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— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

<u>Names Have Been Changed: A Novel</u> <i>by Yu-Mei Balasingamchow</i>	3
<u>Slasher Summer: A Novel</u> <i>by E. L. Chen</i>	25
<u>Make Nice: A Novel</u> <i>by Ryan Effgen</i>	49
<u>Retro: A Novel</u> <i>by Jessica M. Goldstein</i>	65
<u>Villa Coco: A Novel</u> <i>by Andrew Sean Greer</i>	87
<u>The Mortons: A Novel</u> <i>by Justine Larbalestier and Scott Westerfeld</i>	103
<u>Mrs. Benedict Arnold: A Novel</u> <i>by Emma Parry</i>	119
<u>The Last Book Club: A Novel</u> <i>by Joanne Rock</i>	135
<u>The Long Con: A Novel</u> <i>by Jenna Voris</i>	161

NAMES



“Exciting, sharp, at times fun, and at other times heartbreaking, Ophir held my heart in her hands and I was only too happy to give it to her.”

—JESSE Q. SUTANTO

HAVE

BEEN



A Novel

CHANGED

Yu-Mei Balasingamchow





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EPISODE 1



April 17, 2020

Did you know that the Singapore passport is one of the most coveted in the world? It can get you into a hundred and ninety countries without a visa, and a forged passport—not a counterfeit, I’m talking about an original with only the name and photograph tampered with—that goes for a pretty penny on the international black market. Impressive, isn’t it? For a place so small most people can’t even find it on a map.

I used to have one, the real deal, the genuine article. The palm-sized, bright red, gold-stamped fake-leather-feeling book of dreams tricked out with the latest security features. Biometric chip, debossed design, diffractive effects, embedded laser images, all the bells and whistles they could pack into it. That was almost ten years ago, before I left Singapore forever, although I didn’t realize it at the time. My friend Tina says there are newer versions now, with more high-tech wizardry. I

haven't seen one, I wouldn't know. I sold mine in Bangkok for three thousand dollars and a discount on a forged Hong Kong passport. Later I learned that I should've asked for more, a hell of a lot more. But the important thing was, I didn't let on that my shiny red book was on an Interpol watch list because I was running away with a bagful of money that didn't belong to me. I took my new identity, bought a flight to Tokyo in the name of Kara Wong, and didn't look back.

These days, though, something's come over me. It's not remorse. I had only sixty thousand dollars, which didn't get me very far. I'm not a criminal mastermind, I was just one of the little people, and I didn't hurt anybody, I mean, not too much. I fled without a plan, which in hindsight was a fairly stupid thing to do. If I'd stuck around and gone to jail, I would've been out by now, paid my debt to society, proved that I could be trusted as an upstanding citizen—and I'd still have a glossy Singapore passport with my real name on it.

Instead I'm living in a ho-hum town in the middle of a so-so country, working yet another shit job in a long line of shit jobs, with no name to call my own. Before this COVID lockdown that they keep extending, back when we used to, you know, go to bars, flirt with people, and sleep with them if they looked or smelled good enough, I'd be lying awake in the middle of the night, after having awesome or at least adequate sex with the woman or man who called me Sheralyn or Rosie or Samira or Lihua or Debby-with-a-*y* or whatever name I was using. And all I'd want was for that person, when they were having a fucking amazing time—or rather, an amazing time *fucking*, if I do say so myself—to exclaim the name my parents gave me, the name I wasn't done with when I had to give it up, the name I've buried so deep in my heart I barely remember what it sounds like in my father's voice.

I'll never hear him say it again. Because he's gone. A traffic accident a few months ago, not COVID. I found out during the

first lockdown. I was googling my family, which I don't usually do, it hurts too much. But I was bored out of my mind, aren't we all? Living like this, one forlorn day after another.

I found a news report, then an obituary notice, my father's name next to my mother's. She died giving birth to me. I think about that every single day.

My name was there too, at the end of the list of my five sisters and brothers. I'm the youngest. Also the only one who's an internationally wanted criminal.

Should I say my parents *had* names? No, those are still their names, just as mine is still mine, even if I can't use it anymore.

I've decided you can call me Ophir. It isn't my real name, obviously. You just need a word to hang my voice on, I just need a *nom de plume*. It'll be our little secret. No one will ever know me as Ophir—only you.

I'm talking to you in English because that's the only language I'm fluent in. The language of my heart, if you want to get maudlin. The accents I do, they're variations, inflections, intonations. A little more emphasis here, a bit more rounding off or chewing up of the vowels there. Not my real voice. I don't know what that is anymore. This version coming at you, it's not the whole me. There are things I don't dare say even to myself. There are places where the thoughts stop.

ARE YOU STILL THERE?

There's no editing or post-production with this podcast. Tina's set it up so that I talk and it's live online right away. No ifs, buts, or maybes, no *Oops, I didn't mean to say that*.

Because that's what I've decided I need to do: speak my mind and live with it. I'm going to tell you my story, one episode

a week for the remaining four weeks of this lockdown. No script, no agenda, just me sitting by myself in this apartment speaking into empty space about where I've been and what I've been up to: breaking the law, getting the hell out of Singapore, then ten inglorious years of treading water.

Ten years—fuck.

I suppose this began when my best friend, let's call her Nirmala, said to me, "Want to earn some extra cash?"

It was early December, my birthday week, I'd just turned twenty-seven. We were at the wine bar at Zouk, which was *the* club at the time. Nirmala, I'm going to have to get used to saying that, she was working at a PR company that hosted lots of events there. I was her stooge, the hanger-on, with nothing much to recommend to anyone except my willingness to dance, drink, and make sure I looked like somebody you'd want to fuck. Because until everything went down, that was the biggest deal in my uninteresting existence, being the center of attention, the locus of desire, drawing all that energy and wild abandon into me to feel solid and connected to the world. Like I mattered, like I was *something*.

Nirmala and I had been friends since we were thirteen. We were classmates in secondary school, and after O levels, we studied marketing at the same polytechnic. She took to the industry like a duck to water, fish to the sea, birds to the sky. Even dreamed about running her own agency someday. I had simpler goals: make enough money to have fun and always look sensational. I dabbled in becoming a deejay, then wound up as a voice actor. I'd had a knack for doing impressions when I was a kid, to distract my family when they were upset with me. Turns out I was even better at putting on voices once I had a script to follow. I could do different Singaporean accents—you think only got one but actually got many kinds lah. Also American, British, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, I could keep going. It was pretty much the best job I ever had. I got paid, not a

lot but more than you'd think, and once word got around in the business, people would call to offer me work, which was great since the only thing I was actually good at was spending every cent I earned as soon as I got hold of it. Clients said I sounded like an old-fashioned movie star. Sexy but not slutty. Trustworthy and also seductive. A little dangerous but not too much.

That night, as Nirmala and I clinked glasses, she told me to sit up straight and stop hunching over my boobs. Then she asked if I wanted to make quick money. Enough to get a new pair of designer shoes each month, maybe more.

I said, "I told you before, I'm not interested in pyramid schemes, scamming my relatives, or letting men eat sushi off my naked body."

There were some lines I wouldn't cross at the time. I guess I still wouldn't, although there are plenty of others I've blazed past without thinking.

Nirmala laid out the scheme as if it was her idea. She'd been working for a few months with this guy, Chong, a friend of a friend. She kept money for him in her bank account. When he told her to, she returned the funds to him and got to keep a handsome tip for her trouble.

"You could do it too." Nirmala refilled my glass from the pitcher of Red Bull vodka we were sharing, our standard order. Her treat, because it'd just been my birthday, also because she earned more than I did. "Chong won't work with just anyone, you know. But I'll introduce you."

Nirmala was one of the laziest people I've known, maybe because things came easily to her. She was beautiful, charming, and could sweet-talk her way into almost anything. Her parents doted on her, and when she started coming over to my house after school, my family did too. Even my oldest sister loved her. She was twelve when I was born and found fault with everything I did. I'll call her . . . Veronica, she'll hate that. She used to gripe *Why can't you be more like Nirmala?* She

didn't know that most afternoons, my best friend and I lay sprawled on the sofa sharing shoplifted tidbits or huddled under the chempedak tree in the back garden to smoke. We talked about growing up and getting rich. Lots of people made it big—why not us?

If Nirmala and I hadn't happened to sit next to each other that first day in school, I'm not sure we would've become friends the way we did. She was an only child, I was the youngest of six, and, let's not forget, a feckless, motherless urchin. She was undeniably attractive, even in our ungraceful cobalt-blue pinafore uniforms. Gorgeous dark skin, an elegant nose, pouty small lips. A pair of dimples that made her seem as cute and harmless as a bunny. A figure like a model's even though she ate as many French fries and potato chips as I did. I was mixed-race, my skin the color of milk tea. Not the silky, glowing *teh tarik* from the proper *sarabat* stalls, I'm more like the bland, murky dishwasher versions you get at food courts. As for my body, you could say I'm the original little teapot, short and stout. I grew taller as a teenager but stayed the same shape. That night at Zouk, I was what you might call *full-figured*. *Voluptuous* if you were feeling charitable, *lumpy* if you were not. These days I'm definitely the latter. At least it's less likely anyone'll recognize me from Interpol photos.

I told Nirmala I would think about her offer. We were celebrating my birthday, and I didn't want to make any decisions except what to drink and who to dance with.

"Chances like this don't come along often," Nirmala said, reaching into her designer boho bag. She'd bought it several months before, after getting a promotion at work. I knew all too well that even if I scrimped and saved—never my strong suit—by the time I could buy myself something just as fabulous, she'd be on to the next shinier, more expensive thing.

"We'll set up a meeting with Chong next week," Nirmala

insisted. “Consider it my birthday present to you. Along with this.” She slid a gift-wrapped box across the table.

It shimmered between our lowball glasses, the gold wrapping paper as dazzling as the lights pulsating overhead. Nir-mala had artfully knotted purple and burgundy ribbons around it. She was good with her hands, you know. I can only imagine what she did with the men she slept with or when she touched herself—ooh! that gives me the shivers—and what she must’ve been thinking when she got the present ready for me. Unconsciously, of course. She never *tried* to make use of anyone. She genuinely wanted the best for herself and for me, her dearest friend, her closest confidante, soon to be her partner in crime.

Inside the shiny paper was a designer baguette clutch, one of the it accessories of the year. We’d seen it in all the fashion magazines. We both wanted it, no, we said we *needed* it. Nir-mala got it for me in fuchsia, isn’t that a delicious word, and it matched the lipstick I was wearing. I ran my hands over the fabric, *ruched* is what they called it. I felt like I was teasing a pussy for the first time before it knew it wanted another woman’s touch. Then I brushed over the silver latch with the trademark interlocking logo, unclasped it, slid my fingers inside—and I was the one who fell under its spell.

You know what? I still have the goddamn bag. Sometimes I press it against my face when I go to sleep, even though it’s bruised, scratched up, and grimy, probably has god knows what bacteria growing on it, viruses worse than COVID. It’s been soaked in the rain, it’s fallen in black snow, been dunked in seawater, almost got peed on once. The cloth’s tattered now, like an animal’s been chewing on it. I’ve stuffed clean underwear inside, dirty ones too, socks, pills, tissues, half-eaten moldy bread, anything that makes it less likely someone would steal it.

I can't say why I took it with me that last day in Singapore. I was packing for the airport, grabbing things without thinking. And I'm not sure what I'm feeling now when I look at that stupid pink piece of shit. I just know, sappy as it sounds, that it would break my heart if I lost it.

I GOT UP TO CHECK THAT THE BAG'S WHERE IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE.

Although this apartment is safe compared to most places I've stayed at, I'm kind of superstitious. Like if I talk about something precious, it might vanish.

I also put on lipstick, my roommate's. She moved to her boyfriend's last week when the lockdown was extended. This shade of red doesn't really suit me, but talking to you about that time at Zouk makes me want to pretty myself up a little. Tonight's a special occasion, isn't it? I've never told anyone my story before.

In case you're wondering, Nirmala and Chong aren't on the run with me. Both of them got caught, I didn't. Chong I don't care about. It wasn't even his real name, I found out later. Nirmala, though, I still feel guilty about leaving her behind. I like to tell myself she got the better deal. She was in prison for three years, which can't have been easy, but at least she's had the chance to move on. I haven't been able to find her online. Maybe she changed her name or got married.

I don't blame her for disappearing. If you search for my real name, you'll find the sorry details of the case and old photos of me from Facebook. Every few years, the local newspapers do a special feature on the most wanted criminals, SINGAPOREANS ON THE RUN!, and my name gets dragged up all over again. It makes me sick.

At the wine bar at Zouk, I didn't say yes to Nirmala's prop-

osition. I was shimmying around, showing off my new purse, my sexy outfit, being the star of the show. I wanted to stay there forever.

A week later, Nirmala said she'd convinced Chong to meet me. "I told him you're good at following instructions," she explained on the phone. "You don't want to miss this opportunity, okay? Good things, must share." That's what we say in Singapore about passing on juicy tips and inside information.

We met Chong at a café. He was in his late thirties, with chipmunk cheeks and bushy eyebrows that covered almost his entire eyelids. He said to me, "Your friend here has been very reliable. She says I can trust you too."

I nodded, squeezing the pink purse in my lap like it was a talisman. Nirmala was sitting next to me with her boho bag. I hadn't asked, but I was certain she'd paid for it with the money from Chong. This could be my chance to catch up with her and everyone else I knew. It also felt like school days, when Nirmala and I got up to all sorts of shenanigans with two girls we were close to, what should I call them? Jackie O., that fits her, and the other one . . .

Florissa.

God, Florissa.

I can't think about that, I just can't. I'll tell you about it when I have to. The only one who matters right now is Nirmala. In school we'd do things like sweet-talk other girls into letting us copy their homework, cheat during tests and exams, steal cassette tapes and CDs, lipstick, earrings, sunglasses. It was thrilling to take those risks, and we always got away with it.

Now all I had to do was walk up to an ATM and push the buttons. Nirmala came with me the first time. We were at a shopping mall downtown. I keyed in my PIN and requested the account balance. The screen glowed lovingly with green numbers, several thousand dollars more than I usually had.

Nirmala was watching over my left shoulder. “See? I told you.”

It felt like the universe had chosen me at last to receive something wonderful.

You have to understand, I’m not like the rest of my family. Veronica ran a Montessori preschool, my brothers and middle sister were in law, engineering, banking, IT. My father had been an accountant his entire life. His only career advice to me was *Do what makes you happy, dear*. That didn’t get me very far. The things I got a kick out of didn’t bring me money or, at least, not as much as I wanted, whereas here was Chong, telling me through Nirmala that I just had to wait a few days and transfer the money to her, minus my fee. Done.

The same thing happened with a second deposit I received, then a third. “Why is he moving money around like this?” I asked Nirmala over champagne brunch—my treat, for a change, to thank her for hooking me up with Chong. She said something about him being involved in different businesses and not wanting to keep all his money in the same place.

Okay, I know that sounds shady now, but at the time it seemed reasonable. We weren’t doing anything illegal, I thought.

One small step for spending money, one big step for fucking up my life forever.

Our arrangement with Chong went on for a year and a half, all told. He sent instructions by text, something mundane like *Don’t forget to buy ice cream tomorrow* or *Remember to return library books today*. He often changed phone numbers, and when he started using a new one, his first text to me was always *Hi sugee cake*. I don’t know how he came up with that. I’m not Eurasian, and I didn’t say I was, the one time we met. To Nirmala he would send *Hi murukku*. What the hell, right, wasn’t that kind of racist? She didn’t even eat the thick,

crunchy kind anymore, she didn't want to risk chipping her flawless teeth.

Over the months, the sums from Chong got bigger. I got my cut, rinse and repeat. A few hundred here, a few hundred there, it added up pretty quickly. The technical term for what I was, according to news reports later, was a *money mule*. Not an *accomplice* or an *accessory*, not even a *courier*. Just a miserable beast of burden. The work, if you can call it that, paid for designer shoes, oh yes, plenty of them, and fancy dinners, massages and spa treatments, then a giant TV for my room, and weekend getaways with Nirmala or other friends to Bali, Sydney, and Tokyo.

A year into it, Christmas came round and I got expensive gifts for my entire family. I wanted to show them I'd made it, like they had. Not that they were in the habit of exchanging extravagant presents, but after years of me sheepishly handing out cheap, useless trinkets, I thought this was my chance to splash out, to prove that I could afford the good things in life *and* bring some fashion flair and pizzazz to theirs as well.

At the family party, which was an annual affair even though we weren't Christian, I remember everyone was gathered in the living and dining rooms, having a jolly time. My nieces and nephews had worked themselves into a frenzy, yanking their packages out from under the tree and tearing the wrapping paper off. Veronica was telling them to calm down, and they were completely ignoring her, like I used to do. When she opened what I got for her, a wallet from an American designer who was all the rage, her first question was how much it cost.

I said, "More than all the soap sets and career advice books you've given me over the years." It was mean, yes, but I'd been drinking, and those are the worst gifts.

Veronica asked, "Where did you get the money?"

I said I'd worked hard and saved, which was sort of true. I wanted to believe that I was doing well like the rest of them. I was thinking I had it better, in fact, since I didn't have to be tied down to an office, long hours, or shithead bosses.

"You know I don't care about designer brands." Veronica slid the wallet into the plastic shopping bag on her lap. "When will you learn the real value of things? You can't try to buy love."

Of course I couldn't, that wasn't what I was doing. Outraged, I glanced around the room at my sisters and brothers and their spouses. Everyone was talking, laughing, twirling around to holiday tunes. My father was helping one of my nieces assemble a toy set. No one was looking at me or my gifts. Not for the first time, I had the leaden feeling that they would have preferred to have my mother there instead of me.

My face turned hot. I slipped out of the house and called Nirmala, and soon we were off to a club where we could dance the night away. She was always there for me when I called, whatever mood I was in. We grew closer, thick as thieves. Funny, now I know what that really means. You know, we tried kissing for fun once, in the bathroom at our convent school. Our lips had barely touched when she said, *No, no more*. It was the only time she ever put her foot down with me, until . . . We'll get to that soon. I went on to kiss other girls and boys and report everything to her. I'd try anything at least once.

I was still devil-may-care that way when we were working for Chong. Nirmala, on the other hand, started dating someone seriously and got engaged. I liked her fiancé, I was happy for her. She didn't tell him where she was getting the extra money from. I'm not going to mention his name because he wasn't involved in this. After dealing with so many dreadful and thoroughly irredeemable people all over the world, I can see, clear as daylight, how solid and pure he was. I hope he went on to have a happy and uncomplicated life. Someone should.

One day, I was at the ATM at the market near where I lived. It was Saturday morning, aunties fidgeting in line behind me, hawkers shouting, people jostling in front of the stalls, the mixed-up smells of prata, fried beehoon, and pisang goreng. I needed cash. I was hungry and, as usual, hungover. I'd been out with friends at a Thai disco the night before, Sabai Sabai or Neverland, one of those places that stayed open until five a.m. The only reason I was up was I had a recording session, squeezed in at the last minute. I could've blown it off, I had enough coming in from Chong, but I liked my work more now that it wasn't my only source of spending money. I did radio ads, TV, cartoons, government announcements, corporate videos. The best thing was I got paid to speak lines that belonged to someone else, whether I was doing a hoity-toity mission school Bukit Timah taitai accent or cooing *sayang, sayang* like a Malay makcik.

At the ATM, I was a little light-headed and thinking about what I wanted to eat. Then I glanced down at the screen and saw my account balance. Six figures—six! I'd only had a few thousand earlier in the week.

I thought it must be a mistake, I should alert the bank. I even looked at the 1800 helpline number next to the keypad.

I know, I know, I'm a real criminal genius. I was wearing a brand-new rose-gold ring speckled with diamonds, my hand-made leather tote from a chichi boutique in Tokyo was weighing down my arm, my other hand was clutching my brand-new iPhone, which cost more than the ring and the bag combined, and still I didn't make the connection, still I didn't *see*. For several brief, blissful seconds, I assumed this was a genuine error.

Then it hit me, the scope of what Nirmala and I were doing, a weight pressing down on my head and pushing hard against my forehead at the same time. Chong had told me to expect a deposit, but how could there be so *much*? I hit CANCEL and yanked my card out. I stumbled past people waiting for

breakfast and found a seat near my favorite coffee stall. I asked for kopi gah dai, I needed the extra condensed milk. One cup, then another.

What were Nirmala and I really mixed up in? The thought had only fleetingly crossed my mind before, the way I wondered how the weather could flip in an instant from sunny and sweltering to a torrential downpour. When it happened, I noticed, sure, then my mind drifted on to the next thing.

This deposit, *six* figures, I couldn't pass over so easily. Where was the money coming from? Was it stolen, embezzled, from crooked business ventures or drug deals, perhaps something more sinister or nefarious? I knew, even back then, that I didn't have a clue about how the world really worked, how one thing led to another, who was connected to whom or had the power to make things happen, wheels within wheels. My oh-so-sophisticated modus operandi, such as it was, was to take at face value any opportunities that presented themselves, make the most of them, and prance on.

The kopi uncle was used to seeing me leave for work once I'd had my coffee. That day he watched me tapping my nails against the glass mug and staring into space. When I ordered a third, he said, "Had too much fun last night, is it? Need more sugar to wake you up!"

I wonder if he's still alive. He was so old already, a short, skinny Chinese man with a gray mole on his right cheek and straggly white hair that would be blown every which way by the fan inside his stall. He used to say *Hot ah, hot ah, don't burn your mouth* as he handed me my order.

I'm getting nostalgic, thinking about that place, that time. Can you hear it in my voice? I'm sounding more like myself, the Singlish coming out. I made myself erase those clues after I left. I didn't want anyone to be able to tell where I was from. Maybe here I can relax a bit. We understand each other, right?

Who am I kidding, no one's going to listen to this. Just because I'm making a podcast doesn't mean anyone will pay attention.

It doesn't matter. I need to get this story out of my head. I've been carrying it around for so long.

Okay, where were we? I needed to talk to Nirmala. She didn't pick up, then texted that she was having brunch with her fiancé, she would call me later. My head was still pounding. I got a plate of fried carrot cake with dark sauce and extra chili, my favorite.

I was halfway through it when my brother appeared. I'll call him . . . Jacob. He was the youngest in the family until I was born.

"You look terrible," he said. After placing his order with the kopi uncle, he waved to his friends a few tables away, all men about his age in the same kind of sleek athletic wear and sports shoes. They'd probably come from the gym or a run at MacRitchie Reservoir, that was Jacob's idea of fun on a Saturday morning. It was the only gay stereotype he lived up to, not that we ever talked about sex. No one in our family did, unless you count the others asking if I had a boyfriend, they never asked me about girlfriends. Nirmala, when we were sixteen, had a huge crush on him and bugged me to find out if he had a girlfriend. I asked, he said no, and he never did, as far as I could tell, though with some of his male friends I suspected something more was going on.

Jacob's two years older than me. He and I played together the most, growing up. He didn't remember our mother, either. He never said *I hate you!* or *You ruined everything!* when he got upset with me, unlike the others. That's what we called our sisters and brothers, *the others*, as in, *Don't tell the others about this*. When I was six or seven, I went through a phase of being obsessed with games like Snap and Happy Families. *The others*

would roll their eyes when I pulled out the cards. Jacob was the only one who didn't. He would keep going, dealing round after round, for as long as I wanted him to.

At the coffee stall, Jacob grabbed a bottle of mineral water, telling the uncle he would pay for it, and slid onto the stool next to me. "Caffeine won't help, take this. How come you're up? Before I left this morning, Dad told Mimi to let you sleep."

Jacob and I were still living with our father, who had retired, and Mimi, the Indonesian woman who had worked for us since before I was born. Mimi's not her real name, it's how she preferred to be called. The others had moved out after they got married, like Nirmala and her fiancé were planning to. Jacob was doing well enough to afford his own apartment, but he liked the house, he said, and being around our father. I stuck around because it was cushy, obviously, living at home, and I'd rather spend money on myself than pay rent to someone else.

I told Jacob I had to work that day. He said, "You've been at the studio a lot."

I shrugged. Like the deal with Chong, I just showed up when I was told to and did my part. I didn't think about the big picture.

Jacob said, "I know you like having more money now, but you don't have to say yes to *everything* that comes along."

I prodded with my chopsticks at the oily mess of carrot cake and told myself Jacob didn't know, couldn't possibly know about Chong and the latest deposit. He was concerned for me, not suspicious. Even so, or because of that, I said, "I know what I'm doing. I don't need your advice." That's how I was with my sisters and brothers, prickly and defensive. Kind of an asshole.

Jacob uncapped the bottle of water and planted it in front of me. "Drink this. You don't look well, maybe you should go

home and rest. Funny, huh? All the times I had to wake you up for school, now I'm telling you to go back to bed."

He was teasing, he meant it as a compliment, I know he did, because Jacob was the kind of person who always gave people the chance to prove they could be better than they used to be. He couldn't help himself, even when I clearly wasn't in the mood for it.

I drank the water, then said, in a perfect imitation of Veronica, "Life isn't just about having a good time. No one is going to hand things to you on a silver platter. You have to work hard to get what you want."

Jacob laughed, then looked as if he shouldn't have. "You're too good at that."

I held up two fingers in a V next to my cheek, kawaii-style. "It's my only talent."

"It's not the *only*—"

"That's why they pay me the big bucks." I smirked.

My phone rang, Nirmala's name blinking on the screen. I handed Jacob my chopsticks. He said I should take the carrot cake with me, it was my favorite, but I was hurrying out of the market.

Nirmala was raving about the most divine eggs Benedict she'd had at a new Aussie-inspired café. I cut her off. "What's the largest amount you ever received from Charlie?"

That's what we called Chong between us, we thought we were being clever. Sometimes we said *Charlemagne* or *Charlemania*. *Carlotta* for a while, after someone we saw in a drag show.

"What happened, is something wrong? Are you okay?"

"Everything's fine. I just . . . I'm surprised at how much I have today. You know, from . . ."

"We shouldn't talk about it. Don't tell me anything."

I was standing on the pavement in the shade of a tree, yet feeling warm, flushed. My leather tote, wedged against my

elbow, was sticking to my skin. “Where do you think the money comes from?”

“Do you really want to know? I don’t,” Nirmala said. “He trusts us, that’s the main thing.” She was every inch the consummate PR professional. I sounded like a child spooked by the flimsiest shadow on the wall.

“Don’t you ever wonder about—”

“Things are going well, why ask questions? Just do what he tells you.” Nirmala slid into her usual breezy tone. I’d found it irresistible when we met in school, reassuring after we became good friends, an insouciance I never quite mastered myself.

“Asking only lah. You don’t know how he gets it?”

“It’s none of our business.”

“He never told you?”

“I don’t ask, my dear. Aiyo, what’s gotten into you? Don’t think so much. We’ve been doing this so long already.”

I almost blurted out exactly how much money had appeared in my account. It was more than any of my siblings had, I was certain. But laying things out plainly between Nirmala and me could prick the balloon, sully our sweet life. And while we knew, of course, that it wouldn’t last forever, as long as things were running smoothly there was no reason to turn off the tap or even jiggle the handle a little.

I pressed my elbow down on my tote bag. “If you’re sure—”

“Bitch, relax.”

We’d called each other that since we were in school with Florissa and Jackie O., to shock and stir up our straitlaced schoolmates. It was proof of our friendship—no, more than that, a mark of what we could get away with saying or doing to each other. Because no matter how often we tossed it between us, the word never lost its edge. And that was the point, to have the thin-as-a-wire threat hanging in the air. It affirmed that we were best friends, but also: *Be careful. Don’t push me.*

Listen, Nirmala wasn't a bad person. Did she break the law and get me to do the same? Yes. Was she a cold, heartless, self-ish *bitch*? No, she left that to me.

VCR



SLASHER SUMMER

E. L. CHEN

a novel

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THE SLASHER

It was astounding how much blood the human body held. How much it could fountain out of a teenage boy's neck, where someone had sliced away a wedge of flesh like it was an apple pie. How much time it took for the boy to realize he was a dead man walking. No, not walking. *Thrashing*. Performing a suite of full-body lurches like an air dancer in front of a used car dealership, while his girlfriend's severed head rocked at his feet.

Gurgling, the boy clutched helplessly at his spraying wound. In front of him, a pretty blond girl shrieked as a crimson jet hit her squarely in the chest and splattered across her chin. She grabbed her boyfriend's arm—and the shriek collapsed into laughter as the fake blood dripped down her disposable plastic rain poncho. Printed with the *Slasher* movie logo on the back, it had been included in the ticket price and was a prized souvenir for those who braved the front row of the Rialto Theatre.

The audience erupted in hoots and catcalls. “Die, jock!” someone yelled from the back. The high school football player shambled about on screen, his eyes bulging in a comical rictus of terror as a hulking figure in a plain white mask and red buffalo plaid jacket hacked at him with a machete. In front of the screen, on what had been a stage in the Rialto’s pre-cinema heyday, a teenager in a mullet wig and blood-stained jersey mimicked the actor’s exaggerated death throes. A grubby mannequin head in a blond wig—which looked about as realistic as the severed head on screen—leered at the audience. Meanwhile, another cast member in the wings gleefully sprayed the front row of the theater with a Super Soaker of watered-down red poster paint.

It was just another Friday night in Cedar Lake.

At the very back of the theater, the only one not cheering or hollering, a hooded figure observed the mayhem with the keen eye of a scientist. The figure’s attention was drawn to the “shadow cast,” the group of teens who were hammily reenacting *Slasher* on the stage in front of the film while the audience got splashed with fake blood.

The hooded figure didn’t know whose idea that had been. Probably an enterprising Rialto manager who’d been a fan of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Evil Dead: The Musical* and needed a gimmick to pump up ticket sales. *Slasher* had never dominated the box office like *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*. It had modestly debuted during the eighties horror movie rush, spawning two direct-to-video sequels and a gritty reboot directed by Rob Zombie in the early aughts. But the franchise would’ve never reached cult status if not for the fact that the cabin where it had been filmed was still standing on the outskirts of town. Just as Seneca Falls, New York, celebrated *It’s a Wonderful Life* and Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, had their Blobfest, Cedar Lake leaned on *Slasher* to transform their otherwise quiet small town into a popular—and lucrative—tourist destination.

“*Virgin!*” the audience yelled as *Slasher*’s fresh-faced “Final Girl,”

the only survivor at the end of the movie, appeared on-screen. Below, a winsome brunette in a white tank top padded onstage, her look of bewilderment so pronounced it could've been seen from the diner across the street. Despite the girl's terrible acting, the hooded figure drew in a sharp breath.

The movie audience erupted in cheers as the Slasher reemerged from stage right, wielding a plastic machete. On-screen, the girl gasped and sprinted into the woods, the Slasher right on her heels even though he walked with slow, purposeful strides.

Onstage, the actress jogged on the spot, looking over her shoulder as the Slasher approached. The shadow cast's Slasher was usually a lucky audience member, or sometimes a local celebrity who'd be unmasked at the end of the night. Cedar Lake High's principal had played the part a few times. Mock-slaughtering teenagers was probably the only thing that kept cranky old Mr. Cunningham going through the school year.

This year, however, was *Slasher's* fortieth anniversary and Slasher Summer's twentieth. Slasher Summer didn't have as huge a fandom to draw on as the *Twilight* festival in Forks, Washington, but recently the fan convention had attracted higher-profile guests. Most of the original movie cast was scheduled to appear next week, along with special effects artist Tom Savini. It was already rumored they were each going to play the Slasher at various screenings and the forthcoming shows were almost sold out.

It was going to be a summer to remember. Onstage, the Slasher double waved their plastic machete as the brunette cowered. The hooded figure's lips twisted in a smile. But it wouldn't be memorable for the reasons everyone thought.

Soon, very soon, the people of Cedar Lake would find out these performances had been only a dress rehearsal.

CARRIE

The little voice in the back of Carrie's head, the one that sounded unnervingly like Mama, told her again that she was doing the wrong thing. That she was going to screw up, like she always did. Carrie had thought she'd learned to quiet that voice with the help of her therapist, but there it was, whispering in her ear as she pulled into the gas station.

She knew she shouldn't have visited her mother earlier that day. But a month ago Aunt Deb had emailed to tell her that Mama was very ill. Formidable Mama, who rarely had a chance to sit unless she was in church or polishing someone else's silverware, was confined to her bed.

Had Mama asked for her? No, Aunt Deb had admitted. She'd thought Carrie should come anyway. Even though the last Carrie had seen of her mother was a callused palm flying toward her cheek, a month into her senior year at Cedar Lake High. Mama had finally

found out what had happened at the cabin, and instead of comforting her heartsick daughter, she'd responded with uncontrollable rage. Carrie had packed a bag, taken a bus to her dad's, and never looked back. Until today.

No one would've blamed Carrie if she cut Mama out of her life. Her therapist had even encouraged it. Carrie still needed to learn how to end toxic relationships, especially after her messy split with her ex-boyfriend Daniel.

But when the opportunity to return to Cedar Lake presented itself, Carrie had decided to drop by her old home. Even though, according to Mama, she'd lost any claim to being her daughter four years ago.

Aunt Deb had smiled nervously when she'd let Carrie into the old apartment. Aunt Deb, Mama's sister who'd painted nails in a town two hours away, had always seemed carefree and glamorous to Carrie. Now the lines around her mouth pinched with worry instead of laughter. Mama wasn't an easy woman to live with. Carrie knew that firsthand. Unfortunately, neither Mama nor Deb could afford to hire the nurse Mama needed, so Deb had moved into Carrie's old bedroom and taken a job at the Cedar Lake spa.

The apartment was shabbier than Carrie remembered, or perhaps Aunt Deb wasn't as finicky a housekeeper as Mama. The glass covering the portrait of the Virgin Mary was smudged. Dust blanketed the votive candles and religious tchotchkes that crowded the shelves. The only shining thing was Mama's rosary, sitting on the arm of the threadbare sofa, the beads glossy from years of use.

All the childhood photos of Carrie had been taken down, which didn't sting as much as she thought it would. It only strengthened her resolve to move on. Mama had; why shouldn't she?

The apartment still smelled the same, however. Like mothballs, canned soup, and the sickly sweet wax of the candles Mama prayed over. The scent triggered a cascade of unwelcome memories. Carrie steeled herself with a deep breath and silently repeated the affirma-

tion she and her therapist had come up with. *I am a strong woman who can't be hurt anymore.*

All her courage dissipated as a shockingly weak voice called from the main bedroom. “Who is it, Deb?”

Aunt Deb gestured at Carrie to go in. Carrie swallowed hard. “Hello, Mama.” She stared down at the wisp of a woman buried in the sheets.

Mama’s thin eyebrows drew together, and she struggled to sit up among the lumpy pillows. “Oh, it’s you. Just when everyone was starting to forget what you did. Have you returned to disgrace me again?”

The sneer on Mama’s lips and malicious glimmer in her eyes were a gut punch, even though Carrie hadn’t expected to be welcomed with open arms. “Of course not, Mama,” she answered in a small voice, the old shame searing through her like molten lead.

“Why’d you have to come back here?”

Carrie was reminded of the scene in *Friday the 13th Part 3* when Chris’s old flame Rick asks why she’d returned home. To prove her own inner strength to herself after a traumatic past event, Chris had replied. But Carrie couldn’t tell Mama that. Her mother would scoff and tell her that only praying would give her strength.

Carrie had tried prayer, with zero results. Now it was time for action.

“I just wanted to—” she started.

“Have you returned for *him*? I hear he’s back in town.”

Carrie’s mouth dried up. Flushing to the tips of her ears, she fled the room.

Aunt Deb hovered anxiously outside the doorway, wringing her hands. “She’s not having a good day today,” she whispered. “Maybe come back later.”

Carrie had nodded, blinking back the humiliated tears she’d sworn she would never cry again. This would be the last time she’d see Mama. There was nothing for her here anymore.

And so she was heading up to the cabin a little earlier than she'd planned. Via the scenic route. She avoided Cedar Lake's main roads and instead stopped at a gas station closer to a neighboring town. She didn't want more people to recognize her than was necessary, even though her therapist had told her it was important to acknowledge the past in order to move on from it. She didn't know what she'd do if the people of Cedar Lake reacted how Mama had. Returning to the cabin was intimidating enough.

But her therapist was right. Leaving home four years ago hadn't solved a thing. It hadn't taken away the devastating shame. She needed to accept her mistakes, or else her regrets would follow wherever she went, stalking her like the killer in a horror movie. Otherwise she'd always be looking over her shoulder, terrified that everyone she met would recognize her from *The Photo*.

And a weekend in the woods was a good way of dealing with the emotional fallout from her breakup. She was still processing how things had gone down between her and Daniel. His domineering personality couldn't follow her to the cabin, not with the secluded location and spotty cell service. She shuddered, thinking of his last text message from the night before. She should've blocked his number but knew he would've bought a burner phone and kept texting her anyway.

I'm coming for you, Carrie.

He wouldn't be able to find her now.

The gas station was deserted, save for a white SUV with a Park Services logo parked beside one of the pumps. Cedar trees rose from both sides of the highway, obscuring all signs of human civilization. Just what Carrie hoped for. The lonelier, the better. She pulled up beside the second pump, behind the SUV, and climbed out of her car.

The smell of cedar hit her in the face like Mama's farewell slap. It was shocking how many feelings the scent of her hometown evoked. Anguish, remorse, and a deep longing. She thought she'd changed since her teenage years, but the minute she stepped out of the car, the woods reminded her she was still Carrie Zhao. The good girl who'd made a terrible mistake.

The gas station was self-service and stood in front of an abandoned-looking convenience store with dusty windows and a faded Coca-Cola sign. Even better for keeping a low profile. Carrie inserted her credit card, and as she filled the tank, she registered the tall, hulking figure of the SUV's driver as he finished pumping gas. She shivered, despite the warm July sunshine on her bare arms. His height and hunching shoulders reminded her of Daniel.

The ranger's narrow face turned, and pale eyes met hers. Carrie pulled the bill of her baseball cap lower over her forehead, afraid he would recognize her. As a teenager, she'd volunteered at a few lakeshore cleanups. The ranger grabbed the squeegee from the cleaning station and stoically turned back to wash his windshield, and her breathing eased.

Door chimes tinkled behind her. Startled, she spun around. An old man in grubby denim overalls stepped out of the convenience store, scratching his wispy white hair and squinting under the bright sun.

"You headin' to Cedar Lake?" He eyed the full duffel bag riding in the passenger seat of her car.

"Yes, I am," Carrie said. She didn't see any point in lying.

The man spat onto the ground. "Whaddya wanna go there for? That's where they're holding that weird horror movie festival next week."

"Oh, I'm not going into town. I'm heading to a cabin by the lake," she said.

"Even worse. It's real lonely in the woods. No internet or cell phones, and nothin' but trees and crazy movie fans for miles

around.” He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “Nice girl like you won’t be safe. There are some B and Bs close by that I can recommend.”

Carrie hid a smile. This old man was straight out of central casting. The grizzled local, from all the slasher movies she’d watched in high school, who warns young people away from the deserted house or summer camp. Little did he know that she was local, too. She and the Cedar Lake High horror film club had once been those crazy fans.

“I’ll be okay. I’m meeting friends.”

The old man didn’t seem to hear her. “Russ!” he hollered to the ranger.

Panic surged in her chest like a rogue wave. “No, you don’t have to—”

It was too late. The ranger stuck the squeegee back into its bucket and ambled toward them, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. Carrie noted with alarm he was in his early twenties, around her age. That meant he might have gone to Cedar Lake High. She didn’t recognize him, and prayed to all of Mama’s saints he didn’t recognize her.

“This young lady’s headin’ for Cedar Lake cottage country. Keep an eye on her, will ya?”

The ranger looked Carrie up and down. She shrank back, resisting the urge to yank her hat down farther over her face.

The ranger nodded. “Sure will, Jeb.”

Carrie’s smile was starting to hurt her aching cheeks. “You don’t have to, it’s just a little weekend getaway.”

The ranger said nothing as he returned to his car, stony-faced.

As she drove away, she felt the ranger’s gaze boring into her back. Her pounding heart warned her she wasn’t getting away from anything. Instead, she was diving right into a hornet’s nest.

PATRICK

“Do you like scary movies?”

The sinister voice hissed out of Patrick’s car speakers as he’d paired his cell phone for hands-free driving. Under different circumstances it might have sent a chill up his spine, but the ID on his phone screen, visible from its dashboard mount, gave the caller away.

“Hello to you, too, Jen,” said Mikey, leaning forward from the back seat.

The voice cackled, no longer so creepy. “Tiff wanted me to call. Says ETA twenty minutes. *Someone* needed to go back for her fucking hair dryer.”

“The hair dryer at the cabin will probably be from the eighties!” a girl yelled in the background.

Patrick cast a glance at Jason, who was riding shotgun. He was worried Tiffany’s shout might’ve upset him, but Jason had turned

to the window as if they were passing an especially interesting cluster of trees. “We’ll be there in ten,” Patrick said.

“See, Tiff? Patrick’s not losing his shit because we fucked up his schedule,” Jen said.

“I built in a buffer in case one of us got caught in traffic.”

“Of course you did. All right. Later, losers.”

“Don’t call them losers!” Tiffany said.

“Fine,” Jen said. Patrick smiled at the exasperation in her voice. “See you lovely gentlemen in a trice. I anticipate our reunion with bated breath.”

Jen disconnected. Despite her usual sarcasm, she’d summed up Patrick’s feelings exactly. Anticipation with bated breath. One last meeting of the Jumpscare Society, before their old hangout got razed in the autumn.

Patrick had started the Jumpscare Society in his junior year of high school. His father had moved them from the nearby city of Fairvale after his sister Clare’s murder, thinking Cedar Lake was sleepy and safe. It had turned out to be too sleepy for his parents; his father escaped on countless business trips, while his mother treated her grief and boredom with the best rosé her husband’s money could buy.

Mom had been appalled Patrick would start a club dedicated to watching horror movies, especially after what had happened to Clare. She’d been ready to disown him when he and his friends had been invited to join the Rialto’s shadow cast, acting out *Slasher* for the fans who flocked to the theater on October weekends and three days a week in the summer.

Patrick didn’t know how to explain it was his way of processing Clare’s death. There were so many questions no one could answer. Had her murder really been random? Clare had been the only Black girl at Sigma Kappa, but she’d recently traded bedrooms with a sorority sister. Did Patrick wish the other girl had been strangled by an unknown intruder instead, and *her* family shattered by the tragedy? It wasn’t a fate he’d wish on anyone.

Underneath the B-movie camp, *Slasher* showed that sometimes senseless violence happened for no good reason, and contrary to his father's belief, no amount of money could save you. But more important, slasher movies showed there was always a chance of escape. A girl could fight back. It was like that G. K. Chesterton quote about fairy tales. The point wasn't that dragons were real, but that they could be defeated.

The Jumpscare Society had understood this, that slashers were more than just one campy cult classic that flooded the town with annoying tourists. Patrick had sorely missed the club's acceptance over the past few years. At Harvard, his friends in the economics program either thought slashers were too lowbrow or clamored for his opinion, as a Black man, on Jordan Peele's oeuvre.

"Can't you go any faster?" Mikey bounced impatiently in his seat as if he were a small child who needed to use the toilet. Jason and Mikey were cousins, and the same age, but Mikey's puppyish manner had always made him seem more like a little brother.

"I'm driving the speed limit." A weather notification popped up on the screen of Patrick's phone. Chance of a thunderstorm later. That was fine, there was plenty of fun to be had indoors. Patrick swiped the message away.

"Exactly." As if to prove Mikey's point, a couple of cars passed them on the left, including a Park Services SUV. "C'mon, there was a little old lady at the wheel of that Cadillac."

"I'm driving the speed limit," Patrick repeated firmly. Mikey didn't understand. He'd never gotten in trouble with anyone, thanks to Jason looking out for him in high school. If the cops pulled Mikey over, his blond hair and blue eyes ensured the most he had to fear was a speeding ticket. Patrick, on the other hand, walked the path of the straight and narrow—which was ironic, since he was anything but straight.

Also, risk attracted the unknown. Patrick hated himself for often wondering if Clare had inadvertently done something to draw a killer's attention. Had she flirted with the wrong guy? Said

something flippant to a stranger? He would never know. Violence could be random, but he still felt it prudent to play it safe and not tempt fate.

“I don’t know why we have to go back there,” Jason said, his head still turned to the window.

Mikey spoke first, giving Patrick time to nurse his hurt feelings. “The *Slasher* cabin? Are you kidding? When it’s gonna be torn down soon?”

Patrick bit his lip. “I wanted to get everyone together. We haven’t all been in the same place since high school grad.”

His parents had finally split up after he’d graduated, Dad relocating to his Chicago office and Mom spending her divorce settlement in New York, and he had no reason to come back to Cedar Lake anymore. He would’ve happily visited Jason over the holidays, but Jason had never asked, and Patrick didn’t want to torture himself by fishing for an invite. He was done pining for boys he couldn’t have.

Mikey was also attending college in the Boston area but had repeatedly ghosted Patrick’s texts. Patrick understood. College was a fresh start for Mikey, who’d been picked on in high school even after a late growth spurt that put him an inch taller than Jason. Mikey was probably afraid Patrick would accidentally reveal some of the more embarrassing episodes to his new MIT friends.

“We could’ve come to Boston since you and Mikey are already there. Or we could’ve had a fun weekend in Vegas,” Jason said.

“It’s not the same.” Patrick knew he sounded like a petulant toddler, but he didn’t care. The cabin was the only appropriate place for a Jumpscare Society reunion.

Jason turned to him, his words cracking like a whip. “When are you going to live in the present, Patrick?”

The intensity in Jason’s voice took Patrick aback. He cleared his throat and tried to focus on the winding road. “I don’t—”

“You’ve always been stuck in the past, or the future.”

“That’s not—”

But it *was* true. Patrick diligently planned for the future, because of what had happened in his past. “It’s always good to be prepared,” he said stubbornly.

Jason said nothing else, just turned away again. Patrick let out a small sigh. This reunion was getting off to a great start. Something was eating at Jason, and he wished he knew what it was and how he could help. Jason was on the outs with Tiffany yet again, which was why he was riding up with Patrick and Mikey. It was too much to hope they were broken up for good. Bad things happened when people thought Cedar Lake’s reigning young couple were over. Just look at Carrie Zhao.

There weren’t any signs along the highway directing tourists to the cabin, to discourage unsanctioned gawkers. The car’s GPS told Patrick to turn right on an innocuous dirt road, though he could’ve driven there in his sleep. This was his favorite part. The tall conifers seemed to part for them, the golden evening sun flashing through the branches like a magic lantern, and then all they could see was the sprawling cedar forest the town was named for. Mikey drummed his hands on Jason’s headrest. Jason ignored him, his head tilted toward the window like he was reading a message in the feathery cedar needles.

Something sparkled in the distance, the light at the end of the long tunnel of trees. The surface of Cedar Lake, catching the last rays of light. Patrick’s heart beat quicker. A few minutes later and the road fanned out into a clearing, the lake a shining backdrop behind their destination.

The cabin where *Slasher* had been filmed.

Patrick let out an exultant breath and parked the car on the patchy dirt driveway in front of the familiar structure, tucked within a copse of tall trees. A wooden veranda hugged a two-story cabin with a steeply pitched roof, looking like something out of—well, a movie.

He was amazed it appeared the same, cozy and ominous at the same time, its weathered log siding making it look like it had just

sprouted out of the dirt as a respite for weary travelers. He didn't know what he'd been expecting. It had been only four years since he'd last been here, after all. It just felt like a lifetime, now that they'd left high school behind.

Mikey shot out of the car, not bothering to close the door. His eyes goggled as he stared at the cabin. "Wow! I can't believe you managed to get us in for the weekend. I thought there'd be a waiting list, since Slasher Summer starts next week and this is the last season they're renting it out."

Patrick climbed out of the driver's seat and leaned against the roof of the car to take in the view. The familiar scent of pine and damp earth was a balm for his soul. "Anything for you guys. There was a last-minute cancellation and Jason's mom called me right away." Mrs. Ackerman worked in the rental office and had been happy to hear from Patrick when he'd first hatched his plan. Anything that brought her son home to visit was fine with her.

Mikey ran up to the front porch like a kid trick-or-treating for the first time, leaving Patrick standing awkwardly by the car with Jason. Jason's face was closed as tight as a clam, and Patrick didn't know if it was because of the breakup with Tiffany or his inexplicable disapproval of the choice of reunion site. He'd thought Jason also had good memories of this place.

Unless Jason was just as embarrassed as Patrick by what had happened the last time they'd been alone together. Four years ago, the last night the Jumpscare Society had convened on the cabin grounds, Jason had followed Patrick into the toolshed, expounding on the merits of the second *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Patrick had turned around and discovered Jason right in his path, their faces inches apart. Jason had stopped mid-sentence and they'd locked eyes, their breath rasping heavily in the charged silence. Jason's glance had flicked to Patrick's mouth and for three thunderous and sweaty heartbeats, Patrick had foolishly thought Jason was going to kiss him. Until Tiffany hollered from outside that Jen had ar-

rived with the beer, and Jason had ambled out of the shed as if he hadn't just set Patrick's heart—and body—on fire.

Patrick told himself not to be silly. Jason would've totally forgotten the incident. It was only wishful thinking on Patrick's part that it had meant something.

Jason leaned against the side of the car with his arms crossed. "I do appreciate you organizing this," he finally said, although he didn't sound like he meant it.

He didn't meet Patrick's gaze, instead watching Mikey, who was peering excitedly through the cabin's windows. Mikey wore his old Jumpscare Society T-shirt, which Jen had designed when they were in high school. Patrick had Jen to thank for coming up with the club's name. He'd toyed with calling it the Cinebites as a nod to *Hellraiser*, or the Losers Club, but Jen had pointed out that even if their classmates got the reference to *It*, no one wanted to be called a loser. In the end, the name didn't matter. The Jumpscare Society only ever had seven core members. Because Slasher Summer drew so many eager tourists, Cedar Lake teens thought horror movies were desperately uncool, and not even Jason and Tiffany's popularity could get them to join.

Jason sighed reluctantly. "Just look how happy Mikey is."

Patrick nodded, hiding his hurt that Jason wasn't as enthused. But he wasn't going to let Jason's bad attitude ruin this weekend. Even though seeing him again was what Patrick had been looking forward to the most.

A honk interrupted his thoughts. Tiffany's purple Jeep came rambling down the road to the cabin. Jason's bland expression never wavered. He had a lot of practice at existing in the same space as Tiffany during their breakups.

The Jeep parked beside Patrick's silver Audi. Jen and Tiffany spilled out, bickering over Tiffany's driving skills. They were an unlikely pair, Tiffany bright and sunny, and Jen dark and scowling. They were that meme of the black beach house next to the pink

beach house, although Jen had traded in the Hot Topic corsets for an oversize Siouxsie and the Banshees T-shirt and paint-spattered denim shorts over black fishnets. The kohl that rimmed her brown eyes had been applied with remarkable restraint.

“*The native Cedar Lake goth displays her summer plumage,*” Mikey said in a plummy David Attenborough voice. Patrick laughed. Mikey had always been good at imitations.

Jen rewarded Mikey with the finger. “Nice to see you too, Pipsqueak.”

Mikey was hardly a pipsqueak now. His Jumpscare Society T-shirt stretched across his chest, whereas in high school it had hung off his shoulders like a bedsheet. “I have a name,” he protested, hopping down the porch steps.

“Sorry. Nice to see you, too, *Mikey*. Great T-shirt.”

Mikey’s jaw hardened. “I go by Michael now.”

Jen slung an arm around Mikey’s neck and affectionately pulled down his head to muss up his carefully coiffed blond hair. “You’ll always be Mikey to us. Right, Carlton?” she said to Patrick.

Patrick rolled his eyes. Jen’s predilection for insulting nicknames was one of her greatest flaws *and* charms.

“Hello, boys!” Tiffany chirped, her golden ponytail swinging. She ran her gaze along the assembled company. “Is Freddy not coming?”

Patrick checked his phone. Cell service had dwindled to one bar and data had disappeared, as expected. A few local news headlines had popped up while they’d still had internet access. A six-car pile-up, a man found dead in an alley in downtown Fairvale, a celebrity accused of harassment. Patrick swiped the notifications away. They were here to escape the grim cruelty of the real world.

There were no messages from Freddy. “He’s probably mopping up at the theater.”

“You mean, trying to lure girls into his serial killer van,” Jen said.

Tiffany made a face. “I can’t believe the Mystery Machine hasn’t broken down yet.”

“The mystery is how he manages to pick up girls in it,” said Mikey.

“It’s called weed,” Jen deadpanned. “All right. Are we gonna get this party started or what? Come on, Patrick, let’s start the tour.”

Tiffany took Patrick’s arm, probably so she wouldn’t be alone with Jason. Patrick didn’t mind. He liked Tiffany, even though her flair for drama constantly put Jason through the wringer. She had a bigger heart than she let on. She’d joined the Jumpscare Society because of Jason, but had stuck around through their break-ups. To pad out the extracurriculars on her college applications, she claimed, but Patrick knew it was also because she and Jen had rekindled their friendship. Next-door neighbors and grade-school besties, they’d drifted apart after Jen’s parents divorced. Patrick was gratified he’d brought them back together. The Jumpscare Society screenings on Tuesdays after school were the only place the head cheerleader and the scowling goth girl could hang out without disrupting Cedar Lake High’s strict social hierarchy.

He was glad he’d brought everyone back together this weekend.

Well, almost everyone.

He and Tiffany promenaded up the veranda steps, the others following. “I’m so excited!” she squealed, mirroring his own enthusiasm.

Patrick took the key ring from the pocket of his khakis and found the right key. He opened the door and turned on the light. They all crowded eagerly inside, making noises of appreciation.

“It’s even more like the movie than I remember,” Tiffany said, squeezing Patrick’s arm. The cabin was old and musty—*Slasher* had been filmed in the 1980s, after all—but it was no less grand. A chandelier made of antlers hung from the exposed wooden beams that crisscrossed the main room’s high, peaked ceiling. A narrow wooden staircase led up to the bedrooms on the second floor, the

elaborately carved posts of the balustrade visible from the long hallway.

Mikey gawked in wonder. Even Jason and cynical Jen had genuine smiles on their faces. “I can’t believe we’re here,” Patrick said, a grin stretching his lips.

He inhaled deeply and coughed. The pine-scented air freshener burned the back of his throat. It was probably hiding the scent of mildew. Patrick could see why the rental company had decided to tear the cabin down and rebuild closer to town. Tourists these days would expect Wi-Fi and air conditioning and an address easily found by food delivery apps. Not this isolated and aging abode.

It was surreal to be inside, let alone staying for the weekend. They’d never slept overnight as paying guests, only poked around as curious trespassing teens while Patrick fretted about getting into trouble. The Jumpscare Society was most familiar with the grounds, where they’d spent many nights after their Rialto performances around the fire pit by the lake. Drinking, smoking, goofing off, shooting the shit. Typical teen antics, which they would’ve never done together outside of the film club due to all the different cliques they normally ran with.

Jason’s mom worked at the office that handled the cabin bookings, so he could easily “borrow” the keys when it was vacant. The rental company and park rangers turned a blind eye, as long as the Jumpscare Society cleaned up after themselves. Everyone trusted straitlaced Patrick to keep his club in line, and Jason, Tiffany, and Carrie were the “good” kids at school. In return, Patrick and Jason had stocked the woodpile for guests.

Tiffany dragged Jen with her to scope out the bedrooms, leaving the boys to explore the wood-paneled living area. It was like stepping into a time capsule. The cabin had been decorated so it was identical to how it had appeared in *Slasher*. As was true with the Stanley Hotel, made famous by *The Shining*, visitors were paying to experience a piece of movie history.

Patrick opened the windows, hoping to remove some of the stuffiness and dissipate the fake pine scent. The yellowing gauzy curtains billowed in the cross-breeze. Mikey ran his hand along the striped wool blanket thrown over the brown leather sofa. Faded videotapes of *Slasher* and its two sequels, as well as the reboot, *The Slasher*, sat on top of a combo TV/VCR unit. Patrick couldn't believe people used to watch TVs that small. His laptop had a larger screen. But he hadn't brought everyone here to watch movies, even if it was a reunion of the Jumpscare Society.

A life-size cardboard standee of the Slasher stood beside the TV. Mikey posed beside it, throwing an arm around the checkered shoulders. He puckered his lips in a kiss toward the masked cheek as Patrick raised his phone and took a photo.

"Nice," Patrick said, grinning.

Jason picked up the receiver of the beige rotary phone that sat on a table behind the sofa. "Wow. Our grandma had one of these when Mikey and I were kids. Does it even work?"

A dial tone droned faintly from the earpiece. Mikey crept up beside Jason and did an uncanny imitation of the Slasher's gravelly catchphrase. "*You're all going to die tonight.*"

Jason rounded his eyes and mouth in exaggerated horror, like Jordan Knox, the movie's Final Girl, when she picks up the Slasher's phone call. Patrick took Jason's photo, laughing. It was good to see a flash of Jason's old easygoing self again. "The calls are coming from inside the house!" Patrick cried in mock alarm.

Jason put down the receiver. "Nope. If *Slasher* taught me one thing, it's to never pick up the phone."

He and Mikey moved on, reading the spines of well-worn paperbacks and classic board games on the bookcase. Patrick inspected a stereo system with an intimidating number of dials. There didn't seem to be any place to plug in his phone. So much for the playlists he'd carefully curated for this weekend. At least there was a turntable and the shelves were stocked with vinyl records, though he suspected they were all old to complete the retro experience.

Patrick moved on to the kitchen and opened the heavy wooden cupboards—they really liked their wood back in the eighties—exposing an impressive collection of vintage Corelle and Corningware. The knife block was full, and he pulled out each knife and examined it. The knives were light and the handles made of cheap black plastic. Amateurish, but they'd do in a pinch. He couldn't wait to get started.

He drew back the floral-patterned curtains from the window above the kitchen sink. Cedar Lake glittered below and he drank in the sight like a man who hadn't known how thirsty he was until water hit his lips.

Life had taught Patrick the world was dangerous. At the Rialto, as the club's lone Black member, he'd had to play the unnamed hunter who picks up the hitchhiking Slasher and gets killed in the first fifteen minutes. It wasn't logical, and the trope had aged poorly, but because Patrick had made it inside the cabin he felt like he'd escaped his fate as the Black guy who dies first. He felt safe.

His shoulders sagged as he let out a long breath, releasing a tension he didn't know he was carrying.

He was finally at the one place where he could be himself.

He slid out the largest of the chef's knives again, weighing it in his hand before slipping it back in with satisfaction.

He was home.

"Engaging and charming, perfect
for your own summer vacation."

—Elin Hilderbrand

MAKE

NICE

A Novel

RYAN EFFGEN

A BORZOI BOOK
FIRST HARDCOVER EDITION
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Hugs!” Viv announced before throwing her arms around Pete, smothering him in a warm, familial embrace. Her boobs mashed into the zippers of his safari vest, but so it went with hugs. Pete wasn’t a hugger, so she always gave him fair warning. She stepped back and looked him up and down. Little brother. Rosy-cheeked and unwed, well into his thirties. The safari vest perhaps wasn’t helping in that regard, but that was Pete: Life was one big nature hike. Her gaze finally settled on the brown fedora, clean and not at all broken in. A new purchase for the trip and a bold move for Pete. She resolved not to tease him about it, and not to let their father do so either. “Weird being back here, right?”

“It is weird,” Pete said. “Familiar and strange. Like a dream.”

They’d spent much of their childhood summers on the island before their parents sold their dinky little summer home, explaining to the kids that they’d outgrown it. None of the Pickfords had been back until now. They both took in the scene. The island airport terminal was small, white, and more charming than an airport ought to be. Regular airports and their impersonal shittiness at least gave off a no-nonsense vibe: We’re here to get a job done. This place, from the outside, looked like it might be a golf pro shop or a small café where wealthy people ordered egg-white

omelets. Out front, an American flag flapped at the top of a tall pole. A nice little breeze came from Lake Michigan.

“Did that outfit come with a compass?” Viv asked. “You wanna lead us to the hotel?”

“The hotel sends carriages, actually,” Pete said. “With a driver and everything, though I read that the horses can get you there on their own. They know the island like the back of their, well, I suppose, hoof.”

Viv punched his shoulder. “Back of their hoof. Classic Pete.” How was this adorable, brilliant dope alone? A loss for any number of women out there who surely would be as fond of him as he was of snails, sea slugs, and other moist, aquatic things. He was a scientist. Who wouldn’t want to date a scientist? For a time, Viv worried he’d come to regret being so consumed by his work, the double career of slogging around in the muck, panning for specimens, then getting cleaned up and mentoring grad students. But now she had to envy him. A single duffel bag and no one to worry about.

She tilted her head back. “My god, I forgot about the air here. I’m retroactively grossed out by how Chicago smells.”

“It’s the lack of cars.” Pete took a deep, nostril-flaring breath. “And the negative ions from the lake.”

“The what, now?”

Pete shifted to explanation mode, as if there were a whiteboard behind him. “The force of the crashing waves produces negative ions. Which is a good thing! It filters out pollutants. Boosts your mood a bit.” He gave the brim of his fedora a little tug. He seemed not to have settled on how it ought to rest on his head. Viv was already won over by it. It was easy enough to picture him leading a troop of students on a nature center hike, as he often did in his spare time. A spiffy hat was just the thing to distinguish him as the leader.

“Can we talk about the hat? Because I love it.”

Pete quickly took it off and shyly turned it in his hands. “High praise coming from you.”

Viv that day wore a floral sundress, shockingly bright, the pattern like campy, vintage wallpaper. Red-framed sunglasses and lipstick to match. Beside her were a pair of roller suitcases, polished aluminum ones that gleamed in the sun. The cases were fitted out with a pair of locks that you were meant to turn in unison, as if she were transporting plutonium.

Pete looked around. “No Warren?”

“Nope. There’s some mega-crisis at his work.”

“The whole week?”

“The whole damned week. Blah blah merger. Streamlining the synergy. I’m making it sound cooler than it is. But he’s been put in charge of stuff, so, yay?”

“You holding up okay?” He meant about their mother, who had passed away some three months back. Returning to the island had actually been their mother’s idea and had been on the books for some time. The island and their former home had been her thing, and she’d been insistent on having everyone attend this little reunion. Her insistence surprised Viv, as her parents had been tight-lipped about the abrupt sale of their former island home; kids eventually learned not to ask. Then her mom’s sudden passing transformed the week into a tribute. Their father decreed, via email, there’d be no mourning on this trip. This was to be happy, family time.

“Holding up, for sure. A bit worried about the old man finding his way forward. She handled the little stuff, you know? It’s like, he paid for that big house, but does he even know how it works? When we were home for the funeral, I caught him pouring Palmolive into the dishwasher. I had to explain the difference between soap and detergent. His fault for just now learning this stuff, but it kinda broke my heart.”

Pete bit his lip and nodded. Then, turning his head. “Is that

Ashley?” motioning toward the young teen seated on a white bench beneath the airport’s curtained awning.

Viv took a breath before answering. “Ash, not Ashley. She’s become very insistent about it. Got all of her teachers well trained.”

“Oh! Okay. Is this—can I ask—is this a gender thing?”

“More like an I-hate-my-name thing. We have entered the defiant years. Which, really, is all we’ve ever had with Ash.”

“Apple doesn’t fall far,” Pete said. “And how is Ash doing?”

“As well as any high school sophomore, which is to say: not amazing. She had a falling-out with her friend group, and she’s acting like she doesn’t care, but she does. I’m hoping our time on the island will do her some good. It gives you distance, you know? Like, the bullshit back home can’t find me here. It can’t travel over water. Ash! Come say hello to your uncle!”

Ash looked up from her book. “Science uncle!”

Viv said to Pete, “Hope you like the moniker. For a while, we were referring to our other sibling as ‘wayward uncle.’ Sometimes ‘prodigal uncle’ or ‘struggling uncle.’”

“Struggling. I think that’s fair. Makes it sound like he’s trying to do better.”

“It’s generous is what it is.”

“I like that I’m ‘science uncle.’” He looked at Ash fondly. “Actually, I’ve got a little surprise that might interest her. It involves mollusks.”

“Well, color me intrigued.”

Ash joined them and they surveyed the half-dozen horse-drawn carriages, lined up and waiting. “So we’re supposed to just pick one or what?” Viv approached one of the carriages, gesturing at the pair of horses with her chin. “Those two know where the Grand Hotel is?”

The man’s eyebrows shot up. “Grand Hotel, they call it. Just a sec.” He summoned another driver, whose carriage, previously hidden by the others, emerged, led by a massive pair of steeds.

Tourists turned to admire the scene: this cherry-red carriage, lacquered and polished and glistening in the sun. Its driver wore a red coat and a top hat. Pete and Ash sidled up beside Viv. Without a word, the driver climbed down and efficiently gathered up their luggage and stored it on the roof. Even the ropes securing the luggage were charming, brass grommets and all. He then opened a door for Viv and company, setting out a little step stool for them. “I could get used to this!” Pete said, beaming. His enthusiasm was met with a faint nod from the driver: the decorum of a butler who strove to remain unseen.

They began to move. Rhythmic clomps from hooves on asphalt. Viv decided not to think too hard about it. Not to consider whether it was right and just for these magnificent animals to spend their days carting a bunch of yahoos around a cheesy vacation island. She needed the week to be restful, and that included all the noise in her head. The town’s shops came into view. That morning, getting into an Uber out front of her home in Evanston, she could have offered up just a small handful of details about the island. She remembered their house, which was long gone (she’d caught a painful glimpse on Google Street View), and she recalled a few of the ice cream parlors and a little boat shack by the water. But now that she was here, memories were unlocked. Everything was right where she’d left it, all of it candy-colored and vibrant. There was the fudge shop where she first took her lifelong stance against white chocolate. There was the hokey little island gifts boutique where she bought a nautical rope bracelet and wore it until college. The flow of memories kept on, as if a levee had broken. The flavor of root beer rock candy. The smell of hose water on hot cement. Lightning bugs. Waffle cones. Shops that only sold wooden toys. Bicycles with wicker baskets. Mini golf and fireworks. Childhood. Then beyond childhood. They’d kept the house until Viv was about Ash’s age. Her final summer there left Viv with a story she almost never told, save for one time

in college while playing *Never Have I Ever*, when she bluntly proclaimed: *Never have I ever fucked in a rowboat . . .* then, declaring herself guilty, drank.

Brilliant, really, how over the top the island was. Some of the dopey visitors would believe they were seeing life as it once was. And another portion, the one that included herself, would admire how the island had doubled down on the kitsch. It wasn't the set of a movie; it was the set of a musical. It was all so perfectly frivolous. Only candy stores and T-shirt shops and ice cream and coffee. Not a single item that could help a person in an emergency. No Band-Aids, tampons, antiseptic. It would've broken the spell to admit that the body had needs that could not be met with lemonade and saltwater taffy. She had lied about her husband's work. They'd been having problems. Or, rather, a single, mountain-size problem, and the one thing she and Warren could agree on is that they needed some space. If she'd had her druthers, she would be off in wine country with a college friend. But the timing was what it was, and so now she was getting carted along by a pair of horses down Main Street. Of course it was called Main Street. Viv picked out the horse scents. Breath. Hair. A faint whiff of manure—not enough to be repulsive. Just enough to confirm the presence of a living thing. Reassuring, in a way.

“We shall not want for fudge,” she said. Joann's Fudge. May's Fudge. Murdick's Fudge. “Ash, give the book a rest for two seconds and look around!”

Ash complied, resting a colorful Japanese graphic novel on the knees of her fuzzy pajama pants. She and her friends had never fully come out of quarantine. She raised her chin. “This town smells like funnel cake.”

“They have a Starbucks now,” Pete pointed out. It was retrofitted into a cozy storefront, the corporate mermaid hand-carved into a round wooden shingle that hung from a wrought-iron signpost. Viv snapped a photo so she could text it to Warren. They had a thing for quaint-ified corporate storefronts. Ye olde

Targets and such. She thought for a moment, then deleted the photo. Another cyclist passed the carriage, giving a chirpy little *ring-ring* from her bicycle bell. Everyone on the street seemed like movie extras, entering Viv's field of vision on cue. The carriage briefly halted at an intersection so another carriage could pass. An elderly couple sat on a bench, eating ice cream out of oversize waffle cones. "I guess we were too young to really question what this place even is. But what is it?" she asked no one in particular. "A carnival without rides? A beach town without an ocean? A colonial village without the history?"

The driver spoke up. "Many visitors want to know where all the cars are." He seemed disappointed that no one had asked. "The island has been car-free since 1898, just a few years after the arrival of the horseless carriage, as we like to call it. Of course, the island does have a few emergency vehicles. Police, fire, ambulance, naturally."

"Do they have names?" Ash asked loudly.

"What was that?" the driver politely asked.

"The horses. They got names?"

Her question pleased the driver. "Edwin and Hans. Hans is named after Clever Hans, a horse who was famous for his skills with arithmetic. His owner would challenge him with addition and subtraction problems, and Clever Hans would provide the correct answer with stomps of his hoof."

"That was fake, though," Ash said.

The driver turned around on his little seat. "Very good! It did turn out to be a bit of chicanery."

"Your horse is named after a liar."

"Ash." Viv and Pete tightened their lips to stifle laughter.

The driver transitioned back to being unseen.

"Probably the cleverest animal, not counting primates, is the octopus," Pete said brightly. "Easily the cleverest mollusk, in any case."

Neither Viv nor Ash had anything to say to that. Ash was

back to her book. Viv watched Pete watching Ash. Meeting up with family had an effect on Viv. Her husband and child and day-to-day existence—that was everything, that was the entire world. But then a sibling came into view, and suddenly she felt seen. She would view her own life through his eyes, and it all shrank. Her life was no longer the entire world but a niche little museum she'd been curating. *Here's where we display our child's current phase. And in this wing, we keep the husband. He's part of the permanent collection.*

The museum was in shambles. Her mind was back on Warren. *Blah blah merger.* She'd rehearsed that. It'd be more convincing if the reason bored her. *Merger.* She hadn't intended it ironically. They hadn't committed to separating. Not yet. Viv was still processing Warren's bombshell. *Now that I know, it's like I've always known. But of course I didn't. Does that make any sense?* He'd put his hand out on top of hers, as if her sole purpose in that moment was to understand that she had loved, had had an uncountable amount of sex with, and had created a child with a man who apparently had been gay the whole time. And her heart did go out to him. And she also could've killed Warren, as he sat there, wounded, as if this were some sort of saintly affliction. As if she were not merely supposed to understand, but to cheer him on, to wave from the dock as he departed, at long last, on his voyage of self-discovery.

This was a predictable grief cycle, Viv supposed, though she'd skipped denial—which only amplified what followed: anger. Fuck Warren. Fuck him for not knowing himself. Fuck him for this revelation. Fuck him for dragging her into it. Fuck herself for not spotting it. She, of all people. Most of all, fuck him for having Ash with her—an act based on the premise that Viv and Warren were reliable, predictable beings. A union stable enough to grow in number. And now here she was, in a horse-drawn carriage with their child, while he was off doing god knows what or whom. Ash turned a page. At age fourteen, she was no stranger to

the idea of two moms or two dads. Uncommon, but ultimately no more surprising than having a set of twins in your grade.

So, are we done now? That's what Viv had said to Warren. She still didn't know. A separation made sense. She understood that. Not because either of them had a dire need for sex; it was more that the man she'd married was someone else now. Or he was the same, but more fully realized. And good for him. She did feel that. When she wasn't grinding her teeth and wanting to murder him, she felt newly affectionate toward him. She took a breath. She had no illusions that this trip was going to correct anything. Even if she got a massage at the hotel spa. Even if she drank a whole bottle of prosecco in the tub. When she packed up her shiny suitcases and checked out of the hotel, the same three words would still be true: Warren likes guys. Cherry peanut fudge wasn't going to fix that. Nor was croquet on a manicured lawn. Nor was the hotel's famous porch, the world's largest—such an odd bragging point—though, as the hotel came into view with an air of triumph, Viv found herself not just looking at it, but beholding it. It hadn't held a significant spot in her memory, as, growing up, they'd associated it with ultra-wealthy tourists with no real connection to the island. Seeing it now, she found herself saying aloud, "Okay, now that's a motherfucking porch."

The hotel was positioned on the hill, the island's focal point. Like a grand piano, it was long, sleek, and elegantly curved. Eyes were drawn to it. Even Ash looked up. It really was something. Gleaming white, dotted with columns and flags and daisy-yellow awnings. Against the clear blue sky, it seemed like an impossible thing, boasting old-world refinement, seersucker suits, muddled cocktails, and people who wore white sweaters on the tennis court. In a matter of days, she would depart from the island with a plan. Together or apart? Two rocky paths lay ahead. Neither was perfect, but they had to pick one. Viv would use the time here to sort it out. Also, she would make a point to enjoy herself. Drink one of those muddled cocktails or lie around in a spa with

slices of cucumber on her closed eyes while some quiet handlers painted her nails, massaged her calves, and daintily restored her as if she were a fresco.

The horses increased their effort on the home stretch. The carriage ran alongside the hotel's golf course. A man stood in the center of a blindingly white sand trap. He swung at a neon yellow ball, sending it and a comet's tail of sand onto the green.

Ash spoke up. "What's up with that sand? Did they bleach it? It doesn't even look real."

"Oh! I read about this," Pete said. "That's a special variety of quartz. It comes from Spruce Pine, North Carolina. Same quartz that they use in smartphones. Tech companies buy up the purest of it, and then some high-end golf courses pay good money for the leftovers."

"Wait," Ash began, processing it all. "We're on an island. Like, with beaches. They've already got sand. They seriously had a bunch of sand shipped in from somewhere?"

"From North Carolina," Pete said.

"Sorry, that's ridiculous. Why is this sand better? Because it's white?"

"Please don't start," Viv said.

The road veered toward the hotel, and for the last several paces they were engulfed by tulips. The carriage came to a halt and a spry trio of bellhops appeared and briskly took down their luggage, passing suitcases one to the other, a spectacle of choreographed efficiency. Pete climbed down and offered a hand to young Ash, who merely tucked her book under her arm and leaped out, checkered Vans smacking the pavement. Pete then awkwardly offered a hand to Viv, who accepted it and stepped down. "So, Ash has discovered anime?"

"Manga. It's anime when it's in video format. The number of times I've been corrected on that point. And those books are insane. I thought it was just going to be pixie girls shooting pink lasers from their eyes, but Ash is into these ghost-story manga

books, and that shit gets dark. That's not her only thing, though!" she was quick to add. "She loves science. I could see you two connecting. Hope you don't mind if I shove the two of you together while we're here."

"Shove away!"

A wooden sign in the shape of an arrow indicated that the front desk was eighteen steps that way. Yet another uniformed official opened the door. For all their time on the island as kids, they'd never been inside the Grand. Viv was hit with a dizzying shock of color. "What in the what?" She was overcome by an onslaught of decorative whimsy. Green velvet couches on a black carpet patterned with red roses. Yellow floral love seats. Long and narrow black-and-white-checkered hallways. It was Christmas, it was Easter, it was Alice in Wonderland. It would've been gaudy if it weren't so deliberate—someone had boldly stuck to their aesthetic guns. A graphic artist by trade, Viv was acutely aware of an establishment's color palette—whether the goal was to soothe or to project vibrance or to establish a sense of refinement. This place strove for disbelief. You were meant to look twice at the vibrantly clashing couches and carpets, as if to make you think: *Wow, they really went for it.*

A chipper young woman greeted them at the front desk. "Pickford," Viv said to her. "Party of us." She put her hand on Ash's shoulder. "We're one room." She then jerked her thumb at Pete. "Indiana Jones is another. This'll all be in our father's name. H. L. Pickford. The *H* is for Harold, but on paperwork it's H. L."

"Excellent." The young lady typed on a clicky keyboard. Her eyes focused on something. "It actually looks like one of your party has already checked in."

"Huh." Pete looked at his watch. "Dad's flight doesn't get in until late this afternoon."

"I see." The woman typed something rapidly. "Okay, Pete. Pete Pickford checked in earlier this morning."

“Nope,” Viv said. “This is Pete.”

Pete waved. The woman leaned into her computer screen. “Oh, I see. A gentleman named Corey Pickford. He explained that the room reserved for Pete actually was for him.” She looked up and grinned cautiously. To Pete, she said, “Perhaps you’re sharing the room, or . . . ?”

“No,” Viv said loudly. “No, he didn’t.”

“Ooh, bad uncle!” said Ash, wiggling her fingertips.

The young lady gripped the marble desktop. “Perhaps I could . . .”

They waited to see what was on offer. The young lady smiled earnestly and stood there, bright-eyed and eager to help, with no actual course of action to take.

“*Awkward . . .*” Ash said in a jokey way, still young enough to simply be a spectator to the grown-up drama. “What now? Pistols at dawn?”

Pete replied kindly, “We weren’t expecting to see him. He’s been real hard to reach for a while, so this is a surprise—that’s all.”

“And exactly what room is Mr. Corey Pickford in?” Viv asked.

A moment later, Viv was marching down the hall with Pete and Ash in tow. She was now blind to the décor that had so recently gripped her senses. The three of them hurried past a tearoom, a billiards parlor, a quiet sitting nook. Viv led with her elbow, weaved through the hotel guests. Pete reached for her shoulder. “Maybe we should—” She wasn’t having it. Up a flight of stairs and then another, around another corner, and she was outside Room 323. She knocked three times and then peered into the eyehole.

“That’s a concave lens,” Pete said.

Viv knocked more forcefully. “Open up, Corey.”

Footsteps within. The door opened and there he stood, wearing a terrycloth robe with GRAND HOTEL stitched on the breast in royal-blue thread. When had she seen him last? It’d been more than three years. Possibly five. He’d fallen off the face of the earth.

Either hadn't received their calls and texts or couldn't be bothered to reply. Viv had slowly come to accept that he'd removed himself from their lives entirely. Seeing him in the flesh was dizzying. He put his hand to his forehead and smoothed a wisp of black hair away from his eyes. Though his freckles were long gone, he looked like someone who had once had freckles. Surprisingly, he didn't look all that bad. On his feet were white slippers, emblazoned with the same hotel logo. His hand balled into a soft fist, which he raised to his mouth, shielding a deep, bearish yawn. Had this been someone's young husband, he probably would've seemed cute. The little bastard.

"Made yourself at home," Viv said. "Just don't put that robe in your suitcase when you leave. It's not complimentary."

"You're not complimentary," Corey said sleepily.

"You're in Pete's room!" Viv said. "You need to get out. Go get your own room."

Pete, as per usual, was in a big hurry to de-escalate. "Oh, I'm sure we can add another room to the account. Corey's all settled. Glad you could make it, Corey."

Pete reached out to shake Corey's hand. Corey stepped forward and hugged Pete vigorously, slow-dancing him back and forth. "Pete. My brother. *Mi hermano*. Good to see you. How's life among the mollusks?"

"I could ask you the same question," Viv said. "Did you come alone, or did you bring one of your not-at-all-shady accomplices with you?"

"Ashley! Loving the new look."

Corey put out a fist and Ash fist-bumped him, finishing with an exploding sound effect. "Call me Ash, please."

"Roger that. I actually never loved the name Ashley. Is it okay to say that?"

"Not really," Viv said. "Given that it was our grandmother's name."

Corey went on. "For real, Pete, how are you?"

“Good!” Pete answered eagerly. “Just glad to see you. Nice to have the family together.”

“Um, yeah?” Viv said. “Corey, what in the hell? You can’t act like this is normal, you just suddenly being here. I mean, my god, the funeral! How many messages did I leave, did Pete leave? You wanna explain yourself?”

Corey just looked at her, slightly disappointed, as if he’d known she was going to say exactly those words and why could she not bring herself to be more interesting? “Do I want to? Not particularly. I’m exhausted, if you want to know the truth, which is why I needed to get myself a room. Sorry for the mix-up, Pete. And I just filled up the tub and I’d like to jump in before the water goes cold. If you want to stick around while I have a bath, you can carry on with disliking me and whatnot.” He then looked sleepily at each of them in turn. “Ash, you got taller. Makes sense. And Pete, new hat. Love it. Viv, you can go ahead and age already. Looking fabulous, as always.”

“Dad knows you’re here? He invited you? Sorry, that’s just really surprising. He was pretty hurt about you being completely absent over the past year, and I can’t say I blame him.”

“Me neither! No one’s blaming him.”

Viv shook her head. “Not everything is a joke, Corey. And as for watching you bathe, we’ll pass. But we’ll all have lunch at noon. You showed up for this thing, you’re going to be a part of it.”

“Lunch sounds great. I also want to do the high tea thing at some point. Gal at the desk told me about it. She made it sound pretty fantastic.” He made a small pinching gesture with his fingers. “Tiny éclairs, she said.”

“Noon,” Viv said. “And there’s a dress code.”

Corey smiled. “Yep, yep. Got it. And, listen, I can’t wait to catch up, but I’ve got a real issue with wasting water, so I think it’s bath time for this weary traveler. More soon.” He slipped back into his room and shut the door.



Retro

A Novel

Jessica M.
Goldstein

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Come Away With Us
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The bar stranger's apartment was very clean, so clean it was alarming, as if he had recently scrubbed it to cover up evidence of some messy, violent crime. The decor could have been anybody's. Mid-century modern furniture with shiny black accents. Neutral fabrics everywhere. A grid of framed black and white photographs of city scenes Ash couldn't place, and a larger print by his bed of abstract art that it would've fit in a dentist's office waiting room or the lobby of a Marriott Express. Ash felt a surge of disdain, laced with envy. Had this person ever had an original thought in his entire life? Then again, she couldn't have afforded most of it, and though she liked to think she was the type of person who wouldn't have gone for such a pre-curved life in the event she could afford it, she had yet to be in a financial position to test this theory of her unimpeachable individuality.

She walked barefoot to the bathroom. All smooth, opalescent surfaces, aseptic as an operating theater. Sans serif fonts on all his personal grooming products. She squeezed a blob of white toothpaste on her index finger and rubbed it across her teeth. Then she closed her eyes and pictured her own bathroom, where the Softsoap she got at the CVS was the tacky, acidic green of a gummy bear, and whorls of her hair stuck in spirals to the shower tile until they slid into the tub and eventually clogged the drain.

When she walked back out he was already making coffee. It was Monday and he was getting ready for work. He looked up from scooping grinds and said *well, hello there*, smiling at her like this whole interaction was some elaborate inside joke, which she guessed it kind of was? It was funny that she could go home with a stranger and not be murdered. She felt like this is what they'd marched for. This is what Susan B. Anthony lived for and what Joan of Arc died for. It was all so she could have the freedom to do exactly this. Probably this isn't quite how they (Susan, Joan, et. al.) imagined it would be, but life was full of these kinds of surprises, Ash figured, and that's what made it all—waking up, being alive—such a relentless thrill.

She'd met the bar stranger at a dive where the rainbow string lights stayed up all year round and the playlist was only songs from the eighties or before. After a few drinks, they'd gone outside to flirt without having to shout over the music, and she was struck with a sense of *deja vu*: She recognized the building across the street. She'd performed there when she was in this theater company that did pop-up Shakespeare productions on "found stages," spots in the city that were in some state of transition, usually demolition or construction sites or docks that would soon be swallowed by the sea. The actors were supposed to apply the concept of constant change to their characters: to see the plays and everything in them as existing in perpetual flux, as if the texts were still works in progress.

Ash had been the lead in *Romeo and Juliet* at a skyscraper-in-the-making. The church where she'd wed had been a heap of rubble christened by a cross of caution tape; her balcony the exposed scaffolding of what would become a luxury condo, though at the time of her performance it still looked like it could have become anything. Its skeletal beginnings had not betrayed its destiny as the eventual address of an investment banker or absent Russian oligarch, just as her then-ascendant stardom had not seemed, yet, like something that would fizzle into nothing. As she'd told the bar stranger about the play, she could only just make out the Capulet's castle's outline in the glass-walled, foreboding tower looming over her.

"I had this whole theory about my *Juliet*," Ash had said. "That she knew who *Romeo* was the whole time."

“Oh yeah?” The bar stranger sucked on a black vape pen whose tip glowed green against the night. “How’s that?”

“Verona’s not that big. And he’s Romeo — the boy from the family blood feud. Plus he’s cute. He gets around. Girls talk. She knows.”

“So?”

“So she picked him on purpose, because she wanted to blow up her life.”

“Blow up her life? Sounds extreme.”

Though Ash wasn’t quite sure how they’d done it, somehow she and the bar stranger had decided, silently and in unison, to abandon the bar together and walk to his apartment. To her left, the East River glimmered under the moonlight. In the dark it hadn’t looked polluted at all. It had looked clean enough for Ash to scoop it into her mouth with her hands.

“Okay, so when she’s getting ready for the party—the one where she meets him—her mom comes in and tells her that they’re marrying her off to some guy she doesn’t even know. And right then, Juliet sees the truth. Her whole life is just beginning and it’s already over. There’s nothing she can do. She has no agency, no options, no freedom. Right when she’s on the cusp of everything really opening up, it’s all going to snap shut around her. She’s trapped.”

“Is that so bad?” He’d smiled at this. “Being trapped with a man?”

I’m ignoring that, Ash had decided. “Her mom tells her that there are girls younger than Juliet who are already mothers. Like Juliet’s supposed to get excited about having a bunch of babies with some guy she doesn’t even know.”

“What makes you so sure she doesn’t want to have babies?”

“She’s thirteen.”

“Sure. But like, in her society. Wasn’t that the normal thing to do?”

“Do you really think thirteen-year-old girls ever wanted to have babies?”

“I think most people want to do whatever it is that most people are doing.”

I’m ignoring that, too. “What Juliet wants is control over her destiny, which is the one thing she doesn’t have. So when she sees Romeo at the party, she realizes: That’s the ticket. Run away with the one person her parents would never allow her to marry. She knows it’s doomed. She’s basically signing her own death warrant. But at least she’s taking her life into her own hands. This one time—which turns out to be the only time it really matters—she decides.”

As she’d said this aloud, Ash remembered how she’d felt when she first came to this conclusion. Up until then, she’d been self-conscious about her performance, struggling to make her dialogue lose that rehearsed, expected quality it seemed to carry no matter what she did. But then she’d thought of this, of Juliet *deciding*, and the whole play burst wide open, like her thought was the swing that popped the piñata, and candy-sweet clarity rained down around her. When she opened her script again every word shone new as the dawn.

In the elevator of the bar stranger’s building, the cold, mirrored walls had reflected warped images of their bodies back at her. He’d placed his hands on the wall on either side of her face and touched his forehead to hers. “So what happens?”

“What do you mean, what happens?”

“Do they live happily ever after or what?”

“Well, no. It’s Romeo and Juliet. They die.”

“I thought you said the point was that you guys changed everything around.”

“It does change everything around.” Had she not made that clear? Ash felt like her brain was floating in a pool of alcohol, suspended in a jar as if for scientific study.

“Except it doesn’t really change anything,” he’d said. “If they still die at the end.”

Ash had steadied herself against the wall, feeling a faint hum on her temple as the elevator climbed and dinged at their arrival. “She makes up her own mind. It changes everything.”

“Sounds like the same story to me,” he’d said, leading her down the hall and into his apartment.

“It is the same story. But she’s different in it.”

He’d kissed her collarbone. “If you say so.”

She could tell he didn’t get it, and she wasn’t sure whose fault that was. But as she’d trailed him into his bedroom she had the ambient awareness that he was already flattening her into an anecdote for later evaluation and possibly mockery. She had experienced this as a physical sensation, like the flattening was something he was doing just then with his hands against her body: pressing her down until she was petal-slender. He would forget her name; she knew this as if it had already occurred. She would just be “Juliet,” or “Shakespeare girl,” or “some actress,” when he told this story to his friends. As he’d slipped her bra straps from her shoulders, she erased his name from her brain, to keep things even between them.

Watching him now as he readied himself for work—as he fumbled to separate two coffee filters that were stuck together—Ash felt like she was prying, almost, by witnessing this mundane routine, as if they were a couple. To kill time while he got dressed, she imagined that were true. She mentally filled his closet with her clothes, covered his countertops with her clutter, collaged his refrigerator door with their candid photos. She saw herself becoming a smug dispenser, rather than the enraged recipient, of unsolicited dating advice; an occupant of the master bedroom with the en-suite bathroom, instead of the bunk-bed basement dungeon, on group trips. Felt the weight of a ring around her finger, wedding cake icing smeared on her nose, her stomach swelling with pregnancies, rapid as time-lapse photography. She could see it all: late nights at the kitchen table cutting construction paper hearts for Valentines and kissing better the scraped spot where the Band-Aid would go and tiptoeing into soft pink bedrooms to swap baby incisors for silver dollars and making that happy-dopey eye contact with the bar stranger over their children’s slumbering heads like: *can you believe they’re ours?*

Though of course it could all go sideways, the marriage and kids kit-and-caboodle. She could see this, too: a lifetime of grinning through gritted teeth at insufferable in-laws; of passive-aggressive bickering over how to correctly load the dishwasher; of hearing all her conversations with the bar stranger, which during their courtship had been full of riveting debate and imaginative tangents, consist of nothing but logistical matters regarding the comings and goings of their offspring; of her immune system caving to the relentless assault of arcane-sounding diseases (hand-foot-and-mouth, croup) their children would smuggle home from school; of endless hours lost to mind-numbingly boring calculations about the cost of childcare and if it was worth it to move to some soulless suburb in a higher tax bracket for better public schools and how much screen time was too much screen time; of never having a single solitary second or square centimeter of space that was hers, and only hers, to do with what she liked.

The problem was that no future actually appealed, and the only thing less appealing than every future Ash could imagine was the life she was living right this minute continuing on in exactly this way. She reassured herself with the knowledge that the future would never really arrive—that if it did it would be in some form unrecognizable to her presently, i.e. on a charred, uninhabitable earth—and none of her choices, or her abstinence from choice-making that at a certain point not too far from today would become the functional equivalent of having made a choice, would make any difference whatsoever.

She returned to her real life to watch the bar stranger check his reflection in the steel of the microwave door. She went into his room, sank back into his pillows, and recalled, with anarchic glee and a little despair, that she had nowhere to be that day, or any day, now that she'd lost her job. There was nothing stopping her from lolling around in his king size bed and pawing through his medicine cabinet while he was out except for she could tell he didn't really want her there while he was gone.

They walked outside together. It was warm and damp, the sky a shale slate, threatening rain. Dog-breath humid. A poster plastered to the side of a bus shelter warned: *It's not just the hottest summer on record. It's the coldest summer of the rest of your life.* Ash pretended she wasn't going in the same direction as the bar stranger was and watched him head toward the subway which could have taken her to her apartment. It made her feel a little insane to imagine him going about his normal day now, knowing what he knew about her from having had sex with her: how she breathed in sharp, serrated strips; how her body contracted and thrashed and collapsed like a fish fresh on the dock. She thought of him carrying all her sounds and shapes with him while doing, well, whatever it was he did. Something in finance? She hadn't really paid attention to what he said his job was, or maybe he hadn't told her. She imagined him typing numbers in an endless spreadsheet while all her details evaporated from his mind, as the night receded further and further from his consciousness until he forgot all about her.

A taxi driver leaning on the horn brought her mind back to the street. She thought, *I should do something wild, something I'd never do if I had to go to work. I can do whatever I want right now.* This had been the fantasy, back when she'd had the job: of blowing it off to go do some exhilarating, unexpected thing. Now that she could do anything, she found, not without some private embarrassment, that she didn't know what anything to want.

She sat on the curb and reached up with both hands to rub the curves in her jaw where it neared her ears. She hadn't slept well the night before and she expected no rest was forthcoming, that her sleep would be fitful and sweaty and useless until she found another job. She could feel that, somewhere along the way, her world had slipped off its axis, and that she had been waiting around for some greater force to set it back to its proper tilt, like popping a dislocated shoulder back into its socket. And yet no force had arrived; she was starting to doubt that it ever would. She wanted to lie down in the grass and sink into the earth as if she were already dead.

Ash took out her phone. She glanced at her texts: No reply from Pebbles. She avoided checking her email, sure to be a cascade of notifications about overdue credit card statements and student loan payments. Instead, she thumbed through Instagram.

A dimpled baby kicking the air, wooden blocks by her feet spelling out her age in months; glistening legs draped over the rim of a neon pool float, toes grazing the Barbicide-blue water; advertisement (wireless bra on a flat-chested model); a magenta cocktail thrust skyward by a gel-manicured hand; a leather suitcase with its silky, tantalizing contents oozing out the edges, captioned *fine okay we'll check a bag*; advertisement (seamless underwear on a flat-assed model); here's to another trip around the sun; can't believe it's already been five years with this one; and then:

Whenever, wherever.

White text, yolk-yellow background. Bright, inviting. Slimmer writing below:

Retro: The Time Travel Agency

We'll take you from here.

Ash had heard about recreational time travel, of course, but it was expensive—prohibitively so, for all but the sliver of the population who had designed a present so obsequiously bent toward their every desire it was hard to fathom why they'd ever bother leaving it. Though maybe that's why they liked it; maybe for the same reasons as middle-class types go camping. For an experience they've been told is authentic, more real than their real lives.

Last summer, this rich girl who went to college with Ash had a *Little House on the Prairie*-theme bridal shower on some untamed stretch of the American plains in 1875. The pictures were surreal, an abomination against the laws of time and space that was also wildly, aggressively ordinary: an overhead shot of rhubarb pie; portraits of the bride, her short bangs in curls and long hair in plaits, her ruffled dress straps slipping off her anachronistically-toned shoulders. The fields behind her golden and immense—amber waves, just like in the song—going on and on and on forever, beneath a canopy of bunny-soft clouds, boundless blue sky.

Given the rest of Ash's online search history (“cheapest health insurance +not sick +not pregnant +probably” “leggings under \$20 not see-through” “contractors still qualified unemployment?”) she wondered why the algorithmic powers-that-be had determined she was an ideal target for this luxury good, until she saw the tinier text along the bottom of the square:

Come away with us! We're hiring.

I Can't Make You Want To Be Here

Last week, Ash's boss had sent her an email with the subject line *chat about your future here*, leading her to believe she was finally getting promoted — that is, elevated from a contractor to a real-deal, full-time employee. This had been the promise at the time of her hire: that one day, they would make an honest staffer out of her. Instead, her contract had been extended over and over, like trick scarves pulled from a sleeve, for three years.

She'd written back to the email: *can't wait*.

Ash had met her boss at his cubicle. He'd been sitting on the edge of his desk, gesturing to his chair so that she'd have somewhere to sit.

"I need to talk to you about your attitude," was how he'd started.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she'd said.

"Well, it doesn't seem as if you're very happy here."

Each day, Ash had gone to work weighed down by the knowledge that, while in the grand scheme of things, nothing anyone does will have true significance in this universe, what she was engaged in at this particular juncture was even more pointless than the average pointless thing. But she'd tried to be nice about it.

"I mean, it's work," she'd said. "So, sometimes I'm happy here, and other times, I guess I'm not. Are you always happy to be here?"

He'd made a steeple with his fingertips, inhaling deeply. "No one is always happy. That's not how happiness works."

Ash had resented the implication that this man understood the true nature of joy and she did not, a rude conclusion he'd drawn from seeing her only at this workplace, an environment that made her unhappy. "Right, yeah, I know that," she'd said.

"But some people love their jobs. *You* could love your job."

Ash had spent her days in a gray cubicle in a beige building doing vapid administrative tasks. She'd done everything they'd asked of her, only to endure annual reviews in which she was dressed down for failing to go *above and beyond*; promotions never came, raises refused to materialize. She'd been supposed to toil as if she could trust some reward for her work was forthcoming, but they all knew it never was. Her unwillingness to hold up her end of the charade—wherein she did every dumb bit of drudgery with a happy-puppy energy, as if her lot in this life might one day improve—had, evidently, been grating on her supervisor, who could not maintain the illusion of the meritocratic workplace without her complicity.

"Your job isn't just a job," he'd said. "We like to think of ourselves as a family here."

"I'm actually good with the family I already have," she'd said, which was true enough.

This had seemed to offend him deeply.

"And it seems like you aren't really connecting with the rest of the staff," he'd said.

Over the years, Ash had been reprimanded every so often for not "participating more in the culture here" through various "bonding" exercises and activities: dopey jaunts to mediocre bars to drink watery beer with people she barely knew and didn't like; quarterly "retreats" to bowl or play laser tag. These forced displays of camaraderie and leisure, for which she was not compensated, repulsed her.

"When you sit out of our excursions," he'd gone on. "You send a message that you aren't fully committed to being a part of the team."

She'd thought: *Teams are for athletes and children*. She'd said, "I think my work speaks for itself. I mean, I thought it did. I guess it didn't because now I'm here, speaking to you."

"Can you see why, as your manager, I could get the impression that you aren't invested in this job?"

"I'm very..." She'd considered her next move. "I'm grateful for this job, definitely."

In her head, she'd conjured her debt: a number so big that every time she saw it, her first, genuine reaction was to believe it was a typo. After college, which she couldn't afford, she'd had some problems that she also couldn't afford, so to make herself feel better, she'd bought a lot of things that she couldn't afford — believing, in a kind of beautiful, all-American way, that she was but one purchase away from feeling whole. Her debt had grown, but it was hard to figure out why she was supposed to care. Wasn't the whole country in debt? Why did she have to succeed, personally, where America had failed?

Sometimes she liked to imagine her debt as enchanted pieces of paper from a fairy tale, multiplying exponentially with every touch or glance. No matter what she paid, it was never enough for them—this mysterious "them" that was not her school but was just some series of faceless entities that bought and sold her debt amongst themselves. She felt a freaky rush hearing experts talk about student debt on the news, the way they used these ominous, sexually-charged words. (For some reason, the debt was always "mounting.") Something inside her felt special, seeing her personal devastation analyzed on TV.

And then she'd get another bill and she would remember: *I am at the bottom of a pit I will never, ever crawl out of, and all the promises everyone made me about what life would be like were worthless, a bunch of checks I can't cash.*

As a woman, Ash knew that there were parts of her yet to be monetized, that theoretically easy money was waiting for her on the other side of her squeamishness: photos of her feet, envelopes of her dirty underwear. Sometimes it felt irrationally prudish to sit around in her body and not capitalize on its market value, which she presumed was rapidly diminishing. But she wasn't sure her feet were cute enough to sell. And if she didn't want to meet her underwear-purchasers in person, she'd have to send her gently-worn lingerie through the mail. She hated going to the post office.

"I want people here who want to be here," her manager had said. "I want you to want to be here. But I can't make you want to be here."

She'd said, "What?"

Ash had recalled, vaguely, the terms of her contract. No health insurance, no benefits, no job security. Still, they hadn't fired her, because it wasn't the kind of place that liked to fire people. They preferred the passive-romantic tense of the modern workplace, wherein one was simply "let go." She would not qualify for severance.

The Bankers box had been harder to assemble than she'd expected. Which was so embarrassing, on top of everything.

Ash's biceps had burned as she'd schlepped the box all the way back to her place. She lived in a very small apartment, like someone had shoved a reasonable apartment into the dryer. She'd tried not to think about the place she was supposed to get with Pebbles, but it drifted into her mind, radiant and out of reach. A prewar building, high ceilings, crown molding, exposed brick. For that brief, intense period of time when she'd thought they'd be moving into it together,

the apartment had played a critical role in Ash's daydreams about what this stage of her life would look like. Ash could only just afford it, splitting the rent in two. But she couldn't swing it alone.

So now she lived with two random roommates from Craigslist, with whom she never spoke. Her dresser was dotted with a trio of terra-cotta pots housing the starved corpses of succulents she'd been assured could not be killed. Her faded purple duvet cover, which she'd recently laundered in a failed attempt to eradicate some cereal milk stains, was balled in the corner to which she'd sentenced it for actually being really hard to get back on her comforter, a lot harder than the YouTube tutorial she'd watched promised it would be. Harsh track lighting overhead gave anyone who sat beneath it the haunted look of a suspect under interrogation, so most of the time she just sat in the dark, her only reliable light source the bluish glow of her laptop or the smaller beam through her phone's cracked screen. She had expected to be in a better apartment by now, but her life was not turning out that way. Her life was not turning out any way.

The Bankers box sat at the foot of her bed where, in a bleary-eyed morning stumble to the bathroom, she would stub her toe on it and where, in another century, she would have stored a hope chest. Ash tried to remember the last time she felt hopeful about anything. Her brain answered with static.

What Are You Nostalgic For?

Ash trudged home and showered off the bar stranger. She stood in her towel and stared at her reflection. Already pale, she looked paler in the gray-blue light of the early morning, the hangover pallor over her face, her dark hair a long tangle. As a child she'd gone as Wednesday Addams for five consecutive Halloweens, and at moments like this Ash felt like she could see young Wednesday still, petulant and glowering back at her from the mirror, like the time between her past and her present had briefly but totally evaporated.

She skimmed the news on her phone like the responsible citizen she sometimes tried to be and saw her life all over the headlines. Historic unemployment and massive debt compounding the woeful state of affairs for the average young person. Despite a promising adolescence, this was what adulthood had revealed her to be: average. And by this point, she did not feel very young. The rest of the stories were predictably apocalyptic. Democracy on the fritz. Weather report: skies filled with fire. Etc.

She flopped back on her bed. She stared at the popcorn ceiling. She inhaled hard so her ribs stuck out like piano keys. She tapped them with the pads of her fingers and wondered, not for the first time, if there was going to be a place for her in the future, if she would be able to make a go of it there. Or if this was the universe telling her, also not for the first time, that there was not, and she would not. She recited, silently: *The universe is indifferent to your existence and has no investment in the outcome of your personal journey.* Just to cheer herself up.

She felt ridiculous even humoring it, but the Retro ad kept prodding at her, like sunshine sneaking through the slats in the blinds. She rolled over onto her stomach, pulled her laptop toward her chest, and opened up their website.

A butter-bright landing page greeted her: *Retro, The Time Travel Agency*. She clicked on *Who We Are*, and a video player burst open.

At first, the screen was dark. Instrumental music started to play: triumphant, rising horns; the thunderous BUM-bum-BUM-bum-BUM of a timpani drum. After a few seconds, she recognized the score: it was from the opening sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The screen grew brighter and showed Times Square in the present, as if it were a live feed of the block. As the music got louder, the scene changed ever so slightly. Ash saw in the bottom right-hand corner text spelling out the year, which started at 2017 but with each passing second became the year before and then the year before that. Times Square reverted to its older selves, the blaring neon screens giving way to seedier signs, advertisements for old sodas, enticements for X-rated movies. The changes accelerated as the twenty-first century melted into the twentieth, faster still for a half-century, and then it settled on a scene that Ash had seen a hundred times before.

It was the photograph from all her history textbooks: V-J Day in New York. Times Square was packed with soldiers and civilians, euphoric with glory and relief. Here on Retro's homepage, though, it wasn't a photograph—at least not *the* photograph. For starters it was in color, and Ash had only ever seen the picture in black and white. And it wasn't an image but a video — one that had the crystalline precision of high-definition, not the grainy look of a newsreel. Yet it was cacophonous and disorderly as real life, full of obviously unchoreographed movement and emotion, in a way that scenes stocked with professional extras can never quite simulate.

The camera careened around until it settled on the scene's most iconic frame: a returning sailor and a white-dressed nurse locked in a kiss so tight it looked vacuum-sealed. Ash could hear the nurse's muffled *uhnnn*, which could have been a sound of pleasure or protest, and then the sailor released her and made eye contact—it felt, that is—with Ash, and Ash alone, staring straight into the camera lens which apparently no one else on the street could see.

“Welcome! You’ve arrived just in time.”

Ash blinked, hard, three times, and stared at the screen again. She said, aloud, *no fucking way*. In this mid-century sea, approximately three decades prior to his birth, there he was: Ro Temple.

Even Ash, who did not care at all about Silicon Valley or start-up culture and whose entire comprehension of the technology upon which much of her life relied was *have you tried turning it off and turning it back on again* knew about Ro Temple, the man who invented time travel. Founder of Retro, the Time Travel Agency. He was one of the wealthiest men on the planet and, as twenty-first century tech gods were wont to be, on the younger side. She wasn't sure exactly how old he was but she knew he had definitely not been alive in 1945. Yet there he was on the screen: his light hair shellacked into place beneath his white cap, his dark eyes shining as he smiled, a geometric jaw with square, white teeth like Chiclets all in a row.

Ro spun his nurse back to a standing position, kissed her again, and released her into the crowd. She stumbled off in a daze. He walked straight into the camera, and the screen went black. When the picture returned, the scene was completely different: A dimly-lit speakeasy, cigarette smoke making the air blurred and hazy above the tables, red lipstick leaving scarlet kisses on the edges of gimlet glasses. In the middle of a ring of tables was a crowded dance floor, the cheers and music punctuated by the clacking of high heels and the wild, jerky throwing of arms and elbows in the air. The camera panned the party until it found Ro at its edges, holding a cocktail aloft. “And I want to take you whenever you want to go.”

He turned away from the bar, shoved open the door, and strode outside to the street, which wasn't the street anymore; it was a dirt road lined with horses and carriages. Women in vibrant dresses with bell-curved bustles and lace-up boots walked arm-in-arm with men in bowler hats wearing frock coats over their three-piece suits. Since the speakeasy sequence, Ro had, instantly and hilariously, acquired a mustache. He hopped onto a carriage, took the reins in his hands, and sped off down the road. In the privacy of this transit, he confided to his viewers, “With our extraordinary technology, venturing from the present to days gone by is as natural as boarding a plane in Vermont's winter and landing, just hours later, in a Rio de Janeiro summer. Take a look.”

Ro provided the voiceover as what looked like a subway map filled the screen. “I'm proud to say that the Retro Metro is bringing our guests to over 175 Destinations on nine Location Lines across the contiguous United States,” he said. A key in the bottom left showed which colors corresponded to which places. Some Ash recognized: The New York De Luxe was royal blue, the California Classic was yellow. Others were a little more vague: pink for the Heartland Star, purple for the Battlefield Special, orange for the Wild West Express. The stops were designated with gold stars and labeled with years.

“Travel with us, and you'll be outfitted by the dazzling Wares department, transported by one of our brilliant Conveyance engineers, hosted in style at our beautiful Embassies, and guided on your journey by our top of the line Time Travel Agents,” Ro's voice continued, as friendly faces in various period-appropriate outfits surfaced and vanished, a spacetime supercut. A pair of women in enormous hoop skirts twirled lacy parasols over their shoulders, gossiping on a porch

before an expanse of grass greener than astroturf. Then a man in stiff blue jeans, his face half-sunburn and half-stubble, swung his leg over a bareback horse and cantered off toward the horizon, kicking up dust in his wake, the sunset a cotton-candy swirl behind him. He disappeared, and a woman about Ash's age popped up, waving a white-gloved hand to the camera, before she let a coachman help her climb into a brick-red carriage. Everyone looked attractive, purposeful, and a little too cheerful, like child stars.

Ro's face returned as he said, "They're here to show you the world of yesterday and assure your smooth return to the present. So what are you waiting for? Join us for an experience like *ever Before*." He smiled one last time and then the video ended.

Ash scrolled to the bottom of the page and clicked on *Join Our Team*. A new video opened: Ro in the present day, in some indeterminate nowhere-space, his body surrounded by an ambient glow like an angel on a '90s sitcom.

"By becoming a Time Travel Agent, you will be to the twenty-first century what astronauts were to the twentieth. What pioneers were to our nation's earliest days." His voice had this odd cadence, an affected accent Ash couldn't place. "What we are doing here is already changing the very fabric of our society, shattering the norms of our culture, upending our understanding of the universe. I hope you can feel the awesome weight and unparalleled joy that comes with this work. There is nothing else like it in this world."

Details about working at Retro scrolled past like the end credits of a movie. Ash missed most of them, but caught the last line: "Full-time employees travel for free." The screen went golden again, and the Retro logo appeared, thick letters in a swooping Burma-Shave cursive.

Ash pawed across the covers until her hand found her phone and opened up Instagram again, searching the hashtag #timetravel. She couldn't believe how many friends—or, at least, friends of friends—had gone on these trips. A shirtless guy from her high school up to his knees in Walden Pond in 1845, a hunk of a crusty loaf clenched in his smiling teeth, captioned: *I went into the woods to live deliberately and eat the greatest goddamn hazelnut raisin bread I've ever tasted*. A video of Ash's freshman year R.A. and her sister, both with choker necklaces snug at the jugular and twists of their hair pinched off their faces with butterfly clips bright as Skittles, scream-crying in a mob of teens: *The last time we were in the year 2000, Mom said we weren't old enough to go to TRL, but BACKSTREET'S BACK and SO ARE WE*. A coworker (well, ex-coworker) gazing up at a Ferris wheel, the puffed shoulders of her dress ballooning from her small silhouette: *Trying not to get serial killed at the Chicago World's Fair*.

Every square drew Ash in deeper. Sweeping vistas free of skyscrapers. Broad, open beaches before there were boardwalks. Cobblestoned streets and real log cabins and swinging saloon doors. Wooden ships with billowing sails closing in on untouched shores and Model-T Fords the rich, gleaming red of cough syrup tearing down wide, clear boulevards, empty two-lane highways. Was Ash the only person she knew who'd never left the present? Was she the last idiot just out here, living her uneventful, underwhelming life like some ordinary mortal while the rest of her peers hurtled their bodies through time and space to experience the marvels she'd only read about in books, live out the fantasies she'd only seen in movies?

The Time Travel Agent job application was underneath the video. There was no spot to upload a resume, which was a little odd but also a relief. Ash was embarrassed by hers, with its over-the-top active verbs—orchestrated, spearheaded, executed—that made dull, desk-bound pursuits sound as aggressive as military operations. Her meager contributions to past places of employment were not enhanced by such descriptors. If anything, they just drew attention to how little there was there, like when she used to stuff gym socks into her training bra.

Instead, there was a series of open-ended questions:

Is there a Destination (geographic and/or chronological) you're interested in? Tell us where, when, and why.

At Retro, we always say that 'everyone is nostalgic.' What are YOU nostalgic for?

Are there any memories you're running from?

Are you someone who lives without regret? Or are you more inclined to spend your nights worrying over how you've passed your days?

Do any of the following conditions or environments make you anxious: heights; crowds; small, enclosed spaces; vast, empty spaces far from civilization as you know it; darkness (as in the literal absence of light, not the spiritual "darkness" one can sometimes feel); extreme heat or cold; sirens; a general sense of lawlessness?

How punctual are you? How personally do you take the tardiness of others?

Is there a scent you associate with your most treasured memory? Please describe it for us (just the scent, not the memory it evokes).

Have you ever committed a violent crime? If so, and the altercation could be perceived to have had a 'winner' and a 'loser,' which were you?

How good are you at pretending to be someone you're not? Do you ever find yourself pretending without even meaning to?

How often do you feel the need to communicate with your friends and family members? Could you be out of touch with them for any extended period of time without causing upset or alarm? Do you secretly wish you could speak to them less than you currently do?

Do you excel at or at least possess a passing knowledge of any of the following: Archery; marksmanship (if so please list which firearms you've used); calligraphy; dancing (if so please specify, e.g.: ballroom, waltz, square, swing, Macarena); horseback riding; driving (stick-shift); driving (automatic transmission); boating (please list the types of boats you can comfortably captain, e.g.: sail, row, canoe, motor); fire-building; field-dressing an animal; first aid; swimming; prayer?

What is the oldest technology with which you are currently acquainted? (e.g. Can you make a mixtape? Burn a CD? Or only make a playlist? Could you operate a Victrola?)

What's the longest you can go without looking at your phone? Do you think you would be happier without it?

What's the last secret you kept? How long did you keep it? Do you keep it still?

Ash went to the fridge, tugged at the plastic yokes around the remaining four beers in a six-pack, and carried them back to her bed. Then she cracked one open, the soft hiss soothing her before she even took a sip, and started working through the questions.

She was interested in going anytime before she was born, anywhere but here.

What was she nostalgic for? *My preteen metabolism. The time before I knew my parents hated each other. How I used to believe anything could happen to me, and anything would happen, because I was special and worked hard and deserved it.* She paused, reread, and held down the delete key. That wouldn't do, and she could do better.

Ash had an unusually excellent memory. An acting teacher—a tough-love type who barely complimented anybody and from whom a “nice work” was tantamount to a standing ovation—had once called Ash's extraordinary recall her “superpower.” Ash could summon her memories to the surface like a magnet drawing metal filings to its edge. Sometimes she wished she were wired differently, that she could easily let go of all the humiliating and overwhelming experiences that lurked inside her mind. But her past was always readily accessible to her, its textures and contours as sharp as if no time had passed at all.

What are you nostalgic for?

She was nostalgic for when she was small enough for her dad to swing her up and over onto his shoulders for a better view of the Memorial Day parade like it was nothing, and for when if she was crying and her mom told her *everything will be all right*, she actually believed it, and for the crisp autumns and lingering springs of her youth, and for the time in her life when she never had to think about money, and for how she used to ask for a birthday present and get the present and then genuinely be made happy by the present (dollhouse, bicycle, a 64-box of crayons), for that incredible, straightforward arithmetic of childhood joy. She was nostalgic for how it tasted to eat a firecracker ice pop at the community pool when her fingertips were pruned and tangy with chlorine and as she ate her lips went red-blue-violet and her round little-girl belly swelled against her swimsuit and she didn't even consider how she looked, didn't think about anything but the cold sweet ice on her tongue and the hot cement under her bare feet. She was nostalgic for how it felt to act before she even knew that acting was a job, for the way she could play pretend and that was all it was: play, pretend. And—she was ashamed to admit this, but something about the application made her feel like it would know if she were holding back, like she could not hide from its strange inquiries—she was nostalgic for the time when Pebbles wasn't successful yet, when they were both at the bottom, believing they'd rise together.

Are there any memories you're running from?

Ash breathed in very slowly and then exhaled through pursed lips, like she was blowing the air through a narrow straw. This was supposed to help her when the tentacles of what happened wound themselves around her wrists and ankles, pinning her in place. Pebbles had suggested it—she said she'd learned about it from her therapist, and had Ash considered seeing a therapist, too? An absurd question; it was too expensive, and nobody took insurance. Not that Ash had insurance. She studied the question again, spotted the loophole in its framing, and dove through it, writing, simply: *Yes*.

Ash kept going, gaining momentum: She only worried about the future. She didn't love small spaces but felt at ease in crowds as long as no one was trying to talk to her. She was so punctual it had ruined friendships, as every minute someone was late to meet her made her resent them more and more until the thought of socializing with them when they finally arrived made

her want to scream. And so on, and so on, until the final question, which after a moment of consideration she decided was a trick so all she wrote was *it wouldn't be a secret if I told you*, and then she hit submit.

A small part of her felt this tingle, that fizzy sensation of *what if*. She tried to imagine herself: Ash, a Time Travel Agent. Everything in modern life that felt like such a drag could be shiny and special again. Gone would be the dreariness of trekking out to LaGuardia just to squeeze into a middle seat with some brat behind her punching the headrest. In its place: the wonder of the propellers whirling at Kitty Hawk, gliders slicing the sky. Why couldn't she be an adventurous, thrill-seeking person who had an envy-inducing job and a catalog of exhilarating anecdotes with which to charm all her dates and acquaintances? Had her personality already calcified into whatever shape it was going to hold for the next half-century, until she shriveled with age and all that changed was that her worst qualities became even more pronounced? She could not allow this to be so.

You'll hear from us soon! came the auto-reply. *We're working around the clock.*

Haven't You Been Waiting For Something?

Two weeks passed. Ash showered twice. She changed out of nighttime pajamas into daytime pajamas and back again. She ordered pad thai that hardened into stale squiggles on the top shelf of her fridge. She binged hours upon hours of reality TV, not because she liked it—in fact, its constant, arbitrary conflict always left her feeling extremely stressed out—but because scripted shows, and the real actors in them, pressed a thumb down on all the bruises in her heart, and at this particular down-and-out moment in her life, she did not have the strength for such industrial-grade self-loathing.

On the fifteenth day, an email from Retro arrived. It seemed to shimmer through the surface of her phone screen:

Congratulations! You've made it to the next round. Time for your first trip.

The message went on to invite Ash to a satellite office in a converted warehouse in Gowanus in two days' time. The email's sender did not ask if Ash was available on this date or explain what she was supposed to do in the event she couldn't make it; small text across the bottom of the missive told her not to reply to this address, that any messages sent there would only bounce back. Perhaps Retro could sense the total vacuum that was her calendar. Or this was just one of the ways the start-up demonstrated its status: with the presumption that, even if she *had* something to do, she would rearrange her life around this summons on only 48 hours notice. Anyway for Ash the matter was neither here nor there because the only thing she needed to do was shower again.

Ash arrived at the address, which belonged to an enormous brick building overlooking the canal, five minutes early. Before she entered, Ash checked the email for the thousandth time, confirming that there was no additional information about where, exactly, the interview would take place, beyond this street address. She walked through the front door expecting to see some sign inside telling her which floor the Retro office was on. Instead she found that there were no floors and there were no offices. There was just this absolutely massive room, with red brick walls and a floor the same lemonade-spill color of the ad that reeled her in in the first place. It smelled as if she'd walked outside instead of in, to some dreamier, more temperate climate: like fresh-cut grass and a breeze through budding trees. She said, "hello?" in a very small voice, but it echoed out into the space and caught the attention of a man on the north side of the room.

He seemed to be a great distance from where she stood, but as Ash started walking toward him, she reached him quickly, as if the space between them were only a mirage and the room were no larger than her apartment. She looked behind her and saw that the door through which she entered was very far away. She gave her head a small shake like she was trying to get water out of her ears and said to herself: *This is what happens to your mind when you don't leave the apartment for two weeks.*

"Right on time," said the man. "That's terrific. You can understand, we set a lot of stock by punctuality here at Retro."

He was seated behind a small classroom-style desk. He could have been 35 or 55 or any age in between. His skin had the taut plasticine sheen of shrink-wrapped raw chicken breast

under the glare of the supermarket fluorescents. He had a pen clipped into his jacket pocket but no notepad or paper that Ash could see. There was nothing on his desk.

"I had a feeling," said Ash.

"I'm Christopher," he said. "And you're Ms. Eckels. Lovely to meet you. Shall we?"

Ash glanced around the cavernous room. There was no seat for her. She thought about calling attention to this but Christopher did not appear fazed by it, so she just said, "Let's."

"I'd like to know what you've been up to as of late." His voice was a little high-pitched, with a slight twang. "Can you tell me why you left your last job?"

She thought: *Technically speaking, my last job left me.*

She said, "I wasn't feeling all that fulfilled by it."

"What were you doing, exactly?"

"I was an administrative assistant. A glorified intern." Feeling a sudden need to justify her status, she added, "Obviously not what I wanted to be doing with my life."

"I understand you studied drama in school." An odd thing for him to say, given that she hadn't submitted a resume and she didn't remember putting any information about her education on the application. He must have looked her up online.

"That's right. I was a theater major. How did you know that?"

"Don't see a lot of you anymore!" he said. "It's almost like we did *too* good a job of encouraging girls to get into STEM."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Oh, it's a splendid thing. It's why your application was flagged for us here in agent recruitment. You're exactly the sort of person we're looking for."

"Well, don't get too excited. I'm a failed actor," she said, with a forced lightness. It was something she said a lot, a recurring bit in her conversational repertoire. She wanted to make the joke before anybody else could turn her into a punchline. In college, her adjective of choice was "aspiring," and there was a window in her early twenties when she could have accurately described herself as "working," but for years now, she'd been committed to "failed," even though her use of the past tense was failure on top of failure: not only had she yet to make it work but she had already resigned herself to being someone who never would.

"I see," he said, full of understanding. "It's awfully tough to make a go of it out there in that line of work."

"I thought I knew how hard it was going to be." She could feel her shoulders drooping, her spine succumbing to a slouch. "I was prepared, but I wasn't, I guess." An icy feeling slithered around her stomach and she pressed her hand to her abdomen to still it. "Even when I worked, it wasn't working."

"You didn't *think* it was working," he said. "And yet here you are, on this interview with me!"

"That's true."

"This reminds me of how Steve Jobs took that calligraphy class," Christopher went on. "Bet that seemed like a real waste of time to a lot of people. But now look at how beautiful the fonts are on all our computers. You've just got to follow your passion and trust that it will lead you someplace worth going."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. I haven't thought about it much lately at all." Something about the way this admission sounded in the big quiet of the room made her add, "I think I just miss it too much to think about it."

Christopher tapped his pen against his chin. "What do you miss the most?"

She surprised herself by telling the truth. “I miss the way it made me feel.”
“How did it make you feel?”

When she was on stage, when she was really in it, the person she really was would fold up smaller and smaller inside her, like origami, and in the space where she used to be, this other being would bloom. And when that happened she felt so light and open and miraculous. She had power, real power, in these imaginary places. She always knew the right thing to say and she could say it without being interrupted. In plays, she slaughtered and ravaged and battled and loved. She was regal or magical and, sometimes, immortal, but if she died, she died spectacularly, and the loss of her shattered everyone who’d ever known her or known of her. She set the plot in motion with her every word and gesture. She kissed like she meant it, like it actually mattered, like her whole life had been building up to it, like she and the person she was kissing would never be the same again. She slapped men hard across the face with her wide open palm. She slid daggers into their intercostal spaces. She screamed so hard right into their delicate eardrums she knew she left them haunted by the lingering ringing of her.

Back when she was working regularly—for that unreal stretch of time when she was barely, but definitely, making enough money to live on acting alone; when she earned enough in a year to get health insurance through the union—she’d starred in this production of *Antigone* where everyone dressed for modern-day combat, and she’d stomped across the stage in black lace-up boots bellowing, *You are merely a man, mortal like me*, and the whole room was quiet like she’d never heard quiet before, the sound of a thousand breaths held in, hanging on her every syllable.

She said, “Like I could do anything.”

“And you don’t feel that way in your real life?”

In Ash’s real life, nothing ever happened to her and she never happened to anyone. At her shitty little day job, she’d sent emails she knew would be skimmed, ignored, discarded, forgotten. She’d made small talk that evaporated into the air between her and her coworkers before it even left her mouth, uninspired observations about the weather and whether the day of the week it actually was was the day of the week that it felt like, or if this was one of those Tuesdays that should’ve been a Thursday. On the weekends, she went on dates with a blur of guys who were constitutionally incapable of asking follow-up questions, who never read novels but could not stop recommending podcasts. Once, in Manhattan, after a long day of auditions, she stood in dumbstruck, exhausted silence on the A train while a man—a banker-looking type in a suit and tie, probably on his way to Penn Station to catch NJ Transit home to his doting wife and towheaded children and a labradoodle with a wholly unoriginal name, like Scout or Buster—positioned the front of his body carefully behind her and rubbed himself against her ass for six full stops.

“Not really,” she said. “Real life is a bit more limiting.”

“Interesting,” Christopher said. “At Retro, you might find the opposite is true. Real life is expanding, all the time, in every direction.”

“Like the universe.”

Christopher smiled wide, his cherub cheeks aglow. “*Exactly* like the universe.”

Ash was embarrassed at the effect his approval was having on her. But her posture immediately improved.

“Anyone can fake it between ‘action’ and ‘cut,’ when the stakes are nonexistent, the pressure all imagined,” Christopher said. “*This* is acting on a completely different level, beyond

what most performers ever even have the opportunity to attempt. It's 360 degrees of acting. Total immersion. More Method than Method."

The thought of a role that Ash could actually live inside—a place to escape, at least for the time being, from the person she was somehow becoming—filled her throat with longing. "I think I could handle that."

"Now, Retro travels all the way back to 1492. As a Time Travel Agent, you'll need to belong in any Destination we visit. Some people have a face that just gives them away. You know what I mean? There's a certain bone structure that screams: *I was born in the 1990s*. That actress, the one from that vampire show, who was just in that Brontë adaptation?" Christopher made his mouth a flat, unimpressed line. "That's a girl whose eyes say: *I have a cell phone, and I'm checking my texts between takes*. It's not her fault. But we can't afford to miscast anyone."

He stood up from the desk and in a slow circle around Ash. "You, on the other hand," he said, studying her profile. "You could have consumption, don't you think?"

"I mean," Ash said. "I hope not."

"Or write letters to your long-distance lover on parchment," Christopher continued, as if Ash hadn't spoken. "I'd believe you on horseback, or reaching our shores on a steamship. A corset would just be clothes on you, not costume."

"I've worn corsets before. For a play. I wore one every night for months." She remembered the feeling of her ever-accommodating organs shifting around, the soreness at her waist that took weeks to fully fade.

"I've always wanted to know: how do you take a deep breath in that thing?"

"You don't."

He went back to his chair. "Now, we know you can stand out. You stood out to us, obviously."

Ash smiled. "Than—"

"But while traveling, you'll need to blend in," Christopher said, and suddenly the room was full of people.

Ash whipped her head around from side to side. It felt like the subway at rush hour, with all its attendant sounds and energy. A girl who appeared behind Ash was cracking her gum hard against her back molars, the noise like bubble wrap popping. The music from the headphones of the guy to her right was so loud that the high notes escaped his ears and filled the air around him. A baby squalled from a stroller. A cyclist nearly ran over her toes.

Over this new din, Christopher called out, "Blend in."

"What?"

"Well, you're right here at the front," he said. "With that dazed look on your face. That's the opposite of what we're going for."

Ash looked to her left, where an elderly man with a thick white mustache was adjusting his pocket square. "Who are you?" she murmured, but as she reached toward him, his edges went fuzzy, and she felt sparks up the length of her arm.

Christopher, with a theatrical sigh: "They're not *real*."

"Oh," Ash said. She grazed the man again with the back of her hand and watched his surface shiver and glitch beneath her touch. "Right, that makes sense." She'd given it no thought but now she realized that she should have expected Retro to have technology she'd never seen before, that she didn't even know existed. Who knew what else they were was capable of?

She took a careful step back, wedging herself between a woman with a tiny dog in her giant tote bag and a child stomping his light-up sneakers against the floor, clapping as rainbows

burst from his soles. It seemed impossible that this child was not a real child, that he belonged to no one, had never wet the bed or begged to have the crusts cut off his sandwiches. But then Ash heard him giggle. His was the canned gaiety of a laugh track, not the spontaneous joy of a human in the flesh. The uncanny valley-ness of it all made Ash's guts twist.

Without warning, the floor began to move like the belt of a treadmill. Ash staggered and steadied herself as the swarm around her thickened. She started walking forward, faster, to keep from colliding with the brick wall behind her. Through the dips between the shoulders of the couple in front of her, she could make out the top of Christopher's head. She turned to the side, tilting her face toward the ground, keeping her gaze low, until she found a solid, stocky guy to hide behind. She matched his pace step for step, her body contained by his shadow, for what felt like an absurd length of time, until she heard Christopher say, "That'll do it."

The crowd vanished and the floor went still.

Ash tried to make it look like she wasn't having a hard time catching her breath. The room appeared even bigger now than it had when she first walked in. She felt miniature inside it. *Travel size*, she thought, and held in a laugh at her silent joke.

"Well I don't want to jinx you," Christopher said. "But you've done quite well."

"I..." Ash's hands found her back pockets, grateful for something solid to hold onto. She had no idea what to expect or believe. Maybe the walls would slide in from all sides and crush her in their brick embrace. Maybe the floor would disappear and she would plummet directly into the earth's smoldering center. Maybe the reason Christopher hadn't offered her his hand to shake when they met was that he wasn't real, either, and if they touched his fingers would go fuzzy and she'd feel those little sparks scale her arm like ivy. That each of these scenarios, plus a million more Ash didn't have time to imagine, seemed actually, entirely plausible, made her feel woozy and off-kilter. It hit like the third drink of the night. She said, "I don't know. Maybe."

Christopher leaned forward so far his chest nearly touched the desk. "Haven't you been waiting for something?"

Ash ran her thumbs along the pockets' stitching. "Something like what?"

"Something you couldn't name. Something you wouldn't know how to describe.

Something unlike all the somethings you've been stuck with along the way." He was looking at her differently now, and the energy in the air between them took on a new, unnerving charge. "You know what I'm talking about. That *something*. Something that would justify all the time you've waited, that would make all the energy you've spent obviously and irrefutably worthwhile. Something that makes you see all these disparate events in your life, all scattered and directionless, as part of a bigger picture—stars in some magnificent constellation, an image you can only see once all the pieces are put together and you connect them correctly. And then, all at once, it's so clear, you can't see how you ever didn't see it. It was always there. Something was always there. Waiting for you."

Ash prided herself on being able to cry on cue and on never crying unless she wanted to. To maintain her perfect record, she told herself that single tears, like the one sliding down her cheek, didn't count. She felt it hover on her jawbone before dropping silently to the floor.

Christopher rose from his chair. "How soon can you start?"

A vibrant, stylized illustration of a woman in a white dress and wide-brimmed hat standing in the doorway of a villa. The scene is filled with lush greenery, flowers, and a dog. The title 'VILLA COCO' is written in large, bold, white letters across the top. The author's name 'ANDREW SEAN GREER' and his Pulitzer Prize-winning status are at the bottom.

VILLA COCO

A Novel

ANDREW SEAN GREER

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LESS*

FIRST DOUBLEDAY HARDCOVER EDITION 2026

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's invention or are used imaginatively.

Real people and events inspired the composition (as they always do), but the author has fictionalized everything. Don't concern yourself about them.

Just enjoy the book.

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In memory of Rosina, Alice, Carlotta, *Giuditta, *Paride, *Giulietta, *Quo, and most of all, Max Rabino.

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The little Tuscan train station, brown shutters against yellow paint, seemed so fanciful you might unwrap it and find it was chocolate. The departures and arrivals sign had half its bulbs burnt out, so all our young man could discern was a cuneiform description of the current train strike, and while he looked for and could not find a living person, he did find a statue labeled *San Drogo*. The saint wore a floppy hat and seemed overburdened with a crosier, a scythe, and a sleeping lamb, as if he were carrying the shopping for another, more important saint. Our young man himself was overburdened with books, luggage, gin, fish oil, and doubt. He had followed the telegram's nonsensical instructions all the way from the Eastern Seaboard to Florence, whose domes and spires he glimpsed only briefly before boarding a tin-can train into the Tuscan hills, and now stood in the hot wind of a late-September day. For a long time it was only himself, San Drogo, and an olive tree whose roots were breaking through its planter. Though in his later travels, on sea and shore, he

would become accustomed to the sensation of foreign air, this first arrival in Italy would be minted forever in his memory.

Here is the telegram:

GIOVEDÌ COME BY 5:15 TRAIN FLORENCE TO S. DROGO
GAZELLE WILL BE WAITING BRING GIN FOR PRINCESS &
FISH OIL FOR FAINA

He had made his way to the Florence train station; he had taken the 5:15; he had brought gin for whatever princess might desire it and fish oil for anyone named Faina. He looked around for this “gazelle” supposedly waiting for him, though, as the range of the gazelle does not extend to Europe, he was dubious.

A car arrived: a beat-up old creature trailing a veil of dust like a warthog bride. It stopped in the middle of the parking lot and for a long time did nothing; Saint Drogo, with all his shopping, seemed more active. The electric sign flashed something in Sumerian. Then the car door opened and out popped a person so lean and small our young man thought it might be an adolescent. But it was an elderly man.

“JOE!” the man shouted, waving. His head was lightly feathered in gray, accompanied by a raptor’s beak and fervid stare; his movements were equally birdlike, jerky, startling.

Our young man’s name was not Joe.

Halting bits of a foreign language were tossed toward him, like gym class balls our young man was unable to catch. “Giovedì” was the one word he picked up: JOE-VE-DEE. From this and the telegram, he realized someone had misunderstood his name for the Italian for “Thursday.” Then again, an American might be called anything. As might a man in a train station.

“Gazelle?” our young man asked.

The man nodded. He did not smile. Gazelle's name seemed to suit him, as he bounded up to take the bag, threw it into the car as if furious with it, then gestured for our young man to jump in, talking the whole time in guttural dot-dash language that did not at all remind one of the fluid, musical Italian heard in foreign films. The only understandable word was a peculiar one: "MITSU!" he would shout, "BITCHY!" Then he would point at the car and smile proudly. Our young man came to understand it was a Mitsubishi. He clutched his duffel to his chest. The Mitsu-bitchy awakened in surprise. It started, stalled, then started again. A shout from the driver. Then, with a leap over a rock pile, they were off. Our young man sighed to be in a place, at last, where he could take life seriously.

I call him "our young man" because the sight of him—all gangly, double-jointed limbs, waves of filbert hair, and a raised-eyebrow expression of both innocence and arrogance—is so much more like a soulless marionette, an unenchanted Pinocchio, than a twenty-one-year-old American near the end of the millennium, that I can hardly bring myself to write of him in the first person. I'm sure an elderly toad, if magically presented with his younger tadpole form, would sooner eat it up than recognize the creature as any version of himself. So it goes with time.

Because of course the truth is "our young man" was me.

"There's a place in Italy in need of someone. Why don't you look into that?"

These were the words of my college adviser upon our final meeting and the only actual advice he ever gave; the rest of our meetings, infrequent as they were, consisted of heavy sighs at my choice in major (Archives and Record Management)

and at my amorous choice in gender (my own). A dedicated engineer and committed womanizer, he clearly considered both choices personal failures. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and looked sadly into my eyes. It is unlikely this “place in Italy” had occurred to him unaided; he must have canvassed his colleagues for some way to save his poor, gay, bookish charge. He produced an ad clipped from the paper, which he tossed to me across the table with the regret of an executor producing a meager inheritance:

ADJUTANT DESIRED for owner of modest country house. Collection of books, objects, art such as a Picasso to be cataloged before Christmas. Duties: dictation, pruning, shopping, hunting martens. Italian desired. Stipend, travel, board, and room. Tuscany, Italy. Write to: Baronessa.

An address in a town called San Drogo was provided. I looked up at my adviser and asked what an adjutant was.

“It’s a military term,” he explained, loudly closing a book as a sign that our time was finished. “From adiutor in the Roman army. It means assistant.”

Looking back at the paper, I asked what a marten was.

“It’s a weasel-like mammal with partially retractile claws,” he told me, “and Picasso is a painter goodbye.” He stood up, offering his hand and wishing me good fortune in all my future endeavors. My time in this college backwater was over; I was being thrown into the vast ocean of the world.

I had not considered Italy; then again, I had not considered anything. My mind in college was, shall we say, elsewhere. Let me try to make a funny story out of something hard: It was a time of pandemonium. Freedom had come for men such as myself—sex and romance released all at once as

if by a drag Pandora—and oh, the party it was! Yet I was ill-prepared for a carnival of flesh. Here I was, as inexperienced as the Amish (no teenage stolen kisses, no prom night fumbings, nothing), suddenly let into the circus tent to join the sword-swallowing, sleight-of-hand, and juggling of partners. The ensuing burlesque lasted for three and a half years, and I ended up the equivalent of the escape artist trapped in his own device (in reality: handcuffed by a boyfriend to a radiator). My roommate (handy with a lock) gave me a note from the school saying I was currently failing two classes for lack of attendance. It was the splash of cold water I needed; I closed down the carnival just in time, sent away the clowns, and managed to graduate. But it had been a narrow escape, and I vowed: No more men for a while. No more chaos. I would cuff myself instead to intellectual pursuits and the neat methodology upon which I had heretofore relied. The bloodless precision of the archivist's life.

My parents approved; both trained in classical physics, they were glad to see me return to the Newtonian world from that quantum realm of terrifying entanglement and sex. For them, life was an equation, and now that I knew one variable (myself), I could solve for the unknown: my fate. Graduate school? Librarian? Closet specialist, so to speak? They would provide the round-trip ticket with a return at Christmas. Their only expectation of me: “It is time, Son, to take life seriously.”

What could be more serious than Europe?

I wrote to the address on the advertisement, giving my credentials. I did not mention the very many ways in which I was ill-suited. I sent my application off and began my wait.

What was he like, in those days, our young man—me? Charming, inquisitive, organized, focused, and true, loyal to my friends and kind to animals—that's how I would have

described myself back then. A Boy Scout of a man; a flower of American youth; a mensch. But that is not what I was at all. Looking back, I see a carefully reared and protected young man, cosseted as a Pekingese, insufferable, officious, a cable-knit sweater over a cable-knit heart, who had managed to surmount all distractions and complete the course readings and ace the last tests—but was in no way prepared for the crucial final exam of Real Life.

I am too harsh on myself. I am certain I was no more or less irritating than any other good American son of the century, unweathered by experience and unwise to the world. Whatever attributes one found in me were simply, as in the Pekingese, part of the breed. I was still young enough for my qualities to change, like a fresco as the artist reconsiders the position of a saint, but the moment was coming when they would be set forever.

As I went to sleep that night in my dormitory sardine tin (what twins have ever slept in a twin bed?), my mind was on the Baronessa, the marten, the Picasso, as strange-sounding as some novel from another time, another language and tradition. I felt as if I were on a boat headed into unknown waters. Was it adventure I craved? To meet a challenge to my very way of being? Something other than the phantomless folklore of suburban boyhood, or the make-believe importance of college rituals, neither of which I could believe in anymore? But, having never had any real challenge or adventure, how did I know I wanted it? Could it really be what my parents advised: to take life seriously? I did not know. As a boy, I used to lie awake and watch the crossed squares of light that would manifest suddenly and glide across my bedroom walls and ceiling. I did the same that night. And, just as they had long ago, they enchanted me, even though I knew they were mere headlight

projections from ordinary cars of my ordinary world, for they seemed like heralds from some unknown destiny.

And, indeed, I later received the telegram with an arrival date and my instructions.

GIOVEDÌ COME BY 5:15 TRAIN FLORENCE TO S. DROGO
GAZELLE WILL BE WAITING BRING GIN FOR PRINCESS &
FISH OIL FOR FAINA

The advertisement had mentioned a “modest country house,” and this I took to be the winking language of the very rich, and expected (as one does when one knows nothing) an extravagant mansion perched on a hill. Perhaps I imagined it would be pink. Our journey from the train station, however, was not uphill but down, serpentine beside a river until we crossed it on a stone bridge and entered a dirt lane marked not by the iron gates of a villa but by a cardboard sign with a marker drawing of a boar. Farther along, the lane was met by another, and at this intersection sat an elderly woman in a red chair, shouting at us as we passed. Additional narrow lanes, each more treacherous than the last, and darker, deeper into that oak forest of banished fairies and bitter enchantments that children fear. We plunged through mud, then rose at last between two olive groves with trees arrayed in rows like men-at-arms, their silvery foliage fluttering, tattered, in the early-autumn sun. There was the raw smell of wild mint. An alphabet-block set of hives was stacked beyond, and from it came a muttering of bees. I saw no turrets, no castle walls, no clock towers. But where else would a baronessa live?

I was determined to avoid the clichés Americans expect of Italy—though these turned out, of course, to be the very

images that had fed my decision. Stomping grapes for wine, sun-drying tomatoes on a roof, dancing the tarantella; who knows what idiotic fantasies I had picked up? What was certain was that I would not fall for some black-haired, half-shaved stranger leaning on a pitchfork before an olive grove. And so I took my vow, like a monk's, that for this period, I would enter the cloister of my work, my mind, and tend the garden there. The row of cypresses made me smile; what I needed was not romance and chaos but order.

For the whole journey, this Gazelle man kept up a series of barks in his language. I could not tell if they were directed at me, the road, or perhaps at his private god. He had been spry taking my bag, but up close I could see he was quite old for luggage duty, probably past sixty, though if one could look past his sun-lined skin, his smell of cigarettes and manure, and his one gold tooth, he had the profile of an old-style movie star. He had probably been a lady-killer in his youth, this Gazelle. Perhaps still was.

We met one car along the road coming toward us—a lizard-green Fiat—driven by a man with features blurred by sun reflections, and neither he nor Gazelle could decide how to pass on the narrow road, dodging back and forth as they approached each other, until the lizard decided simply to bolt along the edge, and as it passed I caught the eye of the young driver: blond, bespectacled, bewildered. He seemed to be fleeing the wilderness we now were entering, and his mouth was open as if to give mute warning—but in a cloud of dust, he and his car were gone.

“ECCO!” Gazelle barked, and we came to a sudden stop. The car shivered and died. We were not anywhere different from where we had been before. To our right, the olive trees rose up a sunny hillside. To our left: a two-story, ivy-covered wall. Nothing before us but more road, leading back into that

terrible forest. Where was the house? The honk of the horn startled me. But what startled me more was when a portion of the wall began to move, swinging out on hinges to reveal a dark room within, crowded with baskets, and out of this darkness walked a woman . . .

“You’re Giovedì?” she asked. Her sandals scraped along the dusty path. The late-September day was bright and hot as midsummer, but there was the scent of burning leaves and a sensation, in the shadows, of the first hint of autumn.

She was older than I was, but what exact age I was too young to guess, for she walked with the slim elegance I associated with a queen or prime minister, yet her style I thought of as youthful: tank top, dark denim overalls, gold hoop earrings. Her face was narrow, with a wide forehead and chin. Her eyes were large and half closed in the bright sunlight. She wore her kinky hair natural, and the light caught the gold in its spirals, lighting it briefly from within like a Venetian chandelier. She seemed aware of the effect and put a hand to her hair, tossing it as she smiled. She seemed like someone who knew many things that I did not.

“Yes,” I said. “No,” I said. “I mean—”

“I’m Estelle.” She held out her hand and I shook it. “You’re here too early.”

My mind scabbled at her words, looking for a handhold. She spoke with an accent I could not place. “But I . . . I . . . the telegram said—”

This Estelle produced an elastic band and, both hands behind her head, began the difficult act of pulling all her loose Afro into it. “Yes yes, you’re fine. But Coco, she sent the telegram without consulting me. You see, the rooms aren’t ready.”

I wondered who this “Coco” was and somehow understood there was no place for me to stay, and my face must have conveyed it because she laughed and put one hand on my arm. “I mean in the villa! For your list. The rooms aren’t ready.”

“Not ready?” Panic twitched within me.

Back to taming her hair. “Don’t worry, she will find things to occupy you.”

I could see that what I had taken for a stone wall was in fact the plain, flat side of a building, studded with windows whose iron bars were equally twined with ivy. Along its length I could now make out three doors: a large double door camouflaged (and presumably made unusable) by greenery, the small door through which Estelle had appeared, and a wooden gate painted precisely the deep green of the ivy. On that gate hung a dark bronze knocker in the shape of a foot, and poking out above it, one could see the green aigrettes of a bamboo grove. How strange to find bamboo in Italy; I wondered what maniac had planted it. Along the wall also were two stone benches, and I saw, in the shadow of each bench, a number of huddled black kittens, staring bright-eyed up at me. Across the road was another wall, this one built to the height of the olive grove, which it supported. In the wall was a low green door that I assumed led inside the hill to some cool, dark chamber. And above, hanging down over the cliff of the wall: an herb garden fragrant with rosemary, thyme, sage, and others whose leaves I could not yet identify. A basket lay on the road below these with a pair of shears inside. I saw a dog race by on the dark path down the hill, a flash of white fur.

“But . . . I understand I’m to complete a catalog by Christmas. And I don’t even know what I am cataloging—”

She was finishing with her hair; perhaps she did it automatically, because her hands seemed engaged with the task

without involving the rest of her. “You’ll have it done in no time. And don’t worry about this heat wave, things will cool off any day now! That’s how it goes around here.”

“You work here?”

Estelle released her hands to her sides; her hair, compressed, had gone from gold to bronze. “Oh no! I’m a kind of . . . eh, neighbor. A friend of the house.”

“I’m sorry for asking . . . you’re French?”

“I’m Italian,” she said, then smiled. “And Algerian. A long story.” She looked behind her to where the door had closed, hiding itself once again within the ivy of the wall. “You’ll stay in the house with her. I live just down the road. I know this all must seem so strange to you, an esteemed archivist. You’re probably used to regularity. Things aren’t exactly like that here.”

“Oh, I’m not . . .” I was going to say “esteemed,” but something made me stop. Was this some terrible comedy of misunderstandings?

“Let’s get you into the house,” she said. She shouted at Gazelle, who had begun to smoke on the roadside. She said quite a deal in Italian, then turned to me. “Oh yes! We call it Villa Coco.”

Estelle reopened the door and gestured for me to enter the house, and I saw that this “hidden” door led, in fact, to the kitchen. It was of two parts: before us, up a few steps, was the kitchen proper, laid out in a U shape with a sink to the left, an old white-enameled stove in the center, and a cutting board set into the counter at the right. Canisters were crowded on shelves, straw wiskets hung on hooks, tarnished silver platters were mounted one above the other on the walls, books huddled together, painted ceramic bowls overflowed with fruit and vegetables, and as if the decorator imagined this might not be enough, the wall behind the stove was tiled

in black-and-white op-art trapezoids. The second part was the dining area, as free of clutter as the first was crammed. A long table of dark, polished wood stood before an enormous fireplace, on whose mantel sat two crudely done brass cupids in an erotic position, and around the table were arranged tall chairs with white linen covers tied over the cushions. At the center of the table sat an ornate blue-and-white-speckled fruit bowl from which rose a similarly mottled candelabra of sculpted cherubs, and above it all hung two great concentric metal rings, each with half a dozen lamps, such as one sees in an Orthodox church. It startled me: this combination of the coarse and the sublime.

“Ah, here they are,” said Estelle, picking up a set of keys from the deranged confusion of a countertop. “I’ve been looking for these for days.”

“So . . . this is the kitchen?”

“The cook’s not here right now,” Estelle said. “She has a headache.” I could well understand why. “Her husband, the handyman, is somewhere. Do you want to meet Coco?”

“Who’s Coco?”

“Lisabetta. I call her Coco. She’ll be down soon.”

“Lisabetta?”

Her eyes brightened with amusement. “The Baronessa!”

I noticed now that beside us, at the entrance and still two steps below the kitchen, was another humble door. Estelle examined my face more carefully, then lifted the latch. The door opened onto what looked like a dimly lit chapel. I gestured for her to go before me.

She waved her hand. “Oh, I’m not going in. I’m heading home. Don’t worry. If there’s a crisis, I live just up the road, you turn left at Signora Guicciardini. The lady who sits in the chair and yells at cars.”

“She’s always there?”

“You’ll be all right, Giovedì.”

“Oh, there’s been a misunderstanding. My name’s not Giovedì. It’s—”

“Of course,” she interrupted, shaking her head. “Who would be named Giovedì? But Coco thought it was funny. She always has a nickname for people at first. Gazelle’s name isn’t Gazelle.”

“I wondered . . .”

“It’s CHA-zel,” Estelle said, scraping her throat at the first syllable. “He’s from Lebanon. You’ll know she likes you when she uses your real name.”

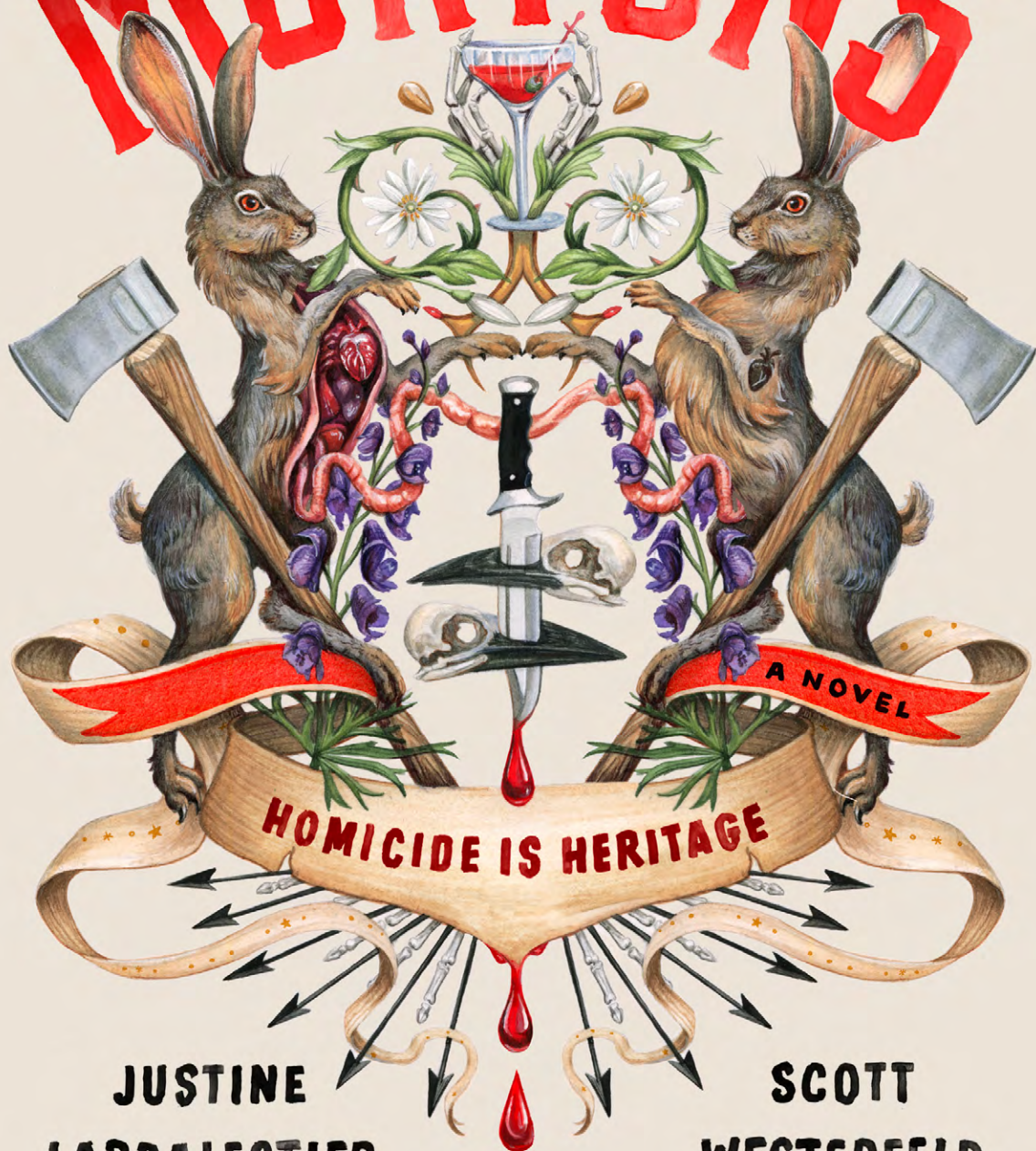
“She doesn’t like . . . Ghazel?”

“She’ll like you! Thank God you’re handsome.”

She let me pass before her into the dimness of the room before closing the door and sealing me in alone, and I wondered if this was all a terrible mistake.

I had entered a realm much cooler than the heat of the kitchen or the dusty road, with a humid, vegetal smell. What I took to be a chapel seemed now to be an entrance hall, and I understood the two ironbound doors to my left were ones I had seen from outside, now long overgrown with ivy. Facing the unused entrance doors and perhaps four strides away was the most striking aspect of the room: a wrought-iron staircase that crossed the wall diagonally, from upper left to lower right like a filigree sash across a bosom, hugging the wall until arriving at the cool stone floor. The space’s only windows flanked the entrance doors and stretched up to the ceiling, but, being also overgrown with ivy and barred with iron, they let in only a fluttering, greenish light, and as these were the only windows in a large room crowded with objects, it took me a moment to apprehend that I was in a hall of treasures.

THE MORTONS



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LARBALESTIER

SCOTT
WESTERFELD

VIKING
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1

A few days after I turned twenty, I took my cousin Peter on a midnight climb.

Peter was two years younger and in awe of me. As kids, I'd taught him how to wrestle, how to throw a knife. Everyone called him my little shadow.

When he followed me to Helshire, I showed him the college secrets: the dead drops in the library basement, the derelict buildings of the Old Campus, the Dining Commons' best desserts.

In return, Peter gave me handmade presents—a coffee mug he'd made, an egg from a robin's nest, drained and painted with the family motto. His gift wrapping was clumsy, the eggshell in pieces when I opened it.

I extended my invitation in the Dining Commons, in the side room reserved for us legacy students. It was empty except for Regina Lindqvist and her latest boyfriend, sitting in the far corner.

"We're climbing the back of Dewitt tonight," I told Peter.

His eyes lit up. Dewitt Hall was the tallest building on campus.

"Is this a test?"

"What do you think?"

He smiled. Everything was a test.

"Bring climbing shoes and gloves," I said.

"Equipment, really?"

"It's nine stories."

Peter sucked on his straw, making the dregs of his soda gurgle. "Jessica.

Someday we'll need to get out of a building with whatever we've got on. We have to be ready!"

"Being ready isn't the same as looking for danger."

"You sound like Grandma."

"Our grandmother is wise."

It was Grandmother Elizabeth who'd given me the order. She's been in charge of our family since I was five years old.

"She thinks I'm reckless," he said. "They all do, but I'm just brave. Like a Morton should be."

Mortons are fearless. That's not the same as brave.

We walked from the dining hall to his dorm, still arguing. The evening sky showed faint smudges of cirrus clouds. Cool settled over the campus, quieting the wind that had stirred the trees all day.

"I don't need climbing shoes. I'm better barefoot, anyway."

"It's freezing."

"No gloves then. I can blow on my hands."

"Okay, no gloves," I relented at the door of Peter's dorm. "But we're only going halfway up."

He smirked, thinking he'd gotten his way.

"Wear black, and don't tell anyone," I said. "Let's call this your first official mission."

Something dark stirred in his eyes. "I won't tell a soul."



We met at midnight at the old willow tree that guards the northern edge of campus. Its branches hang all the way to the grass, a hidden space for drinking, smoking, and groping in the speckled dark.

We heard voices inside—ordinaries. I sent Peter to deal with them. He crept to the edge of the leafy curtain and let out a low animal growl. The voices went quiet, then three boys with beer cans and puffy coats ran out the other side, scampering toward the Quad.

Even freshmen know not to linger when odd things happen at Helshire.

Under the umbrella of leaves, the ground was littered with empty bottles, vape cartridges. Helshire was the last stop for a certain kind of rich kid. For us legacies, these wayward, rebellious children were networking opportunities. Future customers.

“Did you bring chalk?” I asked Peter.

“That’s cheating.”

I held out my bag and quoted our Aunt Veronica. “Never climb without it. If you have to, use whatever’s around. Dirt, even dust.”

Peter scowled as he chalked up, not noticing that I hadn’t put any on my own hands.

The parking area between us and the looming bulk of Dewitt was clear, the path empty. Our breath made clouds of condensation.

“Come on,” I said.

Dewitt Hall had a gothic heart, with a modern wing added in the seventies, another only twenty years ago. Inside this architectural jumble, some classrooms were full of screens and lab equipment; others had blackboards that rolled up and down. I led Peter to the original building—a round tower topped with crenelations, guarding the edge of campus like a giant rook.

“Too easy,” he said, testing his hands on the rough-cut stones.

“Stay behind me.”

I started up, careful and unhurried. A climb like this wasn’t going to wear Peter out, but if we took our time, the cold would gradually seize his muscles.

Through a third-story window, the freshly waxed floor of the Disruptive Anatomy classroom gleamed with moonlight. A battered plastic skeleton hung by the window, organs rubber-banded in their places.

Disruptive Anatomy, taught by our Uncle William, was not in Helshire’s catalog. No ordinary student had ever watched us legacies murdering that skeleton countless times. Freshman year, the garrote and the knife; broken bottles and billiard cues as sophomores. This year we’d used shoelaces

and scarves, ballpoint pens, twelve-inch strips of duct tape, a knee-drop on that breakaway sternum.

“But always first with the mind,” Uncle William would say after each kill. What exactly this meant was the subject of after-class debates at Riley’s Bar.

“I can go faster,” Peter said.

“Mortons don’t boast.”

“That *itself* is a boast.”

I almost smiled.

It’s not that Peter was unintelligent or lacked discipline. But he exercised his talents in unseemly ways. Back at the estate, he bullied younger Mortons. Here at Helshire, he stole from ordinaries. Nobody ever caught him in the act, but he’d wear a pilfered watch a few times before storing it away. He kept his secrets, but let you know he had them.

As Grandmother warned us, being mysterious is not the same as being unseen.

Halfway up, he tried to pass me.

I forced him to the left, away from the easy handholds of the tower. The new wings’ walls were flatter, smoother, the mortar almost flush with the bricks.

Peter was up to the challenge. He dug his fingertips into crannies, used shallow toeholds to lunge for window ledges.

“Too easy,” he muttered as he passed me.

“We’re not going all the way,” I called softly.

He looked at me over his shoulder, as gleeful as when he was adding sticks to a fire. I climbed faster, pulled even. The cold was starting to grip my tendons.

The top of the tower bulged, the overhang slowing me. Peter grasped the highest window ledge a few seconds before me.

“I won!”

“Shush. Voices carry in the cold.”

“But you’re the best climber in the family!”

I pulled myself onto the ledge beside him. “I’ll tell everyone you beat me.”

“Grandma Elizabeth?”

“I’ll tell her first.”

“This climb was her idea, right?”

“Yes,” I said. No point in lying. “Check this out.”

I reached behind me and pulled open the window a few inches. The steam-heated air of the Physics Lounge spilled onto my frozen hands.

“Unlocked it this morning,” I said.

“Hah, you knew I wouldn’t stop halfway.”

I nodded.

“We should climb back down,” he said.

“Peter.” I made sure he heard my disappointment.

“I can do it!”

“Some tests are about restraint, not skill.”

“You sound like Grandma again,” he said, but as he leaned forward to peer at the ground, eighty feet below, I saw it—a flicker of doubt in his eyes. He rubbed his hands together, breathed on them.

My own muscles felt brittle in the freezing air.

It was time for his test.

“If you want,” I said. “But go around that overhang.”

“Don’t need to.” A moment later he was swinging from his hands.

I counted to five, picked up one of the stones I’d left on the window ledge that morning, and threw it into the trees.

It landed with a *crack*, like a branch snapping.

“Peter,” I whispered over the edge. “Someone’s on the path!”

I heard his feet scabbling for purchase. Then his toes must’ve found a crevice. I heard nothing but his breathing, sharp and fast.

I waited for him to speak again. All his weight on four points, motionless, his muscles searing in the cold.

“Are they gone?” he finally whispered.

“No.”

“But Jess . . .”

I threw another stone.

The *snap* of its landing quieted him again.

Peter’s mind would be racing as he hung below me, fingers going numb. If he moved before I told him to, I’d report his failure to the older Mortons. Worse, he might be spotted, and met by campus security at the bottom.

Humiliation, weighed against the risk of falling.

Every second hanging there, Peter was making the choice I’d expected. He couldn’t see his own faults—his boastfulness, his need for praise, for spectacle. Always an explosion when a blade would suffice.

He couldn’t see the test he was failing.

A full minute later he spoke again.

“Jess, I have to come back up,” Peter whispered. “Can you give me—”

I heard a fearful catch in his breath, and then the scrape of flesh on stone.

He didn’t cry out on the way down, didn’t make a sound. A proper Morton at the end.

After the crunch came, I peered over the edge.

Peter’s torso was twisted halfway around, his neck at a lethal angle. His legs and arms were splayed.

“What the hell was that?” a voice carried from the path. Someone really was down there in the dark.

I leaned back on the ledge, out of sight, listening to them crash through the underbrush. When they reached Peter’s body, I shoved the window open and rolled inside.

The lounge was still and dusty—cushioned couches, antique reading lamps, ball-and-stick models of molecules. The ticking radiators made the air warm and sticky, like blood.

I took a few deep breaths to slow my heart, then headed for the stairs.

On my way down, I pulled out a burner phone.

“Grandmother,” I said. “It’s done.”

“And how are you, Jessica, now that you’ve done it?”

“In a hurry. Someone heard him land.”

“Peter loved you.”

That almost made me stumble on the worn stone steps. *Love* was not a word Grandmother Elizabeth had said to me before. Was this also some kind of test?

Then I saw what she meant. “That’s why he fell.”

I could hear the cool, ancient smile in her voice.

“Very good, Jessica. *Fides sine cura.*” The family motto.

Loyalty without care.

2

I took the long way back to my dorm.

I'd chosen a quiet night for Peter's test, the Monday before midterms. No late movie at the Commons. No big parties out at the Terraces. Just a few couples walking in the cold, student security guards studying in their heated booths. Moving silently in black, I saw them before they saw me.

My muscles ached to run. Since I was little, I'd expected my bleeding to be exhilarating, like bursting from underwater to gasp fresh air. But killing Peter had been too easy. A few goading words and two tossed pebbles. *Always first with the mind.*

The burner phone disappeared into Sunset Lake with the tiniest splash.

Lavernick Hall was quiet, half the windows dark. I slipped in the back door, stripping off the electrical tape that had kept it unlocked. The security light I'd broken two days ago was still out. There are no cameras here at Helshire.

Climbing the stairs, something released in me at last, like letting an arrow fly.

My first kill, before I'd even graduated.

The hallway was empty, the doors shut, but when I stepped into my room, a voice spoke from the darkness.

"You should really get a lock."

I didn't startle. I never startle.

“My life is an open book, dear.”

“Says the girl who doesn’t answer my texts.” Faraday gestured at my phone, on my bedside table. “What if you got mugged out there?”

“Then they couldn’t steal my phone.”

“Except they could, because your door’s unlocked.”

Faraday sounded a bit drunk. She was stretched out on my bed in black jeans and T-shirt, a red leather jacket I hadn’t seen before. The pockets, sleeves, and sides were zippered—half a dozen sets of shiny metal teeth. Her chunky boots sat by the door to my widow’s walk.

Faraday smelled like she’d been at an off-campus party—weed, fire smoke, and the sticky sweetness of spilled champagne. More than one party, probably. She was the sort of girl who knew everyone, but didn’t remember their names.

An old British *Vogue* was splayed across her lap.

“You brought something to read?” I asked.

“In case you weren’t home. I like your shoes.”

Faraday was surveying my all-black climbing gear, my split-sole climbing Ninjas. The chalk bag nestled at the small of my back, out of her view.

I stripped off the top to make her glance away and dropped the bag in my laundry basket, reaching in for a crumpled white Oxford.

“Weren’t you cold out there?” she asked as I buttoned up.

“I was running.”

“How is your hair not a mess? Do you have booze?”

We both looked at my glass-fronted liquor cabinet, the bottles of amaro and vermouth, four kinds of whiskey, a small jury of bitters.

“For you, dear? Always.”



Faraday had been my freshman roommate at Helshire.

For incoming classes, the matchmakers at Housing pair each legacy

with an ordinary. Most of us have never lived with one before. It's good practice for the outside world, and forges lifelong bonds between us and the dissolute offspring of wealthy families.

The weakest part of any garment is a loose thread. Faraday was the fraying hem of the Wilbert-Lees of Boston, a sprawling clan of state senators and yacht club commodores, who inherited their furniture and called each other nicknames, but still got drunk at wine tastings.

For two and a half years, I'd insinuated myself into the Wilbert-Lees' good graces. Faraday's mother always gave me the same Christmas present—a makeup subscription, delivered in teak boxes. I sent her monthly thank-you notes in my best handwriting.

I was one of Faraday's few good influences at Helshire. Before me, she'd come back from vacations with an accent; now she came back with gifts.

"Lord, I miss your cocktails," she said after her first sip. An Old Gal—rye, Lillet, and amaro. Faraday's tastes ran as bittersweet as mine.

"You had three last night, dear."

"That's ages. *Please* come and live with us next year."

"We've discussed this," I said. "And isn't your house full?"

"I'd bump Salinger for you. Turns out, he thinks the moon is fake."

"A History major thinks the moon landing was fake?"

"No, the moon—and he can't make drinks for shit."

I took a sip of my cocktail. For our senior year, Faraday had snagged a gorgeous Victorian at the edge of campus, the home of the retiring dean of students. She'd interrupted the faculty bidding war, paying an enormous sum for one year's rental.

The house was beautiful, but the stairs creaked and Faraday's friends kept party hours. Better the single-sex corridors of Lavernick Hall, the floors silent, everyone in bed by two.

I didn't even have to lock my door.

"You haven't mentioned why you're here, Faraday."

“Do I *need* a reason to hang out in your room when you’re not around?”

“Yes.”

She waved her free hand, searching for words. “It’s complicated, dear. The sort of thing better discussed while drunk.”

I took another sip. “I think you’re there, dear.”

“It’s my brother.”

“Marlow, or Oscar?”

“How do you remember everyone’s name? It’s uncanny.”

“Because I love you.”

Faraday rolled her eyes, but she lapped up any sign of affection. The Wilbert-Lees were more prone to intrafamily lawsuits than sentiments. When she called me *dear*, I mirrored her, and she mirrored me back. A wearisome loop, but it worked.

“Marlow was careless. Dad’s old business partner convinced him to sign something. Now our CallHome shares are deluded.”

“Diluted,” I said. Since their father’s death, Marlow had dumped most of the Wilbert-Lees’ money into their most profitable endeavor, a company that gouged prisoners’ families for phone calls. A dollar a minute added up.

“Whatever.” Faraday’s eyes began to twitch. “We’re in trouble, Jessica. Things will go away. The horses, Paris, my house next year. Maybe even my tuition!”

I made an astonished sound. When bad things happen to rich people, you must pretend there’s been some kind of mistake.

“The partner was being misleading when he made Marlow sign those documents. And I thought, maybe . . .”

I took a slow drink, waiting for Faraday to finish.

“Your crowd,” she finally said. “The legacies, the calm people.”

“Calm?”

“None of you gives a shit. I mean, you dress well and get good grades. You use the right forks, the right grammar. But deep down, you don’t

care.” Faraday knuckled her eyes, growling at the world. “God, I wish I didn’t care.”

“Faraday,” I said. “Are you asking me to fix this?”

“Not *you*, Jessica. You’re my friend and that’s messy.” She sat up straighter, finally looked me in the eye, a brave little girl facing the monster in her closet. “But yes. It needs fixing.”

A second shiver of completion went through me. Two and a half years of trains to Boston, of sneaking flasks of whiskey to Faraday’s dying father, of thank-you notes for makeup I didn’t use, and here she was asking for help at last, on the very same night as my bleeding.

Blind coincidence, sweeter than any design.

“Of course, dear. I can find someone.”

“Oh.” Faraday almost sounded disappointed. Like she hadn’t quite believed I was one of them—one of us. Despite my last name, my cool stares, my generations-old, exquisitely made, invisibly mended clothes, she wanted me to be her ordinary friend.

I took her hand.

She swallowed. “I wouldn’t ask, except . . .”

Houses. Horses. Tuition. Paris.

I heard it then, from the hallway, a sound bubbling up. Girls studying for midterms together, glancing every few minutes at their phones.

Ping. Ping.

“It’s going to be okay.” I kissed Faraday’s hand.

She didn’t answer, just heaved a complicated sigh.

Down the hall, the bubbling had spilled out into the corridor. Doors were opening, whispers flying like little scrapes of sandpaper.

I could feel the storm front of tragedy surging, about to interrupt this moment of connection.

In my careful planning of Peter’s test, I hadn’t thought about what came next. The checklist of emotions to perform—frantic questions, shocked silence, fast breathing. Dilated eyes. It was so much work, so much *mess*, pretending to care.

“I’ll always be here for you,” I forged ahead with Faraday. “We’ll fix this together.”

A tear rolled from her left eye. “Thank you.”

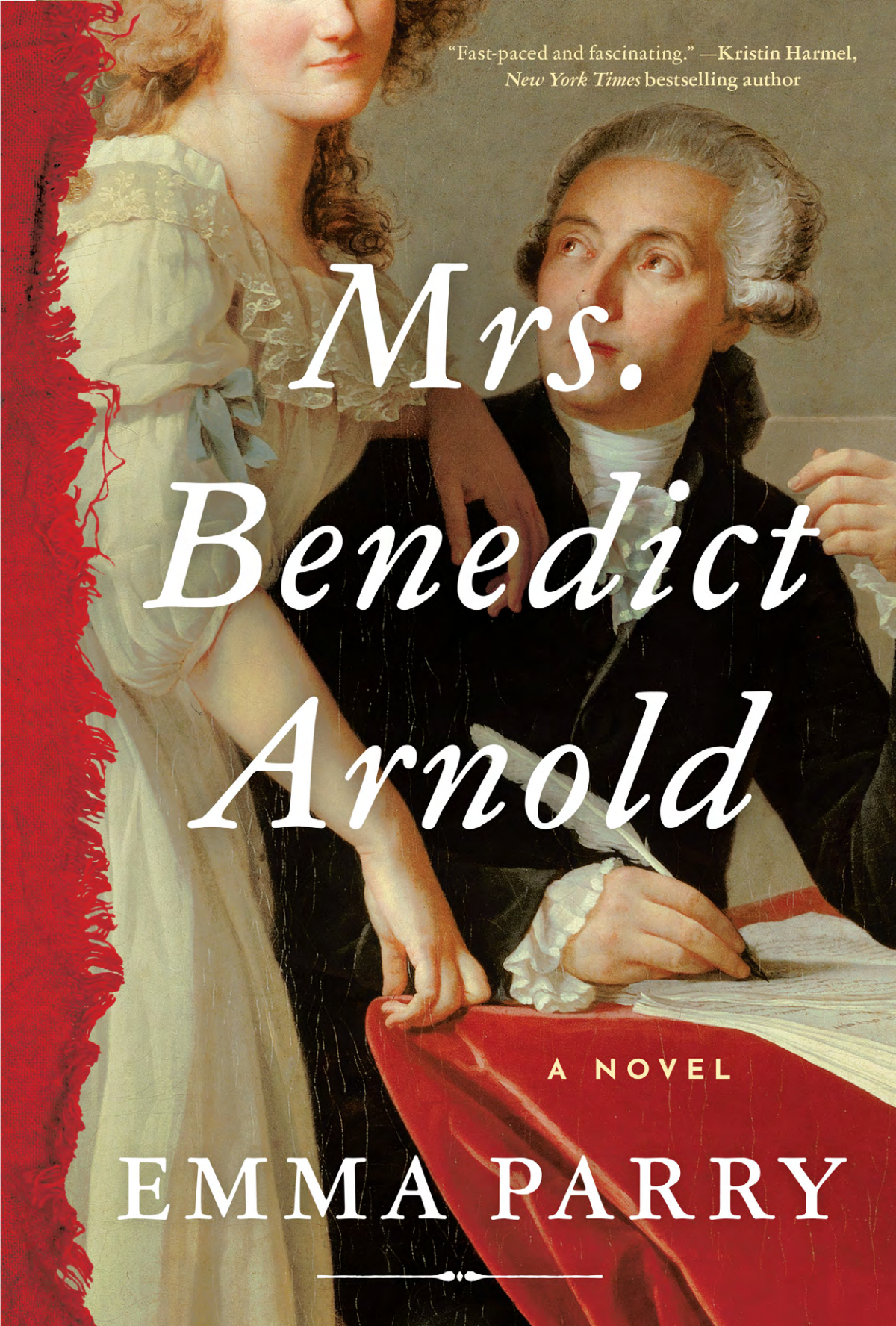
From outside, the sound of my name reached us, whispers breaking into soft cries as more girls woke up.

Even Faraday heard it now, and our eyes unlocked. We turned to face the door.

“What the hell?” she murmured.

I shrugged, like it had nothing to do with me, and squeezed her hand one last time. It was a soft hand, trusting and warm.

As the frantic knocking finally rattled my door, I found myself wondering what Faraday would wear to Peter’s funeral.



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*Mrs.
Benedict
Arnold*

A NOVEL

EMMA PARRY



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Chapter One

Pennsylvania, 1777

I WAS ASLEEP WHEN THE FIRST SHOT CAME. DREAMING I WAS CROSSING an ocean, cold salt spray misting my skin, dread churning along with the restless swell. Conflicting updates arrived at intervals. A big win for one side. Their complete defeat. With no idea what to wish for, I searched the faces of older women for clues to their bewildering conviction.

A gun fired, a body slumped, and I woke with the report still ringing in my ears.

There was a second shot before I realized it was real.

I scrambled to crouch under the window I'd left open to the rain again, letting in the risk of rot.

Across the street, the Galloway house was in darkness. A porchlight exposed a tight mass of men's backs, the silhouette of muskets.

"Committees of safety" sounded deliberately sinister to me. The idea of citizens policing each other's beliefs had fear rising like water. Now they'd started targeting neighbors, even sleep was no relief.

My heart hammered as a sash was raised on the first floor and Mrs. Galloway appeared at the window, lit from behind. Impressively imperious, given her nightdress, and apparently immune to intimidation, the former speaker of the Assembly's wife demanded the men disperse. Raising her voice above their jeering insults like the practiced politician her husband had been, she insisted Mr. Galloway loved his country as much as any man among them. He'd accepted defeat and left the city, and there was now no more to be said!

The sash slammed shut, and with a sickening splintering the door downstairs was forced. Light moved about the house—glass smashing, servants shrieking—before the men emerged empty-handed.

Long after the men's footsteps receded, I kept queasy vigil, the only warped comfort that my brothers had been spared whatever was coming for us.

At first light, my father knocked on the door, instructing Betsy and me to be ready to leave in an hour.

"I am not without hopes that matters will subside. Until then, it's better we're out of the city."

As we began folding clothes to take to our country house, I whispered to my elder sister what she'd missed.

"We should offer to take her with us," I said with sudden conviction.

Betsy looked unconvinced but I went to find Father in his library, where he was volleying out letters to tenants, chasing late payments with his typical tact.

"Don't we have some obligation?" My voice dropped to a whisper. "You said it was a bid for peaceful reconciliation Mr. Galloway made, and he was only narrowly defeated?"

Father's skin, always quick to pink, flushed puce.

"The duty, Peggy, of every moderate-thinking man is to remain silent and inactive in these times."

I retreated, but not without wondering bolshily if it was.

We were all very quiet as we loaded only what one carriage could carry. Two Quaker widows, acquaintances in reduced circumstances, would be installed in our home to deter any committees thinking of requisitioning it. I was grateful to escape, and guilty at the thought we were leaving women with fewer choices to risk what we would not.

Rolling out of the city in a vehicle any mob could tip, the veneer of civilization seemed suddenly very thin.

It was a relief to feel the air cool as we reached Shippensburg, to see familiar oaks with their great green reach. Ignoring my mother's protests, I stuck my head outside the carriage, squinting as dappled sunlight flashed across my face and the breeze whipped my hair stiff.

At the mouth of the driveway, I climbed down from the carriage and waded alone through the wildflower meadow to the old stone house with its faded blue wooden shutters.

While my parents and Betsy went to rest, I set off into the woods. Out of sight, I could still run there—and I did, sprinting like an ostrich in my adult getup along the soft mossy paths I loved.

Javelins of sunshine pierced the woods, spotlighting trees which seemed to grow directly from the rocks. I saw a pileated woodpecker drilling holes like gunshots, a scarlet cardinal, a brilliant blue jay, eastern phoebes—one so far from shy she came with me, looping from one branch to the next along my path. Lichen, fern, mushroom, moss: Everything felt it had chosen to live there in that air.

At the waterhole, I shocked my toes in the cold dark green, water boatmen darting from my feet, and felt the long clench of fear release.

Initially, I was thoroughly taken with thrift. Wearing homespun clothes and eating only what we'd grown made me feel virtuous and romantic, somewhere between a picturesque peasant and a nun.

I scattered seed for the chickens, and collected eggs for Atty, but once I'd arranged the spices in alphabetical order and entirely refolded the linen closet, the days felt long, our seclusion stifling. Anxiety was compounded by all the guilt and grief which went unsaid.

My father took two papers, *The Pennsylvania Packet* and *The Royal Gazette*, and I pored over their pages trying to fuse the dueling perspectives—*The King is bent on our destruction / The Rebels will destroy us all*. I felt like a weathervane in a hurricane, and imagined a thousand grisly endings, the butt of a musket between my eyes, my flesh melting in flames. Any account of violence instilled fear of more. And it was apparently beyond me to read of suffering without imagining a worse what-next for myself. I looked up from the paper five times a minute to eye the driveway, alert for savage radicals or ruthless invaders—wondering truculently if my parents wouldn't have been wiser to keep the shutters shut.

When fear escalated to violent uncertainty—panic—I took unsteadily to the attic. The floor was so wonky we'd played pirates there as children, staggering

on a listing ship. I began a secret index to monitor my dread levels, marking my anxiety like notes on a score, intrigued to see the most violently spiking crescendos didn't necessarily correspond with what I'd read. The grip of the worst fear was so strong I believed it must be reasonable, a premonition that would inevitably prove true.

I went to pester Betsy one afternoon, searching for escape from the endless nervy fretting.

"Don't you wish there were something we could do?"

"There's little any of us can do." She sighed, lifting the embroidery in her lap as a gentle exception. "We need to know our limits, Peggy."

To be told so was annoying.

"Why don't you make yourself a dress?" she suggested.

"There's nowhere to wear anything!"

"There will be, Peggy," she said, half-impatient, half-indulgent. "Make the dress and the occasion will come."

For all the tendency to rebellion, I liked doing what I was told, if I liked who was doing the telling.

I snagged an embroidered waistcoat of my father's and retreated to the attic to refashion it into a stomacher, using homespun for the skirt. I moved the fabric this way and that on the wide, warped floorboards, tilting the green-gold stitching to the low windows' light. I spent hours, all thoughts of radicals and retaliation forgotten, sketching and cutting and pleating, swinging between exhilaration—*this would be the best dress ever*—and dismay—*it was hideous, hopeless, and anyway I'd never get to wear it*—forging on until I felt inspired. Suddenly the dress was telling me where we were going, and if there's a better feeling, I'm still not sure I know it.

But as soon as it was done, worry weevilled back in. I was guilty of longing for something, anything, to break the tension.

Chapter Two

MY FATHER RECEIVED THE MESSAGE IN THE MIDDLE OF ANOTHER miserable mutton lunch. Loss and worry had scored a pi sign between his eyes, which deepened as he read.

“It’s William,” he said. “Inviting himself to dinner.”

My mother’s head reared up. Uncle William had offended her at my brothers’ funeral by asking if we children had not been inoculated, a question I could see had been tactless, but also felt fair professional interest, doctor that he was. He’d taken my face in his large, gentle hands to look for scarring, and I’d been comforted in the aftermath of the boys’ dreadful suffering by the layer of protection he seemed to represent. Selfishly reassured too by his promise that Betsy and I should now have a degree of immunity from having been so exposed.

Father returned to the letter, his frown carved dark.

“He’ll be bringing Neddy. Requests my help establishing our cousin in the legal profession after a spell in captivity—”

“Neddy was taken prisoner?” Betsy cried.

Father took another forkful.

“By which side?” I asked, as he swallowed interminably on.

“Neddy,” he read, finally, “was prevailed upon by Johnny, Andrew, and Billy Allen to go with them to the British army, which he accordingly did, and was civilly received there by General Howe and the British officers. His companions soon after went to New York, and Neddy remained at Trenton. When the attack was made on the Hessians there, he was accordingly taken prisoner by our army”—Father held that “*our*” as if between pincers—“and carried with others to General Washington, who after examining his case and finding that

charged him, and he is now with me.”

“Senseless adventure,” my mother said grimly, “ending in ignominy in lands so civilized!” I marveled.

My father’s kind treatment by both sides was confusing. If allegiance was a matter of manners—decency more than winning—killing ought not to be. All my dread was for a *game*, some kind of officer sport, but reassuring, too. Would war remain harmless for people? Was anxiety destined to be melodramatic? I couldn’t entirely hope for it. I asked my father to let me take Neddy on as my legal clerk, keep him from further engagement, while William himself attends to business.

“The company might be good, Mamma?” Betsy suggested.

“I ought at least to celebrate Neddy’s safe return?” I tried.

“Don’t look at him, the young man my sons should have become,” my father said, and I exchanged a glance, and I appealed to my father for help. “I don’t like it any more than you do. But per duty—”

My mother cut that thread with tight lips. Church was persona non grata. “The reverend said she shouldn’t be attempting to summon her children.”

“It would not go amiss.” Father tried again. “I have neglected leaving the city, and something must pay for Atty, and our mother sighed in compliance. Betsy smiled in relief. I was guided by routine.

“I’d last seen him, Neddy had been navigating an awkward t

He had come a long way. When he walked in the door, he made adolescence feel like enchantment. He was still Neddy, but he'd filled his frame and owned his height. And his skin—

“What were you thinking?” I asked, aware I'd been staring.

“Don't press him,” Betsy said.

“I'm a soldier.” He smiled. “I don't think. Do or die!”

William swatted him.

My uncle too was handsome and glamorous, crisscrossing the Atlantic six times already to learn from the best British physicians and treat the most interesting afflictions. He attended to aristocrats and attended Congress and had to have exacting standards. The room looked newly unkempt in our guests' presence. Family standards had lapsed. I spotted a cobweb on the gilt-framed reproduction of the King that reigned over the table with familial authority. Would William find the portrait offensive?

My father's greetings were more mannered than felt friendly. He shook hands as if assessing a threat. The brothers were near twins in features, with the same pale blue eyes and pink cheeks, but my uncle's skin was plump where Father's was thin. I watched sadly as Neddy tried, and failed, to warm up Mamma. She had been all our sanctuary lamp, but the light had died with the boys.

Neddy offered his arms to me and Betsy. “Heavens, cousins, how have you been?”

The reunion may be challenging, he seemed to say, but nobody need get offended.

William was rubbing my father's back, perhaps too heartily. “A government can rule only by the consent of the people—”

That sounded plausible, until I heard my father's mirthless laugh.

“I think you'll find all the better sort of people unite behind the King. Your cause, sir, is not legitimate—”

“There's honor in it you'll regret not recognizing, sir.”

Why call each other “sir” once a sentence when contempt was clearly the message? Every assertion only fortified opposition. It was like watching bittle-battle wishing both players could win. Perhaps it was as it should be?

Two sides would always be needed—good sorts at each end pulling their weight—while everyone’s happiness hung in the balance.

William’s excitement had curdled into contempt. “. . . while the *British* threaten to make smallpox a weapon of war . . .”

I turned my head so fast I crooked my neck.

“They did it in the French and Indian War,” William said, with something too like satisfaction. Did my uncle know what the disease did to people? He did!

Neddy shrugged apologetically. “Even if not intentional policy, Peggy, the British have herd immunity we colonies are nowhere near. It could be devastating. More dangerous than their navy—”

“The time for hedging bets is over, brother,” William said, taking the seat next to me and pulling my sketchbook onto his lap.

“May I?” he asked, his breath steady as he flipped through my endless iterations of medieval figures. I found those lines soothing too.

“Who’s this?” he asked.

“Joan of Arc,” I said. “Convincing the Dauphin she could help him win.”

“Very good,” he smiled, handing the book back to me and raising his voice, “Now picture the British army being routed from another continent, closer to home—”

He winked, and I felt a guilty glow of benediction and conspiracy.

“William—” my father warned.

William ignored him.

“What did you make of the language of the Declaration, Peggy?”

I remembered my stomach tilting between elation at the rhetoric and fear of what consequences had been unleashed. I was further flustered by the proximity of Neddy, who was suddenly, inescapably, a *man*.

William was watching. “What say you, Peggy?”

I glanced at my father.

“What thinking reader could be unmoved?”

Lashing myself for sounding so mannered and bland, and showering sparks about Neddy, I splashed my face, hastily changed and raced back down for

dinner, poking stray hairs back in place with a finger where there should have been pins. My mother's glance was a barbed dart. She and Betsy were pristine in muslin, backs rigid, while the soup was painstakingly ladled. Father confined conversation to Neddy's education, peppering him with questions about the relative merits of Princeton and King's College.

While I was grateful the sparring had stopped, wasting time on pleasantries felt rude to the universe, given we had only one evening with William and so much to learn. I wanted to hear about fashionable patients and extravagant afflictions and to marvel at all his pioneering new ways of doing no harm.

William spoke of how well Franklin had seemed on the crossing. My spoon splashed into my soup.

"Sorry—" I said to my mother, using my napkin to cover the stain.

"That grand incendiary," Father scoffed.

"Peggy used to dawdle in the passage by his printing shop in hopes of meeting him," Betsy said, returning the napkin to my lap.

"If I had, I'd have been too scared to speak—"

"You admire him?" Neddy asked.

I nodded. I was glad to be alive at the same time as him, but I couldn't say that. The only sounds were our creaking corsets and Father slurping soup.

"It's boring for the powerful if everyone they meet is cowed," William said. "What is it you admire, Peggy?"

That he can't look at a thing without thinking of ways to make it better? I didn't trust my thick tongue to get that out. I managed, "I like his writing—"

My uncle nodded politely. Neddy gave a slightly desperate grin. What I'd have said if I'd been ready was that he was so fizzing with creativity he didn't seem to worry about failure or waste one minute on doubt or deference. He could say the most brilliant thing one week and laugh about farts the next, which felt alien brave to me, still second-guessing every step. He liked himself, was what it seemed.

"When your time with such men comes, Peggy, listen. Keep your thoughts nimble and find the right time to pitch in. Never freeze, never fawn. And don't talk on and on, however fascinating you're being. Edward, you must take care your children don't become parochial. Peggy should travel at the earliest

opportunity. Feel at ease with figures of consequence. You ought to take the family to London. Stay with me—”

“I don’t believe now is the time for a sea journey, William.”

“I’d love to go, though,” I cried, before catching the set of my mother’s mouth.

“So you shall,” William said, refilling his wine glass and mine. “We’re natural travelers in this family. Whatever happens between the mother country and the colonies, you’ll always have the keys to both. Meanwhile, take comfort: Philadelphia is the one city in America all civilized Europeans know they need to see.”

I liked that. Where it was at was where I wanted to be. And I loved America, its land and space; the freedom from persecution it had given our ancestors; the fresh chance it promised to expand all that people could be.

Still, Philadelphia had several impressive blocks. London had actual palaces, cathedrals! We colonies couldn’t compete, not yet. I gave a quick genuflecting glance at the King.

Across the table, the brothers’ jabs were getting sharper. My father was wagging a finger over his glass, preparing for sentencing, while William eyed him like a boil he would have liked to lance.

“Anything less than self-determination makes infants of us.”

“What’s childish, sir, is this temper tantrum rebellion—”

I wanted to believe the men were like wise and reverent chess players calculating many moves ahead, dueling politically to eliminate the real risk of conflict. As it was, I felt pinned in place while puppets bickered over me.

In a deferential, tentative voice Neddy addressed his plate, saying he’d seen there were fine, brave men on both sides, but while he would always feel the greatest respect for the King, reports from Lexington had fundamentally changed his thinking.

My father’s eyes welled in question. I was beginning to worry about his health. Neddy took a deep breath and raised his head. He seemed to feel mine were the least difficult eyes to meet.

“Benedict Arnold’s courage was indelible.”

“General Arnold even you could not disdain,” William said, almost affably. “Brave as they get. Fought for the King initially. Took a look at the evidence. Now an absolute Patriot. There’s no shame in a thoughtful pivot, Edward. Not everyone’s mind can be quick.”

“His men would have done anything he said—” Neddy cut in quickly.

“A lot of dangerous nonsense—” Father harrumphed, but Neddy was forging on, lit with enthusiasm. He leaned toward me and Betsy, dropping his voice.

“When the fighting was done, he held a solemn ceremony. Each of his men signed their name to a vow he’d written—swearing they’d conduct themselves decently, soberly, obediently and expel any person guilty of behavior which might corrupt ‘so great and glorious a cause . . .’”

It sounded as thrilling as a game we’d have played as children. He shrugged appealingly, and looked up at me from under thick brown lashes.

“Persuaded me,” he murmured in his new, becoming rumble.

“I heard the rebels were savages in their way of killing—” father said.

William looked apoplectic. I felt a rising panic. My uncle lopped off limbs. He mustn’t think us expendable. How could Father undermine what Neddy found inspiring, whatever the wrongs and rights? Betsy’s polite agony, my mother’s snide smile. The divide felt geological, a fault line running through us, chaos welling from the crack. Some instinct erupted. I threw my napkin back into my lap.

“But the conflict will end?” I cried. “It must! And when it does, all this”—I was now gesturing frantically, as if catching gas—“fuel spent fighting can push us forward. We’ll progress, better than ever—”

I saw the set of my mother’s mouth and returned my arms to my sides.

“I think we can all drink to that,” Neddy said gamely. Slowly William and my father raised their glasses.

“Unusual, to find that one so intelligent should be as kind,” William mused. “Aren’t you lucky, Margaret, to have a child with a good head on her shoulders?”

It was an affront to talk to our bereaved mother of luck. There was a long sour silence in which I saw how irritating I had been, gabbing on rashly, relishing things I had no business to be.

Mamma stood to leave, and Betsy leaped up like a marionette beside her.

“Couldn’t we stay, Father?” I tried. “Just a little longer. This once?”

“Women have no cause to concern themselves with politics,” my mother said. “We must trust to those who know better.”

Between the high feeling and the tight bodice, my breasts were brimming as I followed.

“I do trust them to know better, Mamma,” I whispered urgently as we reached the small sitting room. “That’s why it feels crucial to hear all they think—”

Betsy tried: “These things are beyond our power, Peggy. Willfully consuming news which puts one in a state of alarm might be thought morally wrong—”

“But what if it *were* in our power?”

“What if what were?” Betsy asked helplessly.

“Margaret Shippen, who do you think you are?”

My mother’s contempt was so palpable, I felt slapped. I fled upstairs.

Betsy found me sobbing on my bed. She sat quietly with me until I finished with the ugly gulps and then brandished the familiar gold spoons with her funny, sommelier-like flourish. I pressed the cold metal to my eyes, and once the swelling felt it had subsided, raised my gaze for her approval.

“Better,” Betsy said. “You’d never know. We only want to protect you, Peggy. Not all men have Uncle William and Neddy’s patience for a girl of sixteen’s ideas. Personally, I admire your stamina. I have heard enough about the Stamp Act and tea tax to last a lifetime.”

I managed to go down to say goodbye to William. “I’m sorry—”

He waved that aside like chips on baize.

“Have you read Mr. Paine’s ‘Common Sense,’ Peggy?”

I shook my head.

“High time. Have mine—”

I hugged my uncle hard and waved until he was out of sight, buffeted by all the high feeling and buffered too by a sense of expanding family.

Neddy wished me good night, murmuring with unnerving maturity how very good it was to be with us. As my mind scrambled in the pleasant precursor to sleep, I wondered if he might be my meant-to-be. Was marrying your cousin becoming a bit embarrassing? How questionable could it be if kings did it?

A glass of red wine is tilted, spilling the liquid onto a white marble surface. The wine is a deep red color, and the spill is spreading across the marble, creating a large, irregular red stain. The background is a white marble with grey veining. The text is overlaid on the image.

Everyone's dying for
an invitation

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Prologue

Present Day, Halloween Night

BLINKING AWAKE WITH a dry mouth and my cheek pressed into the spine of an open paperback, I try to recall whose idea it had been to host a murder mystery-themed game on the night reserved for book club.

Maybe if I can remember, I will be able to figure out why I am here. Because instead of sitting on one of my friends' couches, sipping a perfectly chilled pinot grigio and discussing some fiction (briefly) before launching into local gossip (at length), I'm lying gagged, bound, and blindfolded on someone's cold basement floor.

Not a finished basement, like the one my neighbor just remodeled into a wellness spa and meditation room. No, I'm talking about a dark, below-grade cellar with poured concrete floors and the hint of mustiness that says there's been water damage here.

"Mmph!" I grunt-shout through the duct tape on my face, my situation feeling more and more dire as I try to clear the

brain fog that's preventing me from recalling how I got into this position in the first place. Too much wine?

I have a splitting headache. The back of my skull throbs.

Worse, I have no memory of how I got here, and my head is too heavy to move. Only my feet and wrists are bound, but I don't think I can even roll onto my side if I want to because my whole body feels like there's an elephant sitting on me. I had to have been drugged. Our group read a book once where something like this happened to a college-aged girl. Someone spiked her drink at a frat party, and she ended up assaulted with no memory of what happened.

Fear curdles in my belly. I'm still dressed in the same clothes I'd worn to the murder mystery party, so I didn't think anyone had touched me like *that*. Forcing myself to stop and think, to really concentrate, I can definitely remember arriving at Sophie's house on our book club night. I'd been a little miffed that I'd had to come in costume for the mystery game, since my character's backstory was a snooze, and I didn't have much leeway with the outfit.

I had brought a bottle of wine, as usual. Also my favorite murder mystery novel, since I felt a moral obligation to elevate the literary talk among the group even on our theme nights when reading is usually optional. So I remember I rang the front doorbell at Sophie's place with a worn copy of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in my hand when someone who wasn't Sophie answered. Her extremely hot husband, Luke. I'd been a little surprised since the spouses normally take off on our book club nights, but I never minded running into Luke. The man was a specimen. Tall, fit, and ridiculously wealthy. It didn't hurt to *look*.

The next thing I remember was drinking a glass of wine. Or maybe a cocktail of some sort? I couldn't recall who'd

up for the murder mystery game. No one looked quite like themselves. There'd been the hotel tycoon and the glamorous actress. A Vegas showgirl and a doctor in surgical scrubs passing out Jell-O shots in syringes. Everyone had a part to play.

Had Luke drugged me? Or Sophie? I'd had my run-ins with both of them in the past, but we're all friends now. I'd been in the book club with Sophie ever since I'd moved into a chichi neighborhood in Saratoga Springs. As for the rest of the book club members, I considered them all friends.

Well, I considered them friend-*ly* at very least. No doubt they talked about me behind my back for things like the Eco book and who knew what else. Who doesn't have at least a little baggage with the members of their social circle? And, let's face it, this particular book club has more baggage than most considering just the quiet backstabbing and public betrayals that *I* know about among my friends. I'm not even in the inner circle, so I've always suspected there is a lot more at play beneath the surface. Not to mention there was that hit-and-run a year ago when one of the members had been struck and killed on the way home from a meeting. Something that seemed accidental then, but in light of my current bound status, I wonder. Is our club turning deadly?

Our themed murder mystery game might hit a little too close to home.

A wave of queasiness grips me, and I worry I'm going to hurl behind the barrier of the tape. Wouldn't that kill me? I'd choke to death. Strangely, that thought prods me the rest of the way out of my drug-induced stupor. My heart rate kicks into high gear, a rapid-fire beat making me breathe too fast as the full recognition of my predicament settles into my brain.

I hadn't been tied up and thrown into someone's cold basement as part of any murder mystery game. Somebody

pretty sure I felt a trickle of blood sliding through the roots of my hair. There would be no pinot grigios and bookish discussion with friends this evening. Something is very, very wrong tonight, and I am in real danger.

Panic grips me. I need to move, but I can't.

I might have upchucked then, the swirl of nausea making me dizzy. But at the very moment the bile begins to burn a path up the back of my throat, a scream from upstairs chills me all the way to my duct-taped toes.

1

Jordyn

Present, Two Weeks Before Halloween

CAN YOU FIND *the killer before another murder is committed?* Jordyn Lawson fought a shiver at the wording on the glossy black cardstock in her hand. The sentence wasn't meant to be ominous. The elegant invitation had been professionally printed, complete with the outline of a hooded grim reaper.

She leaned a hip against the wrought iron railing on the second story deck of her neighbor's home and trailed a finger over the gold script on the card. Grateful her hostess was too busy preparing drinks to notice how much the card had flustered her, Jordyn reminded herself to be discreet in her response to the invitation.

Today had been major sensory overload. As a certified introvert, Jordyn normally wouldn't have made an effort to meet new neighbors. But her relocation came with an agenda.

A goal that she'd already made sacrifices for. Attending this block party and getting the lay of the land in upstate New York's Spa City—the alternately charming and pretentious Saratoga Springs—was an important first step.

The setting sun burnished Saratoga Lake and Kaitlin Teal's backyard in the rich colors of autumn. Jordyn had only moved into a nearby rental home a few weeks ago, so she was grateful for today's block party that allowed her to mingle with the locals. On Kaitlin's lawn below, a few teens splashed each other with cold water from the lake while younger kids squealed inside a castle-shaped bounce house.

This scene was more relaxed and raucous than at some of Kaitlin's block party cohosts who lived in stuffier, multimillion-dollar mansions all around her. Jordyn had already dropped by a historic Victorian home with catered hors d'oeuvres and a chamber orchestra for the appetizer portion of the day. Then she'd stopped by a French country-style estate where the owners had a full-on luau in progress, complete with fire jugglers for entertainment and a buffet overflowing with poke, poi, and suckling pig. There had been arbors heavy with yellow hibiscus flowers all along the walkways between a temporary dance floor and the pool deck. Even now, almost an hour later, the distinctive sound of a steel guitar and wooden Polynesian drums echoed in Jordyn's head despite Kaitlin's outdoor Sonos speakers blaring a pop tune.

All of this was a world away from her down-to-earth Texas home. Former home. Her live-in lover of two years had given her an ultimatum when she'd told him she was leaving their place in Austin to pursue a quest almost two thousand miles away. Six weeks later, she still didn't regret choosing the quest over him.

"You said this invitation is for your book club?" Jordyn

killer as she flipped the card to read the back side. There was an October meeting date and contact details.

Jordyn recognized the street address for the ginormous house with the owners who threw a luau as their contribution to today's event.

"It's probably a bit over the top for your average book club invitation, I know. But you'll get used to everything being a little extra around this town." Kaitlin dipped the rim of a champagne flute into a mixture of cinnamon and sugar as she stood at the stainless-steel countertop of her outdoor kitchen. She had a whole tray of glasses lined up and methodically ran a slice of apple around the edge of each one before coating the rims in the sweet and spicy mixture.

While she prepared enough drinks for a crowd, she settled the last of the flutes on a serving tray before picking up a quart of apple cider and splashing a little into each glass. Kaitlin wore a brown sundress dotted with a daisy pattern, a jean jacket and high leather boots were her nod to the cooler temperatures of an upstate autumn. Every high-end piece of clothing she wore made Jordyn very aware of her consignment store clothes.

At least she'd been careful to keep long sleeves down so that the homemade tattoo on her forearm was hidden.

"Are you reading a crime thriller or something?" Jordyn asked, scanning the invitation once more to see if she'd missed a book title for the meeting.

She was playing it cool, but she definitely wanted to attend the book club meeting. She and Kaitlin had hit it off as soon as Jordyn had made friends with Nala, Kaitlin's fawn-colored American Akita, who had almost knocked Jordyn over with an enthusiastic jump. A conversation about dogs led to one about novels, and, now, here they were. With an opportunity

“You would think so, right?” Kaitlin gave a wry laugh as she grabbed a bottle of Prosecco and topped off the flutes with sparkling wine, her collection of silver rings clanking against the glass as she poured. “But the book is optional this month, so I paid no attention to the title. Some of our members gripe about reading too many books each year, so we’ve started doing a couple of theme nights to space out the reading commitments. This month Sophie decided to do one of those murder mystery games where everyone shows up as a character and we all try to guess who committed a crime.”

“And you’re sure it’s okay for me to just show up at the next meeting? I mean, wouldn’t I need to be a character?” Seeing that Kaitlin was ready to start serving the drinks, Jordyn shoved the invitation into her knock-off designer bag and reached to take the tray for her. “Here, let me get this for you at least. I can make the rounds if you want.”

“You’re so sweet.” Shaking her head, Kaitlin kept hold of the silver commemorative platter engraved with a racehorse and the date of a decades-old Travers Stakes. There were horsey touches everywhere in the town famous for mineral springs and a historic race course that touted itself as the oldest continuously operated sporting venue in the United States. Heading for the steps, Kaitlin said over her shoulder, “This way I can greet all my guests while still having a built-in exit strategy for the neighbors I don’t want to get stuck talking to.”

Perhaps Jordyn’s hostess saw her disappointment at being left alone on the deck because she paused to add, “Why don’t you walk with me, and I’ll introduce you to the people you haven’t met yet?”

“Um, yes?” Following her down the steps to the surrounding lawn below, Jordyn lowered her voice for Kaitlin’s ears alone. “Assuming I’m not one of those neighbors you need an

“Ha! Not a chance. I wouldn’t have mentioned book club if you were on my list of people to avoid.” Kaitlin headed toward the side lawn first, where a dozen guests congregated around a seating area anchored by a firepit. Before they reached the group, she confided, “And it’s probably best you don’t mention it to anyone else, either, in case they don’t belong. Some people have been lobbying for an invite for years.”

OK then.

Jordyn counted herself all the more fortunate to be one of the anointed few. Especially since she didn’t exactly blend in with this wealthy crowd. She was renting a carriage house a few blocks down, so it wasn’t like she had a splashy home to impress anyone. Maybe no one else suspected her clothes were all consignment shop finds and a far cry from the tees and pajama pants she preferred to wear, but there were other tells that she didn’t belong in the same sandbox as the rest of this group. Even Kaitlin, who was a family therapist and lived in a humbler home by Saratoga standards, rocked a Rolex watch and Prada sunglasses.

“Welcome, welcome!” Kaitlin plastered on a hostess smile as she approached the guests by the firepit. Logs shifted in the copper bowl as she drew closer, sending a shower of sparks into the cooling air. “Who’s ready for an apple cider mimosa?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” The first one to reach for the tray was an immaculately styled woman in a form-fitting white angora sweater over pale gray leggings. Gold and diamond necklaces lay in the vee of her sweater, glinting in the glow of the fire. Platinum blonde hair swooped over her forehead in an artful roll against her brown skin.

“Jordyn, this is Destiny Griffin. She owns The Ascent, the best gym in town, and lives over on Crescent Avenue.” Kaitlin

town. “Destiny, and everyone, this is Jordyn Lawson. She just moved into the Solomons’ carriage house so be your sweetest to her so she’ll stick around, okay?”

“Give us a little credit will you?” A soft-spoken, extremely good-looking man in a corduroy blazer reached around Destiny to help himself to a drink. “We’re always good to newcomers. I’m Brad, by the way. I just finished up renovations on the white Federalist house two doors down from you.”

“Nice to meet you.” Jordyn smiled a greeting but didn’t have a chance to say more than that when someone spoke over her.

“We’re good to the newcomers,” echoed a big, athletic-looking guy in chinos who sprawled on a patio lounge with a longneck in his hand. He raised the beer to point it at Kaitlin. “It’s the locals we treat like crap.”

“That’s not true, Nikolai,” Destiny crooned, moving closer to him to put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s just *you* we treat like crap.”

There were a few chuckles from people around the fire, and then Kaitlin was already spinning on her heel.

“There are lots more drinks on the patio when you need to top up,” Kaitlin called as she walked away. “Come on, Jordyn, you’ve got about a zillion more introductions heading your way.”

“Nice to meet you all.” Jordyn gave an awkward wave at the firepit group before hurrying after her hostess.

“Slow down, new girl.”

A voice from behind her made Jordyn pause. Destiny picked her way through the grass in metallic-colored kitten heels.

“You too, Kaitlin.” Destiny called as she reached Jordyn’s side. She pointed to Jordyn’s handbag, her silver-painted fingernail resting on the designer insignia. “What’s this all

Confused, Jordyn wondered if she needed to defend her fake Louis purse. “An impulse buy, I guess. Is it that obvious it’s not real?”

She lifted the leather to examine the pattern stamped on it more carefully as Kaitlin rejoined them, her tray still half full.

“Not the clutch. This.” Destiny withdrew the book club invitation sticking out from the side pouch. She waved it in front of Kaitlin’s nose. “You got her in?”

“Well, not in so many words, but I’m going to.” Kaitlin shrugged and, now that the sun was almost down, pushed her sunglasses up into her highlighted, honey-colored hair. “We’re down a member anyway.”

Destiny sucked in a breath before she swore lightly. “And that’s what you’re going to tell Sophie when you bring Jordyn with you?” She tucked the card back into the open exterior pocket of Jordyn’s bag.

“Obviously not, but it’s true.” Kaitlin tipped her chin as she shifted the tray of drinks onto a patio table near the pool. “And does anyone else think it’s in extremely bad taste of her to host a murder mystery game on the first anniversary of—”

Destiny cleared her throat loudly. “Heads up. She just arrived with Luke and the girls.”

Jordyn tensed. Was she picking up on apprehension from the others? Or was it because of the subject they’d just dropped like a hot potato?

“Who’s here?” she asked softly, even though she was pretty sure she’d followed the gist of the conversation enough to make an educated guess.

She’d been involved with the residents of this neighborhood for all of one day, and she’d already pinpointed the most powerful player on the block. But then, Jordyn had done her

read about Saratoga's social scene and its new, undisputed queen. The same woman who ran an elite book club and founded a successful podcast that arbitrated sticky break-ups for entertainment value.

"Sophie Durand," Kaitlin muttered as she glanced sideways at a laughing blond woman bracketed by two gorgeous teenage girls. A dark-haired man with a backwards ball cap and a broad smile stood behind the group, his hands on the woman's shoulders. "This month's book club hostess."

Charlotte is the older daughter. She's a carbon copy of her mother. Smart, ambitious, well-rounded. Amelia is the wildcard. Every bit as intelligent as her sister but a little bit of a smart ass. Kind of like you, Jordyn.

Jordyn's gaze roamed over the young women as she recalled the scouting report on them. Willowy Charlotte wore a cropped pink sweatshirt with jeans and white tennis shoes, her attention focused on the young family that had stopped to speak to her mother. She bent toward a sporty leather stroller, covered in horses, to smile at the baby inside. Amelia, the other daughter, a shorter, curvier blonde dressed in a varsity jacket and denim shorts, gave all her attention to her phone. They were both lovely young women. But it was their mother who held Jordyn's attention.

Sophie Durand had the kind of beauty other women only dreamed about. Flawless skin even though she was old enough to have a daughter finishing high school. Wavy golden locks that looked as effortless as her crisp white button down worn untucked over a navy-colored skirt. She had the strong, lean legs of an athlete, and she moved with the confidence and grace of someone accustomed to being the center of attention.

"Now's your chance to tell her that Jordyn's coming to the next meeting." Destiny elbowed Kaitlin as she gave her a sly

Squeals from down by the lake were quickly drowned out by the sound of a boat motor roaring to life.

“That would be great,” Jordyn chimed in, determined not to lose the ground she’d gained today in expanding her network in her new town. Sophie Durand was an important player in the social landscape that Jordyn needed to navigate. “I’m excited to meet everyone.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Kaitlin said, half to herself, before raising her arm to wave over her new guests. Her silver bracelets jangled with the movement. “Here she comes.”

Jordyn watched with interest as the two teen daughters peeled off in different directions. One toward the lake, the other toward the house. The man in the ball cap remained in the driveway in an animated conversation with another guy who’d just arrived on a motorcycle.

So they would have Sophie all to themselves.

“The house looks beautiful, Kaitlin.” The woman’s voice was low and modulated. A good voice for a podcaster. “Thank you for having us.”

Sophie Durand enveloped Kaitlin in a quick embrace before turning to Destiny and greeting her the same way.

“Well it’s not a luau, but I do what I can,” Kaitlin quipped. “I heard your party was amazing.”

Sophie shrugged as if it was of no consequence. “It was all Luke’s idea. He’s so good at event planning.” Then her marine blue eyes landed on Jordyn. “I’m Sophie, by the way.”

“Jordyn Lawson. I’m a huge fan of your show.” She figured a little flattery never hurt the cause. Then, taking a gamble, she withdrew the book club invitation from her purse. “I’m also a huge fan of murder mystery games if you need any help finding a killer.”

For a moment, her eyes locked with Sophie’s. But it only

Jordyn's heart pounded. "Mostly I just really like reading," she admitted. "I may have twisted Kaitlin's arm into telling me about your book club."

"It *is* the best book club in town, hands down," Destiny added, making a show of buffing her perfect fingernails on the shoulder of her sweater. "I mean, she wouldn't *want* to belong to any other."

Jordyn could have hugged her for the endorsement, since it sort of felt like she was on trial. Except she wasn't really of a mind to hug any of the women who belonged to a book club that was—Jordyn was pretty sure—murderous.

Getting into the book club was crucial.

"Right?" Kaitlin reached back to the tray of apple cider mimosas and picked up two, passing one each to Sophie and Jordyn before grabbing two more for herself and Destiny. "It's not like I go blabbing about our group to just anyone."

Sophie's gaze tracked back and forth between her two friends before coming to rest on Jordyn again. Assessing.

"Well I guess that's settled then." She lifted her flute in a toast. "Welcome to book club, Jordyn Lawson."

Relieved, Jordyn clinked glasses with the others, feeling the full import of the day's victory before she indulged in a single sip. She still needed to be cautious. Watchful. But she couldn't resist celebrating this moment after she'd been tense and anxious all day.

And not just because she was a certified introvert trying her damndest to masquerade as a fun and lighthearted extrovert.

No. Jordyn was a knot of nerves because she really was trying to find a killer.

2

Tara

One Year Ago

“**W**AIT UNTIL YOU see the costume I made.” Tara Hughes adjusted her video screen to better see her foster sister, Jordyn. Tara sat at a breakfast bar in her friend Sophie’s pool house, the de facto office space where they conducted business related to their cocreated podcast.

Sophie hadn’t arrived to start the work day yet, so it was a good time to touch base with Jordyn. The foster siblings lived almost two thousand miles apart, but that didn’t prevent Tara from trying to reestablish a relationship with one of the most significant people in her life. Tara had only been in the foster system for two years, but she would never have survived that tumultuous time without Jordyn. It still blew her mind that she’d managed to mentally block out that time in her life—and the girl who’d saved her in every way possible—until a bout of therapy three years ago. Tara had explored

most of her repressed memories and dealt with the worst of them.

The best of them was Jordyn. It had taken a private investigator to find her long-forgotten foster sister, and she'd broken her promise to her adoptive family never to contact people from that life in order to do it. But secretly defying her family had been worth the risk in order to reconnect. Even if she still kept their relationship under wraps.

For now.

"I'll bet it's fabulous." Jordyn scraped away a curtain of copper curls from her face with one hand while she clutched a coffee mug in the other. She walked through her all-white Austin, Texas kitchen before dropping into a seat across from her screen. She wore a black T-shirt and plaid pajama pants, a perk of working from home as a graphic designer. "Although you have way too big of an advantage. I bet you'll be the only one at your Halloween party in a costume designed by a Fashion Institute graduate."

Tara laughed, enjoying her friend's utter faith in her. How was it that a woman who'd been close to her for just two years as a kid could have such a high opinion of her coupled with zero envy? Meanwhile, the privileged friends she'd made since moving to Saratoga at age fourteen were forever in competition with one another, perpetually ready to backstab.

"Well for all I know I'll be the *only* one in costume since I'm not attending a party, per se. Just my monthly book club meeting." She checked the time on her screen, thinking she should probably wind up her conversation before Sophie arrived at the pool house—the "casita," she called it—to start their work day. "But I ask you, how can anyone host a book club on Halloween night and not expect people to show up in costume?"

"Clearly a costume should be worn." Jordyn slid a pair of reading glasses onto her nose. She looked so different from the

facial piercings were gone, but her self-made tattoo of a labyrinth on her forearm was still visible when she lifted her coffee cup. “Any hints what you’re dressing up as?”

Tara couldn’t keep it a secret. She was too excited about how the outfit had turned out. “I’m going as Maleficent. The headpiece I made with horns is the highlight of the whole thing. Although the train is something to behold, too.”

Behind her, she heard a screen door slam and guessed Sophie had left her main house to cross the courtyard to the casita. Before Jordyn could reply, Tara continued, “Shit. I’ve got to get my workday started.”

“No worries.” Jordyn winked at her and reached toward her screen. “Knock ‘em dead.”

And then she was gone, her sign-off still echoing in Tara’s ears, a callback to the days when Jordyn had been like a stand-in mom, even though she was just two years older. It bothered her deeply that she’d blocked memories of someone who’d been so instrumental in protecting her during her time in foster care, but her therapist had assured her that it was common in patients with dissociative amnesia. The last few years of remembering and recovering her past had been painful but healing, too.

Now, Tara’s device returned to the open tab showing the day’s schedule for *The Clean Break* podcast. The first item on their agenda was to brainstorm their most explosive episodes for a “Best-Of” clip show in the new year.

“Good morning.” Sophie stepped into the living area of the casita, dressed in a gray jersey skirt and gray men’s button-down, her blond waves in a low ponytail. Her blue eyes were bright as she walked straight toward the wet bar. “It came to me last night what episode to feature in the highlight show.”

Frowning, Tara didn’t follow. “We need more than one episode though, right? I thought we were going to do a round-

Sophie spun away from the bar, never bothering to use a laptop when she had Tara around to take notes. Sometimes the uneven power balance bugged Tara, but she also respected that Sophie was the creative force behind the show. Tara had enjoyed working with her over the last few years, getting the show off the ground and then watching it turn into an “overnight success,” topping the charts for listens. Success felt intoxicating after years of struggling with imposter syndrome. Her adoptive family was wealthy, and her life with them had felt like an unearned luxury after those two gut-wrenching years in the foster system after her single-parent birth mother had died. But the success of the show had been merited because of their hard work.

Still, getting swept up in her friend’s creative vision meant that Tara delayed chasing her own dreams, something Jordyn had helped her realize this past summer when they’d had their first in-person visit since they were kids. Tara had spent her vacation week in Austin with Jordyn, although she’d timed it to coincide with a design conference so she could honestly tell friends and family that had been her purpose for the Texas trip. Not just because she dreaded a confrontation with her parents when they learned how much time she’d spent rediscovering her past, but also because the friendship felt too special to share just yet.

“We’ll do clips around one featured episode,” Sophie clarified, opening her phone to scroll through whatever it was that was more important than their conversation. “I got inspired for a whole new approach to the best-of format when I recalled the Mark Ribeki divorce. It was so popular, with lots of great sound bites. We can make that the centerpiece of the compilation.”

“Oh, Soph. You know how I feel about that one.” Her heart sank at the mention of one of *The Clean Break* shows

There'd been a handful of episodes that had been problematic for her. But that one was in the top three worst in her book.

NFL star Mark Ribeki and his wife, Evangeline Jameson, had agreed to arbitration via the show, something divorcing TCB guests were occasionally offered to simplify their process. Sophie, who had a law degree that she'd used briefly in her father's prestigious South Carolina firm before she changed career directions, had an arbitrator certification in New York state. She was legally able to make judgments if her guests signed on for the process. Ribeki had been beloved on the field and in his hometown, but had numerous, documented instances of infidelity. The couple had lived in Louisiana, a state where fault-base divorces were allowed, so his wife had assumed the show would weigh in her favor.

But Sophie had shocked her listeners—and Tara—by suddenly announcing her decision on the couple's assets would be swayed by a listener vote. Tara had been stunned at the obvious ratings grab. Ribeki's fans had called in by the thousands, voting to give him almost everything in the couple's split. Sophie had agreed and a judgment was made heavily in his favor. His ex-wife was still trying to appeal the decision through the legal system, but the last Tara had heard she hadn't had any luck.

That had been one of the few episodes that Tara had argued with Sophie about. Normally, Tara did the behind-the-scenes legwork and left the podcast direction to Sophie. But she'd been appalled by her cocreator's sudden decision to pander to listeners.

"And yet, there's no arguing that it's a fan favorite. If we want to keep growing, we need to take risks. Push boundaries sometimes." Sophie gave Tara a sly smile. "Where's your sense

“Should business decisions be based on wanting adventure?” Agitated, Tara stood to pace off some of her frustration. She walked a path between the ivory-colored couches near the fireplace and the eggshell-colored reading chairs near the built-in bookshelves. “This isn’t like midnight skinny dipping or hooking up with a stranger. We have a responsibility to take people’s break-ups seriously.”

“Do we? What do you not understand about the entertainment industry? Because at the end of the day, that’s what we’re doing. People listen to *The Clean Break* for the entertainment value, not because they want to be sure some quarterback’s trophy wife gets a share of his car collection.” Sophie swiveled the leather seat of her barstool back and forth, her arms folded over her chest. “We don’t need to defend the show’s choices, Tara. We get to decide how we want to entertain people.”

“Actually, no, *we* don’t. You do, Sophie.” She stopped in front of her friend’s chair, wondering how things had shifted from a partnership to Sophie being in charge. “I don’t know how or when you decided that you should call all the shots with the show, but it’s my program too.”

Sophie rewarded her declaration with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. “Well that puts me in my place doesn’t it? Did you put an extra shot in your espresso this morning?”

Tara shook her head. “Don’t patronize me. I’m just trying to have a voice here.”

Outside the pool house, Sophie’s second husband, Luke Sideris, walked through the courtyard dressed for tennis in shorts and a polo shirt. He played three mornings a week, his hours flexible thanks to his consulting work for a tech company.

“And I’m hearing it,” Sophie assured her. “Why don’t you at least listen to the sample pieces I asked Wynn to put

“You already asked Wynn to compile sample audio?” Irritation flicked through Tara.

Sophie was nothing if not committed to having her own way.

“I told you, I got inspired last night. I started hearing how it could all come together. I really think you’re going to like it.” Sophie rose from her seat. “Let me go grab my laptop, and I’ll see if he’s sent me a demo yet so you can have a listen for yourself.”

Would a stronger person have just said, “Hell no” and been done with the discussion? Tara hated the idea that her kindness and quieter nature could be mistaken for weakness. But she’d been born fair-minded. A nurturer. Even her sun sign said so: Cancer. She knew that because their book club had read something with a main character who was an astrologer, and they’d all done their zodiac charts for fun at the meeting.

No surprise that Sophie was a Leo. A lioness who needed to be the center of attention. Who expected to be worshiped. There were probably positive qualities too, but those characteristics were the ones that had stuck in Tara’s mind.

“I’ll listen, but I’m making no promises,” Tara warned her, all the while remembering Jordyn’s advice from that summer visit when she’d encouraged Tara to pursue what she really loved.

Tara’s interpretation of that had been that she really needed to step out of Sophie’s shadow.

Sophie made a show of compliance, lifting her hands in mock surrender. “Of course.”

A moment later, Sophie was out the door and walking across the courtyard to the main house. As Tara watched her through the floor-to-ceiling windows, she couldn’t help but

ruminate too much about it, she heard the slide of the patio door opening behind her, on the opposite side of the building from where Sophie had just left.

Tara's pulse quickened. "Hello?"

The housekeepers didn't usually interrupt them during their workday. They knew Sophie used the space as her office unless they were actively recording a show in the soundproof studio she'd had built over the garage.

"It's me." The masculine voice sounded a second before Luke stepped into view.

"Oh, hey Luke," she greeted him awkwardly, anxiety twisting through her. "You just missed Sophie—"

"I wasn't looking for Sophie." He kept coming toward her, his dark eyes locked on her.

She had about a half a second to recall the weird vibes between them the last time they were alone. The fear he'd misinterpreted an alcohol-infused conversation after the anniversary celebration for *The Clean Break*. She didn't know what had come over her to confide in him.

"You know we should probably talk about—" she began.

His mouth was on hers in an instant, hands gripping her waist. The shock of it—the social boundary crossed, the friendship betrayed—froze her for a critical moment. Her brain couldn't compute what was happening because this should *never, ever* be happening. It didn't matter that they'd had an emotional conversation that one time. She'd never wanted this.

Belatedly, she shoved at him. *And he didn't move.*

Twisting away from his lips, she cursed him. Shoved harder.

When he let her go, the smug bastard was smiling. Worse, he didn't even seem to clock her fury because his gaze was trained over her shoulder.

"Here she comes. See you around, Tara." And then he was

split second before Sophie tugged open the main entrance, all her attention focused on the open laptop she carried.

“Here it is.” Tara’s friend—her business partner, her neighbor, the woman whose life was inextricably tied to hers—looked up at her with a triumphant grin. “Wait until you hear this. You’re going to love the way Wynn edited it.” Then her smile faded as she seemed to register Tara’s expression. “Is everything okay?”

Who knew what she saw? Cheeks red with anger? Mortification? Lips puffy from being crushed by an entitled man who hadn’t sought her consent? Anger seethed inside Tara, clouding her judgement in a haze of red.

Once again, Tara only had a split second to react. To decide whether or not to speak of the colossal betrayal that had just occurred, mere steps away from her partner’s marital home. But, as had happened too many times in their friendship, Tara didn’t have the courage to take on the lioness.

Not right now when her head was spinning.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Still shaking, she waved Sophie closer. “Let me have a listen.”

Later, Tara would have it out with Luke. Make him understand that his behavior was not only inappropriate, it was one hundred percent unwanted. Until then? She knew, once again, that she would let Sophie have her way with the show.

But now more than ever, Tara recognized that she needed a plan to get out of this business and out of this relationship with Sophie. Their friendship would suffer, but it was past time to step away from a work environment that had somehow gone from fun to toxic. The awkward dynamics, the uneven balance of power, and the dogged suffocation of her creativity were slowly killing her.

JENNA VORIS

*The
Long
Run*

A NOVEL

A Dial Press Trade Paperback Original

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ONE

Chloe leans both elbows on the table, slicks on another layer of half-melted lip gloss (L'Oréal Signature Matte, shade *Unfiltered*) and decides she's really not asking the universe for that much. Tonight, it comes down to three things—for the humidity to remain at a somewhat reasonable level, for the straps of her thrifted ballgown to stop coming apart around her neck, and for the aging millionaire at her table to stay awake long enough for her to take all his money.

Three perfectly reasonable requests, in her opinion.

Chloe eyes her reflection in the table's glittering centerpiece as she tucks the lip gloss back down the front of her dress. Between the layers of wilted red tulle and the smooth wave of her normally unruly hair, she hardly recognizes herself in the decorative glass. The centerpiece does, however, give her a clear view of Logan standing against the ornate wallpaper behind her, tray of incredibly overpriced hors d'oeuvres propped lazily in one hand. *Perfect.*

He's on time, she's ready to move, and her date for the evening is two glasses into a wine-fueled monologue about software development. It's now or never.

“Ready?”

Priya's voice is barely audible over the chatter of the party and Chloe resists the urge to adjust the wireless earbud hidden behind her hair. She can't respond here, but there's a flicker of movement in the centerpiece as Logan steps away from the wall, tray passing effortlessly from hand to hand as he cuts his way through the dinner crowd.

“I was born ready, Priya, darling.”

Chloe resists the urge to roll her eyes. Logan's always had a thing for dramatics, even in places like this. It's something she learned the day she found him building an illegal air conditioning unit on the floor of their freshman dorm, insisting she should dump his lifeless,

overheated body in front of the dean's office if he didn't finish by noon. Now, she blames his day job and the *Now You See It* films for feeding his amateur magician's ego. Logan might have two different birthday parties booked tomorrow, but tonight he's here and their plan begins the way they all do—with Chloe sitting across from a mark too rich for his own good, who is still, despite everything, completely oblivious to the cunning tilt of her lips.

This one had been almost too easy to corner. James Montgomery Webber, seventy-two. A tech billionaire who'd recently torn up half a mile of Miami beachfront to build a sprawling new office hub. He currently employs half the city and he's singlehandedly funding half of Andrew Carlyle's senate campaign, which is how he'd scored an invitation to tonight's festivities. Right up front at an exclusive, donors-only dinner in one of the Carlyle hotels.

He wasn't necessarily the target Chloe would have chosen, but there's an art to these things she's learned not to push.

“Sandwich?”

Logan leans over their table, tray extended in Webber's direction. The warm scent of his cologne washes over them (Tom Ford, Ombre Leather), and Chloe risks a glance in his direction. Logan's mouth is turned down in an expression of bored disinterest, but there's a soft pink color painted across his already full lips. Because *of course* he'd found time to touch up. They had both spent the last hour sweating outside, slipping their way through security checkpoints and locked doors, but god forbid Logan Amesfield show up to an event looking anything less than perfect.

Chloe grabs two tiny sandwiches off his tray and tries not to think about the frizzy curls currently sticking to the back of her neck. “Thanks.”

Webber barely looks up. Light from the chandelier flashes off his diamond encrusted watch as he waves Logan away, like the mere presence of a waiter at their table is an inconvenience.

Again, Chloe barely refrains from rolling her eyes. If she was working tonight or wearing her usual catering uniform, Webber wouldn't have spared her a glance. He would have looked right through her on his way to the bar but tonight, she's off the clock. She's armed with four-inch heels and borrowed lipstick and Logan's interruption gives her the opening she needs.

"What were you saying?" Chloe leans in, knee casually brushing Webber's under the table. "The app you're developing. What's it called?"

Webber blinks. The motion exaggerates the wrinkles around his eyes, but his forehead remains unnaturally still. "You mean Slique?"

"Yes! What a great name."

It's not. It's ridiculous, but everything about James Montgomery Webber is ridiculous and Chloe's not about to get picky now. She slides one finger up his arm, stopping just inside the crook of his elbow. "What does it do, again?"

She has him; Chloe feels it as Webber's gaze slides from her face to the neckline of her gown before finally dropping to her hand. He clears his throat. "It's a black car service. For luxury vehicles and on call drivers."

"Oh!" Chloe blinks. "So it's like Uber?"

A hint of a smile touches the corner of Webber's mouth. "Not exactly. Imagine you land in a new city. Your regular driver is back home, and you don't know who to trust. What do you do?"

Chloe has never actually had that problem, but she tilts her head anyway, feigning confusion. "I don't know."

"Exactly." Webber grins, eyes still roaming unsubtly down the length of her body. "That's where we come in."

If there's one thing rich people love more than being rich, Chloe thinks, it's explaining in

great, condescending detail exactly how rich they are. James Montgomery Webber has enough money to change the world and here he is—drinking wine in the ballroom of a luxury hotel and breaking down the basics of capitalism to a girl fifty years his junior.

Some people don't deserve nice things.

Some people deserve to have their watches stolen.

It's only when Priya's voice comes through the earbud again that Chloe realizes she's instinctively tightening her grip, fingers curling into the fabric of Webber's jacket as she imagines him jumping into a solid gold Slique car, filled to the brim with glittering Scrooge McDuck coins.

“Corner by the balcony. Four o'clock.”

Priya is talking around a mouthful of food—probably the pad thai they all ordered for dinner—and Chloe's stomach growls at the thought.

“Really?” Logan asks. “That corner looks pretty exposed.”

Chloe can practically hear Priya's eye roll through the line. “Have I ever been wrong, Logan?”

“Many times.”

“About *this*?”

“Okay no, but—”

“Then stop complaining. Let me know when you're ready.”

Chloe releases her grip on Webber and shoots a quick glance toward the wall. The area Priya suggested *is* exposed, people wandering on and off the balcony on their way to the bar, but Priya has also never failed to find a security blind spot. Chloe pictures her in the back of her trusty orange Subaru, feet propped against the dashboard, romance novel in her lap as she tracks them through the party from several blocks away. If she says that corner is their best bet, Chloe will

make it work. She gives herself three more seconds to plan a route and then, when Webber pauses for breath, she makes her move.

“Oh, I get it!” she exclaims, face lighting up. “Your app is like Charm.”

“No, it’s...” Webber breaks off, confusion threatening to crack the botox-induced stillness of his forehead. “Wait, what’s Charm?”

“That new ride share app?” Chloe pulls out her phone. “The one with the armored cars? That’s who you got the idea from, right?”

“I...no. We’re revolutionizing the future of luxury transportation. I’ve never heard of *Charm*.”

“Sure you have! They’re everywhere. I literally took a Charm car to dinner tonight. I’ll show you.”

Chloe opens her phone, screen deliberately shielded so Webber can’t see she’s tapping at nothing.

Priya snorts faintly in her ear. “I still can’t believe that works.”

“Right?” Logan mutters. “Next time I want to gaslight the CEOs. It’s not fair Chloe gets to have fun while I’m stuck in a cummerbund.”

“I think you look handsome.”

“Please be serious, Priya, I look like a killer whale.”

Chloe ignores them and stands, phone extended above her head like she’s trying to catch a signal. “There’s never any service at these things. She heaves a defeated sigh. “Come on, let’s try by the window.”

She starts toward the balcony without looking back and, because she’s good at her job, because men like Webber truly believe the world is supposed to open for them, he follows.

Chloe weaves through tables of well-dressed donors and waitstaff, dodging photo ops and handshakes along the way. If Andrew Carlyle is really trying to fund a senate campaign, she thinks he can start by cutting his party budget. It's a Tuesday night in late June and this entire event is already several degrees of *too much*. This Carlyle hotel is nearly twice as big as the location Chloe works at across town—sleek and shiny with enormous floor-to-ceiling windows that face out over a private beach and the ocean beyond. It's all dripping chandeliers and ornate pillars and black-tie guests, a dazzling combination that might as well punch Chloe in the throat and call her an imposter for daring to con her way inside.

There's the governor sitting at a table near the front with his equally bored looking wife. There's the weatherman from channel six, laughing animatedly as he downs another glass of champagne. There's Katherine Windey, who can apparently take a break from overseeing her own hotel empire as long as it doesn't require looking up from her phone. Rich people. Powerful people. People who seem completely unfazed by Andrew Carlyle's enormous, spray tanned face beaming down at them from every angle. Chloe shivers and averts her eyes from the campaign posters as she walks. It's not like he's *actually* watching her. Carlyle's not even here yet, which is annoying considering this entire event is for him, but the image of his smooth, dark hair and too-white smile feels burned into her brain.

Chloe pauses next to the balcony with Webber at her side. She moves back and forth until Priya's hum of approval echoes in her ear, then stands on her tiptoes, pretending to wave her phone overhead. "I'm telling you," she says. "You have to see this app."

Webber still doesn't look convinced. "I've really never heard of it."

"Then it's a good thing I'm here. What are the odds you both had the same—"

Something slams into them from behind and Chloe stumbles, heel snagging on the hem of

her dress. She manages to catch herself against the wall a split second before Webber does, and when she looks up, she finds Logan staring back at her, face a portrait of nervous concern.

“Oh my god!” He reaches for her with one hand, the other still clutching a tray of what looks like snail carcasses. “I’m *so* sorry, are you two okay?”

Chloe shrugs him off, trying unsuccessfully to untangle her shoe from the fabric. “I’m fine.”

She’s not. She’s pretty sure part of her dress ripped, actually. There’s a breeze tickling her ankle that definitely hadn’t been there before, but she forces herself to ignore it as Logan reaches for Webber next.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, dabbing at Webber’s freshly stained tie. “Let me get you something for that, I’m—”

“Leave it.” Webber slams his half empty glass onto Logan’s tray. “Just go. And get me another drink while you’re at it.”

Chloe can practically feel the annoyance rolling off him, frustration at the seemingly incompetent waitstaff mixed with the self-preserving instinct of not wanting to draw attention in a place like this. Logan seems to realize the same thing because he ducks his head, tray tucked against his chest like a makeshift shield, before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

Webber curses under his breath, wine still tracing scarlet trails over his rigidly pressed cuffs. “*Unbelievable*,” he mutters. “Tonight of all nights.”

After another precarious second, Chloe finally succeeds in freeing her shoe from the folds of her skirt. She tosses her hair over one shoulder with as much disgust as she can manage. “I know. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Webber waves a hand, and this time, Chloe thinks the dismissal applies to her,

too. “I should go find somewhere to clean up.”

Chloe nods, doing her best to look disappointed as she focuses on his wine splattered shoes. “Of course. Do you have a business card? Maybe we could stay in touch?”

One final trick. Something to fuel his ego when he leaves. Men like Webber, she’s learned, don’t have business cards. They walk through life with the expectation that everyone already knows exactly who they are and what they do, but the flattery works. Webber’s expression softens ever so slightly as he shakes his head. “I’m afraid not. Enjoy the party, though. It was nice to meet you.”

And then he’s gone, another indistinguishable suit in a crowd of dazzling wealth.

Chloe watches his retreating back for another second before tucking her phone back down the front of her dress. *Easy*, she thinks. It’s always easy with men like that. Even now, part of her almost wishes Webber would look down and notice that his watch is missing, the string of diamonds now stashed securely in Logan’s pocket. Maybe then, they’d have a real challenge.

“Got it,” Logan mutters through the earpiece. “That was smooth.”

Chloe rolls her eyes and plucks a half empty glass of wine off a nearby table. “You pushed me into a wall, but okay.”

“Technicalities. Who’s next?”

Who’s next? Because someone had to be. Because they didn’t drive all the way across town and crash Carlyle’s campaign dinner to stop here, not with an entire ballroom at their fingertips. Not with the rapidly growing mountain of unpaid bills on Chloe’s desk.

“What about Carlyle?” Chloe asks, eyes flicking from table to table. “Is he here yet?”

Logan’s snort is a gentle caress in her ear. “You want to go after your boss? I thought you liked your job.”

Chloe resists the urge to tell him that no one actually likes their job. She puts up with the long hours in the hotel kitchens because she gets decent pay and discounted housing. She does it for the health care and the stability, because she has other people to worry about, not because she likes it. The thought of her shift tomorrow is barely a whisper in the back of her mind. Right now, the thrill of success makes her feel unbreakable. She wants something risky. She wants something fun. She wants to sink her teeth into this entire gold-plated room and call it justice.

Priya is typing; Chloe can hear the *click click click* of her acrylics through the earbud. “Doesn’t look like Carlyle’s here yet,” she says. “Katherine Windey is at table seven, though, if you really want to rob a hotel CEO. Her properties are supposed to be better, anyway.”

Chloe tilts her head. “Didn’t she just get arrested for embezzlement?”

“Everyone here gets arrested for embezzlement, Chloe. That’s, like, their whole thing.”

“Hold on.” Logan’s voice sharpens with interest. “Katherine’s here? Is she alone? What’s she wearing?”

“Oh my god, Logan,” Chloe mutters. “You can’t just ask what women are wearing.”

“That’s not...I’m asking about *The Brooch*.”

Chloe grins into her drink. Logan’s been after Katherine’s jeweled bumblebee brooch since the ribbon cutting ceremony of her new island resort last year. He thinks taking it would be “good for his street cred.” Chloe thinks the idea of Logan having any sort of street cred is laughable. Usually she wouldn’t mind getting her hands on something that valuable, but this particular piece is usually pinned directly beneath Katherine’s delicate, upturned nose. Even Logan and his sticky, magician’s fingers haven’t found a way around that.

“No brooch,” Chloe decides. “Not tonight.”

Logan sighs mournfully. “It’s a collector’s item, you know.”

“I know.”

“I’d treat her right.”

“Yeah, Chloe,” Priya says, stifling another giggle behind her hand. “He’d treat her *right*.”

Chloe is about to respond when a flurry of movement at the ballroom entrance catches her eye. Another group of donors arriving late, bottleneaking in the doors as they take in the grandeur of the ballroom.

“On it,” Priya says before Chloe can speak. “I’m pulling up a guest list.”

Chloe downs the rest of her drink, keeping one eye on the door as she slides along the back wall. Maybe tonight could still be interesting after all. One of the new arrivals has an enormous, jeweled brooch pinned to her lapel—not quite as big as Katherine’s but equally as obnoxious. Chloe is about to point it out when Logan sucks in a surprised breath. The sound is staticky in her ear, lighting some deep buried survival instinct in the pit of her stomach.

Chloe’s steps falter. “What?”

“Trouble,” Logan says, voice already resigned to the worst. “Two o’clock. Blue dress.”

Chloe cranes her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of who, exactly, Logan is talking about. *Trouble* could mean a lot of things—hotel security, a boss, a vengeful ex. Once, in Priya’s case, it was all three. Chloe ducks behind another table, gaze flitting from one classically beautiful face to another. “Do you want to elaborate? I can’t—”

There, to her left. A flash of blue silk. Ice tips down Chloe’s spine and she stumbles to a halt in the center of the ballroom. “You’ve *got* to be fucking kidding me.”

A few scandalized faces turn her way, but Chloe is long past caring. She’s frozen to the marbled tile, glass still clutched in one hand, and it’s all she can do not to crush the delicate stem between her fingers.

“What?” Priya’s voice is frantic. “What’s going on?”

Chloe opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. She’s stuck, watching the woman in blue break away from the crowd and head toward the bar. Eventually, it’s Logan who breaks the silence.

“Told you,” he says, wry humor coloring every word. “Trouble.”

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