestic routine. The table bore a number of soiled dishes, plates, and other kitchen utensils. Unwashed laundry was

strewn over the furniture, and there were two empty wine bottles on the floor in the kitchen area. When I glanced at Mr. Riley's computer, I noticed the browser was open at a men-only internet forum on which he appeared to be making an appeal for help with his parenting. (Subsequent investigation confirmed that, under the pseudonym Homedad85, Mr. Riley had made over 1,200 posts of a similar nature.) Another tab was open at a videogame, which was paused. Although Mr. Riley's LinkedIn profile states that he is a freelance journalist, there was no evidence of this, nor of any journalistic work in progress.

- 8.** My client reiterated several times to Mr. Riley that he and his wife wished to try to resolve this situation by means of discussion and reasonable compromise. Mr. Riley did not respond to these assurances. When his manner started to turn hostile, we left.



# SEA WIFE

AMITY GAIGE

A NOVEL

*"Sea Wife brilliantly breathes life not only into the perils of living at sea, but also into the hidden dangers of domesticity, parenthood, and marriage. What a smart, swift, and thrilling novel."*

—LAUREN GROFF



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## I



Where does a mistake begin? Lately I've found this simple question difficult. Impossible, actually. A mistake has roots in both time and space—a person's reasoning and her whereabouts. Somewhere in the intersection of those two dimensions is the precisely bounded mistake—in nautical terms, its coordinates.

Did my mistake begin with the boat? Or my marriage itself? I don't think so. I now suspect that my mistake took root in an innocent experience I forgot to decipher, the mystery of which has quietly ruled me. For example, I remember standing beside a blindingly blue Howard Johnson's motel pool at twelve years old, watching a couple undress one another through a half-drawn curtain, while my estranged father disputed the bill in the lobby. Should I have looked away? Did the miscalculation occur even earlier, as I sat on a rope rug in clean kindergarten sunlight, and I leaned toward the boy beside me and accepted his insistent whisper? I still feel his dew in my ear.

And now I am sitting in a closet.

Michael's closet.

I should explain.

I moved in a couple of days ago. I came in here looking for something of his, and discovered that the carpet is very plush. The slatted bifold doors filter the sunlight beautifully. I feel calm in here.

Hiding in closets is the habit of children, I know. I used to hide in my mother's closet when I was a kid. Her closet contained

some dressy silks and wools she never wore. I loved holding these fabrics against my body, or stepping into her high heels, as if onto a dais, rehearsing my future. I never felt ashamed.

Surely there is some connection between seeking refuge in my mother's closet long ago and hiding in Michael's now, but that insight does not help me.

Sometimes life just writes you tiny, awful poems.

I am uncertain whether or not I can survive this day.

I mean, if I want to.

To go out, to go *outside*, requires preparation and composure. If I were to go out, to start walking around and seeing people again and going to the grocery store and getting on with it, invariably what someone would ask me is, Do you wish you'd never gone? They will expect me to say, Yes, our journey was a mistake.

Maybe that's what they hope I will say.

But saying yes to the boat was my clearest act of loyalty toward my husband.

I can't afford to regret it.

If I did, I would only be left with my many disloyalties.

January 17. 10:15 a.m. LOG OF YACHT 'JULIET.' From Porvenir. Toward Cayos Limones. 09° 33.5'N 078° 56.98'W. NW wind 10 knots. Seas 2–4 feet. NOTES AND REMARKS: We are 102 nautical miles ENE of Panama City, catching prevailing winds into the sovereign territory of San Blas. The shape of the coast is still visible behind us, but ahead is just water. Nothing but water. That's when I realize there's only one ocean. One big mother ocean. Yes, there are bays & seas & straits. But those are just words. Artificial divisions. Once you're out here, you see there's just one unbroken country of water.

You would never feel this way on land.

(Not in our country.)

What a feeling. Generations of sailors have failed to describe it, so what are my chances? Me, Michael Partlow.

Michael Partlow, who can't tell you the title of a single poem.  
Just ask my wife, her head is full of them.

When I first met him, I thought, *I'd never marry a guy like that.* Too persnickety. Too conventional. No sense of humor! But I was wrong. Marriage and kids and the grind made Michael morbidly funny. He got funnier and funnier, while I, who *had* been funny, got less funny.

There was this muscle shirt to which he was superstitiously attached when we were living aboard the boat. The memory of this shirt makes me laugh out loud. While sailing in hot climates, you start wearing as little as possible. And cruising kids, they dress like mental patients—grass skirts and flamenco dresses with muck boots and welding visors and shell necklaces—mementos of places they've been. I have no idea where Michael got the muscle shirt. Panama City? It was white, with huge armholes. Standing ashore, beaming, with his boyish face and unwashed hair, he looked like a prep-school kid who'd gotten lost on a hike about twenty years ago.

The crew of our vessel is fit and in good spirits. Bosun Sybil Partlow (age 7) is sitting in First Mate Juliet Partlow's lap in the cockpit. Deckhand George "Doodle" Partlow (age 2½) is doing his best to stand upright in the small swell. He's pantless, waiting for First Mate to let him whiz off of the side of the boat. His slightly delayed vocabulary is strictly maritime. Boat go, fish go. We were just visited by a very large sea turtle! Surfacing portside with a head like a periscope. Sybil says it's a spy. Whenever Sybil says anything cute, she tells me to write it down. That turtle's a spy, write that down in your book, Daddy.

Pardon me? I say. Are you speaking to me? What do you call me underway, Bosun?

She laughs. Fine, write that down in your book, Captain.

The muscle shirt was so funny because he's normally such a neatnik, a dandy, and a rearranger. He needs almost no sleep. His mother said he'd always been that way. Here at the house, he used to work late into the night, sending emails and finishing reports, but mostly, man-tinkering. Learning about electrical wiring by gutting another appliance or making little toys for the kids. Sometimes he'd even go across the brook, where he'd built a fire pit, and we'd sleep to the rustic scent of wood smoke.

In the morning, he'd leave for work as shiny as an apple. He wouldn't let the children eat in his commuting car. Goldfish, Triscuits—*verboden*. But the family car, *my* car? Lawless. A layer of organic material composted under the seats. Mysterious objects thumped against the wheel wells whenever I made a sharp turn.

I understand it now, sitting here. I understand how nice it must have been for him to have a little fiefdom—a closet, where shoes are paired, and the world is shut out, and you get to make all your own choices.

My closet, just there on the other side of our bedroom, is hap-hazard. I gave up trying to neaten it when Sybil was a toddler. After months of hanging them up, I just left all the blouses on the floor, where they'd fallen after she'd pulled them off the hangers. She'd shuffle out of the closet in my shoes, unsteady as a drunk, and leave them where I'd never find them.

But I am a mother. Gradually, I just gave them all away, all my spaces, one by one, down to the very last closet.

January 17. 6 p.m. LOG OF YACHT 'JULIET.' Cayos Limones. 09° 32.7'N 078° 54.0'W. NOTES AND REMARKS: Made it here to Cayos Limones no problem & are anchored off small island with a good holding. Sybil is jumping off the transom while her mom is wrestling Doodle out of his swimmy shirt.

*Smile!* they used to say to sad-sack little girls like me. Then feminism came along and said fuck smiling—you'd never force a boy

to smile. But as it turns out—recent studies show—that the physical act of smiling *does* increase one’s feeling of well-being.

So sometimes I practice.

I sit here in my closet and grimace.

January 18. 2 a.m. LOG OF YACHT ‘JULIET.’ Cayos Limones. NOTES AND REMARKS: We are inching toward middle of nowhere. Limones is an untouched archipelago of many sheltered islands w/ fringing reefs & clear waters. Not one single man-made structure. Only the sound of the surf crashing against the windward reef. It’s the middle of the night & I can’t sleep. Just cleaned all the corroded connections on the battery. More company here than I would like, due to proximity to the mainland. Folks from all over the world. At least our kids have other kids to play w/ & Juliet has other women to commiserate w/ over warm white wine.

I know it appears that what we are doing is radical. But the truth is, there are so many people out here. Sprinkled all around the hydrosphere. Sailboats, sloops, catamarans, re-creations of famous schooners, wealthy paranoids, retirees, people traveling with cats, people traveling w/ lizards, people sick of giving one quarter of their income to the government, free spirits, charlatans, and yes, children. There are thousands of children sailing this world as we speak, some who’ve never lived on land.

We say we want kids to be joyful/unmaterialistic/resilient. That’s what sailing kids are like. They climb masts & can correctly identify obscure plant life. They don’t care what somebody looks like when they meet them, they sometimes don’t even speak the same language, but they work it out. They don’t sit around ranking one kind of life against another. 71% of the earth is ocean. These kids literally cannot believe they are the center of the world. Because where would that be, exactly? They measure their days against a candid & endless horizon.

Let me begin by saying that buying a boat was the most absurd idea I'd ever heard. I'd never boarded anything but a ferry in my life, and Michael hadn't sailed since he was in college.

You've got to be kidding me, I said to him. You want *me*, and our two little kids, to live on a boat with you in the middle of the sea?

Just for a year, he said.

I don't even know how to sail, Michael!

You don't *need* to know how to sail, he said. All you need to know is which way to point the boat. I can teach you the rest as we go.

You're insane, I said.

But even Juliet was hard to convince. How do you sell your wife on the benefits of assuming risk? After all, if your wife is like mine, she probably married you for your stability.

In order to convince Juliet to buy the boat, I had to channel that great salesman—Artist of Spit and Staples, Prankster, Tightwad—my dad, Glenn Partlow. Nothing made Dad happier than sailing on Lake Erie in his old Westsail 32. He'd bought her on a lark from some guy at work who was trying to get rid of her quick. Those days, apparently even a supervising technician at the GM plant could afford a boat. He kept her at a marina on Lake Erie about a half hour's drive from our house. My sister Therese joined us for the first several outings, but she got seasick. After that, it was just me & Dad on a boat neither of us deserved to sail.

The boat was named 'Odille.' Probably somebody's old flame. My mom didn't want anything to do w/ the boat. She was completely absorbed by raising us, which is not to say this was good for her or for us. It was just what moms like her in Ashtabula, Ohio, did at the time. She'd drive us around, handing us our trumpet case or our paper-bag lunch. When Dad & I went sailing on 'Odille,' she didn't complain. At least not to me.

We couldn't have taken more than 2 dozen voyages on that boat, but they clog my memory. I remember the sea-glass green surface of that windy lake, the short fetch of the waves. If I wanted to see my 13th year of life, I had to learn fast. Which sheet to pull, which one to tie off, how to ready the lines for Dad, when to ask questions, when to shut up. I didn't want to bother him. He looked so important at the helm.

When I was in 10th grade, GM offered dad a transfer from Parma, Ohio, to Pittsburgh. For reasons I never inquired about, he took the deal & sold the Westsail.

He set us up in a modest brick house on a hillside in the City of Bridges, the steep streets of which had no traction in the ice.

This last detail, of course, rearranged my life.

Of *course* I said no. My first reaction was shock. I thought he'd lost his mind. Me and the kids living on a boat? Michael might as well have said, Let's live upside down and walk on the ceiling.

More than once, Juliet pointed out that my father died when he was just a little older than I am now. So maybe I was feeling something breathing down my neck—i.e. eternal quietus? And she could understand how spooky that might feel but maybe could this particular psychodrama be solved w/ something less extreme, like a triathlon?

I don't disagree! She was right. Every marriage needs one skeptic to keep it safe. But a marriage of two skeptics will fail to thrive.

Michael and I both recognized we had problems, we just couldn't agree on the solution. I think what was happening was, I wasn't just talking about the implausible plan to walk away from our

house and the kids' schools and Michael's job, no matter how assured we would be of getting these things back. *I* was wondering, whether we were to go or to stay, what would we do—about *us*?

*You think this will solve all our problems. It's magical thinking, Michael. It's the way a child thinks.*

She kept avoiding the other thing. I wasn't really allowed to talk about it directly, so I dropped hints. Did she know, I ventured to ask, that the ancient Romans believed that sea voyages could cure depression?

She put down her book and glared at me.

Yeah, she said. They also advised eating the brains of baby rams.

She started reading her book again.

I figured, what did I have to lose? I gently lowered her book with my finger.

Juliet, I said. Don't you see? You're stuck. It's been years since I've seen you happy. You want to stay here in Connecticut and be depressed and not finish your dissertation? That's your endgame? Maybe this would be good for you.

I'm not "depressed," she said. Besides, I hate that word.

OK, what should we call it?

She fluffed the pillow behind her back, indignant.

I'm very faithful to my problems.

Listen—I did not want to go. Not because I was happy where I was. Not because I thought sailing was unsafe or unwise. Not even because I thought it would stress our marriage, because, well—too late.

I did not want to go because I was already struggling with a deficit of—I also dislike the word "self-esteem." It had been a rough couple of years after both children were born. There's a lot more to say about that. I'd also recently deserted my dissertation.

The truth was, I was worried I'd be a terrible sailor.  
An embarrassment.

January 23. 10:15 a.m. LOG OF YACHT 'JULIET.' Cayos Limones. A.M. rain followed by clear skies. NOTES AND REMARKS: You know how folks out here define sailing? Sailing is repairing a boat in exotic places. First time I heard that one, I laughed. Not so funny anymore! This morning I opened up the electrical panel because a couple of the lamps were blinking & saw that half the wires were jiggled loose. Shocked that we have any lights. I've got my Twelve Bolt Bible here & my heat-shrink tubing & while seabirds cross the cloudless sky, I'm giving myself a tutorial on crimp fitting.

Doodle is sitting here next to me looking thoughtful.

Crimper, I say.

He passes me a Lego.

Tubing, I say.

He passes me a crayon.

But just when you're starting to hate on your boat, something oppositely beautiful happens. The water beside us ripples as a pod of stingrays wash their wings in our lee.

I *do* know a lot of poems—from all those hours in my carrel at Boston College, trying to write my dissertation, before we moved out to the Land of Steady Habits.

Ironically, one reason I gave up on studying poetry is that it seemed brutally impractical compared to the urgencies of two children. But these days, inside my closet, poetry is as real to me as an ax. I need it more than food.

Lines come and go in my mind. I don't even remember who wrote them.

*Battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won.*

I eat very little, mostly just dinner with the kids, and I lap from the bathroom tap when I'm thirsty. During the day, when I have

to leave the closet, I push open the bifold doors and cross our carpeted bedroom in my socks. The body creaks. The bladder longs. I avoid the bathroom mirror. When I return to our bedroom, sometimes I linger by the front windows, where birds mob our blighted apple tree. I spy on them, just as the occasional curious neighbor spies on me. Our plain white house is now a point of interest. It's been on the news. I see the way people walking past our house slow down, and how, if in pairs in the evening, they exchange a somber look.

*Vivas to those who have fail'd!  
And to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea!  
And to those themselves who sank in the sea!*

It's true—history is written by the victors. That's why we need poets.

To sing of the defeats.

January 25. 11 p.m. LOG OF YACHT 'JULIET.' Cayos Limones. Brisk NE winds. Clear weather. NOTES AND REMARKS: Will sail east in 2 days. Maybe finally get off the beaten path. Sky tonight amazing. A bowl of stars. I love it on deck at night. Sometimes after Juliet falls asleep, I come up here & crawl into the sail cover. You don't even need a headlamp to write by, the moon is so bright. Like a spotlight. Like the sun of a black & white world. You can see every frond of every palm on the island, thrashing in the trade winds. The sand bright as snow. The surf rolling up & down the beach.

If I had it my way we'd be circumnavigating the globe. If I was by myself I'd be halfway to the Marquesas. 3 weeks out of sight of land. Then I'd have me a real night watch!! Instead, in order to reassure Juliet, we've plotted a course that clings to the coast of Central & South America. Panama City, Cartagena, Caracas. From there I am hoping she will sign off on a crossing. We could go anywhere across this huge sea.

Monserrat? Punta Cana? Havana?

But for now, it's just me, my Captain's log & a couple curassows I can see when their roosting tree blows a certain way. Somebody forgot to secure their halyard the next boat over. I have half a mind to swim over there & fix it. Funny how the more alone you get out here, the aloner you want to be. You want to find an anchorage with nobody in it at all. Just you and the stars, stars, stars. Stars get you thinking.

We're just a hyphen between our parents and our kids. That's what you learn in middle age. Mostly this is something a mature person can live with. But every once in a while you just want to send up a flare. I too am here! Everybody is sympathetic until you try and make your minuscule life interesting and then they're like, What's wrong with you? You think you're special?

You learn a lot about people when you tell them you're going to sea w/ your kids. About 10% of them will say, Hey, that's amazing, Godspeed, and the other 90% won't hesitate to tell you why it's impossible. Then they want you to spend a couple hours walking them back, explaining how you are going to get food, or take a shower, or keep up with the news.

Whenever we told people that we were going to sail as a family, they'd fixate on different things. Some folks worried about whether it'd be good for me & Juliet's marriage. Wouldn't it be tough to live 24/7 in a 44-foot floating capsule?

(A fair question, one that I'm still mulling over.)

Everyone was worried about the kids. How could you do this w/ kids? they asked. Aren't you worried about their safety? What if they fall overboard? What if they miss home? Why not wait until they're 18? Why not wait until you're retired?

First of all (I wanted to say to these people but didn't), some of you won't even let your kid climb a tree w/out first taking a tree-climbing class & wearing a harness. So I'm just not going to listen to you.

Secondly, I think there's something wrong with the line of thought that it's reasonable to defer your modest dream for

several decades. What are we, characters in a Greek myth? Waiting for the eagle who comes to eat our liver every day because in a Greek myth, that's normal?

I knew my mom and my sister would miss us while we were gone. I get that. It's a lot to ask. But there were other people who hardly knew us, strangers who wouldn't miss us at all, who seemed offended by our decision to try out life at sea. It's like they were thinking, What's wrong w/ highways & parking lots & elbow pads & Christmas caroling? What's wrong w/ us?

On Michael's side of the bed: a framed photo of Sybil. Age three, crooked pigtails, ambrosial. Even in my dark days, during my worst blues, I loved studying my daughter's face. Even now, I never tire of staring. Look at that *nose*, I often think—so damned cute, so *wee*. Sybil's face is heart-shaped, wide at the temples, with a small, emphatic chin. The truth is, it's her father's face. Distantly Finnish, midwestern, wide open and friendly. You can almost sense the ball fields and the Coca-Cola and the square dances that it took to produce that kind of a face.

Me, I'm the dun-eyed child of upstate New York, a plain split-level house and a messy divorce, as well as a couple other things I'd rather not talk about. My father's people—a tribe of hard-bitten Irish depressives—culled their numbers with committed lifelong cigarette smoking. My mother's mother was a tyrannical lady from San Juan by whom I was awed the few times I saw her. My mother used to say that she was treated like a human clothespin as a child: *Stand there, hold that.*

In short, when Sybil was born, I was relieved that she took after Michael's side of the family. I was relieved that she didn't look like me.

It's sad, though, I realize, to be relieved that your kid doesn't look like you.

Listen, sometimes I don't know whether something is "sad" or not.

I mean, sad poems or songs make me *feel* better. I think—yes, that is *precisely* how I feel. Then I feel better.

But others seem dispirited by the news sad poems deliver.

I used to have to check with Michael.

Was that a “sad” movie? I would ask him, leaving the theater. Is this a “sad” song? I mean, according to you.

Yes! he’d say, laughing. According to *anybody*.

If ever there was a method for squaring dreams w/ reality, it’s buying a boat. Especially a boat you’ve never seen. But what a boat! She’s a 1988 CSY 44 Walkover. Center cockpit. Two berths & a saloon. Larger-than-king-size bed in the aft master cabin. Perfect split berth for the kids forward. Huge fridge, three-burner stove. Very roomy. Fiberglass, mostly. No wood laminate, just wood for the bulkheads and the interior furniture. A horizon-pointing bowsprit for me, wood carvings in the bulkheads for my poet wife. We had to buy her w/out seeing her. Of course we would have preferred to buy something nearby. But the fact that she was in Panama made her 20 grand cheaper. I had already scoured the marinas from Westport to Larchmont. We don’t have that kind of \$\$.

I paid for her outright. 60 grand. The payout from Dad’s life insurance. Our nest egg. (Talk about poetry.) OK, technically I didn’t have the full amount. But I solved that, w/ just a little creativity.

We got down here in September, but after 2 weeks in Bocas del Toro, she still wasn’t even in the water. Her hull needed a scraping, followed by 3 new coats of paint. Juliet spent days hanging out with the kids outside of the super-mini eating fried yucca, waiting to practice her Spanish w/ someone. Eventually she got sick of this & took the kids to sit at the marina bar & let them inhale bowlfuls of ice cream.

I could see them from the boatyard. I had the pleasure of watching a whole U.N. of sailors flirting w/ my wife—Jamaicans, Australians, Panamanians—leaning on the bar

drinking cold Stags. They didn't seem to mind the toddler in her lap, & neither did she. Juliet has a very distinct laugh, you could hear it clear across the boatyard.

The thing about depressed people is, once they feel a little better, they are prone to large, generous gestures they can't really live up to.

For months, throughout an entire winter, we argued about Michael's proposal endlessly. It's amazing how many good reasons I had for not taking the children to live on a sailboat, and also how none of those reasons were my real reason. I simply could not afford another failure. I had already let down "my crew," as it were. I already knew what that felt like.

One night in early spring, we were sitting in bed. It was late. We'd made a habit out of arguing at night. I had a bowl of popcorn in my lap. Popcorn was a good mid-argument snack. Also easy to see in the dark. In the time-outs, we were friends. I fed him little handfuls.

He was speaking about, among other things, how he felt he was being "called" by the sea. He wanted to learn from the sea. He wanted to have "confidence in the face of risk." He believed that was part of his American heritage. Bravery built our nation, he said. I nodded, half listening.

I want this so badly I can feel it in my loins, he said.

Where *are* the "loins," anyway? I asked idly, licking salt off my fingers. I mean, are they a real body part? I've always wondered.

Michael sighed and rolled onto his back. Hand over his eyes. Getting ready for another Juliet-style wild-geese chase.

Suddenly, I felt very bad for him.

I loved him. Long ago, and then, I'm sure now.

I don't know what loins are, Juliet, he said, finally.

I stared out the window, into the dark night sky, etched with branches.

Well, whatever they are, I said, they sound delicious. If we come across any cannibals at sea, I bet they'll eat our loins first.

Michael took his hands from his eyes and looked at me. A husband's eyes look so shiny and plaintive in the darkness.

He threw off the covers and ran around to my side of the bed.

He knelt down and clasped my hand.

Juliet, he said. Is that a *yes*?

Who was I to complain?

This whole damned thing was my idea.

We arrived in Panama right in the middle of rainy season. I'd never seen rain like that. Every hour or so, the air would go quiet, the streets would empty, and then, with absolutely no further warning, the sky would just tantrum. Rain drilled the corrugated roof of our little apartment above the boatyard so loudly that one had to shout to be heard. On the street, the rain pocked the dirt with hail-size divots, turning the streets to estuaries; as it drove into puddles, it bubbled and geysered, giving the impression that the rain was coming not only from above but from below. We were so clueless that we often left our laundry on the line, until we realized *no one* attempted to dry laundry outside during rainy season.

The rain was only matched in passion by my own dumb tears. Those first couple of weeks in Bocas del Toro, I cried every night—I mean, hours of muffled, dehydrating bouts of crying, Michael sometimes rubbing my back, sometimes snoring into my neck.

Then one day I said to myself, *Stop your damned crying, Juliet. There's too much water here already.*

The kitchen in our apartment in Bocas was just big enough to turn around in, tiled with big mislaid chunks and old grout, a printed curtain hanging from the countertop, one of those ancient two-burner stoves that needed to be lit with a match. The kids didn't mind. The kids thought the whole thing was a party. Someone had given George a little FIFA skill ball and that's

about all he needed. He carried it around like a pet. At the supermini across the street they had these ice pops, called *duros*—thick, fresh-squeezed juice frozen in a plastic cup—and we'd sit there licking them like deer at salt. Sybil loved the cartoonish toot of the public bus, and she loved to sit outside the supermini licking her *duro*. Whenever a bus arrived, a whole new wave of people would fawn over her and tousle her hair, like it was her birthday on the hour.

Funny thing was, after living in Bocas for a month, it wasn't too hard to get used to living aboard the boat. I found the small space of the boat immediately comforting, like being straitjacketed. No oversize Ethan Allen sectionals, no ottomans, no flat-screen TVs, no free weights, no full-length mirrors, no garment steamers, ironing boards, or vacuum cleaners, no talking, life-size Minnie Mouses or Barbie playhouses with elevators, no plastic Exersaucers or bouncers or strollers, no cake stands, casserole dishes, waffle makers, decanters, no heirlooms, antiques, or gewgaws, no framed certificates, no eight-by-ten photos, no coffee-table books, no takeout menus, or paperwork from the previous millennium, no glass, no vases, no valuables, no art, nothing that could break, shatter, or make you cry if you lost it, which gradually, of course, changed the relationship I had to *things*, basically dissolving it.

Once we got her in the water, we discovered a laundry list of other necessary fixes, small & large. After an idle rainy season in the tropics, she smelled like a gym towel. The upholstery was a joke, as were the moldy life jackets. Her batteries were dead. The head pump didn't work. I went back & forth on buying a new mainsail. After a shakedown cruise by myself in October, watching her heel, all sails set & drawing, I shelled out for a new mainsail. The engine worked perfectly. The dinghy was a tough little inflatable w/ an 8-horsepower outboard. Sybil named it 'Oily Residue.' The kids and I knocked around in 'Oily Residue' whenever Juliet needed some alone time. We circled the marina at Bocas, waving at all of Juliet's boyfriends. I even taught Sybil how

to steer the dinghy, and all the guys back on shore would pat her head and tell her what a fine sailor she was.

3 weeks turned to 4. 4 weeks turned to 5.

By the time you realize how over-budget you are, you've already fallen in love. I remember when I first saw her, sitting on stilts in the boatyard, her dirty keel exposed, while they blasted away at her with hoses. Took me a couple hours to believe she was real, & that we had done it, after so much doubt & back & forth & finally just the letting go.

The next day they got down to it and painted the boat with two coats of brick-red antifouling. I felt jealous pangs watching the men at the boatyard stroke her hull w/ paint. It seemed kind of intimate. OK, I'd be lying if I denied having vaguely romantic feelings for the boat, a kind of chaste but thirsty love, not unlike the attraction I felt for Juliet when she was in her third trimester, w/ big, jaunty breasts, awesomely wide-beamed.

(Please God, do not let Juliet ever find this log.)

The double Juliets, that was my idea.

Before the guys in the boatyard put her in the water, the last thing we did was scrape off the words on the transom and rename her.

The lettering was on the schmaltzy side, a loopy, romantic script.

Eventually there was my boat, just as I had imagined her: 'Juliet.'

As soon as we moved onto the boat, the differences in our skill level became clear. Michael was always doing something. Whenever we were at anchor, or if seas were calm, or the children were asleep, he could be found with a knife or shredding rope, or glaring at a broken shackle.

Back in Connecticut, I'd never once seen him smooth a tablecloth or fluff a pillow. The home, the children, had been my sphere. Whether or not I had particular gifts in that area had not mattered. We divided everything up unconsciously along gender

lines I'd thought had been consigned to the cultural ash heap. For a poet, I had a lamentable lack of imagination around my daily life—losing myself in laundry and small fascinations. And Michael was the kind of dad who, when left in charge, would send urgent texts asking questions I'd answered when he was not listening the day before, so that I'd spend half of my time away conducting remote assistance, like a NASCAR crew chief.

Who says smiling isn't important for men? He asked all his favors with remorseless good nature. He was confident in his actions, whether or not they were the right ones. Sybil would be hopping from foot to foot needing a toilet, but instead Michael would take forty-five minutes to lash a freshly cut Christmas tree to the car rack, as if we were going to drive home via the landing strip at Bradley airport.

But aboard the boat, our spheres overlapped, ungendering us. Because the boat was not just a boat, it was our home. So he understood what it meant to take care of it. On deck, he coiled the lines in perfect chignons. He liked to buff the chain plates and grease the winches. I had to learn how to slop fish guts overboard and start a flooded outboard motor; it was patently ridiculous to wait for someone else to do these things.

At first, my fears were confirmed—I was a barely competent crewmember. I bumped my head on the same things every day—the companionway, the shelving over the children's berths. There was no learning. I was a cack-handed first mate, a housewife-on-the-run, a poet who'd run out of verse. I had my Ph. but not the D. Someday, due to my inattention, I was sure I'd be hit with the boom and thrown overboard, and the best thing about drowning would be that I wouldn't have to pump the damned head anymore. The piston stuck. You had to grease it with olive oil every couple of days.

Everything at sea was an effort. Especially in the tropics, where equipment dried stiff or rusty or tacky after a downpour, and every crevice was clogged with salt . . .

I did not know that I was becoming a sailor.

I did not know what the sea would ask of me.

Naysayers? Turns out they're everywhere.

One of the guys back in the Bocas boatyard, he used to get under my skin.

You rename the boat? this man asked me.

He wasn't even the foreman, just some dude the other guys seemed to look up to, the one who considered himself big man. He had a gut, w/ skinny legs, and he wore American-style work boots, which no one else wore. Even I went around in supermini flip-flops. When the men worked, this guy would talk & talk. Literally nonstop, no one else ever taking a turn or interrupting him. It was like he was hypnotizing them w/ this endless monologue, which was only broken up by loud machinery.

Bad luck to change the name, this guy had said to me, shaking his head.

You think so? I said, trying to be friendly. I've heard that said.

We looked up at 'Juliet' in her cradle, her hull red like the breast of a robin.

Bad luck, he said again, still shaking his head.

Well you know, I said, people rename their boats all the time.

And you ever know what happen to those boats, my friend?

He tapped me on the arm, even though I was right there.

You study what happen to those boats?

Anger twisted in my chest.

Thanks for your concern, man, I said.

No problem, he said.

I really feel your love, thank you.

No problem, he said coldly.

I left him standing there, looking at me. Then he started up again with the talking.

Walking up the path I heard a chorus of laughter at my back.

Hombre muerto, someone muttered.

We worked so hard to prepare her, to provision, to plot course, that we lost track of days. We even forgot Thanksgiving. Other cruisers in Bocas had told us we would know when we were ready.

And suddenly, we were.

One day, there was a palpable feeling of preparedness.

The ocean waiting like so much road.

We'd take our first overnight sail immediately. Two days across the Golfo de los Mosquitos to the colonial town of Portobelo. Michael didn't relinquish the helm once. We arrived with a buoyant and slightly manic captain. We decided to stay in Portobelo and have an honest Christmas.

Days slipped by. Petals falling on water.

It wasn't until January that we made our first push into San Blas, stopping first at Cayos Limones.

San Blas is the Spanish word.

Guna Yala is its real name.

Nearly four hundred tiny islands: the semiautonomous homeland of the Guna.

The Guna permitted no commerce, no buying and selling. The farther you got into the territory, the fewer traces of mankind there were. The casual tourist stayed away. Because there was only the sea. The sea and small atolls of sand and palm. You wondered if you kept sailing, would you yourself disappear; the idea was not unpleasant.

I have a very clear memory: We were en route from Limones. Eastward into the heart of Guna Yala. Halfway across the Mayflower Channel. I was sitting with my back to the mast. Daydreaming.

The horizon had that effect on me. The undeviating line of sea and sky emptied my mind. Scarves of thought pulled painlessly from the magic hat. You must understand, we were never fully out of sight of land—not until that final crossing. So fear, if one felt it, could be soothed by finding the shoreline, which was always there.

Let's face it, I was a terrible watchman. The changes in perspective entranced me. The different kinds of wind entranced me,

and I kept trying to *name* them: *questioning* wind, *tender* wind, *triumphant* wind. On watch, I was only dimly aware of what was happening in the near distance, or on the boat itself.

Suddenly Sybil was screaming.

Mommy! Daddy! Captain Daddy! Sailboat starboard, Daddy!

My heart dropped. She was right—a sailboat was crossing our starboard quarter at a mysteriously close distance. Where had it come from? From behind the large island to starboard, obviously. I was stunned to realize that Michael was below, while also remembering that he'd told me he was leaving the helm moments earlier. Uselessly, I beheld the boat, not much longer than us, but filling the horizon. Her almond-shaped hull was blond wood, and piles of complicated sails gave her the look of origami.

By the time I had scrambled across the cabin top to the cockpit, Michael was already at the helm, face flushed with purpose.

All right, crew, he said. Are we the stand-on vessel?

Yes? I cried. *No*? Do you want me to look it up, Michael?

He laughed. No, Juliet, honey. I was hoping you'd know. We've got to give way. Let's see you do it.

Is this the best time for a teaching moment, Michael?

But he had already stepped away from the helm, and I had to lunge forward to keep the wheel from spinning.

We are on a port tack, I said. We have to go behind.

I turned the wheel hard, and *Juliet* fell off. Like a spurned woman, giving the passing ship her shoulder.

The origami ship glided past like something from a myth. We were close enough to see the objects in the cockpit, the very cleats on the deck.

One old man stood at the helm steering with his arm looped through the wheel. Despite the dangerous nearness of our boats, he seemed unfazed. I could have heard him if he'd spoken.

He looked at us with a kind of ancient patience, gave us a perfunctory wave, and then was gone.

**Am I doing the right thing? Hell, I don't know. That's a completely different subject.**

Already, I revise the past. I make it sound like the boat was our first real point of contention. Back in Connecticut, we didn't just argue about the boat. Michael and I had much bigger problems. We weren't in a great place. As a couple, I mean. We didn't see the world the same way. We fundamentally disagreed. We weren't—how do I put this? How do I put this *now*?

Never told Juliet this so maybe not such a great idea to write it down. I wouldn't put it past her snooping. (HEY, JULIET. If you are taking the time to read this, you must be A] really, really bored, or B] confined to a hospital bed.) When I was still working at Omni, I used to sneak down to this freshwater marina near the Long Island Sound in the middle of the workday. Just to look at the boats. In my corporate uniform. Nobody ever said to me, What are you doing here? Nobody ever asked me a single personal question. Like it was the most natural thing for a guy in business wear to walk around the docks in the middle of the day asking the cruisers where they'd come from or where they were going. Then I'd go back to work w/ some B.S. about where I'd been.

There was a boat of Canadians, a mother, father & two kids, sailing the most beautiful gaff-rigged sailboat. I'd watch them for long stretches, the kids playing w/ buckets & kayaks & mom and dad working on the boat, or just sitting on deck . . .

One day an older gentleman came up to me.

Some boat, he said.

I know, I said.

They live on that boat, he told me. Already been around the world once.

Me & the old guy stood there looking at the boat in silence. I don't think I've ever wanted anything so badly. I mean, until then, I'd never really envied somebody else's life.

People think they're running from their problems, the man said. But those people are not running from problems.

They just want different problems. They don't want the problems of paperwork and traffic and political correctness. They want the problems of wind and weather. The problem of which way to go.

I looked over at the guy. He had a full head of gray hair that sprouted out the sides of his MAGA baseball cap.

Harry Borawski, he said, extending his hand. You'd be surprised how affordable a boat like that is.

After Georgie, something had changed in our marriage, and there was nowhere solid to put the blame. We were almost forty, and simultaneously our marriage had—I don't know—thickened, agglutinated, become oatmeal-like. Differences between us that had once provided sparks now seemed inefficient. Was there love? Yes, yes—but at the margins. At the center, there was administration. Michael worked until six or seven p.m. All I wanted by then was a handoff for that final hour. At bath time, both kids in the tub, slippery and hairless, as I tried to keep one or the other from going under, I would whisper, *Please* come home, come *home*.

The days were long and shadowy, but no matter how well or poorly I felt I had done as a mother, the final hour of the day was the worst. How time dragged at the end of the day. I'd kept the children alive the entire day but feared some unforeseen disaster in the last ten minutes.

Sometimes the panic made it hard to breathe. I felt like an Irish lass caught in the fields at dusk with my apron full of potatoes. Should I drop the potatoes, save myself, and run? Or slow my progress by carrying them carefully through the dark woods?

I could have gotten from that marina to the Long Island Sound in 8 nautical miles. And from there to Portugal in 3000 more.

But I swear I have never once considered leaving Juliet.  
No matter how difficult she can be!

No matter how different we are.  
I LOVE MY CRAZY WIFE.  
(There you go, Juliet, you damned snoop.)

But now. What I wouldn't give to expect him home at all.

The thing is, I liked Harry Borawski. We'd sit at this picnic table that looked over the marina, paging through binders of yachts for sale, or shit-shooting, drinking plastic bottles of warm iced tea. He sold yachts, he'd sold a lot of them, but whenever I came around he never seemed to have anything to do, or he'd given up on whatever that was. He was one of those old guys w/ encyclopedic knowledge about some subjects & huge holes of ignorance about commonsensical things. Big guy, smudged—you were kind of glad for his non-existent wife that he never married her. Sometimes you just have this previous-life connection with the oddballs. And me, I was an easy target, showing up in my tie w/ my memories of my dead dad and 'Odille.' For some reason I opened up to Harry. I told him things I didn't tell other people.

I told him about Juliet.

I think sailing would be good for my wife, I said to him. She struggles with depression. Though she hates when I say that. She had a rocky childhood. She was fine until we had our own kids. I think having kids kicked up the past. It's been a rough stretch of years.

And nobody's around to help us either, I told him. She doesn't speak to her mother. And I'm away all the time. I'm at work or on business trips. I'm no help.

Then Harry says to me, Some of the best sailors are women. Always have been. Some sixteen-year-old schoolgirl just sailed around the world singlehanded. The sea doesn't care who you are.

That's when I first imagined that we could really do it.

That the boat would be good for both of us. And that I could have this dream I'd been carrying around since I was 15.

The sea doesn't care who you are.

Sounded good to me!

Not everybody likes Juliet.

I thought Juliet and the sea would get along.

I knew a woman from the preschool who had divorced and was pretty happy about it. She told me about how she and her ex had calmly strategized their parting, how relieved they both felt. They'd worked it all out before their children were old enough to know the difference.

One cold morning—during the year Sybil was three, before George even came along—I went so far as to see a lawyer. The office was hushed, airless. The secretary whispered my name. It felt so covert, so guilty. I stood there trembling. Sybil was at home with a babysitter. Just a girl from the block, Patty and Charlie's middle-school girl, barely beyond babysitting herself.

Are you OK, honey? asked the secretary.

I thought, What in the world do we *do* to each other? We love in springtime and doubt in winter. We'll blame our heavy hearts on anything.

I'm sorry, I said.

I ran out. I never told anyone.

Harry talked like an Ashtabulian. That is, he saw things like the folks back home. I liked being able to talk about things I couldn't even bring up in the break room at Omni lest some informant report back the presence of an independent thinker. It was good to talk freely & not be censored by the freegans & utopians, you just don't know whose foot you're going to step on. I live in fear of making an honest mistake in conversation followed by some kind of Maoist-style recrimi-

nation session. I am genuinely proud of my country & my life & do not understand the awkward silence that follows when I say so.

I'm just a regular person. To be taken at face value. I don't have time to read towering stacks of books before forming an opinion. Maybe the reason I mystify Juliet is because she is overthinking my position. I just want to take care of my family & I don't want anybody taking my rights. I especially don't want anybody taking my rights & then telling me it's for my own good.

I am no Rhodes scholar, but I have an ear for doublespeak. Here's what I want to say to the other side, to the Righteous Left, to the Easily Injured and Offended: You say you want concessions/changes/social justice, but let's admit it, you are never going to quit. Not until your moral victory is complete.

Because that's who you are.

I would just like to hear you say it.

That part of you understands public burnings.

Convert, or die.

Someone is coming up the stairs. In my closet, I brace myself. People keep coming to the front door, leaving things for me, trying to inquire. I've had to surrender my privacy. Which is not as hard as I thought. It makes me feel better to relinquish what I don't need. *Go ahead, I think, stare at me, ask me anything, take photos of my house, just don't come inside my closet.*

An old lady enters the bedroom. She's wearing a stiff T-shirt and cardigan and house slippers that she brought with her, on the off-chance that I'm a fastidious housekeeper. She sits on the bed and sighs. Our eyes meet through the crack between the bifold doors.

Hey, hon, she says.

Hi, Mom.

It's almost time for Sybil's bus, she reminds me.

You'll walk up and get her, right?

Sure, sure, she says, looking uncomfortable. It's just . . . you might want to come on out of that closet before she gets home. It's just a little unusual. For a child to see, that is. If you ask me, it's a perfectly reasonable thing for *you* to do. But for *her* . . .

You're right, I say. I agree, I should come out.

But I don't move.

After a moment or two, my mother says, Would you like me to leave you alone, Juliet, or—

It's fine, I say. In fact, stay a minute. I'd appreciate it. Thank you.

This surprises me, that I want her near. She's been living with me and the kids for a full month, since our return. She came the moment I called. But there is a palpable awkwardness while we try out this new intimacy.

Don't let anybody tell you how you should feel, my mother says, after a pause. When your daddy left, it felt like a death. I did not want to feel better. And that was my right.

Another favorite line of poetry comes to me.

*there are so many little dyings that it doesn't matter which of them is death*

January 27. LOG OF YACHT 'JULIET.' From Cayos Limones. Toward Naguargandup Cays. 09° 32.7'N 078° 54.0'W. NE wind 10–20 knots. Seas 2–4 feet. NOTES AND REMARKS: Crew has been busy this morning! During engine check the First Mate burnt her finger checking engine oil. Another small setback when Bosun spilled her Rice Krispies into the bilge.

Today we head deeper into San Blas. Our destination is an island called Corgidup. Why Corgidup? Because Corgidup means "Pelican Island" in Guna and Sybil loves pelicans. The first amendment to the CONSTITUTION OF THE YACHT 'JULIET,' which is written in invisible ink on the back of the Parcheesi board, says, "All crew haveth the right to make spontaneous changes to itinerary at random." You want to play coconut football in your underpants? You want to sit &

watch ants carry tiny fractions of a leaf across a log? Well then, while aboard 'Juliet,' it is decreed you must do those things.

Going to be brisk out there today. Everybody is tethered and in vests. In a minute, we will make the next leg of our incredible journey. We will head her into the wind & hoist the mainsail. Then we will feel that ancient pull.


Like plugging into the cosmos.

The little dyings are so much harder. The interstices.

Look at me. Even though I'm safe, back in my comfortable home, I'm still acting like a refugee—scavenging, foraging, guarding my small space, waiting out the end of the war.

I'm going to *survive*, I know that. Someday, I will talk about this calmly and insightfully. And for a good many years after that, I will go about my days, washing and dressing and caring for this body, but only out of obligation, out of the prolonged obligation to stay alive—I want to say "for the kids," but I know that even if I were childless, I would keep surviving, keep eating and drinking, going on. These actions will filibuster my mortal end, which I will be permitted to achieve only when my body gives out.

Because, as it turns out, we don't really *die* of broken hearts. Sadly.

A photograph of a house on a hill at night, with its lights glowing and reflecting in a body of water. The background shows dark mountains under a twilight sky.

“Riveting, chilling,  
and page-turning.”

—NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
LISA SCOTTLINE ON *WATCH ME*

THE  
GIRLS  
WEEKEND

A NOVEL

JODY GEHRMAN

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

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# 1

Like most clusterfucks these days, it starts with a group text.

I'm lounging on my couch, peering out at the steel-blue sea in the distance. Iron-gray clouds skulk along the horizon. My window's open a crack; a ribbon of salt breeze, tangy with rain, winds through the stuffy room.

My phone chimes, and there it is.

A text from Sadie MacTavish.

The sight of her name there, glowing on my screen, stirs something so old it feels primal.

*Hello my fabulous friends! How are you? I've missed you so much. I hope you'll agree that a Fearless Five reunion is way overdue. What better excuse than throwing an amazing shower for our dear Amy? She's due in early July. I've already looked at Cabrillo's calendar, so I know Moody's done teaching May 22nd. How about we gather @ my place June 3-7? It would mean the world to me if you'd come. xoxo Sadie*

I reel back, heart pounding.

Reading her words, I can hear her voice in my ear, see her beautiful face, those green eyes, the lush black hair. I recognize the exact note she's hitting, perky and upbeat, but also

commanding. She looked up the college calendar; there's something both flattering and off-putting about her taking that extra step, making sure I won't have to work. That's always been her gift: serving a cocktail of bossy and sweet into frosty martini glasses. She can seduce, beguile, and manipulate all in one deft pour.

I stare out the window again, my eyes on the tiny strip of sea that counts as my ocean view. The Santa Cruz coastline is fringed with fog. Wind pushes against the wavy glass like something trying to get in. I shiver and close the window.

We were tight back in college—all five of us. Em and I are still pretty close, but I haven't talked to Sadie, Amy, or Kimiko in years. The thought of a reunion makes me squirm with both delight and dread.

They were some of the best friends I ever had. When I think of them, I picture all the times we laughed so hard we couldn't breathe. We were caught in that magical golden bubble between childhood and adulthood—four years spent trying on different personas, exploring futures with reckless optimism. We knew each other in a way I took for granted. Our favorite songs, our favorite foods, our favorite colors—we could rattle off one another's with the speed and confidence of auctioneers. It was more than just an encyclopedic knowledge of each other's quirks, though. It was love. We knew secrets about one another weighty as grenades. We were there for each other without question. I've never had a circle of friends like that before or since.

My phone chimes again. I pick it up.

It's from Em: *Are you going?*

When I don't respond: *Come in, Moody.*

After another minute of silence: *Call me! We need to discuss.*

Obediently, I phone her. She picks up on the second ring.

“Oh my God, finally.” She’s someplace noisy—a mélange of voices, festive and bright, a bass beat. There’s a slamming sound, and the party soundtrack disappears. “So, what do you think? Want to go?”

“Did you know Amy was pregnant?” I ask, deflecting.

“Amy’s not on Facebook, but I saw when Sadie posted about it. Didn’t you?”

I hesitate before answering. “I’ve been trying to stay away from Sadie’s online empire.”

“Yeah?” Her tone goes cautious. “Why’s that?”

I sigh. “You know. Her life is so amazing twenty-four/seven—yoga classes with celebrity trainers, organic gardens, book tours, annual get-togethers with Tim Burton. It just gets to be a bit much.”

I try to make my tone light, airy, like it doesn’t really matter. The truth is, I found myself tuning in to Sadie’s Instagram and Facebook feeds with the sick relish of a cutter pulling out razor blades. I couldn’t look away from the bright, beautiful world she inhabits. When I caught sight of myself in baggy sweats and an ancient sweat shirt, my self-esteem plummeted. My world looked gray and deflated next to the magical hot-air balloon Sadie MacTavish floats around in.

“You need to get over this.” Em says it with an air of impatience.

“Get over what?” I know what she’s talking about, but I want to hear her say it.

A car honks in the background; I hear footsteps as Em moves away from the source of the noise. “Your thing with Sadie.”

I get up and put on the kettle, but immediately turn it off. It’s after five. Prime drinking time. Reaching into the freezer, I

free a cube of ice from the tray and deposit it in a highball. As I pour Maker's over the cube, it emits a satisfying crackle. "Can you define *thing*?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You're convinced her life is so much better than yours."

"Um, it kind of is." I'm not being petulant, just factual.

She groans. "You don't know that."

"I'm not saying my life sucks—"

"Of course it doesn't suck. You've got me."

"True . . . but come on, Sadie's got everything: the best-selling children's book trilogy, the movie franchise, the hot man, the gorgeous daughter, the organic garden—"

"Stop."

I do. My breath has grown shallow. I take a swig of my drink. "I'm just saying . . ."

"Come with me. Please."

"I don't know, Em. The last time I saw Sadie was ten years ago, and—"

"At Kimi's wedding?"

"Yeah." I sigh, remembering how gorgeous Kimiko looked that day, her hair a wild mane of black curls, her wedding dress a violet satin number that showcased all her curves. It was out on Orcas Island, at a cute little B and B with an expansive garden.

My eye catches on a note stuck to my refrigerator, a quote from Oscar Wilde: *Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much.* With one finger, I caress its edge.

Em exhales. I can picture her in some alley behind a trendy bar in SoMa, still in her work clothes, watching hordes of chic San Francisco hipsters stream from their offices. "What happened at that wedding? I remember you were upset."

I was having a great time until Sadie and I started talking. We'd always been competitive, but I figured we'd outgrown that dynamic by the ripe old age of twenty-eight. Still, after five minutes in her presence, I felt all my hard-won confidence, my scrappy self-esteem, slipping away like sand in an hourglass. Sadie's a lot like family in that way: I think I've come so far, that my progress is undeniable, but all it takes is one Thanksgiving dinner to put me right back at the kids' table, watching my adult self fall away like a cheap Halloween costume.

"I just get so insecure around her, Em." I sip my drink. "She's my kryptonite. I'd love to see Amy and Kimiko, but—"

"It won't be like that now. You're a grown-ass woman."

I cradle the cold glass. "We're like oil and water. She only asked me because she had to. She doesn't even like me."

"She doesn't *dislike* you. She won."

The truth of this shoots through me, an unwelcome stab of clarity. "Wow. Okay."

"You know what I mean." She softens her tone. "This is your chance to prove to Sadie—and Ethan—that you're over it. You've moved on. You're doing just great."

The thought of seeing Ethan and Sadie playing lord and lady of the manor sounds painful. I'd rather endure a slow root canal in a Thai prison. Ethan and I have too much history for that to be anything but pure torture. But then I think of Kimiko's husky laugh and Amy's party-girl abandon, and I ache to be surrounded by my girls again. It sounds like going home. It's just unfortunate that the whole thing is a package deal.

"Come on. I know you're curious," Em prompts.

She's right, of course. In the years that have elapsed since I last saw Sadie and Ethan, I've tried to picture them many

times. I've got a tragically active imagination, so my film reel of their lives comes easily enough. The maddening part is never knowing which versions are closest to the truth. I recall the *Vanity Fair* article that ran years ago. The article featured a massive photo spread of Sadie and Ethan's island estate and their shiny, perfect lives. The family looked like Greek gods, kayaking, surfing, cuddling up by their massive fireplace. It was like a car crash. I couldn't look away. This chance at front-row seats to their reality holds a voyeuristic allure. I want to see them. I just don't want to be seen.

Em changes the subject. "I wonder how Amy's doing. I thought she didn't want kids. Kimiko told me Sadie's been working with doctors, trying to get the meds right, but it's hard to find something strong enough to even out her moods without hurting the baby."

"That's got to be tough—on both of them," I say.

Amy was diagnosed with bipolar disorder back in college, after a pretty hairy incident our sophomore year. The five of us threw some legendary parties back in the day, and Amy was always at the heart of them, effervescent and charismatic. She was like nobody else I'd ever known. Her crazy, uninhibited love of adventure was infectious. She sparkled—she really did. I admired her balls, her willingness to dive into life headfirst. She did everything with gusto. Sadie planned the logistics, but Amy was the stick of dynamite that set the room on fire. Her nickname used to be Crazy Amy—sometimes shortened to Cramy.

Amy's always been a handful, though. Her moods could swing from ecstatic to woeful in seconds. It hurt so much, seeing this bright, vivacious spirit robbed of her verve. It used to scare me. I was never the one tasked with prying her from the jaws of depression, but I always felt like I should be able to

come up with a remedy for her bleak days, throw down the rope ladder that could guide her out of that hole. It wasn't possible with her, though. Once she was down there, nothing and no one could get her out. No one except Sadie—forcing her to get out of bed, take a shower, eat something. Sadie always did the heavy lifting when it came to Amy.

Since they're family, I suppose Sadie feels a different level of obligation. Amy and Sadie are cousins, but they grew up more like sisters. Amy's parents died in a car accident when she was seven, so Sadie's family took her in and the two of them grew up together.

Sadie's always looked after Amy, but I wonder how Sadie feels about Amy having a baby. We're all in our late thirties. Sadie and Ethan's daughter, Dakota, has to be seventeen by now. Rather than contemplating an empty nest, I'd guess Sadie's faced with the prospect of parenthood-by-proxy. Now she can either step away and let Amy fend for herself, or she can spend another eighteen years providing Amy's kid with stability. Not that she'd adopt—nothing as overt as that. But Amy relies on Sadie financially and emotionally. From what I gather, she lives with them and doesn't have a job. If she checks out, Sadie will probably be the one to step in.

Em's tone turns thoughtful. "Sounds like the whole pregnancy's been a roller coaster. I think this girls weekend might be Sadie's way of asking for help."

"Sadie doesn't do 'help.'"

Em hesitates. "Nobody has it easy, June. Even best-selling authors need friends."

I don't reply. The static on the line crackles.

"Don't we have some level of obligation here?" She changes tack. "The five of us were close once upon a time. The least we can do is show up."

I sip my drink. “You think Kimiko will go?”

“Probably. She’s in Seattle. It’s only like an hour drive for her.”

I circle back to her earlier point. “Even if this is an SOS from Sadie, how is a girls weekend going to fix anything, Em?”

“It won’t.” She hesitates. “But we do have history.”

I catch the flicker of memory under her words. The five of us shared so many adventures: running naked across the quad at midnight, taking mushrooms at Fragrance Lake, stage diving at a Spice Girls concert—all questionable escapades. We’re bound by them, a shared history that’s not all that unusual, I guess, but it feels sacred because it’s ours.

Em lowers her voice, speaking close to the phone. “Don’t old friends owe it to each other to answer the call of the tribal drums?”

I swirl the whiskey in my glass. Outside, the rain clouds have started to close in. The wind chimes on my balcony clang a mournful tune. “Maybe.”

“Think about it.” Em knows me well enough to recognize when to back off.

I nod, even though she can’t see me.

Long after I’ve put the phone down, I stay there, staring out at the gathering storm, mentally listing all the reasons going to Sadie’s is a bad idea.

\* \* \*

I try not to think about Sadie in the weeks that follow. There’s a flurry of responses from the others. Plans begin to coalesce in the vague, scattered fashion typical of group texts. I don’t respond, hoping my silence won’t seem too glaring amid the cacophony of friendly female noise.

This is wishful thinking. I'm the elephant in the room. I can feel my nonresponse being noted and avoided, like a smear of dog shit everyone minces around on the sidewalk.

Just to be sure I won't give in to group pressure, I plan a camping trip with my boyfriend, Pete; we decide to leave a couple of days after school gets out. We'll drive down the coast, with stops in Big Sur, Cambria, Pismo Beach, and Santa Barbara. He surfs, so it's not too hard to sell him on the idea.

In the meantime, I focus on my classes, feeding off the steady, easy love I feel for my students. I teach English at Cabrillo, a community college just south of Santa Cruz, a beautiful campus with a view of the sea. It's a dreamy job, in many ways. My colleagues are smart and full of surprises, my students doubly so.

It's April, and the weather's all over the board. Santa Cruz springs can give you nothing but soupy fog for weeks. Then—bam—out of nowhere, this balmy, tropical day lands in your lap like a valentine. On a Wednesday toward the end of the month, just such a day appears. My English 201 class is abuzz with the spring weather, restless and eager for release. I let them go ten minutes early, unable to fight the pull of blue skies outside our classroom windows. It's not a day for discussing the finer points of semicolons.

When I get to my office, I sit in the silent wreckage, feeling unsure about where to start. Stacks of essays compete with folders of notes from meetings.

I hear a knock at my door.

"Come in," I call.

Sarah Madsen opens the door a crack. She shoots me a shy, darting look as she hovers inside the doorway. "Do you have time to talk, Professor Moody?"

“Of course.” I gesture at the chair across from me. “Have a seat.”

She sits, her thin body curled like a comma, her restless hands pulling at the sleeves of her sweater. “I wanted to talk to you about my manuscript.”

“Okay. Sure.”

“It’s just . . .” She looks around, scanning the walls, her eyes swimming behind thick glasses. “I wrote a story about this girl who’s in the class, and I’m worried she might not like it.”

“Oh. Okay.” I try to read her furtive glance. “Is it an unflattering portrait, then?”

Sarah snorts. “You might say that.”

“Will she know it’s her?” I lean back in my chair. “I’ve written stories based on people I know, and most of the time they don’t recognize themselves.”

“Well, it’s about Astrid Lund.” She licks her lips. “And I named the character Astrid Lund.”

Astrid Lund is one of those powerful, larger-than-life girls who moves through life like a tropical storm. I can see why shy, meek Sarah might want to write about her. It’s easy to see things will always fall apart around Astrid. At the same time, you know she’ll emerge from the wreckage, a phoenix blossoming from the ashes again and again.

“That could be . . . Maybe you could change the name?”

Sarah looks wounded. “Aren’t you always saying you can’t compromise your art to make your audience comfortable?”

“You might fictionalize a bit, is all.” I pause. “I mean, the class is called Fiction Writing.”

Her expression is doleful. “I don’t know.”

“It’s taking life and turning it into art.”

This pleases her. Almost as quickly, though, her face falls. “She’ll probably assume I’m jealous, if she does figure it out.”

“Why would she think that?” I keep my tone neutral, curious.

Sarah shrugs. “Really, it’s satire. The character’s a cannibal.”

I put my hand to my mouth, trying not to laugh. A glint of dark humor flashes behind Sarah’s glasses.

“But most people don’t get satire. They’ll say I’m a lesbian who’s obsessed with her.” She looks at the floor. “Either way, I can’t win.”

“So why do you want to workshop it?”

She looks lost for a moment, considering. “I don’t know. I guess because I like it. The story, I mean. I feel like it says something true.”

I nod; this idea resonates like a guitar string inside me. “Then you should put it out there. If other people don’t get it, fuck ’em.”

She lets out a startled bark of a laugh. “Exactly.”

Something occurs to me. “Have you ever tried writing something from Astrid’s point of view?”

“No.” Sarah wilts, her shoulders sagging. She could be pretty, but she carries herself like a person expecting to be kicked. “I have no idea what she thinks about.”

“Might be interesting. As an exercise.”

“I mean, she gets everything she wants.” Sarah picks at her nails. “Where’s the tension in that? If conflict drives the story, she’s got no story.”

“Maybe her life is more complicated than it looks.” It comes out as barely more than a whisper. The echo of my conversation with Em is uncanny. “Nobody knows what someone else is carrying.”

Sarah's young, serious face regards me with interest. "Um, Professor Moody?"

"Yeah?"

"I was trying to find your book. I really want to read it."

"Oh." I can't hide my pleasure at this. "That's sweet."

"I couldn't find it anywhere."

"Yeah." I hope I'm not going to blush. "It's out of print."

"Out of print?" She looks puzzled.

I breathe out a puff of air, wishing I didn't have to say this. Sarah looks so trusting, so sincere in her belief in me as a bona fide author. "It was published by a tiny, obscure publisher; they did a small print run, and—anyway, I have a copy at home somewhere. I'll lend it to you, if you're really interested."

She nods, her face earnest. She stands, one hand snaking out toward the door. "That would be great. I'll take good care of it."

Sarah spots a photo on my wall. It's from Kimiko's wedding, the Fearless Five clutching champagne flutes and smiling at the camera.

"Oh my God. Is that Sadie MacTavish?"

I blink, surprised. Sometimes I forget what a celebrity Sadie's become. "Yeah. We were friends in college."

She gasps. "Do you think she'd sign my copy of *Dakota's Garden*?"

I try not to look as pained as I feel. Something in my gut twists. "She's pretty busy."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have asked." She deflates, turning toward the door.

My voice comes out eager in spite of my misgivings. "Let me see what I can do."

She jerks back around, flattening herself against the door. Her breathless joy is half comical, half heartbreaking. “That would be so amazing.”

I force a smile. “Looking forward to reading your story.”

She returns my grin. Hers is edged with secretive delight. I know that smile. It’s the one we writers wear when we believe, deep inside, we’ve created a masterpiece; we also fear it’s a steaming pile of shit. I feel a protective urge, an unreasonable longing to shield her from the slings and arrows she’s sure to face. Sarah’s already been kicked around; that much is clear. She’ll be kicked around a lot more before her life is over. There’s nothing I can do about that. I can only provide her with a small haven now and then, a place where she can feel visible and appreciated.

\* \* \*

A few days before the semester ends, I decide it’s time to corner Pete and nail down some details about our camping trip. He’s not a planner, which is fine, but I’m not going to get stuck doing all the prep work. Most of the places we’re planning to camp are first come, first served, so we don’t need reservations, but we do need to shop for food and sketch out a basic itinerary. Sitting in my apartment with a glass of wine Wednesday evening, I send him a quick text. *What’s up? Want to come over and plan our epic adventure?*

Blue dots chase each other on my screen. They seem to go on forever. That’s odd. Pete’s not a verbose guy. The longest message I’ve ever gotten from him was probably five words. When the text comes through, I have to read it several times before my brain will compute its meaning. *I don’t know how to tell you this, June, but I can’t do this anymore.*

My stomach drops twelve stories inside me, an elevator plummeting. My fingers tremble as I write, *Can't do what, exactly?*

Another interminable pause. I try to swallow and find my mouth has gone dry.

Before I started dating Pete, I tended to connect with guys on dating apps and met them “over the hill,” as we say, in the South Bay or San Francisco. They were Silicon Valley creative types, mostly—designers, not programmers. We’d meet at wine bars and trendy, exotic restaurants where I had zero chance of bumping into a student. If I liked the guy enough to go home with him, I did, but I rarely repeated the experience. Online dating was a simple supply-and-demand exchange of goods. When I felt the heat building in my bones, needed an outlet for my angsty urges, I’d find someone I liked the looks of whose profile didn’t make me want to retch and spend the night with him. A little human contact went a long way for me back then. One decent encounter could last me a couple of months.

Then I met Pete. He taught the guitar class I took at Cabrillo. He wasn’t very organized, but he was charismatic and playful. On our second date, he played me a song he’d written called “Moody June.” Nobody had ever made such an effort to woo me. I was a goner.

My phone chimes at last.

*I've met someone.*

*Are you seriously breaking up with me via text?*

*I'm sorry. I'm in Amsterdam.*

I almost drop my phone. There’s a surreal, dreamlike quality to this conversation, a nightmarish disorientation that has me gulping more wine. *You're in Amsterdam?*

*I moved here to be with someone.*

I search my memories, trying to recall my last date with Pete. The past couple of weeks have been crazy at work. With effort, I dredge up a memory of our most recent hookup: dinner at his place a week ago. He seemed a little distant, hard to read, but I figured he was just in one of his moods. He gets like that sometimes—unreachable. I chalked it up to Pete’s artistic temperament. I had no idea he was planning to swan off to Amsterdam with a mysterious love interest. Serious plot twist. Jesus.

Fighting the urge to hurl my phone against the wall, I type, *You’re just now telling me this?*

*I’m sorry. You’re a great person and I wish you well.*

Ew. Seriously? That’s the kind of thing you say to someone you barely know, someone you desperately want to get rid of, not the woman who’s indulged your sexual peccadilloes for over a year.

*Fuck off, Pete.*

I scroll through my contacts until I find Em’s number.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Em sounds impossibly normal.

My breathing is shallow, like my lungs have shrunk to half their normal size. I try to find words and can’t.

“You okay? What’s going on?”

I can’t get enough breath to fuel the words. Maybe pain will snap me out of this. With my fingernails, I dig into the flesh of my arm. The sting soothes, but not enough to slow my breathing.

“June? Babe, you there?”

“Pete broke up with me in a text,” I blurt.

She sighs. “Oh, God. I’m sorry.”

It takes me a second to realize what’s wrong with her response. Not enough surprise.

“You want me to kill him? I’ll do it. I’ll choke him with his own intestines.”

A weird, wobbly laugh escapes me. “He’s in Amsterdam. He’s met someone and *moved* there.”

“That *fucktard!*” Now she’s not just trying to make me feel better. Em’s fierce when someone messes with her people. “I had a feeling he’d screw this up.”

“I’m a fucktard magnet.” I swig more wine.

“You want me to come over? I could get in the car and be there in an hour.”

Tears push at the backs of my eyes, making them tingle. Until now, I haven’t felt like crying. “No, I’m okay.”

“Does this mean you’re coming to Sadie’s?”

“Pete and I were supposed to go camping.” I sigh, thinking about the misery of wallowing in my apartment alone. It will be the worst possible start to my summer: endless cartons of Häagen Dazs, bad movies, too much booze, and not enough leafy greens. Some women go on self-improvement kicks when a guy dumps them. I know myself well enough to accept I’m not that girl.

“I know,” Em says. “I’m taking advantage of you when you’re at your lowest.”

I can’t help guffawing. Em always knows how to talk me out of a funk. She’s the perfect person to help me nurse my wounds. But going to Fidalgo Island means facing Sadie in all her glamorous splendor. Am I up for The Sadie MacTavish Show when I feel this down?

I grasp at the first excuse I can find, stalling. “It’s kind of shitty to spring an extra guest on Sadie last minute.”

“Are you kidding? Everyone will be thrilled. It’s not the Fearless Four reunion. It’s the Fearless Five.”

“Even if the fifth is mopey and miserable?” I ask, my voice small.

Em’s tone goes soft and cajoling. “Getting away will be good for you. Nothing heals a breakup faster than talking smack with your girls over copious amounts of booze.”

I glance at my fridge, reading the Oscar Wilde quote again. Next to that is a magnet Em gave me. It shows women dancing in a field over the words *Friendship is about finding people who are your kind of crazy*.

If I stock up on ice cream and mope around the apartment for weeks on end, that will set the tone for my entire summer. Going to Sadie’s will be like jumping into an ice-cold lake. Even if I’m miserable, it will be an excellent distraction—an emotional reset button that will allow me to skip weeks of self-destructive brooding.

“Okay.” I stand up. “Let’s do it.”

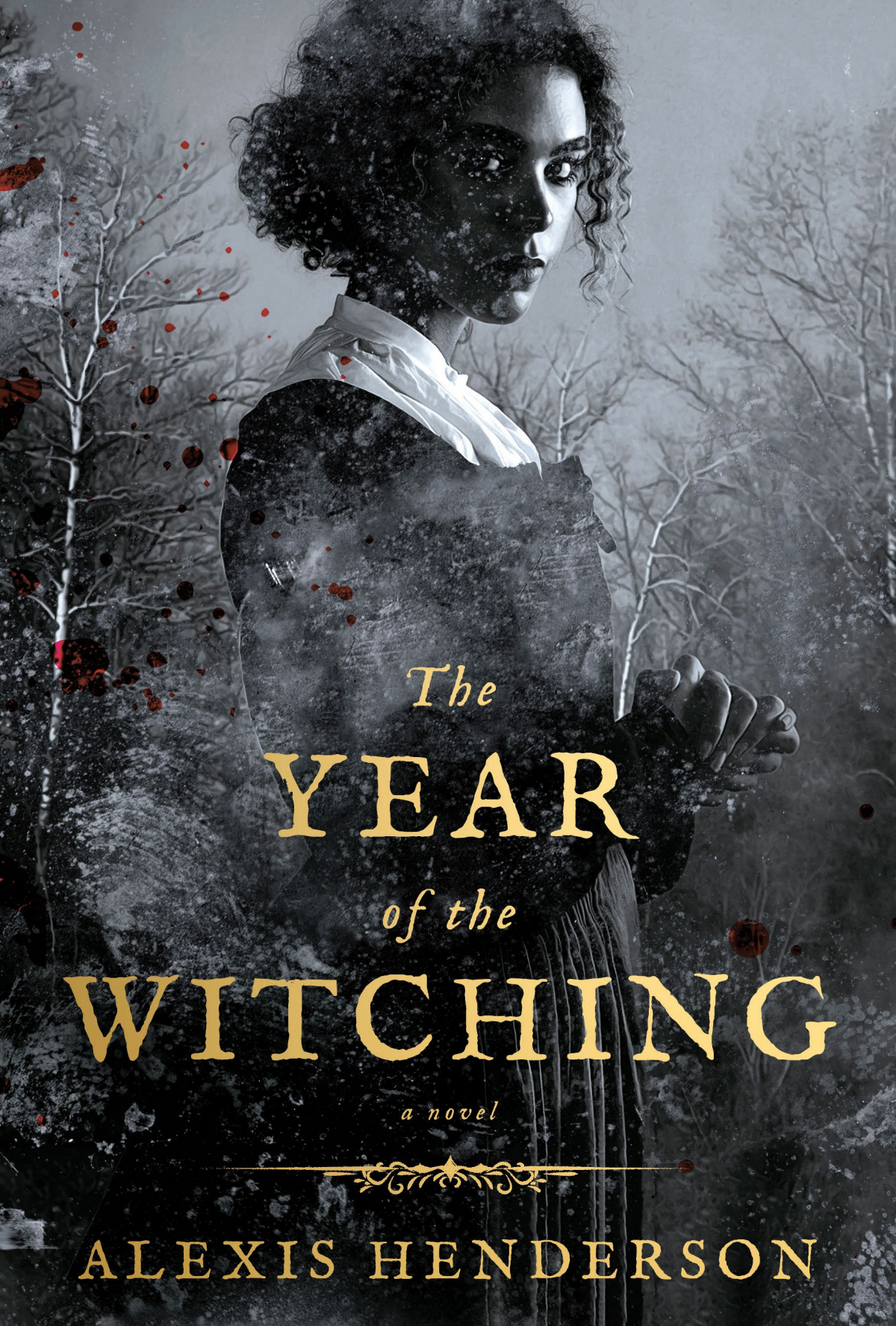
“Yeah?”

“Why not? We’re going to Sadie’s.”

“About fucking time.”

It occurs to me as I hang up that Em didn’t sound the slightest bit surprised. She knew I’d end up going to Sadie’s, just like she knew Pete was a fucktard who’d break my heart.





*The*  
**YEAR**  
*of the*  
**WITCHING**

*a novel*



**ALEXIS HENDERSON**

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## CHAPTER ONE

*From the light came the Father. From the darkness, the Mother. That is both the beginning and the end.*

—THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

IMMANUELLE MOORE KNELT at the foot of the altar, palms pressed together in prayer, mouth open. Above her, the Prophet loomed in robes of black velvet, his head shaved bristly, his bloodied hands outstretched.

She peered up at him—tracing the path of the long, jagged scar that carved down the side of his neck—and thought of her mother.

In a fluid motion, the Prophet turned from her, robes rustling as he faced the altar, where a lamb lay gutted. He put a hand to his head, then slipped his fingers deep into the wound. As he turned to face Immanuelle again, blood trickled down his wrist and disappeared into the shadows of his sleeve, a few of the droplets falling to the stained floorboards at his feet. He painted her with the blood, his fingers warm and firm as they trailed from the dip of her upper lip down to her chin. He lingered for a moment, as if to catch his breath, and when he spoke his voice was ragged. “Blood of the flock.”

Immanuelle licked it away, tasting brine and iron as she pressed to her feet. “For the glory of the Father.”

On her way back to her pew, she was careful not to spare a

glance at the lamb. An offering from her grandfather's flock, she'd brought it as a tribute the night before, when the cathedral was empty and dark. She had not witnessed the slaughter; she'd excused herself and retreated outside long before the apostles raised their blades. But she'd heard it, the prayers and murmurs drowned out by the cries of the lamb, like those of a newborn baby.

Immanuelle watched as the rest of her family moved through the procession, each of them receiving the blood in turn. Her sister Glory went first, dipping to her knees and obliging the Prophet with a smile. Glory's mother Anna, the younger of the two Moore wives, took the blessing in a hurry, herding her other daughter, Honor, who licked the blood off her lips like it was honey. Lastly, Martha, the first wife and Immanuelle's grandmother, accepted the Prophet's blessing with her arms raised, fingers shaking, her body seized by the power of the Father's light.

Immanuelle wished she could feel the way her grandmother did, but sitting there in the pew, all she felt was the residual warmth of the lamb's blood on her lips and the incessant drone of her heartbeat. No angels roosted at her shoulders. No spirit or god stirred in her.

When the last of the congregation was seated, the Prophet raised his arms to the rafters and began to pray. "Father, we come to Thee as servants and followers eager to do Thy work."

Immanuelle quickly bowed her head and squeezed her eyes shut.

"There may be those among us who are distant from the faith of our ancestors, numb to the Father's touch and deaf to His voice. On their behalves, I pray for His mercy. I ask that they find solace not in the Mother's darkness but in the light of the Father."

At that, Immanuelle cracked one eye open, and for a moment, she could have sworn the Prophet's gaze was on her. His eyes were wide open at the height of his prayer, staring at her in the

gaps between bowed heads and shaking shoulders. Their eyes met, and his flicked away. “May the Father’s kingdom reign.”

The Prophet’s flock spoke as one: “*Now and forevermore.*”

IMMANUELLE LAY BY the river’s edge with her friend, Leah, shoulder to shoulder, both of them drunk off the warmth of the midday sun. Yards away, the rest of the congregation gathered in fellowship. For most, the shadow of the Sabbath slaughter had already faded to a distant memory. All was peaceful and the congregation was content to abide in that.

At Immanuelle’s side, Leah shifted onto her back, peering into the thick banks of the clouds that loomed overhead. She was a vision, dressed in sky-blue chiffon, her skirts billowing gently with the breeze. “It’s a good day,” she said, smiling as the wind snatched her hair.

In the Scriptures and the stories, in the stained-glass windows of the cathedral or the paintings that hung from its stone walls, the angels always looked like Leah: golden-haired and blue-eyed, dressed in fine silks and satins, with full cheeks and skin as pale as river pearls.

As for the girls like Immanuelle—the ones from the Outskirts, with dark skin and raven-black curls, cheekbones as keen as cut stone—well, the Scriptures never mentioned them at all. There were no statues or paintings rendered in their likeness, no poems or stories penned in their honor. They went unmentioned, unseen.

Immanuelle tried to push these thoughts from her mind. She didn’t want to be jealous of her friend. If there was anyone in the world who deserved to be loved and admired, it was Leah. Leah with her patience and virtue. Leah, who, when all the other children at school had scorned Immanuelle as a child of sin, marched

across the courtyard, took her firmly by the hand, and wiped her tears away with her sleeve.

Leah, her friend. The only one she had.

And Leah was right: It *was* a good day. It would have been nearly a perfect day, if not for the fact that it was one of the last of its kind, one of the last Sabbaths they would have together.

For years, every Sabbath, the two of them had met after the service ended. In the winter months, they'd huddle together in an empty pew at the back of the cathedral and gossip to pass the time. But in the warm seasons, Leah would bring a big picnic basket stuffed with pastries from her family's bakery in the village. On good days, there'd be an assortment of biscuits and sweet breads, scones and cookies, and on the very best days, a bit of honeycomb or jam to go with them. Together, they'd find a spot by the stream and eat and gossip and giggle until their families called them home. Such had been their custom, as though on those long afternoons in the meadow, the world began and ended there at the riverside. But, like most good things Immanuelle knew, their custom was not made to last. In two weeks' time, Leah was to marry the Prophet. On that day, once she was cut, she would no longer be Immanuelle's companion, but his.

"I'll miss days like this," said Leah, breaking the silence. "I'll miss the sweets and the Sabbath and being here with you."

Immanuelle shrugged, plucking at blades of grass. Her gaze followed the path of the river down the sloping plains and through the reeds, until it spilled into the distant forest and disappeared, devoured by the shadows. There was something about the way the water trickled through the trees that made her want to get up and follow it. "Good things end."

"Nothing's ending," Leah corrected her. "Everything's just beginning. We're growing up."

“Growing up?” Immanuelle scoffed. “I haven’t even bled yet.”

It was true. She was nearly seventeen years old and she’d never once had her flow. All of the other girls her age had bled years ago, but not Immanuelle. Never Immanuelle. Martha had all but declared her barren months ago. She was not to bleed or be a wife or bear children. She would remain as she was now, and everyone else would grow up, pass her by, and leave her behind, as Leah would in a few short weeks. It was only a matter of time.

“You’ll bleed one day,” said Leah firmly, as though by declaring it she could make it so. “Just give it time. The sickness will pass.”

“It’s not sickness,” said Immanuelle, tasting the tang of lamb’s blood on her lips. “It’s sin.”

What sin specifically, Immanuelle couldn’t be certain. She had wandered astray too many times—reading in secret, in breach of Holy Protocol, or forgetting to say her evening prayers and falling asleep unblessed. Maybe she had spent too many mornings daydreaming in the pastures when she should have been herding her sheep. Or perhaps she hadn’t demonstrated a spirit of gratitude when being served a bowl of cold dinner gruel. But Immanuelle knew this much: She had far too many sins to count. It was no wonder she hadn’t received the Father’s blood blessing.

If Leah was aware of Immanuelle’s many transgressions, she made no mention of them. Instead, she waved her off with a flourish of the hand. “Sins can be forgiven. When the Good Father sees fit, you will bleed. And after you bleed, a man will take you up, then you will be his and he will be yours, and everything will be as it should be.”

To this, Immanuelle said nothing. She narrowed her eyes against the sun and stared across the field to where the Prophet stood among his wives, offering his blessings and counsel to the gathered faithful. All his wives wore identical dull yellow dresses, the color of

daffodil petals, and they all bore the holy seal, an eight-pointed star cut between their eyebrows that all the women of Bethel were marked with on their wedding day.

“I’d rather tend to my sheep,” said Immanuelle.

“And what about when you’re old?” Leah demanded. “What then?”

“Then I’ll be an old shepherdess,” Immanuelle declared. “I’ll be an old sheep hag.”

Leah laughed, a loud, pretty sound that drew gazes. She had a way of doing that. “And what if a man offers his hand?”

Immanuelle smirked. “No good man with any good sense would want anything to do with me.”

“Rubbish.”

Immanuelle’s gaze shifted over to a group of young men and women about her age, maybe a little older. She watched as they laughed and flirted, making spectacles of themselves. The boys puffed out their chests, while the girls played in the shallows of the creek, hiking their skirts high above their knees in the streaming current, careful to avoid drifting too far for fear of the devils that lurked in the depths of the water.

“You know I’ll still come visit you,” said Leah, as though sensing Immanuelle’s fears. “You’ll see me on the Sabbath, and after my confinement I’ll come to you in the pasture, every week if I can.”

Immanuelle turned her attention to the food in front of them. She picked up a hunk of bread from the picnic basket and slathered it with fresh-churned butter and a bloody smear of raspberry marmalade. She took a big bite, speaking thickly through the mouthful. “The Holy Grounds are a long way from the Glades.”

“I’ll find a way.”

“It won’t be the same,” said Immanuelle, with a petulant edge to her voice that made her hate herself.

Leah ducked her head, looking hurt. She twisted the ring on

her right hand with her thumb, a nervous tic she'd adopted in the days following her engagement. It was a pretty thing, a gold band set with a small river pearl, likely some heirloom passed down from the wives of prophets past.

"It'll be enough," said Leah hollowly. Then, more firmly, as though she was trying to convince herself: "It will have to be enough. Even if I'm forced to ride the roads on the Prophet's own horse, I'll find a way to see you. I won't let things change. I swear."

Immanuelle wanted to believe her, but she was too good at spotting lies, and she could tell there was some falsity in Leah's voice. Still, she made no mention of it. No good would come of it anyway: Leah was bound to the Prophet, and had been since the day he first laid eyes on her two summers prior. The ring she wore was merely a placeholder, a promise wrought in gold. In due time, that promise would take the form of the seed he'd plant in her. Leah would birth a child, and the Prophet would plant his seed again, and again, as he did with all his wives while they were still young enough to bear its fruit.

"Leah!"

Immanuelle looked up to see that the group that had been playing in the river shallows was now drawing near, waving as they approached. There were four of them. Two girls, a pretty blonde Immanuelle knew only in passing from classes at the schoolhouse, and Judith Chambers, the Prophet's newest bride. Then there were the boys. Peter, a hulking farmhand as thick-shouldered as an ox, and about as intelligent, the son of the first apostle. Next to him, eyes narrowed against the sun, was Ezra, the Prophet's son and successor.

Ezra was tall and dark-haired, with ink-black eyes. He was handsome too, almost wickedly so, drawing the stares of even the most pious wives and daughters. Although he was scarcely more than nineteen, he wore one of the twelve golden apostle's daggers

on a chain around his neck, an honor that most men of Bethel, despite their best efforts, went a lifetime without achieving.

The blond girl, Hope, who had called to Leah, piped up first. “You two look like you’re making the most of your day.”

Leah raised a hand to her brow to shade her eyes from the sun, smiling as she peered up at them. “Will you join us?”

Immanuelle cursed silently as the four sat down in the grass beside them. The ox boy, Peter, began rummaging through the contents of the picnic basket, helping himself to a hearty serving of bread and jam. Hope wedged herself between Immanuelle and Leah and immediately began prattling on about the latest gossip of the town, which largely centered on some poor girl who had been sent to the market stocks for tempting a local farmer into adultery. Ezra claimed the spot across from Immanuelle, and Judith flanked him, sitting so close that their shoulders touched.

As the conversation wore on, Immanuelle did her best to make herself small and unassuming, willing herself invisible. Unlike Leah, she didn’t have a stomach for socialities. In comparison to the grace and charm of Hope, Leah, and Judith, she suspected she looked about as dull as one of her sister’s corn-husk dolls.

Across the picnic basket, Ezra also sat in silence, his ceremonial dagger glinting in the sun. He seemed distracted, almost bored, not even bothering to nod along to the conversation as his gaze scanned the distant plains, east to west, then back again. He watched the horizon like he was looking for something, and Immanuelle couldn’t help but wonder what. Ezra hadn’t had his First Vision yet and wouldn’t until his father’s life was coming to an end. Such was the way of succession—a young prophet’s rise to power always meant the demise of his senior.

Beside Ezra, Judith sucked a bit of butter off the tips of her fingers, squinting at Immanuelle through the thick fringe of her lashes. She wore a yellow dress like the rest of the Prophet’s wives,

but the fit was a little too snug to be modest. Her skirts tangled about her legs, and her bodice was cinched tight, nipping her waist and accentuating the sweeping dip of her hips beneath the folds of her underskirts. The seal between her eyebrows was still pink, and a little swollen, but scarring well enough.

Immanuelle remembered the day Judith had gotten her first blood. The three of them, Leah, Immanuelle, and Judith, had been out in the schoolyard together, plucking mushrooms from a fairy patch, when Judith began to cry. She'd lifted her skirts high above her knees, revealing a single thread of blood trickling down her right leg and disappearing into the shadow of her boot. Their teacher had been quick to whisk her away, but not before Immanuelle heard her whisper in Judith's ear: "You're a woman. You're a woman now."

And so she was.

Judith had been quick to forsake her girlhood. She unbound her braids and piled her hair atop her head, traded smocks and pinafores for corsets and bodices, and adopted all the graces and finery of womanhood in a way that made it seem like she'd been born to them.

Judith licked the last of the butter from her fingertips and leaned closer to Immanuelle, so close she caught the sweet balm of her perfume. "Is it true what they say about you?"

The question took Immanuelle by surprise, though it shouldn't have. It was the same one she saw on the lips of every loose-tongued telltale in Bethel. They'd all been saying the same thing since the night her mother turned the Prophet's blade against him, nearly slitting his throat before fleeing to the Darkwood. They held her name in their mouths like a foul thing that was relished nonetheless.

"That depends," said Immanuelle, feigning ignorance. "What do they say?"

Judith shrugged, smirking. “Well, I suppose if you don’t know already, it must not be true.”

“I suppose not,” she ground out through gritted teeth.

Judith cocked her head to the side. “So, you don’t have a Gift?”

Immanuelle shook her head.

There was a time when Gifts hadn’t been a rarity. Long ago, in the Age of Light, the Father had blessed multitudes with the power to wield wonders and work miracles. But ever since the Holy War, and the dark ages that followed, Gifts had become scarce. With every passing year, there were fewer of them, as the saints of old went to their graves and took their powers with them. Now Martha was one of the few midwives in Bethel with the Gift of Naming, and only prophets possessed the Gift of Sight. Even the apostles were limited to a select few with the power of Discernment—a Gift that allowed one to tell truth from falsehood—or the Healing Touch. In Immanuelle’s generation, Gifts had been bestowed upon only a handful of the Father’s most favored—and as a bastard by birth, she was anything but.

“Pity,” said Judith, leveling her gaze. “I was hoping there was *something* remarkable about you. Considering.”

Immanuelle stiffened. “Considering what?”

Judith arched a perfect brow and a cruel smile played over her lips. “Well, your mother, of course.”

Immanuelle had known the mention of her mother was coming. It always did. But something about the way Judith said it now doubled the insult, making it sting more than usual.

For a long moment there was silence, save for the babbling of the river and the drone of the wasps lurking among the wildflowers. Even the distant chatter of the other churchgoers seemed to quiet, lost to the rush of wind in the woodland. Then . . .

“You know,” said Immanuelle. “Now that I consider it . . . I *do* have a knack for dancing naked in the woods—with the beasts and

devils, of course. It's hard to find the time, what with all the sheep I shepherd, but when the full moon rises, I do what I can." She smiled brightly at Judith. "Like mother, like daughter, I suppose."

There was a pause, the hiss of breath drawn. Leah winced as the group fell once again into complete and utter silence.

For the first time since he'd sat down the Prophet's son, Ezra, turned his attention from the horizon. His eyes fixed on Immanuelle.

She knew then that she'd made a mistake. A sinful, foolish mistake made in the heat of anger. A mistake that she would no doubt pay for with a scolding or lashing, or perhaps even a day in the market stocks.

But then, to her surprise, Ezra's lips skewed into a lopsided grin and he began to laugh. It wasn't a mean laugh, but the boisterous kind that comes deep from the belly. His shoulders shook, and his black hair fell across his eyes. After a moment, Peter joined him, with a barking bellow that carried across the churchyard and drew stares from the kinfolk standing in the shadow of the cathedral. This, in turn, made Ezra laugh even harder. In a matter of seconds, Leah and Hope joined in, and then at last, even Immanuelle cracked a small smile. Before she knew it, all of them were cackling together like a band of old friends.

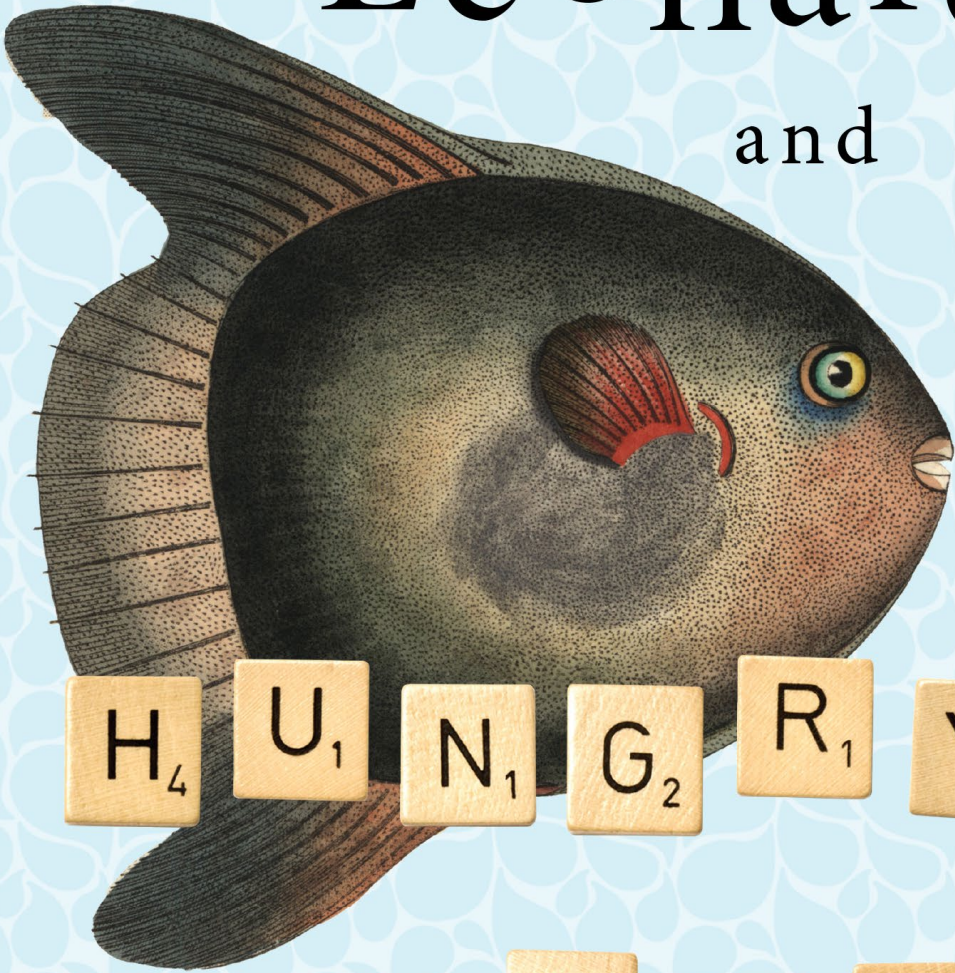
All except Judith, who did little more than choke out a scandalized cough as she stood. She tugged Ezra up with her, pulling on his arm, but as he rose to his feet, he offered Immanuelle that crooked smile of his again.

"Until the next Sabbath," he called over his shoulder as Judith ushered him back to the cathedral, back to his father, the Prophet, and away from Immanuelle. But as he entered the waves of swaying high grass he paused, turning back to look at her. Something flickered through his eyes, and in that moment, she could have sworn he saw the truth of her.



# Leonard

and



A NOVEL

**Rónán Hession**

“[A] quietly brilliant book . . . also a happy book—and we need those.”

—Diane Setterfield

LEONARD AND HUNGRY PAUL

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Leonard was raised by his mother alone with cheerfully concealed difficulty, his father having died tragically during childbirth. Though she was not by nature the soldiering type, she taught him to look at life as a daisy chain of small events, each of which could be made manageable in its own way. She was a person for whom kindness was a very ordinary thing, who believed that the only acceptable excuse for not having a bird feeder in the back garden was that you had one in the front garden.

As sometimes happens with boys who prefer games to sports, Leonard had few friends but lots of ideas. His mother understood with intuitive good sense that children like Leonard just need someone to listen to them. They would set off to the shops discussing conger eels and have a deep conversation about Saturn's moons on the way back; they would talk about tidal waves at bath time, and say goodnight with a quick chat about the man with the longest fingernails in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. But Leonard grew up at a time when quiet, imaginative children did not yet enjoy the presumption of innocence. His mother often found herself having to take his side against ornery teachers who complained that they found it impossible to get through to him. With patient maternal endurance she would sit by herself at parent-teacher meetings explaining that, like his late father, he 'just lacked a Eureka face.'

Even into his thirties, Leonard's mother still liked to fuss over him, buying his favourite ham for lunch—the one with fewer veins running through it—leaving tea by the bedside for

when he woke up, and ironing well-meaning creases into his jeans, which Leonard would quietly iron out later. He repaid her thoughtfulness by keeping her company through her later years and generally including her in the uncrowded bandwidth of his life.

Leonard was not exactly sure, but there must have come a point when their relationship grew from a purely filial one into one of partnership. Though an adult son living with his widowed mother is a situation about which society has yet to adopt a formal position, it is clearly seen in second-best terms. In so far as anyone noticed, they might have assumed that she was overbearing or that he lacked initiative and possibly a sex drive. In reality, neither sought to limit or interfere with the other, both being independent people who liked their own space and who, quite simply, got along. Leonard did recall some awkwardness around the suggestion that they go on holidays together, though he was not entirely certain which of them had first proposed it. Mother/daughter holidays are normal of course, and father/son trips are famously storied as a way to come of age. Mother/son holidays, though, have the connotation that one of them must be a burden on the other. But truth be told, they were well suited as travelling companions. She was a keen walker and had good gallery feet, being able to wander around any reasonable exhibition in its entirety without being distracted by the gift shop honey-pot that drew in tired women half her age. They both liked churches and even though Leonard was not religious himself, much of the world's art is. He would enjoy visiting famous paintings and sculptures in European cathedrals, while his mother would busy herself lighting a candle in the side chapel for her fragile, long-departed husband.

She had never really asked Leonard about girls, knowing the delicacy of the subject for him, and also because of her own doubts about whether his apparently celibate life was due to a lack of interest or opportunity. For Leonard, the fact that he still

lived at home with his mother led to a certain self-restraint on practical grounds. He had wondered what would have happened had he brought a girl home only for them to wake up to two cups of tea at the bedside the next morning.

His mother passed away unexpectedly one midweek night in her sleep, tucked into a duvet with her clothes all laid out for the next day, her neatness being a sign of her respect for the small things in her life. The doctor noted the cause of death as a heart attack, but emphasised that there were no signs of suffering or drama. He said that her heart must have simply ‘run out of beats.’

As Leonard was a shy only child of two shy only children, it was a small funeral. The front of the church was practically empty with the exception of Leonard, as people tended to underestimate their relative closeness to the deceased and sit several rows further back than they should. With no extended family to rely on, Leonard had to multi-task at the funeral: reading the prayers of the faithful, bringing up the offertory gifts, and taking care of all the other minor jobs that are usually done by cousins and in-laws. The priest’s sermon was a generic one about death and hope, which was a relief for Leonard, as his mother disliked it when people summarised a dead person’s life in a glib caricature. Had he had the courage, Leonard would have spoken up and said that his mother looked after everyone in her life as though they were her garden birds: that is to say, with unconditional pleasure and generosity.

At the crematorium, her coffin was launched through the red drapes on a set of rails in a slightly halting motion, fittingly reminiscent of the Ghost Train she so enjoyed at the funfair. With her fear of heights and contests, she had often found funfairs a bit of a trial, but went for Leonard’s sake and enjoyed the Ghost Train as it was basically a slow drive through a dark fluorescent art gallery. As the curtains closed over the coffin to the strains of ‘Nothing Rhymed’ by her fa-

avourite singer, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Leonard wiped a tear from his glasses and headed back to the family home, now his home, as an orphan.

When an only child loses their second parent, the calendar of the generations turns a page. There are practicalities and arrangements to take care of, but there is also a more general facing up to things. Ready or not, here they come. The result is an alloy of sadness and bewilderment. It was in this state, with his mood tuned down an octave, that Leonard spent his first few weeks after the funeral: staring at a pie cooking in the oven; lingering over a bag of sunflower hearts at the bird feeder; or pausing sadly with a highlighter over an entry in the TV guide. If, during that period, you were to ask him what was on his mind or otherwise use the commonplace ways of snapping someone out of it—that is to say, interrupting them for no reason—he would have been at a loss to tell you, his mundane consciousness returning like a cat who walks in after being away for a few days without any explanation.

After dinner each evening, he would sit on the couch in that customary way of single men for whom time is something to fill rather than spend. He would open one of the historical biographies waiting patiently on his bookcase, several of which had bookmarks just a few pages in, the subjects yet to get beyond their childhood. He found book shops to be comforting places and book buying a comforting activity, but he was an absent-minded reader these days, the act of reading that much more solitary without his mother pottering around the house in the background. He would sit at the table and try to copy sketches from *A Birdwatcher's Year*—a Sanderling scuttling along the shore, or a Guillemot with its eggs shaped like a pear to stop them from rolling off cliffs—but, with nobody to show the sketches to, he became careless about the details on the feathers and the subtlety of the colours. And of course

there was always the TV: supreme among alternatives, though strangely distant when there is no longer someone else on the couch to talk about it with.

Had Leonard been a different type of person he might have gone to the pub to meet some friends for an evening of darts, dominoes, cards or other prison games, but nothing made him feel lonelier these days than the thought of spending time in the company of extroverts. It is at times like this that we find out who our true friends are, or in Leonard's case, we call upon our only friend. And so, to avoid or fill that stale chapter of the evening, Leonard had made it a habit to take refuge in the company of Hungry Paul.

## Chapter 2: 'Parley View'

**H**ungry Paul still lived with his parents at the family home he had grown up in. He was now more than thirty years through his allotted three score and ten, and to an outside busy-body it might have seemed that he had no 'go' in him, or maybe that he was hoping to outlast his parents en route to easy home ownership. But Hungry Paul was a man whose general obliviousness defied gossip. In truth, he never left home because his family was a happy one, and maybe it's rarer than it ought to be that a person appreciates such things.

His father, Peter, had worked for many years as an economist, but was now retired and living off a pension provided by the invisible hand of the market. He was bald, though it was as if his baldness had been caused by gravity, with the hair drawn from his scalp into his head, now tufting out of his ears, nose and eyebrows. Hungry Paul's mother, Helen, was a nearly-retired teacher, now down to two days a week. Helen had also taught Leonard for two years in primary school and used to praise his drawings, telling him that he had 'brains to burn if he would only use them,' which is the kindest possible way of calling someone lazy. Like any teacher who meets a former pupil as an adult, she always greeted Leonard with a genuine welcoming gladness.

She met Peter after he had stopped one day to give her directions to an art exhibition and then invited himself along. They fell in love effortlessly. Their initial chemistry broadened into physics and then biology, until they were blessed with Hungry Paul's older sister Grace as their first child. They then

had Hungry Paul after two difficult miscarriages and, understandably in the circumstances, they treasured him. As a couple, Helen and Peter continued to share the closeness of two people who have been through a lot together.

On Hungry Paul's suggestion they had named their house 'Parley View' after a French song that he had once heard at a rugby club. Helen had insisted on a bird friendly back garden and bee friendly front garden, while Peter handled what he called 'internal maintenance': hanging pictures, changing light bulbs and doing all the things you can do to a needy house without buying much in the way of proper tools. Grace had long since moved out and was preparing for her impending wedding, a project that was being managed with the help of nightly phone calls to Helen, whose role largely involved lots of listening, punctuated by interjections of 'I know love, I know' every now and again in a soothing maternal voice.

When Leonard arrived that evening, Peter answered the door with his usual smile and his bright happy-to-see-you eyes.

'Come on in Leonard, come on in.'

Leonard entered with a needless drying of his clean shoes on the doormat, a gesture of social respect rather than hygiene. In the front room Helen was doing a jigsaw on a tea tray. It looked like a picture of an impressionist painting but it was hard to tell with just the edges completed so far. Her tea was balanced on the arm of the couch in a way that Leonard's mother would never have allowed. Peter and Helen resumed their habitual couch positions, nestled in like two jigsaw pieces themselves.

'How've you been, Leonard—everything getting back to normal? I'm sure you've a lot to sort out,' said Helen, getting the sensitive subjects out of the way early and gently.

'Getting there,' answered Leonard, not specifically referring to the normality, the grieving or the sorting out.

'It's good to see you—help yourself,' she said, pointing to an Easter egg opened three weeks ahead of schedule, the guilt

neutralised by sharing. Leonard took a big bit, tried to break off a smaller, more respectable portion, but decided just to eat it all once it broke up into his lap. The TV was paused in the middle of *University Challenge*, one of Leonard's favourite programmes.

Peter's style was to sit in readiness and then shout machine-gun guesses once a contestant buzzed: 'Thomas Cromwell, NO, Oliver Cromwell, NO . . .' just ahead of an impossibly well-rounded twenty-year-old answering 'Cardinal Wolsey.' In contrast to Peter's machine gun was Helen's sniper rifle. She liked to work on something else—a crossword, Sudoku puzzle or, like tonight, a jigsaw—pretending she wasn't listening. And then, on some obscure question that had both teams stumped, she would deliver the correct answer from nowhere, hardly looking up. It was usually something unguessable, like an event that had happened in a leap year or that King Someone the Someteenth was a twin. She pretended not to enjoy how one of her coolly delivered correct answers could cancel out half a dozen of Peter's panicked guesses. One time, Peter recorded an episode and learned the first twenty answers just to blow her mind when they watched it later, which he duly did, although we'll never know if Helen truly fell for it, or just enjoyed the lengths to which he was still prepared to go to impress her after all these years. Above all, what held their interest in the programme was that the two of them genuinely believed in young people. They rooted for them and forgave them any overconfidence, seeing something pure and perfect in any bright young person who had made the most of a good education.

'How's the job going, Leonard?' asked Peter. He still retained a retired man's casual interest in how workplaces in general were getting on since he left it all behind.

'Not bad, not bad. Keeping busy.'

'What's the topic these days—dinosaurs? Ocean creatures? Cavemen? Greeks?'

'Close—the Romans. And especially their time in Britain

and places like that. Pretty interesting actually. The Scots gave them quite a hard time.’

Leonard wrote children’s encyclopaedias and other factual books. While he actually wrote the words, he wasn’t the author as such. That title—and the dust jacket credit—went to the academic charged with overseeing content. Leonard’s role was really about making sure that the main concepts were conveyed in short memorable sentences. Some illustrators liked his way with nutshells and he had slowly built up a reputation as a fact writer with a child’s eye. The job suited him as he was interested in pretty much everything interesting, and he preferred to play a minor part in someone else’s story rather than being his own star. He also liked the underdog credibility that came from being unsung and uncredited, even if the money was a bit less than he would have liked for his stage of life. He worked alone in a big open-plan office shared with people from other companies and the admin people from his own company, who may as well have been from other companies. All this gave him the feeling and appearance of belonging to society, when the reality was that he worked alone and inside his own head most of the time. The illustrators, who were the real breadwinners, added their pictures after he had finished, so he tended not to meet them. His relationships with the overseeing authors were usually businesslike and distant. They gave emailed feedback and tracked comments with formal politeness that was friendly but without warmth. That was okay by Leonard. He wasn’t looking to form professional friendships with the company’s alpha dogs.

‘You should take over the illustrations Leonard—you were always good at that. Then bump off the bossy supervisor and publish books yourself. Move to the Bahamas and write on the beach,’ said Helen, who had spent her career lobbing encouragement in soft little underarm pitches for others to swing at.

‘Maybe someday,’ said Leonard. ‘The problem is that all the factual books have been done over a million times, so it’s hard to

say something original. The illustrators are at the cutting edge; I'm just re-boiling the same old factoids. I suppose I'm happy enough—it's rewarding to think that kids are reading the books and getting excited by them.'

'There's nothing nicer than seeing a kid reading,' said Helen, 'I remember Grace lying on her belly reading on the rug, oblivious to the TV or the rest of us. I never met a child who didn't like reading, so long as they're given a *chance*. I used to have parents coming to the school telling me that their kids wouldn't read and my advice was always the same: if the parents read, the children will follow. If you want them to do it, do it yourself. I bet *their* parents were readers,' she added, pointing at the paused *University Challenge* students on screen.

'Speaking of gifted youths, I don't suppose there's any sign of your favourite son?' asked Leonard.

'Upstairs—he said to send you up,' said Peter, reaching for the remote. As Leonard left the room, the TV was unpaused and he heard Peter shout out 'Magnesium!' behind him.

Upstairs, Hungry Paul's room was unoccupied. Unsure of the rules for entering another adult's bedroom platonically, he paused at the doorway, lingering as comfortably as is possible for a man who can hear his friend emptying his bowels at a distance. He took the opportunity to scan the details of Hungry Paul's bedroom, a place he hadn't really ever been in before. Beyond the age of twelve or so, men tend not to see each other's bedrooms as it can be difficult to contrive a plausible premise for asking. The room was a mix of eras, with a general half-hearted adult gloss undermined by scatterings of boyhood fascination. Action figures stood in action poses on shelves where Hungry Paul's parents had surely hoped great books would one day sit. A homemade cardboard mobile of a Spitfire dangled from the room's only light. The walls were painted a pastel green, the shade you might choose for a nursery if you didn't know the sex of the baby. The curtains and bedspread were of a generic home

store type: leaves and whatnot in graduated blues and greys. On the walls were some of Hungry Paul's own artworks, including a wobbly paint-by-numbers portrait of *The Laughing Cavalier* and a *Where's Wally?* jigsaw he had had framed and mounted as a testament to its difficulty. Though not untidy, the room had that random look you sometimes find among the bedrooms of former children who are still in residence.

Hungry Paul emerged from the bathroom wearing a white fluffy bathrobe tied with a white belt, tracksuit bottoms and flip flops with some tissue paper stuck to them. He was shaking his wrists and wore the look of intense concentration that is characteristic of a man with wet hands looking for a towel. The fact that he was in the unlikely position of wearing clothes made from the very material he needed might have tempted a lesser man, but, having already run the risk of doing a sit-down toilet while wearing white, he was not minded to capitulate under a lesser challenge. He resolved his difficulty by retrieving a t-shirt from the linen basket and drying his hands on it, his assessment being that clothes that were clean enough to wear only a short time previously were unlikely to have become too dirty to use in the meantime. There is much pleasure in relief and, as Hungry Paul noticed Leonard, he welcomed him with genuine warmth.

'Hi Leonard. They sent you up. Great, great. How are things?'

'Good thanks. What's with the bathrobe?' asked Leonard.

'Ah, I have begun training in the martial arts—how do I look?'

'You look like the real thing all right. What has brought this on? It's not like you to do something violent.'

'Oh, I haven't changed my mind about violence, but the martial arts are more about stillness in action. Calm in the midst of combat. It certainly is physical, but the mind remains still and peaceful. There is no mental violence; no ill will, which is the worst part of violence. And besides, it's judo, so there's no punching in the face or anything like that.'

‘And how do you feel about rolling around with Neanderthals? I thought you didn’t like people touching you, never mind twisting your limbs into a figure eight.’

‘Well there is that. I actually thought it might help me with my personal space issues. As you say, it is one of the more intimate combat sports, hence we wear sleepover gear rather than, say, black tie. But to be honest, there is also my personal fitness to think of. I can’t very well tackle a black belt if I can’t even tackle stairs without panting.’

Hungry Paul then dropped to the floor and started a push-up on his knuckles. There was a cracking sound, followed by some oaths, and then he started again, looking like a break dancer doing the caterpillar.

‘How many do you have to do?’ asked Leonard.

‘My sensei says I should keep going until I find my limit, and then go beyond it. To be like water. It was easier in the class with the spongy mats, but my wooden floors are actually quite hard. Maybe I’ll try it with grippy socks instead of flip flops.’

‘You look good in all the gear though. A white belt – that’s pretty impressive. What sort of moves have you learned so far?’

‘So far it’s steady as she goes. The first thing they teach you is how to sign a waiver form, and then they teach you how to break a fall, so you don’t get hurt, although I suspect whether I get hurt or not is as much up to my future opponents as it is up to me. Then we did some drills with the others. Most of them are a bit bigger than me, so I was mainly practising my defence.’

‘I suppose it should be good for your mental strength too. The martial arts are known for emphasising oneness of mind and body,’ said Leonard, who had actually written something on the martial arts in a children’s encyclopaedia about the Olympics, though the combat sports got only a brief section at the back along with shooting, weightlifting and a fact box about steroids.

‘Funny you should say that—I was actually quite light-headed after the class, which often happens whenever I try new things. Still, it’s only my first lesson. I asked the sensei about my potential and he said that if I upgraded from my bathrobe and tracksuit bottoms to buying a *gi*—that’s what they call the proper judo outfit—it would be a real sign of commitment. I can tell it will take many tournaments to win his respect.’

Leonard admired the way Hungry Paul had immersed himself in something that was so culturally alien, and, on reflection, he agreed that it was best to buy a proper *gi*, as the bathrobe probably looked a little too fluffy to intimidate any experienced judoka.

‘If you’re still practising, maybe I should wait downstairs?’ suggested Leonard.

‘Not at all. I can finish this later. Let’s go down for a while and have a chat.’ Hungry Paul tightened his white fluffy belt, using the same type of knot used for tying shoelaces.

Hungry Paul chose the kitchen rather than the front room, yelling ‘We’re in here’ for the benefit of his parents, with Helen chirping ‘Okay, love’ from the other room. He flipped on the kettle and disappeared into the cubbyhole, an off-shoot from the kitchen which was probably intended to be used as a pantry, but which in this house was used to store board games. He scanned the battered spines of the stacked boxes like a sommelier looking for the right vintage. Within the time it took for the kettle to boil, he stuck out a disembodied arm from the cubbyhole and called ‘This okay?’ from within. He was holding out Yahtzee, a game they hadn’t played in a very long time.

‘Good choice. You’re in a very Eastern mood this evening. Making plans to buy a *gi*, making yourself what looks like green tea, and now playing Yahtzee. Is this a new direction you are taking in life? Western civilisation no longer inspires you? Oh, and I’ll have normal tea by the way please.’

‘I think that I need to be a little immersive with regard to the

cultural context for judo if I want to avoid getting beaten up by sixteen-year-old girls again next week. I think there was something important missing at my first lesson. I mean apart from things like balance and motor skills, I felt I was missing something of the essence of the judoka,' said Hungry Paul. 'Now, it's been a while since we played this. How does it go again?'

Hungry Paul laid out the bits and pieces: a circular playing area with raised edges, all covered in faux-Vegas red baize; four dice, which meant that one was missing; a black cup for shaking them in before rolling, which lent that characteristic hollow rattling sound to the game; and a set of impossibly complicated score cards, listing what the players should be trying to achieve.

'It doesn't look very Eastern' observed Leonard about the game, which was invented by Canadians and commercialised by Americans.

'Probably a prisoner of war game in Japanese camps during World War II. Do you recall how to play this? I'm starting to remember why we haven't taken this out in so long. I think the last time we tried this we gave up and ended up playing something less complicated like Risk, which is saying something.' Hungry Paul lived on a knife edge between a passion for board games and an aversion to instruction booklets.

Leonard explained the basics insofar as he could recall them. Hungry Paul, who himself lacked a Eureka face, nodded in false understanding.

'Why don't you just go first and then I'll see how it works. I'm sure it will come back to me. It's just the rules are all a bit like card games, which I can never understand. Oh, I had better get an extra die.' Hungry Paul disappeared back into the cubby hole and removed a die from another set, the board game equivalent of cannibalism.

The game got under way with Leonard rattling the dice cup, which is used two-handed as if the player were shaking cocktails

in it. His first attempt was at a full house but he rolled five different numbers. Hungry Paul decided to try for a full house also and quickly popped a digestive biscuit into his mouth in order to free up his hands, having already dropped several crumbs on his judo bathrobe, which was opening at the chest under the pressure of the moment. He rolled two twos, a three, a five and six. He had no idea what that meant.

‘Oh, I remember—do I call out “Yahtzee”?’ he asked, for want of any better ideas.

‘Not quite. You might be thinking of Bingo or Snap,’ Leonard answered, before interpreting what Hungry Paul’s roll meant and talking him through his next few goes.

As they both played board games regularly, and switched between them often, it was not unusual for games to start slowly whenever they changed to something new. It was perfectly normal to have a warm-up period, like the way a polyglot who has just arrived at the airport needs to hear the local language spoken around him before he can regain his own fluency in speaking it. Before long, the game settled into a steady rhythm of clacking dice and turn-taking, interspersed with uninhibited rallies of conversation between the two friends, both of whom were free thinkers with a broad range of interests.

Hungry Paul had always been fascinated by the world around him, viewing it as something fantastical. It was as if he saw the body of scientific understanding as an anthology of legends, something so wonderful and impenetrable that it might as well be a myth. He liked borrowing copies of *National Geographic* from the library, sometimes months in arrears, not that it mattered when he was reading articles about carbon dating or the Persians. In this way he maintained a lively interest in the wider world, while staying above and apart from what is generally described as current affairs. Leonard, very much the autodidact, held a subscription to *New Scientist*, which had

been his annual Christmas present from his mother for many years. He also liked to read *Yesterday Today*, for all the latest developments in ancient history. For the two friends, the bleaching of the coral reefs was as current as the latest general election; the discovery of new dwarf planets was as relevant as last night's penalty shoot-out; and Marco Polo was discussed as others might gossip about the latest red carpet ingénue. Their conversations combined the yin of Leonard's love of facts with the yang of Hungry Paul's chaotic curiosity.

'Do you remember the Edvard Munch exhibition we went to last year, with all those haunting paintings of sick children?' asked Hungry Paul.

'Indeed I do. I see you still have the fridge magnet of *The Scream* you bought afterwards as a memento. It's not just any artist that makes it on to that fridge.'

'Well, I was reading an article about that very painting today and guess what? Do you want to know what the most fascinating thing about it is?' tantalised Hungry Paul.

'Okay, let me think. The orange background is related to the eruption of Krakatoa isn't it? Is that it?'

'Interesting but that's not it.' Hungry Paul was rattling his dice in the cup the whole time, adding to the sense of suspense.

'Okay, I give up.'

'The figure in the painting isn't actually screaming!' Hungry Paul spilled his dice on the board as he revealed this; a little too enthusiastically, as one of them had to be retrieved from under the table—a four, which did him no good.

'Really, are you sure?'

'Absolutely. That's the whole thing. The figure is actually closing his ears to *block out* a scream. Isn't that amazing? A painting can be so misunderstood and still become so famous.'

'Really? I must confess that I think I have made that mistake myself in several encyclopaedias. Never mind. It will be an interesting thing to include the next time we do a revised edition.'

Leonard rolled his go and completed his four-of-a-kind. He drank from his mug, but the tea had gone cold without him realising, leaving him to swallow a mouthful of nauseating leftovers.

‘I don’t suppose you saw the documentary about Edwin Hubble last night?’ asked Hungry Paul, now entering a state of flow. ‘Dad and I watched it after judo while Mam was on the phone to Grace. I must confess that, without television, I would never understand anything about space. Thank heavens for those enthusiastic Oxford dons doing all those BBC documentaries on the side—earning a bit of egg money I suppose. TV and space were made for each other. Dad and I were so absorbed that we ate a whole Toblerone between us—one of the big ones that you get at the airport.’

‘I’m sorry I missed it. One thing I could never quite get right in my encyclopaedias, even after reading about it many times over the years, is the expansion and contraction of the universe,’ Leonard confessed. ‘I mean I couldn’t begin to understand the physics of it, but the idea that the universe is surrounded by something that is not the universe, and which it expands into, or is it that the universe isn’t expanding but space is expanding? How do you explain that to children without leaving them with a million unanswered questions? Never mind the idea that it will snap back like an elastic into a small little pinhead again, which would terrify any sensible child. How can we just walk around leading normal lives when we know that that sort of thing is going on above our heads? We’d all be a little less precious about our lot if we truly appreciated that the whole thing was going to end up as some sort of tiny full stop eventually. I suppose you just have to trust the science, but it is blind faith really beyond a certain point, at least as far as I’m concerned.’

Hungry Paul’s brow became corrugated. ‘I find the whole expansion of the universe disheartening to be honest. It’s as though Mother Nature is trying to push everything away from

everything else. Hardly maternal. The universe might well be expanding, but it's expanding to get away from *us*, leaving us more alone, and our world feeling smaller.'

The two friends then settled into one of the long pauses that characterised their comfort in each other's company. They could sit quietly for extended periods without the need to hurry back to whatever it was they were doing, allowing the silence to melt away in its own time. However, on this occasion, Hungry Paul's extemporising on astrophysics had struck a melancholy note inside Leonard. In the weeks since his mother had passed on, Leonard had noticed a distinct shrinking of his own personal universe. His evenings were less occupied, his social options had become more limited, and his mind seemed diverted inwards towards a vague, dreamy melancholy. As Hungry Paul got up to boil the kettle again and rinse the mugs, Leonard broached the subject.

'Maybe it's not just the universe that expands and contracts,' he said. 'Perhaps the same applies to us—you know, that as we get older, our lives start shrinking.'

'How do you mean?'

'The thing is, as a child the world looked huge, intimidatingly so. School looked big. Adults looked big. The future looked big. But I am starting to feel that over time I have retreated into a smaller world. I see people rushing around and I wonder—where are they going to? Who are they meeting? Their lives are so full. I've been trying to remember if my life was ever like that.'

Hungry Paul paused a moment. 'I think I know what you mean; but for me, the bigness of life was always the problem. I have spent over three decades hacking a safe path through the wilderness, as have you to some extent. The path may be a little narrow in places, but is that really so bad?'

'It's not just external circumstances,' answered Leonard. 'I feel *myself* getting smaller. I feel quieter and more, I don't know,

invisible. There is this palpable sense of physics; that my life is being pulled inwards. One thing has led to another and now I feel that if I don't do something, I'll just carry on some minor harmless existence.'

'There is a lot to be said for that. As you know, I have always been modestly Hippocratic in my instincts: I wish to do no harm. My preference has always been to stand back from the world. Much like the Green Cross Code, I like to stop, look and listen before getting involved in things. It has stood me well and kept me on peaceful terms with my fellow man. It's certainly better than trying to make my mark on the world, only to end up defacing it,' said Hungry Paul.

'I am not about to start chaining myself to railings or throwing bras at policemen, if that's what you mean. There is no shortage of people willing to take that path. But I just can't help feeling that I need to open the doors and windows of my life a little.'

Hungry Paul hesitated, holding his biscuit over his tea just a fraction too long and despairing as a half-moon of digestive sank to the bottom of his mug. 'That may be so,' he said, 'but the trick is to know how much of the world to let in, without becoming overwhelmed. The universe, as Edwin Hubble taught us, is a hostile place.'

'Indeed. And sometimes it's difficult to know whether you want to scream or block out a scream,' said Leonard.

It was hard to say whether it was the Yahtzee talking, but both men had found themselves in one of those flowering conversations where one thought opens another. Perhaps they could have discussed the subject all evening, if only it had been hypothetical. Things being otherwise, the natural pause in the conversation gave them a moment to check themselves. Even among close friends, there are still some thoughts that ought to be allowed to ripen in private.

They finished their tea and reached an unspoken decision

that, after a pleasant evening's play, and with both their score cards looking a mess, they would call it a night.

Leonard popped his head into the sitting room to say goodbye. Helen had finished the jigsaw—Monet's *Lilies*, a painting Leonard had written about in the *World of Art* encyclopaedia—and was on the phone to Hungry Paul's sister Grace, discussing wedding DJs. Peter, with saintly patience, had the TV on pause again and said goodbye with a thumbs-up.

Hungry Paul saw Leonard off at the door.

'G'night then,' said Leonard.

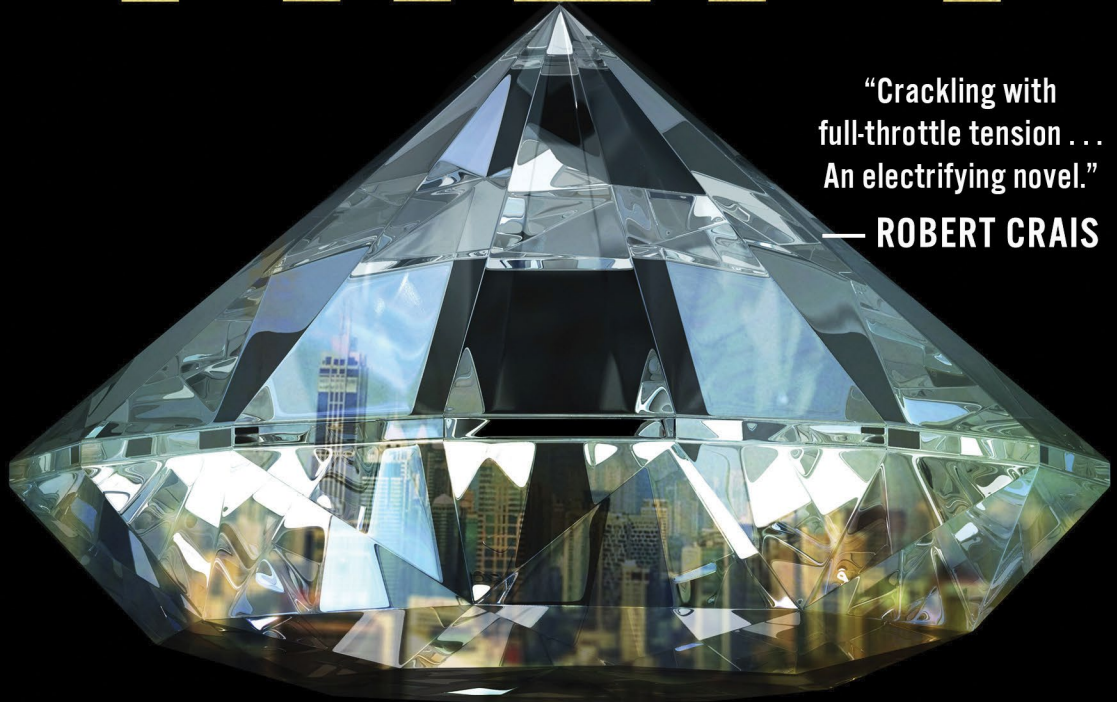
'G'night Leonard,' said Hungry Paul, closing his judo bathrobe at the throat to keep his chest from getting a chill.

Without thinking, they both looked up at the inky universe they had just been talking about, as the big torchlight moon shone down on the snails criss-crossing the driveway. Leonard stepped over them and made his way home, carrying with him the things he had said over the course of the evening; things he hardly knew he knew.



# LOVE AND THEFT

*a novel*



“Crackling with  
full-throttle tension . . .  
An electrifying novel.”

— ROBERT CRAIS

STAN PARISH

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## Prologue

Officer Rob Sullivan of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department is responding to a possible 413 when the second call comes in. It's a Hispanic woman on the line with 911 this time, but the details are the same: white male, late teens to early twenties, wandering the streets in broad daylight with a weapon in his hands. The first caller, who hung up after giving a description, mentioned an assault rifle. "Big gun" is the second caller's phrase. The suspect is supposedly six blocks from Officer Sullivan, who's roaring into his second shift on twenty milligrams of Adderall and half a diet Red Bull. His mind circles the dispatcher's description as he scans the streets. Sullivan has a two-year-old white male at home, and twelve years from now his kid will enter Ed W. Clark High School, where the LVMPD has responded to two bomb threats in the past three years. The school has monthly active shooter drills, and Sullivan wonders what makes these teenage gunmen snap. Their parents seem normal enough when they go on TV asking for America's forgiveness. There's only so much—Jesus Christ, Sullivan thinks, fucking focus. This is why he takes the Adderall. And how it works against him. Sullivan draws his pistol and pulls the slide back to reveal the bright brass of a chambered round.

SARA KOH, emergency services dispatcher with the LVMPD, gets her nails done near the first reported sighting of the gun-

man. She's friendly with the salon's manager, Shannon Jacobson, who comped Sara's last French manicure. Sara does something she's not supposed to do on shift and sends Shannon a text: *Hey stay inside if ur at wrk . . . smthng may b going on by u ☹*

SHANNON JACOBSON is not at work. At 4:25 p.m. she's half-way through the line for a boozy Sunday pool party hosted by Encore Las Vegas at the Wynn hotel and casino. A Swedish DJ goes on in an hour, and it seems like half the UNLV student body is crammed inside the velvet rope that snakes toward the entrance. Frat boys in tank tops and flip-flops share to-go cups with sorority girls wearing almost nothing over their bikinis. Shannon loves the music and tolerates this hormonal day-drunk mob of people half her age. In the coin pocket of her jeans is Ecstasy shaped like a hand grenade, a gift from her coworker at the salon. Shannon dry-swallows the pill and tilts her head back to draw it down her throat. Her phone buzzes with a text.

THERE'S A white male walking north on Fairfield with something in his hand, but Officer Sullivan can't tell what it is at fifty yards.

"Dispatch, this is one-six-two, possible suspect heading north on Fairfield toward Chicago, over."

The suspect is loping down the sidewalk in an oversize Steelers jersey. If he hears the car, he pays no mind. When he stops suddenly, Sullivan taps his brakes. His hands feel hollow as he puts the car in park and grips his pistol. The suspect turns. In his right hand is a leash attached to a small dog.

Another cruiser rolls through the intersection of Fairfield and St. Louis, ignoring the stop sign. It's Russell Pratt and his partner, the newish guy from Phoenix. Windows come down.

"You call something in?" Pratt asks.

"Guy walking his dog."

“Where is this asshole?”

Sullivan shrugs.

“Nobody’s seen shit except whoever made those calls,” Pratt’s partner says. “You’d think this guy’d be hard to miss.”

SIX BLOCKS west of the Wynn, a fifteen-foot U-Haul pulls over on a quiet stretch of Lisbon Avenue. The driver, in a black leather racing suit and full-face helmet, jumps down from the cab. At the back of the truck, he throws up the container door, lowers the loading ramp, and disappears inside. The thin walls of the trailer shake as engines cough and growl inside. Two motorcycles roll slowly down the ramp and into the street. Each bike holds two riders and all four wear full-body racing leathers, their faces hidden behind tinted visors. Both passengers wear backpacks and they crouch down as the motorcycles pick up speed until the riders resemble giant insects with pebbled skin and gleaming eyes. The truck, stolen but still unreported, is abandoned with open doors and hazards blinking weakly in the golden afternoon light.

KAI PRESTON and Anna Levine drove from L.A. to the Wynn Las Vegas last night on a whim. The young, blond, dreadlocked couple won next month’s rent at blackjack before losing it at craps. At 4:36 p.m., Kai reminds his girlfriend that they haven’t eaten anything since breakfast. They leave the casino floor and wander the Wynn Esplanade, a gently curving corridor lined with luxury boutiques.

“Holy shit,” Kai says. “Baby, check this out.”

In the window of Graff jewelers is a brooch shaped like a peacock with plumage made from precious stones. Anna smiles at her boyfriend.

“Can’t hurt to look,” she says.

The marble floor inside looks clean enough to eat from, and

jewels in the display cases sparkle like flitting fish as the couple moves around the store. Anna is examining engagement rings when a petite woman with a platinum bob appears beside her.

“Welcome. Can I help you?”

“I’m in love with that one,” Anna says, tapping the glass.

“It’s a lovely piece. Would you like to see it? I’m Cynthia, by the way,” the woman says, pulling on a thin white glove to unlock the case and extract a six-carat yellow diamond set in platinum. These whiskey-breath surfer kids do not strike Cynthia as likely buyers, but she’s seen stranger things here. Anna slips the ring onto her finger and stares down at her hand.

“It’s unusual to find a yellow stone in that size and clarity,” Cynthia says.

“What’s the color from?”

“Trace elements of nitrogen.” Cynthia leans in. “You know, for a long time, colored diamonds were considered flawed. But Mr. Graff spent years educating people about stones like that one. They’re much rarer than white diamonds. And now they’re much more valuable.”

Kai laughs. “What’s that expression? One man’s trash?”

“Well,” Cynthia says, “that’s one way to think about it.”

“How much are we talking here?” Kai asks.

“I believe that one is \$225,000, but I’ll have to double-check.”

Anna holds the ring up to her face.

“Not bad for the flawed stuff,” Kai says.

BRIAN DALMORE, valet attendant at the Wynn, is ten dollars richer thanks to the driver of a red Corvette who asked Brian to take special care of “Cindy” when he slipped him the bill. Brian is about to duck into the driver’s seat when he sees his colleague, Marty Stetson, locked in conversation with a tall man in a motorcycle helmet. The scene strikes Brian as tense.

“Marty,” he calls out. “Hey, Marty, everything okay?”

Marty nods enthusiastically. Brian puts the car in drive, still

unconvinced. He adjusts the rearview mirror for one last look, but Marty vanishes behind an Escalade packed with kids dressed for the pool party. Brian is dreading their release five hours from now. That, he thinks, will be the worst part of my day.

MARTY STETSON expected a question about parking when the helmeted rider hopped off the back of his friend's bike and approached the valet stand. Instead, the man lifted the backpack slung over his shoulder to give Marty a glimpse of the compact assault rifle hidden underneath.

"Is your friend gone?" the rider asks, as Brian drives off.

Marty nods.

"I need your radio."

Marty hands it over and the man—whom the FBI will designate as Rider 1—tucks the earpiece up into his helmet, switches over to the channel monitored by Wynn security, and calls in a brawl outside the Margeaux Ballroom, at the opposite end of the property, eight minutes away on foot. Rider 1 asks all guards to respond.

"Hands," he says to Marty.

A thick zip tie binds Marty's wrists to the valet stand. Rider 1 opens one of six tall doors to the Esplanade and inserts a locking steel wedge above the bottom hinge. Heads turn as dry heat and car exhaust pour into the perfumed resort. Marty is saying an urgent prayer for all the folks inside when a second bike rips through the arrivals area and stops behind the first. Rider 1 lays a hand on Marty's shoulder.

"If this gets called in from out here, by you or anybody else, I'm coming back to put a bullet in your head. Okay?"

Marty nods.

Rider 1 saddles up and the bikes roll through the open door, engines throbbing in low gear.

IN THE Wynn's security command center, three guards scan the ballroom feeds for the reported brawl, ignoring camera 17, which shows two motorcycles moving slowly down the Esplanade, past carousel horses covered in flowers and through a grove of bare trees wrapped in strings of lights. Guests stop and turn; parents hurry children into stores. A knot of college kids whip out their phones and snap pictures while two New York publicists guess that this is a PR stunt, some kind of viral marketing campaign in which the whimsical, colorful world of the Wynn is thrown into sharp relief by racing bikes and riders in black leather. No one dials 911.

JEREMY DUNCAN has always been a little different. Tall for a fifth-grader, he walks with shoulders hunched and eyes fixed through thick glasses on his Velcro sneakers, which his mother buys him to assuage a crippling fear that his shoelaces will come undone at the worst possible moment. Jeremy loved fire trucks until he discovered that their job is to extinguish fires, not to start them. These days he's into motorcycles, and spends hours clicking through old superbike races on YouTube. He loves watching a pack of riders fly into a turn and lay their bikes down so far that their knees scrape the track. Jeremy loves motorcycles. He's also terrified of them. When his father lifted him onto a Vespa parked outside their local Safeway, Jeremy jumped off so fast that he cut his elbow and ripped his favorite sweatpants with the blue stripes down the sides.

The Duncan family is heading to an early dinner at the Wynn Buffet when engine noise becomes audible over the Esplanade's smooth jazz soundtrack. Jeremy lights up at the sound. His dad says motorcycles aren't allowed inside, but Jeremy knows an exposed inline four-cylinder engine when he hears one. His mom says he can run ahead and see, but just around the corner and no farther, which is fine with Jeremy. Around the corner is

exactly where the sound is coming from. As Jeremy vanishes into the crowd, Andrea Duncan puts a hand on her husband's arm.

"Kyle," she says, "why is everyone running this way?"

CYNTHIA IS showing Anna a pale pink princess-cut stone when two motorcycles pull up outside Graff. The men on back dismount, remove their packs, and shift their automatic weapons to their hips. In comes Rider 1, telling everyone to put their hands up and lie facedown on the floor. The voice is male and the helmet makes it sound as if he's shouting at them from another room. With a flick of the wrist, Rider 3 unleashes an expandable baton and whips it into the rib cage of Rashad Lyons, Graff's armed guard. While a writhing Rashad is disarmed and zip-tied, Rider 1 scans the store and stops on Cynthia, who knows exactly why he's here.

The package arrived this morning with an armed escort. Cynthia signed for the delivery, which is how she knows the single item was insured for seven million dollars. The guards showed her the necklace before they placed it in the safe: a cascade of white and Champagne diamonds with a twenty-carat pear-shaped stone hanging at the bottom like ripe fruit. The piece was shipped in from the Paris store, a birthday gift for the second wife of a Shanghai developer. Li Jianrong insisted on an in-store pickup because his new bride, who grew up in Zhejiang Province without running water, loves shopping almost as much as the things she buys. Mr. Jianrong likes privacy and anonymity, but he's making an exception here. The armed delivery and in-store guard are on his tab. Another guard is due at 6 p.m. to transport the necklace to the happy couple's suite, which won't be necessary now.

Cynthia is shaking. Rider 1 spins her gently and steers her toward a mirror-paneled door that leads to the stock room, one gloved hand on his gun, the other on the back of her neck. Cyn-

thia unlocks the door and goes straight for the safe, a head-high custom piece in green and gold. She knows the combination like her date of birth, but somehow gets it wrong.

She whispers, "I'm so sorry."

"Relax," the man says. "Breathe."

She's retrying when his hand moves from her neck to her arm. Cynthia whimpers and shuts her eyes, but then the man gives her shoulder an encouraging squeeze. It's almost enough to make her turn around. She gets the combination right this time. The steel bolts in the door retract, and Rider 1 brushes her aside. Out comes the necklace and the tray below it, which contains thirty-six diamond rings arranged by color and weight. Cynthia sees the neat rows in her mind's eye as the rings rain down into the bag. Outside in the showroom, glass display cases shatter at five-second intervals. The buzz of a zipper is followed by the creak of leather as Rider 1 exits the stock room. Cynthia sits down beside the gaping safe. She'll stay here until the cavalry arrives. She can still feel the man's hand on her arm.

WHEN JEREMY sees something that excites him, he takes a video with the iPhone he got for his tenth birthday. The behavioral therapist at Lakeview Montessori says Jeremy does this to create distance between himself and things that over-stimulate him. Jeremy's phone is out when he spots the two modified 1200cc racing bikes with matte-black gas tanks and thick Michelin Commander tires that sit—and this thrills Jeremy the most—on the big red rug outside a jewelry store. He hears his mother yelling but feels certain she would drag him backward by the collar if anything was really wrong. All he wants is a good look at the aftermarket front suspensions. He stops ten feet away, as close as he'll get to a live engine, and hits record three times with his trembling thumb before the red dot on the screen begins to flash. The riders don't seem to mind. And then they

do. They turn to him in unison, and Jeremy can feel their eyes burning into him from behind the tinted visors. His mother has gone silent. Jeremy stares at the image on his screen and sees the guns for the first time.

SHANNON JACOBSON is finally poolside, dancing with a college kid who introduced himself by asking for a lighter. They shared a laugh when he relit her cigarette with a white BIC from his pocket. He's clearly doing this for kicks, to scratch an itch for older women. Shannon doesn't mind. He's not obviously crazy and the kid can dance. The pressure of his hands on her back sends heat waves through her body as the drug kicks in. The opening DJ is wrapping up his set when two security guards almost mow down Shannon and her new friend as they sprint toward the exit.

"Hey!" college boy yells. "Get some fucking manners, pigs!"

SARA KOH is struggling to understand the woman on the line with 911. The call is coming from the Wynn. The caller is hysterical.

"Ma'am? Ma'am," Sara says, "I need you to speak slowly and tell me exactly what's happening, okay? Who has your son? Are they holding him hostage?"

"He's taking a video—right in front of them—my son is—they're on the motorcycles—and the other ones—they're robbing the store and—"

"Who is, ma'am? Is your son being robbed?"

"No, he's just—he's close—he's right next to them and they're with the other ones—the ones robbing the store. Are you sending help? Where are you? Where are the police?"

"Can you describe the men to me, ma'am? The police are on their way, I promise."

---

BYRON SHERMAN and Mark Janowski are the first guards on the scene. Initial reports have been confusing: a fight near the Margeaux Ballroom, a distress signal from Graff, some assholes using the Esplanade as a racetrack. Mark goes first through a growing crush of guests, then stops short and says, "Fuck me." Two riders strapped with compact assault rifles sit on racing bikes outside of Graff. Neither Mark nor Byron draws his sidearm. Guards with guns are mainly a deterrent here. In an armed-robbery scenario, their job is to get the perpetrators off the property as quickly and quietly as possible. Every poker chip, Swiss watch, and ounce of gold here is insured, and killing guests in a gunfight does not create value for the shareholders. Mark and Byron shepherd the gathering crowd away from Graff, pushing people into the surrounding stores and back the way they came, clearing the Esplanade.

"Holy shit," Mark says, as three women duck into Cartier for cover.

A kid is standing ten feet from the bikes, between the riders and the exit, filming with his phone. Three guards and two undercover cops arrive at a run, pistols pointed at the floor in front of them. Riders 2 and 4 raise their rifles.

JEREMY IS frozen. People scream behind him as the men on bikes bring up their guns. Another armed man in a helmet emerges from the store and, after a brief pause, walks straight toward Jeremy, reaching for the phone. And then, as if he willed it, the boy is swept up and yanked backward by his mother. Rider 1 misses the phone by inches. He turns on his heel, adjusts his backpack, and mounts up. Engines roar. Jeremy is still filming as the riders accelerate toward the exit, scattering the crowd. He captures the receding yell of the engines before his mother wrestles the phone from his hand.

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WITH HIS keychain Swiss Army Knife, Brian Dalmore saws frantically at the zip tie that binds Marty Stetson's wrists. Engines scream inside the Esplanade, and Brian looks up as two bikes blow through the open door, their draft tugging at the polyester fabric of his shirt. A squad car and a SWAT truck come screeching around the left side of the landscaped center island as the riders make a sharp right turn and hit South Las Vegas Boulevard without touching their brakes.

THE CREW splits up. One bike rips around a ramp onto Spring Mountain Road while Riders 1 and 2 head north, using all three lanes and the shoulder. The glamour of the Strip fades quickly, name-brand resorts giving way to chintzy gift shops, liquor stores, and cheap hotels. A hundred yards ahead, two patrol cars block an intersection, bringing northbound traffic to a halt. Officers Pratt and Sullivan leave their vehicles, sprint between stopped cars, and fan out in the empty street, guns drawn, screaming for the riders to dismount and drop their weapons. The bike is twenty yards away and closing fast when Sullivan fires a shot that stiffens the right arm of the man behind the handlebars. The front wheel wobbles, and both officers dive for cover as Rider 2 locks up the rear wheel and sends the bike into a low-side skid. The men in the saddle are about to come unstuck when the motorcycle somehow rights itself, pulled up as if by invisible strings. Pratt and Sullivan scramble to their feet as the bike bangs up the curb of the center divider and shoots a gap between two palms. A quick ninety-degree turn brings the riders face-to-face with drivers stopped at a red light. The light turns green and horns blare as the bike flies straight into oncoming traffic. Rider 2 leans into a hard left turn that misses the front bumper of a Cadillac by inches. Half a mile later he turns right on Rancho Drive, weaves through a quiet residential

neighborhood, then opens up the throttle one last time before releasing it completely. The bike coasts noiselessly for two blocks and turns into the driveway of a foreclosed ranch-style home. The garage door just misses Rider 1 as it comes down. A bald and bearded man, heavily muscled and tattooed, stands beside the silver pickup parked inside. Rider 1 dismounts and disappears into the house while Rider 2 rips off his helmet, eases the bike up a ramp into the truck bed, and lets it fall onto its side. The bald man spreads a fitted bedsheet over the motorcycle.

“Lose the leathers,” he says.

“Mate, my arm’s fucked.”

The bald man unzips the racing suit and strips it to the waist, revealing a Kevlar vest and a deep gash in the shoulder from the bullet. The garage door jerks open as Rider 2 climbs into the truck, removes his vest, and starts the engine with his good hand. He backs down the driveway and speeds off.

Rider 1 is pacing in the empty living room, slapping the insides of his arms against his ribs like a swimmer on a starting block. The bald man grasps him by the shoulders, sits him on the low stone hearth, and takes a knee. One hand cups the rider’s calf while the other unlaces the left boot, grips the heel, and frees the foot. He’s gentle but purposeful, like a trainer tending to a thoroughbred after a race. Once both boots are off, the bald man reaches under Rider 1’s jaw and unsnaps the chin strap. The helmet comes off easily, its pads slick with sweat.

“Everyone’s home safe,” the bald man says as he helps Rider 1 to his feet. “Let’s hit the road. I want to beat the traffic.”

REBECCA RYAN, the LVMPD’s forensic photographer, is on her knees in the Graff boutique when she spots the ring, a dome of pavé diamonds buried under bits of broken glass.

“Looks like they missed one,” she tells Detective Hector Ramirez, standing up to show her camera screen. “That’s, what? A fifty-thousand-dollar screw-up?”

“It’s a rounding error on this haul,” Ramirez says. “Can you ask Jon to bag that up?”

Ramirez is an amateur middleweight boxer, compact and athletic, his black hair slicked back above a boyishly handsome face that still gets him carded at the age of thirty-six. In a sharply tailored navy sports coat, bright white shirt, and polished loafers, he could be a Graff customer if not for the badge and gun. He pretends not to notice Special Agent David Harris of the FBI’s Las Vegas field office as the stocky silver-haired man unbuttons his ill-fitting tan suit jacket to duck under the crime scene tape that blocks the door.

“Christmas in July,” Harris says as he approaches.

Ramirez looks up from his notebook. “Not bad for three minutes of work. You’re Agent Harris?”

“Call me Dave.”

Ramirez knows the FBI has jurisdiction in a case likely to cross state lines and international waters. As head of the LVMPD robbery squad, he’ll assist with an investigation led by Harris, who ran the bureau’s Jewelry & Gem Theft program before transferring to Vegas. Ramirez knows the man by reputation: a formidable investigator and, in the words of another detective, kind of a dick.

“Do we have a number?” Harris asks.

“Someone’s doing inventory now. The assistant manager says twenty million on the low end.”

“Am I correct in thinking that’s a record for this town?”

“I fucking hope so,” Ramirez says.

“Is there an injured list?”

“The Graff guard has a few cracked ribs but he’ll be fine.”

“Where are we with the traffic cameras?”

“Someone took out two cameras on Sahara Avenue ten minutes before these guys showed up.”

“Took them out?”

“Sorry, shot them out. From the back seat of a black Yukon with no plates. Small-caliber rifle, probably a .22.”

“And they used Sahara to get on and off the Strip.”

“Correct.”

“So we have no idea where these guys went. Or came from.”

Ramirez shakes his head.

“Four men on bikes with automatic weapons materialize outside a casino and disappear into thin air.”

“We’re double-checking everything,” Ramirez says. “But yeah, the headline writes itself. Looks like they called in a bullshit 413 to draw our guys downtown. Two calls, both from burner phones.”

“What about this kid who filmed them?”

“He’s pretty shaken up. The parents turned the phone over, but the father sent the video to at least three people.”

“Do you have a copy or should we watch it on YouTube?”

Ramirez pulls the video up on his phone.

“Wired for sound inside those helmets,” he says, as Riders 2 and 4 spot Jeremy for the first time. “No one heard them say a word, but watch the head movement. They’re discussing what to do about this kid.”

“Did anybody hear them talk?” Harris asks.

“The girl who opened the safe said the tall one sounded American, but the helmet made it hard to hear. And she was scared shitless. Still is.”

“Odds that she was in on it?”

“We’re looking into her. I’d say zero if I had to lay a paycheck on it.”

When Rider 1 emerges from the store and walks toward Jeremy, Harris presses pause.

“One thing I’d lay a paycheck on,” he says. “This guy right here’s in charge.”

AT 7:25 P.M., Shannon stands outside The Griffin, an old-school cocktail bar downtown. She came here with college boy and his friends when the pool party ended early due to an inci-

dent next door. People gathered on the sidewalk where word of the robbery rippled through the crowd. Strangers huddled and gossiped, drawn to each other as if they'd flown through a lightning storm and landed safely. No one wanted to go home so Shannon suggested The Griffin, where college boy ordered a round of Irish car bombs. As she dropped a shot into her pint of Guinness, Shannon decided on an Irish goodbye. When her new friend hit the men's room, she slipped out the door.

The Ecstasy hasn't quite worn off, and Shannon craves the heat and pressure of a body against hers. She scrolls through her texts, weighing several friends with benefits before messaging a tall and much younger Australian who her friends call Captain Kangaroo behind his back. He's rough around the edges—questionable manners, bad haircut, worse tattoos—but handsome enough, cut like a classical sculpture, and remarkably good at going down on her, which is the deciding factor tonight. Behind her, a bouncer discusses the robbery with a bachelor party from Seattle.

“Unreal,” one man says. “Fuckin’ Wild West out here.”

Shannon smiles to herself and lights a cigarette. Captain Kangaroo is not a great communicator, but minutes later he responds to her *hey mister* with *hey what's up w u?* He's watching the game at a mate's place, he says. Does he want to watch at hers? He does. He can be there in an hour. Shannon hails a cab.

Craig Hollinger knocks on the door to her condo ninety minutes later, helmet in one hand, sweating bottle of Champagne in the other.

“Wow,” she says as she accepts the wine. “Are we celebrating?”

“Why not, right?”

“I like it. Come inside.”

In the kitchen, she takes two wineglasses from the dishwasher and rinses them out in the sink.

“Do you want to put the game on?” Shannon asks.

“The game?”

“The one you were watching.”

“That’s all right. Reckon it’s over now.”

“Guess where I was earlier.”

“On the golf course.”

“No, silly,” Shannon says. “At the Wynn.”

“Yeah? Did you win big?”

“Did you not hear what happened?”

Craig shakes his head.

“These guys on motorcycles robbed the place. Made me think of you, actually. You and your big fast bike.”

“Robbed the cashier?”

“No, they rode into the Esplanade and cleaned out Graff.”

“What’s Graff?”

“Obnoxiously expensive jewelry. Stuff you should buy the women in your life when you get your act together.”

Craig smiles. “How’d they ride out after they robbed the place? Someone hold the door for them?”

“I don’t know,” Shannon says. “They did, though. It’s all over the news.”

“That,” he says, pressing his body against hers, “sounds like a bullshit rumor.”

Shannon pushes him away and peels the foil off the cork.

“Take your coat off,” she says. “Stay a while.”

Craig gingerly removes his jacket, wincing as he frees his right arm from the sleeve. Even the loose waffled cotton of a long-sleeve Henley can’t hide his swollen, bandaged shoulder.

“Holy shit,” she says. “What happened?”

“Took a bad spill at the track this morning,” Craig says. “Nothing serious.”

“Are you sure it’s not broken?”

“Broken? Nah. It’s just a bump.”

“You should be icing it.”

She’s halfway to the fridge when her phone buzzes with a text.

“There’s a video,” she says. “Of the robbery. My friend just sent it to me. Are you ready to be wrong?”

“You want to watch that now?”

“Definitely,” Shannon says. “Don’t you?”

She holds her phone between them. On-screen, a local news anchor is shuffling his papers between segments.

“. . . and the ranchers say they’re looking forward to their day in court. Finally this evening, we have exclusive body-camera footage from the officers who confronted a pair of thieves near the Wynn hotel and casino after four armed men made off with an estimated twenty-two million dollars in jewels earlier today. Take a look.”

The body cam is trained on East Sahara Avenue through the windshield of a cop car. A call comes in over the radio, and Officer Sullivan jumps out of the vehicle and sprints between two lanes of stopped traffic, his pistol pointed down the Strip.

“Told you,” Shannon says, as the bike comes into view.

The image jerks when Sullivan fires his gun. The man behind the handlebars is obviously hit, and the scene blurs as the two officers dive for cover.

“The LVMPD is asking anyone with information about the suspects you just saw to call the number on your screen,” the anchor says.

The clip ends. Craig and Shannon stand side by side, staring down at the still image on her phone. The tension feels like rising water. Shannon slips the phone into her pocket, slides her hands over Craig’s hips, and presses her nose into the tendons of his neck. She’s shocked but not offended to learn that he’s mixed up in this. For her own safety, she needs Craig to know she doesn’t care.

“I lost four hundred bucks at blackjack last time I was at the Wynn,” she whispers. “And the service sucks. Let me see your arm.”

Craig takes off his shirt and peels back a corner of the bandage.

“Jesus,” Shannon says, “how’d you get stitched up so fast?”

“These boys had a doctor standing by.” Craig tilts her head

back with a finger underneath her chin, looks down into her eyes, and says, “This never happened.”

“What never happened?” Shannon asks with a coy smile.

When he opens his mouth, she covers it with hers. Craig grabs the hem of her shirt with his good arm and Shannon raises her hands as he pulls it over her head.

A large, solid yellow silhouette of a woman in a dress, standing with her hands on her hips. The silhouette is positioned on the left side of the cover, overlapping the blue and yellow background sections.

A ROOM  
CALLED  
EARTH

*A Novel*

MADELEINE RYAN

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*Designed by Alexis Farabaugh*

# 1.

I decided to wear a kimono and high heels to the party because I wanted people to see me in a kimono and high heels at the party. I tried putting chopsticks from the kitchen drawer in my hair and it felt like it was overdoing things a bit, so I put them back. I even considered painting the chopsticks black because they were brown, and black would have suited my outfit better. Yet the fact that I considered painting them at all caused me to be embarrassed at myself, so I decided to ditch accessories that were at one time used to stuff pad Thai into someone's face. Painted or not, you can't change the reality of what chopsticks are or the main way that they've been used for, like, centuries. Eons, even. So let a chopstick be a chopstick, and my hair can be what it is, too.

I've fantasized for days about wearing this kimono and these shoes, and tonight is the night. The shoes are high and patent and black and shiny, and the kimono is red and silky with sleeves like wings. I guess the sleeves are a part of a traditional

style, or whatever. It's just that my only association with them is that they're like wings. I don't know why they're so wide, or if that has some kind of practical aspect to it, and, you know, who cares.

I've put a tight black spandex skirt underneath for modesty. Well, it's a half-hearted gesture in the direction of modesty. I'm not wearing underwear of any kind because that would be ridiculous.

The people who are going to see this outfit and me in it are both known and unknown to me. I mean, I've been invited to this party. Like, I'm legitimately allowed to be there. It's just that my self-image is in no way going to be constrained by knowing too many people in attendance. I won't be readily identifiable to the majority of the crowd, so who and what I am can remain undefined, and expansive.

And, right now, from my perspective, the people who are going to be there are made up of Futuristic Shadow Beasts Without Faces that are deeply impressed by me. They make life worth living, because I can decide exactly who and what they are, from this place of having no actual idea. I can just imagine them, and dress for them, and have high expectations of them, and envisage the amazing connections that I might have with them. And I hope that all of the Futuristic Shadow Beasts Without Faces are currently giving themselves the same rapturous, pre-party experience that I am. Because even if we don't get a chance to meet, or to talk, we can remain in a state of wonderment together. My dream is to leave people wondering, and nothing more. It's safe, it's sexy, and I want to live there forever.

Mystery is my favorite accessory.

As I get ready, I keep looking over my shoulder just in case someone walks into the room unannounced. My music is loud, and I'm worried that someone will knock and I won't be made aware of their presence until it's too late, and who knows what they will have witnessed or, worse, how they'll perceive what they have witnessed. I don't even want to think about it.

It's one thing to be humiliated for my own reasons and a whole other thing to be the catalyst for someone else's sense of humiliation. I really don't want to take on that responsibility. I've always felt a strong inclination to smooth things over for the people around me, and now I've become terrified of the prospect of having to do so at all. I'm not really wired to care for other people unless they ask me directly because, in any given situation, I'm either completely immersed in myself, or completely immersed in someone else. There's no in-between.

Anyway. I keep sensing footsteps down the hallway and it's fucking annoying. They're echoing around my rib cage, and, I mean, no one ever walks in. How did I get to a point where I feared that they might? Every strand of hair is standing on end and my neck is moving like a magnet toward the door. Why? Is it self-obsession? Paranoia? Anxiety? My inner processes can be visceral to the point of being completely illusory, and absurd. Thankfully I live with a cat called Porkchop who is a very grounding influence upon me.

Porkchop is ginger and his job is to sit on my bed and stare at me, and he's very good at it. It was a self-appointed position, and he never lets the team down. I once read in a book that we

need to be wary of growing too close to animals, because it can reveal a lack of closeness with our own species, and, around the same time, a boyfriend read aloud a section of a novella, which said that people who empathize with the animals involved in bullfighting don't empathize with human beings—like, at all—and that they're more likely to be psychopaths. We were in his kitchen when he shared this with me, and I remember taking a deep breath, from my shoulders, and quietly mashing more clumps out of the guacamole.

Connection with my own species has been difficult. I'm more at ease with the animal part of myself than the human part of myself. I feel at peace when I'm with Porkchop. I have no concerns about what he might or might not be thinking, or what might or might not happen next. Porkchop is always clear about his wants and needs. They aren't hidden behind lies, or delusions. They're right there, in the sunlight, wanting a tummy rub. Or, they very obviously prefer tuna to sardines, because the sardines are left on the plate and the tuna isn't. Or, they've carefully positioned the ball of string at the bottom of the stairs, because it's playtime.

Porkchop and I access a sense of wholeness that I rarely experience anywhere, or with anyone else. Our non-verbal union re-creates the stillness of the respective wombs we left long ago. We can't be all that different, really, because we pretty much came from the same place, and now we're here, living in the same place, and one day, we'll die, and end up in the same place.

Porkchop must feel the same way, because he doesn't go anywhere. That cat barely moves due to being so overcome

with contentment in our space together. Everything that he does, and every sound that he makes, and every bit of smoked salmon that he licks, and carefully chews, suggests the utmost confidence in his decision-making capabilities. I see no reason to question Porkchop's level of commitment. I can trust the satisfaction that he experiences at my side, because when people or things want to move on, they just do.

Porkchop is also a potent reminder of why I don't eat anything like, or associated with, pork chops. I look at Porkchop and I feel safe in the knowledge that I don't eat his kind, or take what wasn't given to me by his kind. Porkchop isn't a sandwich, and he doesn't belong on a barbecue. He's a cat, and he lives with me. Just like all of the animals living alongside humans everywhere, every day, all the time, at every corner of the earth. Not just in houses or on farms. They're in the sea, and in the air, and in the jungles, and rainforests, and in the native parklands, and in all of the other places that animals are, which is heaps and heaps of places. We've all ended up here together, and that's all there is to it, because that's all the knowledge that we have about it.

Symbolically, Porkchop is "every animal" to me and I love him dearly. Look at him. He has a little soul, which has an agenda that miraculously involves staring at me all day. I feel so blessed.

Sometimes when he sits on my lap, I tell him that he's a god, and he shuts his eyes with what I'm sure is a gentle, appreciative knowing. We're all gods, and the ancient Egyptians withheld from those who refused to accept that.

An ex-boyfriend once said that I should “stop trying to be Holly Golightly” with my cat, and I said that he should stop relating everything back to the first pop-culture reference that pops into his head, because it won’t make him any more relevant or useful to the tribe. And relating me to a man-made fantasy of womanhood said more about him than it did about me. He’s in advertising now where he belongs, and we spent a year together that I don’t really think about unless I’m talking to my therapist.

## 2.

I like to sip vodka martinis with olives before I go out, because Dad used to make a vodka martini with olives for Mum every night before dinner. It was their evening ritual. After a long day of writing and researching, he'd put on Artie Shaw and roll out a bowl of pistachios. Mum would put her feet up on the coffee table, snap the shells open with her long, pale-pink nails, and suck the salt off, before taking a sip of the brew and crunching a nut.

Dad took a lot of pride in the fact that he made the strongest martinis anyone in his circle of friends had ever drunk. Grown men were often seen keeling over on the lawn outside after a few of Dad's martinis. He never drank them himself.

Vodka martinis with olives are a family tradition that I've chosen to celebrate and embrace. There's something very decadent and straight-to-the-point about a vodka martini with olives. There's no yeast or citrus or bubbles to be used as a distraction. And I like to experience life directly and intimately so,

naturally, I like to drink alcohol that is direct and intimate. Drinking vodka in this way, you get to feel every bit of it. There's no hiding from a vodka martini with olives.

Gin doesn't taste the same, or have the same feel about it, and I'm not sure why. Vodka is cold and clear, and it hits the bottom of my stomach like an ax, so, sorry to the guy I once dated who liked gin with soda and cucumber in it, it's just that that's a completely different thing. My family's martinis don't have a drop of gin in them, and there's nothing more to be said about that subject because it will get boring.

### 3.

I used to get ready to go out with other girls because that's what girls are supposed to do and it's meant to be all *Grease* without the bullying, except the bullying is always there. That's why Sandra Dee ends up singing about Danny outside by herself, next to a play pool, in a white nightie. And if you looked at my best friend and me during high school, you'd think I was Rizzo and she was Sandra Dee, and that would be a misconception. Maybe every woman thinks that would be a misconception.

My hair was long, thick, brown, and wavy, and hers was white-blond and straight. My hair looked different depending on the weather, and on how I had slept, and on how I had chosen to wear it the day before, and on what I had been thinking about too much, and hers was always the same. Like, exactly the same. Even after she washed it. She would try to cut it in different ways to create variation, yet every layer would remain visible and readily identifiable.

Try as she might to embrace unpredictability, her very being refused it. She did everything she could to rail against sameness and monotony. She moved across the landscape of life like a lightning rod: fast, primed, and ready for the next destination to electrify with her presence. She always had a bag in hand or over a shoulder in preparation for leaving. Her sky-blue eyes would rapidly assess situations, and people, before turning their attention back to a heavily distorted body image, which would shriek at her from every mirror and shop-window reflection.

During summer at the beach, I would play in the shallows like a mermaid and read novels filled with sand, as she chased surf-lifesaver boys past the break and inhaled freshly made salad sandwiches in front of them. The act of eating and nourishing herself was a spectator sport for the benefit of men and boys only. Eating like that always required an audience, because it was a public testament to a degree of normalcy that she practiced nowhere else. She never ate with such gusto when we were alone together or, if she did, it became swaddled in a sense of guilt so palpable that we both suffocated.

It was easy to get caught up in the swell of her energy, and expectations. I have an extraordinary capacity to be taken way out of my depth by the desires of others, and I'll never forget the time I tried to chase her chasing the surf-lifesaver boys past the break and I was dunked repeatedly. The tide knew exactly what the fuck was up, and it knew how to say it to me without tentativeness or restraint.

Stop.

She loved going to parties with me because her body had a lot more to say to the opposite sex than I did. Her big cheekbones, and white-blond hair, and large breasts made for very engaging conversation. Yet she often became fed up with the limitations of this. She wanted to be seen as more than a plaything. So she would try and beat the boys at drinking games I didn't want to have anything to do with, and she would crack sex jokes that I didn't understand.

I lived poetry and she lived politics. When she lost her virginity, it was because she wanted to get it over with, and when I lost mine, it was because the stars were bright, and I was infatuated.

One night she had a dream about sprinting against a group of other women in order to "win" the affections of a guy that she had set her sights upon. She awoke from the dream, arrived at brunch, ordered a soy latte and scrambled eggs on sourdough, and asked me what it meant. As her loyal soothsayer, I gently said that it seemed to reflect the ways in which she allowed the whims of men to dictate the parameters of her existence, and that she obviously saw herself as being in competition with other women. She looked at me, smiled, and said nothing. She enjoyed being seen, regardless of what other people saw. I admired that about her.

She won't be at the party tonight because she's already married to a mortgage, two dogs, two cars, one baby, another on the way, a man without a job who golfs on Saturdays, and a

large plasma-screen TV that stays on in the background when you go to spend time with her. And I've never been able to find a suitable pre-party replacement. Because while she was busy chasing surf-lifesaver boys, and sprinting against other girls, she won my heart, and she still has it.

THE  
SMALLEST  
LIGHTS  
IN THE  
UNIVERSE

A MEMOIR

SARA SEAGER

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FIRST EDITION

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*Book design by Dana Leigh Blanchette*

**N**ot every planet has a star. Some aren't part of a solar system. They are alone. We call them rogue planets.

Because rogue planets aren't the subjects of stars, they aren't anchored in space. They don't orbit. Rogue planets wander, drifting in the current of an endless ocean. They have neither the light nor the heat that stars provide. We know of one rogue planet, PSO J318.5-22—right now, it's up there, it's out there—lurching across the galaxy like a rudderless ship, wrapped in perpetual darkness. Its surface is swept by constant storms. It likely rains on PSO J318.5-22, but it wouldn't rain water there. Its black skies would more likely unleash bands of molten iron.

It can be hard to picture, a planet where it rains liquid metal in the dark, but rogue planets aren't science fiction. We haven't imagined them or dreamed them. Astrophysicists like me have found them. They are real places on our celestial maps. There might be thousands of billions of more conventional exoplanets—planets that orbit stars other than the sun—in the Milky Way alone, circling our galaxy's hundreds of billions of stars. But amid that nearly infinite, perfect order,

in the emptiness between countless pushes and pulls, there are also the lost ones: rogue planets. PSO J318.5-22 is as real as Earth.

There were days when I woke up and couldn't see much difference between there and here.



One morning it was only the distant laughter of my boys that persuaded me to push back the covers. Max was eight years old. Alex was six. They were looking out the window, their faces lit with kid joy. It was a blue-sky weekend in January, and a thin white blanket of snow had fallen overnight. Finally, a bright spot. We could go sledding, one of our family's favorite pastimes. After a quick breakfast, Max and Alex began putting on their snowsuits. With their plastic sleds stuffed into the car, we made the short drive to the top of Nashawtuc Hill.

The hill is a popular gathering spot in Concord, Massachusetts. It's steep and fast enough to thrill even grown-ups. It can get busy, but not that morning. There wasn't really enough snow to sled, and tall grass and weeds poked out of what snow was there. I tried to pretend for the sake of the boys that sledding would still be fun. I didn't believe it myself. I'd spent my entire life searching for lights in the dark; now I could see only the blackness that surrounded them. But we had gone to the trouble of getting to the top of the hill. The boys might as well try to get to the bottom.

There were two other women standing at the top, mothers talking and laughing with each other while their kids played. They were beautiful, their faces put together enough to make me resentful. I looked at them coldly. I thought: *Who gets up on a Sunday morning and thinks to do their makeup like that?* They looked like a picture from a brochure for happiness.

Max was big enough to get all the way down the hill. Even if he hit the weeds, he had enough mass and speed to pass over and through them. Physics weren't so much on Alex's side. He kept getting stuck. He tried going down a few times but eventually gave up. Seeing his brother hurtle to the bottom was too much for him to take. Alex sat there, pouting, right in the middle of the hill. He wasn't crying. He just spread himself across the hill and refused to move. If he wasn't going to have any fun, nobody was.

One of the women called over and asked if I could shift him. He was in the way, and she was afraid he was going to get hurt. I understood why he needed to be moved. I was also spent, my best plans undone. I wasn't in the mood to take orders from someone like her, from someone so pretty. I wasn't in the mood to take orders from anybody. I glared at her and shook my head.

She asked again.

"No," I said. "He has a problem."

She smiled and maybe even laughed a little. "Oh, okay," she said. "I mean, it's just that—"

I ignored her.

"It's just that the hill—"

"HE HAS A PROBLEM. MY HUSBAND DIED."

When you're in the ugly throes of grief, most people are repulsed by you. Nobody knows what to say or how to behave in your presence. Everybody's scared of what you represent, and in a way, I suppose, you learn to want them to be. The distance that people keep is a sign of respect: Your grief warrants a wide berth. You come to crave the ability to influence the movements of others, your sorrow a superpower, your sadness your most extraordinary trait. You come to crave the space.

I thought the woman on the hill would be shocked. I thought she would recoil. Instead, she did the strangest thing. She smiled, and then her eyes brightened. She became an oven, radiating warmth.

“Mine, too,” she said.

I was stunned. I think I asked her how long she had been a widow. “Five years,” she said. It had been only six months for me. *She’s forgotten what it’s like*, I thought. *How dare she laugh at me.*

I had an overwhelming urge to run, to return to my bed, lashed by my storms of molten iron, but Max was still having fun on the hill. It’s moments like those, when you’re torn in two, that you realize how alone you are. You need to find solutions to unsolvable problems. I decided that I’d take the boys home, and we’d get Alex the iPad. Then we’d come back. Alex could sit in the car and play, and Max could still sled. Hopefully the other widow would be gone by the time we got back.

She was still there when we returned. Meeting beautiful new people wasn’t easy for me in the best of circumstances, and these were far from ideal. I had no idea what to do next. I tried to stand far away from her, to become even more repellent than I already felt. It didn’t work. She started walking toward me. I was mortified. Could she not read the sign that was around my neck? Did she not know to leave me alone? But this time she approached me a little differently. She was measured in her movements, as though she didn’t want to scare me away. She was still smiling, just not as widely.

She held a piece of paper in her hand. She’d written down her name, *Melissa*, and her phone number. She said that there was a group of widows our age in Concord. She spoke of them as if they were some kind of macabre troupe of acrobats, as though their name should be capitalized: the Widows

of Concord. She said that five of them had just met for the first time to help each other through their new realities, their new parts as the abandoned ones. I should join them when they met again, she said. Then she smiled her warm smile and went back to her friend.

I would make six. I stood at the top of that hill and did the probability math. So many young widows in such a small town—Concord’s population isn’t twenty thousand—seemed highly unlikely. I had announced as much: “That’s a statistical impossibility,” I’d told Melissa. Then I remembered the previous summer, when I’d called Max and Alex’s camp to warn the director that their father was dying. The director said that it wouldn’t be a problem. “We’re used to it,” he said. I was taken aback at the time, but now I understood. Concord had more than its share of fatherless children, gone halfway to rogue.

I kept Melissa’s number in my coat pocket. I would pull it out and look at it day after day, making sure it was real. I was terrified that I would lose it, but I was also too scared to call. I’d never met anybody quite like me; why should I now, after I’d become even more of an outlier? I didn’t want to find out that the other widows weren’t like me after all. Months before, I had called a number I’d seen in the local newspaper, advertising a widows’ group, but the woman who picked up the phone had rejected me, saying that the group was for old widows, not young ones. She’d made me feel like a freak. In the middle of such sadness, it’s hard to imagine that anyone in the world knows how you feel. And yet somehow there was a small army of women in my little town who knew exactly what I was experiencing, because they were experiencing it, too. Whenever I pulled out that that scrap of paper, I felt as though I were holding the last unstruck match in a storm.

It was nearly a week before I got the courage to call Melissa. The paper was nearly worn through by then.

The phone rang. Melissa picked up. She asked me how I was doing. Hardly anybody was brave enough to ask me that anymore, and I didn't know how to answer.

"Okay," I said. "Not okay."

Melissa said that the Widows of Concord were going to have a party soon. She asked if I wanted to come.

"Yes," I said. "Very much. When are you getting together?"

There was a little pause.

"Valentine's Day."

# ONE TO WATCH

A NOVEL

Kate  
Stayman-  
London

“Relatable,  
incredibly smart . . .  
an extraordinary debut.”  
—New York Times bestselling  
author **JASMINE GUILLORY**

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

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# PROLOGUE

*Paris, France*

*Ten years ago*

The flea market at Clignancourt was at the far northern edge of the city, a few blocks past the final stop on the number 4 Métro, where the Parisian architecture grew more simple, more mundane—a reminder that not all of the city was steeped in centuries of history and romance. Some of it was just where people went to work and took their kids to school and bought their bread in plain old supermarkets instead of quaint boulangeries.

Bea had come to the flea market in search of gifts for her family—maybe some lace for her mother or vintage records for her brother Duncan—but she also hoped she might find some etchings for herself, or, even better, some children’s books with hand-tipped illustrations to read with her stepfather to her new baby nephew. Her friends in her study-abroad program had raved about their flea-market finds, so Bea thought it was worth a trip, even if there was no chance of buying chic vintage clothes like the ones they had modeled for her. It was

hard enough for Bea to shop in America, let alone here in Paris, where it was almost unthinkable to see a woman on the street who couldn't be described as "bird-boned."

After years of practice, Bea thought she'd mastered the art of being large and invisible at the same time—the dark, baggy clothes, the quiet manner, the downward gaze. When she arrived as a freshman at UCLA and found herself surrounded by lithe, toned Californians, she was afraid she'd stand out like a bulbous blemish on a glassy complexion, but the L.A. culture of self-obsession made it easier than she expected to slip by unseen.

In Paris, though, she felt eyes everywhere she went. The city was so beautiful, Bea's favorite place she'd ever been—yet she couldn't shake the feeling that the entire population was noticing her, judging her, preferring, silently, that she would leave. Waiters and booksellers in cramped cafés and shops, narrow aisles stuffed with tables and wares, Bea stepping carefully sideways to avoid toppling someone else's plate of pain au chocolat, salivating at the sound of those crunchy, buttery pastries that waiflike Parisians relished each morning without a second thought. Whenever Bea stepped into a patisserie to order something for herself, there were ripples of sideward glances, even occasional bald stares, the accusation always implied: *It's your own fault you look like this.*

It was easier when she got farther out from the center of the city, into the diverse neighborhoods by the canal where the streets were wider and the pace was slower, where groups of students laughed and drank wine from paper cups on big concrete blocks by the water. It was similar at Clignancourt, Bea thought as she made her way down the few blocks from the Métro to the flea market while people hurried by, too focused on their own lives to pause to sneer at her.

Bea couldn't tell what the flea market was like from the outside—for a solid block she could see only the back walls of the stalls, dark slabs of plywood and plasterboard, and she started to feel skeptical that this market could possibly be as extraordinary as her friends had insisted. But once she found the entrance, she understood: It was like stepping through Alice's looking glass into an entirely other place where everything was wonderful and strange.

The market was a maze, with pathways that cut at haphazard diagonals—whichever way Bea turned, she never seemed to pass the same stalls twice, each new alley bringing untold bins of brass knobs and walls of antique oil paintings and spools of silken ribbon. The stalls themselves didn't feel makeshift—some were covered in ivy or string lights, others had stucco walls and wooden shelves piled high with leather-bound books so dusty Bea imagined they'd been there for decades. Wandering the market's aisles, Bea felt a sense of belonging she'd never experienced anywhere else in Paris. Or maybe, she considered, it was just that everything there was so lovely and bizarre that nothing and no one could be out of place.

Before Bea realized how much time had passed, the sun was starting to set, so she made her way toward the edge of the market as proprietors packed up their stalls. Bea hadn't stopped by a single clothing purveyor, but near the market's exit, one stall caught her eye: It was filled exclusively with capes—racks and racks of heavy brocades and soft furs and embroidered silks.

Bea cast the stall a longing glance, but it wasn't any use. She was sure that no cape in the place was big enough to cover her body, that instead of cocooning her in luxury, the capes would simply hang off her back like a child playing dress-up

with a beach towel fastened at the neck. But the shopkeeper, a reedy, androgynous Frenchwoman in her sixties in oversized black glasses, saw Bea looking and took a step toward her.

“*Vous désirez?*” she asked with a quick flick of her eyebrow; her voice was deep and throaty.

“*Non,*” Bea apologized in her muddy accent. “*Merci.*”

“Ah, American.” She switched to English immediately—Parisians always did. “What is your name?”

“Beatrice”—Bea pronounced it the French way, *Bay-ah-treeez*—“but everyone calls me Bea.”

“*Enchantée,* Bea. I am Jeanne.” Jeanne took her hand and clasped it firmly, and Bea immediately warmed to her; she smelled like spiced wine. “Tell me, Bea, who is the woman whose style you most admire?”

Bea’s mind went immediately to the black-and-white movies she’d spent hours watching as a kid on basic cable in her family’s rec room. She’d taken a couple of film classes at UCLA, and she was thrilled to discover that Paris had dozens of single-screen cinemas with little paper tickets and red velvet seats that showed classic American movies (with French subtitles, of course) every night of the week. Bea frequented these theaters whenever she had a free evening, delighting in the escape of elegant starlets and breakneck banter. As she considered Jeanne’s question, she thought of the different actresses she revered: She could never be twee like Audrey Hepburn, nor statuesque like Katharine. In her wildest fantasies, she imagined herself more like a femme fatale of film noir—a mixture of soft and hard, of danger and intense vulnerability. In Bea’s opinion, there was one actress whose style embodied that ideal more than any other, who effortlessly combined sensual laces and silks with angular sunglasses and sharp-shouldered blazers.

“Maybe this is silly”—Bea ducked her head—“but I think I would choose Barbara Stanwyck?”

Jeanne smiled knowingly, her whole face creasing in fond crinkles. “*D’accord—un moment.*”

She disappeared among the racks, a few moments of rustling and the jangle of sliding hangers before she emerged with a floor-length cape fashioned in plush velvet, a dark forest green. It was hooded, lined with silk, and clasped at the neck with a silver brooch fashioned to look like lilies of the valley, with clusters of tiny freshwater pearls where the flowers would be.

“Oh,” Bea breathed as Jeanne draped the cape over her shoulders, the fabric gently cascading.

Jeanne led her to a floor-length mirror, smoky with age, and Bea felt a sharp twist in her chest—it was like looking at a glamorous stranger. Bea never had a sweet-sixteen dress, never went to prom, convinced her parents to let her wear jeans to graduation (since, she argued, she’d be covered up by her cap and gown anyway, tentlike and maroon), and reluctantly shoved herself into a series of appalling bridesmaids’ dresses for her brothers’ weddings. In her entire life, no garment Bea had put on her body had ever made her feel like this.

“How much is it?” she heard herself asking, her voice choked and small.

“It is two hundred,” Jeanne offered, but she paused when she saw the look of panic cross Bea’s face.

“How much do you have?” she asked kindly.

Bea opened her wallet—she had forty euros and change, which was also her money to eat for the next week. She’d already spent too much at the flea market, and the credit card from her parents was only for emergencies. Two hundred euros was an unthinkable sum.

“I’m so sorry,” Bea whispered, and reached to take off the cape, but Jeanne put a hand on her shoulder.

“Perhaps,” she said, “there can be an arrangement.”

Bea didn’t understand what she meant. “Arrangement?”

“I will make you a gift of this cape, and in return, you will wear it all over Paris, and you will tell everyone you meet about my shop, yes?”

“What? No, I couldn’t possibly accept—”

“*Bien sûr*, of course you can.” Jeanne deftly snatched the cape from Bea’s shoulders and removed its handwritten tag. “You would like a bag, or you will wear it now?”

Bea’s face flushed, and she looked down.

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this,” she mumbled.

Jeanne tenderly placed the cape around Bea’s shoulders.

“The way you dress, the way you hang your head? I think perhaps you are hiding,” she said quietly. “But in this cape?”

Bea looked up to meet her eye. “In this cape, what?”

Jeanne’s lips curled at the corners, the barest hint of a grin.

“You will be someone who everyone must see.”



# AGREEMENT

*Los Angeles, California*

## ONE TO WATCH: FASHION BLOGGER BEA SCHUMACHER

*by Toni Santo, TheCut.com*

The Internet was ablaze this week when pop star Trish Kelly took to Twitter to complain that multiple designers refused to dress her for the Grammys—because she’s a size 8! Bea Schumacher is all too familiar with this conundrum: With more than half a million Instagram followers and a blog (OMBea.com, a play on OMG) that logs millions of visitors each month, Bea is one of today’s most popular fashion bloggers—but because she’s plus-size, almost no high-end designers make clothes that fit her.

For this week’s edition of “One to Watch,” we caught up with Schumacher to chat about her thriving career, enviable travel schedule, and hottest tips for rocking a red carpet, no matter your size:

**TS:** How did you get started as a fashion blogger? Have you always loved fashion?

**Bea:** *(laughs)* God, no. When I was in high school, I wore ex-

clusively baggy black pants and T-shirts and sweaters. I didn't want to stand out; I didn't even want anyone to look at me.

**TS:** When did that change?

**Bea:** Junior year in college, I spent a semester abroad in Paris—that's where my fashion addiction began. I was totally broke at the time, I spent the semester digging through vintage shops looking for treasures. I found so many great things that my friends encouraged me to blog about them, a little fashion travel diary. My best friend in my program was a photography major, and she took pictures of me in flowing dresses and floppy hats drinking wine by the Seine. I didn't know the first thing about launching a website, so I just made a preformatted blog on Tumblr—that was the first iteration of OMBea. At first, I just posted pictures, but then I started writing more about my life and the challenges of searching for great clothes as a plus-size woman; it became a really important outlet for me, particularly after I moved back to Los Angeles with its totally monolithic beauty standards.

**TS:** Was the blog an overnight sensation?

**Bea:** Hardly! In the early days, it was really only for people I knew. After college, I went to work at a Hollywood agency; I thought maybe I would be a stylist for movies and TV shows one day, and it seemed like a good way to learn the ropes of the industry. I was an assistant there, and one of my boss's clients was a really famous actress who always loved my outfits. We got to talking about my blog, and she tweeted about it—that's when things really blew up. I got tons of new followers, and I started being included in magazine roundups of who to follow, things like that. Once my reader numbers started getting big, I was able to pound the pavement to find sponsors and advertisers.

**TS:** All while you were working a full-time job?

**Bea:** Yeah, it was pretty nuts. But after a year of hard work, it really paid off: I was able to quit my assistant job and become a full-time blogger, and I've never looked back. It's been more fun than I could have dreamed.

**TS:** Tell us more! What's a typical day like in the life of Bea Schumacher?

**Bea:** It's always different—that's one of the things I love about my job. I might be meeting with a plus-size brand about a potential collaboration, or heading off to a fashion party in London or New York, or doing a photo shoot in my own backyard to show readers how I'm planning to style new looks for summer.

**TS:** But you don't just write about clothes—you also write about the experience of being a plus-size person who loves fashion.

**Bea:** I think it would be dishonest not to. It's only very recently that a lot of companies have begun to make clothes that fit me—and especially when it comes to high-end designers, many brands that do claim to offer “plus-size” clothes only go up to a size 16! Which I find ridiculous, because size 16 is essentially *average* for women in America. Within the plus-size community, I identify as “medium fat,” so I still have a lot of privilege when it comes to finding clothing options. It's much harder for women just a few sizes larger than I am, which is infuriating, not to mention senseless from a business perspective. I want to shake designers and say, *Hey, do you guys hate fat women so much that you're willing to cut out two-thirds of your potential customers? Do you really see our bodies as so unworthy of wearing your clothes?* But the hard truth is that a lot of people in the fashion world would really prefer that I weren't in it.

And I think a lot of plus-size women feel that way in our day-to-day lives. For us, something as simple as posting an outfit-of-the-day selfie is a political action, and we have to live with all the people who feel entitled to comment on our bodies, to tell us we're ugly, or unhealthy, or grotesque.

**TS:** People actually say that to you?

**Bea:** On my blog, and on my Insta and Twitter comments? All the time! So many people have this vitriolic hatred of women in the public eye—especially women who have the audacity not to conform to conventional beauty standards—and on social media, they can deliver their hostility directly to our mentions. I wish I could say it never gets to me, but sometimes it does. It hurts to have strangers echoing the worst things I've ever believed about myself. But I love fashion so much because it has the power to make me feel strong and beautiful. Ditto for my closest friends and my amazing community of readers.

**TS:** What about romance? Anyone special who makes you feel particularly beautiful?

**Bea:** Not right now! My schedule is pretty hectic, and I haven't had time or energy to put into finding a great relationship. But who knows, maybe I'll figure that out soon.



**TEXT MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT, JUNE 9:  
BEA SCHUMACHER & RAY MORETTI**

**Ray [9:48am]:** Guess . . . what . . . I have

**Bea [9:53am]:** A spaceship. Ten rubies. Oh my god, is it a pony????

**Ray [9:54am]:** Nope, better than all those things

**Ray** [9:55am]: I have, in my possession . . . a plane ticket to Los Angeles.

**Bea** [9:56am]: 😊 😊 😊

**Bea** [9:56am]: Is this really happening? I haven't seen you in so long I forget what you look like

**Ray** [9:57am]: Ouch. (You're right, I deserve that)

**Ray** [9:57am]: But yes! I get in the afternoon of July fourth, and then I'll spend the night at your place (if that's okay?) before I head to San Diego the next morning for Sarah's folks' anniversary party. Does that work?

**Bea** [9:58am]: Definitely! Want me to poll the old crowd from the agency to see who's around?

**Ray** [9:59am]: Up to you, but I'd rather just catch up with you than split time with a whole group

**Ray** [10:00am]: I know I had to move to Atlanta to "be supportive of my fiancée's career" or whatever, but I hate being so far from you, Bea.

**Ray** [10:00am]: I really miss you.

**Bea** [10:04am]: I miss you too.



Bea insisted she wasn't nervous to see Ray, but the deep breaths she kept taking (air hissing in through her teeth, then pushed back out past lips pursed in a Lamaze-shaped "ooh") as she sat in traffic on the 10 told another story. She reassured herself that she was a different person now than the girl who spent all those years obsessed with him, the shy Hollywood agency assistant in love with the most handsome guy in her mailroom class.

*How unbearably cliché*, Bea thought of her younger self as she pulled off the highway and into the winding, moneyed

streets of Westwood, where quaint Tudor houses that looked airlifted from a Grimm story lined every block. She'd rather have stayed in her hodgepodge neighborhood on the east side of Los Angeles, but her favorite wine shop was here, nearly an hour away in traffic. For her one night with Ray (pretend though she might that it was no big deal), she knew she had to make the trek.

Les Caves was easy to miss with its unobtrusive sign and rough-hewn wooden door, and still easier to ignore when one peered inside briefly to see scattered tables laden with disorganized clusters of bottles. But Bea loved it here—loved speaking her broken French with the shopkeepers, loved delighting in the quirky wines they put aside for her, mouth-searingly dry Meuniers and sharply honeyed Savennières.

“Bea, *bon matin!*” Paul, who owned the shop with his wife, was pudgy and ebullient. Bea often joked that Paul had turned her into an insufferable wine snob, but he always laughed heartily and corrected her that she should be proud to be a connoisseur.

“*Bonjour, Paul,*” Bea said with a grin.

“*Et qu'est-ce que tu désires aujourd'hui?*” he asked. “Perhaps something very light, dry fruit and mineral? It is so hot!”

“*C'est vrai,*” Bea agreed—L.A. was experiencing its annual July heat wave, the few days a year when even the desert nights barely dipped below 90, rendering the entire city unlivable. It had been like this, too, the night Ray kissed her. That one perfect, terrible night five years ago, when he was stumbling drunk on the sidewalk in front of Chateau Marmont, his breath stale with cigarettes and whiskey, tears streaming down his face as he told Bea his mom was sick again, maybe terminally this time. He put his arms around Bea's neck and whispered, “I can't do

this without you.” She replied, “You don’t have to,” not understanding whether he meant as friends or something more.

After all the countless nights of drinking together, sharing hushed secrets and whispered observations, feeling so starved to be physically close to him, clamping down nausea as she watched him flirt and kiss and leave whatever bar they were in with yet another gorgeous aspiring actress/model/singer, finally, *finally*, he was looking right at Bea.

It was too hot, and everything was damp, and she knew it was wrong when he leaned in to kiss her—he was too upset, too drunk, too distracted. But she didn’t care, because she had wanted this so much for so long, and she felt like she had somehow managed to wrench her life onto the right track by sheer force of will.

After the kiss, she expected him to say something profound—or something earnest, at the very least—but he just mumbled that he needed to call a car, he had an early flight.

“Oh,” Bea had stammered. “Sure. Of course.”

He flew home to Minnesota the next morning. He was only supposed to be gone for a few days, or maybe a few weeks, but he never came back, except to pack up his things and drive east. He spent the next few months at home with his family, watching his mother die; then he moved to Virginia for law school; after that, it was off to a fancy firm job in New York, where he met his girlfriend, Sarah; he followed her to Atlanta when she won a coveted promotion; that was where they got engaged.

And somehow, Bea still couldn’t believe any of it, as if the last eight years of her life had existed in some kind of stasis. Three years of knowing Ray, dreaming of Ray, yearning for

Ray, believing with all her heart that he must feel the same. One night of blissful, agonizing confirmation. Five years of wondering whether any of it had been real.

She'd dated other men in the intervening time, of course, but she never found that same spark—no one so movie-star handsome, so quietly funny, so utterly captivating. Of all the app dates and setups, no one else had that thick, dark hair and those smoldering Brando eyes; no one else could run a finger along her arm and make her entire body feel weak.

And anyway, Bea's primary focus was on other aspects of her life—career, friends, travel, family—she didn't mind waiting to find another love as passionate and exciting as what she'd felt for Ray. She was sure one would come eventually. And in the meantime . . . well, in the meantime . . . was it really so bad to live in her memories? Her fantasies?

But today wasn't a memory or a fantasy: Ray was on a plane right now, probably somewhere over the Midwest, hurtling toward Los Angeles, where he was spending one night in Bea's guest room before catching a train to San Diego the next morning for some kind of anniversary weekend for his fiancée's parents. Bea and Ray hadn't seen each other for more than a year, not since a stilted meet-up in a crowded bar (with Sarah in tow, no less) during one of Bea's whirlwind trips for New York Fashion Week. It had been loud, Bea had been exhausted, Ray had been sour. But tonight could be different—just the two of them, no noise. A chance to rekindle the connection Bea so desperately missed.

"No." Bea shook her head when Paul produced one of her typical bottles, a crisp twelve-dollar white. "For tonight, I need something special."

Three hours later, Bea paced the wide, uneven floorboards of her bungalow in Elysian Heights, a rickety little rental

perched precariously on a hillside overlooking Elysian Park. The place was filled with creaks and cracks where faucets were rusty and doors weren't cut quite long enough, but Bea loved it all the more for that; she vastly preferred a homey, colorful aesthetic to anything too modern or tidy—which, to her eye, lacked character.

Now, though, with Ray in a cab just minutes away, she began to see her home through his eyes: not artful but ragged, not welcoming but pitiful. She smoothed down the full skirt of her black corseted sundress (affectionately nicknamed her “slutty goth milkmaid ensemble” because of the off-the-shoulder neckline that showed off her cleavage in Oktoberfest proportion) and wondered if he'd see her the same way.

“This is idiotic,” Bea muttered, stopping in front of her hall mirror to tousle her meticulously mussed waves one more time, her hair nearly as dark as the perfectly smudged kohl eyeliner that rendered her bright blue eyes electric. She sucked in a breath: He was just her friend, just Ray, just visiting. Him coming here didn't mean anything—just as their kiss, their whole history, all of it, probably never had. It was all in her head, as usual.

Except the second she opened the door and he threw his arms around her, she knew that she was wrong.

“Bea.” He exhaled, dropping his bag on the floor with a thwack so he could fully encircle her with both arms, hugging her tightly against him.

“Hiya, stranger.” Bea beamed up at him, and God he looked the same, straight nose and soft lips and those eyes that drank in every inch of her, his hungry gaze that always made her face flush with heat.

“I missed you.” He gave her a little squeeze, leaning down to kiss her temple gently.

“I’ve been here this whole time,” she retorted, surprising herself with the edge in her voice.

“You’re right.” He took her hand. “I’m an asshole. I should visit more.”

“Well, you’re here now,” Bea said quietly.

“And you’re . . . happy about that?” He met her eye, not letting her duck the subtext.

“Come on, Ray,” she demurred. “You know I am.”

“So?” He moved his body against hers, giving her a little nudge. “What does a guy have to do to get the ten-cent tour around here?”

“Oh my God, you’ve never been here before. How strange is that?”

“Unbelievably strange.” He grinned. “Stranger than long-form improv in the basement of that chicken place on Sunset.”

“They should have called it longest-night-of-our-lives-form improv,” Bea joked, and Ray laughed appreciatively. “Anyway, this is the living room. Do you like it?”

Ray wandered through the cozy room, perusing the treasures from all Bea’s travels that crowded every available surface—a carved wooden elephant from Siem Reap, a hand-glazed vase from New Orleans, her laminated LACMA membership card. Ray picked up a glass figurine she’d found in Paris, turning it over in his hands.

“You bought this in college, right—at that flea market you loved? You used to keep it on your desk at the agency.”

“Good memory,” Bea said, her voice suddenly mottled with emotion.

“This place is great.” Ray shook his head. “You should see our nightmare condo in Atlanta—everything shiny and new like a perfect little HGTV prison. Kind of a great metaphor when you think about it.”

Bea wasn't sure what to say to that—or if she was meant to say anything.

“Um, do you want something to drink?” she ventured. “I have some rosé chilling.”

“Sounds amazing.” Ray let his fingers brush against hers, and Bea realized that *this* was the idiocy—the idea that she had ever been remotely over him.

Their plan was to head to a rooftop party at her friends' loft downtown, but Ray wanted to shower first. So after their glass of wine, Bea waited on the couch, listening to the water run and dragging her mind forcibly away from visions of Ray's naked body wrapped in one of the fluffy white towels she'd laid out for him. A shiver went up her spine—or maybe it was just the air conditioning kicking into overdrive.

“I feel like a whole new human,” he remarked as he breezed into the living room.

It was unfair—unholy, even—how good he looked in an easy pair of khaki shorts and a soft white linen button-down. Black hair, damp skin, like James fucking Bond climbing down from a yacht and wading ashore.

“Plane grime,” Bea forced out, her voice an octave higher than normal. “The worst!”

“You sure you want to go to this party?” He plopped down on the couch beside her, his arm casually leaning against hers—they were a little too still, like they'd both noticed the contact but had no idea what to do about it.

“Oh, um,” Bea stumbled, “did you not want to go out?”

Ray shrugged. “I dunno. We could just hang here. If you wanted.”

Was he suggesting—what? Nothing? Anything? *Something?*

She had to get out of this house. Being here with him was making her paranoid, so desperate for his attention that

she was reading imagined prurience into every harmless sentence.

“My friends are expecting us.” She hopped off the couch and grabbed her phone to call a car. “It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“If you can brave the heat, I guess I can too,” Ray grouched good-naturedly.

Bea nearly exhaled audibly. He just wanted to avoid the heat! He didn’t want—

*Me.* She made herself finish the thought. *He didn’t want me.*

Well, good. He was engaged to another woman. Nothing could happen, even if he did want her. Which he didn’t, so. That was that.

Bea hit the button to confirm her cab. Their driver would arrive in seven minutes.

The party was just a touch on the wrong side of fun—everyone a little too drunk, a little too hot, quippy comments that otherwise would have made for light banter landing somewhere closer to ornery, tempers running thick and foul, the heat hanging darkly even after the sun went down.

“Who’s *this* tall drink of water?” Bea’s friend Mark asked with a leer.

“He’s Ray, and he’s straight,” Bea snapped.

“But not narrow.” Ray winked, flirting—as he always did, with everyone, making every person he ever talked to feel special, when the truth was that no one ever was.

“Excuse me, I need another drink.” Bea rolled her eyes and flounced off to refill her glass of punch. Why had she wanted to come to this party? Why had she wanted to see Ray in the first place? After so many years of missing him so much, she thought seeing him would feel good, but it was awful. Just an

acutely painful reminder of how much she still wanted him, and how completely he would never, ever be hers.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ray came up behind her, a hand at her waist. She jumped away, the contact too close, too intimate.

“Don’t do that,” she chided.

But he reached for her again. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

Above them, the first firework exploded—flashes of green and gold, and appreciative gasps all around them as everyone looked skyward. But not Ray. His eyes were trained on Bea.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she insisted. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he said firmly, but there was a note of desperation there. “I know you’re not fine. Bea, I’m not either.”

Cracks and booms echoed around them, red and blue and silver, as he circled her wrists with his fingers.

“Bea . . .”

She shook her head. “Ray, what are you doing?”

He pulled her closer. “You know what I’m doing.”

His fingers were grazing up her forearms, her biceps, her shoulders, his hands were in her hair. She heard him ask “Is this okay?” and it wasn’t, it fucking wasn’t, he knew it wasn’t, but she felt her head nodding as if a puppeteer were bobbing it with unseen string, and then he was kissing her. It was so intense, his body pressed against hers, his hands pulling her face closer and closer, his teeth nipping at her lips, and she couldn’t breathe, and she didn’t care, and when he said, “Can we go home now?” she nodded again. This time, with agency. With intent.

The car ride was unbearable, his hands on her thighs, stand-still traffic on the 101. When they finally got to her house, she thought they wouldn’t even make it to the bed; he threw her against the wall so hard and ripped the damn dress off her. No one had ever wanted her that much. She was so confused, even as it was happening—had he always wanted this? Why hadn’t

it happened sooner, when they lived in the same place, when he was single, all those years that she was so in love?

*It doesn't matter, she told herself. He's here now. After all this time, he's here.*

He was on top of her, kissing her gently, and a smile lit up her whole face.

“What is it?” he asked, smiling too.

“Nothing.” Her heart swelled, the joy of the moment so expansive it was almost painful. “I’m just really, really happy.”

“Me too.” He kissed her again, and she breathed in his reassurance. “Bea, you’re all I’ve wanted.”





*Summer  
Sips & Snacks*

*Discover the perfect recipes to pair  
with your summer reading*





# Roasted Summer Vegetable Couscous

**JAKE COHEN**

## SERVES 6 TO 8

**1 medium zucchini, cut into ½-inch pieces**

**1 medium summer squash, cut into ½-inch pieces**

**1 red bell pepper, cored, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces**

**1 yellow bell pepper, cored, seeded, and cut into ½-inch pieces**

**6 tablespoons olive oil**

**½ teaspoon Aleppo pepper flakes or red pepper flakes**

**2 teaspoons kosher salt, plus more to taste**

**2 cups cherry tomatoes, halved**

**2 cups pearly couscous**

**4 ounces feta cheese, crumbled**

**½ cup minced fresh flat-leaf parsley**

**½ cup minced fresh dill**

**2 tablespoons minced fresh tarragon**

**Zest and juice of 1 lemon**

There's a rainbow of vegetables in this recipe, but that's just scratching the surface of how queer this couscous actually is. You see, my husband and I never had many gay friends, and as we sought to find our community, we were simultaneously figuring out what role Judaism would play in our lives. We decided that hosting a queer Shabbat was the answer to both dilemmas, and would serve as a way to gather community while connecting to an age-old Jewish tradition. We brought together colleagues, acquaintances, and friends in my mother's apartment, where, alongside a feast of torn challah, a lush cheese board, and a platter of za'atar-crusted salmon, stood an overflowing bowl of Israeli couscous. It was a magical evening during which queer Jews gathered together to break bread. This recipe is my summer version, incorporating roasted squash, bell peppers, and cherry tomatoes, paired with feta and an herby dressing. The best part? You can swap any of the herbs, spices, and veggies to fit your preference and season. Add the protein of your choosing and you've got yourself a complete meal. I never expected my pride as a Jew would intertwine with my pride as a gay man, but here we are with a technicolor bowl of couscous—a recipe of which I'm naturally very proud.

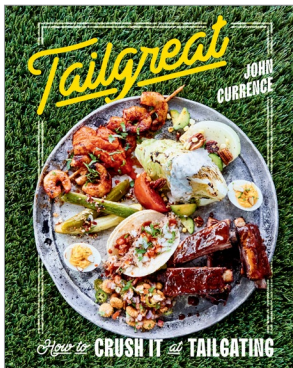
1. Preheat the oven to 450°F.
2. In a large bowl, toss the zucchini, summer squash, and bell peppers with 2 tablespoons of olive oil, the Aleppo pepper, and 1 teaspoon salt. Transfer to a baking sheet and roast until tender, about 15 minutes.
3. Turn on the broiler. Add the cherry tomatoes to the pan of roasted vegetables and toss to combine. Broil until the tomatoes are golden and slightly blistered, about 4 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, in a small saucepan, bring 2¾ cups of water to a boil. Season with 1 teaspoon of salt and stir in the couscous. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer until the water is almost completely absorbed and the couscous is tender, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and let sit uncovered for 10 minutes, until the remaining water is fully absorbed, then fluff with a fork.
5. Transfer the roasted vegetables and couscous to a large bowl and toss with the remaining 4 tablespoons olive oil, the feta, parsley, dill, tarragon, and lemon zest and juice. Season with more salt to taste, then serve warm or at room temperature.



# GRILLED CORN GUACAMOLE

You know how you see guacamole everywhere in the summer and it's never, ever flavored with anything else? It's just plain delicious guacamole, right? Do you know why that is? Well, I'll tell you: Guacamole is perfect when it is done right. Ripe avocado, smashed with a little lime, some onion, a touch of oil, hint of cumin, a sprinkle of salt—that's all that guac needs to achieve wonderfully sublime perfection. It's that simple.

Then comes me. Big, dumb white guy with his chef coat and goddamn Beard medal, stomping around in the bucolic tranquility of guac-land and putting other shit in it. I just can't leave well enough alone. Fortunately for you, I happen to be a little bit of a genius, because sweet corn at the height of the season makes a killer addition. We'll just agree to leave it alone after this. The gods might not forgive us twice.



3 ears sweet corn, shucked	1½ tablespoons minced garlic
2 tablespoons vegetable oil	3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and black pepper	¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
6 fully ripe avocados, pitted, peeled, and diced	2½ teaspoons ground cumin
3 Roma tomatoes, seeded and diced	2 to 4 dashes Tabasco sauce (optional)
1¼ cups finely diced yellow onion	Good-quality corn chips for serving
1 jalapeño pepper, minced	Hot sauce for serving, preferably Valentina
Grated zest and juice of 4 limes	
¾ cup chopped fresh cilantro	

Prepare a hot charcoal or wood fire.

Rub the corn with the vegetable oil and sprinkle with salt and black pepper. Place over the hottest part of the grill and cook, turning every 4 minutes, for 15 minutes, or until well colored all over. Remove from the heat and allow to cool. Slice the kernels off the cob and discard the cobs.

Transfer the grilled corn to a large bowl and add the avocados, tomatoes, onion, jalapeño, lime zest and juice, cilantro, garlic, olive oil, cayenne, and cumin, stirring until well blended. Season lightly with salt and black pepper. Allow to sit in the cooler for 20 minutes and taste again for seasoning. Add several splashes of Tabasco, if desired, and a touch of salt and black pepper, if needed.

Serve with good-quality corn chips and a dash of Valentina hot sauce.



## A REALLY BUTTERY CROQUE MONSIEUR

This sandwich represents a simple taste of childhood, something my mum made for lunch for me and my brother when we were growing up. I have to confess that the combination of ham and melting cheese on buttery, soft white bread tastes just as good as an adult, particularly after drinking too much wine. When friends who used to live around the corner from La Buvette got married, my friend Alix Lacroche and I made these sandwiches for everyone as a late-night bite to eat.

The best way to make a croque monsieur is to buy sliced white bread (we call it “American bread” in France) and butter it really well before griddling the sandwiches. I prefer to make the sandwich on small slices of bread so I can eat two sandwiches instead of one. The best croque will have fancy cheese and ham, but this is not always about being fancy.

*Brush both sides of each piece of bread generously with butter. (This is a really buttery croque monsieur after all!) Lay out all of the pieces of bread. On 4 of the pieces, place 1 piece of cheese, followed by 1 piece of ham, followed by 1 piece of cheese (that way the ham is in the center). Top with the remaining bread.*

Heat a griddle or skillet over medium heat. In batches, cook the sandwiches until the bread is evenly browned and the cheese is completely melted. If the bread is getting dark but the cheese hasn't started melting, turn the heat to low and continue to griddle, gently turning the sandwiches over for even cooking. Serve hot.

SERVES 4 (2 IF YOU ARE EXTRA HUNGRY)

½ cup salted butter, melted

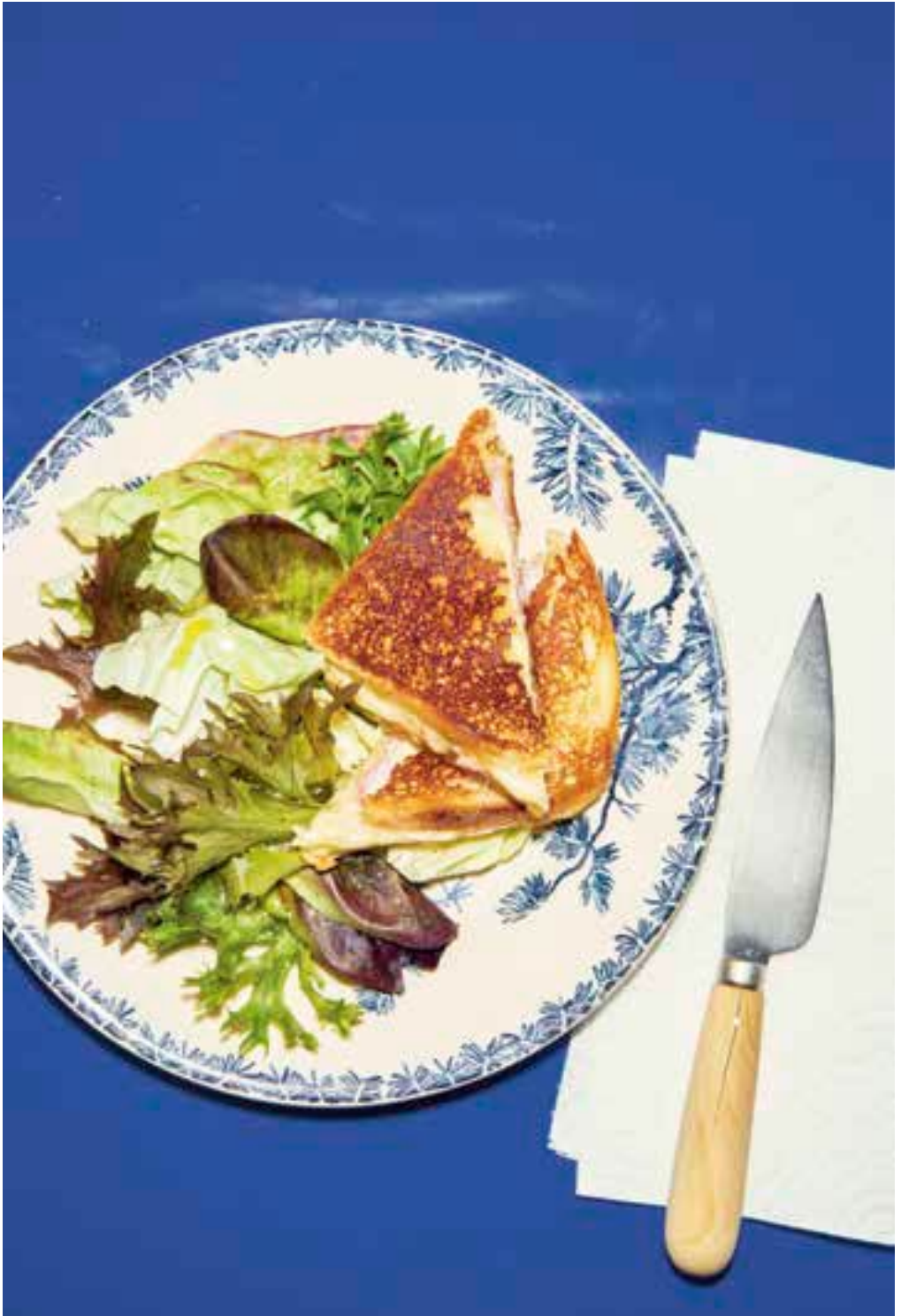
8 slices classic white sandwich bread or pain de mie

8 slices Comté or tomme or another good melting cheese (about 6 ounces)\*

4 slices ham

*\*For the best results, buy a cheese that melts easily, which means Comté or tomme in France, but could mean Monterey Jack in America. Avoid cheeses like aged Cheddar, which is a little too sharp for the sandwich.*





## Eggplant, chickpea, and tomato bake

### *Musaqa'a*

Echoes of Greek moussaka are correctly heard here, both in the name and the feel of the dish. It's a vegetarian take on the hearty, humble, healthful, and completely delicious sheet-pan dish. It works well either as a veggie main or as a side with all sorts of things—piled into a baked potato, for example, or served alongside some grilled meat, fish, or tofu. It's just the sort of dish you want to have in the fridge ready to greet you after a day at work. It's also lovely at room temperature, so it's great for an on-the-go lunch.

*Getting ahead:* You can make and bake this in advance; it keeps in the fridge for up to three days, ready to be warmed through when needed.

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Preheat the oven to 450°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Use a vegetable peeler to peel away strips of eggplant skin from top to bottom, leaving the eggplants with alternating strips of black skin and white flesh, like a zebra. Cut crosswise into round slices, ¾ inch/2cm thick, and place in a large bowl. Mix well with 5 tbsp/75ml of oil, 1 tsp of salt, and plenty of black pepper and spread out on the prepared baking sheets. Roast for about 30 minutes, or until completely softened and lightly browned. Remove from the oven and set aside.

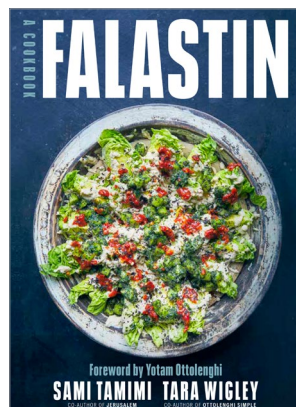
Decrease the oven temperature to 400°F.

While the eggplants are roasting, put 2 tbsp of oil into a large sauté pan and place over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook for about 7 minutes, until softened and lightly browned. Add the garlic, chile flakes, cumin, cinnamon, and tomato paste and cook for 1 minute, or until fragrant. Add the bell peppers, chickpeas, canned tomatoes, sugar, water, 1¼ tsp of salt, and a good grind of black pepper. Decrease the heat to medium and cook for 18 minutes, or until the bell peppers have cooked through. Stir in ¾ cup/15g of cilantro and remove from the heat.

Spread out half the plum tomatoes and half the roasted eggplants in a large baking dish, about 9 x 13 inches/23 x 33cm. Top with the chickpea mixture, then layer with the remaining tomatoes and eggplants. Drizzle with the remaining 1 tbsp of oil, then cover with aluminum foil and bake for 30 minutes. Remove the foil and bake for another 20 minutes, or until the sauce is bubbling and the tomatoes have completely softened. Remove from the oven and let cool for about 20 minutes. Top with the remaining ¼ cup/5g cilantro and serve either warm or at room temperature.

**Serves four as a main,  
or six as a side**

5 medium eggplants (2¾ lb/1.25kg)  
½ cup/120ml olive oil  
Salt and black pepper  
1 onion, finely chopped (1 cup/150g)  
6 garlic cloves, crushed  
1 tsp chile flakes  
1 tsp ground cumin  
½ tsp ground cinnamon  
1½ tsp tomato paste  
2 green bell peppers, seeded and cut into 1¼-inch/3cm chunks (1⅓ cups/200g)  
1 x 14-oz/400g can chickpeas, drained and rinsed (1¾ cups/240g)  
1 x 14-oz/400g can chopped tomatoes  
1½ tsp sugar  
¾ cup plus 2 tbsp/200ml water  
1 cup/20g cilantro, roughly chopped  
4 plum tomatoes, trimmed and sliced into ½-inch/1.5cm rounds (12¼ oz/350g)







# Sweet tahini rolls

## *Kubez el tahineh*

The journey of these rolls can be traced through Lebanon to Armenia, where *kubez el tahineh* comes from. They are simple to make, impressive to look at, and loved by all. They're a particular favorite with kids. Eat them as they are, or sliced and spread with *dibs w tahini*, the Palestinian equivalent of peanut butter and jam, where creamy tahini is mixed with a little bit of grape or date molasses.

**Makes 10 rolls**

### Dough

1½ tsp fast-acting dried yeast  
1 tsp sugar  
7½ tbsp/110ml whole milk,  
lukewarm  
Olive oil, for greasing  
2 cups plus 6 tbsp/300g  
all-purpose flour  
Salt  
5 tbsp/75g unsalted butter, melted  
1 egg, lightly beaten

½ cup/100g sugar  
1 tsp ground cinnamon  
7 tbsp/120g tahini  
1 egg yolk, beaten  
1 tbsp white sesame seeds

*Keeping notes:* These are best eaten fresh on the day of baking but are also fine for up to three days once baked, warmed through in the oven. They also freeze well, after they've been baked and left to cool; you can pop them into the oven straight from the freezer until warmed through.

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To make the dough, put the yeast, sugar, and milk into a small bowl. Mix to combine, then set aside for 5 minutes, or until it starts to bubble.

Lightly grease a bowl with olive oil.

Put the flour and ½ tsp of salt into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook. Mix on low speed, then slowly pour in the yeast mixture. Add the melted butter and continue to mix for about 1 minute.

Add the egg to the mixer bowl, then increase the speed to medium and mix for 5 minutes, for the dough to get well kneaded. Using your hands, scrape the dough into a ball; it will be slightly sticky and elastic. Place it in the oiled bowl, turning it a couple of times so that the dough gets well greased. Cover the bowl and let rest in a warm place for about 1 hour, or until the dough is almost doubled in size.

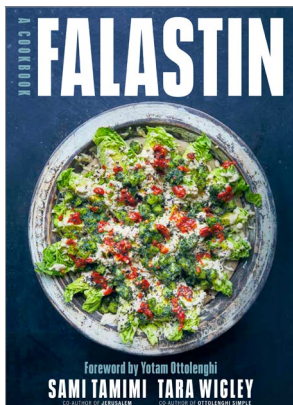
Put the ½ cup/100g sugar and the cinnamon into a small bowl. Mix well to combine, then set aside.

On a lightly floured surface, roll out the dough into a large rectangle, about 14 x 20 inches/35 x 50cm. Drizzle the tahini over the dough, then, using the back of a spoon or a spatula, spread it out evenly, leaving ½ inch/1cm clear of tahini at both the shorter ends. Sprinkle the sugar mixture evenly over the tahini and let rest for 10 minutes, until the sugar looks all wet.

Starting from one of the long sides, roll the dough inward to form a long, thin sausage. Trim away about ¼ inch/2cm from each end, then slice the dough into 10 equal pieces; they should each be just over 1¼ inches/4.5cm long. Sit each piece upright, so that a cut side is facing upward, then, using your hands, gently flatten it to form a 3¼-inch/8cm-wide circle. Cover with a damp dish towel and let rest for 15 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Transfer each roll of dough to the prepared baking sheet, spaced 1 inch/2.5cm apart. Brush the top and sides with the egg yolk, sprinkle with the sesame seeds, and bake on the middle rack of the oven for 18 minutes, or until cooked through and golden. Remove from the oven and set aside for about 20 minutes—you don't want them to be piping hot—then serve.



## ROAST PORK AND PEACHES

Makes 8 to 10 servings

Years ago, when Frasca Food and Wine first opened, we started the tradition of a Monday Night Wine Dinner; it was organized around a theme, most often a winemaker who worked with the kitchen to design a wine-pairing menu and then joined us to pour his or her bottles. One summer night at the height of peach season, we decided to serve a simple peach salad with roast pork featuring the wines of Livio Felluga. The wine flight consisted of a Friulano, Sauvignon Blanc, and Terre Alte. Little did we know that this dish would become a Frasca classic. Rather than focusing on technique, we were thinking about what people wanted to eat and drink on a warm August night. The lighter protein speaks of summer. We've since made this many ways, playing with how we cook the pork as well as the fruit pairings—cherries, pears, plums, and persimmons all work well, but peaches may be our favorite. This recipe feeds a crowd, and we suggest serving it family-style.

### YOU WILL NEED

Mortar and pestle  
Digital meat probe

4-pound boneless pork loin roast, tied	6 garlic cloves, minced
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper	10 fingerling potatoes
4 tablespoons olive oil	3 ripe peaches, peeled, quartered, and pitted
1 tablespoon minced fresh rosemary	8 Cipollini onions, peeled and quartered
1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme	1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
	Extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Pat the pork loin dry with paper towels. Season generously all over with salt and pepper.

In a mortar, use a pestle to combine 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, the rosemary, thyme, and garlic into a paste, then rub this mixture all over the meat.

In a large frying pan over medium-high heat, warm the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil. Add the pork loin and sear, turning it several times, until nicely browned on all sides, 8 to 10 minutes total.

Insert a meat probe deep into the center of the meat, place the meat in a 9 by 13-inch baking dish, and transfer to the oven.

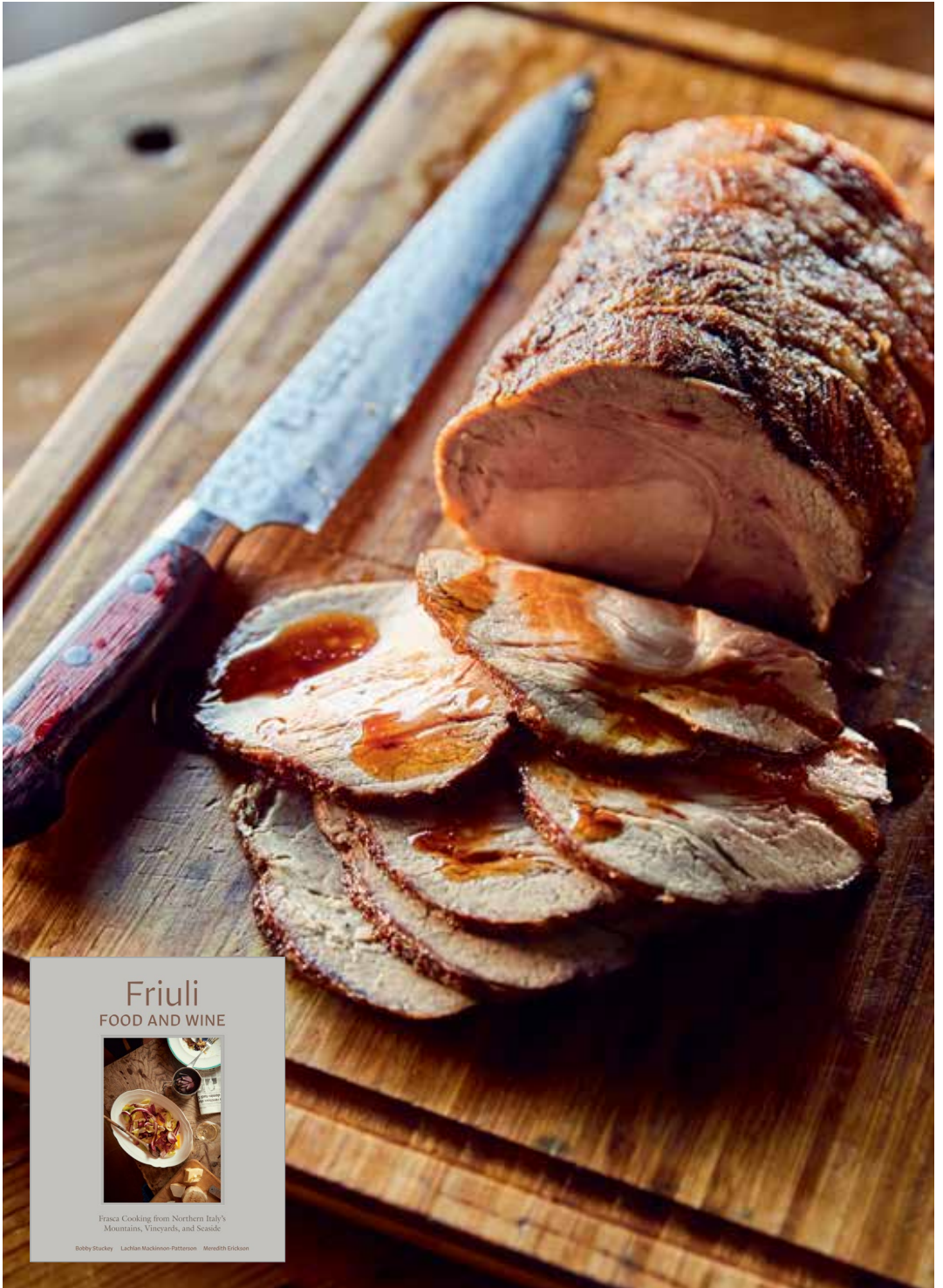
In a medium saucepan over high heat, cover the potatoes with water, add 1 tablespoon salt, and simmer until tender, about 25 minutes. Drain, use the back of a paring knife to peel off the skin, and then slice into ½-inch-thick coins.

Cut each peach wedge in half and set aside.


After the meat has been roasting for 45 minutes, add the onions and roast another 10 to 15 minutes, until the meat probe registers 140°F. Transfer the meat to a cutting board, tent with aluminum foil to keep warm, and let rest for 20 minutes.

Stir the mustard into the cooking juices and onions and season with salt and pepper. Add the potatoes and peaches and stir gently to coat with the warm dressing. Check the seasoning again, then generously drizzle extra-virgin olive oil over the top.

Cut the roast into ¼-inch-thick slices and transfer to a large platter; spoon the warm salad next to the meat. Serve immediately.



**Friuli**  
FOOD AND WINE



Frasca Cooking from Northern Italy's  
Mountains, Vineyards, and Seaside

Bobby Stuckey Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson Meredith Erickson

# El Diablo

There are a ton of different ways to make an El Diablo. I'm sure there is a definitive version somewhere out there, but that's an unimportant endeavor next to finding a recipe you actually like. To start, here's a version that I love. Most people use ginger beer, but I think it's 1000% better with sparkling wine. This drink is a bit bigger in volume than usual, which is why I recommend serving it with ice in an old fashioned or water glass. The ice helps soften the intensity from the ginger and provides additional dilution to balance the alcohol.

## Makes 1 drink

1½ ounces **reposado tequila**  
 ¾ ounce **Ginger Syrup** (recipe follows)  
 ¾ ounce **fresh lime juice**  
 ¾ ounce **Lejay crème de cassis**  
 2 ounces **sparkling wine, such as Cava or Prosecco**

**Garnishes** Lime wheel and candied ginger on a pick

In a shaker, combine the tequila, ginger syrup, lime juice, and crème de cassis. Add ice and shake for 15 seconds. Strain into an ice-filled old fashioned or water glass. Top with the sparkling wine and garnish with the lime wheel and candied ginger.

## GINGER SYRUP

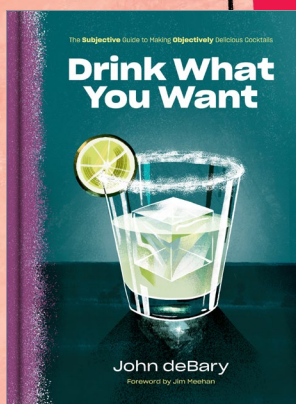
### Makes about 2 cups

2 pounds **fresh ginger**, thoroughly scrubbed\*  
 About 2 cups **granulated sugar** (depending on juice yield; see Note)

Using a juice extractor, juice the ginger. Pass the liquid through a gold coffee filter to remove all solids. You should have about 1 cup. Combine the ginger juice and sugar in a small saucepan. Cook, stirring occasionally, over medium heat until all the sugar has dissolved. Remove the pan from the heat and allow the syrup to cool for a few minutes. Place the pan in an ice bath and stir every few minutes until the mixture is below room temperature. Use immediately or store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks or in the freezer for up to 6 months.

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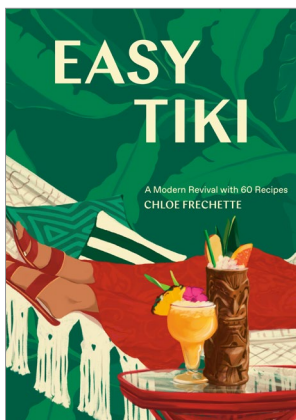
\* I prefer the more robust flavor of unpeeled ginger, but you can peel it if you think doing so is worth your time.



#### NOTE

The yield on ginger juice can vary widely depending on the piece of ginger and on how diligent you are in juicing. No matter what, in this recipe be sure to use 2:1 parts, by volume, of sugar to ginger juice. If you don't have a juice extractor, use a food processor to purée the ginger and then filter out the juice.





## BALDWIN'S (EASY) SHERRY COLADA

RAN DUAN, BALDWIN BAR, BOSTON

At Baldwin Bar, located above Boston's Sichuan Garden restaurant, bartender Ran Duan serves his Sherry Colada, a mixture of palo cortado, manzanilla, and amontillado sherries, plus pineapple juice, house-made coconut cream, and lemon juice. Here he offers this “easy” version, which requires only one sherry—amontillado—cutting the ingredient list down to four without sacrificing craveability.

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**2 ounces amontillado sherry**

**1 ounce coconut cream  
(page 156)**

**1 ounce pineapple juice**

**¾ ounce lemon juice**

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**GARNISH** pineapple wedge, pineapple fronds, Angostura bitters (optional)

Combine all the ingredients in a cocktail shaker. Add ice and shake until chilled, about 10 seconds. Pour into a Zombie or highball glass. Add crushed ice to fill the glass. Garnish with a pineapple wedge, pineapple fronds, and Angostura bitters (if desired).

## CINNAMON SYRUP

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**MAKES** about 1½ cups

**½ ounce (16 grams)  
Saigon cinnamon bark,  
broken into pieces**

**1 cup sugar  
1 cup water**

In a small saucepan, briefly toast the cinnamon over medium heat until fragrant, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the sugar and water and bring to just under a boil, stirring until the sugar has dissolved. Remove from the heat and let cool. Strain into an airtight container and store at room temperature for up to 24 hours or in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

## COCONUT CREAM

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**MAKES** about 2 cups

**1 cup canned full-fat  
coconut milk**

**1 cup cream of coconut**

In a medium bowl, whisk together the coconut milk and cream of coconut until incorporated. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

## GINGER SYRUP

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**MAKES** about 1¾ cups

**1½ cups sugar  
1½ cups water**

**1 cup ginger juice**

In a medium saucepan, heat the sugar and water over medium heat, stirring, until the sugar has dissolved. Remove from the heat, add the ginger juice, and stir until fully incorporated. Let cool, then store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

**NOTE** If you don't have a juicer, look for fresh pressed ginger juice at health food stores or juiceries.

## DONN'S MIX

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**MAKES** about 3 cups

**1 cup cinnamon syrup  
(opposite)**

**2 cups grapefruit juice  
(from about 2 grapefruits)**

In a medium jar or other container with a lid, stir together the cinnamon syrup and grapefruit juice until well combined. Cover and store in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

## DONN'S SPICES #2

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**MAKES** about 3 cups

**2 cups sugar**

**1 teaspoon vanilla bean paste**

**2 cups water**

**¾ ounce pimento dram  
(preferably St. Elizabeth)**

In a medium saucepan, combine the sugar, water, and vanilla and heat over medium heat, stirring, until the sugar has dissolved, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat, add the pimento dram, and stir until fully combined. Let cool, then transfer to an airtight container and store in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

## GRENADE

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**MAKES** about 1½ cups

**1 cup unsweetened  
pomegranate juice**

**1 cup sugar**

In a small saucepan, heat ½ cup of the pomegranate juice over medium-low heat until it has reduced to a quarter of its original volume (about 2 tablespoons). Add the remaining ½ cup pomegranate juice and the sugar and stir until the sugar has dissolved. Let cool, then store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. (See store-bought options, page 44.)

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