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Holiday/Winter 2023







Holiday/Winter 2023

Hottest Books

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INTRODUCTION



Dear Reader,

When I founded <u>Meryl Moss Media</u> thirty years ago, the world was a different place, as was the media landscape. Eventually, it became more difficult for authors to connect with readers. There were fewer outlets offering good exposure to reach the right audience. I wanted to create something innovative to help bridge the gap—an easy to navigate online community where readers can find their next book and meet authors from every genre—and <u>BookTrib</u> was born.

Now, after 20 years of working with terrific authors and publishers, we are proud to launch the inaugural edition of *BookTrib Lit Picks: First Chapters from the Hottest Books.* Every installment highlights new releases and hidden gems from titles that are both traditional and independently published.

If you are a passionate reader like me, you thirst for the chance to discover a new book and lose yourself within its pages. We hope you enjoy this collection, savor the many different stories, and share with your friends.

BookTrib Lit Picks is a special holiday gift from me to you, and I hope you experience something magical along the way.

Meryl Moss

Publisher

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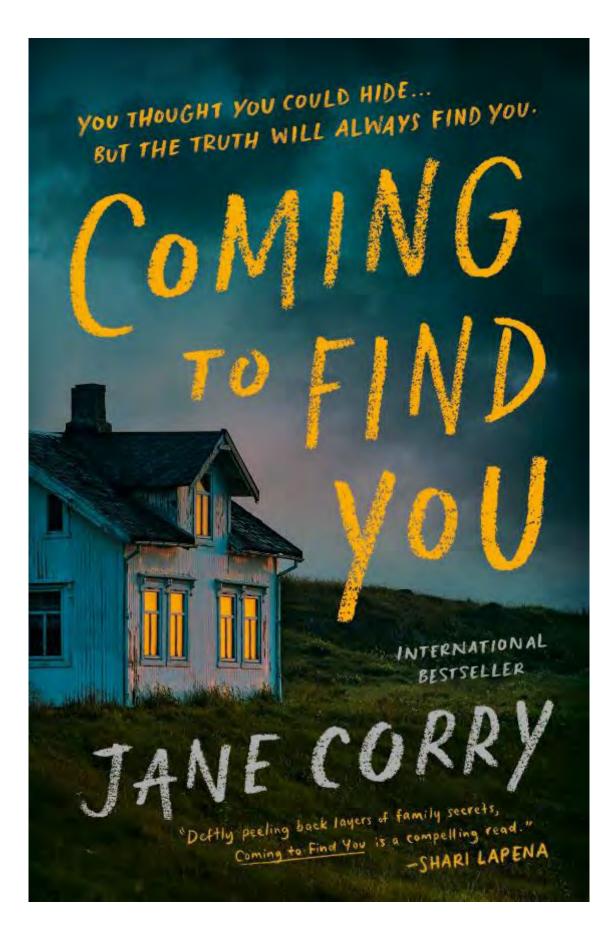
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MYSTERY, THRILLER, & SUSPENSE



COMING TO FIND YOU BY JANE CORRY

A #7 Sunday Times Bestseller

"Intrigue, drama and secrets both past and present make *Coming to Find You* a must-read thriller." -B.A. Paris, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Behind Closed Doors*

A heart-stopping psychological thriller about a woman running from the aftermath of a gruesome family tragedy—and from the truth about her part in it. For fans of Gillian McAllister's Wrong Place Wrong Time and The Family Remains by Lisa Jewell.

Nancy's mother and stepfather have been brutally killed, and after a trial that gripped the nation, her stepbrother has been convicted of the double murders. But the end of the trial is just the beginning of a new nightmare for Nancy: the press is rabid, certain that Nancy isn't the grieving daughter she's presenting to the world. In fact, they believe she knows more than she's telling about that night at the farmhouse.

Grief-stricken, Nancy flees to the Cornish seaside, to her grandmother's secluded inn, Tall Chimneys, to escape the media circus and scrutiny.

Finally alone, save for a few neighbours who keep to themselves, Nancy is relieved. But she soon realizes that Tall Chimneys holds many dark secrets... and that she is holding the biggest one of all.

What really happened that night at the farmhouse? And what will Nancy have to do to keep the truth hidden?

"Everything I love in a book." -Lisa Jewell, #1 New York Times bestselling author of Then She Was Gone and The Family Upstairs

"Gritty, real, interesting and clever. Highly recommended." -Gillian McAllister, author of Wrong Place Wrong Time, Sunday Times Thriller of The Year and a Reese's Book Club Pick

Paperback: 9780385697880 / \$17.95 eBook: 9780385697897 / \$12.99 Audiobook: 9780385697910 Pub Date: Dec 19, 2023 Publisher: Doubleday UK Publisher: Penguin Buy Link (Canada): https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/735469/coming-to-find-you-by-janecorry/9780385697880 Buy Link (US): https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/735469/coming-to-find-you-by-janecorry/9780385697880 JANE CORRY is a Sunday Times and Washington Post bestselling author who spent three years as the writer-in-residence at a high-security prison for men—an experience that helped inspire *My Husband's* Wife, her debut thriller. Corry's novels have sold over 1.5 million copies worldwide and have been translated into sixteen languages. Corry is a journalist who has written for *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Mail on Sunday*, *Woman*, *Woman's Own*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman* & *Home*, and *My Weekly* magazine. She is a former creative writing tutor at Oxford University; former Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Exeter University; and past winner of the Elizabeth Goudge trophy and the Vera Brittain cup for short stories. Corry runs regular writing workshops and speaks at literary festivals worldwide, including the Women's Fiction Festival in Matera, Italy. https://www.janecorryauthor.com/

EXCERPT

The Night of the Murder 8.25 p.m.

The knife rack is on the side. I've always thought it was a dangerous thing to have in the house. An armoury of lethal weapons, hiding under the guise of domesticity.

But isn't that exactly what a family is like?

At least, it is with mine. Sharp tongues, bedded next to each other, simmering with resentment.

"It's all your fault!" someone screams. Everything happens so fast. I snatch the phone. Dial 999.

But even before I speak, I know it's too late.

CHAPTER ONE

Nancy

"Have you got somewhere safe to go?" asks the barrister after the verdict. His dark brows knit together with anxiety. Over the last few weeks of the case, I've noticed that this is not uncommon. But right now, the worry lines seem even deeper.

Outside the Old Bailey, the crowds are baying for blood. We're in a small room inside the building. The place is like a rabbit warren, with so many stairs and levels that there's no way I could find my way out alone.

Somewhere safe to go to? It occurs to me that I should have thought of this before.

"Yes," I say. "Tall Chimneys."

Whether it's safe is another matter. Hadn't I always told myself I'd never go back there? "Where?" he asks.

"It's a sort of family bolt-hole in Devon."

I think of the beautiful three-storey white Regency "boarding house," as they used to call it before the term B&B became commonplace. My grandmother's home. The one my mother left me.

He interrupts my thoughts. "But the locals would know you there."

"Not necessarily. I was fifteen when I left." The memories swarm back as I speak. I can't help it. That voice from the past is as clear as if he is standing right next to me now. Stroking the side of my face. Then slowly and deliberately, tracing an invisible line down the side of my throat. Tilting my chin very gently, so I am forced to look straight at him.

"You've got such beautiful eyes, Nancy."

"We could give you a new identity," chips in the detective inspector, breaking into my thoughts. "Is this place empty?"

Place? It's not a place, I want to say. *It's more like a person*. At least that's how I had felt when Mum, Dad and I had packed the car every summer and headed south from London for the five-hour drive with the dog, our cases and my father's paints in the back. Before Duncan had wrecked our lives.

"Yes," I say, numbly. "My mother rents ..."

I stop. It still seems impossible that she has gone. Then I force myself to continue.

"My mother *had* been renting it out for years, but the tenants left recently."

"Convenient," says the DI.

He speaks as though I have engineered it. As if it was I who had been imprisoned for life instead of Martin.

Not for the first time, I wish my defence barrister had been a woman. The same goes for the DI. I can't help it. I'm naturally distrustful of men.

"I'm afraid that, through no fault of your own, you've been given what is known as a 'silent sentence," says the barrister grimly.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Crime – like fame – tends to rub off on anyone connected with the accused and the convicted. You're the nearest they can get to Martin."

My mouth goes dry. "What might they do to me?"

The DI chips in again. "Send you nasty emails. Put excrement through your letterbox. You name it. They can do it."

I wince. The barrister notices.

"These pressures that they put on you, Nancy," he says in a kind voice, "might make it hard for you to live a normal life. That's why some families of prisoners say they feel as if they are serving a silent sentence – even if they're innocent."

Even if they're innocent. Does the Crown Prosecutor still believe that I had something to do with the murder of my own mother and stepfather?

I feel sick inside. "Who are *they*? And why might they persecute me?"

The DI gives a hoarse laugh. "Joe Public. Anyone reading the case in the paper or online or hearing someone else talk about it. Someone you might have known years ago, perhaps, and who recognizes your name. A busybody. A fantasist. You'd be amazed at the folk who are glued to murders like this – especially when it's a high-profile victim, as in this case."

There's a pause for breath. Isn't that enough? But the list continues. "The press. The man or woman next door. A total stranger. A nutter. Someone who feels that your brother hasn't been punished enough – or that the whole truth hasn't come out."

"Stepbrother," I remind him quickly.

"Yes. Of course. Sorry."

The shouts are getting louder now. "Get the bastard!"

"Kill him!"

"And the rich bitch too. I don't believe her."

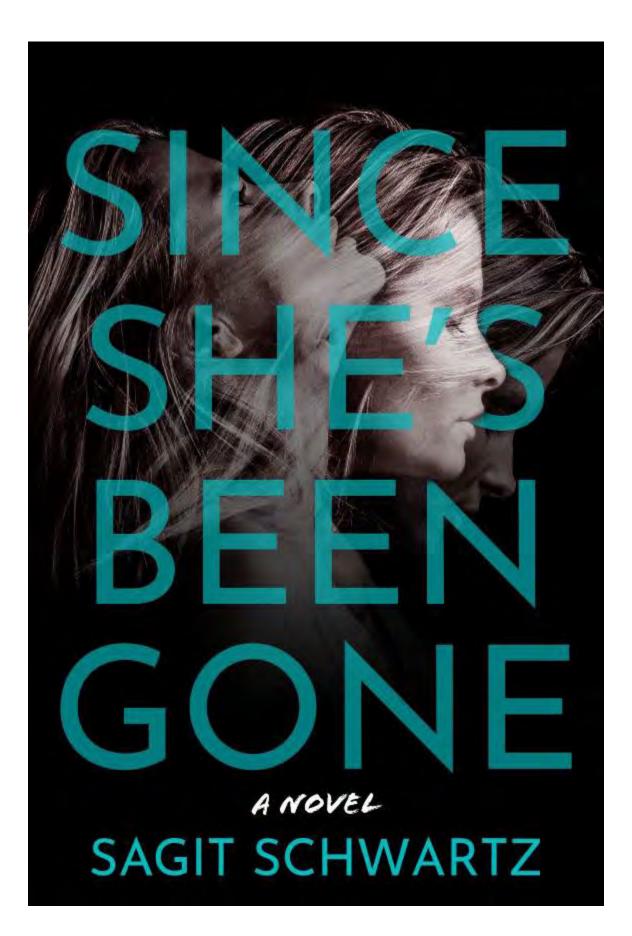
"She's hiding something."

Fear tightens my chest. If Mum hadn't been loaded, would they have been so interested? Maybe they don't know that her wealth was virtually an accident. My father's paintings, which he'd struggled to sell during his lifetime, had been "discovered" after his death by a well-respected critic, which sent prices escalating to heights we'd never imagined. If only my beloved dad could have lived to see this. Maybe that's why I've never taken an interest in the money. It feels wrong to enjoy a fortune that Dad should have benefited from. He deserved the kudos too.

Of course, I could use my inheritance to buy a private jet and hole up somewhere abroad. But I'm sure the press would find me. Besides, it would make me look even guiltier.

I touch my pearl necklace in the way I often do when I need reassurance. My mother gave it to me when I was twenty-one. Before her, it had belonged to my grandmother Adeline. It's the only thing I have of hers. My grandfather had been shot down during the war. My mother told me that the necklace had originally been a present from Adeline's best friend Elizabeth. "*Take care of it, won't you?*" Mum had said.

"We need to get you out the back way," says the DI curtly. His sharp tone brings me back to the present. "And quickly. Let's go."



SINCE SHE'S BEEN GONE BY SAGIT SCHWARTZ

An emotionally charged, dual-timeline suspense set between LA and NYC, this debut novel is perfect for fans of *The Last Thing He Told Me* and *Luckiest Girl Alive*.

A clinical psychologist is thrown into her dark past as she races to uncover the truth about her mother's death while struggling with her own mental health.

Can we ever truly know the people we love?

Losing her mother to a hit-and-run at age 15 threw Beatrice "Beans" Bennett's life into turmoil. Bereft, she developed a life-threatening eating disorder, and went through a challenging recovery process which paved the way for her work as a clinical psychologist decades later.

When a new patient arrives at her office and insists that Beans's mother is still alive—and in danger—Beans is forced to revisit her past in order to uncover the truth. She learns the "patient" is a member of a notorious family that owns a drug company largely responsible for the national opioid epidemic, and that her mother was once tangled in their web. In a race against time—and her mother's assailants—while once again facing the disorder she thought she'd put behind her, Beans discovers that, like herself, her mother had a devastating secret.

With its fast-moving, edge-of-your-seat action and intimate look at mental health, Since She's Been Gone will keep readers in its grasp long after the last page.

"A fast-paced, timely thriller."

-Laura Lippman, New York Times bestselling author of Lady in the Lake, coming to Apple TV

"Schwartz's thrilling, twisty debut beautifully explores recovery, redemption, and the everlasting bond between mother and daughter." **-Lara Prescott**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Secrets We Kept*, a Reese's Book Club Pick

"A deeply heartfelt and thrilling book with a totally inventive take on eating disorders woven into a fabulous mystery." **-Zibby Owens, award-winning podcaster and author of** *Bookends*

Hardcover: 9781639106271 / \$29.99 eBook: 9781639106288 / \$17.99 Pub Date: February 6, 2024 Publisher: Crooked Lane Books, <u>https://crookedlanebooks.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/738378/since-shes-been-gone-by-sagit-schwartz/</u> **SAGIT SCHWARTZ** is a writer, producer, and licensed psychotherapist. Her work has been featured in *Medium, Slate, The Atlantic, Reddit NoSleep,* and *Lifetime Television*. She resides with her husband, daughter, and rescue dog in a Southern California beach town. <u>https://sagitschwartz.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

The new patient called yesterday.

"Can you get me in today?" she asked. "It can't wait."

I've gotten calls like this before. Sometimes people are in deep emotional pain, desperate for immediate help. Other times I learn, after the fact, that they lack boundaries. I told her I had no openings and offered to squeeze her in at seven this morning.

"That's even better," she said. "Fewer people will be around then, right?"

Her question made me wonder if she's self-conscious about being in therapy—I've had my share of patients who are. Or maybe she's famous and doesn't want to be recognized.

As a therapist with a private practice in Beverly Hills, I've had a few celebrity patients, some of whom I didn't know were famous until I Googled them.

It's 6:42 am, and I'm tired. I sip my coffee, trying to wake up, regretting offering up the 7 am time slot.

Eddie and I stayed up until one thirty in the morning, having the same conversation we've been having for the last few months. He wants me to move in with him, and I've been waffling.

On paper, it makes sense. We've been together for almost two years. He's a wonderful guy—loyal, funny, and a dedicated father. But I know moving in together will be the final step before he asks me to marry him. And I already went down that path a decade ago, unsuccessfully.

I also worry it'll be hard on Sarah, his seven-year-old daughter, if things don't work out between us. Eddie's late wife unexpectedly died when Sarah was just four years old. If I step in as her mother figure and our relationship falls apart, Sarah will lose another mom. And this time, it'll be worse, because she'll have memories with me, ones she doesn't have with her own mother since she was so young when her mom died. I know that pain all too well.

And what if I don't measure up as a day-to-day mom? Eddie says Sarah adores me, but I don't tuck her in every night and wake up with her every morning. The three of us spend weekends together and see each other a couple of times during the week for dinner. Moving in with them will mean being there for her *all the time*—from nursing fevers to planning birthday parties to taking her to the dentist.

I take another sip of coffee, trying to swallow down my thoughts. I Google the new patient's name. Nothing of note comes up for an Audrey Gladstone in Los Angeles.

The call light turns on. She's fifteen minutes early. Left to my own devices, I'd bring her in now. Setting boundaries is something I have to continually work on. I remind myself that if I do it this time, she'll expect it the next, and next time I might not be able to if I have a patient before her. I scroll through the news on my cell phone instead.

After fifteen minutes, I leave my office to get her from the waiting area. She's seated on a chair wearing a nondescript, black baseball cap with her head facing down. Both of her knees are nervously bobbing up and down. And one of her hands is wound tightly in a fist. *Anxiety disorder?*

As soon as she notices me, she jumps up. She looks like she's in her early twenties, but there's a worry on her face that ages her.

I bring her into my office, close the door behind us, and motion for her to sit on the couch. "Please take a sea—"

"I only have a few minutes," she interrupts, still standing. "I'm not here for therapy."

What? I came in early because she made it sound like she needed to be seen as soon as possible. "I don't understand," I admit.

"Your mother's in danger."

"I'm sorry?" I've heard a lot of things over the last decade between the walls of this two-hundredand-fifty square-foot office, but this is a first.

"You need to find her to let her know," she implores.

"My mom died twenty-six years ago," I tell her, though I don't owe her an explanation.

The woman shakes her head. "No, she didn't."

My chest feels like it's starting to burn. "This isn't funny."

"I risked my life by coming here." She bites down on her lip nervously. "The people after her will come after me too if they find out I met with you."

"Who are you?" I demand.

"It's not safe for either of us, if you know. You need to find Irene and warn her. But don't go to the police, FBI, any type of law enforcement—that'll put her in more danger. I heard she's somewhere in the Bay Area. You need to tell her she's in trouble again."

Again? My mother is *alive* and in trouble *again*?

I don't know who put this woman up to this, maybe a former disgruntled patient, but it feels like the cruelest, sickest joke anyone could tell, and I want her out of my office. Now. "Leave," I say.

"I didn't think you'd believe me," she says, opening her tightly wound fist. That's when I see it—a gold bracelet with a Tiffany lima bean charm, just like the one Mom wore. The one the police told Dad had been stolen after the hit-and-run accident.

My chest is on fire. I'm unable to form words. I feel like I might pass out. I try holding onto the side of the couch to steady myself.

"... Where did you get that?"

"I gotta go," she says, dropping the bracelet on the floor as she bolts out of my office.

Before I know it, I'm chasing after her down the hallway. My legs understand what my brain hasn't registered yet. If what she just told me is true, this woman may be the only way to track down my dead mother.

I slip in my heels, coming down hard on my left ankle, but I pull myself back up and keep going.

She ducks into the stairway exit and runs down the stairs. I hobble after her, the distance between us growing as she reaches the first floor and swings open the door to the lobby.

By the time I reach the ground floor, she's already outside. A black-tinted Cadillac Escalade with an obscured license plate screeches up to the front of the building. She jumps in the back seat and speeds away.

I'm left standing alone on the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Rexford Drive at 7:04 am on a Tuesday morning, surrounded by palm trees and sunshine like nothing ever happened.

CHAPTER TWO

My colleagues and I keep an ice pack in the communal office fridge. I sit at my desk, icing my throbbing ankle.

For twenty-six years, all I've wished was for my mother to somehow still be alive.

Dad and I went through the unimaginable after we lost her. She'd been my rock, my cheerleader, my everything, and I found life without her unbearable.

All the things I'd previously taken joy in as a teenager, like hanging out with friends at the beach, going to concerts, and playing on my high school soccer team, I struggled to do. Life was marching on for everyone around me, while I was slowly withdrawing from it.

Dad had his own challenges as a new widower and single parent. In addition to her career as a therapist, Mom had been in charge of everything in our house, from grocery shopping to paying bills to calling a plumber whenever a sink was clogged. After she passed, Dad had to shoulder all of it alone, along with his job as a partner at a law firm in downtown LA.

He was barely keeping his head above water, so he didn't notice when I started rationing my food, skipping breakfast, and barely touching my dinner. It was only when I flat-out refused to eat at all and my clothes began hanging on me like I was a Halloween skeleton that he realized I had a problem. He tried everything in his power to get me to eat, and I was horrible to him. I threw bowls of food, accused him of abusing me by forcing me to eat, and even hit him on several occasions. My brain was so deformed from months of starvation that any will I'd had to live had all but disappeared. I was on a death march, and he was in my way.

The stress was too much for him to bear, so he started smoking again, a habit Mom had helped him quit when I was a toddler. He died of lung cancer over a decade after she passed. I've spent the better part of the last twelve years blaming myself for what I put him through, even questioning if I was responsible for his death.

Now, hearing that Mom could still be alive, however unlikely it is to be true, how can I not wonder if Dad and I might've been spared all the suffering we went through? If she's really alive, does she know anything about what happened to us after she disappeared? Did she keep tabs on us from a distance? Or did she orchestrate her death to cut us off for good?

Maybe she was secretly unhappy in her life with us. She didn't act like it, but I've read enough novels about unhappy housewives who one day decide to pick up and leave, to their families' great surprise.

And what about what the fake patient said—how Mom is in trouble? *Again*.

Was she leading a double life while married to Dad? Was she in some kind of trouble?

No. She can't be alive. We buried her. We held a memo- rial service at a family friend's funeral home. Though, Dad and I never did see the body.

He told me the police said it was too mangled after the hit-and-run accident for viewing. Instead, he said he gave them her dental records, and they identified her that way.

But what about the bracelet the woman dropped on the ground before running out of here? Everyone who knew her knew she wore a bracelet with a lima bean charm—she never took it off. It's in every picture of her for the fifteen years after I was born. Someone trying to get to me who knew that specific detail about her could weaponize it to hurt me. But who would that person be?

The ice pack is thawing. Wet droplets drip onto my ankle. I focus on them instead of the bracelet staring at me from the white carpet. The sunlight from the window catches on the gold chain, making it sparkle.

I memorized every centimeter of Mom's bracelet when I was little. Dad bought it for her after she held me for the first time at the hospital and dubbed me her "little bean." My name and birthdate were engraved on the lima bean, and there was a small scratch on the top left-hand corner.

I can't tell from my desk whether the engravings or the scratch are there. And I'm scared to check. Because a sense is taking hold that this may be the last moment before every- thing I know to be true about my life is turned upside down. Before I find out that the person I thought loved me more than anyone else on the planet possibly abandoned me.

Courage, I tell my patients, is not the same as fearlessness. Courage is action in the face of fear. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and stand up.

I limp over to the carpet, my throbbing ankle providing little distraction from my thumping heart pounding so force- fully that it feels like it might break my chest wide open right here, right now.

I close my eyes and pick up the bracelet, first holding it tightly in my fist and then slowly opening my eyes and the palm of my hand.

My name, birth date, and the small scratch in the lefthand corner are all there.

My head suddenly feels heavy. The room starts to spin. I collapse on the couch to buffer myself, clutching Mom's bracelet, and trying to calm down by taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

Could she really be alive? And, according to the fake patient, living in the same state as me? My mind can't wrap itself around this possibility.

I reach for my cell phone with a shaking hand and cancel all my morning sessions. I can barely form thoughts, let alone give anyone advice.

I don't know what to do next, but I know I don't want to do it alone.

I'm standing in front of Eddie's house off Pico Boulevard, pounding on his door. He opens it, clearly confused to see me here on a weekday morning at this hour.

"Everything okay?" he asks. "We're about to leave for school."

Sarah appears behind him, holding her pink and purple tie-dyed backpack. "Hi, Beans!"

"Wanna join us?" he asks me.

I'm temporarily pulled back into the reality of my life. If I accompany Sarah and Eddie to her school, he might think I'm getting closer to saying yes to moving in together. I don't want to mislead either of them, but I'm struggling to find an excuse for why I can't.

Sarah looks up at me with her wide, blue eyes. "Triple please," she says.

Her words tug at my heart. Whenever Eddie and I take her to get ice cream, we get a triple scoop cone and share it because of a story I once told her about the last trip I took with my parents before Mom died. Mom, Dad, and I had gone to Italy for the summer, and whatever town or city we were in, we would order a triple scoop of gelato, which the three of us shared.

Mom used to carry a picture in her wallet of the three of us sitting on the Spanish Steps in Rome, sharing a cone. Her purse was stolen along with her bracelet after she was killed, so we never recovered that photo. And I haven't looked at any others from that trip since she died. They are memories of before times, when my family was complete, and I still wanted to eat ice cream.

Sarah's still standing in front of me, waiting for an answer.

"Sure," I say.

She slips her hand into mine, and we walk to Eddie's car together.

We drive along Pico Boulevard until we reach her charter elementary school. Eddie pulls up in the drop-off line, gets out, and walks around to the back to open Sarah's door. She climbs out of her car seat, and he hugs her goodbye.

"I love you," he says.

"Love you, Daddy," she says back.

She waves at me through the window, and I wave back.

Eddie gets in the car and turns to me. "What's going on? Why aren't you at work?"

"Something happened," I say.

"With a patient?" he asks.

"Not exactly." I pause. My ankle is still throbbing and everything that happened this morning is

starting to catch up with me. "I'd rather talk at your place."

When we return to his house, I fill him in on everything—the fake patient, how she said Mom might still be alive and in the Bay Area, and the bracelet.

"Whoa," he says, taking it all in. "Do you know who the woman was?"

"She didn't give me her real name," I say. "She said it was too dangerous for me to know because the same people after my mom would go after her if they knew she came to see me. I tried to chase her, but she was too fast. I have to find her, Eddie."

"Are there cameras in your office building, like in the lobby?" he asks.

"I never noticed before," I admit.

"Because if we can get an image of her, we could try using a facial recognition app to find out who she is," he says.

Eddie knows about all things tech. He's a software engineer who creates, designs, and develops computer software that companies use to run their organizations, like operating systems, business applications, and network control systems. He's fortunate in that his job allows him to work from home, which has been a godsend since he became a single dad.

"Even if there are cameras, she was wearing a baseball cap that covered her face," I say.

"You never know," he says. "There might be an angle where her face is exposed. Let's find out. I'll drive." He picks up his car keys.

"Don't you have to work?" I ask.

"I'll make it up later," he says.

"Thank you."

I'm grateful for his kindness. He knows how much losing my mom impacted me and about the eating disorder I struggled with in high school after she died. One time I even confessed to him that I felt guilty about Dad dying of lung cancer because of what I'd put him through, and Eddie only showed me compassion.

"Something I've learned through my support group is that everyone grieves differently," he told me.

He still meets with a group of widowers once a month, the same support group he started going to after Sarah's mom died. He said they were instrumental in helping him make the right choices for Sarah. And his primary focus has always been to do whatever's best for her. That's how we met.

A couple of years ago, I was on my way to work and stopped at a local bakery to grab a birthday cake for one of my suitemates. When I stepped inside the bakery, a man in his thirties with brown hair and kind eyes was trying to order a cake, and I could tell he was struggling.

"So, white frosting with pink writing?" a young store clerk with a short, blond ponytail asked him. "Yes," he said. "Wait, I'm not sure. Maybe chocolate frosting and purple writing would be better."

"We can do that," she told him. "Do you want any decorations on it? Edible flowers? Animals? Sprinkles? Balloons? We do themes too."

He stood there looking at her like a deer in headlights. "I'm not sure," he said.

"Do you want to think about it, and I can help this other customer?" she asked him, pointing to me.

"Okay," he said.

When he stepped to the side, I noticed tears in his eyes.

"How can I help you?" she asked me.

"Hang on," I said to her and walked over to the man. "Are you all right?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make a scene," he said. "It's my daughter's fifth birthday, her first since my wife died. Her mom was always the one in charge of her birthdays. I don't know what little girls like."

"I'm so sorry for your loss. Can I help you?" I offered.

He nodded. "Okay."

We walked back to the counter and stood side-by-side. "Before I pick up my cake, I'd like to help him finish his order," I told the store clerk.

"So far, he has a rainbow-shaped cake with chocolate frosting and purple writing on top," she said. "My daughter likes rainbows," the man told me.

"Is there any way to do rainbow-colored frosting on the rainbow cake?" I asked the woman.

"Sure, we can do that. How about toppings?" she asked.

I spotted some cakes inside the refrigerated glass counter below with long rainbow-swirled lollipops.

"I think those lollipops would be great on top of the cake to keep with the rainbow theme," I told the man. "What do you think?"

"Okay," he said.

She totaled his bill, and he paid her. "Thank you," he said to me.

"I'm sure her mom would be happy you're celebrating your daughter's special day," I said. He nodded, the tears still in his eyes, and left.

Later that day, I checked my phone for messages between sessions and saw one from a number I didn't recognize. I figured it was a prospective new patient. But it was the man I'd helped at the bakery. His name was Eddie.

He'd gone back to get my name from the bakery clerk, Googled me, and found my therapy website. He asked if he could take me out for lunch to thank me.

I wouldn't characterize that first lunch together as a date, since he had asked me out to thank me. So it felt pressure-free, and we got to know each other without all the usual dating stressors.

I remember leaving the lunch thinking I liked him, not romantically, but as a person. He was hurting, in pain, and trying to do right by his daughter, just like Dad had tried to do with me, and I admired him for it.

When he asked me out again, I thought it was the beginning of a friendship. It wasn't until a couple months later, when he kissed me for the first time in front of my house, that I realized he felt something more.

The truth was that I had wanted him to kiss me for a while but wasn't going to go there since he was grieving his late wife.

In the middle of the kiss, he pulled away from me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not sure I can do this. It feels like I'm cheating on Helen."

"It's okay," I told him. "We can take things slowly or just be friends."

"Thank you for understanding," he said. And then he pulled me in close again, kissing me for a long while. We've been together ever since.

When we arrive at my office in Beverly Hills, I knock on the building manager's office door.

"Coming," the manager shouts before opening the door. He only has a few strands of white hair left on his head. I notice a couple of dated security television screens behind him.

"Yes?" he asks.

I take out my driver's license and show it to him. "Hi, I'm Dr. Beatrice Bennett from suite 301. I saw a new patient today who didn't give me her last name or contact information, and I need to call her. It's an emergency. I'm wondering if you have any footage of her," I say.

He looks confused. "I might," he says. "But how's that gonna help?"

Eddie holds up his phone. "We can scan her face using a facial recognition app to figure out who she is."

"I'm not sure I'm allowed to do that. You're not the police. What kind of danger are we talkin' 'bout?" the manager asks.

"A danger to herself," I say.

He raises his eyebrows. The hairless skin on his scalp bunches up in surprise. "Okay... but do it fast. Don't want trouble if the owners come by," he says.

"I'm a software engineer," Eddie explains. "If you allow me to scroll through the footage, I can do it quickly and leave it exactly as is after we're finished."

The manager motions for us to proceed. We walk over to the dated security screens, and Eddie takes control of the panels.

"What time do you think she arrived?" he asks me.

"Sometime between six thirty and six forty-five," I say.

He scrolls back through the footage of the first screen, which covers the exterior of the building. A couple of people walk by the entrance, someone walking their dog, another holding a Starbucks togo coffee cup, and then at the 6:44 am mark, I spot a woman with a black baseball cap.

"That's her," I tell Eddie.

He goes slowly through the footage of her approaching the building. We watch her enter, but her hat obscures her face. No luck.

Eddie moves to the second screen that covers the lobby and scrolls back to her entering it. She steps inside the building with the cap still on, presses the elevator button, and disappears inside—still, no luck.

At 7:03 am, we watch her run out of the stairwell back into the lobby as I chase after her. And then it happens—for a split second, her baseball cap falls off.

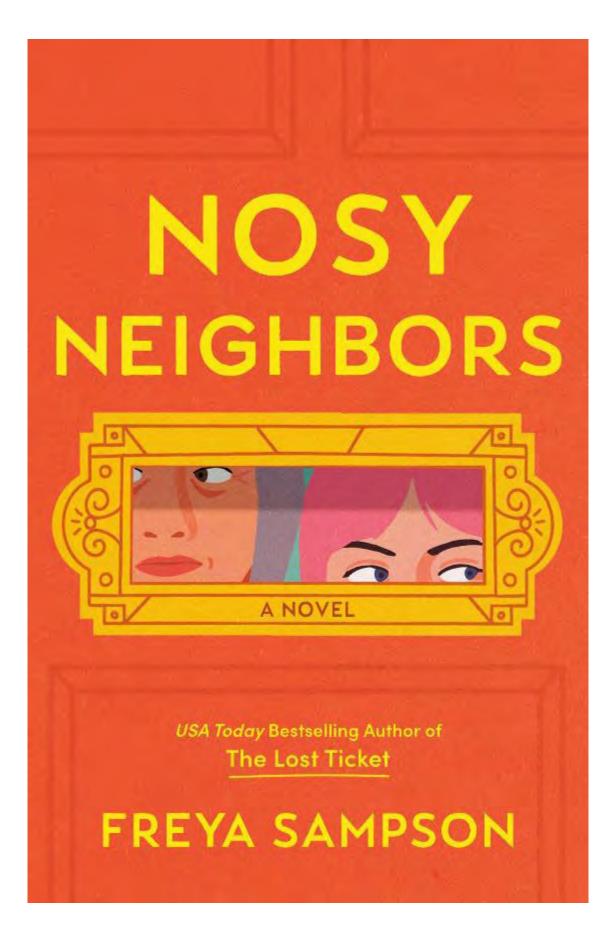
Eddie zooms in on the moment the hat drops and grabs a screenshot of her face on his phone. It's not a great image, but it's something.

"Got it," Eddie says.

"Time to get goin," the manager tells us.

"Thank you," I say.

"No need to thank me 'cause this never happened."



NOSY NEIGHBORS BY FREYA SAMPSON USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Two neighbors-at-war band together to stop a dangerous criminal in their midst in this enthralling new novel from the author of *The Lost Ticket*.

Twenty-five-year-old Kat Bennett has never felt at home anywhere, and especially not in crumbling Shelley House. According to her neighbors, she's prickly and unapproachable, but beneath her tough exterior, Kat is plagued by guilt from her past.

Seventy-seven-year-old Dorothy Darling is Shelley House's longest resident, and if you believe the other tenants, she's as cantankerous and vindictive as they come. Except there's a good reason Dorothy spends her days spying on her neighbors—a closely guarded secret that no else knows and the reason Dorothy barely leaves her beloved home.

When their building faces demolition, sworn enemies Kat and Dorothy become unlikely allies in their quest to save their historic home. But when someone starts to play dirty and viciously targets one of the residents, Dorothy and Kat suspect foul play in their community. After the police close the investigation, it's up to this improbable pair to bring a criminal to justice.

"[Sampson] delivers another emotionally resonant tale that tugs at your heartstrings in the most poignant way ... *Nosy Neighbors* is a delightful and heartwarming read that's perfect for those who love feel-good stories with well-developed characters and a touch of mystery. This is a must-read that will remind you of the beauty of community, forgiveness, and embracing life's quirks." *-NetGalley*

Hardcover: 9780593550519 / \$28.00 Paperback: 9780593550526 / \$18.00 eBook: 9780593550533 / \$12.99 Audiobook: 9780593825662 Pub Date: April 2, 2024 Publisher: Berkley (Penguin Random House) <u>https://www.penguin.com/berkley-overview/</u> Buy Link: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/722237/nosy-neighbors-by-freyasampson/9780593550526

FREYA SAMPSON is the USA Today bestselling author of The Last Chance Library and The Lost Ticket/The Girl on the 88 Bus. She studied history at Cambridge University and worked in television as an executive producer, making documentaries about everything from the British royal family to neighbours from hell. In 2018, she was short-listed for the Exeter Novel Prize. Nosy Neighbours is her third novel. She lives in London with her husband, two young children, and an antisocial cat. https://freya-sampson.com/

CHAPTER ONE

Dorothy

Years later, when the residents of Shelley House looked back on the extraordinary events of that long, turbulent summer, they would disagree on how it all began. Tomasz in flat five said it started the day the letters arrived: six innocuous-looking brown envelopes that fell through the communal letterbox one Wednesday morning in May. Omar in flat three claimed the problems came a few weeks later when an ambulance pulled up in front of the building, its siren wailing, and the body was loaded into the back. And Gloria from flat six said her astrologer had told her way back in January there would be drama and destruction in her near future (and, more importantly, that she'd be engaged by Christmas).

But for Dorothy Darling, flat two, there was never any question of when the trouble began. She could pinpoint the exact moment when everything changed: the single flap of a butterfly's wing that would eventually lead to the tornado that engulfed them all.

It was the day the girl with pink hair arrived at Shelley House.

That morning had started out like any other. Dorothy was woken at six thirty by thumping from the flat overhead. She lay in bed for several minutes, her eyes squeezed shut as she chased the last shadows of her dream. When she could put it off no longer, she rose, her knees clicking obstinately as she moved through to the bathroom to perform her morning ablutions. In the kitchen, Dorothy lit the stove with a match and did her morning stretches while she waited for an egg to boil and her pot of English breakfast tea to steep. Once they were ready, she carried a tray through to the drawing room, where she consumed breakfast sitting at a card table in the bay window. So far, so normal.

As she ate, Dorothy observed her neighbors depart the building. There was the tall, ferocious man from flat five, accompanied by his equally ferocious, pavement-fouling dog. Next came the pretty-if-only-she'd-stop-scowling teenager from flat three, staring at her phone and pointedly ignoring her father, who followed her carrying a battered briefcase under one arm and an overflowing box of recycling under the other. As he emptied the contents into the communal bins, a tin can missed the deposit and rolled onto the pavement. The man hurried off after his daughter, oblivious. Dorothy reached for the diary and pencil she kept near at all times.

7:48 a.m. O.S. (3) Erroneous rubbish disposal.

Once the morning rush hour had passed, Dorothy washed up her crockery, dressed, brushed her long silver hair, and put on her string of pearls. She was back at the window by eight fifty, just in time to see the redheaded woman from flat six departing hand-in-hand with her current paramour, a tall, bovine man in a cheap leather jacket. After that there was a lull and Dorothy changed the beds and dusted the picture frames and objects on the mantelpiece, accompanied by Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* to block out the din from the flat above.

And then, a little after ten, she was brewing her second pot of tea when she heard a tremendous bang from outside. Dorothy abandoned the kettle and rushed to the front window, where she watched an old, ramshackle blue car pull up in front of the building, its rear wheel mounting the curb. A great cloud of black smoke burped from the exhaust pipe as the engine puttered out, and a moment later the door opened and the driver emerged. It was a young person who looked to be somewhere in their twenties, although at first glance, Dorothy was unsure if it was a man or a woman. They had short, unkempt hair dyed a lurid neon pink and were dressed in a pair of dungarees of the sort one might expect a laborer on a building site to wear. The youth did not seem to have any kind of coat or knitwear, despite it being unseasonably cool for early May, and Dorothy could see tattoos snaking up their arms like graffiti. The person reached into the back seat of the car and heaved out a large, well-worn backpack, then kicked the door shut, causing the vehicle to shake precariously. It was only when

they turned to face Shelley House that Dorothy realized she was looking at a young woman.

The girl's face gave nothing away as she surveyed the building, but Dorothy could imagine her taking it in with a mixture of apprehension and awe. After all, one did not come across dwellings like Shelley House every day. Built during the reign of Queen Victoria and named after the English Romantic poet, its broad façade was a mixture of precise red brickwork and embossed white masonry, topped by an ornate balustrade. Wide stone steps led up to the imposing front door, over which the words **SHELLEY HOUSE**, **1891** were engraved in Gothic script. Impressive bay windows framed the door on the first two floors, while the highest floor—once the servants' quarters before the building was converted into flats—had smaller, rectangular dormer windows. Dorothy could still remember the first time she had seen the building herself; how she had stopped in the middle of the pavement and stared, mouth agape, marveling at its grandeur and history. It was the most beautiful house she had ever seen, and Dorothy had pledged there and then that it would become her home. Thirty-four years later, it still was.

The pink-haired girl continued regarding the building, and as her eyes swept along the ground floor they seemed to pause for a moment on Dorothy's window. Dorothy instinctively drew back, even though she knew nobody could see her through the net curtain. Still, she found her heart beating a little faster as she watched the young woman climb the steps and disappear from view at the front door. Who was she coming to visit in the middle of the working day? Perhaps the uncouth new tenant in flat four? Dorothy waited to hear the sound of a distant bell ringing and was therefore utterly confounded when she heard the unfamiliar chime of her own. Good gracious, it was for her! Should she answer it? It had been a long time since Dorothy had had a caller, and the girl hardly looked trustworthy. Perhaps she was one of those scoundrels who preyed on vulnerable elderly people, tricking her way into their homes, robbing them and then leaving them for dead? Of course, Dorothy was neither vulnerable nor stupid enough to fall for such a trick, but this young rapscallion was not to know that. Should she fetch a knife from the kitchen drawer, just in case?

The bell sounded again, jolting Dorothy. She reached for her pencil—the nib was sharp enough to be used as a weapon, if circumstances required—and moved to her front door. Some years earlier, a previous landlord had installed an overly elaborate entry system whereby when someone rang her bell a video appeared on a little screen by her door, showing Dorothy who was there and even allowing her to speak to them before she "buzzed" them in. Dorothy had been horrified by it, even when the engineer insisted that the video was one-way and the person outside could not see her. Now she lowered her face so that her nose was almost touching the screen. It showed a grainy black-and-white image of the woman, who was chewing a fingernail as she waited for an answer. What could she possibly want?

The bell sounded a third time, a longer, more persistent ring. Dorothy cleared her throat before she pressed the button labeled intercom.

"Who are you and what do you want from me?" She had to shout to be heard above the third act of *Götterdämmerung*, which was still playing in the background.

"I've come about the room."

Dorothy frowned. "You must be mistaken. There is no room here, I assure you."

She heard an audible sigh through the intercom. "Has it gone already? You could have let me know; I've driven all the way here especially."

Dorothy bristled at the girl's impertinent tone. "Then you can go back whence you came. And take that menace of a car with you."

Even on the tiny monitor, Dorothy could see a flash of anger in the girl's face.

"It is parked illegally," Dorothy clarified.

The visitor did not even look back at the vehicle. "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is. Your rear wheel is mounted on the curb, in contravention of Rule 244 of the Highway Code. So unless you move it, I may be forced to telephone the council." The girl let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a snort. "Wow, you sound like a right barrel of laughs. Maybe I dodged a bullet after all."

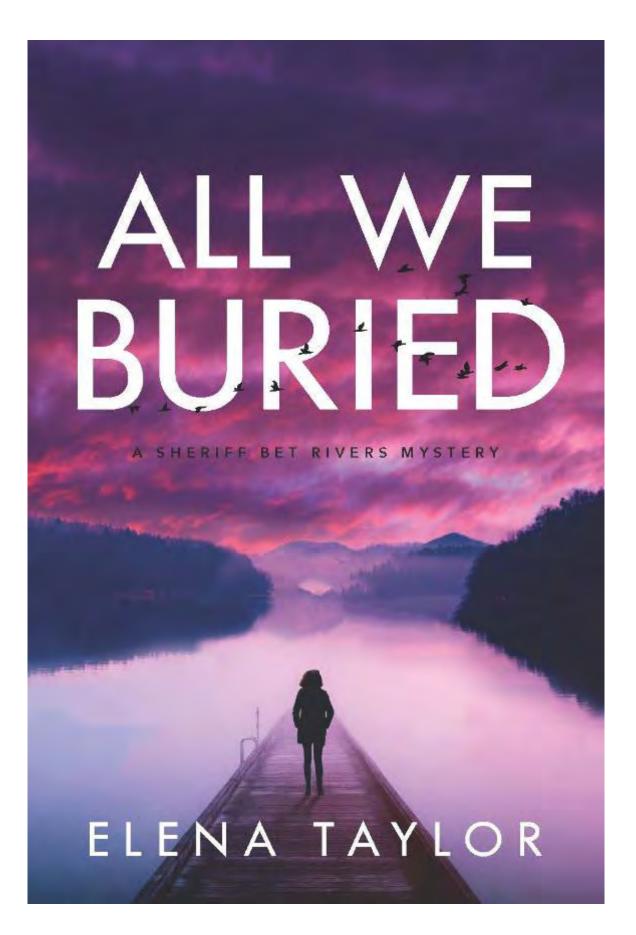
Dorothy had no idea what bullet the girl was referring to, but before she could say something suitably caustic she saw the youth turn and start down the steps, without so much as a thank you or goodbye.

Dorothy stepped back from the door in triumph. She had no doubt that the girl had intended to ring for flat one, whose ghastly tenant made a habit of illegally subletting his second room. Dorothy had reported him to the building's landlord on three separate occasions, but so far there appeared to have been no obvious sanctions. Still, she took some satisfaction in having thwarted this particular attempt. Standards in Shelley House might have been slipping for years, but she could quite do without that disrespectful young hoodlum living across the hallway.

Dorothy glanced toward her diary on the table. She should write this interaction up now, while it was still fresh in her mind.

10:17 a.m. Impertinent pink-haired caller mistakenly enquiring about room. Educated her on Highway Code and sent her away.

But that could wait. More pressing at this moment was the abandoned pot of tea in need of resuscitation. Dorothy returned to the kitchen, accompanied by the soaring notes of Wagner's Brunhilda riding to her death in the flames.



ALL WE BURIED (A SHERIFF BET RIVERS MYSTERY) BY ELENA TAYLOR

An amateur sheriff confronts the long-sleeping secrets of her small Washington State mountain town in this dark, twisty mystery.

Interim Sheriff Elizabeth "Bet" Rivers has always had one repeat nightmare: a shadowy figure throwing a suspicious object into her hometown lake in Collier, Washington. For the longest time, she chalked it up to an overactive imagination as a kid. Then the report arrives. In the woods of the Cascade Mountain range, right in her jurisdiction, a body floats to the surface of Lake Collier. When the body is extricated and revealed, no one can identify Jane Doe. But someone must know the woman, so why aren't they coming forward?

Bet has been sitting as the interim sheriff of this tiny town in the ill-fitting shoes of her late father and predecessor. With the nightmare on her heels, Bet decided to build a life for herself in Los Angeles, but now it's time to confront the tragic history of Collier. The more she learns, the more Bet realizes she doesn't know the townspeople of Collier as well as she thought, and nothing can prepare her for what she is about to discover.

"Well-crafted... Taylor skillfully sets the scene, describing the distinctive local landscape [while] the introspective, conflicted Bet proves her mettle. Readers will look forward to her next outing." -Publishers Weekly

"A wonderful protagonist [and] a stellar mystery with a current of tension and suspicion powerful enough to quicken your pulse." -**Allen Eskens**, *USA Today* **bestselling author of** *The Life We Bury* **and Nothing More Dangerous**

"This spooky, suspenseful story should be a must-read for fans of Lisa Unger, J.A. Jance, and Julia Keller." -*Booklist*

Hardcover: 9781643852911 / \$26.99 eBook: 9781643853123 / \$12.99 Audiobook: ASIN Bo85864RX2 Pub Date: April 7, 2020 Publisher: Crooked Lane Books, https://crookedlanebooks.com/ Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/All-We-Buried-Sheriff-Mystery-ebook/dp/Bo7RQH353V

ELENA TAYLOR spent several years working in theater as a playwright, director, designer, and educator before turning her storytelling skills to fiction. Her first series, "The Eddie Shoes Mysteries," written under the name Elena Hartwell, introduce a quirky mother/daughter crime fighting duo. With *All We Buried*, Elena returns to her dramatic roots and brings readers a much more serious and atmospheric novel. Her favorite place to be is Paradise, with her hubby, horses, cats, and dogs. https://www.elenataylorauthor.com/

CHAPTER ONE

Sheriff Bet Rivers leaned back in her chair and gazed out the office window at the shifting light on Lake Collier. Bright sunlight cast up sparkling diamonds as a late-summer breeze chopped the surface—turquoise-blue and silver. The fragment of a song from her childhood teased her mind—*silver, blue, and gold.* She hummed the tune under her breath.

Red and yellow leaves turned the maple trees in the park across the street into Jackson Pollock paintings. Hard to believe Labor Day weekend ended tonight. Somehow summer had slipped by and fall had snuck up on her as she tended to her new position.

If she had still been in Los Angeles, she'd have been a detective by now. Instead, she was back in her tiny hometown with a job her father had tricked her into taking.

"I need you to cover for me while I get chemo," he said. "It's just for a few months. I'm going to be fine."

With the detective exam available only once every two years, it meant putting her career on hold. But her father had never asked her for anything; how could she say no?

He never said he would die, turning her "interim sheriff" position into something more permanent.

Her father always knew what cards to play. Competition. Family. Responsibility. Loyalty. Collier. A perfect straight. He'd used them all this time, as if he'd known it would be his last hand.

No easy way to extricate herself now, short of gnawing off her own foot.

The sound of instruments tuning up pulled her attention to a trio set up at a bench outside the market across the street. The raised sidewalk and false front of the old building made the perfect backdrop for their performance. Collier relied on tourism for much of its income, and the local musicians encouraged visitors to stay longer and spend more.

A beat of silence followed by a quick intake of breath, the unspoken communication of musicians well attuned to one another, and the trio launched into song.

Church of a different sort. Bet could hear her father's words. *I don't know if there's a God, Bet, but I do believe in bluegrass.*

The music produced a soundtrack to her grief. The banjo player favored the fingerpicking style of the great Earl Scruggs. Loss etched in the sound of three-part harmony, Earle Rivers's death still a wound that wouldn't close.

She recognized the fiddle player. She'd babysat him years ago. It made her feel old. Not yet thirty, she wasn't, but as the last generation of Lake Collier Riverses, the weight of history fell heavy on her shoulders. In a line of sheriffs stretching back to the town's founding, she was the bitter end.

Looking down at her desk, Bet eyed the new fly she'd tied. The small, barbless hook would work well for the catch-and-release fishing she did, and the bright yellow and green feathers pleased her. The only thing she'd missed while living in California. Surf fishing wasn't the same.

I should name it in your memory, Dad. The Earle fly. Her grandfather had named him after Scruggs, but her grandmother added the e because she liked how it looked.

Bet imagined her father's critical response to her work, the size of the hook too dainty for his memorial.

Bet "spoke" with her father more now, four months after his death, than she'd ever done when he lived. Another burden she carried. The conversations they'd never had. Things she should have asked but didn't.

She took a deep breath of the dry, pine scent that drifted in through the open windows, filling

the room with a heady summer perfume. She should get up and walk around, let the community see she was on the job, but her body felt leaden. And it wasn't like anyone would notice. She could vanish for hours and it wouldn't matter to Collier; no one required her attention. Not like they had depended on her father. His death still hung over town like a malaise, her presence an insufficient cure no matter what Earle might have believed when he called her home.

Before her father's illness, she'd had a plan. First the police academy, then patrol officer, proving she could make it in Los Angeles as a cop. She'd envisioned at least twenty years in LA, moving up the ranks—something with Chief in the title—returning home with a long, impressive career before stepping into Earle's shoes.

Too late, she'd realized he wouldn't get better. He'd brought her home for good.

Stretching her arms above her head, she walked her fingers up the wall behind her, tapping to the beat of the music. Anything to shake off the drowsiness brought on by the hot, quiet day and long nights of uneasy sleep.

The coffee stand beckoned from across the street, but the sound of the front door opening and the low, throaty voice of the department's secretary, Alma, stopped her from voyaging out. A twopack-a-day smoker for almost forty years, Alma sounded a lot like Lauren Bacall after a night of heavy drinking. She'd given up smoking more than twenty years ago, but even now, as she edged into her seventies, Alma's voice clung to the roughness like a dying man to a life preserver. Bet hoped the visitor only wanted information about the community and Alma could answer.

No such luck. The efficient clop of Alma's square-heeled shoes clumped down the scarred floors of the hallway, a counterpoint to another set of feet. Bet brought her hands down off the wall and automatically tucked a wayward curl of her auburn hair back up under her hat before Alma arrived, poking her birdlike head around the wooden frame of the door. Gray hair teased tall, as if that would give her five-foot frame a couple extra inches.

"Bet?" Alma always said her name as though it might not be Bet Rivers sitting behind the enormous sheriff's desk. Bet assumed Alma wished to find Earle Rivers there. She wondered how long that would last. If Bet threw the upcoming election and fled back to Southern California, leaving her deputy to pick up the reins, maybe everyone would be better off, no matter what her father wanted.

"Yes, Alma?"

"I think you'd better listen to what this young man has to say."

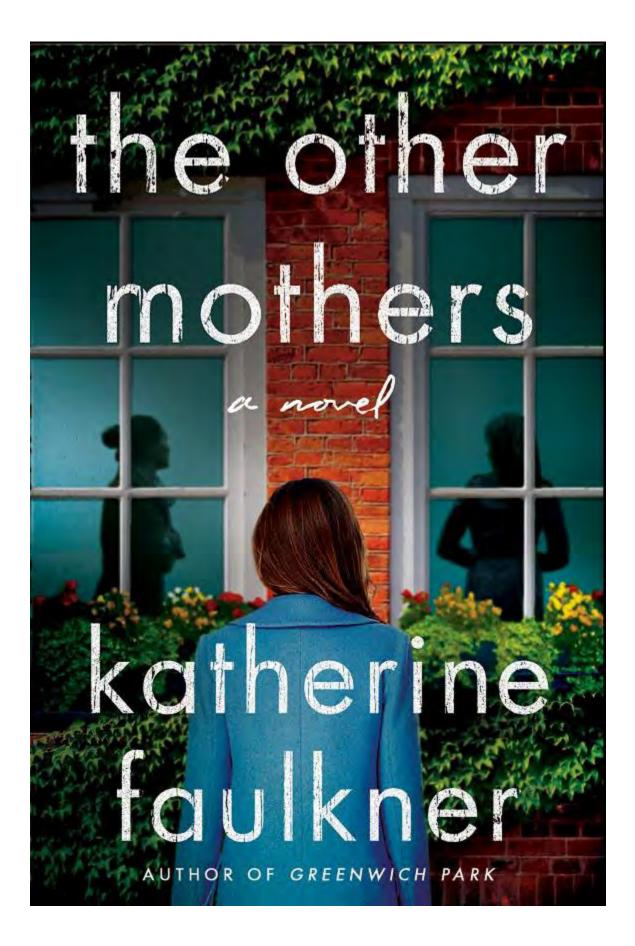
The "young man" in question could be anywhere under the age of sixty in Alma's book, and as he stood out of sight down the hallway, Bet had little to go on.

"Okay," Bet said.

"I think it's important." Alma waited for Bet to show appropriate attention.

"0kay."

"Seems he found a dead body floating in the lake.



THE OTHER MOTHERS BY KATHERINE FAULKNER

The author of the "twisty, fast-paced" (*The Sunday Times*) Greenwich Park returns with a fresh and deftly paced thriller about murder, class, and motherhood in an exclusive London community.

When a young nanny is found dead in mysterious circumstances, new mom, Tash, is intrigued. She has been searching for a story to launch her career as a freelance journalist. But she has also been searching for something else—new friends to help her navigate motherhood.

She sees them at her son's new playgroup. The other mothers. A group of sleek, sophisticated women who live in a neighborhood of tree-lined avenues and stunning houses. The sort of mothers Tash herself would like to be. When the mothers welcome her into their circle, Tash discovers the kind of life she has always dreamt of—their elegant London townhouses a far cry from her cramped basement flat and endless bills. She is quickly swept up into their wealthy world via coffees, cocktails, and playdates.

But when another young woman is found dead, it's clear there's much more to the community than meets the eye. The more Tash investigates, the more she's led uncomfortably close to the other mothers. Are these women really her friends? Or is there another, more dangerous reason why she has been so quickly accepted into their exclusive world? Who, exactly, is investigating who?

"A first-class thriller." -Robin Morgan-Bentley, Author of *The Wreckage* and *The Guest House*

"A brilliant portrayal of the complexities of parenthood, work and - oh yes - murder." -Ellery Lloyd, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Club*, a Reese's Book Club Pick

Hardcover: 9781668024782 / \$28.99 eBook: 9781668024805 / \$14.99 Audiobook: 9781797163246 / \$23.99 Pub Date: December 5, 2023 Publisher: Gallery Books (Simon & Schuster) Buy Link: https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Other-Mothers/Katherine-Faulkner/9781668024782

KATHERINE FAULKNER is a London-based award-winning journalist and the author of *The Other Mothers* and *Greenwich Park*. She studied History at Cambridge University, graduating with a First, then completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Newspaper Journalism. Since then, she has been working as an investigative reporter and latterly an editor. Her work has been published in many national papers, and she most recently worked at *The Times*, where she was the joint Head of News. While working as an undercover reporter, Katherine won the Cudlipp Award for public interest journalism and was nominated for a string of others. She was also commended by a committee of MPs for 'the highest standards of ethical investigative reporting.' Katherine was inspired to write her debut novel about the complexity of female friendships after attending NCT classes while pregnant, and her experience of sudden intimacy with complete strangers. She lives in Hackney, East London, where she grew up, with her husband and two daughters.

https://www.instagram.com/katherinefaulknerwrites

CHAPTER ONE

Tash

North Cornwall police station April 2019

WE MEET IN A room with no windows in a town of pebble-dash houses and a high street lined with boarded-up storefronts and bookmakers' shops. They have taken me inland, to the nearest station, I assume. Here there is no crash of waves, no call of birds. No cheery stripe of blue peeping out from behind rooftops.

In the car on the drive down here, Tom and I had made a game of it for Finn. First one to spot the sea. I had seen it first, though I kept quiet to let Finn be the winner. Seeing that sapphire ribbon stretched across the horizon, my heart had lifted, despite everything. At the promise of a vacation. Days on the beach building forts and castles. Finn's feet making perfect prints in the wet sand of the bay.

I wondered if they might handcuff me, but they didn't. They seemed almost apologetic, the officers in the car. They kept asking if I was cold, if I would like a window open, a drink of water. I shook my head, tried to focus on the landscape outside the windows. I wanted to find a landmark, a place I knew. But I couldn't. And the farther we got from the coast, the more unfamiliar it became.

They opened the door for me when we arrived, offered me a hand, but I stepped out on my own. Overhead, the cold sky, speckled with a swirling milk froth of stars, was so beautiful I'd actually caught my breath. We never see stars in London. I had a sudden sense that I was only now seeing things the way they really were. And that I, too, was finally being seen.

Now we are inside the room. It's just me and Detective Pascoe, a gray PVC rectangle of table between us. His colleague, Williams, said she would go and get some tea. She said it like tea was the answer to my problems. When I look down, I see there is a dark smear of blood on the cuff of my sweater.

I find my voice is weak, like something far away.

"You are looking, aren't you? You need to look. On the cliffs. He fell, but maybe he's still . . ."

My mind forms the next few words, but I find my mouth cannot.

A loud buzz. The interview room door opens. Williams is back, holding a mug for me and another for Pascoe.

"Careful," she says as she sets them down. "Very hot."

There is nothing sensuous about Williams. She is slim as a Boy Scout, neat in her gray suit. She has a heart-shaped face, so pale you can almost see through it. Her hair is cut short, like a li'le child's. Like Finn's. I feel a twist in my gut. Finn.

Pascoe acknowledges the tea with a nod, then clears his throat into his balled fist, replaces his hands on the table in front of him.

"We're doing everything we can to locate him, Mrs. Carpenter.

Should I call you that, or do you prefer Natasha?"

"Please, call me Tash." I am like you, I want to tell him. A professional person. I am a wife, a mother. I don't belong on this side of the table.

"Can we go over what happened tonight, Tash? On the cliffs?"

I try to focus on the details in the room. Count the polystyrene ceiling tiles, one by one. They don't know anything. They weren't there. They can't know.

"I went for a walk."

We both know this is an opening offer. One Pascoe isn't likely to accept.

"Bit late for a stroll, isn't it? Especially on a night like this."

When we'd go'en down to the water earlier, the storm had already started. The wind was plucking napkins from the tables on the seafront, sending them dancing up the cobbled lanes. The sea was beaten to a seething green foam. The man at the boat-trip kiosk had shaken his head, offered Tom the money back. I'd scooped Finn into my arms, promised him we would go tomorrow. I suppose we won't now.

Of course, I scold myself. Of course we won't. The vacation is over.

Everything is over now.

"I take it you're not local?"

I shake my head. "No. We're here on vacation."

"Where are you staying? Rental? Second home?"

I listen for an edge of hostility in Pascoe's voice. I used to vacation here with my family. Spoiled, middle-class teenager that I was, I couldn't understand why people would live in the gray towns we sped through on our way to the postcard-perfect coast. Why live in Cornwall, but here, rather than by the sea? As if it were simply a ma'er of choice, a kind of eccentricity on the part of the locals. Now I know the truth. What people like us were responsible for. A slow asphyxiation. Trimming away the pre'iest parts for our Easters and summers, leaving the rest to blank-faced decline. The ultimate selfishness.

If the hostility is there, though, I can't hear it. Pascoe's face is stone-like, impassive; the face of a man who sees the world as it is, and does not see much point lamenting it. Behind it is a logical mind, concerned with material things. Which sees pa'erns, and notices when they are disrupted. Like when a middle-class mother strays from a vacation home at night, and ends up bloodied on a cliff edge, someone screaming for the police.

"It's called Crugmeer House," I explain. "It belongs to a couple we know. We've been staying with them, a few other friends." Friends. My tongue feels wrong as I say the word, my mouth emptied out of moisture.

"I see. Have you known them long, these friends?"

Less than a year. It doesn't sound like much, does it? But friendships are different when you are a mother. Your eyes meet those of another mother over the swings, the sandbox, the GP waiting room, and you just know. The lack of sleep, the exhaustion, the funny moments and the painful, the constant emotional wringer.

That was how it had been. Our lives had been so familiar to each other. I had known what they laughed about, what they worried about, what kept them up at night. At least, I thought I had.

"How do you know each other?"

I open my eyes now and force myself to meet Pascoe's gaze.

"We met..." It comes out as a croak. I clear my throat, start again. "We met at the playgroup." The li'leness, the innocence of the word almost makes me laugh out loud.

> *London Evening Post*, November 21, 2017 WILD SWIMMING WARNING AFTER NANNY DEATH

BY Natasha James

A warning about the dangers of open-water swimming has been issued following the death of a young woman at a local nature reserve.

Sophie Blake, twenty-one, went missing on the evening of July 7, 2017. Miss Blake, who worked as a nanny, had been reported missing by her employers. Her body was found several days later in the East Reservoir. She had suffered a large cut to her head.

A pathologist who carried out the postmortem told the inquest it was possible Miss Blake could have sustained the head injury when she dived into the water.

The injury—combined with the water temperature, which had been cooler than usual for the time of year—could have left Miss Blake unconscious or dazed and unable to swim to the side, he said.

Miss Blake was known to enjoy open-water swimming. The alcohol levels in her blood suggested "a degree of intoxication," the inquest was told.

Coroner Victoria Carmichael said it was not possible to say for certain what had happened, but it was "likely" Miss Blake had decided to go swimming after drinking alcohol and had gotten into trouble in the water.

She said her death should act as a warning to others amid the growing popularity of so-called "wild swimming," which is not permitted in Woodberry Wetlands, a nature reserve comprising twenty-seven acres of reed-fringed ponds and dikes.

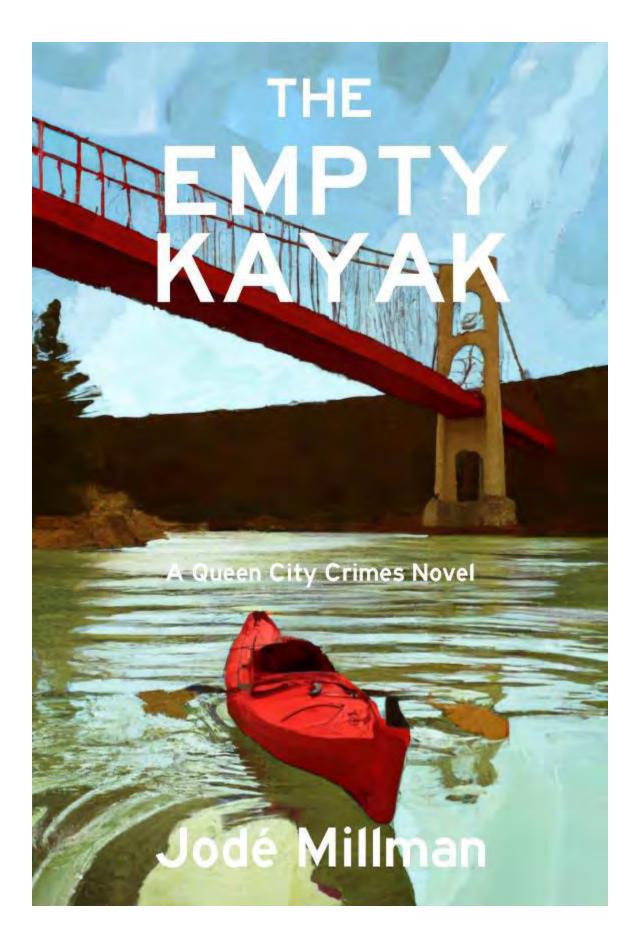
The reserve forms part of the Woodberry Down regeneration site, one of Europe's largest building projects that will see forty-six hundred new homes built.

Dave Holt, the manager responsible for the reservoirs on the site, admitted that wild swimming had become popular in the nature reserve, which comprises the old East Reservoir.

"We have signs up to say that it is not safe," he added. "People just ignore them."

Miss Blake's mother said her daughter was "irreplaceable," and that her death was something from which her family would "never recover."

The coroner recorded an open verdict.



THE EMPTY KAYAK (A QUEEN CITY CRIMES MYSTERY, BOOK 3) BY JODÉ MILLMAN

For Detective Ebony Jones, crime is always personal. But this time, it strikes too close to home.

A pop-up thunderstorm marched its way across the Hudson River, ambushing a young couple's kayaking trip. The woman miraculously made it back to shore, but her fiancé remains missing. Ebony and her partner are the first responders who rush to the river to assist in rescuing the capsized boater.

The victim's identity shocks Ebony to the core. Kyle Emory, the ex-boyfriend of her estranged best friend, attorney Jessie Martin, is the man who never made it out of the water. The accident ignites a firestorm between the two friends, pitting them against each other in a race to discover whether Kyle survived or whether he met his untimely demise. Under pressure from the chief and the DA, Ebony needs to solve the mystery, while Jessie seeks justice for the sake of the daughter she shares with Kyle. The investigation leads them through the dark worlds of social media, online sports betting, and extreme sports. Along the way, they uncover lies and betrayals and gather a list of dangerous suspects who are all linked to the accident survivor, Kyle's mysterious fiancée. Even more, the discovery that Kyle possessed his own life-shattering secrets has trapped Ebony between her career and her lifelong friendship with Jessie. Yet neither Ebony nor Jessie will stop until they discover the truth about the drowning, even if it destroys their friendship and their lives.

But the evidence is as murky as the secretive Hudson River. Only the river knows whether Kyle's tragic death was an accident, a suicide, or something more sinister.

"Impressive... An involving whodunit with strong characters who must find a way to work together." -*Kirkus Reviews (*Editor's Selection)

"Three strong women follow their own inexorable paths to justice in *The Empty Kayak*, and it's a pleasure to cheer them on. *The Empty Kayak* is not only a compelling and believable mystery, but a sharply drawn portrait of women's friendships." -**Joseph Finder**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *House on Fire*

"Poignant in places, nail-biting in others, the tension and turmoil add up to some fine high-stakes suspense." **-Steve Berry**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Kingdom*

"In Jodé Millman's propulsive thriller *The Empty Kayak*, a drowning investigation leads to legal wrangling. The prose is emotive and sensory... and in effect, the book doubles as a study of how women assume power, while also showing how such roles affect their lives and relationships." *-Foreword Reviews*

"Twisty personal relationships build to a satisfying, stunner finale in *The Empty Kayak*." -Lisa Black, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Locard Institute series Paperback: 9781685122874 / \$16.95 eBook: 9781685122881 / \$5.99 Pub Date: May 30, 2023 Publisher: Level Best Books, https://www.levelbestbooks.us/ Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/Empty-Kayak-Queen-Crimes-Mystery/dp/1685122876/

JODÉ MILLMAN is the multi-award-winning author of the Queen City Crimes series. Her debut mystery, *The Midnight Call*, won the Independent Press, American Fiction, and Independent Publisher Bronze IPPY Awards for Legal Thriller. Her sophomore mystery, *Hooker Avenue*, won the Independent Press Award for Crime Fiction, was a Finalist in the Romance Writers of America Daphne DuMaurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense, and the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award. She's an attorney, a book reviewer, the host/producer of The Backstage with the Bardavon podcast, and the creator of The Writer's Law School. Jodé lives with her family in the Hudson Valley, where she is at work on her next novel inspired by true crimes in the region she calls home. https://www.jodemillman.com

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Ebony Jones felt as though she was toting around a thousand-pound weight, which grew heavier and more torturous with each step. Her cargo, a petite one-year-old, nestled her dark curly head against Ebony's shoulder and wriggled on Ebony's bum left hip, the one with the .38 caliber bullet fragments lodged in it. Even the slightest pressure from the child's body sent relentless jolts of electricity sizzling down her leg. Between the squirmy kid and the merciless pain, Ebony's trek up the sidewalk was a living hell. And the situation was about to get worse. Much, much worse.

The toddler's green eyes locked onto Ebony's, so trusting and innocent that they tugged at her jaded cop's heartstrings. Lily Martin's face was muddy, her fuzzy pink hoodie was soaked from the sudden rainstorm, and she was missing one sneaker. But it wasn't Lily's bedraggled condition that made their journey up the front walk so unbearable; it was the heartbreak that would follow after Ebony rang the doorbell. And Lily's mother answered.

The Tudor-style City of Poughkeepsie home belonged to Jessie Martin, Lily's mom and Ebony's on-again, off-again best friend. Since kindergarten, over twenty-five years ago, the two women had been BFFs, but once they pursued conflicting careers in the law, Ebony as a cop and Jessie as a criminal defense attorney, their relationship had deteriorated. Around every corner, clients, cases, and the legal system had thrust obstacles in their path, testing their friendship. Sometimes, Ebony wanted to pack it in and move on, but deep in her heart, she yearned to reconcile with Jessie. The present catastrophe wasn't going to help that cause.

On her trip to Jessie's, Ebony had stewed over the appropriate way to tell Jessie that her ex, Lily's father, Kyle, was missing. There would be so many questions—*how, when, where, why*. How could Ebony explain the outcome of Kyle's disappearance when she didn't know for sure whether he'd survived the freak accident?

Ebony limped up Jessie's bluestone path, laden with a cauldron of emotions. Sorrow. Guilt. Anger. Disbelief. Fear. And reluctance, to name a few. She still couldn't swallow the reality. Kyle Emory was missing, and, if she was honest, presumed dead.

Midway down the walk, Ebony glanced over her shoulder at Zander, who had remained curbside with their unmarked black Explorer. He was tall and slender, and leaned against the hood of the car. Zander's brows were drawn together, and he watched her with hawk-like precision. As partners, they were supposed to deliver death notifications in pairs, but he'd made no move to join her on the threshold.

Chicken, she thought. Or was he being uncharacteristically empathetic, given her close relationship to Jessie?

Delivering the news of a loved one's death—or possible death—was the most onerous part of her job, and fortunately, she'd never discharged this duty before. Why did the first time have to be Jessie? This was going to be a day, a moment, that would be branded into Jessie's heart and mind forever.

The need to perform the death notification properly, professionally, prompted Ebony to ask herself how she'd prefer this horrific news disclosed to her.

It wasn't as if she was notifying a stranger. She knew Jessie as intimately as she knew her own kid sister, Carly. And similar to her arguments with Carly, she and Jessie had always forgiven each other eventually. Ebony only hoped being the messenger of a suspected death didn't permanently sever their already fragile bond.

But Jessie was a lawyer; a smart, strong, and fierce criminal defense attorney. She'd understand. She'd want honesty. No bullshit.

Straight but gentle, Ebony reminded herself as she scaled the porch stairs, clasping Lily to her side. Upon reaching the landing, she exhaled a deep breath, pressed the doorbell, and waited.

An eternity passed before Jessie answered the door. Jessie's eyes flitted from Ebony to Lily. Jessie's broad smile vanished as a ripple of worry lines surfaced on her forehead, and her ears flushed pink. Hal Samuels, Jessie's fiancé, stood behind her, looking equally surprised. They were dressed for early autumn hiking with scuffed tan boots, plaid flannel shirts, and faded jeans. They radiated happiness. Every time Ebony saw Hal and Jessie together, she was reminded that a homicide investigation had reunited them and that new beginnings could grow from despair.

"Eb, what are you doing here? How did you get Lily? Is she okay?" Jessie craned her neck to peek past Ebony's shoulder toward the street. "What's going on? Where's Kyle?"

Ebony cleared her throat. "Jessie, we have a situation."

Hal dipped his head in recognition. The former District Attorney, and now Dutchess County Court Judge, seemed to acknowledge her gravitas and cupped his hands on Jessie's shoulders as if propping her up in anticipation of an imminent disaster.

Jessie's mossy green eyes burned into hers, and she snatched Lily away from Ebony as though protecting her child from a mistress of evil.

"What do you mean? A situation? Tell me what happened to Lily. Is she hurt?" Jessie peeled off Lily's wet hoodie, socks, and muddy sneaker, and ran her trembling hands over her daughter's plump body, checking for bumps, bruises, and cuts. Finding none, she continued, "Has Kyle been in a car accident? Where is he? Is he okay?" As expected, the questions tumbled out, heavy with worry.

Despite the pain in her leg, there had been something comforting about having the baby's legs locked around her waist and the soft body cuddled against her. The warmth. The maternal stirrings. The irresistible scent of baby shampoo. The sudden emptiness in Ebony's arms only exacerbated the burden of her visit and reminded her that the worst was yet to come.

Ebony's entire vocabulary lodged in the back of her throat like a fish bone. Her mind analyzed the techniques for being sensitive, caring, and supportive, as protocol and friendship required. She stood frozen in time and space, cognizant that the truth would make the tragedy real for both of them.

"Ebony, please come in," Hal said, guiding Jessie across the foyer. "Take a seat in the living room." She followed them into the living room, where vibrant flowered sheets blanketed the sofa and chairs, protecting them from tiny, sticky hands. Ebony recalled that almost four months ago, she and Zander had barged into this room, attempting to pressure Jessie's client into testifying in what had proven to be a landmark serial killer case. But Jessie had obstructed them, her customary modus operandi when dealing with the police.

The same floral sheets billowed as Ebony occupied an armchair that faced Jessie, who had Lily nestled in her lap upon the couch. Hal settled in beside them and leaned forward with his hands clasped and his elbows resting on his knees.

Ebony coughed at the dust motes floating in the air and cleared her throat. *Straight but gentle.* "Jessie, I have some bad news." She sucked in a long breath and exhaled slowly to prepare herself. "We believe Kyle may have drowned in a kayaking accident this morning on the Hudson River. We haven't found him, but we're out looking for him. I'm so sorry."

Jessie's eyebrows shot up as she absorbed the words. *What?* Her dilated pupils seemed to demand.

"Jessie, did you hear me? Kyle disappeared this morning."

"What do you mean, you believe he's missing? Don't you know if he's dead or alive?" Jessie's face flushed, and her grip on Lily tightened. "Kyle had Lily with him. How could he have been kayaking? Who was watching Lily?" Jessie's voice increased in pitch until it was a squeak.

Hal slid close to Jessie and slipped his arm around her shoulders, shoring her up against the blow. "Let's take it step by step, Jess. You must be in shock. Ebony, can you please start at the beginning? I'm sure that will answer some of our questions."

"Before I get into the details, do you want me to call your mom and dad? They can help with Lily while I fill you in. I can send Zander over to retrieve them."

Jessie balked at the suggestion and clutched the fidgety baby tightly to her breast. Hal tilted his head backward and jutted his chin toward the door, signaling his consent.

Taking the hint, Ebony shot off a text to Zander. *Please pick up Ed and Lena Martin and bring them here*. She gave him their address, and he texted back. *10-4*. *On the way.*

Although she owed Jessie an explanation, she wanted to delay getting into the details until Ed and Lena arrived to take care of Lily. The poor tot had been through enough at the scene.

"When did you last see Kyle?" Ebony asked.

"This morning. He came by around nine to pick up Lily. It was his Saturday with her."

"Did he mention where he was headed?"

"No. I didn't ask. We're supposed to sign the custody papers this week, and since we were getting along, I figured I'd cut him some slack." Jessie paused. "I'm working on my trust issues with him."

"So, he didn't tell you he was going kayaking at Kaal Rock?"

"No. He was there by himself? He had Lily with him?" A sense of disbelief colored her voice.

"Did he indicate he was meeting... friends?" Ebony asked. She needed to proceed step-by-step. *Straight but gentle.*

"No, what friends?"

"Does the name Olivia Vargas mean anything to you?" Ebony kept her tone calm, although her stomach clenched into a knot.

"Ebony, you're scaring me. Who is this person, and what is happening?"

"Apparently, Kyle was engaged to Olivia. They became engaged three weeks ago on Labor Day. They were supposed to be getting married on Valentine's Day next year."

"What the hell? You're telling me Kyle's missing, and he was engaged?" Jessie shouted. Lily startled and bawled as though she understood the significance of Ebony's announcement. Jessie rose and paced across the living room carpet, shushing her daughter and planting kisses on her curly head. "It's okay, Lilybean. Hush, hush."

Hal narrowed his eyes and made a time-out sign. "You're asking a lot of questions and not revealing any facts about what happened to Emory." He paused. "Stop beating around the bush and start at the beginning like I asked." Hal's demeanor had pivoted from being a supportive partner into a cool and controlled prosecutor ready to cross-examine an adverse witness. "What does this Vargas woman have to do with the kayak? And Kyle's disappearance?"

"I'll explain after the Martins arrive," Ebony said.

As they waited, an uncomfortable silence filled the room.

Ebony shifted in her chair as the hinge of the front door squeaked, followed by the shuffling of feet. Jessie's parents, Lena and Ed Martin, accompanied Zander into the living room, and Jessie's anxious expression greeted them. Then, in one swift movement, Hal gently pried Lily from Jessie's embrace and deposited the toddler into her grandmother's waiting arms. Ed opened his mouth to speak, but Hal interrupted him by whispering into his ear. Ed sighed and disappeared with Lena and their granddaughter in tow.

With the arrival of Jessie's parents, Ebony could quit procrastinating and get down to business. Zander perched on the arm of Ebony's chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Okay. Here's what we know," Ebony said.

"Tightly woven and utterly compelling." --William Kent Krueger, New York Times best-selling author

CARL VONDERAU





A NOVEL



SAVING MYLES BY CARL VONDERAU

When the FBI can't help, an unassuming banker takes matters into his own hands to bring his son home.

Wade, a respected banker in La Jolla, CA, and his estranged wife, Fiona, make the unbearable decision to send their teenage son, Myles, away to an expensive treatment center after a streak of harmful behavior. After a year of treatment, Myles comes home, seemingly rehabilitated. But soon, he sneaks off to Tijuana to buy drugs—and is kidnapped.

When the ransom call comes, Fiona is frantic and accepts help from Andre, the Quebecois whose charity Fiona runs. Wade is wary of Andre's reputation and the bank he owns, but seeing no other way to secure a kidnap negotiator or the ransom, he swallows his doubts to get his son home.

In order to get the ransom money, Wade makes a deal with Andre—he'll work for Andre's bank in exchange for the cash. But as Wade races to rescue Myles before his kidnappers lose their patience, he realizes he's wrapped up in more crime than just a kidnapping—he's now indebted to a cartel.

Perfect for fans of Harlan Coben and Lisa Scottoline.

"A truly unforgettable, thrilling experience. You don't want to miss it!" -The Big Thrill Magazine (International Thriller Writers)

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CARL VONDERAU grew up in Cleveland in a religious family that believed God could heal all illness. Maybe that's why he went to college in California. After majoring in economics and dabbling in classical guitar, he ended up with a career in banking. Carl has lived and worked internationally and has managed to put his foot in his mouth in several languages. He brought his banking expertise to his debut thriller, *Murderabilia*, which won a Lefty, as well as to his just-published novel, *Saving Myles*. Carl is president of the San Diego chapter of Sisters in Crime and also helps nonprofits through San Diego Venture Capital. <u>https://carlvonderau.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Wade

May 2018

Wade Bosworth turned on the front lights of his house for the men who would take away his son. He'd never met them, but on the internet, they appeared in their twenties. The men were driving down from LA and had texted that they'd be on time.

He made his way to the dark kitchen and sat down. Through the screen of the window, he heard the chirr of crickets, then the neighbor's tree rustling and settling back into the dark. He breathed in the quiet enormity of what he was doing. It was four a.m. His son didn't know what was about to happen. In less than an hour his life would be ripped in two. Myles was sixteen years old.

Wade put the water on the stove to boil and crept up the groaning stairs to the bedroom. He and Fiona dressed in the dark, then padded down the hallway to listen outside Myles' room. No growls and screeching of heavy metal music. No tapping computer keys. Wade eased open the door. The lava lamp Myles had begged them to buy oozed red bubbles that cast a blush over their son in his bed. Asleep, his face looked like a child's. It was hard to square that face to the rants in magic marker on the window shades. "Fuck families."

"I'm an alien trapped in La Jolla."

"Does a zombie know he's a zombie?" Wade breathed in the musky odor of marijuana. He needed to center that smell in his thoughts. It was evidence that they were doing the right thing.

Fiona's slippers swished ahead of him through the hallway. They creaked down the stairs to the kitchen and the beat-up oak table they'd bought a month before Myles was born. Tonight, Wade had to block off those memories. For Myles' sake.

He poured the boiling water and set the French press on the table. Wade had ground the coffee the night before so the shriek wouldn't wake his son this morning. Fiona sat opposite, her long back hunched. She was two inches taller than him but tonight seemed smaller. Splotches shadowed her angular cheeks and lines had deepened around her eyes. Needles of grey had snuck into her brown hair. In only a few months, ten years of aging had telescoped into her body. He was doing this for her too.

"We're saving Myles' life," Wade said, his voice low. When had they started whispering in their own house?

Fiona shook her head. "We let him come to this."

"We did everything we could."

"Did we?"

"Please, Fiona. We can punish ourselves later."

"Don't tell me what to feel."

He blunted his anger. He had to wear his banker's calm now. Wade poured coffee into the two mugs. He watched Fiona interlace and unravel her long fingers. Those hands used to fly up in excitement and joy. Not for months. Or was it years? He laid his palm on her arm, his fingers touching the yin and yang tattoo on her wrist.

"All the experts told us this is the right intervention," Wade said. She pulled her arm away. "But Utah is so far."

They'd been through this so many times. But Wade would do it again if that was what she needed. "San Diego is too full of triggers."

Triggers. The psychiatrist, the psychologists, and the teachers had endlessly repeated and defined that word for them. Triggers were so many things—friends, Myles' room, the school, San Diego. And especially his parents. That was what the director of the treatment center had said.

She extended her arms toward him over their table. "His high-chair used to be right next to where you're sitting," she said.

He refused to look, refused to weaken when they all depended on him to stay strong. "Let me go over it again. Skipping school, plummeting grades, sneaking out at night, continuous pot smoking."

She was silent. He knew she was waiting for him to drop the last, incontrovertible reason, and he didn't restrain himself. Not tonight when their son's life was in the balance.

"OxyContin," he said.

She stared out the back window into the dark backyard. On the wall, his father's clock counted out seconds like a warden's pocket watch ticking down to an execution. It was four-twenty a.m. The men would arrive in minutes.

Wade had been flummoxed about how to get Myles to Hidden Road Academy. The treatment center was in the middle of Utah, and Myles would never go willingly. But the center had a solution for moving recalcitrant children to their facilities. Teen Rescue was based in Georgia, but they could go anywhere. The chirpy woman on the phone had assured Wade that they'd transported teens to safety hundreds of times. Their people made the trip to Hidden Road almost every month and no child had ever been hurt.

There was a knock at the door. Across from him, Fiona sucked in a breath.

Wade went to the front and opened the door. The whole block was asleep but for the two young men standing in the lights of their house. Ricardo and Sam looked like college students or trainees at his bank. Hair neatly combed, unwrinkled slacks, and long-sleeved Oxford shirts. Sam, the taller and thinner one, had a small beard. Ricardo was big-shouldered and cleanly shaven.

Fiona's shoulders seemed to loosen when she saw them. Perhaps these young men, just a few years older than Myles, could assuage her doubts. The four of them sat at the kitchen table and Wade poured coffee.

"We're going to do this with respect," Sam, the one with the beard, said.

Ricardo nodded at his partner and then at each of them. "No blaming," he said.

"We do this with dignity," Sam said.

Wade looked at Fiona. She stared at the two men as if they were selling insurance. Wade asked the question before she could. "Suppose he doesn't cooperate?"

Sam gave Fiona a sympathetic smile. "I've only had to use restraints once," he said.

"Restraints?" Fiona said. "Did you just say restraints?"

Wade steeled his palm against the chair. Why the hell did he have to say "restraints"?

"We won't have to do that here," Sam said.

Ricardo set his arms on the table. Wade noted how they were thick and muscular, like he'd been lifting weights. "That's why this happens at four thirty in the morning," Ricardo said. "Your son will be disoriented, his defenses down. We talk to him like men so he can retain his pride."

"Jesus," Fiona said.

Sam met her gaze. He must have dealt before with hesitant mothers like Fiona. "You set it up with the reason why. Very short. We don't want any arguments. I'd suggest that Mr. Bosworth do that. Just tell Myles that, because of the choices he's made, you're sending him to a place where he can get help. He'll be shocked—"

"Shocked?" Fiona said. "He'll be scared to death."

"No no," Sam said, raising his palms. "We're not like that. You leave and we talk to him. All calm. We lay out everything we're going to do and tell him it will happen whether he wants it or not. But he chooses whether he keeps his dignity."

"They always choose dignity," Ricardo said.

Wade didn't like how they kept repeating "dignity."

"I guess you don't tell him you're taking him to a lockup," Fiona said.

He couldn't stop the words from busting out. "Damnit, Fiona, you know it's not a lockup."

"It's in a fucking desert. It's in Utah. How the hell is that not a lockup?" Her fingers had curled into claws.

Sam studied Fiona and scratched the part of his beard over his chin. "A lot of mothers feel exactly the same way you do. But these kids never volunteer to go to a treatment center. It takes people like us to persuade them."

Sam was all soothing comfort—his voice, his eyes, the way he gently moved his hands. But Wade suspected that would make Fiona trust him less.

Sam pointed to stocky Ricardo. "We've each done this more than fifty times. The kids are always better when you get them somewhere safe. And Hidden Road is one of the best."

Fiona locked her arms in front of her. Wade knew that sign and braced himself. *Jesus, not now.*

"None of you has any idea what it's like to be a mother," Fiona said. She was sabotaging it. He wanted to start shouting.

"We've seen kids just like Myles," Sam said. "We understand what they're going through."

Fiona's eyes glistened. She swallowed and her head dropped. She was relenting and Wade released a breath. The only sound was his father's clock striking the seconds.

"I know we have to do this," Fiona said.

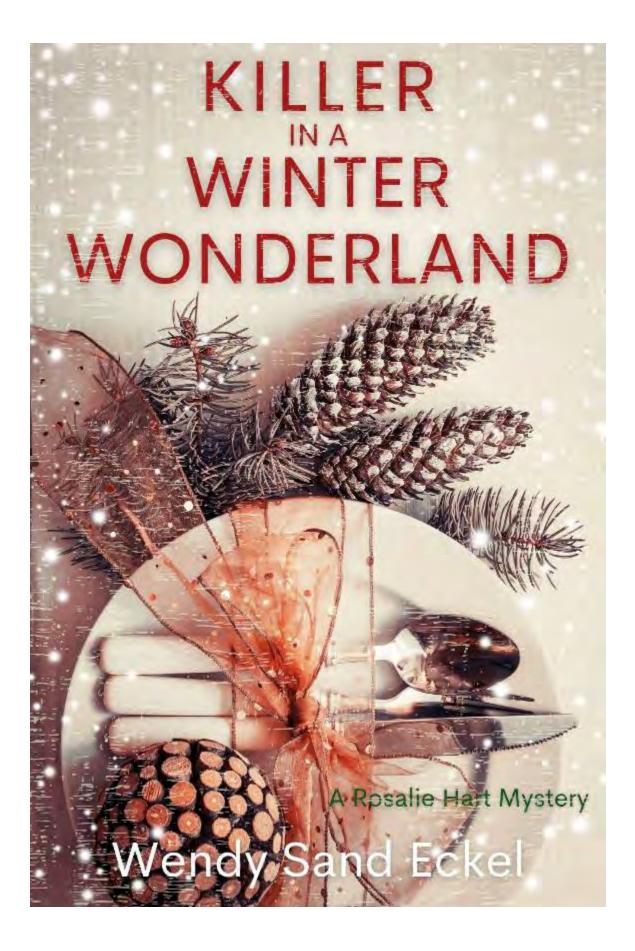
"You're a good mother," Wade said. "That's why you're rescuing him."

"But he'll never forgive us. Don't you see that?"

Sam slid his hand closer to her on the table. "Later, he'll thank you." Her shoulders shuddered and she cradled her face.

Wade thought of something to make it easier for her. "You can stay here in the kitchen. Sam, Ricardo, and I can go to his room and get him."

Her hands dropped. She took a big breath. "I'm his mother. Of course, I have to be there." Wade looked at his watch. It was late. They had to stop talking and do this. Fiona stood. "Let's get it over with."



KILLER IN A WINTER WONDERLAND (A ROSALIE HART MYSTERY) BY WENDY SAND ECKEL

In "Killer in a Winter Wonderland," the much-anticipated holiday-themed fourth book in the Rosalie Hart Cozy Mystery Series, Eckel once again brings the fictional town of Cardigan, Maryland to life and delights with suspense, humor, and mouth-watering menus.

Holidays are fickle things — often good, but sometimes not so good. It's December in the quirky town of Cardigan, and Rosalie Hart has been thrown several curve balls. For one, her ex-husband has booked a semester break vacation to Dubai with their only daughter, Annie, leaving Rosalie alone for Christmas. And following a renovation, Rosalie's restaurant, the Day Lily Café, is open for business with an expanded dining room and a chef with an inflated ego. To make matters worse, when her head waiter and best friend Glenn Breckinridge is concerned about a neighbor who hadn't returned home, they learn he had been murdered while riding his bike on River Road.

In the midst of the holiday hustle and bustle, Rosalie and Glenn pair up once again to uncover who killed Bill Rutherford on that raw wintry night.

With delectable menus, high stakes sleuthing, and the rich atmospheric scenes only the holiday season can provide, "Killer in a Winter Wonderland" is a cornucopia of delicious fare, compelling new and returning characters, and a fast-paced tale that will keep one riveted to the last page.

"In *Killer in a Winter Wonderland*, the 4th Rosalie Hart mystery, Eckel delivers a coolly crafted plot, compelling characters, satisfying suspense, and fabulous food." -*Susan Moger*, Award-winning author of "Of Better Blood"

Paperback: 9781685125363 / \$16.95 eBook: 9781685125370 / \$5.99 Pub Date: November 14, 2023 Publisher: Level Best Books, https://www.levelbestbooks.us/ Buy Links: www.wendysandeckelauthor.com https://bookshop.org/contributors/wendy-sand-eckel

WENDY SAND ECKEL is the award-winning author of the Rosalie Hart Mystery Series. Her mystery series has been awarded 'Best Cozy' by *Suspense Magazine*, and *Mystery at Windswept Farm*, the third book in the series, made the humorous novel bestseller list on Amazon. A trained life coach, Wendy writes the advice column for the Maryland Writers' Association newsletter and enjoys mentoring aspiring authors. Wendy studied criminology in undergrad and earned a Master's in Social Work. Before becoming a writer, she worked as a psychotherapist, helping families and adolescents. She lives in a small town on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, a unique and quirky part of the country, which is also the setting for her series. In addition to her husband, she lives with two male orange tabbies, Frodo and Sam, who her daughter rescued from a soybean field. https://www.wendysandeckelauthor.com

CHAPTER ONE

Holidays are fickle things, Christmas most of all.

Christmas can fill us with joy and anticipation of the wonders that are about to unfold. It can tease us with the faintest pang of hope that peace will blanket the earth at last. Twinkling lights pierce the shortest, darkest days of the year and our senses are indulged with nutmeg and mulling spices, peppermint bark and iced cookies. And who can't feel optimistic in front of a crackling fire?

But Christmas can be tricky. Through all the grandeur, the traditions, the celebrations, the choirs resounding through the rafters, memories of Christmas past nudge the grief we manage to store away during the rest of the year — memories that become bolder, achier, and a little harder to bear.

For me, Rosalie Hart, Thanksgiving was recent history. A glass container of mashed potatoes, which I would most likely reconstitute into fried potato cakes for lunch, was all that remained. The tablecloth had been dropped at the cleaners and the pumpkins fed to the chickens and goats. My Annie had returned to Duke to take her final exams.

All of which meant that my Christmas season was upon me. And I already knew this one was going to be a challenge in many ways.

On Monday morning, I sat at my kitchen table at my home in Cardigan, a small, historic town on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, chin in hand, slowly spinning my phone with the tip of my finger.

The click of Dickens' nails on the wood floors announced Tyler Wells would not be far behind. Despite his age, Dickens hadn't lost his Labrador sense that every day was a new adventure with endless possibilities, at least for a minute or two. I gave his ears a good scratch and he slumped onto his bed.

Tyler, the man who leased my farmlands, and the man I was very much in love with, stood in the doorway.

"Morning," he said, as the scent of fresh cool air breezed into the room. His crooked smile stirred up a series of flips through my stomach. He stopped and took me in. "You okay?"

"First of all, good morning to you." I stood and wrapped my arms around his neck. It was an effort as I was at least a head shorter, but it was my favorite place to be, my cheek on his chest, the scent of sandalwood soap, my fingers threading through his sandy-blond hair.

He stepped back. "Let me guess. This melancholy I'm detecting has to do with Annie's departure."

"You got it." I tucked my unruly dark hair behind an ear. "And I just learned Annie is going to Dubai with her father for Christmas. No, correction—for her entire winter break."

Tyler's lips curled into a wry smile. "*Dubai*? Could he come up with a more un-Christmas like destination?"

"I hadn't thought about that, but yes, a legitimate question. It's puzzling to say the least."

"Command performance?"

I shrugged. "She seemed to be a little excited but who can tell with a text."

"This guy knows no bounds. Did he even run this by you?"

"Radio silence."

Tyler headed over to Mr. Miele. "You going to be okay with this new development?"

I followed him to the coffee maker. "You mean having a Christmas without Annie? It's unimaginable. Even if we aren't together Christmas Day, I at least expect to fill her stocking."

He stirred several spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and faced me. "Isn't Oliver supposed to come down from New York?"

"My brother said that a couple of months ago. I sure hope he does but we are a family — Oliver,

Annie, and me. It only works if all three of us are here."

"I'm submitting a request to be adopted into this family."

"Adoption accepted." I laughed. "You know I want to be with you every minute I can."

"Well, I'm sorry, Rosalie. Ed should have worked you into Annie's Christmas."

"It's all going to be very strange. I mean, why buy presents for under the tree if there's no one to open them? And for that matter, why put up a tree at all?"

He draped his arm around my shoulder. "Should be an interesting holiday."

"Um, Tyler? I've been thinking."

"Uh oh."

"Maybe we should tell Bini about our relationship. You know that we're a thing. I don't like having to hide it. It doesn't feel right. Or necessary."

Bini Katz, a long time family friend of Tyler's, was our only farm employee and Tyler and I had kept our relationship a secret so that things wouldn't be, as he put it, 'weird.'

"You mean tell her we are in love?"

"Yes, that."

He shrugged. "Okay."

"She won't be upset, will she? Has she ever hinted she was in love with you?"

"Bini? Good lord, no. Our families have been on the shore so long there's a good possibility we are related. Not to mention I'm twelve years older than her."

"You two work so well together."

"Yes, we do. I don't know what I would do without her."

"Okay, so—"

Bini, whose timing was reliably uncanny, shut the front door with a thud. Tyler's arm dropped from my shoulder as she entered the kitchen in a thick thermal hoodie and Wrangler jeans. Pushing her hood from her head, she started for the Miele but stopped and looked at us. "What's wrong with you guys?"

"Bini," I said, twisting my fingers together. "Tyler and I want you to know that, well, we, um, we are in love." I gave my head a sharp nod. "With one another. We're in a relationship."

"Hah," Bini said. "Are you serious?"

I glanced at Tyler. He was frowning, most likely thinking my idea was a big mistake.

She filled a stainless steel mug with coffee. I rolled my lips in, waiting for her to speak.

"Do you think this is breaking news?"

"I'm sorry?" I said. "You knew?"

"Like from the first time I met you. We were sitting on the front stoop drinking beer, remember? You guys were so smitten I wasn't sure if I was gonna take the job." She snapped on the lid. "And that's the last I want to hear about any of this. Got it?" The arc of her eyebrows made it clear her question was rhetorical. "Now I am going to feed the goats something other than pumpkins."

The door slammed.

I stole a glance at Tyler. There was that crooked smile again. I covered my mouth and tried to stifle a laugh. Tyler's guffaw made it impossible not to let out my own and by the time we stopped laughing, tears streamed from my eyes and my stomach felt as if I'd just done fifty crunches.

After I was dressed and showered, my mother's pearls around my neck, I said good bye to Dickens, who didn't seem to notice, and headed for my car. The chickens clucked and flapped, hoping I had breakfast scraps. "Sorry, ladies," I sang, "I only ate a banana."

A cool breeze restyled my hair and a hint of woodsmoke met my nose as I walked. A stubborn brown leaf, finally forced to let go, pirouetted to the ground in front to me.

I was almost to my car when a gunshot pierced my serenity. White-tail deer hunting season was upon us. I hunched my shoulders at another rapid round of "pop—-pop—pop," and picked up the pace.

Although it was just a few miles into town, I always enjoyed the transition from life at Barclay Meadow, my home and farm, to managing my café. I noticed a blue heron waving its heavy wings low over the Cardigan River as I drove. The Eastern Shore of Maryland is a flat and lush stretch of land between the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic. 'The Shore' is a unique, quirky part of the world, and over time I had grown to love living here. In Cardigan, one was never less than a mile from a sprawling farm or a tidal waterway. The weather was clement, the atmosphere friendly, the stores locally owned.

My restaurant, The Day Lily Café, located in an historic building on Main Street, had grown chilly overnight. I turned up the thermostat and dropped my things on the bar. Although our grand opening was a year and a half ago, I still held my breath every time I walked through the door, pinching myself to confirm it was all really mine. The ochre walls, the color of a Tuscan hillside at sunset, glowed in the early morning light.

I started the hot pot to make a cup of tea for Glenn Breckinridge, my best friend and head waiter, who had asked me to meet him here this morning. The text arrived at 6:00 AM and I had no idea why he wanted to get together at the café on our day off.

At seventy-three, Glenn Breckinridge was an intelligent, elegant man. We got to know one another when we both arrived in this close-knit community feeling friendless and a little lost, realizing not long after that between us we shared an enormous amount of curiosity and a passion for getting to the bottom of things. Our inquisitiveness had gotten us into some sticky situations, but in the end, we had teamed up to right a few wrongs.

With the promptness of a bullet train, Glenn pushed through the door separating the kitchen from the restaurant just as the digital clock on the coffee makers glowed 9:00. He draped his coat over the back of a bar chair and kept his plaid Burberry scarf around his neck. Nudging his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose he said, "Thank you for meeting me, dear."

I set the tea with a side of lemon on the marble counter as he sat down.

"Is everything all right?"

He frowned. "I'm not really certain."

I sat next to him. "I'm listening."

"And you're very good at that." He gave me a warm smile and took a sip. "So here's my concern. You see, my neighbor, Bill Rutherford and I have an arrangement. We are both widowers and live alone, so one night over a martini we agreed to turn our outside lights off every morning to signal one another we were alive and well. You never know what can go bump in the night."

"That's actually pretty smart."

"We thought so. You think of these things when you live alone."

"And Bill's light was still on this morning?"

"Yes, and his bike isn't in the rack by the sidewalk. I knocked on his door twice and I've texted him so many times my thumbs hurt. But no response. Not even an emoji."

"Maybe he has a lady friend."

"Oh, believe me, I thought of that. He's quite popular with the women in our community. But it's

not like him to ignore a text."

"Is it time to call Sheriff Wilgus?"

"What do you think?"

I picked up my phone. "What could possibly go wrong?"

The café had warmed and Glenn and I brought out the last of the cinnamon muffins from yesterday's champagne Sunday brunch. The sheriff was on his way and hopefully would have good news about Bill Rutherford.

I licked cinnamon topping from my fingers. "I guess I need to start decorating in here."

"Don't do it on my account," Glenn said as he brushed crumbs from the counter into a napkin.

"You don't like Christmas? Did I know this about you?"

"I've done my best to ignore it since Molly passed."

I studied him. Glenn was one of the most optimistic people I knew. It was unusual to see him so introspective and sullen.

"I get that," I said. "The first Christmas after Ed and I split, I bought a Charlie Brown Christmas tree on the 24th and promptly took what was left of it down on the 26th. I did it for Annie, but I knew Christmas would never be the same for me."

"I pretty much white-knuckle my way through December." He checked his phone. "I believe I'm correct in thinking the Sheriff's office is only a block away. What could possibly be taking him so long?"

"Tell me about Christmas with your Molly, Glenn. What was it like?"

"Oh, Rosalie, I don't know that I can."

I placed my hand over his. "Tell your story. I think it will help."

"Where do I begin? It's hard to capture Molly in words. It wasn't that she was extravagant over the holidays." He stared out the window.

"You're doing great." I sat back in my chair.

His eyes met mine. "The rooms would be filled with the scent of fresh pine. She placed candles in the windows and the house would glow like a warmed heart. On Christmas Eve, we would open our home and encourage everyone we knew to stop in for a holiday toast. Oh, the food she would make. Her whiskey balls were enough to get you tipsy in one bite. Spiced wine simmered on the stove while Teddy, my oldest, played carols on the piano. Teddy is a very good musician." He paused at the memory and I wondered how his sons felt about the current omission of Christmas from Glenn's life.

"Oh, Rosalie, the house was so full of love and hope and joy. We would all gather around as Teddy played and my soul would swell at my good fortune." Glenn stopped. His head fell forward. "I'm not capturing it."

"Oh, but you are." I leaned in. "What was your favorite carol?"

"God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, for certain."

"And what would you give her for Christmas?"

"Molly was beautiful, inside and out, and in no need of adornment, but I bought her jewelry just the same. Her birthstone was sapphire."

"How lovely."

"And all I did was drag in the tree and start the fires. She did everything else. I wonder if I knew how fortunate I was at the time." He crossed his arms. "Did I take it all for granted?"

"It doesn't sound like it. I wish I could have met Molly."

"You two would have been as thick as thieves." He gazed over at me. "You are very much alike. I think that's why I'm so comfortable with you." He smiled. "I never thought about it that way before, but I believe it's true."

"Hart?"

And just like that the mood evaporated in a 'poof' with the arrival of Sheriff Wilgus. "In here," I called.

Joe Wilgus pushed through the doors from the kitchen and sauntered into the restaurant. "Thanks for coming, Joe," I said and waited for his reaction. Although we'd known each other for

three years, it was only a few months ago that he finally allowed me to call him by his first name. He frowned but said nothing.

"Yes, thank you, Sheriff Wilgus," Glenn said. "Have you heard anything about Bill Rutherford?"

The sheriff glanced over at the array of professional grade Miele coffee machines and I hopped up to make him a cup.

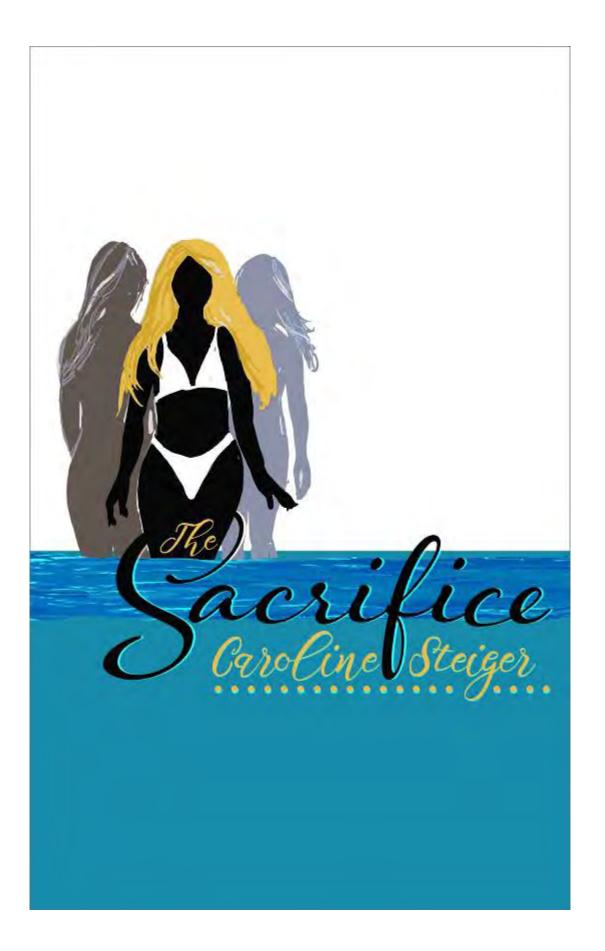
"Unfortunately I have bad news, Mr. Breckinridge."

"I knew it," Glenn said. "I just knew it. What's happened?"

He tucked his thumbs in his belt. "A river keeper spotted him and his bike along the side of the Cardigan River early this morning."

"He's dead?" Glenn said, his voice cracking.

"I'm afraid so."



THE SACRIFICE BY CAROLINE STEIGER

Spring Break. A rite of passage. A ritual. A must-do until everything turns on its side. A sociopath amid the revelry. The three J's, their ringleader John. Always together and never apart. The witnesses to his crime, or accomplices, as he refers to them. "You did nothing to stop me," says John and his friends forever linked to him. A sacrifice made to keep them from prison and their souls forever fractured. The Sacrifice is a psychological thriller spanning three timelines, three murders and souls forever bound by the carnage of their ill-fated spring break to the exotic Cancun in 1989.

"The Sacrifice takes readers on a chilling journey through three intertwining timelines. With its intricate plot, well-drawn characters, and atmospheric setting, the book is a captivating exploration of guilt, secrets, and the enduring consequences of our actions." *-Amazon Reviewer*

Paperback: 9798987573419 / \$12.95 Hardcover: 9798987573426 / \$20.99 eBook: ASIN BoBXJGG7CT / \$4.99 Pub Date: March 5, 2023 Publisher: Independently Published Buy Link: http://www.amazon.com/author/carolinesteiger

CAROLINE STEIGER was born in New York City and is now living in Florida. Winters are not missed. Summers are her sweet spot and the water her peace. She is married to a man who is the support to her backbone and works alongside the most beautiful dog ever. *The Sacrifice* is her debut novel with more books to come. <u>http://www.clsteiger.com</u>

CHAPTER ONE

John, 1989

We board the plane without saying a word, exchanging glances, pushing our caps down in an attempt to cover our faces, indicating our intent to remain silent very much unlike how we started this trip.

That flight, from New York to Cancun, ran like a quasi-strip show, with women actively flashing their tits for a drink, or maybe just because they outnumbered the staff and because it was their right, "I flash my tits for you, you buy drinks until we get to Cancun", and so it continued, the ones who were told to put their shirts back on chose the next best option of making out with the person seated next to them, very non gender specific in their choices. There may have been more girl-on-girl action, in lieu of not being able to flash their tits. A fucking free for all. The three J's had no complaints. We may have even pulled our pants down to show our support for the female passengers. We partook in the pandemonium, our rationale being, could they really just kick us off the plane, and what, kill us? We

were obnoxious, maybe even more obnoxious now as we head back to New York to resume our lives as if nothing life changing had happened. We may have even seen more action on our flight to Cancun than the destination itself.

We also could have been too inebriated to know which side was up, but without worry or fail, I did bring protection. "Make sure you don't have unprotected sex", was a phrase my parents uttered daily and so I promised them I wouldn't. It's incredible what a promise like that does to appease a mother as I thought, "yes, I promise not to have unprotected sex, however I will do what was not promised, and drink enough alcohol while consuming enough drugs to quell a whale, but as long as I promise to not bring back gifts in the form of sexually transmitted diseases and very premature and unwanted grandmother titles," I was fine. I was also told to "have fun son, just be safe", a statement I find amusing in their very earnest attempt to have me returned to them safely, as though I was fragile and could break if proper precautions were not taken.

We stayed safe and arrived for our flight home on time and without incident. We not only wanted to make our flight, but we waited for it, and not just at the airport. We had anticipated this flight since last night as each of us remained awake, watching the time, willing it to go faster, which kind of made it seem as though time forgot to stop moving so fast. It wanted us to wait. It wouldn't hurry along because we wanted it to.

We needed to get the fuck out of there. We had to get out of there. I was the unofficial designated smart one in the group, making decisions while the other two waited for any and every decision to be made for them. I have always been the measured one, the "good" one, while the other two had become synonymous with reckless. They never played it safe, yet they can't look at me. They won't speak to me. Do I remind them how they have never been the angels their mothers made them out to be? They were there. They could have stopped it, but no one did. We may have laughed harder during it, maybe I laughed the most, until they realized I was not playing a game. Their now very sad, possibly remorseful faces were anything but as I joined them in the pool.

She was not laughing and very quickly became aware of the person approaching her. I couldn't tell you exactly what they were doing, but as I held her head under the water, they never tried to actually save her and so I continued until she conceded. She lost her fight and before long her body would begin to float. I only had to look at them signaling we needed to go as they started to see what others soon would and so we left. There were hundreds of people in one pool, and not one person noticed the guy who had just killed a girl because he could, while his friends watched, horrified or otherwise, they just watched. They may have said stop once, maybe twice, but telling someone to stop and actively trying to make someone stop are two different things. I think they may have enjoyed it which is why they remained mostly silent.

The girl? She entered my orbit when I saw her very actively engaging in the game of "dunking the drunk girl". It was a game I was only too happy to engage in. I know I should say I was too drunk or too fucked up to understand what I was doing, but I was sober, and very much in control of my actions. She had made the choice to play a very dangerous dunking game in a pool filled with intoxicated strangers in a foreign country on spring break. If she ever possessed an ounce of brilliance it was lost to her last night, as we exited the pool, and it wasn't until we reached our rooms that the screaming started. "She's dead, she's dead, someone call 911."

There was a slight temptation on my part to stick my head out the door to remind the spring break revelers that we were no longer in the States, but Mexico, and had anyone thought to research that much needed number before they put a toe in that pool? It's safe to say most people in attendance knew their home numbers in case they needed to call Mommy or Daddy for help. This situation was very much ill-equipped for Mommy or Daddy, with the suspicion now cast on everyone in the pool, as I imagine the hotel will absorb much of the liability for a life lost on their premises. The hotel should have invested in some much-needed lifeguards but instead chose to focus on dosing their guests with alcohol as they aimed bottles brimming with booze straight into their mouths. Were we lucky or fortunate if what tasted like gasoline didn't actually make its way into our mouths? I think the bulk of it filled the pool contributing to the haze every single person in attendance was in.

They asked me once, the friends who had suddenly become responsible and concerned adults. "Why did you do it?" My response was truthful, when nothing about their question was, as they didn't actually want to know why, they just didn't want to get caught. I told them I did it "because I wanted to." I asked them why they didn't stop me. This question could have been the most confounding either has ever been asked. Their very obvious, possibly rehearsed responses were so expected I could have recited them myself as they said "I thought you were playing", "I thought you knew her" and "I thought it was a game." Lastly, "I thought you would stop." Well, "why the fuck didn't you stop me"? Stymied. Confused. This is the best I can describe them when I answered their question.

We are about to land in New York, when one of them asks the questions I THOUGHT they would ask when we were in Cancun. "Will we get caught?" I tell them no. "How did it feel"? This is what I thought my moron friends would ask first. I survey them before I answer this question. Do they have the capacity to understand or will they remain focused on getting caught? I continue to pause because the looks on their faces may be as horrified as the girl in the pool when she realized she and I were not playing a game.

I give them the answer they want, but not before telling them, if we don't want to get caught then we won't. I looked before we left, there were no cameras, no witnesses, well there were witnesses but none who could be described as credible even if a video had existed.

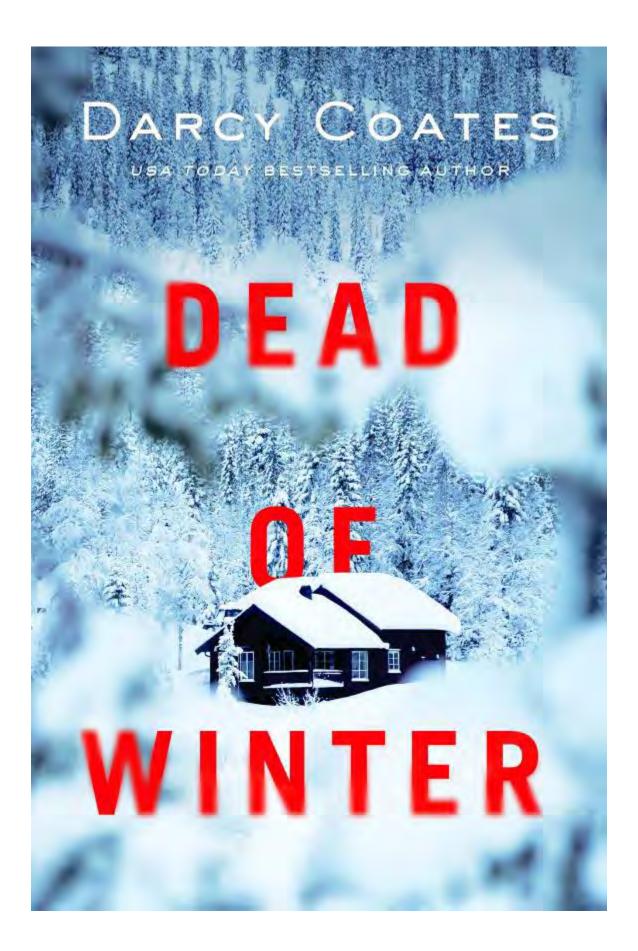
There are no objections, no further questioning, just nods. I think they may still be in shock. I too thought it was shock when we left the pool, but it was fear, not completely certain no one else had seen what I had just done, beside the friends who failed to stop me and for hiding what they knew. I left the window open when the paramedics came and heard them say she most likely drowned. The fear began to dissipate as I began to pack and instructed them to do the same. Did they look at me as I casually packed without a care in the world? Yes. Did they envy me because I had the balls to do what they wanted to do, but couldn't? I won't even try to answer this question.

This is when I told them they were complicit. They watched as I held her head down, making them equally guilty, well not exactly, but I did ask if they understood me. "Yes," they said in unison.

I tell them our silence and the pact we just made in never disclosing this to anyone, is the sacrifice we need to make to ensure our freedom. I also answer their second question on "how did it feel?" with my own question.

"Why don't you try it the next time we go back?" I tell them.

HORROR-THRILLERS



DEAD OF WINTER BY DARCY COATES

USA Today Bestseller *A 2023 LibraryReads Selection*

When Christa joins a tour group heading deep into the snowy expanse of the Rocky Mountains, she's hopeful this will be her chance to put the ghosts of her past to rest. But when a bitterly cold snowstorm sweeps the region, the small group is forced to take shelter in an abandoned hunting cabin. Despite the uncomfortably claustrophobic quarters and rapidly dropping temperature, Christa believes they'll be safe as they wait out the storm.

She couldn't be more wrong.

Deep in the night, their tour guide goes missing...only to be discovered the following morning, his severed head impaled on a tree outside the cabin. Terrified, and completely isolated by the storm, Christa finds herself trapped with eight total strangers. One of them kills for sport...and they're far from finished. As the storm grows more dangerous and the number of survivors dwindles one by one, Christa must decide who she can trust before this frozen mountain becomes her tomb.

"A fast-paced thriller aimed at readers who enjoy a hunt." ~*Kirkus Reviews*

"The execution is fresh, scary, and—especially for readers who are even a little claustrophobic deeply unsettling. Coates' writing is so vivid that we can hear the winds buffeting the cabin, we can feel the bone-chilling cold, and we can smell the fear. Fine work." ~**Booklist**

Paperback: 9781728270258 / \$15.99 Kobo eBook: 1230005937554 / \$4.99 B&N eBook EAN: 2940185847176 / \$4.99 Audiobook: 9798368958873 / \$19.99 Pub date: July 3, 2023 Publisher (paperback): Poisoned Pen Press (Sourcebooks) <u>https://read.sourcebooks.com/</u> Publisher (eBook, audiobook): Black Owl Books, <u>https://blackowlbooks.com/</u> Buy Links: <u>https://darcycoates.com/books/dead-of-winter/</u> https://read.sourcebooks.com/fiction/9781728270258-dead-of-winter-tp.html www.barnesandnoble.com/w/dead-of-winter-darcy-coates/1142384891

DARCY COATES is the USA Today bestselling author of more than a dozen horror and suspense novels. She lives in the Central Coast of Australia with her family, cat, and a collection of chickens. Her home is surrounded by rolling wilderness on all sides, and she wouldn't have it any other way. https://darcycoates.com/

CHAPTER ONE

Snow in my mouth. In my nose. Burning my eyes as winds buffet me about like a scrap of cloth tangled on the mountainside.

Kiernan screams for help. His voice is raw, cracking. He holds my hand with a grip so tight it hurts. I suspect it would hurt more if I weren't so numb.

"Stay with me, Christa," he repeats, and his words are dragged away by gale-force winds. "Don't leave me."

Snowdrifts rise up to my knees. We're struggling, clawing our way across a landscape we can barely see. I don't know where we're going. I don't think Kiernan knows either, and that thought is terrifying.

Nothing around us is familiar. I can no longer see the sun or which way the summit is or whether there was ever a path under the snow we're stumbling through. All I can see is white, interrupted by pockets of black rock jutting out of the empty void. The landscape is inhospitable. Jagged and harsh, inhumane. Not even the wildlife wants to live here.

My black jacket has turned grey under a coating of snow. My heart thunders, each pulse bruising the back of my ribs. I can barely breathe. My scarf keeps sliding down to my chin, exposing my face to the brunt of the snowstorm. My nose burns. I imagine blood vessels bursting and spreading a web of red lines across my skin.

I pull the scarf up again, trying to hold it in place, but then my footing slips on the uneven terrain and I stumble. Kiernan clutches at me. He tries to pull me back up, but we've been fighting the snowstorm for too long and we're both exhausted. Instead, he drops to his knees beside me.

Not much of his face is visible, just a slim line between his neck gaiter and thermal hat, revealing squinted eyes and pale skin. Ice flecks cling to his brows and lashes.

"It's not far," he says. The wind howls around us, deafening, and he bends close so that I can hear his voice. "We only need to go a bit farther."

He's said that before, nearly an hour ago.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. No one had expected the storm. Or how rapidly we would lose the path once visibility dropped.

Kiernan tugs at me, his gloved hands slipping off my jacket as he tries to pull me up. "Come on, Christa." Another pull. "Not far."

I'm so exhausted. My exposed skin is either numb or burning. I scramble to rise, and Kiernan pulls me against himself. "There we go," he says, or I think he says, under the gale. His hand runs down my arm until it finds my hand, then he grips it, and I grip back as fiercely as I can.

We're perhaps a hundred miles from civilisation. My view from the tour bus window showed sparse hiking trails, but no houses. No shelter. Nothing but endless stretches of unforgiving wilderness: craggy, dark rocks and infrequent, anaemic pine trees. The mountain range rose ahead of us and cut across the skyline like a broken knife. We are truly, unbelievably alone.

We're going to die out here, I think, and the fear turns to acid on my tongue.

"Hello!" Kiernan yells into the void. "Hello!"

I'd screamed with him at first, pushing my voice to rise above the howling winds, until it cracked in the cold air and I couldn't even hear myself. Now, it's all I can do to stay on my feet. Stay moving.

The scarf slips again, and it feels like my skin is being scraped off by sandpaper. I turn my head away from the gale and Kiernan notices. He tugs his own scarf off his neck. Out of the two of us, he was the better dressed. The better prepared. He'd grown up in an area not too different from here; he'd known how temperamental it could be.

He reaches the scarf towards me. I shake my head. *You need it.* His hand finds my jacket lapel and pulls me closer as he loops the thick merino wool around me.

"Don't fight me on this," he says.

The scarf doesn't just sit around my neck but covers the lower half of my face, almost blocking my eyes. It smells of damp and Kiernan's breath and sweat. My own hot breath blows around my cheeks with every exhale.

Kiernan bends to put our heads at the same height. He's still wearing his neck gaiter, pulled up to cover his nose, but it looks too lightweight without the scarf. Crystals have formed around the corners of his eyes and I can't tell if it's an effect of the sharp wind or whether he's fighting back tears.

"We need to stay together," he says. "This way."

The landscape is changing around us, growing up vertical, the jutting black shards of rock rising high past our heads. The snowdrifts are deep around them, and every step is a fight. A horrendous sinking sensation forms in the pit of my stomach. This isn't even remotely like the area where the bus was forced to halt. We're moving in the wrong direction. I try to call to Kiernan, to tell him we need to turn back, but my throat is stripped raw and my voice escapes as a reedy whisper, inaudible even to myself.

Uneven walls rise to my left, crusted in ice. An endless expanse of white stretches to my right. Clumps of snow tumble away from my boots and vanish into it. I press back, pushing closer to Kiernan, grabbing at his arm to warn him we're on the edge of a ravine. He sees my gestures.

"It's okay," he calls, and his voice sounds thin and broken under the wind. "We just need to get around this. Stay close to the wall. Don't let go of me."

I've never seen Kiernan terrified before. It feels like an alien emotion for him. Something unnatural, something that doesn't belong.

But still, he's moving forward.

I grasp his hand and try to pull him back. It's too dangerous. We need to retrace our steps. See if we can find out where we turned wrong and which path will lead us back to the tour group.

He calls something to me and leans forward again. I shake my head, but he doesn't see it. His shoulder brushes along the rough stone as he moves close to it, holding himself as far from the ravine as he can.

I can't get him back. Which means I have to follow.

The ground feels uneven, though it's hard to be certain with the snow as thick as it is. I mimic Kiernan's motions and press against the bare stone face, my glove running across the rough surface to guide my movements. The snowstorm is so thick that I can't tell how close the cliff's edge is. I can barely see the snow around my legs, white and blurred under the flakes funnelled in by the wind. At a certain point, I can't see the ground at all any longer. There's no clear edge. No sharp line to warn me how close I am. Just a fade into nothing.

Kiernan is moving fast. I can feel the desperation in the angle of his shoulders and the thought returns to me: *We're going to die here.* I wonder if that idea has occurred to him yet. Whether he's dwelling on it.

Hot air gusts out of my mouth, trapped in the scarf, and brings pins and needles to my damaged skin. I feel as though I am suffocating, but pulling the scarf away won't bring any relief.

I still can't see the edge of the ravine to my right, but the ground under my feet is tilting towards it. I press hard against the rocks to my left. My boots are slippery on the ice. Kiernan is pulling ahead. I try to call to him to slow down, but my voice comes out as a whistle.

The wind races across the bare rocks, trying to pry me away from them. My heart is pumping ferociously, and I've never been so hyperaware that the heart is a muscle because it feels like it's on the verge of snapping.

Kiernan turns to say something. I catch a vowel, but the rest of his words are torn away.

I'm watching his face, not the ground, as I step forward. My foot plunges into the snow and fails to find anything solid beneath.

If I'd been less exhausted—if my reflexes had been sharper, if I'd been more prepared—I might have been able to pull back. Instead, I plunge down, my mouth open in a gasping cry that never quite

materialises. Snow gets into my mouth. My arms stretch out, fingers reaching for any kind of purchase, but they only find fresh snow, crumbling and delicate.

I feel myself sliding away. Towards the edge, towards the void. I claw and kick but it's like grasping at air.

A hand catches mine. Kiernan, his eyes huge and wild, clutches at me.

It's not enough.

Pain arcs up my arm as I slip out of his hold. He grasps for better purchase, taking the glove and a strip of skin off the back of my hand before I fall away.

I don't even have the breath to scream. My face is to the sky, my back to the empty white void beneath me as I plunge, carrying a wave of snow in my wake.

CHAPTER TWO

Crimson bleeds across the white.

My eyes sting. My lungs ache. Spasms of pain rise through my leg and hip, but when I try to twist to relieve it, I find I can barely move. Everywhere I look is white, dotted with red, and I realise that, although I feel the press of ice against me, I'm no longer experiencing the driving force of the winds.

I'm under the snow.

That thought sends a jolt of terror through me. I push, thrashing, before falling still again. It's difficult to breathe, and I can feel the air inside the scarf growing stale.

I've heard that skiers who are caught in avalanches often perished because they don't know which way to dig to get themselves out. Trapped under layers upon layers of freshly churned snow makes it nearly impossible to tell which way was up. The advice is to spit: see which way your saliva drips, then dig away from it.

My mouth is bone dry, and I've barely started to work my tongue around looking for moisture before realising I'm a fool. The spit will just absorb into Kiernan's scarf, which is cinched so hard around my face that I can barely move my lips.

I can see light, though. Not much, but a little, filtering through the snow. I reach one hand towards it. The snow shifts around me, heavy, and then my hand breaks free and feels the bite of icy air.

I begin struggling again, clawing and kicking towards the surface as the snow presses in around my face and tries to suffocate me. I'm already drained. Every extra inch of effort feels like nails being pushed into my muscles, but I fight and fight and eventually get my head free of the snow.

My lungs are on fire as I hang there, my head and the tips of my shoulders out of the snow, and suck deep, gulping gasps of fresh air in through the scarf's layers. The storm is immense. Even when I squint my eyes open, I can't see anything but a hopeless expanse of white.

White and red. My hand reaches out of the snow ahead of me. The skin was torn when Kiernan tried to catch me. Streaks of bright crimson run down its back and disappear into my jacket's sleeve. It's stopped bleeding, though, I think; the blood is already drying as the wind tears across it. I don't feel much. That whole hand has started to go numb, and the fingertips are a frightening white.

I try to twist to see the area around me. If there are any landmarks, the snowstorm hides them. If there are sounds, the howling winds swallow them.

What happened to Kiernan?

Did he fall as well?

Icy air burns my lungs as I breathe deeply and then scream, as loudly as my cracked voice will allow: "Hello!"

I don't think he could hear me even if he was close. My body aches at the thought of moving, but I force myself to begin struggling again, crawling out of the snow an inch at a time. I reach the surface and collapse, my lungs heaving for air like a racehorse pushed too far. I try again, even though I know it won't do any good. "Kiernan!"

The wind funnels into my eyes, making them weep. Twinges of pain continue to rise from my leg and hip. I don't think it's bad—a sprain or a pinched nerve—but it will make walking harder.

The temptation to rest and regain my breath is sinfully attractive. I know I can't afford it. I'm already very close to freezing. If I sit, even for one or two minutes, I doubt I will ever get up again.

And so I roll onto my hands and knees, the numb fingers plunging into the snow, then groan as I finally make it to my feet.

I stagger in slowly widening circles. The snow is over my knees and I have to fight to gain each inch of ground, but I can't overlook the chance that Kiernan came down the cliffside with me. The narrow walkway was treacherous, and my own fall dragged clumps of ice free from it. If he fell, he could still be under the snow, struggling but unable to escape.

The hole that I surfaced from is still visible but quickly being filled in by the driving wind. I circle the area until I'm certain there are no other piles of snow where a person could be trapped.

Jutting rocks mark the base of the slope I fell down. I can't see the top. I try to scramble up the surface, but the slope increases within a few feet and I slide back.

My teeth are chattering. It's growing harder to feel my arms and legs, and my feet threaten to skid out from under me.

I need to get back up there. The brutal cliff face continues to the left and the right. It's impossible to tell how far. I turn left.

Strange sounds come through the roar of the gale. They blur in and out until it's impossible to know whether they are manmade, animal, or the whistle of wind passing through narrow gaps in the rocks. Sometimes, they sound like screams. Lasting longer human's lungs could manage, they shriek and shriek and shriek.

My feet stumble with nearly every step. I look back to judge how far I've come, but the tracks I'm leaving fade into the uncanny white within moments. The cliffs are no longer at my side. I don't know when I staggered away from them, but I did.

Something dark rises up on my other side. Human-shaped but indistinct, I think I can make out the width of a torso. Energy flows back into me and I force my way through the rising snowdrifts to reach it.

The shape resolves into a tree, its lower branches stripped off by the winds, and I want to scream. *I'm going to die out here.*

The thought is circling me like a vulture. Before, it was a fear. Now, it's almost a certainty. I will walk as long as my legs carry me, and it will not be as far as I want them to. Once I collapse, I will have maybe an hour, if I'm lucky, before my body folds under the strain of the cold and drags me into a sleep I won't wake from.

The tree fades behind me as I move away from it. A dark ridge teases at the edge of my vision. Without any other markers to keep my path running straight, I aim for it.

At first I try to tuck my gloveless hand between my other arm and my body to protect it, but every stagger and scramble forces me to pull it free again, and eventually I just stop trying.

The screams rise out the whistling wind again and again, always lasting too long, lingering until they hurt my ears. I don't know how long I've been walking. I can feel my consciousness bleeding in and out, even as I stay upright and continue stumbling forward. I was trying to find Kiernan, but I have no idea which direction he might be in any longer. The landscape rises and collapses in unpredictable patterns. For all I know, I could be going in circles. When possible, I choose a downhill path, though it never lasts as long as my numb legs would like.

A new sound breaks through the howling wind. My mind is so numb that it takes a moment to register. I lift my head. My mouth aches from the dry and my eyes burn. There is nothing to see ahead except the hazy, pale void. I pause, my breathing ragged, as I listen.

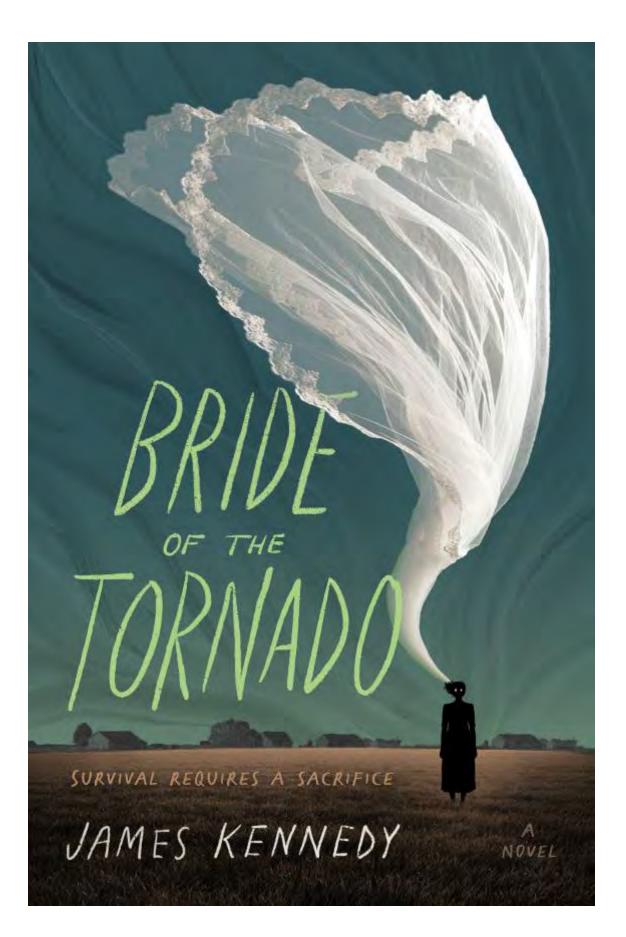
The sound comes again. It's sharper and higher than the wind. Manmade. A whistle.

I don't even have to force my legs to move this time. They stumble forward, carrying me blindly. I could be facing another cliff edge and I wouldn't even know. But the whistles are growing louder, and my mind is empty of anything except the blind desire to reach the source.

Dark shapes flicker in and out at the edges of my vision. Pine trees. More than before. They cluster erratically, bent at uncomfortable angles, their roots clinging to the thin soil as though to spite the environment they've found themselves in.

And then, past them, a darker, broader shape. For a second it looks like another wall of stone rising out of the ground, but then I realise it's too sharp, too straight. A building of some kind.

And inside the building is a light.



BRIDE OF THE TORNADO BY JAMES KENNEDY Author of *The Times* Best Sci-Fi Book of 2021, *DARE TO KNOW*

A young woman's secretive midwestern town is engulfed by a mysterious plague of tornadoes every generation-and she must escape it before it claims her.

Stephen King's *The Mist* meets David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* in this inventive, mind-bending horror-thriller.

In a small town tucked away in the midwestern corn fields, the adults whisper about Tornado Day. Our narrator, a high school sophomore, has never heard this phrase but she soon discovers its terrible meaning: a plague of sentient tornadoes is coming to destroy them.

The only thing that stands between the town and total annihilation is a teen boy known as the tornado killer. Drawn to this enigmatic boy, our narrator senses an unnatural connection between them. But the adults are hiding a secret about the origins of the tornadoes and the true nature of the tornado killer—and our narrator must escape before the primeval power that binds them all comes to claim her.

Audaciously conceived and steeped in existential dread, this genre-defying novel reveals the mythbound madness at the heart of American life.

"A genre-bending horror thriller that grapples with adolescent desire and existential dread in equal measures...gooey, gory, and frightening." **-Booklist**

"A powerfully weird, original tale that combines American folk horror with a surreal coming-of-age nightmare." -*Guardian*

"Kennedy puts an eerie, surrealist twist on the American Midwest, highlighting everything unusual about small-town living. The focus on creating a desolate and strange atmosphere pays off. Horror fans who value ambience over jump scares will want to check this out." -Publishers Weekly

Paperback: 9781683693277 / \$17.99 eBook: 9781683693284 / \$10.99 Audiobook: 9798212028837 Pub Date: August 15, 2023 Publisher: Quirk Books, https://www.quirkbooks.com/ Audiobook Publisher: Blackstone Buy Link: https://www.quirkbooks.com/book/the-bride-of-the-tornado/ JAMES KENNEDY has a degree in physics and philosophy and worked as a computer programmer, subjects he continues to explore in his writing. He is the founder of the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival, an annual contest in which kid filmmakers create short movies about Newbery-winning books, and he is co-host of the Secrets of Story podcast. Kennedy is the author of the critically acclaimed *Dare to Know*. https://jameskennedy.com/

EXCERPT

They called it Tornado Day but none of us knew what it was about. Mom and Dad wouldn't tell us. Neither would our teachers.

I never remembered having a Tornado Day before and neither did Cecilia or any of our friends or anyone at school.

All that week leading up to Tornado Day, Mom and Dad didn't let us eat much. I wasn't even supposed to feed Nikki. Breakfast was, like, one piece of dry toast. Lunch was a hard-boiled egg. Dinner was nothing. Late one night Cecilia and I were so starving we snuck some blueberry Pop-Tarts to eat in her bedroom, but they tasted wrong. I felt guilty somehow and ended up throwing most of mine out.

I fed Nikki anyway.

All that week we weren't allowed to watch TV. We couldn't even listen to the radio. Dad unplugged everything—the VCR, the stereo, the microwave, the alarm clocks, all the way down to the toaster and the coffee maker. He and Mom took the batteries out of the flashlights, the boom box, my Walkman, and even old toys Cecilia and I hadn't touched in years. They unscrewed the light bulbs and put them in a box along with the batteries. The refrigerator was cleared out.

Mom and Dad stopped talking to us. It was the same with everyone else's parents. Someone said it's what you had to do to prepare. Prepare for what?

Nobody would tell us.

A killer was coming to town.

That's what we heard from the other kids. We were all scared. We asked, is the killer coming for us?

The adults wouldn't say.

The day before Tornado Day all the stores closed early. We didn't have to go to school. The house was quiet except for the patter of rain and Nikki meowing in the kitchen.

It wasn't much of a holiday.

Growing up, when there were tornadoes, Mom and Dad and Cecilia and I would all run down to the basement with candles and food grabbed from the kitchen, and when the electricity blacked out we'd light the candles and set them all around the cold gray basement until it flared up like a cathedral. The candles pushed back the darkness and made it dance, colors multiplied, became richer and warmer. We'd hear the tornado raging outside, pounding at the doors and windows, shrieking like it was mad at us personally, but I felt safe, locked down in the concrete basement, cozy and cared for, but just dangerous enough for me to feel a thrill.

I liked the tornadoes because they forced Cecilia and Mom and Dad and me to hang out

together. We played Monopoly and Clue, we listened to our little transistor radio, Dad told funny stories—I wanted more tornadoes, more thunderstorms, because I wanted us to be close like this all the time.

But when the lights flickered back on, when the all-clear siren sounded, Mom and Dad would get up from our game too quickly, "Finally!" they'd say; Cecilia, too, would bolt up the stairs, and then I would be left alone on the basement's concrete floor with the abandoned game, surrounded by old exercise equipment and Halloween costumes and yellowing paperbacks, feeling a little disappointed because it was finally my turn and nobody wanted to play anymore.

It was still dark outside when Mom woke us up. It was a raw April morning, black and wet. Drizzle and fog and low, heavy clouds.

It was four a.m. Way too early. The electricity was back on, but after a week without it the light from the hallway looked jarring on the carpet, it cut too bright and hard through the dark. I stayed under my blankets. I had secretly put new batteries in my Walkman and it was under my pillow and the headphones were still on my ears. I'd fallen asleep with it on again. Nikki was awake but she was just staring at me with her yellow slit eyes. I stroked her and she purred but I already knew it was going to be a bad morning. Rushing my shower while Mom banged on the door. The bathroom stinking of Cecilia's toxic hair spray. Everyone fighting.

A normal day.

Not normal, though. Usually, Dad was already off to work before any of us woke up—I never saw him in the morning, I'd just come into the kitchen and see his bowl of milky cereal dregs in the sink, which always depressed me for some reason. But this morning was wrong, everyone's schedules collided. Dad was clunking around in the kitchen, blinking at us like he was still half asleep. Mom usually slept in, but this morning she was up and ordering us around, looking frazzled in her ratty blue robe and huge curlers.

She'd laid out two dresses for Cecilia and me to wear to school for Tornado Day. I'd never seen these weird dresses before. They were old-fashioned flower-print things with puffy sleeves and lace trim. Like something a pioneer girl would wear in an old movie.

Cecilia slammed her bedroom door. There was no way she'd wear that crappy dress to school, she shouted at Mom. Everyone would make fun of her, she said.

I didn't want to wear mine either. The dresses smelled sour, like they'd been boxed up somewhere for a long time. But I put it on anyway. I cleaned out Nikki's litter box as Mom and Cecilia yelled at each other. I kind of hated myself for it, but whenever Cecilia fought with Mom, something in me wanted to be really good, to balance the family out.

Cecilia won. Mom said go ahead—fine, don't wear the dress! But you'll be sorry! Now I was the only one wearing an ugly, stale- smelling dress but the bus was already pulling past our house, way too early. There wasn't time for breakfast, not even to grab a bite on the way out. Cecilia and I had to run to the corner to catch up with the bus. We got on and its doors hissed shut.

The morning was still as dark as night.

It turned out everyone had dressed up for school that day. All the boys wore awkward suits and all the girls wore old-fashioned dresses. Cecilia stuck out in her normal jeans and her pink sweater. She went to the girls' bathroom and stayed there. Mr. McAllister asked Mrs. Bindley to go in and get her. Some of the popular girls were snickering at Cecilia. I happened to be standing near them when Mrs. Bindley came out of the bathroom, pushing Cecilia along by her elbow.

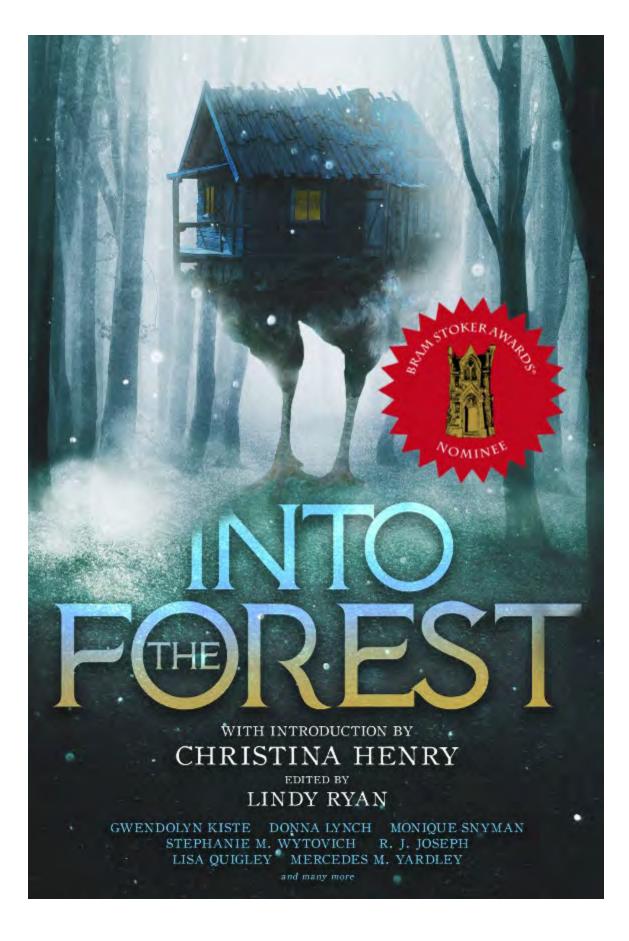
As they walked past us Cecilia said to me, "You just keep on laughing."

We were going to meet the tornado killer.

What tornado killer? None of us knew about any tornado killer. That's how you know he's a good tornado killer, the teachers said— when's the last time you even saw a tornado? We had to admit, not since we were little. But, we said, you always heard about tornadoes in other towns! Exactly, the teachers said. But not here. Would we recognize the tornado killer? They said no, it's against the law for the tornado killer to actually come into town. He does his work outside city limits. But today is a special occasion, they said. Today is Tornado Day.

Some of the younger kids were scared. They begged their teachers, please, please, no, we don't want to meet the tornado killer.

Everyone meets the tornado killer, was the firm reply.



INTO THE FOREST: TALES OF THE BABA YAGA EDITED BY LINDY RYAN

A Women-In-Horror Anthology Excerpt story: Last Tour Into the Hungering Moonlight by Gwendolyn Kiste

Bram Stoker Awards® Nominated Anthology

Deep in the dark forest, in a cottage that spins on birds' legs behind a fence topped with human skulls, lives the Baba Yaga. A guardian of the water of life, she lives with her sisters and takes to the skies in a giant mortar and pestle, creating tempests as she goes. Those who come across the Baba Yaga may find help, or hindrance, or horror. She is wild, she is woman, she is witch—and these are her tales.

Edited by Bram Stoker Awards[®]-nominated and Silver Falchion Award-winning editor Lindy Ryan, this anthology brings together some of today's leading voices of women-in-horror as they pay tribute to the Baba Yaga and go *Into the Forest.*

A collection of new and exclusive short stories with an introduction by Christina Henry. Authors include Gwendolyn Kiste, Yi Yu, Sara Tantlinger, Lindz McLeod, Christina Sng, Donna Lynch, Catherine McCarthy, Jo Kaplan, Lisa Quigley, Monique Snyman, Carina Bissett, Mercedes M. Yardley, Jill Baguchinsky, Stephanie M. Wytovich, Jess Hagemann, Jacqueline West, EV Knight, Octavia Cade, R. J. Joseph, Alexandrea Weis, Heather Miller, and Saba Syed Razvi.

"Perfect for horror fans who can't get enough of folklore and fairy-tale retellings that veer in unexpected directions." -*Booklist* Starred Review

"A lovely, thorned, haunted gathering of tales of what it means to occupy a woman's body. Baba Yaga serves a reminder of the wildness sleeping within all of us. This collection brings her roaring to life." -Kristi DeMeester, author of Such a Pretty Smile

"The stories in *Into the Forest* collect the guts and bones of some of the world's oldest witch tales and refashion them into something new, beautiful, and gruesome." –*Foreword Reviews*

"Edited by Lindy Ryan, a champion of women's voices in horror, this is a sharply imaginative, diverse anthology of dark fantasy and horror stories.... Readers who love to tread the dark and treacherous paths of the human heart will happily lose themselves here." –*Shelf Awareness*

Paperback: 9781645481232 / \$15.95 eBook: 9781645481249 / \$4.99 Pub Date: Nov 8, 2022 Publisher: Black Spot Books Buy Links: https://bookshop.org/p/books/into-the-forest-tales-of-the-baba-yaga-christinahenry/18299840

https://www.amazon.com/Into-Forest-Tales-Baba-Yaga/dp/1645481239 Audiobook Publisher: Blackstone, https://www.blackstonepublishing.com/ Audiobook: 9798212256575 (Libraries) Audiobook Buy Link: https://www.blackstonelibrary.com/into-the-forest-434541?sp=434560 Anthology info: https://www.lindyryanwrites.com/into-the-forest.html

Editor LINDY RYAN is the Bram Stoker Awards®-nominated and Silver Falchion Award-winning editor of INTO THE FOREST: TALES OF THE BABA YAGA. She has been named one of horror's most masterful anthology curators alongside Ellen Datlow and Christopher Golden, is the current authorin-residence at *Rue Morgue*, and was named a PW Star Watch Honoree for her work at Black Spot Books, an independent press focused on amplifying underrepresented voices in horror. Ryan is the author of the forthcoming titles, BLESS YOUR HEART (Minotaur/2024), COLD SNAP (Titan UK/2024), and more, as well as an award-winning short film director for her children's picture book turned animated short, TRICK OR TREAT, ALISTAIR GRAY. A long-time advocate for women-in-horror and an active member of the HWA, ITW, and the Brothers Grimm Society of North America, Ryan is the current co-chair of the HWA Publishers Council. The author of numerous works of fiction and nonfiction, Lindy's work has been adapted for film. <u>https://www.lindyryanwrites.com/</u>

Author of excerpt story: GWENDOLYN KISTE is the three-time Bram Stoker Awards®-winning author of THE RUST MAIDENS, RELUCTANT IMMORTALS, BONESET & FEATHERS, PRETTY MARYS ALL IN A ROW, and THE HAUNTING OF VELKWOOD. Her short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in outlets including *Lit Hub*, *Nightmare*, *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Vastarien*, Tor Nightfire, Titan Books, and *The Dark*. She's a Lambda Literary Award winner, and her fiction has also received the This Is Horror award for Novel of the Year as well as nominations for the Premios Kelvin and Ignotus awards. Originally from Ohio, she now resides on an abandoned horse farm outside of Pittsburgh with her husband, their excitable calico cat, and not nearly enough ghosts. https://www.gwendolynkiste.com/

LAST TOUR INTO THE HUNGERING MOONLIGHT by Gwendolyn Kiste

Greetings, and welcome to our perfect little neighborhood! We're so very happy to have you here. You'll be a lovely addition to our community.

Follow us now, and please come see our beautiful homes. Matching shutters, matching cars, matching families at neatly-set dinner tables. Everything's absolutely flawless, don't you think?

(Pay no attention to the clogged gutters or the cracks in the foundation or the mortgage bills piling up in the kitchen corner. This tour should have a little fantasy, shouldn't it?)

One home after another, we want to show them all to you. Our vaulted ceilings, our vaulted lives. This is our little pocket of paradise, you might say. After all, we have everything we could ever want. Our gleaming white walls as plain and straightforward as each new day in our lives. There's nothing out of the ordinary here, nothing calling to us from just beyond the property line.

Where are you, my girls? And who's the new face among you?

Please keep up now. We've got one last place to show you. At the end of the cul-de-sac, past all the pretty little houses and the pretty little families locked up within, there's a final sight you should see. It's easy to miss if you don't know what you're looking for. And why would you know? You're new here, the same way we were all new once.

Look there among the dense patch of pine trees, and you'll spot it. A dirt path, the kind that could be no more than an access road. And as it turns out, it does access something. Or someone.

We never say her name, but that's because we don't have to. We could recognize her in an instant, even though we've never seen her up close. She's always with us, a whisper on the wind, a shadow passing over our eyes when we're looking away. Something so near it makes the hairs on the backs of our necks stand on end.

(They say her house in the deep, lonely woods is propped up on chicken legs and filled with a thousand bones. Late at night, we sometimes lie awake and wonder if those bones make her home stronger than ours. We also wonder if maybe we should find some bones of our own.)

Tucked there in the gloomy forest, she's our unlikely den mother, the creature of the green, the enchantress you'll never tame. And why would you want to tame her anyhow? She's better wild.

(Everything's better when it's left to run wild.)

It's getting dark now, so we should get a move on. But this isn't the last time you'll come here, is it? You might settle in for a while, unpacking all your porcelain and linens, and pretend you don't care about this secret place. But it will needle you, just like it needles us.

When you go jogging in the evening or take the stroller out at noon, you might want to creep a little closer to the path. Just for a moment, just to get a better look. That's when you'll see how terribly overgrown it is, all clotted with brambles and darkness. It doesn't look very welcoming. It doesn't look like home.

(Yet it feels like home, doesn't it? Somewhere you thought you'd dreamed up, somewhere you'd always longed for.)

So now that you're part of our neighborhood, the important thing to remember is to never take that path. If you're smart, you won't even stand at the mouth of it, the heady scent of pine and promise filling your lungs. You especially won't stare down its winding turns into the eager darkness looming there.

In fact, it's best to pretend the path doesn't exist at all. Please won't you forget we mentioned it to you? That would be safer for you. And for us.

Where are you, my girls? What are you waiting for?

We tell ourselves we're satisfied here. Our hands aching and raw, we scrub the filthy dishes and spritz Windex on all the windows, and pick out a new Whirlpool refrigerator as all the dreams we've surrendered whirlpool down the drain.

Still, not every evening is quite so bad. Sometimes, there's a strange shift within us. That's when we find ourselves restless at midnight, standing in murky hallways, a mortar and pestle gripped tightly in our hands. We didn't even know we owned a mortar and pestle, yet here we are, like the witches of yore, conjuring magic when we don't mean to.

We wander to our front windows and stare up at the dark clouds. Our breath twists in our chests as a shadow passes over the moon, and we know she's so near to us. She can emerge from the forest anytime she wants. Only she rarely does. That's because she wants us to come to her. She'll answer any question we ask, fulfill any wish we desire. Of course, it might come at a price. But then again, what doesn't have a price?

What are you willing to surrender, my darlings? What parts of yourselves are you eager to slough off like thin skin?

Despite ourselves, she sees us for what we are. Obscure power tingling in our fingertips, rage boiling in our bellies. All the things we could have been. All the things denied to us. This fear we share,

these tired bodies the world battles over. *Our* bodies, even though we're told they don't belong to us at all. They belong to men with gavels, men in suits, men without souls. Without decency, either. The kind of men who would mock us like we're silly schoolgirls, men who would hold us down on a bed and guffaw while we thrash and scream and cry.

Men that aren't so different from the ones sitting across from us at the breakfast table each morning. Faces that we used to know. Faces that are no more than strangers to us now.

Come to me, my darlings. Come to me and be free.

But we've got to make the best of things. We've got to keep pretending not to hear her. On warm summer days, we sit together in sunrooms and sip fresh iced tea and smile at each other for hours, the corners of our mouths twitching from the weight of our make-believe mirth. We compliment each other's decorating schemes and act like we honestly give a fuck about things like crown molding and matching dinnerware and how to choose the best duvet.

At last, when the sun is dipping in the sky, and none of us can stomach the charade any longer, we each walk home alone, the neighborhood deteriorating around us. Our front steps cracking in two, the frosted sconces on our porch lights shattered to dust. This once-perfect neighborhood, turning to cinders at our feet.

We'll make the best of things, though, we'll make the best of it, we will, we will.

Yet all day and all night, we find our gazes set on that dirt road that extends beyond the cul-desac and into the hungry trees.

The men do their best to distract us. They coax us back to them, tying the apron strings so tight we can't catch our breath. We tell ourselves we should stay. But the world's crumbling around us, and there's nothing we can do to stop it. Not unless we run.

Not unless we take the path that's calling to us.

We could wait until midnight. Listen for the screech owl serenading the moon as we slip out the back door and disappear into the dark toward the verboten path.

Or we could do it in broad daylight. In front of the passersby and the postal workers diligently delivering little brown boxes from Amazon. Everything so nice and normal until we do the one thing we know isn't allowed—make a choice of our own.

Or we could be polite about it. Fix a nice dinner first. Maybe a pot roast or a honey-baked ham. Sit down together as a family for once. Do the dishes afterward, since nobody else will help us. Fold the laundry. Make sure the children have done their homework. Check all their math problems. Check all their spelling, too. It's potato without the 'e' at the end, darling. Please remember.

But even as we do our best impression of ourselves, the men sense it in us, they sense our resolve, and they're suddenly hovering nearer.

"You'll stay right here," they whisper, their eyes darker than every sin they project on us. "You're ours."

But this time, we can't help but laugh because they're wrong. After all, these bodies do belong to us, and we'll do with them what we please.

For so long, we were told we needed to be perfect. But all we ever really needed was to be wild.

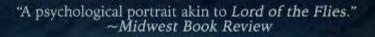
Still smiling, we turn away and march out our front doors toward the end of the cul-de-sac. The path is open to us now. The brambles have cleared, and there's a faint light ahead in the woods, ready to guide us.

Somewhere back in the lonely houses, strangers are calling our names. They screech and weep and beg and bargain, but that's no matter now. That's all in the past, and we have no need for it. Our hands entwined, we drift down the dirt path, the brambles and thorns closing in behind us like thick blood filling a wound.

Welcome, my girls. I've been waiting a long time.

Together, we'll rush into her arms, the moon slicing through the sky, and we'll dance on a floor of a thousand bones. And with our wild hearts gleaming and new, the forest will sing dirges around

us, and our dreams will burn so bright and furious they'll sear everything and everyone we've ever known to ash.



ALEXANDREA WEIS · LUCAS ASTOR

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RIVER OFER ASHES

RIVER OF ASHES (ST. BENEDICT, BOOK 1) BY ALEXANDREA WEIS & LUCAS ASTOR

* One of Apple's Most Anticipated Books for Summer in Mysteries & Thrillers* *Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award Winner for Best Southern Gothic* *Dragon Awards Nominee* *Montaigne Medal Finalist*

"Despite its ghosts and hauntings, this evocative tale presents an all-too-real terror that gets under your skin—and stays." ~*Rue Morgue*

Some truths are better kept secret. Some secrets are better off dead.

ALONG THE BANKS OF THE BOGUE FALAYA RIVER, sits the abandoned St. Francis Seminary. Beneath a canopy of oaks, blocked from prying eyes, the teens of St. Benedict High gather here on Fridays. The rest of the week belongs to school and family—but weekends belong to the river. And the river belongs to Beau Devereaux.

The only child of a powerful family, Beau can do no wrong. Star quarterback. Handsome. Charming. The "prince" of St. Benedict is the ultimate catch. He is also a psychopath.

A dirty family secret buried for years, Beau's evil grows unchecked. In the shadows of the haunted abbey, he commits unspeakable acts on his victims and ensures their silence with threats and intimidation. Senior year, Beau sets his sights on his girlfriend's headstrong twin sister, Leslie, who hates him. Everything he wants but cannot have, she will be his ultimate prize.

As the victim toll mounts, it becomes clear that someone must stop Beau Devereaux. And that someone will pay with their life.

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"I thought I would read a few chapters before going to bed, NOPE! I stayed up until 3am and finished the whole thing. I can't wait to dive into the second one this weekend AND I placed an order to carry ALL of their books in the shop." *~Brittnay Sears, Owner, The Inside Story Bookstore & Cafe*

"Alexandrea Weis's novels are destined to stand alongside authors such as **Stephen King, Gillian** Flynn, Joyce Carol Oates, and Jeffery Deaver." ~*The Strand Magazine* Paperback: 9781645480983 / \$17.95 eBook: 9781645480990 / \$7.99 Audiobook: 9781645482307 Pub Date: Aug 2, 2022 Publisher: Vesuvian, https://vesuvianmedia.com/ Buy Links and Book Info: https://vesuvianmedia.com/river-of-ashes/ Distributor: https://www.ipgbook.com/river-of-ashes-products-9781645480983.php Media Kit: https://alexandreaweis.com/media-kits/st-benedict-media-kit/ YouTube Link: https://youtu.be/KuYcuhsErlQ

ALEXANDREA WEIS, RN-CS, PhD, is an award-winning author, advanced practice registered nurse, and historian who was born and raised in the French Quarter of New Orleans. She has taught at major universities and worked as a nurse dealing with victims of sexual assault, abuse, and mental illness in a clinical setting at New Orleans area hospitals.

Having grown up in the motion picture industry as the daughter of a director, she learned to tell stories from a different perspective. Infusing the rich tapestry of her hometown into her novels, she believes that creating vivid characters makes a story moving and memorable. The first person to give her writing advice was Tennessee Williams, a family friend. Weis is a member of the International Thriller Writers (ITW) and Horror Writers Association (HWA). She lives with her husband outside of New Orleans where she is a permitted/certified wildlife rehabber with the Louisiana Wildlife & Fisheries and rescues orphaned and injured animals. <u>https://alexandreaweis.com/</u>

LUCAS ASTOR is an award-winning author and poet with a penchant for telling stories that delve into the dark side of the human psyche. He likes to explore the evil that exists not just in the world, but right next door, behind a smiling face. Astor is co-author of the St. Benedict series and the Magnus Blackwell series with Alexandrea Weis. He also wrote the lyrics in *Speak No Evil* by Liana Gardner, a Bram Stoker Awards[®] Nominated YA Novel. Astor is from New York, has resided in Central America and the Middle East, and traveled throughout Europe. He currently lives outside of Nashville, TN. https://ghliterary.com/clients/lucas-astor/

CHAPTER ONE

"The scariest monsters are the ones that lurk within our souls. Edgar Allan Poe," Beau Devereaux muttered as he read the sign on the wall in English lit. "What a load of shit."

He turned to watch the minutes tick by on the clock. The only noise in the stuffy classroom was his teacher's monotonous, raspy voice.

The jarring school bell circled the room, setting him free. Beau headed for the door, not taking time to put his book in his bag. He rounded a corner on his way to the gym and spotted a familiar blonde. Her hair in a messy twist and secured with a claw clip, it reflected her no-nonsense style.

"Leslie." Beau cornered her in the hall. "How's it going?"

Her blue eyes blazed—just what he expected.

"What do you want, Beau?"

He almost laughed. His attention settled on the notch at the base of her neck. It fluttered like a scared little butterfly.

"Can't a guy say hi to a friend?" Beau put his arm on the wall behind her, trapping her between the lockers. "We never talk. Why is that?"

He loved watching her eyes dart about, searching for rescue, but no one would challenge him. No one ever did.

"I'm not your friend." She shoved him back. "Go talk to Dawn."

He curled his hand into a fist. If he couldn't have Leslie, her twin sister was the next best thing. Or so he thought. He'd started dating Dawn to get his mind off Leslie, but it hadn't worked. They looked alike, but Dawn wasn't her sister. She didn't have her sass.

That he still wanted Leslie infuriated him. Beau leaned in, letting his breath tease her cheek. The scent of her skin was like the sweet vanilla smell of fresh spring clover. "One day, I'm going to take you to The Abbey and set things right between us."

"Is there a problem?"

An aggravated, deep voice buzzed in his ear like a gnat. Beau turned around. It was Derek Foster, her trusty watchdog. He spent way too many hours studying with the geek patrol and not enough time partying with the popular crowd.

"No problem, Foster," Beau said. "We were just talking about next week's chemistry test."

A few students gathered near the lockers, watching.

Leslie edged around Beau. "You can't even spell chemistry."

He bristled. That smart tongue of hers begged to be tamed. "That's really hostile. I'm trying here, for your sister's sake."

Derek put a protective arm around her. "C'mon, Leslie. Let's get out of here."

Before Derek pulled her away, Beau wheeled around. Running his fingers through his hair, he stuck out his elbow and landed a perfect shot right to Derek's cheek.

He stumbled back, bouncing off some girls.

"Derek!" Leslie went to his side, pushing Beau out of the way.

Holding in his satisfaction, Beau frowned. "Oh, man. I'm sorry." He put a hand on Derek's shoulder, checking the red spot on his cheek and suppressing a smug grin. "I didn't see you there."

Leslie shot him an icy glare. "You're an ass."

He gave her an innocent expression, reveling in her reaction. "I'm sorry, Leslie. I didn't mean to hit him." Beau spoke loud enough for onlookers to hear. "Stop making me out to be the bad guy. Can you give that attitude of yours a break?"

Derek took Leslie's hand. "I'm fine. It was an accident. Let it go."

Beau offered his best wholesome grin. "You should listen to your boyfriend."

"What's going on here?"

Ms. Greenbriar's screeching voice made all three of them spin around.

The middle-aged principal of St. Benedict High stood with her hands on her hips. "Mr. Devereaux?"

"Nothing, ma'am." Beau gave the principal a big smile. "Just a misunderstanding. I hit Derek with my elbow when I turned. My fault entirely."

Ms. Greenbriar shifted her beady brown eyes to Derek. "Mr. Foster, anything you want to add?" Derek nursed his cheek. "No, ma'am. It was an accident, just like Beau said."

She tapped her heel on the tile floor, glancing from Derek to Beau. "My office, Mr. Devereaux." Beau backed away from the lockers as his stomach tightened with anger. "Yes, ma'am."

"What an asshole!" Leslie bolted out of the double glass doors with Derek close behind. A pain shot through her when the sun highlighted the red mark covering his right cheek. *Damn Beau Devereaux*.

For almost a year she'd tolerated his comments and lewd glances, but since she'd started dating Derek, he'd stepped up his game. "I can't believe he punched you like that."

Derek put his arm around her waist as they walked down the stone steps to the parking lot. "It was an accident."

She halted and stared at him, numb with disbelief. "You don't buy his bullshit, do you?"

"No, but what am I going to do about it? Punch him back?" Derek urged her along. "Then I would be the one in Greenbriar's office."

Students on the grassy quad sat on benches, tossed footballs, studied their laptops, and listened to music.

"Does anyone in this town stand up to him?" Leslie shook her head. "He's got everyone believing he's Mr. Perfect and I'm crazy."

Derek slipped the book bag off her shoulder to carry it. "No one thinks you're crazy, least of all me."

The simple gentlemanly gesture melted her heart. Leslie touched Derek's dimpled chin, feeling fortunate. "My hero."

"What did Beau say to you, anyway?"

She shrugged. "The usual."

Hard rock blasted from a nearby car.

Derek glanced at the source of the noise. "I don't get it. How can he date your sister and not like you at all?"

Leslie removed the claw clip and ran a hand through her shoulder-length hair. "Sometimes I think she went out with him to spite me."

"What makes you say that?"

She shrugged and fell in step beside him. "We aren't exactly the closest of sisters. It was always a competition between us when we were younger. I joined the swim team, and then Dawn joined. I wanted to be a Girl Scout, and so did she. I wanted to take riding lessons and guess who went with me. But I gave up competing with her when we got to high school." She gazed at the neatly trimmed grass beneath her feet. "Dawn never stopped. Sometimes I think that's why she became a cheerleader and started going out with Beau—to show me she could."

"I can't see her dating Devereaux to get back at you. He's the richest and most popular guy in town. Isn't he every girl's dream?"

Leslie stopped short, shuddering. "Not mine. There's something off about him."

"He's just used to getting his way. It comes from two hundred years of inbreeding. Don't all those old, rich Southern families marry their cousins? Maybe that's his problem. Too many batshit crazy relatives in his family tree."

A brisk wind stirred as they crossed the blacktop to the car she shared with her sister. The chill wrapped around her, seeping into her bones.

Derek nudged her. "Hey, you okay?"

She came out of her daze, shaking off the bizarre feeling. "Just really sick of Beau."

Derek smiled, and the look in his eyes made her heart skip a beat.

"Want to sneak up to The Abbey? I could show you around. It's pretty cool."

She'd never been to the abandoned St. Francis Seminary College on the banks of the Bogue Falaya River but had heard stories. "Yeah, no." She hit the remote on her keychain and unlocked the doors.

He climbed into the car. "We can skip The Abbey tour and hang out at the river."

She put her book bag in the back seat. "I have no interest in the river. I've told you that."

"No. You told me you used to go there, then stopped."

Leslie wanted to smack him for not dropping it, but didn't. Her life had been empty before she'd met Derek. They shared classes for almost a year before getting the nerve to talk. "Do you remember the first time you spoke to me?"

"How could I forget?" He leaned over the console. "I left class early and found Beau pinning you against a locker. Seems to be a thing with him. Anyway, you threatened to tell everyone his dick was the size of a number two pencil. I was impressed."

She laughed as Beau's horrified expression came back to her. "And you told him to leave me alone and then offered to buy me a soda. Never realized you were so nice."

"Then why did it take you two months to go out with me?"

Leslie started the car. "Because I wanted to see how serious you were."

A bit rough around the edges, with bashful glances and soulful brown eyes, Derek reminded her a little of James Dean with a dark tan—a sign of his Creole lineage. He was from what some would call "the wrong side of the tracks."

The polar opposite of Beau Devereaux.

Leslie didn't care where he came from or what he drove because, to her, Derek Foster was the most perfect guy in the universe. When he finally asked her out, she turned him down. She hadn't wanted to ruin her dreams of him with the disappointment of reality. But she took a chance, and six months later, here they were.

Her stomach fluttered with one glance at him. "If I agree to go to the river, what did you want to do there?"

Derek sat back, eyes on the road and grinning. "I'll come up with something."

CHAPTER TWO

Beau sat on a wooden bench outside Ms. Greenbriar's door in the administrative offices. Arms crossed, he tapped a finger on his elbow while staring out the window. He waited, keeping a lid on his rising anxiety.

Students rushed past the window to the principal's office, but their occasional stares didn't bother him. His mind was on getting to practice. Coach Brewer hated when players were late, and Beau made a point never to show a lack of discipline. Next to his father, Coach Brewer was the only man whose anger he never wanted to incur.

"Beau," *Madbriar* called from her office.

He stood from the bench and put on his best smile. *This will be fun.*

The room was jam-packed with bookcases, a small desk, and an outdated computer.

"Tell me what happened with Leslie Moore and Derek Foster," the principal asserted.

"I was speaking to Leslie when Derek came up. I accidentally hit him with my elbow when I turned around." He cleared his throat and looked at the floor. "I completely understand if you want to punish me for hitting Derek."

Madbriar took a seat behind the desk, her chair squeaking in protest. "Relax, Beau. You're an exemplary student and an upstanding member of this community. No one is questioning your behavior." She sat back and stared at him for a moment. "Ask your dad to give me a call when he can to discuss the new gym addition. I want to see whether Benedict Brewery will donate for the school fundraiser."

Beau folded his hands, keeping the tips of his index fingers together, a thrill of amusement running through him. Everyone always wanted something from him or his family. Being the town's biggest employer made donating to every fundraiser in St. Benedict obligatory. He sometimes wondered how his father put up with all the bloodsuckers.

"Sure. I'll let him know, but he's always happy to help."

She pointed at the office door. "Now, you'd better get to practice."

His tension eased, Beau stood. He wanted to pat himself on the back for an impeccable performance. "Thanks, Ms. Greenbriar."

"And Beau, do yourself a favor."

He gripped the door handle. "Ma'am?"

"Stay away from Leslie Moore." She picked up an open folder. "That girl will be nothing but trouble for you."

He nodded, then hurried from her office, chuckling.

Trouble is my middle name.

The smell of sweat and freshly cut grass greeted Beau as he strutted onto the practice field. He tightened his grip on his helmet. The team was already in the middle of their stretches. He was late.

His belly flopping over the waistband of his gym shorts, Coach Brewer walked between rows of guys, blowing his whistle to keep time with their exercises. One among the team struggled to keep up. Jenson Theriot.

The bungling offensive tackle annoyed the shit out of Beau. He'd missed several blocks, leaving Beau vulnerable in the pocket. The freckle-faced redhead had become a detriment to his team—something Beau couldn't tolerate.

Beau's attention drifted to the metal bleachers and the cheerleading squad working on their routine. Dawn was there wearing a short, white cheerleading uniform. He loved how the bright red St. Benedict dragon, its mouth open and teeth bared, hugged her breasts. The other girls on the squad, whose names eluded him, shouted their silly rhymes for victory and team spirit as Dawn watched them kick, split, and jump.

Dawn turned to the field and, spotting him, waved.

The wind whipped her long blonde ponytail and brushed several strands over her shoulder, making it appear shorter, like Leslie's. Though they were physically identical in every way except for their hair length, Beau wished Dawn was the smart-mouthed bitch he really wanted.

Before he could get away, she came running to greet him. It was the last thing he needed. Coach Brewer would be pissed.

"Hey, honey." Dawn frowned at him. "Everything okay? I heard Madbriar called you into her office."

Her voice wasn't Leslie's. He'd memorized the smoky, sexy sound of her sister. The way she raised her tone ever so slightly when she was about to say something sarcastic. Dawn had none of Leslie's nuances—her voice was utterly lifeless.

Dawn worked hard to portray a wholesome image by avoiding cursing and smoking, which he admired. But her love of cherry-red lipstick and excessive mascara aggravated him. He'd told her more than once not to wear so much, but she didn't listen. She just put on more, thinking he liked it. Beau longed to wipe the color from her mouth.

He gave her a warm smile, hiding his thoughts. "She wanted to talk to me about my father contributing to the gym fundraiser." He looked over at his teammates.

"I heard it was because you were giving Derek and my sister a hard time."

His head snapped back around to her. How dare she contradict him. "No way, baby." He laced his voice with extra charm to sound convincing. "Why would I waste my time on them when I'd rather spend every moment with you."

She squealed.

Putty in his hands, Dawn melted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I knew it wasn't true," she whispered.

He smelled her skin. It wasn't there—the heady aroma of clover always lingering on Leslie. Another difference between them, but one he was sure only he noticed.

"Beau, get your ass over here," Coach Brewer yelled.

"Gotta go." He unwound her arms. "See you after practice."

"I love you," Dawn managed to get out before he walked away.

He pretended not to hear her while putting on his helmet. Love wasn't what he was after.

A load lifted from Leslie's shoulders the moment the red-brick walls of St. Benedict High were behind her. The months of putting up with Beau had taken their toll, making the school almost feel like a prison. She relaxed her hands on the steering wheel. The cool afternoon breeze ran through her hair as she drove toward Main Street, where rustic storefronts sat between modern buildings. The hodgepodge of styles reminded her of the people in town. An interesting blend of old families who had lived in St. Benedict for several generations, and new families running away from the urban sprawl taking over nearby cities.

Derek touched her knee. "Why don't you like going to the river?"

Leslie glanced at a thick swath of honeysuckle vines on the side of the road, her unease returning. "All you ever said was you went to the river with Dawn junior year, ran into Beau and his friends, and swore you'd never go back."

"Dawn and I got invited to the river by some seniors. Being asked to party on the river at night was a big deal to me." Leslie's shoulders drooped. "Beau started out talking to me, and I knew he was interested, but Dawn didn't like that. So, when I went to grab something to drink, she stepped in and hit on him. They hooked up and disappeared. I got stuck fighting off his football buddies, who wanted to show me a good time."

Derek scowled. "What did you do?"

Leslie raised her nose in the air. "I started spouting feminist literature, and they ran for the hills." "That must have been scary."

"It was." Her voice cracked. "When three guys manhandle you, it's terrifying. I didn't have my car, so I walked back to town."

"At night?" His voice rose.

She took in the sunlight skipping across the tops of the buildings. The smell of hamburgers from Mo's Diner filtered through the car. "Staying at the party was dangerous. A virgin hanging around a bunch of drunk and horny football players would only end badly."

Derek moved closer. "I don't want you in that situation again. The only guy I want around you is me."

Leslie noticed a hint of possessiveness in his tone. "But you never try anything with me when you're drunk. Or any other time."

He sat back. "I will when you're ready."

Near the edge of town, tall oak trees covered with Spanish moss replaced the buildings. A gentle breeze ruffled through their leaves. Leslie turned onto Devereaux Road and headed toward the remains of St. Francis Seminary.

Derek put his hand on her knee, then slowly rubbed up her leg. A warm tingle spread between her thighs.

"I want your first time to be special." He bobbed his eyebrows. "But that doesn't mean we can't fool around at The Abbey."

She let her foot off the gas, slowing as the road narrowed, her sense of dread returning. "Are you sure you want to go?"

Derek flashed a boyish grin. "Hell yeah."

The spires of The Abbey appeared as the car cruised along. The ruins of the towering white marble and brick structure rose behind the trees. Leslie slammed on the brakes, not wanting to go any farther.

Derek leaned toward her. "Is something wrong?"

Tearing her gaze away from the macabre structure, she sought refuge in his eyes, and the feeling passed.

"Can we skip the tour of The Abbey? I don't think I'm in the mood."

He lightly kissed her lips. "We can do whatever you want."

CHAPTER THREE

Leslie drove down a tree-lined street of tired old homes with peeling paint, sagging porches, and varying degrees of disrepair. It saddened her to see the residences crying for attention. One of the older neighborhoods in St. Benedict, the atmosphere reflected the work-weary attitude of the people struggling to hold on to their dreams.

She pulled into the cracked driveway of a yellow wooden house. With a rusted tin roof, broken white picket fence, and bent mailbox, the residence mirrored others on the street. Despite its unsettling appearance, the home contained happy memories.

She shut off the engine. "Is your mom still working doubles at the diner?"

Derek shoved open his door. "Yes. Thank goodness."

Leslie got out of the car, astounded by his comment. "What makes you say that?"

He pointed to the bruise on his cheek. "You know how she feels about fighting. I hope she doesn't kill me when she sees my face."

The chug of an approaching engine caught their attention. A blue pickup truck, with a bent front fender and cracked windshield, pulled in beside them.

Leslie blocked the sun with her hand, a sinking feeling settling over her. "I guess you're going to find out real fast."

"Thought I might beat you home." A waiflike brunette with naturally tanned Creole skin stepped out of the truck.

Her beige polyester waitress dress made Carol Foster look older than her forty-two years. It stressed the crow's feet and circles rimming her eyes. But Leslie still saw some of the pretty woman her father once told her about.

Derek helped his mother unload groceries from the truck. "What are you doing home early, Mom?"

"I got the afternoon off." Carol nodded to Leslie. "How have you been, dear?"

Leslie went to Derek's side, nervous. "I'm good, Mrs. Foster."

"I told you to call me Carol, sweetie. No need for all the—" She homed in on her son's cheek. "What happened to your face?"

Derek walked toward the porch steps, ignoring his mother's reaction. "It's nothing."

"Nothing, my butt." Carol grabbed his chin to get a closer look. "Who did this?"

He stepped back. "It was an accident. I ran into Beau's elbow."

Carol's cheeks paled. "Gage Devereaux's son? Why were you fighting with him?"

"I wasn't fighting. He turned around and struck me with his elbow in the hall. No big deal."

The anguish in Derek's voice frustrated Leslie.

"Were you there?" Carol demanded.

Leslie twisted her fingers as her guilt intensified. "He was coming to my rescue."

"Your rescue?" Carol marched toward the porch. "What did Beau do to you?"

Derek waited for Leslie to climb the steps before following with the groceries. "He's been

bothering Leslie in the hall a lot lately."

Carol's green eyes widened, and she looked at Leslie. "Why would Beau pick on you?"

"Because he hates me." Thinking of Beau made Leslie queasy. "He has ever since the night he got with my sister. He keeps telling everyone he wants to be friends, but I don't buy it. The way he looks at me, the things he says ... He doesn't want to be friends, not by a long shot."

Carol yanked her keys from her handbag. "Sounds like you need to steer clear of him." She unlocked the front door and pressed her shoulder against the warped wood, shoving hard to get the door to budge. "I've been meaning to fix this."

A single mother working twelve hours a day deserved a break, but Leslie didn't know how to help Derek or his mother. Getting ahead in St. Benedict took more than a strong work ethic, it took the good graces of the town patriarch, Gage Devereaux.

Leslie followed Carol inside. The sparsely furnished living room had a small worn sofa, a wobbly oak coffee table, and an old oval rug covering the dull hardwood floors. The only new item was the flat-screen TV mounted on the wall above the dusty mantle.

"I haven't cleaned." Carol ran her hand over her forehead, hiding her worry lines. "But you've seen the place messier than this."

Leslie put on a reassuring smile, her heart aching for the woman. "You should see my room. My mom's always complaining about it."

Carol set her five-gallon purse on a rickety, round table next to the kitchen. "What about your sister? Do you two share your propensity for messy rooms?"

Leslie shook her head as she considered her sister's OCD-like ways. "No. Dawn is the perfect one. Her room is always spotless."

Derek carried the groceries to the kitchen counter. "But her personal life's a mess."

"That's not a kind thing to say." Carol slapped her son's shoulder, frowning at him.

"Why not?" Derek tossed his book bag down. "She's dating Beau Devereaux and thinks he can do no wrong. She's seen him bullying Leslie and blames her for it. What else do you need to know?"

"You don't know that." Her lips set in a firm line, Carol went to the kitchen and flipped on the lights. "Right now, Dawn's wrapped up in having the attention of a guy she thinks is the catch of St. Benedict. Dating the football star and heir to the Devereaux fortune seems like a dream come true. She's probably afraid to ruffle Beau's feathers and risk losing him."

Leslie arched an eyebrow. "You seem to know an awful lot about what Dawn is feeling."

Carol lifted milk from one of the grocery bags. "I was in your sister's shoes once."

More than a little intrigued, Leslie edged closer. "You were?"

Derek put the eggs in the fridge. "Mom dated Gage Devereaux in high school. Didn't I tell you that?"

Leslie gave a wide-mouthed no you did not look. She faced Carol. "So, what happened?"

"There isn't much to tell," Carol muttered. "Gage and I dated for a couple of years in high school, and then he went to college in Boston."

"She met my dad after she quit college," Derek interrupted.

"Don't remind me." Carol took a ragged breath. "We weren't even married two years when your father ran off to California."

Derek's father skipping town was a sore spot, so they never talked about him. But Leslie's curiosity about Carol's past with the Devereaux family got the better of her. "Is Beau like his father?"

A slight smile added a touch of warmth to Carol's sad eyes. "I don't know Beau, but Gage was very considerate of other people. Even though he was the richest boy in town, he never acted better than anyone else. I'm going to take a shower." Carol nodded to Leslie. "Good seeing you, sweetie."

Leslie waited until Derek's mother disappeared down the narrow hall. "Did she seem upset to you?" She hooked her pinkie around his. "When I asked about Mr. Devereaux, she changed."

"Nah. She's upset about my face. I'll get an earful after you leave."

Leslie rested her head against his chest, wishing she could stay. "I should go. My mom wants me home for dinner."

She went to the freezer and found a pack of peas. Returning to his side, Leslie gently pressed the bag against his bruised cheek. "Keep this on for a while. I can't have my boyfriend walking around school looking like the other guy won."

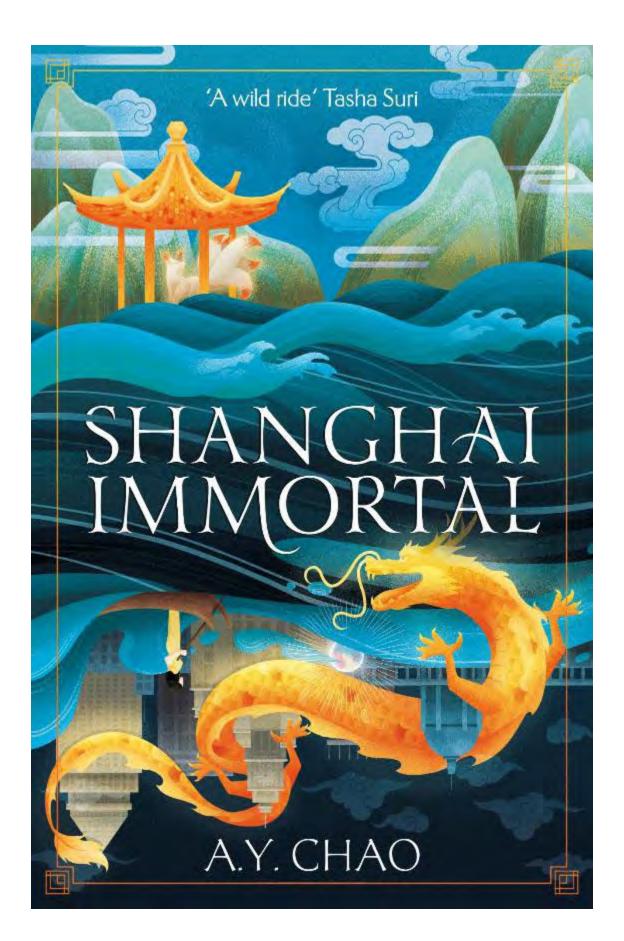
Derek chuckled and walked her to the door. It took a stiff yank to open.

After kissing Derek goodbye, Leslie walked to her car, thinking about Carol's connection to Beau's father. There were secrets buried in their small town, especially about the Devereaux family. Hints of their past had circulated among the residents of St. Benedict for as long as she could remember. But Carol's history with Gage had not been one of those tales.

If Dawn continued dating Beau, would she end up like Derek's mother?

The chill she experienced on the road to The Abbey returned. She didn't know why, but the daunting thought of her sister's future made her think of those sinister spires. Unnerved by the sensation, Leslie decided to take the long way home and avoid the area altogether.

FANTASY, SCI-FI, & Speculative Fiction



Shanghai Immortal by A. Y. Chao

#1 Sunday Times Bestseller

This richly told adult fantasy debut teems with Chinese deities and demons cavorting in jazz age Shanghai, and addresses complex issues of heritage, identity, belonging, and intersectional feminism in a multicultural migrant context. SHANGHAI IMMORTAL is a love letter to the author's Chinese diaspora heritage with a twist of Canadian sensibilities... and a huge amount of sass.

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With the help of a gentle mortal tasked with setting up the Central Bank of Hell, Jing embarks on a wild chase for intel, first through Hell and then mortal Shanghai. But when her hijinks put the mortal in danger, she must decide which is more important: avenging her loss of face, or letting go of her half-empty approach to life for a chance to experience tenderness - and maybe even love.

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Hardcover: 9781399717410 / \$28.99 eBook: 9781399717434 / \$10.99 Audiobook: ASIN BoBV3GYDG1 Pub Date: Oct 17, 2023 Publisher: HodderScape (Hodder & Stoughton) <u>https://hodderscape.co.uk/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.amazon.com/Shanghai-Immortal-richly-debut-fantasy/dp/1399717413/</u>

ALICE CHAO is a Chinese Canadian author of fantasy. She's fascinated by the interplay between selfperceived versus imposed identity and how this intersects with belonging and enjoys exploring these spaces in her stories. A recovering lawyer and xiaolongbao enthusiast, she knits to soothe anxiety and has a deep abiding love for Hobonichi planners and kawaii planner stickers. <u>https://www.aychao.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

The Delivery

The steaming Shanghai night drapes heavy over my bare shoulders. I lean against the door of a decrepit warehouse, gums aching, stomach grumbling, and wait on Big Wang's secret delivery. Cicadas scream all around me. With a title like *Lady Jing of Mount Kunlun* and ancestry that includes the great goddess Queen Mother of the West, running errands at 3 a.m. in this rotted heat might be considered below my station. With such a title, you'd expect me to be beautiful — all hair, ta-tas, and ass, held together with lashings of poise and dignity. Well, I'll disabuse you of that notion right now. I am a degenerate mix of unfortunate genes and circumstances. From my dearly departed mother— a hulijing, or "bitch of a fox-spirit" as I prefer to call her—I inherited my feral lack of charm; from my father—some leech-faced vampire who couldn't be bothered to stick around—a damned inconvenient predilection for blood.

While 3 a.m. might be when the sodden heat is at its worst, twilight is when the veil between the mortal world and the realms of Hell thins, making it easier for mortal couriers to make their deliveries. Hot as it is, Big Wang expects me to wait, so that's what I do.

What's Big Wang got to do with anything? Allow me to share my poor orphan story: my darling mother also had a damned inconvenient predilection. *Hers* was for diamonds the size of quail eggs, treasures a down-and-out deity such as herself could ill afford. Rather than give up her precious jewels, she pawned me as a whelp to Big Wang, a.k.a. the King of Hell, to pay her shopping debts. And then she went and died before she could claim me back.

Yeah, sob, sob, I know.

The swollen wood of the warehouse door creaks against my back. The red brick building, one of a row of identical squat brick structures lining the Whangpoo River, is past its prime, worn and weathered from the humidity. It would be easy enough for Big Wang to make the warehouses shiny and new, but he prefers them this way. Gives the place character, he says. I shimmy the fine cotton qipao up my thighs and stand with my legs as wide as the form fitting-dress will allow. It's hotter than the Hearths of Hell out here. I run my tongue over my gums, sore but still smooth, fantasizing about the nice tall glass of ice-cold blood I'll earn for this errand. Three days old, my favorite — when it gets just the right amount of *pétillant* tingle.

My feet ache so I slide one from its silk slipper — a tiny, tight, ridiculous thing more useful as a torture instrument than an item of clothing — and massage my cramping arch. Big Wang is probably expecting another of his rotted collectibles. One of his beloved tortoises maybe, or a koi for his pond, but the damned delivery is late. Impatience and hunger war inside me. Much as I'd like to leave I can't. Sweat prickles down my back, so I gather my hair, twist it into a makeshift bun off my skin then unbutton the collar of my qipao and try to fan myself. There's no respite. Even the breeze burns hot.

Most people know the decadent, divided version of Shanghai on the other side of the veil—a foreign enclave nestled in the tender-as-tofu ta-tas of the Middle Kingdom. The mortals call it *Paris of the East, New York of the West.* Their version of my city teems with yang qi—violent, virulent, vibrant life force; an unending playground for foreign powers, merchants, and gangsters, all vying to dominate. But the most inviolable rule of the Cosmos is balance. Yang cannot exist without yin. Mortal Shanghai is no different. We yaojing—deities and demons alike—have a yin version of our own: immortal Shanghai, the glittering capital of Hell.

On our side of the veil—the Hell side—the deserted river flows black and thick in the gloom. But through the veil, smoky shadows of mortal boats crowd the currents. Large junks with their bat-wing

sails ghost across the water, smaller sampans bounce in their wake while floating among them are dark rectangular shapes. Coffins. More and more these days. Civil unrest in the mortal world, compounded by foreign powers eager to butcher the Middle Kingdom into trophy cuts of meat, floods immortal Shanghai with ghosts. A few years ago, the Japanese bombed Zhabei, Shanghai's Chinese quarter. The ghost ferries docked at our ports, one after another, in a never-ceasing convoy of death.

The sour, sweet stench of rotting plants and brine burns my nose. Mixed into the cocktail of scents is one that makes me gag and salivate at the same time: the unmistakable reek of bloated corpses full of blood. My fangs, tiny white claws, pierce through my gums. The pinch in my belly grows, gnawing upwards until it is a burning thirst that lines my throat with needles. The sudden slap of water against wood sends fear pebbling across my skin despite the sodden heat. My fangs retract, the bloodlust fades. I press hard against the door, though I know I'm a safe distance from the water. The wood creaks in protest and it takes a few seconds before I understand it's only the approach of a sampan. With effort, I peel myself away from the door so I don't break the weathered wood by accident. I've never liked the water. Thank Tian it never rains here.

As the dark shape of a sampan approaches the fog boundary I rearrange my qipao, tugging the pale blue fabric past my knees and redoing my collar button. Big Wang, like all yaojing, is quite conservative about these things. One of those bitch fox-spirits from my grandmother's court reported me for showing too much leg and I had to peel garlic in the Cathay Hotel's kitchens for a month, in apology for my disregard of Confucian virtues and 'offending my ancestors'. What a load of piss-fart. It took a month for me to stop sneezing and another before I stopped reeking of the stuff.

The scratch of a match and the hiss of a flame pull my attention back to the river.

"Boh-yo-boh-lo-mi." A gruff voice utters the words which pierce the barrier to our Shanghai.

From the murky dark emerges a dingy sampan, more sliver of bark than boat. A squat man steps off the open stern onto the rickety dock. The wood creaks under his bare feet. Over his shoulder, he balances a large, lumpy sack and from his mouth dangles a glowing joss stick. As he makes his way up the gangplank, coils of blue smoke spiral in the air behind him, releasing the scent of sandalwood into the night. He stops at the edge of the dirt road, twenty paces from me, and dumps his cargo with a grunt. The delivery is much larger than I expected. The mortal doesn't come any closer; he is no fool. He may have a pass from Big Wang to enter and leave our realm as long as the joss stick burns, though it's no guarantee of safety. His blood and yang qi sing to me, but I keep my distance. Big Wang forgives me many of my failings, both accidental and intentional, but even I know not to harm his couriers.

I press against the door again, this time not from fear but out of caution. The mortal bows in my direction, low, as befitting a mortal to a yaojing. He doesn't know what I am, only that I'm dangerous. Slowly, the mortal shuffles backwards, an eye on the shadows where I stand, retracing his steps to his sampan, back to mortal Shanghai. His scent lingers and makes me shudder with want. Only when his sampan is safely across the veil do I approach the roughly woven bag. It's an awkward shape, all bulges and strange angles. I reach for the sack. The thing inside wriggles, then a mortal-shaped form sits up.

I jump back three feet. What the Hells?

The scent is so strong now that my knees wobble and I'm forced to hold my breath. *Tian*. The siren song wasn't from the mortal with the joss stick. It's coming from the bag. My fangs extend fully, my gums throb, I can't see straight. This is no stale blood. There's a live mortal in that bag, pulsing with blood that's rich, sweet, fragrant, and cloying as a tan hua, the ephemeral white flower that blooms once a year in the dead of night and dies at sunrise—a fitting metaphor for such a delicious smelling mortal in Hell. My skin tingles and I swallow over and over because I can't stop salivating. I've never been this close to a living, breathing mortal, and it makes my head spin. Big Wang did say he had a surprise for me. We've been arguing about my upcoming birthday: in a couple weeks, I turn one hundred years young. I am expected to embrace my title and position at court, something I have

absolutely no intention of doing. Maybe the delivery is a peace offering, though I wouldn't bet on it. Still holding my breath, I crouch over the bag to untie it.

The rope falls free, the bag unpeels like a plump mandarin to reveal a thirty-something-year-old man wearing a light grey Western-style suit, popular among the trendier Shanghainese these days. Gone are the changpao robes with their mandarin collars, replaced by the newest fashions from the West, arriving via the endless stream of cruise ships and magazines and talking pictures. The man has smooth skin, clear brown eyes, and a cow lick in his dark hair. He regards me with bright eyes and a beaming smile. I take a careful, shallow breath. Healthy. Not a whiff of the sickness usually tainting the corpses dredged from the river.

With a resounding slap, he slams his fist into his palm and bows with such enthusiasm I can't help but stare.

"This unintelligent one has long admired your glory, most venerable Lady Jing," he says, his tone confident and cheerful, like he is pleased to meet me.

I frown. No one is ever pleased to meet me. "How do you know who I am?"

A broad smile sets off dimples in his cheeks and his whole being exudes a childlike eagerness. He reminds me of an overgrown puppy. 'The most noble Yan Luo Wang instructed this humble one to offer my lowly self to virtuous Lady Jing. Abundant gratitude for awaiting this tardy one's arrival.'

Offer to me? He must be a gift: a willing snack. Big Wang actually did something thoughtful. This is unexpected and I'm both excited and nervous. My blood always comes in a glass with a straw—I'm not sure I like the idea of feeding from a live mortal. What if he moves or makes strange noises? But then the bloodlust takes me and dissipates all those thoughts until the only thing I see, hear, and smell is the blood pulsing at his throat. I lean in, stretch my jaws wide.

The man makes a strangled noise, jerks back and shoves a hand between my face and his throat. In it is a small black card splashed with three crimson characters. A muted warning nags at the back of my mind. I shake my head to clear the fug and squint at the card. The characters in bold red strokes slowly come into focus. *Yan Luo Wang*. Big Wang's full name. I jerk away from the mortal and his tempting scent.

The card in his hand is an official invitation to Hell from the King himself. I scramble back to put some space between me and my almost-drink. *Too close*. Snacking on Big Wang's guest would have earned me another long lecture and probably half a year peeling garlic.

"Lift high your honourable hand,' he says, a little less confidently this time, 'and guide this one who is beneath you to the venerable King of Hell, Yan Luo Wang."

My shoulders twitch at the courtly piss-fart. Why can't he just say please don't hurt me? Lift high your honourable hand. It doesn't even make sense.

I snarl at him, baring my fangs and my irritation. He blanches, grabs at his neck and pulls out a battered silver bi—a coin-sized disc with a square hole in the centre and stamped with anti-demon incantations. It's meant to conceal the mortal's true nature from yaojing and act as an official ministry pass for safe conduct through Hell. Strictly speaking, while yaojing dislike yin silver, it isn't debilitating. Afterall, yin silver is an export from the Hulijing Court, where it exists in abundance beneath the mountains of Turquoise Hills. None of my hulijing elders suffer from handling yin silver. They seem to be inured to it but whatever I've inherited from my deadbeat dad makes my skin blister and my eyes and nose burn if I get too close. The last time I came across a Ministry of Thunder and Storm talisman, small as it was, my eyes stung from five paces away. This bi doesn't even tickle my nose. I lean forward and lightly pinch the charm between my finger and thumb. Nothing. No heat, no rash, not even a tiny wave of nausea. It's fake.

I laugh, startling the mortal, then just as quickly understand how much mafan this means for me. There is no way I can simply walk the mortal to Big Wang. My temper simmers, threatening to erupt. If I can't get him safely to Big Wang I won't get my glass of blood. All because the rotted mortal couldn't tell the difference between real yin silver and a cheap imitation. "I hope you didn't part with too many silver taels for this," I say, tone sharp with irritation and hunger.

He tries to shuffle away from me, which is a bit difficult since his legs are half-inside the burlap sack, and I'm holding onto the bi around his neck.

"It was worth it! The old woman said Lord Lei blessed it himself." His earnest panic only angers me. Foolish mortal.

"Lord Lei, *the* Lord of Thunder? Bless this shit stick?" My laughter is as harsh as the shrieking cicadas. "If this were a real talisman from the Ministry blessed by Old Lei, yes, that would grant you safe passage through Hell. But this? This won't even get you passage into the nearest latrine."

"This humble one followed the most exalted and virtuous Yan Luo Wang's instructions to the letter. This humble one paid what the learned and noble Yan Luo Wang said to pay the old woman."

'Oh for Hell's sake, shut up with the courtly crap. I need to think.'

Without the talisman neutralising the scent of his blood and yang qi, the mortal will be a beacon to all yaojing. While the hypocrites look down on my weakness for blood, it's not like they're any better, drooling over mortal yang. I stand, brushing the dust off my dress. Understanding what I need to do to get this mortal safely to Big Wang does not improve my mood.

"That"—-I point to the black card clutched in the mortal's fist—"is what gets you into Hell. But without Lord Lei's talisman—"

"But this humble—" His gaze darts to my pretty, shiny, sharp teeth. 'Uh—I paid good money for this. Is Lady Jing sure—"

"Hold your tongue if you want to keep it in your head. And don't interrupt me."

He cowers, then shifts to his knees and throws his arms out as he kowtows, over and over, knocking his forehead against the dirt. "Lift high your honourable hand, this humble, I mean, uh, I, most unworthy, I beseech your glory, lift high your honourable hand, lift high your honourable hand." His voice increases in pitch with each soft thud against the ground.

I tilt my head back to look at the starless sky, taking a deep breath. Big Wang always says *count* to ten, slowly, before you do anything rash.

"Yi. Er. San," I count, and keep counting, nice and slow, until I hit ten. The irritation recedes, despite the mortal's continued kowtowing.

"Please," he whimpers.

His whimper incinerates my hard-won calm. The weak should never show their vulnerabilities. He might as well offer me his neck. This fool has no sense of self-preservation. The next time his forehead hits dirt, I step on his head. He struggles beneath the finely embroidered cricket and yellow butterfly of my blue silk slippers. *Do not stomp his head into a porridge of bone and brain*. I repeat this mantra three times—part of the anger management techniques Big Wang is making me learn. Then I count to fifty this time before I speak.

"I am not going to eat you. I am not going to let you get eaten. For the love of holy yang, shut the fuck up."

He finally stills. I curse Big Wang. He told me I should bring the 'package' directly to his private quarters in the penthouse of the Cathay Hotel. I can't risk taking the mortal through the front doors. The hotel's swarming with deities and demons attending the Ministerial Mahjong Council; they'll be on him like locusts on a rice paddy. If he had a real talisman, we could walk straight through the lobby, even wander through the Mahjong Council, and none would be the wiser. Apart from my red eyes and sneezing and all the blisters that is. Without the talisman, the only feasible route to the penthouse is up the side of the building.

"Lady Jing is not going to kill me?" He gets up from his knees, slowly stands, and looks at me with doe eyes. My hand itches to slap him.

The mortal is a full head taller than me. Broad, with a strong jaw and long full lashes like a rotted deer. Not bad looking. Still, I suck my teeth. None of those things are going to make it any easier to carry a large *living* lump reeking of blood and yang through the streets of immortal Shanghai.

He holds his hand out to me. "'I'm Tony. Tony Lee." His voice, like his hand, trembles.

My instinct is to swat his hand away; how dare he presume to touch me without invitation. Instead, mindful of my temper and my task, I grab his outstretched hand, and in one motion swing him over my shoulder like a fur stole, his body curved around my neck, legs dangling over one shoulder. It's not very comfortable. Especially as he is trying, unsuccessfully, to escape my grip.

"Lady Jing! Please! This is unseemly!" His voice is squeaky with indignation.

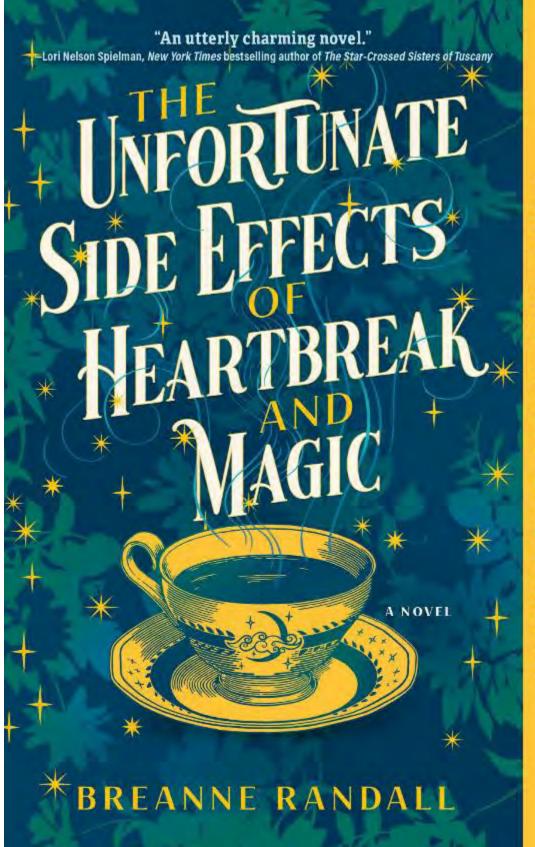
The closeness of his pulsing blood makes me grit my teeth. His head hangs over my right shoulder; I have a clear view of his face and he of mine.

"Mr Lee, listen to me carefully. You do not have a valid Lei talisman. Do you understand what that means?"

He stops squirming. His silence tells me he does.

Big Wang might be the King of Hell, but it's the Ministry of Thunder and Storm that controls passage through Tian—the Celestial lands and the realms of Hell. Without the talisman, he might as well be wearing a flashing neon sign that says: *Free Buffet*.

"I will bring you to Big Wang. But if you want to make it there alive with your prenatal qi intact, keep yourself tucked in tight around me and your mouth pinched shut. The smell of your yang qi is most noticeable when you breathe. Hell is full of hungry spirits, and you, mortal, make for a mouth-watering midnight snack."



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE UNFORTUNATE SIDE EFFECTS OF HEARTBREAK AND MAGIC BY BREANNE RANDALL

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For fans of Practical Magic and Gilmore Girls, The Unfortunate Side Effects of Heartbreak and Magic is a debut novel that explores the shields we build around our hearts to retain our own magic.

Sadie Revelare has always believed that the curse of four heartbreaks that accompanies her magic would be worth the price. But when her grandmother is diagnosed with cancer with only weeks to live, and her first heartbreak, Jake McNealy, returns to town after a decade, her carefully structured life begins to unravel.

With the news of their grandmother's impending death, Sadie's estranged twin brother Seth returns to town, bringing with him deeply buried family secrets that threaten to tear Sadie's world apart. Their grandmother has been the backbone of the family for generations, and with her death, Sadie isn't sure she'll have the strength to keep the family, and her magic, together.

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Readers who love the magic of *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* and the sense of community found in *The Very Secret Society of Irregular Witches* will enjoy this warm, witchy novel.

Paperback: 9781639105731 / \$18.99 eBook: 9781639105748 / \$13.99 Pub Date: September 19, 2023 Publisher: Alcove Press (Crooked Lane Books) <u>https://alcovepress.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/734104/the-unfortunate-side-effects-of-heartbreak-and-magic-by-breanne-randall/</u>

BREANNE RANDALL lives in the sleepy foothills of Northern California with her husband, two daughters, and a slew of farm animals. When she's not writing, you can find her wandering the property searching for fairy portals or serving elaborate stuffed animal tea parties. https://www.breannerandall.com/

CHAPTER ONE

The sun was cold, the teakettle refused to boil, and the wretched scent of old memories burned from the logs as Sadie Revelare built up the fire. Even the grandfather clock, which never paid attention to time, warbled out ten sad magpie notes.

A sign I must not miss.

Sadie threw the tedious old clock a withering look and kicked it at the base. It swung its gold pendulum as though wagging its finger in warning. Irritated, but not one to mess with the sign, she crossed herself with a cinnamon stick and then crushed it under her boot heel on the front porch.

Back inside, the house echoed its silence like a gentle reproach. Gigi had already left for the day. Seth had been gone nearly a year. Not that she was counting the days. She wouldn't give her brother that satisfaction. She glanced at the toothbrush holder as she washed her face. One lone toothbrush.

Long ago, she let herself dream of her own house, a pair of toothbrushes, maybe even water spots on the mirror from a child brushing their teeth too close.

But her curse made that impossible, and she'd given up on romance too long ago for it to make a difference now. Some people needed flowers and pretty words. Sadie needed truth and kept promises. She finished getting ready, and on her way out the door, with coffee in hand, the clock chimed again.

"I took care of it!" she shouted back.

But on the short drive to work she had to swerve twice: once to avoid a snake in the road and another time to dodge the crow that nearly swooped into her windshield. She shivered. Portents of change and death, respectively. Still. She shrugged them off. Business didn't stop for bad omens. Actually, it thrived on them.

The winding canyon road was in its full autumnal force as Sadie rolled down the window, the chilly air kissing her face. She inhaled the smell of leaves and mossy rocks and the promise of a sharp noon wind. But there was something else there too. River silt.

"No, no, no." Her foot pushed harder against the pedal as she rounded the last sharp bend faster than she should, and Two Hands Bridge came into view.

Despite the lack of rain, it was flooded. Only a little. But enough. Sure as sunshine daisies, it was the third bad omen of the morning. There was no more ignoring it.

Even townsfolk who didn't believe in magic knew what a flooding meant: someone was about to return.

She slowed down, her tires sluicing through the muddy water, her knuckles white against the steering wheel.

Cindy McGillicuddy, a neighbor from a few doors over, slowed down as she approached in her four-by-four truck, the back weighed down with a dozen bales of hay for the horses she kept. She rolled down her window and then pointed at the bridge.

"River flooded," Cindy said knowingly. She was a no-nonsense kind of woman, her six-foot frame built with solid farmwork muscle. And even she was worried about the flooding.

"I know." Sadie sighed.

"Maybe your brother is coming back, huh?" Cindy said hopefully. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

Sadie forced herself to smile, even though it felt tight against her teeth. Sure. Nice.

"Maybe. Either way, I'm sure everything'll be fine."

Sadie drove away, knowing that Cindy would spread the news far and wide. She took her duties as the town's resident busybody seriously. There wasn't a pie that Cindy's finger wasn't in, and if you needed help or information, she was always the first stop. She was a meddler, but in the way of a good fairy who secretly dropped off food for families that needed it or brought firewood to the elderly who were too weak to chop it themselves.

Everything is fine. It'll be fine, Sadie told herself again.

Sadie hated that word *fine*. It was a Band-Aid, a sugar-coated pill to mask the bitterness beneath. *Fine* was what you used when it was anything but. But fine was what she had to be because if it wasn't, everything would unravel. Sadie so often walked the line between who people expected her to be and who she really was, the lines blurred until sometimes she forgot who she actually wanted to be. But the townsfolk had expectations. And she liked to exceed those as often as possible.

Still, her fingers tingled with fear. Someone is returning.

Who, who? The question echoed through her head as she arrived at A Peach in Thyme, the café she owned with her grandmother. The day was still waking up, but her mind was already caught on the hamster wheel. The single word was like a constant drop of water as she started mixing up three batches of carrot-cake cookies with cream cheese frosting. The ginger would humble the eater while the carrots would take them back to their roots.

Maybe she had her brother in mind; maybe she didn't. At any rate, she'd timed everything perfectly, as she always did. The kitchen was warm and comforting as a hug, the smell of the oven heating up reminding her that everything would be okay. She settled into the noise. The *shick* of the whisk against the metal bowl, the slide of the baking tray against the counter, the whip of the dish towel as she settled it over her shoulder. The repetition and ritual soothed the constant stream of persistent thoughts. The unwanted, obtrusive worries that only went away when she was lost in the rhythm of movements and measurements.

But when the first batch of cookies came out so spicy that she had to spit a mouthful out in the sink, a tingling began in her toes and worked its way up her body. She tried to brush it off by throwing a dash of ginger over her shoulder and dabbing lavender oil behind her ears, but it clung firm. The rituals weren't working. The images kept slithering in. The flooding river. The snake and the crow on the road.

"Rule number six," Sadie groaned. One of the more unfortunate rules her grandmother had pressed into her since childhood. Seven bad omens in a row meant a nightmare was around the corner. And she'd just reached bad omen number four.

Sadie had learned the rules of Revelare magic while growing up at her grandmother's feet, her grubby little toddler hands searching for earthworms as Gigi explained why mustard seed helped people talk about their feelings and how star anise could bond two people together. The sweet tang of tangerine rinds scented the air as her little fingernails were perpetually stained orange.

And always, Gigi warned her how their creations would speak to them. If you were in love, things tended to turn out too sweet. If dinner was bland, you needed some adventure. And if you burned a dessert—well, something wicked this way comes.

Sadie listened to those lessons among the bitter rutabagas and wild, climbing sweet peas, drinking in every word, and letting them take root in her heart. She grew up comfortable with the knowledge that she was strange, weaving the magic around her like ribbons on a maypole.

Now, she made her living from selling that strange. A little dash of dreams in the batter and a small drop of hope in the dough. The magic had been in her veins for so long, sometimes she forgot who she was without it. Like layers of phyllo dough, they were nearly impossible to separate.

Gigi had arrived and was in the front, "pottering about" as she called it. Sadie could hear the crinkle of plastic wrap being taken off pitchers. The clink of jars bumping into each other. The common little noises that turned the café into a symphony. The cookies, perfectly spiced this time, were fresh out of the oven for the early customers, the sweet scent beckoning them in like a childhood memory. Mason jars filled with fresh lavender and wild buttercups dotted the tables, and the pot of crystalized ginger sugar was turned just so toward the pitcher of hazelnut-infused cream.

The glass case brimmed with orange-essence croissants sprinkled with candied zest, the card in front reading, "Will cause enthusiasm, encouragement, and success." Its neighbor, the fruit and basil tartlets that glistened like a long-forgotten dream read, "Use for good wishes, love, and serious

intent." And the cinnamon streusel cake that some locals swore would turn your day lucky had a card that simply said, "Stability." Generations ago, the townsfolk would have rebuked or shunned such blatant displays of magic. Now, even if they didn't understand it, they welcomed it with relish and a rumbling stomach. It was part of a routine that had woven itself into the DNA of Sadie's days. And it was about to begin again.

Sadie excelled at routine. The tiny town of Poppy Meadows, much like Sadie herself, ran like clockwork. All up and down Main Street lights were clicking on, tills were being counted, and "Closed" signs were rattling against the glass as they itched to be flipped. She settled into the rhythm, her shoulders relaxing as she scanned the wooden walkway connecting the hodge-podge of brick-front buildings. Her eyes traveled to the end of the street, where a nineteenth-century, steepled white church stood. Its stained-glass windows, which local legend claimed caught prayers in the wind, were casting jewels of light on the sidewalk, when a figure caught her eye. No. It couldn't be—

"Sweetheart," Gigi hollered in her foghorn voice.

"Coming!" Sadie called quickly, stomach churning as she shook herself out of the past and pushed through the double doors into the kitchen. Absolutely not. It was impossible. And much like everything else in her life, she shut the door on the thought. The possibility of who it might be. She'd trained herself to take every thought captive, shoving them away where they were safe in darkness. Otherwise, they'd spiral out of control into full-blown anxiety. It didn't always work. Even now the tightness was squeezing her chest again.

"Sugar, if you don't move this honking bag of flour, one of us is going to trip and break our neck." With Gigi, someone was always going to break something, get a "crick," or "ruin their lovely hands."

"Maybe some necks deserve to be broken, Gigi," Sadie answered sweetly, hoisting the twentyfive-pound bag of flour and settling it against her hip.

"Stop that or I'll pop you one. I know when you're talking about Seth. You get that mean little gleam in your eye."

Before Sadie could answer, she tripped on the rubber mat that lined the floor and watched, as though in slow motion, as the flour cascaded against the ground and billowed into a cloud of white.

A mess in the kitchen was bad omen number five.

"You little pissant!" Gigi laughed with her deep smoker's rumble. Gigi—a nickname that made her grandmother sound much more French and much less feisty than she actually was—shook her head. Her short hair was a cotton-candy puff, perfectly curled as always and a peculiar shade just between rust and copper.

"I know, I know. '*Disaster follows me around like stupidity follows a drunk,*" Sadie quoted, gritting her teeth as she secured the top of the flour.

"Says who?" Gigi demanded, rounding on Sadie with a hand on her hip and a look that threatened trouble.

Sadie shrugged.

"That brother of yours isn't too old to have his mouth washed out with soap." Gigi sighed.

"But he'd have to actually be here in order for you to do that." Her voice went flat as oat cakes as she absentmindedly smoothed her apron.

"Don't go down that road, sugar," Gigi said as Sadie's eyes slid into the past. "Whoever digs a pit'll fall right into it. It wasn't your fault."

"I'm sure he'd say differently," Sadie said with pursed lips.

"That boy has got his own demons to fight," Gigi said. "And he will. Now, I'll get this cleaned up before we open while you go wipe that mess off yourself."

At the bathroom sink, Sadie rinsed her mouth and tried to finger-comb the flour out of her long auburn hair. She hoped for the best, refusing to glance in the mirror, as that was only to be done at dawn, midday, or dusk, for fear of what else might appear in the reflection. It was one of the many

oddities that were as sure as sunshine in the Revelare family, like burying found pennies in the garden at midnight, always wearing green in some form or another, and never whistling indoors. These were truths that Gigi had taught Sadie from the cradle.

The bell tinkled merrily as Sadie opened the front door and stood there a moment, letting the last of the morning chill clear her mind. She could smell waffle cones from the ice-cream parlor a few stores down on the right, and bacon wafting across the street from the diner. The half wine barrel full of marigolds on the sidewalk swayed in a sleepy morning hello. The streetlamps winked out, one in particular blinking a few times, as though sending her Morse code. Her shoulders loosened. Even without magic, this would still be the most perfect place on earth to her.

Just as she flipped the sign to "Open," Bill Johnson stood at the threshold, his kind face lined and worn with a smile that fell into place like it was meant to be there. He was a little younger than Gigi and held a special place in Sadie's heart for the simple fact that he was secretly in love with her grandmother. His flannel shirt, fresh and clean as always, hung loosely on his lanky frame. His shaggy, grayed hair gleamed smooth in the morning light but failed to hide his large ears that stuck out like jug handles.

"Morning, Sadie," he said, ducking his head.

"Good morning, Bill. What'll it be for you this morning?" Sadie asked warmly, walking behind the counter while making sure her apron was tied securely in place.

"What's Gigi Marie recommend?" he asked, staring behind the counter, as though his eyes could drill a hole through to the kitchen.

"She recommends you mind your own taste buds, you big galoot," Gigi called from the back.

"Surprise me, then," he said with an indulgent smile.

Sadie, her back straight and shoulders squared, poured his coffee: black with two sugars, because that part of his order never changed. Then she cut him a slice of peach mascarpone pie and put it in a to-go container.

"And what does this do?"

"If anything has been ailing you, you'll feel right as rain today." Sadie grinned. "And it might just give you a bit of extra energy, to boot."

"I could use it." Bill raised his eyes to the heavens.

"Old Bailer?" Sadie guessed, and Bill nodded. The restoration of the local landmark had been experiencing some unexpected setbacks.

"That place is twelve thousand square feet of trouble," he said right before his eyes swiveled to Gigi like a magnet. Her grandmother stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. He cleared his throat and bid them both a good morning before leaving, but not before Sadie saw the flush that colored his cheeks.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?" Sadie demanded with a grin. "Poor Bill has been sweet on you for ages. Why can't you be nicer to him?"

"Hush," Gigi barked with harsh laughter, "Nobody's after a doddery old fool like me. And don't you pretend like half the young men in this town aren't pining away for you, Revelare name or no. Why do you think that boy proposed to you?"

Just then, they both shivered as the back of their necks grew warm. They looked up to see Ryan Wharton walking by. As he caught Sadie's eye, he gave her a sad smile and a half wave before trudging on. He was the temptation Sadie had almost given into. Not out of love—nothing like it. But comfort. Companionship. Someone to hold her hand or listen to the story of her day. In the end, though, it wasn't fair to him. He deserved more than lukewarm affection, especially since he'd been in love with Sadie since they were in grade school. Her need to do the right thing was greater than her desire for the relationship. She'd wished, more than once, that she could do something for herself, no matter the consequence of injustice. But the guilt always ate at her before she could follow through.

"Speak of the devil." Gigi laughed with indulgence. "None of the boys around here are good enough for you. Because that's what they are—boys."

"It's a good thing I'm not in the market, then," Sadie said drily, pouring herself another cup of coffee. She added a blend of cinnamon and sweetened German cocoa and swirled the spoon around thoughtfully.

"I've told you a hundred times. Love is more important than magic, sugar." And Gigi, who was never prone to displays of physical affection, laid a gentle hand on Sadie's cheek for the briefest of moments.

"Easy for you to say. You don't have a curse that'll take yours away," Sadie said, sliding an arm around her grandmother. "Honey, I've got curses coming out my ears." "You do?" Sadie asked, startled.

"Never you mind." Gigi pulled her in for a hug and patted her waist. "Now, get back there and finish those cookies before I sugar 'em to death."

Sadie hurried to her dough, checking the timer as she did and wondering what kind of curses Gigi was talking about and what had brought on the physical display of affection. With eight minutes left, she gave the frosting a contemplative stir.

Heartbreak for Sadie wasn't a passing folly, to be recovered from with time and chocolate and tears. Because of her curse, it could take everything from her. Which made falling in love a risk that wasn't worth taking.

Something drew her to the oven despite the six minutes left on the timer. Peering in, panic scorched down her body like chili flakes when she saw the cookies were starting to burn at the edges. The message was clear as cold ice: *"Something wicked this way comes."*

"No, no, no," she whispered, hastily grabbing the nearest dishtowel. But the pan burned her hand through the fabric.

She yelped and dropped it on the stovetop with a reverberating clang. Someone, or something, had turned the oven up to five hundred degrees. She waved the dishtowel frantically, trying to fan away any scent of the evidence, because if Gigi caught so much as a whiff, she'd banish Sadie from the kitchen for the day.

She hurriedly scraped the burned cookies into the sink and turned on the garbage disposal. A familiar fire was burning along her veins, and her fist ached to hit something. The sixth bad omen. The sachet of lavender and buckbean she kept in her apron pocket was doing little to keep her calm the way it was supposed to.

In front of her, peppered on the countertop and the long wall shelves, she eyed her canisters. Each one had a label, written by Gigi. There was no cinnamon, basil, clove, or marjoram. Instead, "Youth" sat next to "Friendship," while "Love," "Kindness," and "Forgetfulness" were relegated to their own section. "Stability," "Health," and "Fertility" kept "Good Wishes" company, while "Misfortune" was pushed to the back like a dark secret.

Sadie reached for the glass jars labeled "Traditions" and "Protection." She inhaled the scent of freshly ground cinnamon before sprinkling some into the dough. Traditions—would this do the trick?

With careful fingers, she grabbed a pinch of salt and whispered a quick blessing over it before dashing it into the bowl, hoping it would keep whatever was coming at bay.

Sadie stirred the ingredients in with her wooden spoon, carved by hand from the white oak tree in the forest behind Gigi's backyard. Her grandfather had loved wood carving in his spare time. He had passed away when the twins were six, and she didn't remember much about him other than his famous pastrami sandwiches and the little wood figurines he'd sculpt for her. He had traveled a lot for work as a technician and would always bring Gigi a small collector spoon from whatever state he'd visited. Sadie had loved those little spoons, tracing her finger over the intricate filigree or studying the resin design. She hadn't thought of those spoons in years.

"Querido amado." A high, musical voice barged into her sanctuary just as she slid the baking tray into the oven. "Did a tornado hit in here?"

Sadie turned and frowned at the raven-haired woman. Raquel, her best friend since childhood, scanned the room with wide, expressive eyes. Even when she was still, she somehow seemed to be in motion. Fingers or foot always tapping, eyes so thoughtful you could practically hear her talking even when she was silent.

"I thought I banned you from coming in here if you couldn't say anything nice," Sadie retorted, holding up her wooden spoon like a sword.

"I'm not worried until I see the fire in your eyes." Raquel laughed. "That's when I know we've really got a problem."

Sadie hugged her best friend and then pinched her on the arm.

"Ow!" Raquel cried, her face drawn into a frown.

"Pinching is my love language." Sadie shrugged, checking the timer.

"What's wrong?" Raquel demanded, leaning against the counter and eyeing her best friend, waiting.

Sadie's lips pursed. She never could hide anything from Raquel and found it rather inconvenient the way best friends could see into you even when you refused to look yourself.

"Hello!" Raquel snapped her fingers. "You in there?"

"I'm thinking."

"You're always thinking. Sometimes it's healthy to just say what's on your mind, you little control freak." Sadie laughed.

"I'm just—you know, just wallowing in a bit of self-pity. Freaking out about being alone for the rest of my life. I had a minor panic attack over toothbrushes this morning. So, you know, the usual."

"Were the toothbrushes on fire? Did they insult you?"

"More the fact that there was only one."

"Exactly how many toothbrushes do you need?" Raquel demanded, arching a perfectly lined eyebrow.

"I'll only ever have one. You know, because I'll always be brushing alone." Sadie dragged a finger along the countertop, trying and failing to stop the ache that bloomed in her chest.

"Do you want me to brush my teeth with you? All you have to do is ask, you know."

"Shut up." Sadie laughed again. "It's just the curse," she started.

"The curse, the curse," Raquel chattered. "When are you going to let that go? Listen, you're not alone. Nobody is abandoning you. Your brother is going to come back. Gigi's not going anywhere. Neither am I. You run a successful business. You're loved. We're all here to support you." The words came out in a rush, like they'd been rehearsed. For all Sadie knew, maybe they had. She wondered when she'd become the friend who had to be talked off a ledge so often that Raquel had a speech for it.

Sadie took a deep breath and let the words wash over her. Reassure her. But for some reason, they couldn't pierce completely through her armor. Because the truth of the matter was that Seth *wasn't* back, and even if he did return, there was no guarantee he wouldn't vanish again. Gigi wouldn't be around forever. They'd both leave. Just like her mother. Just like Jake.

"And now that I've buttered you up . . ." Raquel started.

"Oh no." Sadie groaned, again folding the thoughts in half and tucking them away. "What are you roping me into this time?"

"Let me start off with the good news." Raquel was practically beaming. "They said yes!"

"Did you propose to someone I should I know about?"

"Hilarious. And no. You're the only one for me. But the school board said yes to *Carrie*!" she squealed. "I had to sign an agreement swearing I'd personally clean the blood off the stage, but it's totally worth it."

Sadie laughed. Raquel was the local high school music teacher and always directed the musicals.

Sadie had been cornered into her fair share of sitting through hours of long auditions and backstage teenage meltdowns.

"What do you need me for?" she asked with resignation.

"You're an angel, you know that? I was wondering if you and Gigi could help with the gym costumes. You know, the toga-like ones?"

"Your parents own literally the only costume store in town! They don't have anything?"

"Um, excuse me. The Mad Hatter is a costume and *tux rental* store. We also do prom dresses. And no, they don't have what I need. I was also thinking maybe you'd want to host a bake sale or something to raise funds?" Raquel smiled obscenely.

"Okay, okay," Sadie said, laughing. "Done."

"Now I just need someone to help me with the lighting. It needs some strong design. Know of anyone who could help?" Before Sadie could answer, the air in the kitchen suddenly pulsed with an energy that felt like endless summer nights where anything was possible, or of first frost on Christmas morning. It was anticipation, pure and clean.

Sadie nervously wiped her hands on her apron again, her stomach dropping to her feet. The "Traditions" and "Protection" hadn't had time to bake through yet.

"No, no, no," Sadie moaned with a hand over her mouth. The noise of the world faded to a hum. It buzzed in her chest like a painful memory. The kitchen went eerily quiet, even the popping and creaking of the hot oven gone silent.

Beyond the double doors, something pulled her. Something warm that smelled like sweet summer peaches.

Pushing the door open a sliver, she peered out the front window. The hum turned into a roar, and her ears burned hot as she saw him.

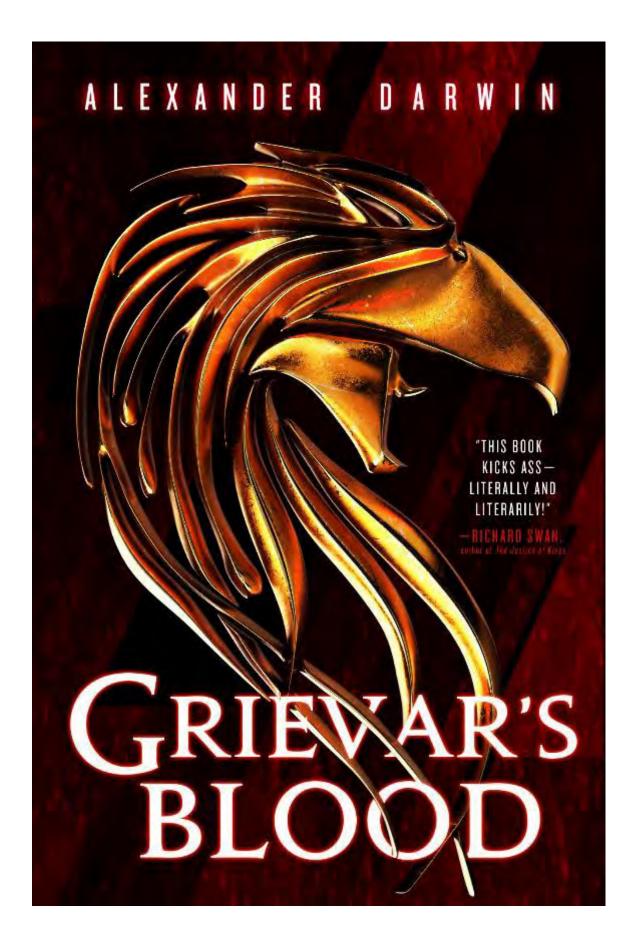
The omens. The flooded river. That quiet voice in her head snickering and whispering.

Jacob McNealy.

He stood on the sidewalk like a living, walking daydream. Her mouth went desert dry, and it was like she'd been thirsty for years and hadn't realized it. Looking at him was like stretching your limbs after a long nap.

The first heartbreak that had sparked her curse to life.

And seeing old sorrow before noon was the seventh bad omen. A nightmare was on its way.



GRIEVAR'S BLOOD (THE COMBAT CODES, BOOK 2) BY ALEXANDER DARWIN

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Paperback: 9780316493239 / \$19.99 eBook: 9780316493345 / \$9.99 Audiobook: 9781668633083 Pub Date: Dec 5, 2023 Publisher: Orbit (Hachette) <u>https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/alexander-darwin/grievars-blood/9780316493239/</u> ALEXANDER DARWIN is a second generation Vietnamese-Jewish-American author living in Boston with his wife and three daughters. Outside of writing, he teaches and trains martial arts (Brazilian Jiu Jitsu). He's inspired by old-school Hong Kong action flicks, jRPGs, underdog stories and bibimbap bowls. <u>https://www.combatcodes.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Ghosts

The Grievar who does not serve will be lost. All martial prowess shall be acquired for the purpose of serving the greater good of society, standing in the Circle in the stead of Lord or Nation. The Grievar who strays from the path of servitude will quickly find themselves stumbling in the thicket, tripped up by vice and lure.

Passage One, Ninth Precept of the Combat Codes

The eerie rays of the blackshift blanketed the Underground, sending most deepfolk homeward. Servicers, planters and diggers trudged back to their hovels, ready to sleep and begin again at the rise of the rubellium dawn.

Some deepfolk did not return home for blackshift. Some gambled and drank away their meager wages at the all-night Circles, where gaudy lights and raucous cheers advertised blood and glory. Some bit-rich patrons spent their nights within the Courtesan Houses under the hazy fog of honey-sweet perfumes and intoxicating neurogens.

Some did not have a home to return to.

A bottle clashed to the hard pavement, reflecting the neon glow of an overhead bar sign. The big man's head rocked to the side, his eyes rolling into his skull.

A street urchin scrunched his nose as he rifled through the unconscious man's pockets. He reached in close, getting a whiff of the sour ale and crusted bits of vat-meat entangled in the man's wiry beard.

The kid's dirt-covered fingers pinched something hard: a square onyx-piece. He smiled and pulled away.

"Big Grievar..." the boy whispered. "You be stinkin'."

Suddenly, a gnarled root of a hand latched on to the kid's wrist. A single piercing yellow eye shone out from the cowl of a cloak.

"Agh!" the urchin gasped, dropping the onyx bit and turning tail into the alley's shadows.

The big man moaned. He looked down at the onyx before hurling it after the kid.

"Take the darkin' thing!" the man slurred. "Buy me another drink while you're busy thieving my bits!"

He stumbled to his feet and used the wall to steady himself, before pulling down his trousers and releasing his bladder.

"Darkin' kids..." he muttered as the sound of his spray echoed in the back alley.

Another shadow joined the man's on the brick wall beneath the neon lights.

"Come back for more, thief?" the man growled. "Think I'm so slow I won't rattle your head this time?"

He pulled his pants up and turned around. It was not the street kid standing in front of him. His eyes widened.

"Hello, Murray."

Murray zipped his trousers up, uncaring that he was standing in a puddle of his own piss. He stared at the old man in the alleyway.

Farmer.

"Don't care if you're a darkin' ghost, give a man some privacy while he takes a piss next time." Murray slurred the words, still feeling the drink in him.

He stumbled away from the neon glow of the bar sign, toward the darkness of the alley where the Underground's sweepers pushed discarded trash.

He began to dig through a pile while the old man stood silently and watched.

"Think you know something about me?" Murray turned and spat as he tossed aside a chewed-up fruit husk.

The ghost was still there.

"Wherever the dark you been, don't care," Murray said.

Farmer returned Murray's stare from beneath the cowl of his cloak. He raised a hand to his mouth and barked a wet cough.

The old man looked frail, wasted away.

"I know I look like shit, but you've got me beat," Murray growled as he turned and set back to digging through the trash heap.

He tossed a corroded can into the shadows, and a swarm of bats fluttered from their roost toward the cavern ceiling thousands of feet above.

"There we go!" Murray yelled as he dug his hand into the refuse down to the elbow and pulled out the black onyx bit.

Farmer stared at him, unmoving.

"I'm going to get a drink," Murray said as he brushed past the old man, stepping back under the neon light and into the dingy bar beyond it.

Murray walked straight to the counter and slammed the onyx bit onto it.

"Same stuff."

The Grunt barkeep sniffed the air before sliding an ale to Murray. "You smell like a Deep rat nest." "Don't tell me you care, Tlik," Murray downed half the glass and slouched forward to watch the blurry SystemView feed set above.

A cloak brushed against his arm. Farmer sat beside him, the old man's eyes tracking Murray from beneath his cowl.

"Don't darkin' judge me, ghost," Murray said. "I know where you've been. I know what you've done."

Farmer didn't say anything; he sat there. Just like the way he used to fight.

Farmer had trained Murray along with the rest of the Citadel's veteran Grievar Knights. The man would wait for the slightest opening and give nothing before. And then it'd be over.

"You don't think I know what you're doing?" Murray yelled as he stood, towering above both the barkeep and Farmer. "You think I give a shit you've come back from the dead?"

"Settle down, Pearson," the Grunt said wearily. "Don't want to have to ask you to leave again. Why don't you take that table over in the corner?"

Murray grabbed his ale and stalked across the dim room, nearly empty besides a pair of hawkers dealing at the far end of the bar. He threw his bulk into a seat at the corner table and called back. "Two more, Tlik."

Farmer drifted across the floor and sat beside Murray. He pulled the cowl from his head.

Though Murray certainly wasn't a specimen of health, he couldn't help but frown, looking at his old coach. This was the man that had trained Murray, taught him nearly all he knew, acted a father to

him.

Farmer's cheekbones seemed to want to burst from his ashen skin. The burning eyes Murray remembered were now dulled like candles starved for air.

"What was it like?" Murray asked. "Being in there."

"You've trained in the Sim." Farmer's voice was parched, barely a whisper. "You know what these machinations are like."

"I've trained in the Sim, but I've not lived more than a decade of my life in it." Dormant anger bubbled up within Murray. "I've not stepped into the darkness, floating there in some tube, letting the Bit-Minders have their way with my path."

Farmer broke into a spasm of coughing. He took a sip of the ale Tlik had placed on the table to calm the fit.

"It seems a long time I was gone, but within the darkness, it was only a heartbeat," Farmer said. "To me, it was only yesterday when I was at the Citadel in my prime, leading the Knights alongside Memnon."

"How...how the dark did you get out?" Murray asked, downing his second ale, not knowing if he wanted to know the answer.

"The Cradle where I trained the brood," Farmer said. "The Minders deemed it to be a flawed environment. They told me it was unlikely to turn out champions as the program was designed for. And so, they released me from my service."

Murray's grip tightened on his glass. "I know. One of them, thing named Zero, told me as much. I paid him a visit at the Codex surface-side. He said the Daimyo planned on deleting the program, getting rid of the kids hooked up to it still."

Farmer nodded. "This is true."

Murray's jaw clenched, the anger bubbling up again. "Always the same. Treating these kids like things to be bought and sold, tossed out when they aren't needed. And you, right in the middle of it. I used to admire you. I used to—"

"—I accept my fault," Farmer said. "My intentions were to help guide the kids within the Cradle, teach them the Codes so that they might be more than killing machines. But I was misguided in what I could do in such a place. I did not understand what little effect my nurture would have when the Minders were in control of the environment."

"Maybe death would have been best for them," Murray growled. "Better than floating in a tube, getting used by all."

"Perhaps," Farmer whispered.

"Why did you come here?" Murray was weary. He stood, wanting to get out, away from this ghost. The old man hacked again. "Murray, I'm working for one of the Lords down here—"

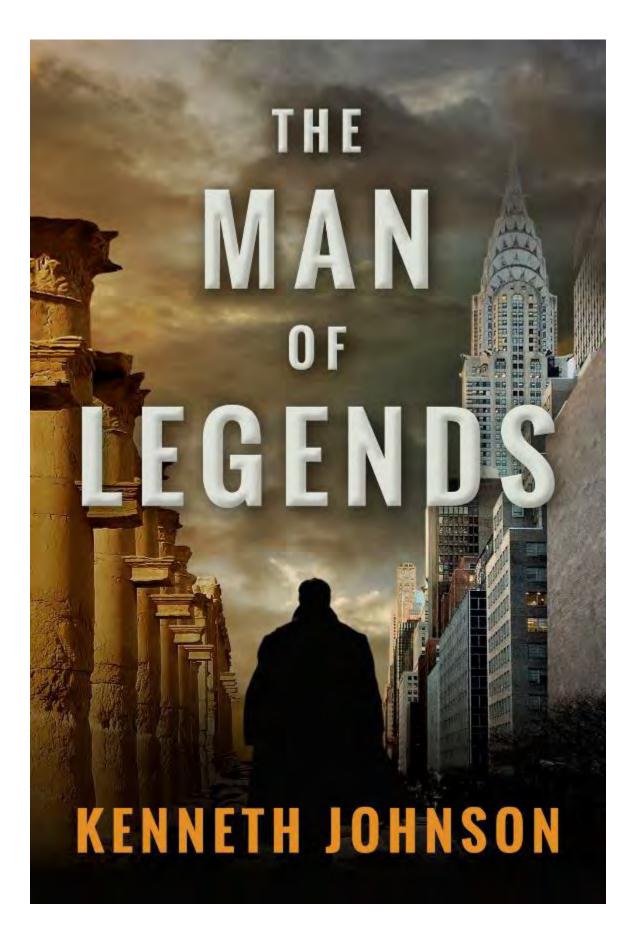
Murray slammed his empty glass down on the table, shattering it. "You're a darkin' merc now, working for some soap-eater? Farmer, the greatest coach to grace the Citadel, now wiping some Lord's ass?"

"And you?" Farmer asked, staring up at Murray's swaying body. "I came to see you because I heard you'd come Deep. I know why you came down here, Murray. But look at yourself. You're a mess."

"Forget me," Murray whispered, staring off into the shadows of the bar. "Dark it all. I'm done with it."

He began to walk toward the door.

"Murray!" Farmer barked after him. "The path still lies before you. The Codes are still within you." Murray didn't turn around.



The Man of Legends by Kenneth Johnson

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Award-winning science-fiction mastermind Kenneth Johnson blends epic adventure, romance, and evocative drama into an intense supernatural thriller rooted in one of the great untold legends of human history.

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Paperback: 9781477819685 / \$14.95 Kindle: 9781477809556 / \$4.99 Audiobook: 9781536630749 / ASIN: B071HXDT37 Pub Date: July 2017 Publisher: 47North, https://amazonpublishing.amazon.com/47north.html - https://www.apub.com/ Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/Man-Legends-Kenneth-Johnson/dp/1477819681 **KENNETH JOHNSON** has been a successful writer-producer-director of film and television for more than four decades. Creator of the landmark original miniseries V, he also produced *The Six Million Dollar Man* and created iconic Emmy-winning shows such as *The Bionic Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Alien Nation*. He has directed numerous TV movies and the feature films *Short Circuit 2* and *Steel*. Johnson has received multiple Saturn Awards from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films, as well as the Sci-Fi Universe Lifetime Achievement Award and the prestigious Founders Award from the Viewers for Quality Television. His novels include *The Man of Legends* and *The Darwin Variant* (47North), *Holmes Coming* (Blackstone), and V: *The Second Generation* (TOR). He has presented his unique graduate-level seminar, The Filmmaking Experience, at UCLA, USC, NYU, Loyola, New York Film Academy, the National Film and Television School (UK), and many others. https://ghliterary.com/clients/kenneth-johnson/ * https://www.kennethjohnson.us/

A VERY IMPORTANT NOTE

To each of the people who allowed me to record their eyewitness accounts of the mysterious and frightening supernatural adventure we all shared, I must again express my indebtedness. Their ages at the time are listed, and I endeavored to transcribe their voices and speech patterns exactly as I heard them.

Their experiences were interwoven with my own account of the astonishing and dangerous events to which I was both a witness and a participant. Together with mine, they formed an oral documentation that became the original *New York Times* edition of this book, published sixteen years ago.

I was, and remain, humbled by the lovely reception which that publication received from both the public and my peers.

But I was always frustrated that a vital element of this history was missing: it had been impossible at the time to get a first-person narrative from the remarkable man who was the principal player in all that occurred, a man who, on a great number of occasions, had altered the course of human history.

Then, only a few months ago, I was amazed when he reappeared in my life. And I was blessed to receive from him a copy of his own perspective of those incredible days.

His generosity allowed me to entirely reedit and greatly expand my earlier publication. His invaluable material has been blended into all I'd previously gathered to create this comprehensive and definitive new edition.

The words that begin on the next page, and are interspersed on so many new pages herein, are those of the subject himself and have been faithfully rendered. For sharing his side of one of the most unique stories the world has ever known, I am grateful to him, and I will be, eternally.

> *Jillian Guthrie New York City, 2017*

CHAPTER ONE

Will, age 33...

The images were so vivid, so tangible, so minutely detailed, that all of my senses confirmed I was in the midst of total reality. It never occurred to me I was dreaming.

The overlapping sequences varied wildly in time and place, but they were laced to one another by a strong common thread, by the recurrent theme of my nightmares: once again I was fleeing to avoid capture.

Lightning flashed outside the massive stained-glass rose window portraying Saint John's vision of the Apocalypse. I heard the voices of the two priests pursuing me. The younger cried out in French, "Stop him!" The older shouted hoarsely in Latin, "He has opened the sacred reliquary! Touched the treasure! He must not escape!" But I was determined to do so, yet again.

I lifted the hem of my coarse black monk's robe so it would not catch in my sandals as I rushed desperately up the marble steps from the dank crypt below. Reaching the top of the staircase, gasping for breath, I ran out from beneath the rough-hewn wooden scaffolding designed to support artisans during their construction labors. It was tied together with thick ropes and lined the walls of the dark, deserted Gothic cathedral.

More flashes of lightning from outside blasted into the lofty church's spectacular interior with momentarily blinding illumination. Rain gusted down through the stone tracery of the fifteen magnificent but unfinished windows that surrounded me, towering fifty feet overhead. I remember thinking that in another year or so, perhaps by AD 1248, their openings would be filled with stunning stained glass, and the interior of Sainte-Chapelle de Paris would remain dry during a storm. But on this night the cathedral was still open to the elements, wet and miserable, chilling me to the bone. The rainfall had extinguished most of the torches, creating a smoky haze. My thick wool robe was heavy with the rain and smelled like a wet sheep.

I blinked from the drops of rain spattering my face as I strained to run through the vast, vaulted sanctuary. Some dark, invisible force made me feel as though I were trying to run underwater. Struggling past the central altar, I heard discordant shouts from other angry voices and the running footfalls of King Louis's royal guards approaching from the palace cloister to the north. The guards had been roused by the cries of the two priests pursuing me. The younger one reached the top of the marble steps behind me, shouting angrily as he ran, "I command you to stop!"

But I did not. I reached the lofty cathedral's main entrance, the Portal of the Last Judgment. As I lifted the massive iron locking bar, I glanced up at the statue of lithe Saint Etienne, shadowy within his niche above. Graceful Etienne gazed down upon me, then, during a flash of lightning, I saw his pale marble face come alive with a nightmarish, eerie smile that raised the hair on the back of my neck. His shining eyes followed me as I pulled open the ornately carved portal door beneath him and rushed through it into ...

The Red Garter Saloon. The 1859-era barroom was packed with boisterous prospectors plus the requisite con men, gamblers, and whores hoping to relieve the miners of their hard-earned silver or gold dust.

The surreal transition didn't seem unnatural as I looked around, panting from exertion. Brightly lighted by candelabras and kerosene lamps, the Red Garter was typical of many saloons in Nevada's burgeoning boomtowns, but the amazing Comstock Lode had made Virginia City a beguiling destination.

I hurried away from the back door, pushing through the scruffy prospectors of mixed ethnicity and age. Unshaved, in serviceable clothes and muddy boots, most wore sidearms. Still breathing heavily, I caught a glimpse of myself in the gilded mirror behind the bar and saw I fit right in: my clothes were like theirs; a four-day beard stubbled my face; from under my sweat-stained cowboy hat light-brown hair hung shoulder length and itched because I needed delousing; a long-barreled Colt Navy revolver was holstered on my hip. I was Caucasian, stood five foot ten, looking as though I'd weathered some thirty-three rough years.

The people and images swirled weirdly around me. I hurried past a piano player in a dented bowler with a cigar clenched in his wickedly smiling, stained teeth while he pounded out "Camptown Races" on a tinny piano. Boozy clientele hung about his battered upright, adding their inebriated voices; several spat with uneven accuracy at one of the many spittoons on the pitted wooden floor. I squinted from the thick tobacco smoke, the breath of cheap alcohol, and the sweet or very sour smells of wildly divergent hygiene.

"Hey! W.J.!" I saw the smiling, bushy-haired reporter, Sam, shouting to me from across the room, waving me over. But I kept moving. Casting a furtive glance back over my shoulder to see if my pursuers had yet followed me into the saloon, I bumped into a full-bodied, redheaded prostitute with a beauty mark on her chin. I inhaled the fragrance of her rose water and saw the flesh of her bosom blossoming upward from her flouncy scarlet bodice. She had a good deal of eye shadow, rouge, and mileage.

Her fine white teeth gleamed as she grinned at me with come-hither, wanton eyes and murmured in a deep, near-masculine voice, "How about a return match, Will?"

I waved her off. "Sorry, Rebecca." I elbowed on through the jostling mob toward the saloon's entrance, but sensing something, I glanced sideways through the cheery men and painted women. I saw that sitting at a rustic gaming table was a fastidious gambler wearing a black suit and ruffled white shirt with a black silk string tie.

With a swoosh, everyone else suddenly grew hazy. Their voices melded and echoed as from a great distance, and the room darkened. The gambler and I were suddenly the only two clearly visible in a cloudy limbo. He expertly shuffled cards with elegantly manicured fingers. The gambler was a sleek young man in his mid-twenties, clean shaven with neatly trimmed dark hair and brows. His faintly smiling eyes were riveted upon mine in greeting. We knew each other, sharing a history that was long and most certainly out of the ordinary. The gambler nodded toward an empty chair at his gaming table, inviting me to sit. His intense gaze gave me a chill yet was also very seductive. Then I heard a shout from the back door behind me.

"There he is, Sheriff! That's the man!"

The boisterous saloon burst fully alive again around me. Turning quickly, I saw a Catholic priest pointing at me across the jovial crowd. The sheriff and his deputy drew their revolvers, pushed past the priest, and began battering their way through the tangled mob toward me.

I shot a last glance in the direction of the smiling gambler, but he had disappeared. I turned and ran toward the saloon's front entrance as the sheriff fired his pistol upward, shouting, "Don't let that man escape! There's a big reward!" Suddenly I felt a dozen hands grasping at me, but I ducked, spun, and twisted with surprising agility, shouldering my way through the swinging doors.

As I bolted outside, my head was spinning. Fighting dizziness, I registered that I was wearing a three-piece 1930s business suit and a white Panama hat, and carrying an old leather briefcase. Then I saw the big black Packard, gleaming under the streetlamps, speeding up Chicago's rain-slicked 18th Street right toward me. One of the Boss's fedora-wearing enforcers leaned out the front passenger window, another out the back window, both aiming tommy guns that began blazing at me. I opened my mouth and screamed, but no sound emerged.

I tried to dive for cover behind an iron mailbox, but my move was too late. The Thompson submachine gun had originally been named the Annihilator. And for good reason, I realized, as a half dozen .45-caliber ACP bullets blew through the briefcase I was clutching and continued through my worsted suit and deep into my body. The impact of the hot lead blew me backward as it cut down across me in a diagonal line starting at my left collarbone. Though the bullets came nearly instantaneously, I felt the first slug shatter my clavicle and the second go cleanly through my left lung,

ricocheting off the brick building behind me. The third shot splintered my sternum and must have also grazed my aorta, because I saw my blood immediately fountain out. The next slug entered at my navel and slammed into my spinal column, paralyzing me from the waist down. The fifth and sixth ripped through the soft tissues of my spleen and liver. The pain was overwhelming. The world around me became even more illusory.

Blood poured from my wounds as I fell into the filthy water streaming along the gutter. Barely conscious, my cheek against the gritty pavement, the image of the wet Chicago street swimming in my head, I caught a quick glimpse of someone watching sadly from the shadows of an alley. It seemed to be the same dark-haired, sleek young man from the saloon, but now in a smartly tailored 1930s suit with spats. His eyes were on mine as he shook his head at my plight.

I heard the big Packard's tires screeching in protest. From my sideways perspective on the pavement, I saw the driver swerve through a 180-degree turn in the next intersection at State Street. I was vaguely aware of echoing screams from pedestrians as they leapt out of the car's path. The gangsters were coming back to finish me.

Struggling against the agony of mortal wounds, my flowing blood mixing with the gutter's polluted stream, I clawed at the rough macadam, pulling my battered body toward a steaming manhole that was partially open. I heard the Packard's throaty engine accelerating toward me from a block away.

I pushed at the manhole cover, which seemed impossibly heavy, but I knew I had to keep the bullet-ridden briefcase out of their hands. I got the weighty manhole cover slightly more open and shoved the briefcase in ahead of myself just as the machine guns started snapping like a string of firecrackers. The bullets ricocheted off the pavement, blowing chips of concrete off the curb. Though my legs were numb, I felt the punctuating pressures as several slugs struck and cracked the bones inside them. My mouth was filling with blood, choking me, as I grasped the edge of the open manhole and made one final agonizing exertion to pull myself headfirst into it. I fell downward into the darkness...

And landed atop the corpses of four ragged men, two women, and three children that were strewn haphazardly in the medieval wooden cart. I saw that their eyes were rolled back sightlessly, their skin was mottled with black pustules and running sores, and their gaping mouths showed blackened tongues, marking them as the latest victims of the plague. I hazily remembered that the pustules had been developing in my own groin and armpits. The pain was intense, consuming.

Lying helplessly in the wagon, clad in a tattered brown monk's robe, I heard the heavy clip-clop of a horse's hooves on cobblestone. Turning my head, I saw that the old wooden cart was being slowly pulled by a decrepit mare along a dark, bleak eastern European street. Acrid smoke was drifting. I hazily glimpsed ragged people with torches setting fire to the shacks that served as peasant dwellings in about AD 850.

I tried to drag my agonizing body to the edge of the cart, but another dead body landed atop me, heaved onto the cart by two burly men with rags tied around their faces. I fought the dizzying waves of pain, darkness, and nausea that coursed through me.

Then I sensed gravity changing. Instead of pulling from beneath me, gravity was suddenly over my head. My disordered mind indistinctly realized that the cart was being tipped, and I was sliding headfirst off of it, along with the corpses. I landed atop still more jumbled dead bodies at such an angle that I felt my neck crack. Almost immediately, another consignment of the limp, ragged deceased was unloaded into the crude pit, landing atop me. I was tightly pinioned. The weight on me was such that I could hardly draw a breath.

As I gasped, my nostrils caught the unmistakable scent of oil. Through one jaundiced eye, I saw by the flickering, nightmarish torchlight the villagers on the lip of the pit with their faces and hands swathed.

Suddenly I heard urgent shouts in Hungarian. "No! Wait!" From my half-inverted angle, I caught

sight of several Benedictine friars rushing onto the macabre scene. "If he is among them we must have him!"

"Too late," the nearest villager yelled back as he and others sloshed oil from rustic wooden buckets onto all the diseased bodies, of which I was the only living part.

The priests protested, shouting that they spoke with the full authority of Rome. Several of the locals grabbed and restrained them. One infuriated Benedictine bellowed, "I tell you we must have the bastard! His Holiness the Pope commands it!"

I saw a blurred shimmer of torches appear closer by as the villager responded curtly, "Tell His Holiness you were too late."

I tried to cry out, but my hoarse voice was too feeble to be heard. A torch landed upon the corpses near me. The oil ignited with a whoosh, and I was engulfed in searing flames.

A squealing, tortuous screech snapped my eyes open.

I blinked, thoroughly disoriented for a moment. I realized I had been dreaming and was wary that I still might be.

Then I glanced around, realizing I had dozed off while seated in the rapidly moving New York subway car on the number-nine train of the Broadway Line. It lurched sharply again, causing another screech of heavy metal wheels stressing against unyielding steel rails.

I drew a slow, grateful breath, relieved to be free from the grasp of my painful, recurrent, all-toovivid dreams.

Lights flashed by in the dark tunnel outside. The surface of the window beside me was deeply etched with late twentieth-century graffiti. I looked at my reflection in the distressed glass. In two ways it was quite different from my image in the Red Garter's mirror: I was clean shaven, and my brown hair was clean and much shorter, if still a bit scruffy and needing a little trim. But otherwise the face looking back at me was the same: that of an everyday man in his thirties, with features that I supposed some might compare to an old Roman statue. My nose was definitely of that variety, my forehead and cheekbones broad and more or less sturdy. My face had a healthy color with smile lines around the eyes. I actually had been smiling a good deal in recent days, days which—dark dreams aside—I felt held much positive promise.

My eyes were light brown, and I had often been told that there was something out of the ordinary about them—something indiscernible that occasionally people had characterized as either oddly arresting or somewhat unsettling.

I gazed into them myself for a moment longer, as though sharing with a close friend my optimism about the days immediately ahead. Then I looked around the jostling, half-full subway car at my fellow passengers, wondering how the events of the next few days might affect each of them. At least seven distinct variations of multiethnicity were represented, including an East Indian boy who was about six and spoke to his mother in a dialect I recognized as Gujarati. When his large and innocent brown eyes met mine, I winked at him and said hello in his native language. He shyly returned my smile.

Like the others around us, he was dressed as I was: for midwinter in New York. I wore faded jeans, a white wool turtleneck, sneakers that were comfortable for walking, and a warm navy-blue peacoat I had long since broken in.

I stretched a cramp out of my right leg, and my gaze fell upon the small brass rivet securing the pocket seam on my well-worn Levi's. A faint smile crept across my face as I recalled the first time I ever saw such a rivet on denim.

The subway loudspeaker interrupted my recollection, announcing the 116th Street station. The train decelerated to a squealing stop. The doors rattled and hissed open, and I stepped out onto the old tiled platform, very much enjoying the unique buzz of contemporary New York around me. I walked toward the exit stairs at the end. A beggar sat on the floor with his back to the wall, his tousled gray head slumped forward. I dropped some coins into the man's cup and continued down the

platform.

A clean-cut young black preacher wearing an inexpensive but cared-for suit handed out pamphlets nearby. He spoke cheerfully to passersby, saying, "You have only two days to get right with God, brothers and sisters! Two days until January first, when His Glory will finally be revisited upon us!" He reached out a pamphlet to me. "Here, brother, God bless you."

I received it with a polite smile and moved toward the exit. The spring in my step reflected the positive spirits that were coursing happily inside me. But as I approached the exit stairs, I glanced down the dark subway tunnel and slowed my pace. I sensed that something lurked deep within the tunnel's obscurity—something disquieting.

Was that a slender shadow I glimpsed moving past a distant yellow warning light in the dark tunnel? Did I really hear a faint whisper from a familiar voice saying something like, "Isn't it about time we talked?"

I paused, narrowing my eyes, but still unable to penetrate the darkness, to divine the presence I sensed down the tunnel.

All the while the young minister behind me continued passing out his pamphlets, saying, "Two days until the Son of God returns to judge the quick and the dead. Forty-eight hours until you will face blessed Redemption or eternal Damnation. Do not tarry, friends. He is coming."

His words distracted me from the tunnel's ominous darkness and brought some comfort. With a grateful heart I glanced back at the reverent minister, inhaled, and climbed the exit stairs toward the bright December sunlight.

CHAPTER TWO

Jillian Guthrie, age 27, journalist...

I was really pissed at my editor. About the only thing George hadn't messed with was my byline, which the typesetter at least managed to spell correctly this time: Jillian with a *J*, not a *G*.

Not that George's changes were all bad. Some of them, I grudgingly saw, actually improved the flow of the read. But I was still angry because he'd made other changes just for the sake of making changes. Justifying his damn job. I hated that shit. Different, but no better. I would have argued against them but hadn't had a chance to see them until the tabloid hit the streets that morning. I had just snagged a copy of the latest edition before heading up to 116th Street in the taxi.

It was the week after Christmas, 2000, so the seasonal decorations were still everywhere along Amsterdam Avenue.

I bailed out of the cab at 116th, stepping over the grungy remnants of gutter snow, and blinked when I saw my exact double staring back at me. Actually it was me, mirrored in a liquor store window, complete with grumbly face: shortish at five three; hair cropped in a wash-and-go do; figure kept trim by activity, nerves, and excessive caffeine; simple eyeglasses in thin wire frames, no contacts, my eyes were too dry. Normally I wore pants, but that day I was wearing a soft, loose skirt under my car coat to appear more feminine and accessible to the people I was en route to seduce.

I walked west along 116th at the brisk pace that was my norm. You snooze, you lose, in a New York minute. Clichéd, yes, but accurate. I tucked the tabloid under my arm while fumbling to pull out the address I had scribbled on the back of a Ray's Famous Pizza receipt. Then I ran headlong into someone.

He was a fortyish Latino with a round face and a drooping mustache; he gestured an apology and kept going. But I froze, snagged by the sharp memory of my childhood sidewalk in our low-rent area of Brooklyn.

I was five, zipping along on my trike in the spring sunshine when I collided with Mr. Ramirez. He

was a fortyish Mexican, with a round, cherubic face and a drooping mustache. He wore a neatly pressed and starched white shirt. He always did, every time I saw him afterward. But that was the first time. He smiled kindly and helped me up, speaking in Spanish-accented English: "Sorry, *chiquita*. Are you alright?"

Behind him, I saw a moving van unloading his belongings into a small house. My ever-friendly, petite Romanian mother smiled, extended her slender hand, and welcomed him to our neighborhood. I also vividly remembered Mr. Ramirez pressing her hand and whispering something confidentially into my mom's pretty ear. From her reaction, I knew it was flattery.

Standing there at 116th and Broadway on December 30, 2000, I felt the memory tighten my face, which made me grit my teeth. But the light changed, so I sucked it up and headed on to my appointment, walking west across Broadway, frowning.

Will...

I was cheerfully walking east across the Broadway intersection along with two dozen other pedestrians. I dodged between the numerous people walking in opposition. I noted that some were frowning or merely preoccupied with their various concerns, but others were like me: simply enjoying the ambience of the Upper West Side. Cloaked with Christmas decorations that sparkled in the clear December morning, the avenue was buzzing with the unique energy of quintessential New York: striving traffic moving in a herd, innumerable people heading in all directions, wafting scents of cinnamon and charred chestnuts, echoing music from various radios, all part of the ambience of the great city.

I inhaled deeply, enjoying the bracing, chilly air, blue sky, and bright sunlight on the many stillwhite patches of snow as I crossed onto the Columbia University campus. I felt an effervescent enthusiasm within my chest.

As I looked ahead, the particular configuration of the university buildings, the snow still blanketing much of the broad campus lawn, and a custodian pulling a trash cart toward me caused me to slow with déjà vu.

The campus momentarily became a snowy countryside in Germany; the custodian was a medieval peasant pulling a small hay cart toward me, smiling a friendly greeting. In the distance, I could see Altenburg Castle. Its tall central tower commanded a view across the snow-covered meadows where I stood and on to the distant bishopric at Bamberg.

As I came back into the moment, standing there at Columbia, I noted that an NYPD officer, rocking on his feet to keep the blood flowing, was taking my measure. Always wishing to avoid any questioning, I discretely continued across the campus, giving the appearance of someone who belonged there and was going about my business the same as the other people. The people who were normal. Unlike myself.

I saw an urbane young mother of East African descent talking on her cell phone, her breath making puffs in the cold air above the colorful scarf wrapped around her throat. Her two-year-old daughter sat patiently in a stroller, bundled against the winter weather, playing with a string of brightly colored wooden beads in her mittened hands. The child's large brown eyes locked onto me and followed me strangely. Then she spoke quietly to me with a dark voice that sounded oddly like an adult male. "You oughta just give it the hell up, man."

I blinked and stared at the toddler. She had looked away and was cheerfully occupied with her string of beads, completely unaware of my existence. But the child's mother gave me a sharp glance that clearly said, *Stop looking so intently at my child, creepy stranger.* She wheeled the stroller away.

I watched them go, feeling the same disturbance in my gut as when I tried to see into the

darkness of the subway tunnel. Then I drew a breath and continued walking eastward. As I passed a newsstand, a grisly cover of *National Geographic* arrested my eye. It showed a face, recognizable as having been human, but now resembling a shrunken head. The entire visage was brownish black. The eyes were squinted tightly closed; the mouth with its broken teeth was open grotesquely as though crying out in pain; the stringy hair extended down beneath a bristling rope that was wrapped tightly around the shriveled neck. The headline proclaimed, "Bog People: Sacrifice Victims Preserved in Danish Marshes." The image churned up a queasy memory within me, which I suppressed as I continued on.

P.J. CALDAS **DABENARDAS DABENARDAS DABENARDAS**

TUTTLE

THE GIRL FROM WUDANG BY P.J. CALDAS A Novel About Artificial Intelligence, Martial Arts and Immortality

From Emmy-winner and Brazilian best-seller PJ Caldas, comes a story that will make you change the way you look at life, science, and the crazy times we are living in.

My Name is Tigress and I am immortal. This is my story.

Yinyin, called Tigress, was raised in the sacred mountains of Wudang, where her life was about Tai Chi, the Dao, and trying to balance her yang with yin. Artificial intelligence and neuroscience were things she'd never even heard of. But then her overpowering yang sets her on a course to the Bay Area to become a professional fighter.

For as long as she could remember, Yinyin had been told she was poised to become part of something big, but what "big" turned out to be was beyond her imagining: a scientific experiment that would allow her to connect her brain to a thing they called "Brainternet" and become unbeatable. Bonus: the suicidal headaches that had plagued her all her life would cease.

But nothing comes without a price, and this connection would give others access to family secrets Yinyin has sworn to protect. Secrets that, at large and in the wrong hands, could be a very dangerous thing.

Fans of the legendary cyberpunk novels and gritty sci-fi thrillers of William Gibson and Stieg Larsson will be captivated by this new techno-thriller--a fast-paced blend of action, neuroscience, spirituality and martial arts.

"Unpredictable, disorienting and wonderfully absorbing...a book you can't stop reading." -Monica Rector, professor emeritus of Literature, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

"An interdisciplinary brewing of ideas and imagination, packed with futuristic brain science tech, martial arts action, and Asian culture." -Professor Paul Li, faculty and author in Cognitive Science at UC Berkeley

Paperback: 9780804856928 / \$17.99 ebook: 9781462924134 / \$9.99 Pub Date: October 17, 2023 Publisher: Published by Tuttle Publishing, an imprint of Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., https://www.tuttlepublishing.com/ Buy Link: https://www.tuttlepublishing.com/china/the-girl-from-wudang-9780804856928 **PJ CALDAS (a.k.a PJ Pereira)** is the author of multiple best-selling novels in Brazil and was picked by the Dictionary of Brazilian Literature as one of the most important writers of the twenty-first century. There, he published four books inspired by the mythology carried to the country by the African diaspora and reached the top five best-selling titles multiple times. PJ is also a martial artist with 40 years of experience in combat sports, including kempo, karate, tai chi, and Brazilian jiu jitsu. PJ is the co-founder of **Pereira O'Dell**, an Emmy award-winning advertising agency with offices in NY and San Francisco. Known as a pioneer in the intersection of marketing, entertainment and technology, he has worked with brands such as Coca-Cola, LEGO, Google, Skype and Intel. In 2023, he was named Jury President of the Artificial Intelligence Awards at the Art Director's Club, and curated a Global immersive exhibit of designers collaborating with AI, called ADC101+1, as a way to explore the use of this emerging technology as a creative tool. <u>https://www.pjcaldas.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Pushing Hands

I used to think the world's obsession with technology was merely pathetic. Then came the internet Blackout, remember? Twenty-four hours of widespread fear. I was at home when everything stopped working. On my phone, all apps froze, like dragons do with the first winds of winter. No Google, no news, no Netflix...which would have been fine, if that was all we were missing. Our ancestors never had any of that and they did just fine. According to the newscast on my old airwave TV, it was worse. Armageddon level worse. Theories of terrorism, cyber war and solar flares that may have fried our entire cable infrastructure, even killed people—which they seemed certain it did, just didn't know how many yet. The disoriented anchor, I remember as if it were happening now, tries to paint a picture of the end of the world, speculates if this is coming from Russia, North Korea or China, then cuts to an interview.

You were watching it too, I know. Alone in the dark, sucking on a piece of your shirt as if that would make things better. Don't take this as judgment though. There is none, I promise. Just saying I can see it, on your files. But, given your state of fear, I can't tell if you were paying attention. Because what was said next mattered.

On the screen, the name of some frail-looking bigwig from Yale. Between a mahogany desk and a wall filled with thick books of all colors, he warns us that the underpinnings of the entire planet rely on the internet. Food and water supply, electricity grid, defense systems... "If the failure continues for a few days, we go back to the nineteen nineties. A couple extra weeks, and we are back to the nineteenth century."

"The nineteenth century? Fine with me," I tell the nerd on the screen, almost certain he couldn't hear me. If I need to go to the mountains to kill my own meals, I will. Easy. I did that a lot growing up in the mountains of China already. I dial my boyfriend Jason. He answers, the call broken at best. Not that his hospital ever had good reception, but now it's worse. Most of their outside connections were gone, he tells me. Then the line drops. Shit. Then it buzzes, the phone. "Keep safe, Ok? Luv u," the little screen glows.

Kind of cute, my city boyfriend worrying about me. On the TV, chaos continues. Airplanes crashing, now. It's getting too much. Whatever the Dao is planning for the world, better leave it alone. I turn the TV off and leave for my run.

Jogging is one thing Americans got right, I must say. It's like standing meditation, but less boring.

Though it comes with its own restrictions. "Girls shouldn't be out this late," they say. "Never run alone, in the dark, through the guts of Oakland." I see it differently: when the local thugs see you so comfortable and relaxed by yourself, they think you are either crazy or are hiding something.

I am both. Crazy and hiding. No one breaks my stride.

The streets don't seem to have fully caught up with the news yet. Outside a club, a young couple seems puzzled by their unresponsive phones. Further down, two white dudes in lab coats placidly chew on their candy bars and follow me with curious eyes. So aloof, I almost feel for them. If cyber-havoc comes, brain snobs like them will be the first to perish. On the corner, a homeless dude protects his food as I pass. Is he the only one that knows?

The thing about these streets is: even on the brink of a digital apocalypse, they're still fairly predictable. Shit always happens in the same places. There's where the junkies get fucked up. Where cops receive their *gifts*. Where blacks get shot, where dumb fights break, where girls are roughed. If you want to avoid trouble, you stay away. Otherwise...

A scream of horror interrupts my thoughts. A woman's voice. *She shouldn't be out this late. Not around here*. The mouth of an unsecured construction site, that's where the voice came from. I go check. The open gate whines with the end of the evening breeze, and behind a large stack of lumber a sloppy white figure, still wearing his stained khaki overall, a denim jacket two sizes too big and a battered construction helmet, holds a blonde, scantily-clad woman by the wrist. She tries to shake him off, but he doesn't seem into her plan.

"That ain't how you treat a lady, sir," I yell from the entrance.

"Fuck off!" He laughs drunkenly. To my ears, that's an invite. As the adrenaline kicks in and my heartbeat picks up speed, I pass the fence, causing him to pause—more amused than wary, I must say. With the sleeve of his stained jacket, the white demon wipes the messy bush growing around his mouth and opens a grin full of gaps. Yes, an invite indeed.

When it comes to fighting, here's the difference between a guy and a girl: we know they underestimate us. And I love to make them regret that. "Leave her alone, sir!"

The drunk cackles and lets go of her hand. "Huh, looks like the Chink wants to join us, babe. Isn't she cute?" He takes out a pocket knife. I sing the little mantra I made for myself. *The Dao is the nothing. In me, infinity it will be.* Bring it on, you feeble fuckhead. With the same speed, same determination, I keep marching forward. He holds his inviting grin too. *Oh, yeah*.

The girl. Long legs, short skirt, breasts overfilling her bra. He must take outfit as permission, of course. For a moment, she glares at me, pauses in fear and gasps for air. I smile and wait for her appreciation. "Somebody fucking help!" she screams toward the fence, instead.

Thanks for the confidence, lady. I gaze at the knife, twist my wrists for a little stretch, then pounce.

If you think a dead phone is disorienting, try a fight. A real one, not those in the movies. In real life, they are short, messy, and unforgiving. You never know where the next pain is coming from. Or how strong. Or why. You have to deal with your dumb opponent, make sure you don't kill the fucker, and that he doesn't kill you, all while trying to avoid stepping on a nail or tripping on a ladder. That's what real chaos looks like. My eyes are still adjusting to the light when I wrap his wrist and pull him into me and, in a moment of confusion, his blade nicks the side of my shoulder, right over the tattoo of my hometown. Wudang, its mountains and fog, its mighty tigress and the swarm of bees Shifu cursed me with, now covered in blood. *You're so fucked, jackass.* I touch his wrists and gently move my stance to lure him in. It works like magic. He comes. I adjust the angle. One more step, and all he cares about is recovering his balance. I headbutt him in the nose. Not a pretty move, but it works. He yells, covers his face in pain. The blade is mine.

"Eat tofu," I say, and the dude freezes in the most absolute confusion. In Mandarin, it would have worked much better. Whatever. "Fucking depraved," I correct. Now he smiles with pride. *Asshole*. I kick him in the chest, thinking of how Shifu would scorn such excess, but I have a plan. In panic, the drunk tries to hold my leg. Men are so dumb—they have the emotional range of a fucking ant. My heels smash his sternum making a crack and a puffing sound, though momentum and idiocy keep pushing his hips forward. His feet take off, his body spin backward. Like a butterfly, he glides in the air.

It's beautiful, in its own way.

The knife goes into my pocket. Safer. The world is so slow I can count my breaths. All sounds are muted, and life moves unhurried. The poor man? He now floats in the air and the yang trapped inside me escapes through my pores. *Go, chaos, go cause mayhem elsewhere.*

Myself, I am happy here. Watching him descend a perfectly drawn arch, his chest floating back, the legs raising, knees first, toes whipping next. I think I can even hear old echoes of China, Shifu's flute playing its long notes in the background. Oh, the glorious peace of violence.

Taken aback by the outcome, the khaki mass flips up and down, a zeppelin taken by desperation. Then BAM! The pervert smashes onto the ground. Head first. He stays there, the face pressing against the gravel and dirt, the body vertical like a tree, legs hanging as branches. The distant neons from the neighborhood blink on and off, multiple times, and he shows no sign of life. *Shit*!

I turn to the blonde. "Go!" But instead, she attacks me with her tiny handbag. A dozen times. *Are you crazy*? I hold her by the arms. She struggles. I want to tell her she needs to leave now, but her eyes widen before I have a chance. On the wall in front of me, a looming shadow expands fast, eating every inch of light I have left. I shove the woman with my wounded shoulder. It hurts, but works: she falls to safety three feet back and I barely have time to turn. The guy now has his arms and head wrapped around my waist, shoulder pulling my ribs back, as the lady explodes into a horror movie scream. "No takedowns today, pal." I grab his ears and push the asshole away. Behind me, the woman yelps, her gaze now locked on her own blood-soaked shirt. Her chest drips red and she waves her hand. "Oh my God! Oh my God!" With the knee, I hit the man's solar plexus to keep him at bay. She needs to calm down, nobody wants the police to come. "Hey, lady! It's Ok, it's Ok! That's *my* blood, see?" She breathes, relieved, then goes back to a total lack of sisterhood and threatens me with the purse again. "Leave him alone," she cries.

Really?! I'll deal with her later.

In the meantime, the dude insists on taking my hips, though apparently he has no idea of what to do from that position. *Fair enough*. Over his back, I extend my arm and stick my finger into his ass. I remember wrestlers call it an oil check and I laugh to myself. Despite the thick overalls protecting the limits of his manhood, the creep shrieks like a cartoon character! Hooked in the dude's rear end, I anchor my heels to the floor, weight to the back leg and while I sink, I brush my hand across his spine all the way to the collar I grab. It's almost sensual, I confess. The idiot stares at me in confusion as I sink my hips near the ground and circle my way toward his crotch. *Snake creeps down*, I tell myself, as if directing my Tai Chi classes in the park. Hard not to laugh when I yank him over my shoulders, and he screams... "Wait! Wait! Wait!" But I had work to do. *Concentrate, Yinyin*. I flip him in the air, crash him on his back. The thump is dry, almost silent. His eyes bulge, the mouth open like an orangutan and he wheezes so deeply I wonder if he's ever going to find air. I let him try. One, two, three times. Better? My fingers dive onto his scalp now, force him to his knees. He's mine. Him, the fight, the battleground. Everything.

Suddenly, Oakland is the quietest place on Earth again. The sound of a single TV comes from far away. Maybe I'm not the only one with an unplugged screen. On a large trash bin, the lights reflect the alternating reds and blues from the strip club beyond the gate. And among all that disarray, placidly observing from the top of a wall, a black cat scans the place for rodents. From a large tree, an owl stares too, probably searching for the same unlikely dinner. I think it's funny. In China, owls are called cat-faced eagles. So it sounds like the beginning of a joke: a cat, a cat-faced bird and a girl nicknamed Tigress walk into a dark alley.... The Dao can have some sense of humor sometimes.

"I have kids! Please!" the asshole begs, eyes bouncing between mine and the knife I now hold. *Mercy? Nah.* I raise it high, the tip pointing at him. *Should I?* I was about to go for a no and let him run away this time, but the fucker finds a slab of wood somewhere on the floor. "Suck my dick," he says

as he swings at me.

Heavens know I tried. I let it pass and kick the wood so hard it breaks in half, then I throw the blade down.

He squints.

The blade keeps going down. So fast for the world, so slow in my mind.

Like Tai Chi. Or Shifu's flute.

Then the blonde's glass-cracking shriek breaks my peace and I'm done caring.

That's when *it* happened. The flash. So bright it's blinding. Then, as my vision returns, I am somewhere else. Where? How? A tight corridor, full of people rushing down some sort of stairs. An emergency exit. I'm pushed, shoved. I try to protect myself, but my body...it doesn't respond. It's as if it isn't me there, or like someone else is in control. My spirit swirls in a near-panic confusion, yet the heart remains calm. An alarm sound buzzes on and off. Where is this place? The door opens and the wind blows fresh.

It's outside. A parking lot, at a business complex of sorts. Glass buildings. Seven or eight, people coming out of all of them. There's no sign of smoke, no first responders. Just people walking around, staring at their phones, moving toward the giant sculpture in the shape of a tree, where lights were still on. Oh, and lab coats, lots of lab coats. A short white woman in a suit and a stern face waves at me and hollers, "Perry!"

Who is Perry?

Behind the woman, a lanky guy, Indian or Pakistani, I guess, comes running. "It's down everywhere," he cries.

She asks, "Could it have been China?" and he responds with a no. "Did you call Natalie? What did she say?"

"They've been attacked too. Looks like one of ours, boss." Oh, a boss woman. Nice. She comes so close I can read her name tag. Nancy Karpel, CEO. She takes a deep breath. "One of ours? How do you know?"

What am I doing here? I try to scream, but no one listens. Did I die?

The guy shows her the screen, "The servers, they've been all diverted to the game." The woman wipes her face with a sleeve, turns to me again, "Fuck, Perry. Where is he?"

I say I have no idea. But it's not my voice. Neither do I know why I said that. The security guard, he comes running, flashing his freaking light on everyone's I.D. He stops a skinny black woman with the biggest eyes I have ever seen, both turned to me, trying to say something I don't understand. It doesn't matter. The guard checks her badge, her face, and proceeds in our direction. The group next to us. The Indian guy. The Nancy lady. My turn. The light blinds me, and the fresh air is gone.

It now stinks of alcohol, cigarettes, wood and the worst of the body odors. I skim my surroundings: yes, the construction site again. The drunk, the stripper, the cat and the owl. *How long have I been out?* My hand still holds the knife, but the blade now hides inside his thigh. I wiggle it to make sure I have my movement again and with the man's bellow, a red stain spreads on the khaki fabric over his quads, just a few inches from his crotch. I yell too. "Aaaaaaaarg!" I'm inches from his nose now, my fury louder than his fear and pain combined. Deranged, possessed by the darkest of all demons, I yank the blade and his dirty blood drips thick. That's it. I toss the knife away and tell him with the ironic enthusiasm of a kindergarten teacher, "Look! You have your own cunt now. You can twist your dick that way and fuck your fucking-self."

The man's eyes are still lost into the infinity of mine.

"Isn't it awesome? Now, get out of my sight!"

At first, he just stays there, frozen. So I slap his face, he winces and trips back, then limps for his life. Bouncing on walls, falling over himself, the coward finally disappears beyond the corner.

"Good job, Tigress," I tell myself, then brush off some of the concrete powder and sawdust covering my running clothes. *How am I going to get rid of all this blood?* Who cares? A smile creeps

in. Behind me, the woman continues to yell, "Stupid bitch! You are one person! Will you beat them all?"

Yes, I will.

Hi. My name is Tigress. I am an immortal from Wudang, and I can help. But before you open the package I sent, you must listen to a story.

My story.

¹. In 2017, I worked on a documentary about our reliance on the internet called *Lo and Behold: the Reveries of the Connected World*, directed by Werner Herzog. This idea was a central element to the movie, and in one scene, Jonathan Zittrain, from Harvard, says something similar to this frightening statement.

DANGEROUS

kind of a ghost story

BLUES

a novel

STEPHEN

the author of Beautiful Somewhere Else and Come Away

POLICOFF

DANGEROUS BLUES: KIND OF A GHOST STORY BY STEPHEN POLICOFF

A dark yet comic storm of family relationships laced with a buzz of the supernatural, where the fleeting light of the present must constantly contend with the shadows of the past.

Paul Brickner and his 12-year-old daughter Spring are subletting an apartment in New York City. They came to escape the sorrow of their empty house in upstate New York after Nadia, Paul's wife and Spring's mother, dies.

Spring quickly takes to her new Manhattan middle school life, including making a new friend, Irina. Through that connection, Paul meets Irina's mother, Tara White, a blues singer, and perhaps just the spark Paul has been missing.

But Paul begins to fear that he is being haunted by Nadia, who appears to him in fleeting images. Is he imagining it, or is she real? Tara, who grew up in the inscrutable New England cult known as the Dream People, is haunted, too, hounded by her very real brothers to return to the family, and to give back the magical object—a shamanic Tibetan vessel—which they claim she stole from them.

Paul's cousin Hank, a disreputable art dealer, becomes obsessed with this object. Meanwhile, Paul's father-in-law, an expert on occult lore, tries to steer Paul toward resolution with Nadia's ghost.

Driven by Paul's new circle of odd and free-spirited iconoclasts, *Dangerous Blues* asks the question: when do you let go, and what are you willing to let go of?

"A wildly creative new novel, the absolute perfect chord of magic, a wifely ghost, a bit of shamanism and a lot about human bonds and beliefs, all set against the backdrop of a Greenwich Village blues club." -Caroline Leavitt, New York Times bestselling author of With or Without You

Paperback: 9798986245904 / \$18.00 eBook: 9798986245911 / \$9.99 Pub Date: October 26, 2022 Publisher: Flexible Press, https://www.flexiblepub.com/ Buy Link: https://bookshop.org/p/books/dangerous-blues-stephenpolicoff/18662833?ean=9798986245904

STEPHEN POLICOFF won the James Jones 1st Novel Prize for *Beautiful Somewhere Else*, published by Carroll & Graf. His second novel, *Come Away*, was published by Dzanc Books and won the Dzanc Award. *Dangerous Blues* is his third novel and published by Flexible Press. His essays and stories have appeared in *Family Fun*, *Provincetown Arts*, *The Rumpus*, *Otis Nebula*, *Wondertime*, *Review Americana*,

and many other publications. He has taught writing at Yale and Wesleyan and is Clinical Professor of Writing in Global Liberal Studies at NYU. <u>https://www.stephenpolicoff.net/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

2 Washington Square Village Apt. 21 New York, NY September 10, 2011

SHOULD I TELL LUCY?

Because the first night we spent in her apartment was one of the worst nights of my life.

Of course, many recent nights have vied for that accolade, even before Spring and I sublet this place.

Back home in Phoenicia, I had almost gotten used to fitful sleep, stupid nightmares, and the occasional leap up from my abject bed, heart thudding in my ears.

But what I wasn't used to was the sensation of being crushed, like a giant stone had been dropped onto my chest, which is how I felt a few nights ago.

Will I have to get used to that too?

Spring took to Lucy's apartment right away, flinging the few clothes she brought in her backpack into the unused chest at the foot of the bunk bed. She immediately began placing her beloved objects—the panda she has slept with since she was two, her journal, her Kindle—in various corners of the room and set about digging through the small closet, as if it were a site of archaeological interest.

I sat on Lucy's bed and glared at the suitcases and boxes that held the detritus of our life upstate. I could not bring myself to unpack them. I was not at all sure this sublet was a good idea. I was not at all sure what a good idea might look like. But Spring knew. She ran into the room carrying a large black box. "Look what I found in the closet, Daddy! This must have belonged to Lucy's son. This is amazeballs!"

"I don't know what that means," I said. But I had to smile, just a little, at her preteen, almost preternatural enthusiasm.

The box declared "Sung Soo's Deluxe Magic Kit!" in bold red letters with a drawing of a tall, thin Chinese man in a red robe pulling a devil's head from a silver bowl.

"Creepy," I said. "Sung Soo was a pal of Houdini's. I read his biography about ten times when I was your age."

"Cool!" She flung open the box, examined the slightly cheesy apparatus: silvery plastic coins, collapsing wand, velveteen change bag. "Did you have stuff like this?"

Spring likes to hear about my childhood enthusiasms. She especially delights in tales of my stint as a barely competent teen magician, the Amazing Paul, entertaining seven-year-olds at birthday parties throughout southern New Hampshire with my lame sleight-of-hand.

"Sort of," I said. I took the red plastic cup and magnetized balls from the box and showed her how to make the balls appear and disappear. I clumsily palmed one of the coins and almost managed to produce it from behind her ear. She laughed, clapped, then dashed back toward her new bedroom. "I'm getting hungry, by the way, Daddy," she advised me on her way down the hall. "What are we going to do about that?"

She wanted to explore the neighborhood, but we were both tired from our move to the city. So, instead, we explored the kitchen and discovered that Lucy had foreseen our dilemma: Plates of cold chicken and sesame-ginger green beans sat waiting for us in the refrigerator, decorated with bright pink Post-its saying

WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

"Aunt Lucy is awesome!" Spring pointed out as we sat at the round wooden table and ate the first of our many slapdash Greenwich Village meals. But she yawned as we ate and rubbed her eyes in an almost comical way, as she has done since infancy when she is sleepy.

She wolfed down the chicken, picked at the beans, announced she was going to bed. She unrolled her blue sleeping bag, but couldn't decide whether the top bunk, still covered with yellow legal pads and dusty diskettes from Lucy's various research projects, or the bottom bunk, which sags noticeably, was the proper place for her. A few minutes later, I poked my head in; she was sleeping on the floor, clutching the panda, cocooned in her sleeping bag.

I paced around the apartment, stared out the window at the dim lamps along Mercer Street. I tried to stop myself from thinking about all the things I can't stop thinking about, but instead found myself remembering how Nadia and Spring would dance around the kitchen in Phoenicia, bellowing the words to "Box of Rain" and "Ashes to Ashes."

I could almost touch Nadia's slender arms; I could almost hear her slightly off-key voice ringing through Lucy's living room. And it gave me a terrible headache. I stumbled to the bedroom, and without even bothering to wash my sweaty face or peel off my damp clothes, I fell onto Lucy's neatly made bed and curled myself into a pathetic ball.

I have always had bad dreams—lost in a forest while Spring calls out my name, Nadia in a tiny room pounding on a door, trying to get out.

But that night—was it only last Tuesday?—occupied a whole other category of sleep disorders. Maybe it's the apartment? Maybe I should tell Lucy something is wrong with this place?

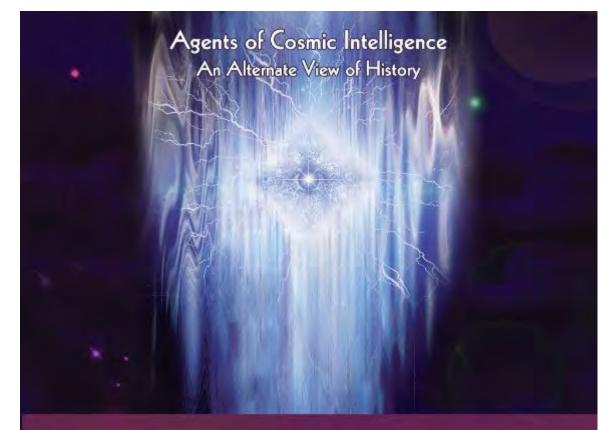
Because it was a dream, sure, but it felt real. It felt true.

I dreamed that Nadia rose up from the borrowed bed, dancing wildly around the room. She leaped and whirled and reached out for me to join her, and I couldn't. I couldn't lift my arms, and then I couldn't lift my head, and then I was awake, or thought I was, and I couldn't open my eyes or move my hands, and there was a weight upon me, sitting on my chest, on my neck, and it was Nadia, sitting on me, pressing down on me, only she was old, haggard, glowering at me, and I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't scream, then I did scream, but the sound caught in my throat and stayed there, forever. I sat up, sweat pouring from my face. I could move again. I opened my eyes, and the room was spinning. Spring was standing beside the bed.

"Are you OK, Daddio?" she asked sleepily. "You were shouting something, Mommy's name maybe?"

I wiped my face with the flowery sheet, forced a smile. "Nightmare," I murmured. "Go back to bed. I'm fine."

She drifted out, clutching the panda to her chest like a shield. I sat there amid the bunched up bedding, wide awake for the rest of that long night, and the words *I'm fine* echoed in my ears like the punch line of a very bad joke.



THE MESSAGE

BILL HARVEY

THE MESSAGE (AGENTS OF COSMIC INTELLIGENCE) BY BILL HARVEY

One day every psychic on Earth receives the same message—but who sent it? The US Theta Force and the Russian Psychotronic Division both want to find them first. Whoever has that much psychic energy will be an invincible ally.

West Point career officer Martin Williams had led a team of US special forces when the ISIS-Taliban civil war erupted in Afghanistan, forcing the US to send troops in yet again to protect the already nearly decimated civilian population. Williams had been disparaged for the uncanny luck his life-saving hunches gave him until one day when the US found out about the Russian Psychotronic Division and figured the US needed its own psychic force—a failed idea in the minds of the Generals old enough to remember the 1970s.

Somehow knowing that billionaire technology inventor Ari Mann warranted psychic investigation, President Gomez assigned the new US Theta Force team, with Marty as second-in-command, to the mission—even before the unit was fully formed and long before the team had undergone much training. What Theta Force uncovered would have been mind-blowing enough were it not for another threat vector it was hard to get their heads around—a mysterious message heard by all psychics around the world.

Who sent that mysterious message?

<u>THIS MESSAGE</u> is the prequel to <u>PANDEMONIUM: Live to All Devices</u>. Other books in this series include: <u>THE FIRST SON</u> and the forthcoming title, THE GREAT BEING. By restoring a sense of wonder at what the Universe might be, the transcendental epic adventure series <u>Agents of Cosmic Intelligence</u> aims to have a transformative effect on readers. The fictional characters use the mindfulness techniques described in Harvey's non-fiction book <u>MIND MAGIC: Doorways into Higher Consciousness</u>, and the foundational backdrop of his stories is described in his latest non-fiction title, <u>A THEORY OF</u> <u>EVERYTHING including CONSCIOUSNESS AND "GOD"</u>.

"Bold, Brisk, Conspiratorial, Psychic Thriller... Harvey takes wild narrative risks that readers will not see coming." -BookLife Review by Publishers Weekly

"This new sci-fi series stands on the shoulders of Asimov and Bradbury. Harvey's narrative is gripping both in the story he crafts and the way he grounds it in reality." -*BookTrib*

Paperback: 9780918538178 / \$14.99 eBook: ASIN BoBQCY6N6J / \$7.99 Pub Date: November 14, 2022 Publisher: The Human Effectiveness Institute, <u>https://www.humaneffectivenessinstitute.org/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.amazon.com/Message-Agents-Cosmic-Intelligence/dp/0918538173/</u> **BILL HARVEY,** Emmy® Award winner and media research industry leader, has foretold the future of media for over 35 years. He is the author of three nonfiction and three science fiction titles. His writing, including the sci-fi series *Agents of Cosmic Intelligence*, is focused on helping individuals become more effective. In works of fiction, he demonstrates the strengths of his characters in action and zooms in on the inner processes that these characters use. In his nonfiction books, he provides experiments that the reader can do, which could lead them to the discovery that their hunches are meaningful, and that the universe might be trying to give clues to each of us. His childhood experience on stage led to a lifetime of study of the flow state—the state of consciousness most conducive to success. This process started early in his life when his show business parents had him on stage from the age of five. Bill's first book, *Mind Magic*, is now in its sixth edition. He is the recipient of the Advertising Research Foundation's Great Mind Award. https://www.humaneffectivenessinstitute.org/about/

CHAPTER ONE

Martin Williams' father was a career soldier, like his grandfather and his great-grandfather, and the men in his family they talked about from long before his time. So, it was natural for him to assume that he too was going to be a soldier. But something about it bothered him from his earliest memories. As he grew older, he'd go back and ponder the source of these doubts—doubts he never expressed openly. Eventually he concluded that some very deep part of him, intrinsic to his being, felt that the job he had to do was even larger than fighting to protect free people. But that deep part of him never revealed what that big job was. He waited and hoped that someday he would understand himself at least that much, meanwhile setting about on a military career.

His parents once took him to a museum when he was very young. It was one of his earliest memories. The museum was hosting an exhibition on Venus Aphrodite, replete with statues and paintings of her throughout the ages. He imagined he knew Venus long ago, though he had no idea what that meant. When he reached puberty, he began to dream of making love with Venus. When he began dating, he picked the girls who looked like the Venus of his dreams, blonde, colorfully made up, a graceful neck, inviting, mischievously yet innocently flaunting her lush body.

Growing up, Martin noticed how often he made mistakes of one kind or another, which led him to become introspective and very observant of his own behavior, internally as well as externally. He told himself that mistakes could turn his whole life into a waste. He saw that before he acted, a flurry of conflicting impulses in his mind would present a range of possible actions, then he would apparently choose one path and take it. The word "apparently" appeared in his mind often, because he was well aware that reality could differ from appearances. He had become an avid reader of books on science, and science fiction novels from the age of five. He became an agnostic the more he felt drawn to science. (Nevertheless, one Christmas he was touched by the meaning of the holiday and sang baby Jesus to sleep in his mind.) To him, science meant certainty, and the avoidance of surety until the evidence was inescapable. So, he regarded whatever he thought in his mind with a grain of salt.

He noticed that right before he took any particular action, the voices or thoughts in his head intimating which action he should take could be identified as the internalized voices of his father and mother. He formed an impression of the advice each one would give him, and became given to predicting how they would advise him in whatever the current situation happened to be. He kept track of the outcomes and could tell that sometimes the advice of either parent could lead him to take an action that was regrettable. One time in self-defense he really hurt a boy more than necessary, which had been sanctioned by his mind's predicted father's advice. Another time he was so civilized with his young friends that they embarrassed him about it, his behavior having been advocated by his mind's predicted mother's advice. By the time he was ten years old, he realized he had an advisor in his mind whose track record was flawless in giving action recommendations that satisfied him in retrospect. Often that "voice" didn't even use words—it was more like a hunch he understood without having used words to explain it to himself. By age twelve, he had figured out something strange was going on. He had many, many hunches each day, and they always turned out to be right. He also noticed that his mind made up things like hunches, which almost always gave bad advice. He very gradually learned to tell the difference between his real intuitions and the mock intuitions that apparently some part of his mind made up to make itself feel smart.

Once, at around age twelve, the point of view in his mind that gave him the real hunches used words for a change—words accompanied by a strong feeling of realizing a deep truth. The words were, "I am God… and so is everybody else." That felt truly weird because he was agnostic, and totally committed to science. He tried to figure out what those words meant, and why it felt so true—like it had to be true for some scientific reason that his mind could not yet explain to him. For the rest of his life, he would work to unravel this mystery.

Captain Martin Williams, rangy and sandy-haired, was being briefed by his superior officer in a dark cave in Afghanistan. Both men used small flashlights to illuminate the map. The Major pointed to a rocky pass. "Intel says take your men through here."

Martin had a hunch. He pointed at the next pass to the west. "What about this one?" he asked. "Why that one?"

"Just a hunch."

The Major looked exasperated. "Marty, don't start that crap."

Martin shrugged.

He gathered and moved his men relatively soundlessly through the moonless night. As they approached the pass they had been ordered to take, Martin, leading the way, held up his hand and the company halted. He picked a fireteam and pointed up to the ridge on the left. "Make a deep recon just the other side of the ridge line. If you meet resistance, dig in and protect our flank, then scramble down and rejoin us," he ordered. "No radios unless there's a firefight." All their helmets had radios. The enemy had learned how to listen in, however. The enemy was a branch of ISIL that had recently taken over the country by crushing the Taliban.

The rest of the company was surprised to be waiting in place as the four soldiers disappeared into the night. Martin kept them waiting five minutes. They heard and saw a firefight erupt just over the ridge to the west. Martin motioned his men forward at a fast trot. The 140 men ran through the pass. Noting craters in the ground, Martin figured out that the unit his fireteam had engaged had been working on zeroing in mortars on the pass they were running through, and he sprinted forward at the fastest speed he could manage. His men took the hint.

His superior apologized. "Good work, Marty. You'd have lost fewer men if I'd listened to your hunch."

"Sir, I have a hunch you should check the source of the intel," Martin said, and his boss nodded sensibly.

"Sir, you want to give me my own command because of my hunches?" Martin laughed out loud. Was he dreaming? This was ridiculous. Wearing dress uniform as ordered, he was meeting with a bunch of Generals in the Pentagon.

"This comes straight from the top. The president has given top secret orders. Intel confirms the existence of a psychic unit within the Russian army. We've got to have our own, and we've got a lot of catching up to do. We've got to assign it to somebody who we can trust, one of our own, not some civilian, although you are free to recruit civilians to work under your command. This is a mental arms race. The president feels that it could be the most important arms race we're in," a five-star said. "He wants this Theta Force to report to him personally."

Martin checked in with himself, and found that this made him very excited and happy. But he had a hunch.

"Sir, may I speak plainly?" Martin asked, looking around although addressing the five-star, who was senior in the room. The general grunted and others nodded. "Sir, I could cock this up. I can train people to use their minds the way I do, I'll need help finding people who have the raw talents both within and beyond the Army, and I can use my hunches to help protect Theta. What I can't do while doing all that is to handle the politics of running a command that reports so high."

"What are you asking for?" the five-star queried.

"I would like to be the executive officer of Theta, in charge of training and security. I don't want to be the commanding officer. I'm not ready."

The group looked at each other. They had all, including Williams, graduated from West Point, where they had been trained to want to move up the ladder as fast as possible. This guy is weird, maybe he's right to say he isn't ready for command of what is probably going to be a battalion-size unit.

"Anyone in mind?" the five-star asked.

Williams nodded. He had done his homework. "Colonel Tim Shannon," he said. He had observed Shannon, who commanded the brigade of elite troops from all branches of service in which Williams had been just a cog. Shannon always got nearly all of his people out. Williams had a hunch that Shannon could also be trained to have hunches, and he was glad nobody asked him to explain this particular hunch, which had come to him in a dream. In the dream—set in a brightly lit place, almost too bright to see, with beautiful white ornate temples everywhere-Martin was a teacher, and Shannon was his star pupil, wearing the same bushy mustache that Shannon now sported.

The five-star looked around. Shannon's current boss looked irritated, but in the spirit of cooperation, allowed reluctantly, "We can make do without him in Afghanistan."

"One more request, please, sir?" Martin boldly surprised them all. He could hear the common thought in the room: cheeky. The senior officer nodded cautiously.

"Please don't ever tell Colonel Shannon that you offered me his command," Martin enjoined, and they all signaled agreement.

Seana Moon's earliest memory was of being in a baby seat in the back of a car. Her parents, whom she loved above all else, were in the front, laughing and talking to each other. Her heart was full of happiness and everything was perfect in her life, being off on some adventure with her parents. She suddenly sensed something bad and began shrieking a wordless warning a moment before a bullet came through the driver's side windshield.

As she grew older, she always sought out more information about the tragedy in which her parents both perished, her father killed by the bullet and her mother killed in the crash. The authorities could only surmise that it was the kind of test gangs used to decide whether to take in a newcomer.

Seana's perfect life disappeared in an instant. First there was the horrible sound of things smashing and the unforgettably awful sounds her parents made as they died. Then the smell and smoke that made her cough and unable to breathe, none of which mattered because she only wanted to go wherever they were going. She was surrounded by frantic strangers, who manhandled her in their panic to free her from the car, and then the memories blurred as she was taken from place to place, examined, talked about as if she wasn't there. Then some nice person would try to comfort her but she was inconsolable, crying all the time, crying herself to sleep, crying herself awake, realizing that she would never see her Mummy and Daddy again—though some part of her somehow doubted that.

When the tears finally subsided and she was able to think about what had happened, though still just a toddler, Seana had the strange idea that she herself had been the target. *Where did that terrible idea come from?* Wherever it came from, it made her hate herself. She forced herself to give up that idea and convinced herself it had not been her fault. She took this precocious act of will before she learned to talk, never realizing how unusual that was.

Seana was taken in and brought up by her Aunt Anna and Uncle Jim. Anna made her living as a professional psychic. Jim was a car salesman and though not psychic he had seen enough to convince him that Anna's talents were real. Anna worked for wealthy people, reading tarot cards for them, and advising them accordingly. On occasion the police also called her in for help on an unsolved case.

Seana thought she saw lights in the air around Anna sometimes, and when she took a picture of Anna with her first cell phone, the photo picked up the lights around Anna's head.

Anna explained that the lights were her protectors. She pointed to one of the lights. "This is Jocko," she said. "Jocko is very big and carries a long, pointed weapon."

"A spear?" Seana asked.

"No, a directed-energy weapon," Anna disclosed.

All her young life, Seana was open to the existence of "magic"—as she thought of it—in all its forms. Nothing was impossible if you didn't rule it out in your mind, Anna had taught her. Anna taught in many ways, often dressing up the three of them (with Jim) in costumes and carrying out strange rituals. She demonstrated the use of the I Ching, Ouija board and the pendulum. She guided Seana through concentration, contemplation, and meditation exercises. She taught her how to read tarot cards, and Seana started to give readings for money so she could go to college without saddling herself with debt.

In college Seana studied philosophy and psychology. Her friends at school partied with psychedelics, from mescaline, psilocybin, and Molly, to LSD, 25i-NBOMe, and ayahuasca. Seana tried them all but always left the party early and went off alone when tripping, to do serious self-investigation and to pray for contact with God. She had no set religion but had always sensed the presence of an intelligence far greater than human.

When Tim Shannon was given command of Theta and introduced to Martin Williams as his secondin-command, the two hit it off from the start. Tim knew of Martin as one of his Company commanders, and when being briefed about plans for Theta, he was told that Williams was the only blooded combat officer in the U.S. Army who had shown any promise of having psychic abilities. Martin had learned to have great respect for Shannon, having observed him make the right strategic decisions in tough combat situations, and having seen how fraternally and protectively he treated all the men and women under his command.

Martin felt that if reincarnation happened to be true, Shannon might have long ago been his star

pupil, just like in the dream.

In the early days of Theta, the two spent their time training Tim to not block his innate psychic powers, which Martin now claimed that everyone has, causing Tim to regard some of Martin's ideas with a modicum of skepticism. But there was no denying the effects: Tim soon found that he could tell his own real hunches from wishful thinking and was amazed at the accuracy of true hunches. He also started to be able to read thoughts that Martin communicated to him.

Shannon started to recruit people and bring them into Theta, some from the U.S. armed services and some who were civilians, all now given officer status in the U.S. Army. American intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies, whose top officials had received secret orders from the president to aid in the hunt for America's psychics, tested thousands of claimed or suspected psychics, finding only a small percentage able to pass the usual tests such as the Rhine cards. Those who made the cut were presented to Tim, who then made his own assessment and decided which people to take, largely based on his own hunches.

Theta had offices in the Pentagon but its main base hid in plain view in a suburban neighborhood in Virginia. It had been a Howard Johnson motel a long time ago. Now it masqueraded as a no-name motel that was mysteriously always sold out. Within a few months the base housed more than a hundred recruits along with Tim and Martin.

Seana was one of the first recruits. More than one intelligence agency knew that she made her living as a psychic and her clients included some of the wealthiest people in New York City. Tim was surprised by her beauty, intelligence, and upbeat nature. This is the one woman in the world made just for me, he thought at first blush. He didn't take the thought seriously at the time; their professional relationship strongly discouraged his paying any attention to that line of thought—besides which she was just barely an adult at twenty-one, and he was thirty-seven. Still, he found it extremely easy to talk to her and when he asked her to read his mind she did so with amazing accuracy.

"You are attracted to me, but that line of thinking is forbidden to you," she said without embarrassment.

Now getting used to being an Army officer, she addressed him with decorum. "Sir, I can attest that I'm not the one woman in the world that was made just for you. You're a gallant hero to millions of women who watched you winning a war on television. I'm sure more than one of them would like to meet you."

They shared an easy laugh. *It might always have to be platonic,* he thought, but he loved her already. He gave himself permission to love her as long as he didn't express his feelings in any way. He hoped she was not reading his mind right now.

"Incidentally," he shared, "Martin and I agreed at the start of Theta that among ourselves, we would not read each other's minds except by invitation and in any emergencies."

Seana concurred, adding, "That's what all true psychics believe too." She had met quite a few.

Tim drove them from the Pentagon to Theta's base outside Arlington to meet Martin. When they arrived at the base, Tim inquired and was told that Martin could be found in the hot tub by the pool. The sun was just going down. Tim and Seana dropped off their things in their respective rooms, put on their bathing suits and joined him.

Minutes later, watching from the hot tub and sipping vodka tonic from a plastic cup, Martin was galvanized seeing the two of them approach. He got it that Tim was bringing in a recruit to meet him. His mind immediately compared Seana to Venus and decided that this was not the real Venus coming back to him from his dreams or his imagination. Seana was petite whereas Venus was Junoesque. They both had wonderful curves and playful expressions, but Venus in his dreams was flirtatious while Seana projected a demure vulnerability. As she came closer, he could see that Seana had larger eyes and higher cheekbones. They were different women, though he quite appreciated Seana's appearance.

Templegard's body was sleeping in a cave in Afghanistan with his finger on a trigger. His consciousness was off in an enjoyable dream. In the dream he was on a cleaner mission in a spaceship with his comrades in arms. He recognized two of them easily, one being his former boss, Colonel Shannon, who had left the theater recently on a classified mission. Templegard was happy to see them back together.

The second one, a woman with black hair and pillowy lips, he recognized as the woman in half his dreams, so no surprise there. As always, she was alluring to him. Now she was dressed in some kind of tight-fitting black coverall. He liked the way it fit her. She smiled impishly at him.

Another woman he didn't recognize reminded him of somebody he must have once known. She was a curvy blonde with high cheekbones. He liked her right away.

And there was a man who seemed to be the leader. Templegard had never seen him before but he looked familiar somehow. Sandy hair, tall and muscular, eyes that took in everything.

They were all looking out through the huge transparent nose of the spaceship. From above the plane of the ecliptic near Saturn, Templegard saw the ringed planet below forming a sort of line with Jupiter and Earth. He had a clear sense this was as prophesied: his partners down on Earth, who had forgotten their identities, were about to be jarred by a miracle. Templegard sent them a prayer. Then he wondered who and what he had been thinking about. After all, his partners were right here on the ship.

Just east of New York City in a brick professional building, most of his partners—who other than Shannon did not know he existed and didn't know who they really were themselves either—were additionally unaware of the major events, mandated high in the multiverse governance, which were about to befall them.

As if all that ignorance were not enough, they had plenty of trouble already.

In the conference room with the large mirror on one wall, Lieutenant Colonel Martin Williams held up Rhine cards only he could see, and Major Jason Page tried to psychically detect the symbol on each card held up.

Behind the one-way mirror in the next room, their boss, Brigadier General Tim Shannon, sat with Congressman Warren Baynes, hearing the piped-in voices of Williams and Page, and able to see the cards over Williams' shoulder. Page was getting almost nothing right. Baynes' bejowled face radiated disgust as he mumbled to himself. Shannon maintained an impassive exterior while noting his political stock value dropping by the second.

Williams said sympathetically to Jason, "Something distracted you during meditation."

"What was that?" Jason asked.

"Probably worrying about your score," Williams said and smiled. Neither of them looked at the one-way mirror but they knew they were both thinking of the source of pressure.

Shannon tapped the Bluetooth in his ear and said, "Try the other one." Williams flinched at the word "try", looking let down. Sorry... *I mean run the other one*, Shannon said telepathically to Williams, hoping the other would get his message. *Williams is better than the rest of them at ESP, so maybe he will*, Shannon thought.

Williams' smile returned.

Shannon signaled Baynes to turn his chair to face another one-way mirror in the room. As they rolled their swivel chairs in that direction, the lights came on in the exercise room. Jason had shed his outer clothes as he entered the room and flipped on the lights. Behind him came Lieutenant Colonel

Ahmed Khan, wearing judo *gi*, followed by Williams and a pretty young woman, Seana Moon. Williams and Seana tied blindfolds over the eyes of Jason and Khan, adding high-tech "earmuffs" to block out all sound. Baynes peered hopefully at the proceedings through the one-way glass while Shannon maintained his poker face.

Stripped to the waist and barefoot, wearing only his U.S. Army fatigue pants, Jason looked like a young Black Adonis, exuding confidence. Khan looked much older and comparatively out of shape, although he obviously worked out daily.

"This fight seems kind of unequal," Baynes commented to Shannon in their dark observation room.

"Khan has been practicing blindfold fighting since he was four," Shannon disclosed.

Khan and Page began to circle. Page attacked Khan with a surprisingly well-aimed flying kick, Khan deflected it, Page rolled to his feet and continued circling.

"Wow!" Baynes said. Shannon looked grimly satisfied.

Baynes watched more attentively now. Page attacked Khan with a flying leg trip and they both went down, scuffled briefly, and came up circling.

"Why didn't you show me this first?" Baynes asked.

"That's the problem," Shannon replied. "You never know what's going to work, when."

"Sounds like all our other advanced weapons systems," Baynes muttered.

"Yeah. But we're finding out the things that block psychic power. We're going to discover all the blocks and learn how to keep them out of the way, someday—"

"Maybe someday—*if* you can show some results soon, so we can get this program put back in the budget—" Baynes dropped the other shoe.

"Put back?" Shannon felt the bottom fall out as Baynes nodded somberly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why do you think I came to see you here in New York?"

Shannon turned from him and stared through the one-way mirror, bringing his sudden anger and angst under control. Page and Khan were exchanging a volley of Kung Fu attacks and parries.

"Williams sensed this coming..." Shannon mused. "You don't know how complicated... Seana is going to turn her head and look at me."

Baynes turned to watch Seana, thinking to himself how pretty he found her. She turned to look at the one-way mirror to where she knew Shannon was sitting, then turned back to her tablet, which showed the brainwaves of Jason and Khan.

"I knew I could make her do it just then," Shannon said. "If I'd waited a second, the confidence would have gone, and I couldn't have done it."

Baynes looked interested.

"Page is looking pretty good, huh?" Shannon went on, and Baynes nodded. "He's still embarrassed from the card test, trying to redeem himself," Shannon continued. "Think I can make him fail in there?"

Baynes shrugged.

"We've got to know how to make enemy psychics fail, you know, Mr. Baynes. You don't put our budget back in, this country is wide open to enemy psychics."

"It's not just up to me," Baynes objected.

"Watch this," Shannon said, reaching for the stars as he flicked his Bluetooth. "Seana, don't turn your head. Encourage Page—*don't* turn your head!"

Seana looked confused. Page at that moment body-blocked Khan, knocking the wind out of him. Khan recovered and they began to circle again.

"Hey, not bad, Jase!" Seana said. Page stopped, grinned, and started circling again.

"Can the side comments," Williams admonished her.

"Williams heard you order her to do it—" Baynes started questioningly.

"He doesn't want Page to guess that," Shannon explained.

Page made a series of attacks on Khan, who fell back fending them all off, until one of his defenses unintentionally hit Page on the chin. Jason went down clutching his jaw in pain. Khan ripped off his blindfold and he, Williams and Seana reflexively went to Page's side. Page got up, took off his blindfold, and rubbed his jaw, looking suspiciously at Seana and sheepish at the same time.

Baynes eyed his watch. "You have someone to take me to LaGuardia, Colonel?" he asked, hoping it would be Seana.

"I'll take you," Shannon said, sensing Baynes' interest in Seana and sparing her Baynes' lechery. In the car, Shannon asked, "How much time do I have to come up with results I can show you?"

In the car, shannon asked, now much time do i have to come up with results i can show you?

"I don't know," Baynes admitted. "What I also don't know is why the hell you're in New York. I'd think you'd be able to demonstrate results faster by keeping all Theta personnel together in your very expensively equipped main base in Virginia—"

"That was our recommendation too," Shannon surprised him by saying.

"So why are you in New York?"

"Orders."

"I know," Baynes said caustically. "Orders from the president. Secret orders." He suddenly turned to Shannon. "Did you vote for him?"

Shannon flicked a glance at him, answering, "No."

Baynes slapped his thigh. "I haven't found anybody that will admit having voted for him."

"We've had a lot of presidents like that," Shannon said calmly.

"We used to have great men—historic giants," Baynes said reprovingly and passionately. Shannon glanced at him again and decided the man was deeper than he had realized.

Baynes muttered as if to himself, "The prerogative of the Executive Branch. For all I know he could be using you to spy on his political enemies and covering it with a blanket of 'national security'." He looked at Shannon. "You know you wouldn't have gotten your original funding if it wasn't for me. Now I don't even know what you're working on."

This was a bluff on Baynes' part. The president wanted Theta, and it was the president's influence that made Theta happen, not Baynes', but almost no one knew that. Williams had been sworn to secrecy on that very point.

"I said we couldn't do fieldwork and demonstrate results at the same time—"

"Why New York," Baynes pressed. "You want me to roll pork barrels with you, son, you roll pork barrels with me. Why New York?"

Shannon owed this guy. Theta couldn't afford to lose him as their champion in Congress. He'd have to break a rule, which meant Baynes would have something on him. He had to trust Baynes. What a dumb thing to do. He did it anyway.

"That's where ... the subject is."

"What subject?"

"The subject of surveillance."

"Who is he?"

"Can't... I've told you too much already."

"What's his importance?"

"He's demonstrated... some unusual effects... he could be a very powerful psychic."

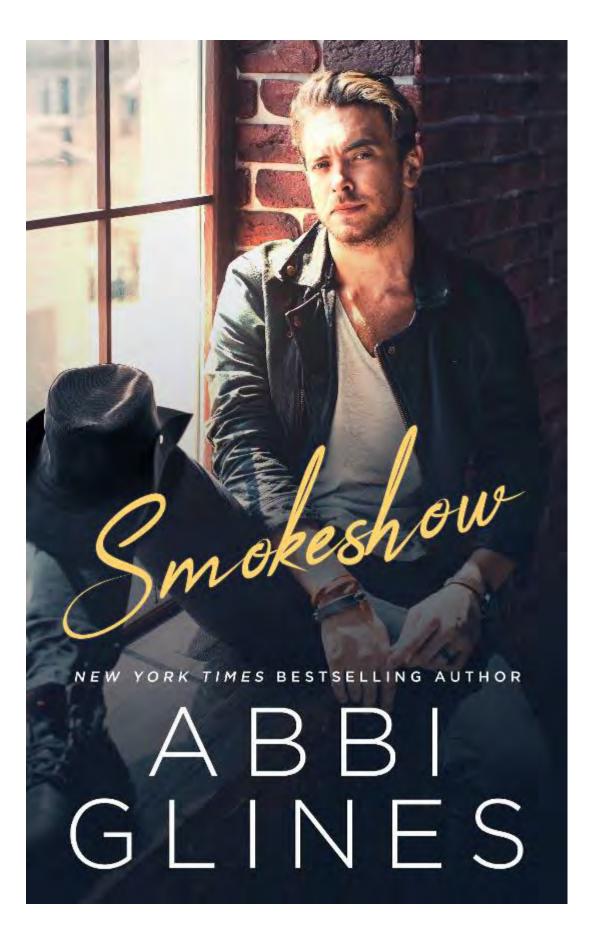
"What are you going to do, recruit him?"

"Maybe... we don't know where his loyalties lie ... he's a citizen now but wasn't born here ..."

"All of the top Theta people had to be sent to New York to observe one guy you might recruit? What does he do, part the Red Sea?"

"Mr. Congressman, you're a pretty good agent yourself. I'll get you your results."

WOMEN'S FICTION & ROMANCE



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A Southern Mafia Romance

Set in a world where southern wealth and power comes from one source. The Family is ruled by one boss and it's time for the newer generation to step into place.

It's a fragile thing- the whispers of truth that you hope are lies.

Hughes Farm was the largest racing horse establishment in the south. The family that owned it were known to be wealthy, powerful, arrogant, and terrifying. My first encounter with them didn't prepare me for all that was to come. I don't think anything truly could have.

Growing up with only my father and brother hadn't been easy but we'd had each other. Losing them was the hardest thing I'd ever faced. It had made the times we went without food, electricity, or even shelter seem insignificant in comparison.

It is when a woman, claiming to have been my mother's best friend, arrives to take me home with her that questions begin to surface. My father had rarely spoken of my mother. She'd died when I was a toddler. Having no other option, I trust this stranger and am thrown into a world of mansions, racing horses, extravagance, and *him*.

It's true that there is a thin line between love and hate. But there is an even thinner line between truth and lies.

Paperback: 9798390858837 / \$12.99 eBook: ASIN BoC24DMWYT / \$5.99 Pub Date: April 16, 2023 Publisher: Abbi Glines Books Audiobook: BN ID 2940159731371 / ASIN BoC7S95QCY Publisher: Dreamscape Media Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/dp/BoC4JS8NLP

ABBI GLINES is a #1 New York Times, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, and international bestselling author of the Rosemary Beach, Sea Breeze, Smoke Series, Vincent Boys, Boys South of the Mason Dixon, and The Field Party Series. She is also the author of the Sweet Trilogy and the Black Souls Trilogy. She believes in ghosts and has a habit of asking people if their house is haunted before she goes in it. Her house was built in 1820, and she finally has her own haunted house but they're friendly spirits. She drinks afternoon tea because she wants to be British but alas, she was born in

Alabama although she now lives in New England (which makes her feel a little closer to the British). When she's not locked away writing, she is entertaining her first-grade daughter, reading (if everyone in her house including the ghosts will leave her alone long enough), shopping online (major Amazon Prime addiction), and planning her next Disney World vacation (and now that her oldest daughter Annabelle works at Disney, she has an excuse to frequent it often). http://www.abbiglinesbooks.com

PART I

How often the line fades that stands between love and hate.

CHAPTER ONE

This wasn't my home. It never would be. Home wasn't a place. Home was a person. If you were lucky, it was more than one person. Because of that, I'd never be able to go home again. My home had been my dad and my brother, Cole. Now, they were dead, and I was alive. I was homeless. Even though I had a roof over my head.

"Madeline, honey, breakfast is ready. No hurry though. I don't have an appointment until nine thirty," Melanie Houston called from the other side of the closed door.

I stood there, staring at my reflection in the mirror, wearing clothes that weren't mine. Melanie had bought them for me. I would have never chosen these items for myself or any of the other items she had filled the massive walk-in closet with before my arrival yesterday. My mother's best friend was someone I had never met until she walked into my former neighbor, Mrs. Miller's, living room with tears in her eyes to take me "home."

Melanie was nice. She had come to save me when I had nowhere else to go. Mrs. Miller barely made it on her monthly check from the government. Staying with her had been temporary. I had been planning on getting a third job in hopes I could afford a place to live. I was a legal adult. I wouldn't stay with the Houstons that long. Just until I could save enough money to live on my own.

"I'll be right there," I replied and bit my tongue to keep from reminding her yet again that my name was Maddy.

My mother had named me Madeline, but I didn't remember much about my mother. She had died from breast cancer before I turned three years old. My dad had always called me his "Maddy girl." I'd never been called Madeline by anyone, except on the first day of school every year. I would correct my teachers when they called roll that first time. *Had my mother called me Madeline?* There was so much I didn't know about her.

With one last look at the stranger in the mirror, I walked to the door and opened it, then headed down the hallway toward the wide, curving staircase. The chandelier that hung over the foyer appeared to sparkle as the sunlight came through the windows, hitting it directly. Everything was so clean and smelled fresh. That was the first thing I'd noticed when I walked in the large double doors yesterday afternoon.

There was no lingering hint of weed or stale beer in the air. The moldy smell that I'd grown accustomed to in our apartment was also absent. *Would I ever get used to this? Did I want to?* I didn't miss that smell, and it made me feel guilty. I had hated the stench and complained about it often to my dad and brother. If I could have them back, I would never mention it again.

"There you are, and don't you look beautiful."

I turned to see Melanie beaming brightly up at me as I descended the stairs.

"I knew blue would be your color. It was your mother's color too. Those eyes of yours are like looking at Etta. You do have her eyes."

My dad had once told me I had my mother's blue eyes. He said they were bluer than the sky and deeper than the sea. I had always wanted the hazel eyes my dad and Cole shared, simply because they looked so much alike. There wasn't anything about me that looked like either of them.

"Mrs. Jolene made homemade waffles with her special strawberry glaze. You'll love it. It's Saxon's favorite breakfast," she told me and patted my arm. "Let's go get you fed."

I followed her toward the kitchen as she continued to talk about the different milk options and the juice selection. Breakfast wasn't something I was used to unless it was cold Pop-Tarts and a glass of water before I hurried to catch the bus.

"Oh good," she said as we entered the spacious white kitchen. "Saxon, you're eating in the house this morning."

Melanie moved to the side of the island, and when she did, the guy standing there studied me. I, in return, did the same to him. He was tall—at least six foot, if not more—with broad shoulders and dark brown hair that held the slightest bit of curl. His brown eyes were set off by his thick, dark lashes. They would almost seem feminine, if not for his chiseled jawline and the small scar on his left cheek. When the corner of his mouth lifted just barely enough to form a smile, I noticed the hint of dimples.

"Madeline, this is my son, Saxon," she said before looking at him. "Saxon, dear, this is Madeline." She turned back to me. "He gets up early to go out to the stables. Racehorses are what the Houston men eat, sleep, and breathe. You'll find that it takes over every part of our lives here."

Saxon kept his gaze locked on me as he finished the glass of milk in front of him. I had been too tired yesterday after our flight from Dallas, Texas, to Ocala, Florida, to stay up and meet the family for dinner. Instead, I'd taken a shower and gone to sleep.

Although Melanie had told me all about Saxon during our flight. He was her only child, my age. He had been the all-star high school quarterback his senior year and worked with his father, raising and training racehorses here on their five-hundred-acre ranch, even though he had been offered several football scholarships. Kenneth, Melanie's husband, had been born into a racing family, and Moses Mile Farm had been in his family for over eighty years.

"You left out a few details," he said to his mother, raising one eyebrow at her, then smirking. When his gaze swung back to me, he asked me, "You ever ride a horse?"

I shook my head.

"But you're from Texas," he stated the obvious while looking confused. As if being from Texas meant we all had our own horses and rode them around for transportation.

"And yet I'm not a cowgirl. Go figure," I replied.

He laughed, and both dimples were out in full force. "I've got to get back out there before Dad realizes I snuck inside for a second breakfast. Jo didn't make this out at the barn kitchen." He nodded his head toward the back door. "The waffles are delicious, trust me," he added. "When you're done, you can head out to the stables. I'll show you around."

I wasn't sure how I felt about horses or going out to the stables, but what else was I supposed to do with my day? I simply nodded, and he turned and exited out the door in the far-right corner of the kitchen.

"He grew up on horses. He forgets that there is a life outside racehorses," she said as she walked over to the kitchen cabinet and began getting me a plate. "We aren't formal around here for breakfast. Mrs. Jolene, who Saxon has been calling Jo since he could talk, cooks breakfast for the ranch hands early every morning and then comes in to make sure we have a hot breakfast before returning to clean up the workers' breakfast. Kenneth always eats with the hands. Saxon eats in here the days he has classes, but he's not taking any classes this summer semester. Which reminds me, we need to talk about college. If you want to attend locally, we need to get you registered for the fall term. Anyway, Mrs. Jolene will always have food to eat in the house. You just come in and make yourself at home." She paused. "I want you to feel at home here. I truly do."

"Thank you," I replied, although I didn't see that ever happening, but Melanie was trying her best to make it so.

"After breakfast, go on out to the stables and find Saxon. He can give you a tour and then show you some things you can do every day to help out. We all have some chores, and I think that'll help you feel like a part of the family."

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Working out at the stables would be better than anything you could do inside the house. Besides, I am willing to bet you're gonna fall in love with horses. Your mama sure loved them. I imagine it's in your blood."

My mother had loved horses? How had I never known this?

Melanie had told me how she had grown up with my mother. They'd been best friends all their lives. Dad had never told me we had lived in Ocala, Florida. He never mentioned Melanie or where my mother was from. Whenever I asked him about grandparents, he would tell me they were all dead. I had assumed there was no other family or friends.

"I didn't know my mother loved horses."

Melanie's smile faded, and she looked away. "Well, I can imagine your father wouldn't have wanted to talk about that much," she replied, then began talking about the fresh juice options, as if she hadn't mentioned my mom or dad at all.

When Melanie had arrived to pick me up, she'd been dressed as if she had walked out of a magazine and into the wrong reality. Mrs. Miller frowned at her, as if she'd spoken another language, and asked if she was confused. I had thought the same thing. I couldn't envision someone in my family knowing anyone who looked like Melanie. My dad hadn't even been able to show me a picture of my mother, so all I had were the small things he would mention on occasion. I learned not to ask him about her though. Dad wasn't mean to me, but he had a temper. Talking about my mother always sent him into a drinking spell. I had done everything I could to keep him happy.

"Maddy girl, where is the fucking milk? I told you to get milk when you went to the grocery," Dad yelled from the kitchen.

I glanced over at Cole nervously, hoping he would speak up and say something. It was his fault we didn't have milk. I'd barely had enough money left after he took most of it from me before school this morning. Cole shrugged as he stayed silent, watching a basketball game on the television.

"Did you use it all?" I whispered.

Cole glanced over at me. "I had to, Maddy. I owed Rev," he replied, as if it were my fault he'd gotten hooked up with a dealer.

"What am I supposed to tell Dad?" I asked.

Cole shrugged again. "Just tell him you didn't have enough. I don't care what you say."

"He asked me—" I stopped talking the moment Dad's large form filled the doorway.

His angry scowl went from me to Cole. If he knew about Cole selling party favors for Rev at school, he'd beat him.

"You want to say that a little louder, Maddy girl?" he asked me, not taking his eyes off Cole.

"I was telling Cole I had forgotten to get the milk and asked if he had money I could borrow," I lied. Dad didn't seem convinced as he took a long drink from a can of Natural Light. Dad always had money for that. "What'd you spend all that money on then? There's barely shit in that fridge."

He had left me a hundred dollars. That was all he left me every two weeks, and I was supposed to buy the groceries with that. Most of the time, I would babysit the Johnson kids three doors down at night to help buy us more food. But lately, Cole had been finding my hiding spots and stealing my money. Instead of selling cocaine, I knew he'd started snorting it. He said he wasn't, but I could tell when he was high. It was becoming more and more frequent.

"Eggs have gone up in price, and so has fruit," I explained, which wasn't a lie.

"Don't need the fucking fruit. We ain't damn uppity folks. Use that money for some damn milk and them chips I like. Stop trying to make us healthy," he said with a growl, then went over to flop down in his faded green recliner.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

Apples were the only thing I ever bought for me. They might not care about eating healthy, but I did.

"Make us some grilled cheeses tonight, why don'tcha, Maddy girl?" Dad told me. "Okay," I agreed, thankful he hadn't lost his temper over the milk. "Why can't you be more like your sister? Huh, boy?" Dad asked Cole. I hated it when he did that. It only upset Cole, and that led to him getting high.

CHAPTER TWO

Melanie continued to talk while we sat and ate breakfast. She barely touched her food, but she had three cups of coffee. When I was finished, she told me she had a tennis match at the club and then a luncheon with friends. Before she left, she sent me down to the stables and told me where I would most likely find Saxon.

I passed several large, circular fenced-in areas with horses inside them. Some were alone while others had someone riding them. I froze when one massive horse raised his front legs and tried to toss the rider off his back. However, another man jumped over the fence and stood in front of the horse with his hands up in the air, talking to it. The horse came back down on all fours, swinging his head side to side. I was amazed the rider hadn't fallen off.

Melanie had talked about me working here and going to college. My plans were to get a job, save some money, then get a small studio apartment somewhere. I wasn't her child, and I doubted very much that her husband wanted to pay for my education. I also didn't think I was going to love horses the way my mother had.

"Just when I thought this day was going to be shit, you walk right out of my dreams," a voice said close to my ear.

Startled, I spun around. Piercing gray eyes met mine, and I stepped back because he was standing too close. His black hair was long enough to be tucked behind his ears, and he had a square jaw with lips that were entirely too lush to be fair—the combination was startling.

"Ignore him. He's an asshole," Saxon said, and I tore my eyes off the stranger to see Saxon walking up behind him.

"He's just jealous. Always has been," the guy replied, then winked at me.

Saxon chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that's it."

"Shiiit," he drawled and smirked at me. "The package doesn't get better than this."

Saxon ignored him and looked at me. "Madeline, meet Trev. I'd apologize, but he comes around a lot. He's one of those things you get used to."

"I might come around more often now," he said with those eyes of his still locked on me.

"I doubt that's possible," Saxon replied. "What's up? You don't normally show up this early. It's not even noon yet, and you're awake."

He finally moved his gaze to meet Saxon's, but he did it so slowly, as if taking his eyes off me was difficult. I knew guys like him. I'd been exposed to them enough to know how to handle them. The flirting was not something to take seriously. It was in his nature. He enjoyed female attention and knew he was charming. I doubted he'd ever been rejected.

"My dad woke me up at seven. Who the fuck gets up that early? Well, other than you," he replied.

Saxon found this amusing. "What did he want?"

Trev frowned. "He wanted me to work."

Saxon raised his eyebrows. "Where?"

Trev shrugged, as if this was a good question. "Got me. What do I know about working with horses? I ride them, I watch them race, I enjoy the alcohol at the track, but that's the extent of my knowledge."

Saxon looked back at me, grinning, as if he wanted to laugh. "Trev is a Hughes," he said, as if that explained this conversation. When I had no response to that, he continued, "Hughes Farm is the biggest racehorse establishment in the South."

"With the most wins, the best horses, an Olympic-sized pool, and a hot tub big enough for twentyfive people," Trev added.

I didn't need to look at him to see the cocky smile on his face. I could feel it. He was too much like my ex. Except my ex, Hank, hadn't been wealthy. Not even close. He'd just been blessed with looks that got him what he wanted. I decided I would be careful around Trev for that reason alone.

"Khan's gonna have some competition," Saxon said as he looked out over the fences toward a horse that seemed much calmer than the one I had been watching. "Firefoot is going to give him his first dose of a real match."

Trev didn't seem to care. He shrugged. "Great. Hope he does," he replied. "I'm not here to talk horses or racing. Not my thing. I thought you might want to come over later for a swim. I've invited over some people." He was looking at me, so I met his gaze. "It would be a good chance for Madeline to meet everyone."

"Maddy," I corrected him.

Saxon's gaze was on me then, and I gave him a small smile.

"I go by Maddy," I explained.

"Mom knows this?" he asked.

I nodded, and he rolled his eyes.

"She's got this thing about not shortening names," he told me, then looked back at Trev. "What time?"

"Around four," Trev replied.

"We'll be tired and hot by then. You up for a pool party?" Saxon asked me.

I wanted to say no and go find a place to be alone and read. However, Saxon's eyes looked hopeful, like he really wanted me to go. Hiding in my room wasn't going to make this any easier.

I managed to nod. "Sure."

Saxon's smile got bigger, and his dimples flashed. "Okay then, we'll be there at four thirty."

"Excellent," Trev replied, sounding pleased. "I'll see you both later."

When he finally walked away, I felt relieved. I must have sighed that relief because I heard Saxon chuckle.

"Don't worry about him. He's a flirt. It's how he is wired."

I gazed out over the ranch and shrugged. "Other than the fact that he's rich, I've dealt with guys like him before. It's fine."

"Yeah, I guess that's something you deal with a lot."

I turned my attention back to Saxon. "Why would you think that?" I asked, hearing the defensive tone in my voice. I hadn't meant to sound like he had insulted me.

He almost looked embarrassed, and I found that interesting.

"Well, the way you look ... guys notice you."

I felt certain that was a compliment and only that. There was no flirty gleam in his eyes.

"Oh, um, thanks." My response sounded awkward, and my cheeks warmed.

Saxon nodded his head toward the stables behind him. "Come on. Let me show you around."

I fell into step beside him as he started walking. "Your mom mentioned that I needed to pick up

some chores. I think you're the one who's supposed to give me some. She said I was needed out here more than inside or that I'd like it better. I'm not sure."

"How do you feel about working around the horses?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I'm certain I don't want to ride one or get too close."

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Before Trev arrived, I was watching one of these four-legged monsters rear up like he was trying to throw the rider off. It was terrifying."

Saxon chuckled. "Iron War. He might be great one day. He has some emotional damage, but our best trainers are working with him now. Hopefully, they can turn him around. Don't judge all horses because of him though."

I didn't feel convinced, and apparently, I didn't look it either because Saxon led us into the stables and directly over to some stalls with horses in them. I stayed a few feet back as he walked up to a horse and began rubbing him and talking to him, as if the horse understood him.

"This is Rig," he told me. "He's brilliant, and he comes from a winning line of thoroughbreds. No first places for him yet, but he's only two. He's got a couple of third places and a second place."

Saxon took a carrot out of his pocket and fed Rig from his hand. "That's a good boy," he said, then patted his forehead. "Come on," he urged me, waving me closer.

Fine. I'd move a little closer.

"She's scared of you, Rig. Be a gentleman," he told the horse.

Rig made a sound, as if he were attempting to respond.

I moved another step closer.

Saxon reached out and took my hand, then pulled me close enough so that Rig could nudge me with his nose. I jumped, and Saxon laughed.

"He's trying to ease your mind."

"Oh. Well, it looked like he might eat me, like he did that carrot," I replied.

"You're not orange and crunchy," Saxon said. "Here." He took my hand and placed it on the horse. "See, it's easy."

When Saxon took his hand off mine, I began to slowly rub him the way I had seen Saxon do. Rig moved closer to me, and I felt a smile tug on my lips. He wasn't scary at all.

"He's like a big puppy," I said in awe.

Saxon laughed. "Now, that's the first time I've ever heard a thoroughbred being compared to a puppy."

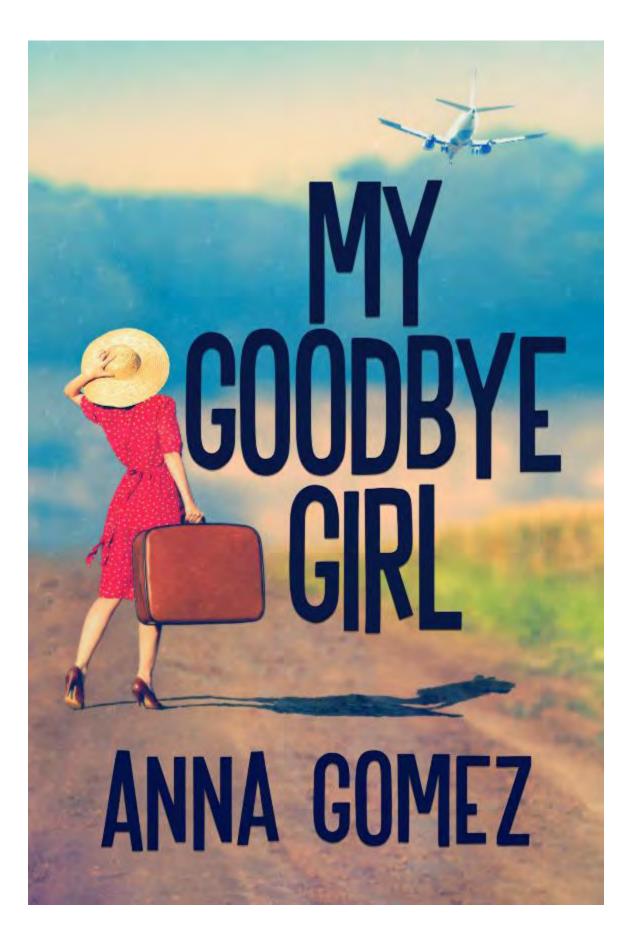
A phone started ringing, and Saxon pulled it out of his back pocket. I saw him glance at the screen before putting it to his ear.

"Hey," he said into the phone, then moved away from me, leaving the horse and me alone.

I watched him walk to the other side of the stable. Surprisingly, I wasn't nervous. I glanced up at Rig. He was beautiful.

My thoughts went to my mother. A woman I barely remembered. Dad had never told me about Mom loving horses or riding them. Just like he'd never mentioned Melanie or Florida. I wanted to know more about her, and maybe being around horses would do that for me. For now, I would stay and find out all I could about my mom and her past.

Why had my parents left here? Why hadn't Melanie come to see me sooner? There was so much I wanted to know.



MY GOODBYE GIRL BY ANNA GOMEZ

1st Place Winner for Multicultural Romance in The BookFest Award Fall 2023

"One universe, nine planets, 204 countries, 809 islands and 7 seas, and I had the privilege of meeting you." ~Unknown

When Tessa Talman first meets Simon Fremont, not only is she attracted to him, she's intrigued by how different their lives are. He's a dedicated scientist, practical, pragmatic, and grounded. She's a head-in-the-clouds romance author. As their relationship grows, they meet in places around the world, while continuing to live in different countries. Though their feelings for each other deepen, their priorities remain the same. Simon is in a hurry to be financially sound and settle down, but Tessa is enjoying her freedom and newfound success. Neither is willing to give in, but as each goodbye gets harder, Tessa begins to wonder whether fame is the path to happiness, or if she has everything she needs in Simon.

Just as Tessa finds the courage to go after her own happily ever after, the unthinkable happens, separating them in ways she never imagined. To move forward, she must let go of the past and determine once and for all if love is truly more powerful than the pain of goodbye.

"A heart-wrenching tale of two people destined to be together. Simon and Tessa are fantastically portrayed as star-crossed lovers whose lives are worlds apart. Even those who are not fans of romance will enjoy the relationships, scenery, and beautiful prose of this book. Five stars!" *~San Francisco Book Review*

"Both whimsical and heartbreaking, this sexy, globetrotting adventure is a must read love story. Anna Gomez is a master of the genre."

~Kristoffer Polaha, Actor and Author of the From Kona with Love series

"A beautiful story of a woman's quest to open her heart and let love in. It made me want to travel and fall in love all over again." ~**Willow Aster**, *USA Today* bestselling author

Paperback: 9781645482086 / \$16.95 eBook: 9781645482093 / \$4.99 Pub Date: June 6, 2023 Publisher: Rosewind, <u>https://rosewindbooks.com/</u> Buy Links and Book Info: <u>https://vesuvianmedia.com/my-goodbye-girl/</u> Distributor: <u>https://www.ipgbook.com/my-goodbye-girl-products-9781645482086.php</u> Media Kit: <u>https://www.annagomezbooks.com/media-kit/</u>

ANNA GOMEZ (pen name Christine Brae) is an award-winning author who was born in the city of Makati, Philippines and educated abroad before moving to Chicago. *My Goodbye Girl* is her solo debut under Anna Gomez, and *Moments Like This* (From Kona with Love series), her collaboration

with Kristoffer Polaha, is optioned and in development for film. She is Global Chief Financial Officer for Mischief at No Fixed Address, a consolidated group of advertising agencies. Gomez was recently selected for the 2020 HEROES Women Role Model Executives list, which celebrates 100 women who are leading by example and driving change to increase gender diversity in the workplace. Gomez has championed various ERGs for Black and API colleagues as well as resources essential to address challenges of ageism. She has sat on several boards and served as treasurer for Breathe for Justice and The Jensen Project, both focused on socio-economic issues, particularly violence against women and human trafficking. She was a keynote speaker in the 2020 Illinois CPA Society Young Professionals Leadership Conference as well as the Northwest Indiana Influential Women's Association's Breaking the Glass Ceiling Event. https://www.annagomezbooks.com/

CHAPTER ONE

The day she met him, Tessa was second in the priority lane for the Boeing 777 bound for La Guardia from Boston.

He was third.

After boarding the plane, Tessa found her place—7C—then hopped on the aisle seat to place her bags in the storage space above. She quickly tucked her purse far into the corner to prevent it from being smashed by the larger carry-ons, completely unaware she was holding up the line.

"I think this is me," said a man as he pointed his boarding pass toward her heavy black boots squashing the edge of his seat. It took her a few seconds to decipher his words. He had a heavy accent, certainly foreign. British, she decided. He had a distinct lilt to his tone.

"Oh, I am so sorry," Tessa exclaimed, hopping off and backing into another passenger who had tried to squeeze past them. She shrugged and smiled in embarrassment before brushing her hand over his chair. She scampered across the middle seat and settled in next to the window. Before she could turn back to address the man, an elderly gentleman sat beside her with a glass of orange juice in one hand and a torn-up paperback in the other. Tessa couldn't help her curiosity, she wanted a better look at the man who sat by the aisle. He didn't fit the mold of the typical businessmen who normally took this midday flight. If only her view wasn't blocked by the man who separated them.

Without turning her head, she tried her best to assess him. Long, lean legs, jeans, and vintage Converse sneakers. Through the corner of her eye, she strained to see his face. He had just put on some reading glasses. She noted his sandy brown hair, side swept and thicker on top, dense eyebrows, and prominent nose. It was also the only thing she could see past the older man, who had now removed his shoes.

When the guy in 7A stood up to retrieve something from the overhead compartment, Tessa noticed some serious abs hiding under his shirt. The way he leaned back in his seat, the way his fingers leafed through a pile of papers, he looked like an intellectual dressed as a cool dude.

Tessa was a writer. A keen observer of people, events, and places. She was obsessed with stories and lived and breathed with a passionate imagination, always finding love in the daily trivialities of life. The characters in her books were a combination of the stories she made up about the people she'd met, muddled with memories that turned themselves into fiction. Her inspirations started out as feelings and emotions. In time, they would blossom into words that seized control of every waking moment.

She began to write on the back of her boarding pass.

Hot guy on the aisle seat meets girl on plane to where? Leaves key chain on seat. He searches for her everywhere. Write about that journey. Elderly gentleman. Mentor? Cupid?

Gosh, he's cute.

The whirlwind of book signings and fan functions left her exhausted. This was all new to her, and the past year had been too hectic. New York was the last stop in this year's spring tour. *Smile, laugh, get your A-game on.* But the satisfaction of seeing her words come to life in the hearts and minds of complete strangers kept her going. There was nothing better than meeting new people from all walks of life and from every place in the world. People who shared your feelings and understood your messages, who ceased to be strangers and turned into friends.

"You say you hate it, but you do it every single time," her best friend had said. Riley had flowing black hair, flawless olive skin, and perfect makeup. The same Riley who had the heart of Tessa's older brother, Jacob, wrapped around her finger.

"I know," Tessa had said while sitting on a bench outside the Soul Cycle on Wacker Drive just two weeks before. "My agent insists I do at least four events this year. It's all so unexpected. I don't think we know how to deal with it yet."

"What? Hitting the bestseller list?"

Tessa had nodded. "I think she's in shock and wants to make sure I take full advantage of it. You know, it gets lonely sometimes. There's no one to share these interesting times with," Tessa hinted, winking.

"Hmm." Riley had cocked her head and placed her finger on her lips. "New York does sound inviting. I'll tell you what. I'll assist you at the signing if you let us extend for two more days to attend Fashion Week. I'm sure Gaby will be able to score us some tickets to the McQueen show."

And that's how this trip came to be.

The rest of the flight was uneventful. The older man coughed incessantly, and Tessa faced away from him. Soon, she fell into a deep sleep, periodically interrupted by the forward bobbing of her head.

Tessa jolted upright when the plane skidded to a stop. She reached for her phone to turn it on. It began vibrating with message after message. Riley's flight from Los Angeles would be landing in about two hours. Tessa would have time to unpack at the hotel and walk around Manhattan before Riley arrived.

After a loud ding, passengers began unbuckling their seat belts all around her. The young man in 7A shot up like an arrow, facing in her direction. For a brief second, she caught his gaze. He smiled at her, a lopsided kind of smile. Unsure. Maybe even embarrassed.

As the aisle began to fill, Tessa stood, leaned on the headrest, and waited for the line to move. All this time, she felt him watching her, the heat of his stare causing her ears to burn. He made small talk with a woman who asked him what he was doing in New York. She overheard the word "convention" and perked up to listen, but his voice was soon lost amidst the hum of other exchanges. She boldly watched as the interesting man unlatched the overhead bin, removed a black leather bag, and placed it on his seat. And then, to her surprise, he gently handed her bag over.

"Thank you." Tessa smiled as she reached for her burgundy purse.

"You're welcome," he answered. Then he was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Simon was confused about what had just happened and annoyed he hadn't spoken to the woman in 7C or asked for her number.

Talk about going overboard playing it cool, and now he was kicking himself. It's not like he hadn't had the opportunity. Back at O'Hare, he'd noticed her as soon as she got to the gate. Of course, extremely punctual as he was, he'd been sitting for a while, zoned out listening to music and reading a magazine. He'd heard her first—apologizing to strangers she had just whacked with a long cylindrical object slung across her shoulder. She sat right next to the counter, and there'd been a seat open right across from her. Slowly, he'd found his way to the empty seat, smitten by her looks alone. When she hadn't been sipping coffee or checking her phone, her nose was buried in a book.

Simon was on overload, his mind taking him places no one should visit in the middle of the day. She had on a pair of black leggings, an off-the-shoulder sweater, and motorcycle boots. Her beautiful Asian eyes lifted at the corners in a permanent smile, and every feature on her flawless face balanced in perfect harmony.

At first, he thought she was a fashion model, but she didn't have that air about her. She seemed unsure of herself, almost self-conscious. She kept her head down, like she was always deep in thought. And then several people approached her, and although she was gracious, the way she checked her watch every second gave her discomfort away.

Minutes before boarding was announced, she gathered her things and walked toward a sweet little woman standing in line at the far end of the gate. He watched them interact and saw them walking hand in hand toward the counter. The elderly lady beamed, her steps slow and deliberate as the woman patiently guided her through the throngs of waiting passengers.

Oops. Another casualty. The object hanging from her shoulder had just taken a man out, hitting him squarely on the forehead.

Simon followed her as she waited to board the plane. He was struck by the way she glided down the Jetway, moving as if she were skating on ice. The strides of her tiny feet, the back of her head with the short and clean eye-catching hairstyle only women with perfect faces could carry. He acted on impulse. Maybe he'd been working too much lately, but her beauty bowled him over. Nice to know he wasn't immune to the allure of a pretty girl.

She stopped at row 7 and stepped on his seat, and he thought it was his lucky day.

When she lifted her bag, she took his breath away. He uttered the first thing on his mind and told her she had just planted her boots on his seat. And before he could salvage his blooper, they had a seatmate. An elderly man who couldn't wait to remove his shoes.

When she nodded off, he gave himself permission to look past the old man and admire her as she slept. It was a welcome departure from his other uneventful flights, especially since all this traveling had been getting to him. Same routine no matter what airline, no matter what airport. Same type of people, day in and day out.

She was different. Everything about her looked uncomplicated. Her face epitomized symmetry and refinement, yet she was totally oblivious to it. She had melancholy in her eyes, subtlety in her movements. The designer purse, the red and green strip on the side of her boots, and the world-renowned stainless-steel watch she wore showed her success. He couldn't quite figure it out—this tumultuous feeling brewing in his chest, the deep breaths he had to take to calm himself down. What he saw was a myriad of contradictions. Beautiful yet shy, accomplished yet unsure, friendly yet sad. While she slept, her hands remained tucked under her legs so he couldn't see whether she already belonged to someone else.

Regardless, he knew they had to meet.

Earlier, while sitting at the gate, he had wanted to know what she was reading, whose message she was waiting for—and that frothy bubble on her top lip—was that a cappuccino she was drinking? Functional.

If someone asked him, that would be how he'd describe the ugly, ungainly hallways of La Guardia, surely one of the dingiest airports in the Western world. But he did appreciate how it took five minutes flat to get from the gate to baggage claim. Normally, he made a quick stop at Auntie Anne's

to pick up a pretzel dog, despite his doctor's warnings against consuming processed meats. Instead, he ran down the escalator, two steps at a time.

Baggage claim, if she even had any luggage, would be his last opportunity to meet her. But his brother waved furiously at him from the end of carousel 10.

"Hey, bro!" Adrian walked over as Simon stood at the very end of the baggage ramp. "We pretty much landed at the same time."

The two men clasped hands and pulled each other into a loose embrace. Simon was happy to have his brother fly all the way from Essex to support him at the event he was to be speaking at, although he was a little bit distracted at the moment.

"My flight was delayed for two hours!"

"Oh? That's too bad," Simon said. He was too busy scanning the area, waiting for the brownhaired girl to stand in line for her luggage. His suitcase rolled toward him on the conveyor belt. He made no move to pick it up.

In the middle of an approaching group of passengers, he spotted the elderly gentleman who'd sat next to him. He wondered how she was doing with that ridiculous tube swiping every living thing in its way. Damn, he could have offered to help her with it, maybe even shared a cab with her. But who shared cabs these days?

"How long are you staying? I took an extra day to tour the city, you know. Empire State and all."

When Simon turned to respond, there she was, appearing out of nowhere, her shoulders slightly hunched under the weight of the long pole she had slung across her body.

He saw the surprise in Adrian's face when he walked away to slide up next to her.

"Hi," Simon said, resembling a giddy schoolboy but feeling every bit like a man on a quest. He fully realized how idiotic he must look. Why did this have to be a whole production? It's not like he hadn't done this before. It'd been a while, he got that. But this time—the adrenaline rush, the total blackout—felt like nothing he'd ever experienced. The sounds around the normally bustling airport faded—it was the two of them and nothing else.

Surely, he must have pursued Maxine in some sort of way. Well, on second thought, maybe he hadn't. They'd met at a convention, seen each other when they returned home to Boston, and things just fell into place.

He scratched his chin a few times, and then pulled on his ear.

"Hi," she said, her gaze fixed on the moving beltway.

"Have you checked your purse yet?" Simon asked.

Her head snapped toward him and she clutched her purse tight against her body. "Excuse me?" Her brown eyes glinted gold under the fluorescent lights.

She had misunderstood his question. He scrambled for a way to explain so she wouldn't think he was some sort of weird stalker.

She glanced at the conveyor and took a step closer to it, grabbing a mid-sized black Samsonite with a bright red name tag from the belt and setting it on the ground.

Simon couldn't make the name out for shit.

"Your purse." He tried to put on an American accent, afraid of being misunderstood. A twang here, a twang there. Although careful not to overdo it.

"Sorry, I have to get going," she said as she pulled out the suitcase's handle and transferred the long black pole to her shoulder. She started for the exit, but halted after a few steps and turned to him. "Thanks again," she said, this time with a warm smile and a wave.

He saw hope in her smile.

Feeling like he had flopped in front of his brother, Simon tried to mask his blunder by pushing his shoulders way too far back and adopting a swagger. He didn't really know what all that effort was for, this desperate attempt to get her attention. A number, perhaps? A sign of interest? Clearly, none of those had materialized.

"What was that about?" Adrian asked.

"A girl I met on the plane. Just wanted to ask if she needed any help with her luggage."

Adrian shot him a look that said he wasn't buying it. "Simon Fremont making a pass at a woman—I never thought I'd live to see this day," he teased. "You finally looked up from those science journals in time to notice a chick?"

Simon pulled his luggage out from underneath Adrian's nose. They were the last ones there, and his bag just about to make another round of the airport. He wondered why he was so jittery. It was merely one encounter. A failed one, that is. He had much more important things to think about on this trip.

Like the speech he was going to be giving in a few hours. Or, how about the news he'd just received about his well-being.

"Shut up and grab your bag. The hotel shuttle leaves in five minutes."

CHAPTER THREE

She wondered why the guy at the airport had asked her to check her purse. Not that she was alarmed or anything. After all, she was still trying to get used to the spotlight, strangers coming up to her, giving her letters and gifts. It was a day in the life, sadly. Mostly impersonal, but oddly comforting at times. To know she was making a difference with her words soothed her.

She laughed when a silly thought crossed her mind. Was he trying to get an autograph for his mom or something?

While standing in the taxi line, she was preoccupied with listening to phone messages and forgot all about meeting the stranger.

Attempting to simplify her life, Tessa dated casually. It was a conscious decision, made to ensure she never tied herself down to one place. She often wondered about this, and asked Riley why settling down never appealed to her. Riley always told her it was because love hadn't found her quite yet.

After checking into the hotel, Tessa headed up 53rd Street to 5th Avenue, where she shopped at Saks Fifth for well over an hour. She walked back to the hotel thirty minutes after Riley texted she had landed. Tessa was busily searching through her shopping bags when light footsteps on the carpet floor outside her door announced Riley's arrival.

"Hey!" Riley shrieked as Tessa held the door open. In she traipsed, her makeup bag bigger than her luggage. Riley dropped them both on the ground and ran into Tessa's open arms. After giving Tessa a tight hug, she skipped toward the bed by the window.

"Sorry, all they had was a king."

"No biggie," Riley answered, climbing under the covers, coats, shoes and all. "You look great! Did you get your hair cut again?"

"Rye, what are you doing?"

"Ahh." She exhaled loudly, burrowing her head deeper and deeper in between the pillows. "Give me a second. It's the Heavenly Bed."

"Yup. New haircut." An awkward silence briefly followed. They both knew that Tessa's haircuts were controlled by her emotions. Whenever she felt stagnant, whenever she wanted a change, Tessa took it out on her hair.

"It's beautiful!" Riley said. "Short hair suits you so well. You've got that rare face that can do any hair. I'm more worried about why you did it. This book thing. Too much?"

"I was just bored the other day and needed a new look." Tessa climbed over the mound of bags strewn on the floor. She searched through the piles until she found the package that held her new purse.

Riley sighed loudly. "Bored already, huh."

Tessa nodded. Riley knew how she was. There was no point in arguing. They'd been friends since high school, had their share of adventures and misadventures in college. Until her brother Jacob began seeing her friend in a different light. Riley and Jacob had been a couple for the last two years.

Tessa untied the intricately wound ribbon around the silver box that held her new purse. "Look!" She pointed excitedly. "I think I'll wear it tonight." She held her new purse in the air.

"Gorge."

"Where are we going?"

"What about The Standard?" Riley kicked her shoes off the bed but remained buried under the comforter. "Hi-line Fling?" she asked.

It would be good to have a night out. They'd both been in this city often enough to know their way around.

"Sure," she answered without looking up. Tessa turned the bag upside down and watched as each item fell on the bed. She gathered them with one hand and placed them into the new purse.

Riley busily eyed the room service menu. Tessa didn't know how Riley stayed so lean and fit when all she did was eat.

She raised her head as Tessa sprang off the bed. "You forgot something," she said, pointing at an object that fluttered to the floor.

"Oh, the receipt," Tessa guessed, bending down to pick it up.

It wasn't the receipt. Tessa giggled.

"What?" Riley asked.

"He must have slipped his business card inside when he took my bag down on the plane," Tessa mused, holding it up.

Simon Fremont, Research and Development Nanoproducts Licensing Gladtech Corporation

"He asked me to check my purse when I saw him at baggage claim."

Riley whooped. "Oh, Lord. Seriously? Some guy on the plane hit on you?"

"No, it wasn't like that. He helped me with my bags. We hardly said a word to each other." Tessa sat on the bed next to Riley. She slowly reclined and slid her legs under the covers.

"What a weirdo. Slipping his card in your purse." Riley moved over to give Tessa some room. "Looks like a nerd. A pretty desperate nerd."

"He didn't look like a nerd. He was cute. Had an accent. Definitely not from here." Now it was Tessa's turn to bask in the softness of the mattress. "You're right about this bed. It's making me want to take a nap. Would you mind if I took one? I'm still so exhausted from the signing in Boston."

Riley turned to face her just as she yawned. "Who'd he look like? Describe."

"Stu."

"Stu who?"

"The British model. The guy I showed you months ago, the one on every teaser and book cover on Facebook."

"Another one of your book boyfriends? He must not be too hot if I don't remember him."

"No one but Jake looks hot to you," Tessa teased.

"Well then, look how lucky you are! You look just like your brother," Riley shot back, laughing. "Same hair color, same eyes. Except his hair is a wee bit longer than yours!"

"Funny," Tessa answered.

Riley and Jacob had the picture-perfect kind of love. The kind Tessa couldn't even write about because it was so simple and straightforward. He and Tessa came from an unconventional family, and Riley had all the love and support she would ever need. Riley had waited patiently while he drifted in and out of his rebellious years. And when he decided he'd had enough, he straightened up, went to med school, scooped her up, and never let go. She was his family now, and he held on to her like he had finally found his home.

Tessa and her brother had been orphaned at an early age, shuttled to and from uncles and aunts and cousins and grandparents. They lived in different houses and changed schools at least every two years. They had love, but it came and went with the tide. Relatives, friends, family members—it was like a game of hot potato. Whose turn, which house, and for how long?

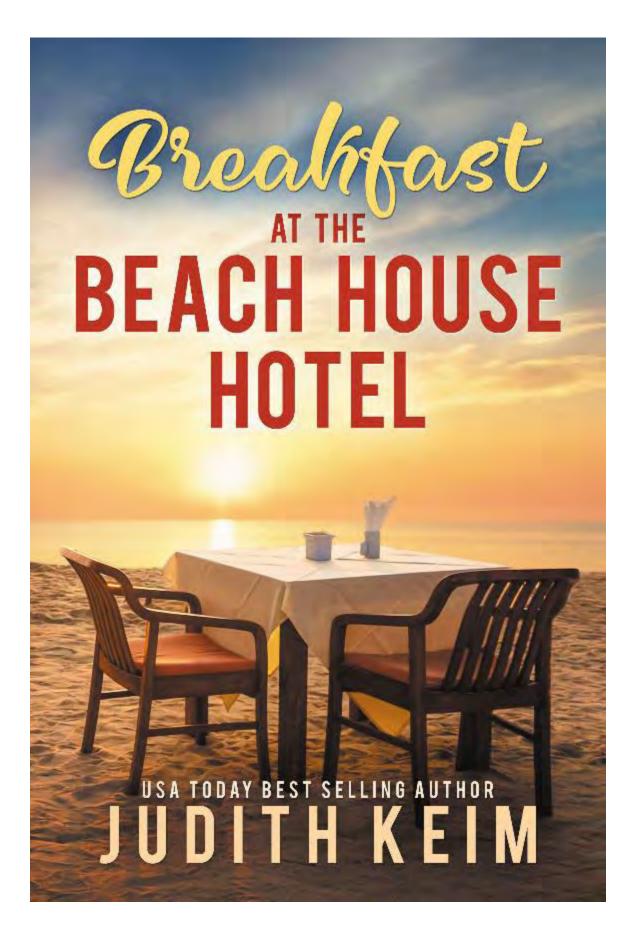
"Don't hold your breath for this one. I'm not calling him."

"You complain about being alone, yet you can have your pick of almost anyone," Riley objected. "And all the guys you go out with—you leave them just as they're beginning to grow on me—"

"I'm still trying to figure myself out," Tessa said with a yawn. "And we've talked about this so many times! I'm just starting out and can't be tied down. These guys, they need a wife, someone to start having babies with, which definitely isn't me."

Riley poked her shoulder as Tessa turned to face away, pulling the comforter up to her chin. "You can't be Wonder Woman forever. At some point, she gets Steve Trevor to sweep her off her feet."

"Nonsense. Now, leave me to my nap so I can get back some energy for our night on the town!"



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Hardcover: 9781954325593 / \$19.99 Paperback: 9780996435017 / \$14.99 eBook: 9780996435000, \$5.99 Audiobook: B01HDSF49S Pub Date: May 27, 2015 Publisher: Wild Quail Publishing Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/Breakfast-at-Beach-House-Hotel/dp/0996435018

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CHAPTER ONE

I gripped the armrests of my seat as the jet accelerated down the runway with a roar of its engines. The plane lifted into the air like an eagle in flight. I let out the breath I'd been holding and told myself to relax, that it was too late to make any changes, and I needed to escape the dreary weather of Boston and the drama of my recent life. And though I felt so vulnerable, so unable to find joy, staying with a total stranger wouldn't be all that bad, would it? Not when it made Liz, my daughter, so happy.

She'd convinced me to fly with her to the Gulf Coast city of Sabal, Florida, to spend Thanksgiving as a guest of her freshman college roommate's mother. I didn't know Rhonda DelMonte, except through emails in which she'd chatted about the wonderful connection her sweet daughter, Angie, had made with Liz and me. She'd seemed friendly, but still ...

Tamping down my anxiety, I turned to Liz. "What are you reading?"

She held up her *Cosmopolitan*. "Not reading, more like drooling over some sexy soap stars. One of them looks just right for you, Mom. Vaughn Sanders. He's a real hottie."

I gave her a weak smile. After all my heartbreak, the thought of dating anyone made my stomach curl.

Liz squeezed my hand. "Mom, I'm so glad we're making this trip. Dad is being such a jerk, and I can't stand you-know-who."

I gazed out the window at the clouds that caressed the plane with long white fingers. As I stared at the mistiness outside, I wondered what I was going to do with my life. The divorce had happened so suddenly I wasn't ready for all that followed. I couldn't help a snort of disgust. Breaking up with me, Robert had declared he no longer wanted to be a wallflower at the dance of life. As if he'd ever been that poetic! I knew very well it took two to tango, but I'd been caught off guard that he'd chosen a new dance partner—the young, voluptuous receptionist in his office just a few years older than Liz. "Kandie with a K" is what she'd called herself, flashing a smile and a generous peek at her implanted breasts. No doubt Robert's ridiculous wallflower comment had come from her and one of the silly magazines she constantly read at work.

Liz gave me a worried look. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. But inside, I was anything but okay. The divorce had left me without a home, a job, and with much less money than I'd thought.

Our landing was as smooth as the rest of the flight. Prepared to make the best of the situation, I gathered my things. This was the only vacation I'd have for months, perhaps years, to come.

We deplaned down steps onto the hot pavement of the airport apron. I drew a deep breath of the pungent, tropical air and stood a moment, admiring the tall Australian pines and palm trees lining the Sabal airport. I blinked against the brightness of the sunlight, and my heart lifted. I was so glad to be away from cold, gray New England.

"Hurry up, Mom!" said Liz impatiently. "Angie's waiting."

When we walked into the waiting area, Angie rushed forward and swept Liz into a warm embrace. Watching them, I smiled. With no siblings, they'd quickly become like sisters. I turned to Angie's mother, and shocked, I rocked back on my heels. *This was sweet, shy little Angie's mother?*

Wearing a bright-green, silk caftan and sparkly, gold and "diamond" sandals, Rhonda DelMonte stood before me like a large, tropical bird. Rhinestone-studded sunglasses rested atop her head, and huge diamonds, offset by a deep tan, winked at her ears, wrists, and throat. My gaze traveled up to Rhonda's bleached-blond hair pulled away from her full face and gathered in a knot at the base of her head. Wide brown eyes, surrounded by lashes stiff with mascara, studied me openly.

"So, you made it!" Rhonda boomed, pulling me into a bosomy hug that reeked of *Poison* perfume. "Let's see if we can put some color on that thin, little figure of yours!" She squinted at me. "And a sparkle in those eyes."

Bowled over by her presence, I forced a smile.

She gave me a little jab in the arm. "Boy, have I heard a lot about you! But, don't worry! It wasn't *all* bad." She let out a short burst of laughter and studied me. "Ann Rutherford sounds so formal. I've decided to call you Annie."

"But ... but ..." I sputtered. I *hated* the name "Annie." It reminded me too much of Little Orphan Annie. My parents were killed in an auto accident when I was just five, leaving my strict grandmother to raise me. "I don't ..."

"Don't pay any attention to me." Giving me a broad grin, Rhonda elbowed me playfully. "I have to dub people in my own way, and with those round blue eyes of yours, you're an Annie if I ever saw one!"

Before I could respond, Liz tugged on my arm. "Mom! You have to see what Angie got for an early Christmas present!"

She led me outside. A shiny, little white convertible was parked in the waiting zone.

Liz grinned. "Neat, huh? I've always wanted a Beemer!"

"It's just perfect!" Angie gave her mother a quick hug. She might be a little spoiled, but she was a sweet girl. Dark-haired and quiet, she was a perfect match for my more outgoing blond daughter.

We loaded the car with the suitcases, and I squeezed into the backseat of the BMW with Rhonda. As we drove through town, it was difficult to hear Rhonda's chatter above the rush of wind in my ears, but I strained to listen.

"Palm Avenue is one of the nicest shopping districts in Sabal. They have some beautiful things." Rhonda gave me a meaningful look. "You'll be able to buy some bright, fun clothes, and not be quite so beige."

Dismayed, I glanced down at the simple beige dress I was wearing.

"Don't worry." Rhonda winked. "We've got plenty of time for shopping."

I sat back in my seat, realizing this short visit wasn't going to seem short at all.

We left the commercial area and drove along a winding street lined with large, palatial homes. Angie slowed, entered a drive between two huge pillars, and pulled up in front of an enormous stucco mansion. Liz and I exchanged looks of amazement. Awed, my gaze swept across the extended façade of the house, and I wondered how many rooms it contained.

"This is The Beach House," Rhonda announced proudly, indicating the lovely estate that belied its simple name. "It used to be a small hotel at one time, but now it's where we live. Someday I may turn it back into a hotel—a kind of place for classy people. Your kind of place, Annie. Come on in! Manny will get your bags."

Angie shook her head. "Mom, Manuel, and Consuela are off for the holiday."

Rhonda gave a hearty laugh. "Oh, yeah. I forgot." She turned to me. "Manny is my right-hand guy. You know what they say, every woman needs a Manny around the house!" Rhonda roared at her joke, and I couldn't help chuckling.

We entered the house through double, carved-wooden doors. As I stood in the tiled entry, I looked across the living room through a wide expanse of sliding glass doors that led to a lanai. It held a magnificent spa and an infinity-edge pool that appeared to be one with the sparkling blue water of the Gulf of Mexico just beyond. I was captivated by its beauty.

"It's wonderful, Rhonda!"

She grinned. "Get comfortable. Then we'll swim and have lunch." With a flash of green silk, she disappeared into the back of the house.

Angie took the suitcase from my hand. "I'll show you to your rooms."

She led me upstairs into a sizeable room overlooking the broad expanse of beach and Gulf water. The walls, a rich cream color, were enhanced at the baseboards and the ceiling with wide, carved wooden moldings painted a contrasting stark white.

I set my bag down on the bed. The green in the plush, quilted bedspread was repeated in the

mini-print draperies and, again, in the cream, patterned carpet.

"Lovely," I murmured.

"A professional did it." Angela gave me a knowing look. "My mother would go for pink flamingos on the lawn if you know what I mean." Even as the corners of her mouth lifted, unconditional love shone in her eyes.

I smiled. Angie and her mother seemed as close as Liz and I.

Angie left, and before I unpacked my suitcase, I yanked off my beige, knit dress. I'd never wear it in Rhonda's presence again. No doubt she'd order me to take it off. The woman had no idea about boundaries.

After settling in, I pulled on my new bathing suit, loving the thought that, while Robert and Kandie were coping with sleet and early snow back home, Liz and I were able to enjoy tropical warmth in a gorgeous setting far away from them.

Standing on the balcony off of the bedroom, I gazed down at the pool. The waterfall at one end sent glistening ripples dancing across the pool's surface. The sound of the tumbling water was almost drowned out by the lapping of the Gulf on the broad, white beach beyond the house. Peace such as I hadn't known for a long time wrapped around me, and the headache I'd developed after meeting Rhonda eased.

Downstairs, I walked outside and blinked rapidly from the glare off the water. I was pleased now I'd splurged and bought a new beach cover-up. After the cool November days up north, the sun felt especially hot.

"Hey, Mom! Come on in. The water's great!" Liz looked up at me from the pool with a happy grin.

At her smile, I was happy I'd agreed to come to Florida. The divorce had rocked her too. I dipped my toe in the sparkling water and let out a contented sigh. It was pleasantly warm. I took off my cover-up and opened my bottle of sunblock.

"Is that a new suit?" Liz asked.

"Yes. Do you like it?" I'd chosen a tasteful, black, one-piece bathing suit.

Liz wrinkled her nose. "Mmm, not exactly."

Rhonda approached us, munching on a carrot stick and carrying a plate of sandwiches. "It looks like you're going to a beach funeral. You'd look great in a bikini! Why are you wearing that?"

For a moment, I was too surprised to say anything. "But it's a nice traditional suit."

"I bet that's just the kind of thing your ex liked to see you in. Right? From what I've heard, he was an uptight asshole."

A furious retort died on my lips as old memories came back. It was true. Robert had a fit if I wore anything he considered too "daring" at the country club pool. Especially after one of our neighbors, drunk at a party told Robert he was lucky to have me in his life and his bed.

"I knew it!" Rhonda gave me a smug look. "Tomorrow we'll get you a new suit. I'll even pick it out." She grinned. "Boy, have you got some changes coming. You're going to have a ball! Or should I say balls?"

I swallowed hard as Rhonda roared with laughter. What, I wondered, had I gotten myself into with this visit? Rhonda and I were like night and day, totally out of sync with each other. I could almost hear my grandmother say, "You're in trouble now, young lady." And, for once, she'd be right.

Rhonda threw an arm around me and grinned. "I knew we'd get along."

"Yes, of course!." I ordered myself not to roll my eyes and wondered how many hours until my flight home. Our first day together was not half over, and I had another five to go.

By the time I crawled into bed that night, I was too tired even to continue counting the remaining hours of the visit. The sun had overheated my skin, and my trying to remain an enthusiastic guest as my grandmother had taught me had fried my mind.

I awoke and stretched. The sun peeking through the drapery caused my lips to curve happily. It

was another beautiful day in paradise. Vowing to relax and get along with my hostess for the next few days, I climbed out of bed and got dressed.

Downstairs, I took in the view from the living room and let out a sigh of pleasure. As I walked into the kitchen, Rhonda greeted me with a smile. "Today, we'll go to the Shops at the Lagoon for a bathing suit for you. It's time to liven you up a bit."

I could well imagine what Rhonda would pick out for me and pressed my lips together. The neon pink tank top she was wearing outlined every one of her curves, and her orange shorts were ... well, too short.

"Yeah, Mom, liven up, as Rhonda says." Liz beamed from Rhonda to me. "I've tried to tell you ..." At my warning look, she stopped talking.

Rhonda rose and put an arm around me. "I just want to see you have some fun, hon. I know what it's like, following a divorce. Now, do as I say and go take that skirt off. We're wearing shorts today."

"But ..." I looked down at the filmy skirt I'd bought on sale last summer—I'd been so excited about a chance to wear it.

"Go on now," urged Rhonda.

"Hurry, Mom! Rhonda's taking us out to breakfast."

Deciding not to make a scene, I headed back upstairs praying I could make it through the next few days without coming to blows with Rhonda. She was so ... so ... damn ... bossy!!

Thanksgiving was another beautiful, tropical day. I pulled on shorts and a T-shirt and padded downstairs. Rhonda was already in the kitchen finishing a pumpkin pie.

"Happy Thanksgiving! Can I help?"

Rhonda shook her head. "Maybe later. Right now, I'm ordering you out of the kitchen. Go for a walk on the beach, and then you can relax by the pool."

More orders. I took a deep breath. Two and a half more days to go. "Okay, let me know if you need me to do anything." It was, I now knew, useless to argue with her.

As I strolled along the beach, the sound of the waves lapping against the shore eased the tension in my shoulders. The cry of a gull swooping above me caught my attention. I waded into the water, letting the salty froth wash over my feet and cool me before I headed down the beach. My muscles stretched as I picked up my pace. It felt so good.

After a quick bite to eat back at The Beach House, I changed clothes and lay on a chaise lounge next to the pool. In my new, lime-green bikini—the skimpy one Rhonda and the girls insisted I buy—I immersed myself in a book, unwinding for the first time since I'd arrived in Sabal. The television blared from the kitchen, announcing cold, rainy weather for Macy's New York Thanksgiving Day Parade. I thought of all Robert had done and hoped it was just as miserable in Boston.

Liz took a seat on the lounge chair beside me. "I love being down here in Florida. How about you?"

I nodded. The thought of still being at home, facing my first big holiday as a single, sent a chill racing across my warm skin.

"It hasn't been so bad then?" Liz studied me.

"Rhonda drives me crazy, but I'm glad to see you happy." I was learning to cope with Rhonda's bossiness. Growing up as I had with my straitlaced grandmother in Boston society, Rhonda's salty language still jarred me. Rhonda didn't even notice, and I doubted she ever would. But she was tender-hearted, and that went a long way with me.

Later, Rhonda came out to the pool. "All right, ladies, it's time to go upstairs and get dressed

for dinner. Wear something nice for the holiday. We're celebrating!"

With thoughts of Thanksgivings in the past, I slowly climbed the stairs. It would take me a long time to get used to all the changes in my life. I undressed and stepped into the shower. The cool water felt good on my skin as I soaped my body, removing the last of the suntan lotion.

Drying off, I glanced at my reflection in the glass shower door. Though the big four-oh would happen in another two years, I didn't look close to my age. At five-three, and with my shoulder-length black hair hanging straight, I looked more like an older sister to Liz. Had I been such a disappointment to Robert? We'd married young, right after I discovered I was pregnant. I'd accepted that time had cooled things down. But after all I'd done for him as a lover, a mother, a business partner, I'd thought our marriage was solid.

I pushed aside the lingering doubts that rubbed my mind raw, dressed in my frothy skirt and a sleeveless top, and went downstairs. The girls had set the dining room table. Crystal water goblets, white wine glasses, and sparkling silverware lay at each place atop the white damask tablecloth.

My mouth watered as I slid onto the plush dining room chair Rhonda indicated for me. Tantalizing aromas had wafted from the kitchen all afternoon. She left and reappeared with a golden brown turkey on a huge platter.

"It looks wonderful, Rhonda," I gushed. Her cooking was great.

"Thanks." She set the platter down, then handed me an opened bottle of white wine. "How about taking care of this, Annie? Just make sure you fill mine to the top." Her lips curved impishly. "Leave a little for yourself."

Relieved to be able to do something useful at last, I accepted the bottle and poured the wine out just as the girls finished carrying in the side dishes.

We ate in peaceful silence, each morsel of food worth every calorie.

"I hope Kandie burned their turkey," Liz said out of the blue, and we all laughed. Kandie, the twit, couldn't even heat something properly in a microwave.

Rhonda raised her wine glass. "Here's to us!"

We clicked glasses and smiled at each other before sipping our wine, well aware of the pain each of us had endured.

At the end of the meal, I took the last bite of my pumpkin pie and dabbed my mouth with my napkin. The girls hastily excused themselves and bolted to meet some of Angie's friends. Sipping coffee, Rhonda and I remained at the table. There was still so much I didn't know about her. With the girls around, we hadn't had much time alone with each other.

"Everything was scrumptious," I said, meaning every word. The woman was a whiz in the kitchen.

She grinned. "It's something creative for me to do. And I have to tell ya, I get bored easily. With Angie away, it's hard for me to fill my days—other than ladies' lunches and that type of thing." She leaned forward. "How about you, Annie? What keeps you busy with Liz away at school?"

"Well, recently I've been struggling with the divorce." A long sigh escaped me. All the changes in my life suddenly felt like a blow to the belly. "In the past, I've helped Robert with our business consulting for companies regarding their benefit plans. And I've done volunteer work at the local library. Now, I need to find a place to live. Then, I'll have to find work elsewhere to bring in money; I can't trust Robert's support to last. He's promising to make things easy, but I'm sure it's just to keep things simple while he and Kandie set up housekeeping."

"Yeah? What kind of work will you look for?"

Rhonda's interest encouraged me. "I'm not sure. I've been very much a part of Robert's consulting practice, but it was more or less in the background. I don't know if I'll be able to convert that into a paying job."

She gazed at me thoughtfully. "Something will work out, hon."

More comfortable with her now, I blurted out, "After all those years with Robert, I thought my

life was settled." I shook my head. "Delivering the news, he was so darn smug. It was bad enough that he'd been fooling around, but, with Kandie? If it weren't so painful, it would be laughable. It's such a typical story—the boss and the bimbo." Tears stung my eyes. "He all but crowed like a rooster when he told me Kandie was pregnant, and they were going to be married as soon as possible. I've always wanted more children, but it never worked out."

Rhonda clucked her tongue. "That's terrible. I thought I was all settled too. Sal and I started going out in high school. Who knew things would get so screwed up?" She rose. "Come on, Annie. It's a beautiful evening, and we can talk some more outside."

I followed Rhonda outside.

She stopped and turned to me. "Men are bastards, aren't they? Let's have an after-dinner drink and toast them, 'cause, bad as they are, I want 'em around."

I wasn't at all sure I'd ever feel that way again. I just wanted to succeed at whatever I chose to do as a single woman, proving to Robert and everyone else I could do very well on my own.

Drinks in hand, we stretched out on long, comfortable chaises by the pool. The early evening air, full of the tang of salt was pleasant as gentle, onshore breezes whispered by us.

"What is your ex like?" I asked. No further mention had been made of him by either Rhonda or Angie.

"Sal? He was a skinny little kid, a real loner in my neighborhood at the Jersey Shore, where we grew up. My brother, Richie, used to bring him home for supper now and then because he lived with his mother, and she worked late. We married right after I graduated from high school. My father wasn't going to put up with Sal just hanging around me, you understand. Not if he wanted to be part of our family's business." She smiled dreamily. "Sal was a really good lover, and we were happy—living in Jersey, working in my family's butcher shop."

"What happened?"

"You don't know?" Rhonda sat up in her chair and faced me with a broad grin. "One hundred eighty-seven million dollars is what happened. That's what!"

Shocked, I rolled to a sitting position.

"Sal and I put aside some money for a vacation in Miami Beach," she explained. "I bought a lottery ticket there. 'No way you're gonna win, Rhonda,' Sal tells me. But I've got a feeling I just might. 'If I win, it's all mine,' I tell him. Sure enough, that Saturday night, they called out my numbers. Sal just sits there like a dummy while I shriek my lungs out. I tell him I'm sick and tired of the cold weather up north, that I want to give the butcher shop to my brother Richie, and come live in Florida."

Rhonda's smile disappeared, replaced by a hurt look I understood all too well. "Money turned Sal into a real asshole. We left the family business, came to Florida, and bought this house, thinking it would be fun to fix it up together and turn it back into a hotel. But he wasn't interested in that. Not really."

She let out a sigh that spoke volumes. "One day, he announced he was moving to Palm Beach with a young girl he'd met in Fort Myers. Guess those girls saw dollar signs when he drove them past the house, 'cause he let everybody think he had all the money. But, he didn't; I'd been advised by my brother's lawyer to keep all of it in my name, in a trust. Sal told me he didn't care; he'd take enough money to live well, that he just wanted out of the marriage so he could be with someone young and new."

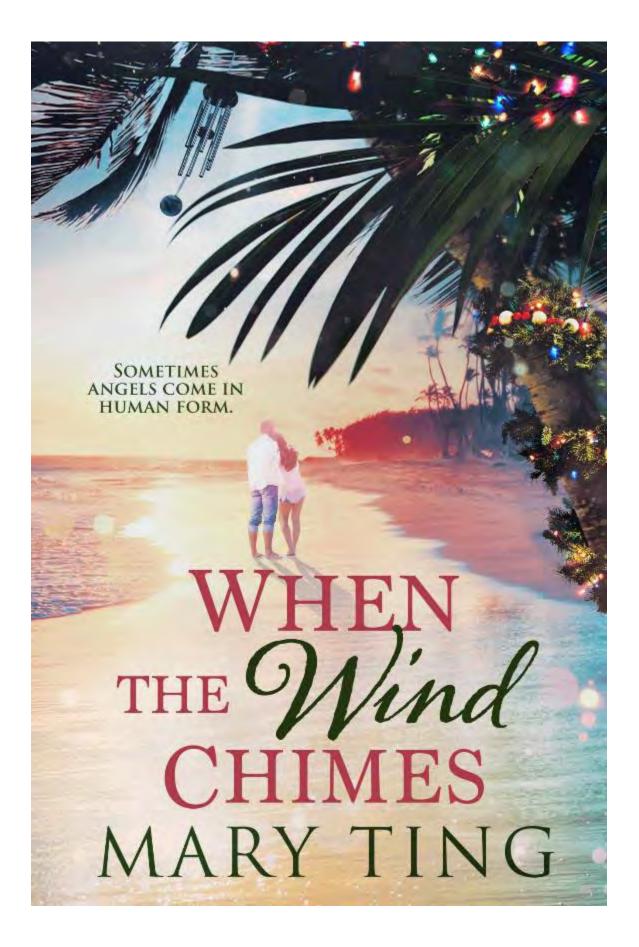
I recognized the haunted look in Rhonda's eyes and reached over and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry, Rhonda." I knew very well how much that hurt.

"Me, too. It sucks, don't it?"

I couldn't stop a giggle. All of a sudden, we were laughing together, letting out our pain and sorrow in great, gulping guffaws.

Rhonda leaned over and flung an arm around me. "Ah, Annie, you're not as bad as I thought."

My heart warmed. They were the nicest words anyone had said to me in a very long time.



WHEN THE WIND CHIMES (SPIRIT OF 'OHANA) BY MARY TING

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SOMETIMES ANGELS COME IN HUMAN FORM.

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She throws herself into helping her sister's struggling art gallery, even taking a temporary job for extra money by looking after a little girl from her nephew's school. She also begins to paint again, something she's been unable to do since her breakup. It's tempting to stay on Kauai, but she has obligations back in Los Angeles.

Life gets more complicated when circumstances keep putting her close to Leonardo Medici. Not only is he drop-dead gorgeous, he's a local celebrity. But Kaitlyn can't shake the feeling he's hiding something.

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MARY TING is an international bestselling, Benjamin Franklin gold-award-winning author. Her books span a wide range of genres, and her storytelling talents have earned a devoted legion of fans, as well as garnered critical praise. Becoming an author happened by chance. It was a way to grieve the death of her beloved grandmother and inspired by a dream she had in high school. After realizing she wanted to become a full-time author, Mary retired from teaching. She also had the privilege of touring with the Magic Johnson Foundation to promote literacy and her children's chapter book: No Bullies Allowed. https://www.tangledtalesofting.com/

CHAPTER ONE

Unexpected Passenger

"Jingle Bells" blasted at Lihue Airport on Kauai, only I wasn't dashing through the snow. I was sprinting through the terminal with a carry-on duffel bag hiked over my shoulder and a smaller one clutched in my hand.

Outside the terminal, dark gray clouds clumped like gloomy snowballs. Rain was imminent. All the travelers scurrying over the tile floor toward the doors had the same plan—to catch a cab before the downpour.

Footsteps pounded around and past me. People bumped into me as I hurried along. My duffel bag became heavier the longer I carried it. Even as I struggled to keep pace with the flow, I admired the garland adorned with red baubles, coiled around the pillars.

The beautiful twelve-foot Christmas tree with twinkling lights distracted me as I passed, and I almost ran into someone who'd stopped in the walkway.

"Sorry. Excuse me," I said. Good grief, Kate. Pay attention before you do some damage.

He waved a hand with an affable grin and tugged his rolling suitcase away.

I arrived breathless at the outside baggage center, sweat beading my forehead, but was soothed by the sweet fragrance permeating the air. In every direction were kiosks selling handmade leis, some with beads or coconut shells. A lady waved a pink fresh-flower lei in my face, but I politely declined and walked toward the taxi line under an awning about fifty yards away.

The cool wind kissed my cheeks and tousled my long brunette hair, and I pulled my unbuttoned sweater off. Seventy-two-degree weather didn't warrant a sweater even with the rain. As soon as I joined the line for a cab, the sky unleashed its wrath and water pelted the ground like bullets.

This line will take forever.

"A Holly Jolly Christmas" belted through the outside speakers, but the crowd and weather

offered no cheer. People squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder under the awning while they waited to catch a shuttle or flag down a taxi. All the line jostling caused my neighbor to bump my arm when a suitcase slammed into him. My eyes watered as someone's strong perfume fought with the fragrant leis. I grimaced and wondered what had happened to personal space.

I had promised my sister she could count on me this year for Christmas, especially since I hadn't been there last year. I couldn't wait to spend time with her and my nephew. The last time I had seen them had been in early spring for my brother-in-law's funeral in New York where they used to live.

I pulled out my phone to text my sister to let her know I had arrived.

Abby: I'm sorry I couldn't pick you up.

Me: Don't worry. I'm on my way.

As I pushed send, a taxi pulled up and parked across the street. I had two choices: stay dry under the awning and wait my turn or grab the taxi across the street.

Forget staying dry. Forget waiting in line.

"Taxi!" I waved frantically splashed through the puddles, as I made a mad dash toward it, lowering my head against the pouring rain. The likelihood of snatching the taxi was slim. But I had to try.

A few cars honked as I dodged past. *Not a good idea.* "Sorry," I bellowed, but a roll of thunder drowned out my voice.

The wind had kicked up and practically pushed me across the road. With my bags trying to take flight, I felt like Mary Poppins, only less graceful and more drenched to the bone.

Not a good idea? More like horrible, dangerous, idiotic idea. I could have been hit by a distracted driver. Or I could have slipped, and in the rain, no one would spot me until I'd been flattened. What was I thinking?

But I made it safely across.

I jerked open the door and threw my bags—and my soggy self—into the back.

"Hi." I flipped my damp hair to the side and checked that I'd closed the door. My cold wet clothes stuck to me like a second skin, I sighed with relief and positioned the smaller bag on my lap. "Poipu, please."

Beside me, someone cleared his throat.

I gasped and jerked, my heart thundering with the storm. I hadn't expected anyone else in the backseat, especially a good-looking man with slicked-back dark hair and wide, annoyed eyes.

He smoothed the lapel of his out of place, but classy, gray tailored suit. Who flew to Kauai in business attire? He sure smelled nice, though. A scent of cedar and pine permeated the small space.

Either I was hallucinating my dream guy, or he had gotten in the cab at the same time. But I had been the only crazy person running across traffic. I'd done a quick check before I got in, but the tinted window had prevented me from getting a clear view.

He clutched a dry, folded umbrella on his lap. I waited in case he was a passenger that hadn't gotten out yet. A guy in a suit like that might be hesitant to run into the rain.

He blinked the most beautiful chestnut-colored eyes framed with thick eyebrows. The intensity of his stare drew me in and made me forget about the pelting rain, but I imagined cozy nights and intimate dinners. Then a muscle twitched in his jaw, and he wiped away the water I had flicked on his face with my hair.

I covered my mouth in horror. *Oops.*

"I'm ... I'm so sorry." I swallowed, expecting him to yell or shoo me out of the cab. "I didn't see you. I'll just go." But I didn't move.

It'd take forever to get another taxi, because I'd have to get back in the long line and wait my turn. When I finally broke the gaze, I clamped my fingers around the metal door handle just as a gentle hand rested on my shoulder.

"It's fine. You stay. I was just leaving."

Combined with the tension in the car, his swoony eyes, and the unexpected touch, his smooth baritone sent a surge of pleasant electricity through me. It had been so long since I'd felt this magnitude of attraction ...

Forget it!

He was probably leaving for a business trip, anyway—he was dressed much better than the average tourist. But then the taxi would have dropped him off at the departure terminal and not across the street.

"What do you mean?" The driver twisted at his waist and propped an arm along the seat back. "You just got in. I can take you both."

The man gave an uncomfortable laugh. In spot-on timing with the song "Baby It's Cold Outside," playing softly in the background, the man said, "I can't stay."

Keep me company. I parted my mouth and the words almost escaped. I was surprised how much I hoped he would. So much for my holiday vow to forget men.

"It's okay. You can stay. I mean, you do what you want. I'm sorry I got you ..." I winced. "Wet. I honestly didn't see you there. We can share a cab, and I am more than willing to pay."

Stop rambling.

"No need to apologize," he said in that smooth voice.

"But—"

Before I could say more, he stepped out and raised his black umbrella, shielding himself as he leaned over the door.

"Brandon, take this lovely lady where she needs to go. Put it on my tab and add the same amount of tip as usual."

"Thanks, Lee."

Did he just call me lovely?

"What? Wait."

"Have a good day. Don't worry about me. I can call my driver." He offered a gorgeous crooked grin and shut the door.

I twisted around to get a better look at him and watched him strut away like the weather was perfect. Like a dream, he faded into the pouring rain.

"Where to, lady?"

I faced the bald, middle-aged man and pulled the seatbelt strap over my chest. Then I gave him my sister's address.

"He called you Brandon. You guys know each other?"

Nosy question, but the man's kindness had been unexpected. What a gentleman to not only leave in the rain and give me the cab, but to pay for my ride. Nobody did stuff like that these days. It was like something out of an old movie.

The driver looked at the rearview mirror, green eyes glinting at me, and turned on the meter.

"His name is Leonardo, but his friends call him Lee. He calls me every time he's back from a business trip even though he could call his driver. Not much of a talker, but a big tipper. Told me once he likes to pay it forward."

I thought about asking more about Leonardo but didn't see the point. I was never going to see him again, anyway.

As Brandon talked nonsense on the way, my mind drifted to Leonardo and wondered where he lived. What his occupation was, if he had a family of his own. I didn't usually fixate on a guy just because he was attractive, but he had intrigued me and had made my crappy day a little bit brighter.

My crappy day had started before I'd even gotten out of bed. First, I'd slept through my alarm, and a horrible accident on the freeway had almost caused me to miss my plane. Then the family sitting behind me had a toddler who wouldn't stop kicking my seat and an infant who cried almost the entire trip. From the flight alone, I needed some serious spa time.

Brandon cleared his throat and turned the wheel to the left. "Where are you from, miss?"

"Los Angeles. Have you been?" I ran my fingers through my wet hair.

"No, but I'd like to visit one day, though I hear the traffic is horrible."

"It's not like Kauai for sure."

Brandon chuckled. "Got that right. There's no place like Kauai. Are you here for business or pleasure?"

"I'm visiting my sister and my nephew." I shifted to get comfortable from my sodden jeans, fighting the urge to itch through the stiff material. The rain had stopped almost as soon as we had exited the airport. Just my luck to have been caught by the deluge.

"What about your brother-in-law?" Brandon stopped at an intersection, glanced back at me, and then turned right.

"Excuse me?" I fanned my shirt from the hem, hoping that would make it dry faster.

"You left out your brother-in-law. Are they divorced?"

What's with the personal questions? I'd never met such a nosy cab driver.

"No, he passed away from cancer." I looked out the window when we got on the highway. The swaying palm trees and the grassy hills blurred the faster he drove.

Brandon sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry."

I forced an awkward smile, but he didn't look back. I never knew if it was appropriate to tell someone casually that my sister's husband had died. I also didn't know what to say when someone apologized. Sometimes his death seemed so long ago, and sometimes like it happened yesterday.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked to break the silence.

"All my life. I've been a cab driver for almost thirty years. I meet all kinds of people, and I've learned to read people well. So what troubles you?"

I pulled my gaze away from the landscape, startled. "I have no troubles." Besides a broken heart from my ex and my brother-in-law's passing, but he didn't need to know that.

Brandon hiked his eyebrows, meeting my gaze in the rearview mirror. "That's what they all say at first. Don't worry. Whatever you say stays in this cab. I'm a once-in-a-life chance for free therapy. Something about this island makes newcomers open up. Eventually, my passengers always spill their guts to me. They can't help themselves."

I let out a light laugh. He was quite entertaining. "I'm fine, but thank you."

It was going to take at least forty minutes to get to my sister's house, so I gazed out the window, admiring the simple beauty of the curvy hills that stretched for miles.

There were no clumps of looming buildings or people hustling and bustling on the streets. As "Mele Kalikimaka" played on the radio, the six feet tall grass blurred along the long stretch of one-way road and joined forces with the sun as it peeked through the clouds.

"We're now passing through one of the famous sites in Kauai: the tree tunnel," Brandon said, breaking my trance. "A grand gateway to Kauai's South Shore."

I leaned to the middle to see through the windshield. "Wow. It's beautiful."

Trees lined on either side of the road like a canopy. Sunlight spilled through the cracks between the branches and crisscrossed the pavement in golden streaks.

"This tunnel started with five hundred eucalyptus trees from Australia." He grinned at me in the rearview mirror and winked. "I tell this to every one of my passengers."

"You're a great tour guide," I said as I admired the scenery.

A few miles on, we drove through a town. We passed by a group of boys renting surfboards and snorkeling gear at a wooden storefront. Restaurants were filled with families, and people strolled

around shopping plazas.

Elation bubbled inside my chest. I couldn't wait to explore the island and spend time with my family.

As I took in the serenity of the slow-paced life Kauai was known for, no sign remained of the rain except for the beautiful rainbow that shimmered across the sky. I had no doubt this Christmas would be special.

CHAPTER TWO

My Family

Brandon turned into a neighborhood where the houses were close enough to feel neighborly, but separated by a good-sized lot for privacy. He slowed as a family of chickens made its way across the street. Not something you'd see every day on the streets of LA.

The cab slowed to a stop in front of a house. My sister and nephew ran across the yard. Two pairs of arms wrapped around me as soon as I got out of the taxi.

I squealed and hugged them tight. "Abby. Tyler. It's so good to see you."

We held each other as if we were each other's lifeline, and I didn't want to let go. I'd felt that way when I'd had to go home after Steve's funeral. The guilt of leaving had never subsided, but I was here now. We were together and that was all that mattered.

"I'm so glad you're here, Auntie Kate." My four-year-old nephew's voice was muffled, his face pressed to my stomach.

It was still so strange that Steve was gone. One less person to greet, one less hug. I could almost feel him with us. Any second now, my tall and lean brother-in-law would casually walk out the door and, being his usual shy self, would wait for an invitation before joining the hug.

My sister took the large duffel bag from me, and my shoulders welcomed the relief.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why are your jeans damp?"

I let out a light laugh and waved a hand. "A long story. I'll tell you later." Then I turned to Tyler. "Wow, look at you, Ty. You've grown so much." I ruffled his fine hair. "You're almost as tall as me."

He laughed, his brown eyes beaming. "No, I'm not. You're being silly."

Tyler had grown an inch taller and lost a little bit of his baby face. His features were similar to Steve's—sharp nose and square jaw—but sometimes when he smiled, he resembled my sister.

I dropped a big, fat, exaggerated kiss on his forehead and took his hand, leading him to the onestory house. Pampas grass and coconut trees ringed the front yard. We passed between two plumeria trees with yellow and white flowers on either side of the front walk.

The scent of sweet, ripe peaches embraced me when we entered. White plumeria flowers floated in a round glass bowl on the entryway table.

I slipped off my shoes and placed them next to Tyler's on a shoe rack. It felt strange not to see any of Steve's shoes, but my sister wouldn't leave his things around. I'd never thought about something like missing shoes being part of grief.

My sister had lived in an upscale apartment in New York City, but when Steve passed away, she'd moved to Kauai, where they'd gone for their honeymoon. Being here seemed to give her peace.

"I love what you did to the place." I glanced about the airy family room and set my purse on a wooden end table. "The pictures you sent didn't do it justice."

Abby waved a hand toward the hearth by the bookshelf. "I painted the stark white walls a warmer beige and put in hardwood floors before we moved in. It gave the house a new feel."

"It does, and your oil paintings look absolutely breathtaking." I went closer to examine a sunsoaked beach scene hanging beside the fireplace. My sister had emailed me pictures of the landscapes of Kauai she'd painted but they were even more impressive in person. On the other side of the fireplace was a tropical mountain with a misty waterfall that gave the whole scene a pensive, slightly sad aura.

"I wanted to fill up the empty space. What's an artist if they don't display their work somewhere? Let me show you your room." Abby took my other bag and carried both down a short hall. "This is your room." She dropped my bags beside the bed. "It's small, but so is the rest of the house."

I sat on the bed, ignoring the damp and heavy material still clinging to me like a second layer of skin. I smoothed the flowered bedspread beside me. It had been a long day.

"It's perfect," I said. "This home is perfect. I'm glad you made the move. Steve would have loved it."

The room was only big enough for a queen bed and a dresser, but that was all I needed.

Abby's chest rose and fell as she breathed slowly. First Christmas without Steve was going to be hard for everyone but especially her and Tyler. He had passed away sooner than the doctors had expected.

Cancer, like everything in life, was a mystery. Even the experts couldn't predict the outcome. Illness not only ate away the victim's body, but it damaged the loved ones' souls.

Sometimes things happened when you least expected them to, both the good and the bad. But regardless, we had our health and each other. Though grief plagued our hearts, we found a way to move forward.

"Thank you. I needed to hear that." She blinked her teary eyes before meeting my gaze. "Sorry."

"It's okay." I put a gentle hand on her arm, but I wanted to do more than that. I wanted to take away her pain. "You're allowed to be sad. I'm here."

She nodded with her lips pressed tight and leaned her back against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest.

Even the strongest people need to be vulnerable.

Tyler stepped into the doorway and glanced between Abby and me with a serious expression. Then he dashed the short distance to his mother and linked his arms around his mom's waist.

"It's okay, Mommy."

His gentle voice nearly broke me. Such a brave boy. At such a tender age, no child should experience the loss of a parent. I wanted to put him in a bubble and keep him safe from the world.

Seeing him comforting his mother told me Abby was raising him well. Whatever she said or did to help him through his grief showed he was capable of empathy, no matter how cruelly life treated him.

I needed to change the subject before the three of us ended up in a crying session. Abby and I could talk later and sob in each other's arms if needed, but not in front of Tyler. Though we spoke often on the phone, Abby typically wasn't as emotional as she was being now.

I understood. Holidays were hard when a loved one wasn't around. It hadn't been that long since Steve had passed away. Christmas was supposed to be the happiest time of the year. I was going to make sure it was for them both.

"So, Ty, do you have a girlfriend?" This question should break up the sadness.

"Auntie *Kate*." Tyler turned away from his mother and tilted his head, as his cheeks turned color. Abby made a funny noise that sounded between laughter and choking and wiped the corner of her eyes with her knuckle.

"Oh. My. Goodness, you do?" I bent lower to be face-to-face with him. I loved seeing him flustered. He looked so adorable.

"No. She's just a friend." He curled his shoulders inward, shifting his stance from side to side, avoiding my eyes. "Mommy says it's okay to have a friend that's a girl." He peered up at Abby to confirm.

"She is absolutely right. Your mother is smart, but not as smart as me." I winked. "You should

always listen to her."

"Yeah, Mommy says that all the time."

"Well ..." Abby clapped her hands to get our attention. "Would you like something to drink? I was in the middle of making dinner. Let's go to the kitchen. We can talk there. You can unpack later, right?"

"Yes, I would love some tea." I rose from the bed. "And I can unpack my beautiful ballgown later."

My sister rolled her eyes and the corner of her mouth tugged a little, then she slipped out. Her footsteps headed toward the kitchen.

"But let me change first. I'll be right out," I called.

"Ballgown? Like Cinderella?" Tyler shook his head and strolled out of the room.

I took out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt from my duffel bag, changed, and tied my hair back.

While Tyler played with his building blocks on the living room rug, I leaned against the light wooden cabinet by the stove while Abby opened a cabinet. The appliances were white and minimal—unlike the state-of-the-art, stainless-steel stove and refrigerator she'd had in New York—but they fit the simple look.

"Here. Good for your soul." She handed me a steaming, fragrant mug and got back to stir-frying slices of chicken breast.

"Mmmm." I sighed deeply, savoring the warmth and the flavor. "You make the best tea." I flinched when the rice cooker beeped.

Abby threw cabbage and broccoli into the pan, sizzling with oil and garlic. "I'm sorry I couldn't pick you up at the airport."

"Would you stop apologizing? Just because you're older than me doesn't mean you have to take care of me. Besides, I'm here to take care of you and Tyler, not be an added responsibility."

"Thank you." She dashed some salt, chili powder, and hoisin sauce into the vegetables and mixed up the ingredients. "I had to meet a client at the gallery and I couldn't change the time." She lowered her voice so Tyler couldn't hear. "I really needed this sale."

Abby had worked in an art gallery in New York. When she'd moved to Kauai, she'd decided to open up a small one. I used to love painting too, but after Jayden broke my heart, I'd lost my confidence.

Abby had some of my oils on canvas hanging in her Kauai gallery. She'd even sold a couple. A long time ago, I'd pushed away the dream of being a painter and became a graphic designer so I could get a steady income; however, I did paint every chance I got. Or I had, before Jayden.

Sometimes I wished I could take the leap as Abby had and pursue my dream. If I knew for sure it would pay the bills, I just might quit my job and paint full time.

I took another sip of the passionfruit green tea and let out a long breath. "Like I said, I understand. Can I ask you a personal question? You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but I'm worried."

My sister gave me that stare but surprised me when she nodded.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure Tyler wasn't listening and then set my eyes on Abby. "Are you in financial trouble?"

Abby divided the stir-fry onto three plates, scooped some rice, and then handed two filled plates to me. "I have some savings. I'm okay for now. I've got enough rent money for the gallery, thanks to the person who purchased one of my paintings today, but who knows how long that will last."

I set the plates on the table. "Ty, dinner is ready."

Tyler peered up from the block tower he had been building, his big brown eyes wide and alert. The blocks toppled to the ground when his heel knocked against the base on his way to the table. He eased into his chair next to me and picked up a fork.

Abby grabbed her tablet off the counter, turned on background music, and sat across from me. A soft Christmas melody filtered through the house, filling my soul with peace.

"You've made it this far," I said. "You'll be fine, but if you—"

"Nope." She raised a hand. "I'm fine. But thank you."

If she needed financial help, she would reach out to our parents. Her pride wouldn't let her ask me. For her, it would mean she had failed because I was the younger one.

"But just in case." I wanted to stress my point.

We weren't little anymore. The little difference between our ages was nonessential. We should lean on each other through troubled times. Yes, we were sisters, but we were more than that. Best friends.

Abby shrank into her seat and smiled. "Thanks. I appreciate your concern. The future is unsteady and impossible to predict. That's the hardest part of this business. Sometimes I wish I had taken your route and opted for the steady income."

I took a bite of the delicious chicken and savored the sweet sauce. "Sometimes I wish I hadn't."

"Well ..." Abby regarded Tyler with affection. "Let's put aside our worries for now and eat in peace. I'm glad you're here."

"Me too. It's going to be the best Christmas ever," Tyler said around a mouthful of rice.

He glanced up at me, then back to his plate. He did it a couple more times. When I pretended I wasn't looking at him, he quickly placed a few pieces of broccoli from his plate to mine. I smiled at his attempt at being inconspicuous and made a mental note not to feed Tyler broccoli.

At the mention of Christmas, I realized I hadn't noticed any holiday decorations. I glanced around to see if I'd missed them, but there were none. No Christmas tree. Not a single holly leaf or twinkling lights.

Simple furniture took up the cozy family room. A large family portrait of the three of them hung over the mantel and a few framed pictures of Mom, Dad, Abby, and me when we were younger sat on the end table.

Abby and I looked similar and yet different. We both had our father's eyes and our mother's smooth, pale skin, but I had inherited our mother's narrow jawline.

"So ..." My sister cleared her throat, bringing me back to the present. "I didn't have a chance to get a tree."

Two cardboard boxes sat by the TV, marked *Christmas*. I jerked my head toward them.

Abby scrunched her nose and swallowed. "I haven't had time to unpack."

She meant it was too painful to look at the Christmas things she had collected over the years with Steve. Though I knew my sister was making an effort to be in the Christmas spirit for her son, her heart wasn't there. I didn't blame her.

"Leave that up to me." I poked through cabbage with my fork. "I'm good at unpacking."

"You don't have—"

"I know, but I want to help. What are sisters for?"

I meant it with all my heart. I also wanted to make up for when I hadn't been there for her. Jayden and I had been going through rough times and I hadn't been in a good mindset to help anyone.

Abby nodded and picked up a piece of broccoli with her fingers, but didn't eat it. "Have you spoken to Jayden lately?"

I knew Abby had been dying to ask that question. She hated my ex. Even before he had cheated on me, she'd always said he wasn't good enough for me.

I chewed on some cabbage and looked at Tyler, who smiled at me with curious eyes. Sometimes I didn't know what was appropriate to say around a child his age.

"I'll explain more in detail later, but ..." I lowered my voice. "He called me before I left for the airport today and begged me to take him back again."

My sister's face contorted into something wild and dangerous as she dropped the sprig of broccoli. She could probably kill someone with that expression.

"You didn't, right? Please tell me you didn't."

Her volume and passion shocked me into silence. Even Tyler stopped chewing.

"No, of course not. I learned my lesson ... twice."

Last Christmas, I'd spent the holiday with my boyfriend. The very next day, I'd found out he'd cheated on me. He'd begged me to take him back, and I had. A big mistake on my part, because he never left the other woman.

This Christmas, I planned to do things differently. Like forget him for good—forget all men in general. I didn't need love in my life—for now, at least. I just needed my family.

Abby lowered her shoulders, her voice softening. "Well, you shouldn't have had to learn that lesson, and once is plenty. Maybe you'll meet someone nice over the holiday and move here permanently." She offered a sly but hopeful smile.

"I don't think so. Besides, I don't need a man to convince me to stay. It'll be on my own terms if I decide." I sipped my warm tea. "Anyway, when are Mom and Dad coming? I know they're going on a cruise but I forgot the dates."

"They'll be here before Christmas. They plan to spend a week here and then fly back home to LA."

"So what's the plan for tomorrow? You don't work on Sunday, do you?"

"No, I'll show you around." She waved a forkful of chicken through the air. "But I might go in for a little while to do some work."

"Sounds like a plan." I held up my fork as if I was giving her a thumbs up.

After dinner, while my sister did the dishes, Tyler and I played a game on Abby's tablet. The object was to splash paint over the other player's territory. Sometimes, on my bad days, I wished I could make that kind of mess on my canvas. But I never had the courage to cut loose. Not in life or in art.

CHAPTER THREE

Poipu Shopping Plaza

Tyler pounced on my bed far too early and begged me to get up. After breakfast, while Abby went to work, I helped Tyler build a city with building blocks and read him several books. When my sister came back, we went to Poipu Plaza and had lunch at a quaint restaurant.

"Look at all the decorations," Tyler said as we strolled down the plaza after lunch, bouncing at my side.

Wreaths adorned with baubles coiled around the poles. Strings of lights framed the shop windows. A tall Christmas tree was stationed in the middle of the plaza, covered with gold trimmings and oversized ornaments. The festive embellishments lifted my spirits, and for a moment all my worries were nonexistent.

"When do we get to decorate our house?" he asked.

I squeezed Tyler's hand. "Very soon. I promise."

Tyler, sandwiched between Abby and me, peered up at his mom. "What about the Christmas tree?"

"We'll get one today," Abby said.

"Yippee." Tyler jumped and swung his legs forward, pulling on our hands for support.

Abby and I stumbled forward, and I nearly dropped the camera hiked over my shoulder. The three of us laughed as we meandered past the bakery, jewelry, and clothing shops.

"Wow. Look at the view of the ocean." I let go of Tyler's hand and took a step back. Releasing my lens, I aimed to get the perfect angle shot between the ice cream shop and the small market.

I took pictures of the sparkling ocean reflecting golden hues and the puffy white clouds decorating the blue canvas like swirls of whipped cream. Then I focused on my sister and Tyler. My

camera clicked almost continuously.

"That's enough, Kaitlyn. Stop taking pictures." Abby waved a hand, annoyed.

"Okay. I'm done. I'm thinking I can blow them up and you can sell them." I carefully covered the lens and walked beside Tyler.

Abby halted, her forehead creasing as if she were in thought. "That's a good idea. See what you can do."

I appreciated my sister trying not to talk me into painting again. She knew I would do it when I was ready, but her quick acceptance of my idea took me by surprise.

"Can I have shaved ice, Mommy?" Tyler asked.

"Sure. I think your aunt would like one too."

"Shaved ice, you say? I've always wanted to try it. Do they actually taste like snow?"

Tyler let out a cute sound. "No, Auntie Kate. You're silly."

He laughed, swinging his arm along with the rhythm of our steps. While we stood in line, I glanced at the list of flavors attached to the door. Strawberry, mango, and the list went on. After I picked out the flavor, I released the cover on the lens and prepped my camera.

The vibrant colors caught my eye. I raised my camera and took pictures again. In the middle of the outdoor shopping plaza, local vendors set up their displays of fruits, flowers, handmade jewelry, candles, and many more items on individual tables.

I took pictures of the fruits: mangos, papayas, pineapples, and lychees. The massive lens I'd gotten from my parents last Christmas came in handy when wanting to take pictures from a distance. I also took some of the surrounding shops and the Christmas decorations.

When I focused at the greatest distance, the background blur resolved into a restaurant we had passed on the way. Then I zoomed out a few yards and focused on a man wearing a white, long-sleeved button-down shirt, sitting on a bench with one arm resting on the top. Only his profile was visible.

Curious about the woman next to him, I continued to invade their privacy. It was through the lens, after all. No harm in that, right? I couldn't see her face, only the long, blonde hair hanging down her back and the ankle-skimming violet dress she wore, billowing with the soft breeze.

They seemed to be in a heated conversation. The woman turned in her seat, and I got a glimpse of her beautiful face. She pointed to a store and said something. Then the man shifted to look in the same direction, giving me a clear view.

I blinked.

Leonardo.

I lowered my camera, flushing volcano hot. Then slowly I raised my camera again. His face made my heart skip as it had in the cab.

What was I doing spying on him? And worse, I felt a tiny tinge of jealousy when he caressed the woman's face.

"What are you doing?" Abby placed a gentle hand on my arm.

Click.

Crap. I'd accidentally taken a picture.

I jerked guiltily and dropped my camera to my chest. Had it not been for the strap around my neck, the camera might have fallen and shattered.

As if Leonardo had sensed me watching, he had chosen that moment to look straight at the camera. Or at least it seemed he had.

"Nothing. Just checking my view." Heat suffused my face again.

"Mommy, we're next." Tyler pulled on Abby's arm.

"What can I get you ladies?" a young guy asked, smiling.

Abby leaned closer and took out her wallet. "Two please. One strawberry for my sister ..." She looked at me to confirm. When I nodded, she continued. "Another one with mango." After Abby paid,

she grabbed some napkins. "My treat," she said.

I didn't argue. I would return the favor next time.

"Yummy." Tyler took a small bite and exited the double doors.

"This way to the Farmer's Market." I tipped my head to the side and stole a quick glimpse at Leonardo, who still sat on the bench with the woman. I had to look away, so I distracted myself. "Let's buy some fruit."

"I like the mangoes." He poked one. "Can we get mangoes, too, Auntie Kate?"

"Ty, keep your hands to yourself, please." Abby gently pulled back his arm and looked at me. "You were always the fruit lover. I'll hold your shaved ice for you."

"Thanks." I picked out a few papayas and mangoes and handed them to the lady running the shop.

The seller placed my purchases in a brown paper bag. "That'll be fifteen."

"You didn't buy any passionfruit. Have you ever tried those?" Abby picked up two and handed them to the lady. "They were Steve's favorite."

The vendor leaned closer. "People say that it increases your sex drive." She winked. "That'll be twenty."

"Oh, no." Abby shook her head, flushing pink. "Not me. I don't need ... I haven't ... I mean ... never mind." With cheeks burning red and wetness in her eyes, Abby rushed to the next table selling flowers.

At that moment I realized my sister wasn't herself. She was always the confident one. She could give anyone a straight answer, even if the topic was awkward.

Ever since we were little, she had been my voice, the one who spoke up for me. I was the shy one, and I couldn't remember ever seeing her flustered before. Yes, she was still grieving, but I didn't want her pain to drive her into depression.

I had no one to tie me to Los Angeles anymore. I didn't love my job. Perhaps it was time for a change.

My sister and I had both been born and raised in Los Angeles, and we'd graduated from USC with degrees in illustration. City life was what made me stay in the first place. Something about the bustle made me feel young and vital.

Shops, theaters, restaurants, and bars—anything you wanted was right there. The night life was alive and fun. In Kauai, stores closed early. Besides water sports, there wasn't much to do.

"My sister is ... Thank you." I didn't know what to say to the lady as I handed over the money and joined my sister by the flower vendor.

"Tyler. Come here. You're spilling all over your shirt." Abby wiped his mouth with a napkin, sounding irritated.

It seemed the fruit vendor had touched a nerve.

"I can't help it. It's melting." He licked faster, orange-yellow juice smeared over his chin.

"Let's move away." I gave an apologetic smile to the middle-aged gentleman who seemed nervous Tyler would get the sticky liquid on the hibiscus. "So, I was thinking," I said as we strolled past more shops. Perhaps I could put her in a better mood.

"About?" Abby threw the used napkins into the trash, her tone still sharp.

I handed her the bag of fruits and grabbed the shaved ice from her.

"I'm thinking maybe I'll look for a job in Kauai. Then I can move here permanently and be close to you," I said and took a bite.

The icy treat numbed my mouth and speared through my forehead. I held up a hand as I shivered through the brain freeze. The chill passed and tangy, sweet strawberry flavor melted on my tongue.

I proceeded along the sidewalk, but when I noticed she wasn't beside me, I grabbed Tyler, who was oblivious to everything except his shaved ice, and waited for Abby to catch up. She had been looking at something through the jewelry store window.

"Are you serious about moving here?" Her eyes widened with a happy glow as she matched my slow steps.

It was a picture-perfect moment. I was tempted to take a photo of her, but I knew she would bite my head off.

I hiked a shoulder. "I'm thinking about it. I have two interviews lined up."

Living from paycheck to paycheck was arduous and stressful enough. If I wanted to live in Kauai, I needed to find a job.

"What?" She squealed and then lowered her voice. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to get your hopes up. Even if I get an offer, I might not take it if it doesn't feel right. You know how much I love the city. I also want to be close to you, but I don't know how long I can handle being surrounded by water. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Abby softened her voice. "I don't want you to feel like you have to live here on account of me. I'll be fine. Ty and I will be fine. We'll be."

My heart cracked at her uncertainty. It sounded like she meant to convince herself, not me.

"When's the interview and where?" Her lips flattened in a thin line, hindering her smile.

"Tomorrow, late afternoon, at Poipu Design." I took another bite.

"I was going to take you to my gallery but that can wait. Do you need a ride?" She placed the bag of fruits in front of her chest and wrapped her arms around it.

"No, I'm fine. I'll call a driver. Besides, you need to be at your gallery. Someone has to pay the bills. Geesh, look at you trying to get out of work. Slacker."

Abby shoved me lightly and then linked her arm with mine as we continued our stroll. On my other side, Tyler slid a small, sticky hand into mine.

"I'm so happy you're spending Christmas with us this year," she said as we passed the bakery.

My heart swelled, easing the guilt I still carried for spending Christmas last year with my ex.

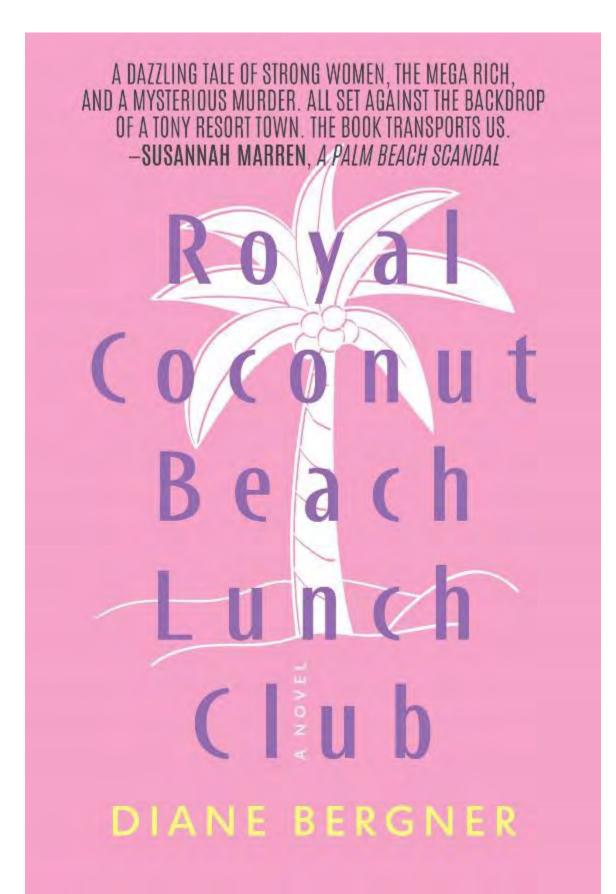
Jayden and I had been having problems and I'd decided to stay to work things out. If I'd left to be with family while things between us were unsettled, I would have been a Grinch. I wouldn't have wanted to go anywhere or do anything, aside from sulk in bed. I'd thought I was sparing them the annoyance.

Jayden and I had talked about visiting my sister together. We'd planned to go snorkeling, drive along the beach, and eat all the shaved ice possible. But now I was here without him. Life was unpredictable that way.

I reminded myself I was there to lighten the mood for all of us, not wallow in the past. "Let's get out of here and get our Christmas tree. What do you say?"

"Yes. Yes." Tyler whooped and pumped a fist in the air.

Before I turned toward Abby's car, I glanced over my shoulder, hoping for one last glimpse at Leonardo. But he was gone, and so was his beautiful companion.



ROYAL COCONUT BEACH LUNCH CLUB BY DIANE BERGNER

Listed among "The Best New Books to Read" in the New York Post

Julia Wild was thrilled to trade her legal briefcase for stiletto heels and a glam wardrobe when she accepted the position as a high society fundraiser at a prestigious performing arts center. The Addison Center is supported by mega-donations from the ultra-rich in Royal Coconut Beach, but the gala lifestyle is a minefield.

As if the punishing schedule isn't enough, Julia's boss is having an affair with an important donor (*is this what it takes to get big donations*?) and someone is trying to sabotage her job. Even as she begins to doubt her new career choice, she weakens to the seduction of elite social circles and the allure of becoming a fundraising rainmaker.

But what really matters are the fascinating and strong-willed women who become her confidantes. They meet regularly for lunch, gossip, subtle lessons, and cocktails—while they dissect the wealthfueled dynamics of the rich and powerful.

The deeper Julia is drawn into this world, the more reality and fantasy blur, and fault lines in her marriage surface. When she meets a debonair Argentinian billionaire, moral ambiguities and temptations are stirred. Will this fascinating man push her to her limit? Will she listen to her new companions who offer their smarts and feminist sensibilities?

It is only when a suspicion caused by an untimely death blows up the carefully constructed glittering mask of the moneyed set that Julia realizes she must decide whose side to take—and how willing she is to risk everything?

"A fully engaging and riveting read." -Midwest Book Review

"A dazzling tale of strong women, the mega rich, and murder. All set against the backdrop of a tony resort town. The book transports us." **-Susannah Marren, author of** *A* **Palm Beach Wife**

Paperback: 9781959170037 / \$19.95 eBook: 9781959170044 / \$5.99 Pub Date: March 7, 2023 Publisher: Meridian Editions Buy Links: https://www.amazon.com/Royal-Coconut-Beach-Lunch-Club/dp/1959170031 https://bookshop.org/p/books/royal-coconut-beach-lunch-club-diane-bergner/19692208 https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/royal-coconut-beach-lunch-club-diane-bergner/1143008649 **DIANE BERGNER** is the Chief Development Officer at the Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach, Florida. Before joining the Kravis Center, Bergner was an attorney in her native New York City, and the Director of Public Sector Career Services at Hofstra University School of Law, where she earned her Juris Doctor degree. As a Chartered Advisor in Philanthropy® she has served in leadership roles on several not-for-profit boards in Palm Beach County. She is a member of The Writers' Academy at the Kravis Center and was the runner-up in the Best Writer in Palm Beach County, hosted by The Palm Beach Book Festival. Royal Coconut Beach Lunch Club is her first novel. <u>https://www.dianebergner.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Below The Deck

THREE MONTHS INTO A NEW CAREER, and here I was aboard one of the most opulent yachts in the world. It was January, and the Royal Coconut Beach social season was in full swing. Docked at the end of the pier, the Lady Sweet Savannah IV towered over all the other vessels. Illuminated by underwater and deck lighting, the buoyant palace seemed to float above the water. Tangerine hues from the sunlight only added to its splendor — and something that happened below deck made it a night to remember.

I didn't tell my husband, Mark, about it until Saturday, when I finally had his undivided attention. We were enjoying a peaceful afternoon in our backyard.

"About the party the other night on Savannah's yacht. I thought I was dreaming," I said, as Mark reclined on a chaise lounge, sipping iced tea. His dark wavy hair had a bit of gray around his temples which added to his distinguished appearance, along with fine lines around his warm brown eyes.

"Another good story? They seem to be getting better and better," he said.

"Yes, they do. Look at the clear periwinkle sky. And the billowy clouds; they look like cotton candy." I pointed to the palm trees swaying in the breeze. "We're lucky to live here. South Florida is so under-rated."

"The story, please." Mark reached over and nudged my arm.

"Okay. So Savannah saw me standing around and, in her sweet drawl told me, 'Julia, dear. Before I pitch a hissy-fit, would you be a sweetheart and go to the galley below the deck? The servers are slow as molasses, and we need more caviar and champagne passed. They're about as useful as a screen door on a submarine. Light a fire under them, please.' It wasn't so much a question as an order." Mark laughed at my awful imitation of the Southern matriarch.

"I mean, where was her crew? Wasn't that their job?" I added.

"Calm down. This falls under 'other duties as assigned'." His fingers made quotation marks, referencing all the extraneous assignments that fell under the umbrella of my new job as Fundraising Coordinator at the Addison Performing Arts Center.

"Yes, but she made me feel like I was the hired help. I wasn't really offended, though, since she was oozing charm."

"Go on." He gestured with his iced tea.

"Well, I managed to find a narrow staircase leading downward, even with my poor sense of direction."

"That's for sure." Mark rolled his eyes upward.

"No expense was spared upstairs, but the downstairs was unfinished and poorly lit. The doors were all locked until I made my way to the end of the corridor, where I heard soft music playing from the last room. Since the door was slightly ajar, I opened it slowly, thinking it was the galley."

"Yes?"

I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath. "There they were!"

"Who?" Mark asked, sitting up straight in his lounger.

"Chrissy was stark naked on a bed — unless you count several strands of diamonds draped around her neck. Chrissy. My b-o-s-s."

Mark shot up from his chaise, swinging his legs around and planting them firmly on the pavers. His mouth gaped open, as he stared at me.

"Chrissy's long hair was spread out on the silk sheets — I think they looked burgundy, what with the candles. She was spread-eagled, and not just any eagle. Full Kama Sutra position, long legs high in the air, knees slightly bent."

Mark's face had a blank expression, but he motioned for me to continue.

"The man was kneeling between her legs, holding onto her ankles as he had his way with her. And get this: her hands were tied above her head with an orange Hermes tie."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. Definitely Hermes."

"Very funny, Jools," he said, twirling his finger by his temple. "I have to admit, this tops them all."

I'd only been working at the Addison Center a few months, but had already regaled him with a few choice tales. "Here's the thing, though. It was hard to see who Chrissy was with, because all I could see was his back. But then he turned his head. It was Chandler, Georgina's husband of at least fifty years! You know, the past chairman of Addison's board. He heads the development committee now. Never mind her spread legs; think about the age spread. Twenty-five years at least!"

Mark took a gulp of his tea. "Well, thank god for Viagra. Did they see you?"

"I'm pretty sure they didn't. They were too busy."

"Sounds like it."

"One more thing," I added.

"There's more?" Mark lips formed a sexy half-smile.

"The song that was playing was 'Reasons' by Earth, Wind and Fire." Not being able to carry a tune didn't stop me from belting out some lyrics. Mark chimed in on the chorus.

"Okay, enough with the seventies," I said. "Do you think they're in love? Or is it just one big sexfest? And for how long?"

"All night?" Mark asked, cocking an eyebrow.

I frowned. "Not how long were they going at it! How long has this been going on?"

"I have no idea, but did you ever find the head server?"

"All you can do is crack jokes, when I've been traumatized."

"Okay, calm down. So a rich, older, successful married man is having a fling with a younger, very pretty woman who happens to be your boss. It's probably Chandler's last hoorah. He's around 75, right?"

"Yup."

"It has to be a thrill for him. You keep telling me what an enigma Chrissy has been since day one."

I thought about how Chrissy passed by me in the hall several times this week and ignored me when I said hello. I was paranoid I'd done something wrong. "She is. When she's around donors, she knows how to act charming. Everyone's enamored with her. But she's so patronizing to me. On top of that, she makes me feel like I'm incompetent."

"Don't worry about Chrissy. Just ignore her." He put his iced tea on the table.

"You're right. Despite her, I'm really happy. I feel like I'm doing something meaningful, raising money for the arts."

"Chrissy and Chandler were just having a good time. It's probably a passing fling." He waved his hand dismissively. "Maybe his wife Georgina knows, and looks the other way."

"You sure perked up when I told you about it," I said.

"Hey, it's good to know there's something to look forward to in life." He winked.

I gave his shoulder a playful shove. "Ha, ha. Don't worry, you have a long way to go." I thought for a minute. "I guess I should keep this to myself, right?"

"Duh. Of course, let it go. Or, as your friend Savannah might say 'Go rest the mule'."

"For the record, she isn't my friend. I happened to be on her yacht because of my job."

"That's true." Mark reclined in the lounger, and shut his eyes.

"I'm going to make dinner. Thanks for listening." I stood and bent to kiss the top of his head.

It was a relief to get the story off my chest, since Mark had been out of town earlier that week. Once inside the house, the air conditioning was refreshing. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, looking around at the open floor plan. The house was a bargain when we moved from New York City to West Coconut Beach five years ago. Mark was a corporate lawyer specializing in mergers and acquisitions. His partners had charged him with managing a satellite office in Royal Coconut Beach, and we agreed it was a great opportunity. Our home's large windows allowed ample sun to stream in, and hardwood flooring flowed throughout the first floor. Compared to our small viewless apartment in New York, it felt like a mansion.

As I took the chicken and mushrooms out of the refrigerator and began to prepare dinner, my mind drifted to when Mark and I first met. He was in my dorm at Dartmouth, and was visiting some girls down the hall. I instantly judged his maturity level from his tee-shirt — *How About a Nice St. Pauli Girl* — and assumed he was just a player. From the flirty way he told me he loved my tennis shorts, I knew he was checking me out. He was much taller than me, and had dark hair and sparkling eyes, sported a glowing tan, and possessed a driving energy that was contagious. Even "Wild," his last name, had a certain dangerous allure.

Despite my initial impression, we became good friends when I realized that the body came with a brain. Our relationship blossomed into much more later on. Since we'd been friends first, lust was never at the forefront. Needless to say, we'd never had forbidden sex, much less on a yacht.

Mark was a few years ahead of me in college. He always knew he wanted to be a lawyer, and his self-assurance was a big part of my attraction to him. He majored in foreign languages, and then headed to NYU Law School right after Dartmouth. By his third year, he was elected Editor-in-Chief of its Law Review. I was captivated by his sharp mind, quick wit, self-confidence, and perhaps most of all, his unwavering attentiveness to me.

Back in college, we went out for dinner to celebrate Mark's birthday. He caught me eyeing his plate, and reached over to switch our entrees.

"You don't need to do that," I protested. "Besides, it's *your* birthday. You should eat what *you* want." He leaned forward. "What I want is for *you* to be happy. Your happiness matters more than anything else."

His words sent shivers down my spine, since he wasn't usually that effusive. It made me feel safe and whole. Later that night, in the middle of our lovemaking, he gently whispered that he wanted to be with me forever. Seduced by his words, along with the tender kisses he planted on my neck, I knew I wanted the same thing.

I sorely missed him when he graduated, and looked forward to weekends and holidays together. Over the summer, when I worked in New York City mainly to be near Mark, we had our first serious discussion about our future. I was thinking about law school, or possibly graduate school.

We were sitting on a Central Park bench on a perfect summer day, wearing shorts and sneakers, after walking several miles.

"There's so much you can do with a law degree," Mark said. "You're smart and driven; it'll take you places. Trust me."

"What if I don't like law school?" I asked, not convinced that I should go. Facing graduation, pressure was mounting to decide on a career path.

"No one likes law school. Besides, I want you close by me. I'm sure you'll get into NYU." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a sparkling engagement ring. "I want us to be together. Marry me."

His authoritative tone sent shivers down my spine. It felt great to be with someone who knew exactly what he wanted — and that included me. I put my hand out, and he placed the ring on my finger. Ecstatic, I wrapped my arms around him. I felt secure, enveloped in his warm embrace. Bound by love, the idea of a future together with Mark immediately outweighed any other plans I was considering.

We lived together in his tiny bachelor apartment while I attended law school. Afterwards, we married and I went to work at a law firm in the city, specializing in trusts and estates; the least confrontational practice area.

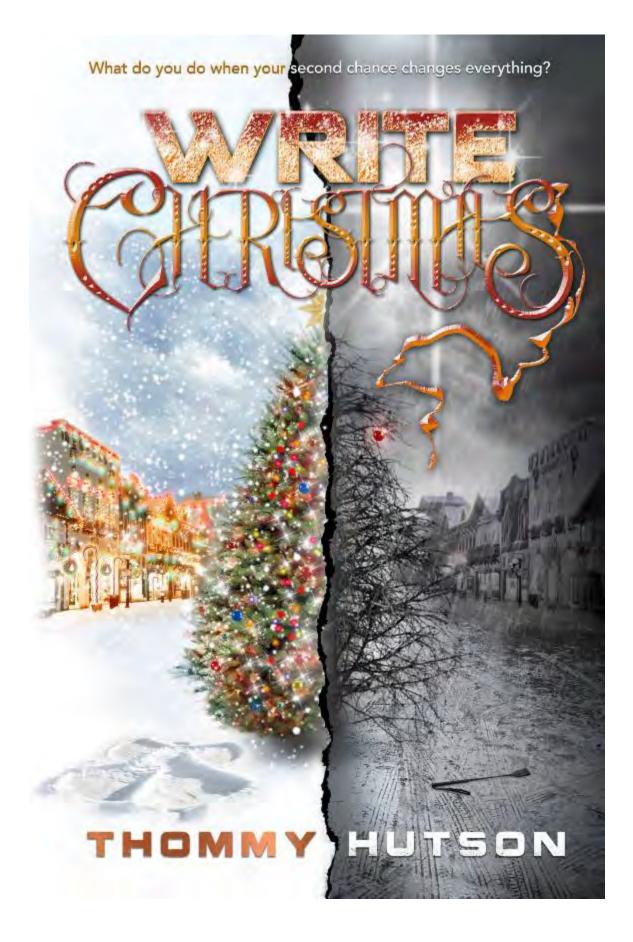
Jolted out of my reverie when the boiling water overflowed, I wiped it up and added the penne. I was looking forward to the evening, just the two of us. I made a mental note to have lots of candlelight later. I'd been focused on my new position and trying to prove myself at work. As usual, Mark was intent on finishing negotiations for a client. We were equally busy, and both of us worked long hours, so it was great to finally have a relaxed evening to ourselves. There was a chilled bottle of Sancerre; a delicious dinner of Chicken Marsala with whole-wheat pasta; and glowing candles all around to set the mood.

Later that night, I rummaged through my pajama drawer as it overflowed with tee-shirts and boxer shorts, and snatched up the sexy white silk negligee buried at the bottom. I slipped into it, and noticed how the cool smooth fabric draped my bare skin, suggestively outlining my figure. I lit the unused lavender candle on my night table, inhaling its sweet, intoxicating scent. Mark looked up for a second and went right back to his book. *Couldn't he have at least said something about how I look?* Regardless, I slithered into bed, and snuggled against his warm body.

Our love-making was filled with fervor and excitement; much more satisfying than the usual status quo. After we cuddled for a while, Mark fell asleep. Seeing Chrissy and Chandler must have stirred my desire for more passion, which made me feel slightly guilty. I should be more grateful for all that Mark and I did have. I reassured myself that craving more intimacy in my twenty-two-year old marriage was completely normal. It wasn't as if I was thinking of having an illicit affair.

Tonight was a good start toward a second honeymoon. Not only in the bedroom, but perhaps in other dimensions of our relationship. I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning we lingered in bed, a welcome change from our rushed routine. I stayed beneath the fluffy duvet a while longer, grateful that it was Sunday and I had no work obligations. But the rest of the day, as I went about my chores, I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd witnessed on Savannah's yacht, and all that had transpired in the past months — beginning when I accepted a position at the Addison Center.



WRITE CHRISTMAS BY THOMMY HUTSON

1st Place Winner for Holiday Romance in The BookFest Award Fall 2023

A contemporary, holiday fantasy with a new twist on A Christmas Carol and It's A Wonderful Life

What do you do when your second chance changes everything?

Abby Nicholson used to love Christmas. Until she didn't.

After leaving Winter Glen, the small town famous for its Christmas celebration and her family's greeting card company, Abby is forced to return to the home she left behind when the unexpected passing of her father thrusts the business into her hands.

Turning her back on the magic of the holiday beloved by her father and the town, she decides to sell the business. Signing the paperwork with the very pen her father used to create it, she is shocked to discover her hometown has become a whole new world. One where Christmas has vanished!

Now stuck in a place devoid of hope, joy, and the spirit of the season, Abby sees family and friends altered in the most terrible of ways.

Determined to set things right, though unsure how, Abby takes out her father's pen and begins to draw. When she realizes her art is coming to life, she sets out to recreate the holiday and bring back the most wonderful time of the year. But some are determined to keep an iron grip on the town and will do anything in their power to stop her.

"This heartwarming fantasy updates a favorite Christmas trope as a Scrooge-like woman is given the magical gift of a new perspective on her life. Christmas enthusiasts will find this hits the spot." ~Publishers Weekly

"A blend of romance and fantasy in *A Christmas Carol* style of writing. An outstanding inspirational read for the holidays." *~Midwest Book Review*

"A story of second chances, *Write Christmas* will make you believe in the magic of the season again." ~The Nerd Daily

"WRITE CHRISTMAS is a Hallmark Christmas movie that lives in my Kindle. It's a delightful story full of hope, transformation, and charming characters straight out of a Dickens tale." **~T.H. Hernandez, Goodreads**

Paperback: 9781645482000 / \$14.95 **eBook:** 9781645482017 / \$7.99 **ASIN:** B0BLS894SN Pub Date: Nov 15, 2022 Publisher: Rosewind, https://vesuvianmedia.com/rosewind-home/ Buy Links and Book Info: https://vesuvianmedia.com/write-christmas/ https://books2read.com/Write-Christmas Distributor: https://www.ipgbook.com/write-christmas-products-9781645482000.php

THOMMY HUTSON is a bestselling, award-winning author, screenwriter, and producer. He has written or produced film and television projects in multiple genres—horror, thriller, holiday, animation, and documentary—released on Netflix, Hulu, Hallmark, Lifetime, Bio Channel, Audible, Shudder, Syfy, and more. In addition, he wrote *Never Sleep Again: The Elm Street Legacy*, a non-fiction book detailing the making and impact of horror icon Wes Craven's 1984 classic, "A Nightmare on Elm Street," and the award-winning Christmas Fantasy Romance, *Write Christmas*. iHorror also named him one of the <u>7 Essential LGBTQ Horror Authors for Your Summer Reading Lists</u> for his award-winning debut YA horror novel, *Jinxed*. A member of the Producers Guild of America, Horror Writers Association, Writers' Union of Canada, and a Saturn and Home Media Magazine award-winner, Hutson continues to develop unique and compelling projects across multiple genres for film, television, publishing, and home entertainment. <u>https://thommyhutson.com/</u>

PROLOGUE

30 years ago

Fluffy snowflakes, the kind one could *not* pack into a snowball despite every effort, floated through the air and blanketed Winter Glen in a shimmer of white.

With every passing icy fractal, the sun hid deeper into the horizon, whispering its goodnights and throwing an inspired, orange hue over everything the rays could touch. Twinkling lights on the shops, wreaths on doorways, and snowmen in yards were all its target. None of that would seem like much to the casual observer, passerby, or occasional tourist looking for a quick bite on their way to the city. Winter Glen, just another small town. A blip on a map.

If drawn by a better-than-thorough cartographer.

But such a mapmaker didn't live there. They didn't know. They couldn't feel it.

Those people didn't understand the tiny town equaled more than the sum of locally owned shops, town square gazebo, distinct houses, and the Winter River Bridge. Winter Glen also meant home, a collection of people and places unified in every way. An enclave created by one of them, for all of them. While every winter preordained a lot of snow, each day's wintry gift brought Christmas closer. Christmas—a season which meant so much to so many, but maybe none more so than Samuel Nicholson.

He sat at the drawing table deep within the building which marked the end—or, some might say, the beginning—of Main Street.

Nicholsons Cards.

Aglow with so many lights and decorations, if Christmas were a place, the structure would give Santa's Workshop a run for its money.

And the man, Samuel, might have even challenged Saint Nicholas with his own love for the holiday. Perhaps the look, too, with his thick beard and wire glasses. He could not—at least not yet—fill Santa's red suit. The notion, tucked away, pleased him as the task at hand grabbed his focus once again. Using a beautifully crafted red and silver fountain pen, he worked with fervor on a new piece of art.

He hummed holiday tunes as the pen went in wide arcs and quick back-and-forth strokes to create an exquisite rendering of Winter Glen during the holidays. Like a Rockwell painting, or Coca-Cola's Sundblom Santa, Samuel toiled to fashion an iconic image for the season—the latest in a long line, many of which were framed and hung up on the walls surrounding him. Greeting cards for every holiday. All designed and drawn with his own hand.

Christmas, though, sparked his imagination. His soul. More than any other time of year.

His hands had stayed steady and sturdy when he was younger, but these days he took more time to draw the straight lines, create the shadows, and any other nuance he felt necessary to make his work more than mere art, but life. While not particularly old, he appeared younger than his morethan-he-liked-to-admit accumulated years. Still, the days of youth and falling in the snow to make angels were long behind him. His back ached, he tired easily. And snow? Well, it got colder every year. Time doesn't just march on, he thought. Sometimes it races off.

He stared out the window into Winter Glen. Not for inspiration. He never needed that. He knew the town and every single person in it. He and his wife had come to the place, the dot on the map, for years and years. A town easily overlooked by the same passersby who, even now, might not comprehend the feelings of joy the town evoked. He and Stella, his good wife who made good on the promise to stay by his side no matter what. Samuel had a lot of ideas, many of which ended up being a part of no matter what. As he looked at the day's last vestige of light slip away, his eyes moved to the gazebo, a once-cozy structure now swallowed up by garland and bows and illuminated candy canes.

Time races off, he thought.

When he and Stella first saw the gazebo, the wood of the platform, decorated beams, and sweeping arches that held themselves together by what could have been anyone's guess, even termites thought it a lost cause. Peeling paint flaked off and danced in the wind, never to be seen again. The crumbling and decay were symbols, Samuel thought, of how all too soon even the structure itself would be lost to time and, at some point, memory.

Samuel had fallen in love with the possibilities right then and there and thrown Stella the no matter what glance. He'd waited for her reaction, for a heavy sigh, a signal to put away childish fantasies. Or perhaps the hint even this was too big a dream for a big dreamer.

She'd done nothing of the sort. He could still feel her warm arm wrap around his side, see the smile spreading across her face. And her voice. Soothing and excited at the same time.

"I see it, too. I do," she'd said. "And if anyone can make it real, you can."

Samuel smiled at the memory as he focused on the flames in the lamps down in the square. How the yellow and orange flickers danced with each other one minute and fought the next. He shook all the remembering off and focused on his paper.

The time to ponder such things, real or imaginary, ended as the door to his office burst open.

"Daddy!" Samuel's daughter, Abigail, rushed into the room, joyful and energetic as always.

Samuel's smile returned, brighter now. He watched as his daughter bounded toward him. Her red hair, tied in chunky pigtails, sprang with each little-girl-leap she took. He welcomed her into his arms.

"Now there's the stuff," he said. "Hugs all around."

"What'cha drawing now?" Abigail wondered. She craned her head to look.

Samuel feigned secrecy, pulling a sheet of blank paper over his work. "Now, if I told you—"

"Come on, Daddy. You can tell me. I won't say anything to anyone," she said. Then, she whispered, "Promise."

Samuel smirked. Of course he'd give in to his six-year-old. "A promise, huh? A Christmas promise?"

Abigail stepped back and her expression widened, as if she had been told something incredible, unbelievable. Samuel knew the look. Knew what she thought. He had always told his daughter there were promises, the things we say we'll do and usually do. But a Christmas promise? Nothing rivaled its importance. More than just a phrase, such a holiday vow could not be forgotten or explained away if not followed through with the special pledge.

"Yes, Daddy. A Christmas promise."

Samuel soaked the words in, longer than he needed to. Enough to let his antsy daughter get antsier. "Oh, okay, then. Remember, a Christmas promise is the most special kind."

"I remember."

Samuel laughed. "It must be pretty important, huh?"

"Daddy."

Samuel nodded toward the papers. He didn't want to make her wait any longer, as his desire to see her reaction matched her fervent wish to see the artwork.

"Really?" Abigail wondered.

He answered with a smile and watched his daughter's brown eyes get bigger as she stepped toward the desk. She gazed back and forth at everything upon it. Pens, pencils, artwork, books. Her gaze stopped on the fountain pen. It always did.

Abigail reached up and slowly pulled away the paper Samuel had placed over his drawing.

Samuel barely realized he held his breath, watching and waiting to see what her opinion might be. His artwork, ultimately available to everyone, went to consumers after being fashioned into a printing plate, put through a color process, embossed on thick paper stock, then folded and packaged as its meant-to-be greeting card. Yet, before all of those steps, before anyone else even got a glimpse, the creations were for Abigail. Each and every one. Her feelings would give each unique piece the seal of approval.

Abigail's little eyes grew and grew with thrill, exactly what he had hoped.

"It's so pretty," she said. Her fingers hovered over the fresh ink, careful not to touch the elegant lines as she traced over them in the air. She focused on the little black-and-white town, waiting to be brought to life.

Her small voice, barely above a whisper, meandered through the room. "It's home."

The sentiment filled Samuel's heart and fed his soul. He felt a warmth in his spirit. "That it is, my sweet girl."

"It really is perfect, Daddy," Abigail said as she turned to him.

"Almost. I think it might still be missing something. Something extra special."

Abigail stared back at the drawing, then to Samuel. "Like what?"

"Something from you," Samuel said as he handed her the fountain pen.

He knew he opened a floodgate in her imagination. At the same time, it opened his heart.

"Really?" Abigail wondered. Her word hit Samuel's ears with a mix of fascination and trepidation.

"Come here, my sweet girl." He picked his daughter up and sat her on his lap. They faced one another. "One day, it will be you in charge of making sure Christmas in the Glen is perfect. And you know what that means."

Abigail's voice joined with his. "We have to make the magic."

Samuel pulled his daughter close, filled with the security and love only a father could feel. The

embrace weakened as he started to cough.

Abigail pulled away and stared. "Are you okay, Daddy?"

Samuel let Abigail slide to the floor. He nodded even as he covered his mouth when another cough, this one louder, longer, wracked him.

"Fine," Samuel said through a smile he hoped she wouldn't see as forced. "I'm fine, sweetheart."

"If you're sick, you won't be able to go to the tree lighting."

"Now what a silly goose thing to say," he responded. "If there's one thing we do, we always go to the tree lighting."

"Oh, yes." At the soothing voice of Stella Nicholson, Samuel and Abigail looked to the doorway. "The tree lighting needs to have a Nicholson there. It's tradition."

Samuel recognized the look on his wife's face. Her expression told him to stay strong, because you are strong. Perhaps so, but he acquired no immunity to the knowledge the family rested on her strong, stable back.

Stella Nicholson could and would try anything. Failure to try, or failure to complete, were not part of her mindset. And while she took a decisive, sometimes intricate, approach in her decisions and in making things happen, those traits were at odds with her outward appearance. Instead of perfect, crisp, clean, and rigid, she embraced a soft, classic, and simple look. Some might say homely.

She made many of her own clothes, even though most would never know it. In fact, too many times people asked her where in the world she'd gotten such a beautiful blouse, and while Stella politely smiled, Samuel would catch himself chuckling. Or how did she find pants with such a perfect fit? If only they knew her like he did. One in a million may have been a cliché descriptor, but it was also true. And now, as always, she arrived to make the day's end better with the simple act of holding a tray. A tray with three steaming mugs of homemade hot cocoa, whose chocolatey, soul-filling goodness was hidden under a bountiful dollop of whipped cream.

Stella walked in as Samuel tried, rather poorly, to stifle another cough. He noticed her eyes moving from him to Abigail. Her gaze shifted back to him.

"Drink this. Someone told me it'll cure anything."

Samuel reached for a mug. He blew on it and watched swirls of steam puff away under his breath. At the same time, chocolatey froth retreated toward the back of the rim. "I'm pretty sure I'm that someone."

She smiled. He could tell the grin was, if not forced, tinged with concern.

"Then prove it."

He wanted to smile, and almost did. Then, the cough came again. This time he did not look at Stella. He couldn't bring himself to do so. Instead, he focused on Abigail.

"You've come at the perfect time, Mama, because I'm about to explain to this little elf how one day she'll be in charge."

Stella laughed. "Watch out, world."

Abigail turned to them, pensive. "In charge? Of what?"

Samuel laughed. A good, hearty one. This time he did look at his wife. She smirked. Yes, yes, he and his old tricks, his old sayings. His old self.

"Of what? Of Christmas, of course. At least here in the Glen. We've done it for a very long time. And I think now is the perfect time to get you started."

He saw, practically felt, the excitement in Abigail as she grabbed the pen, ready to put it to the paper.

"Daddy, what if I mess up? I don't want to ruin Christmas."

Stella moved closer. Samuel pulled his wife to him and the two stared at their daughter. Samuel reveled in her innocence. He soaked up his wife's warmth and kindness.

"Don't be silly," Stella said.

"Your mother is right. If you believe with all of your heart, and if what you put forth comes from the heart," he said, placing his hand on her chest, "then nothing can ever be ruined."

"I believe, Daddy. I believe, Mama," Abigail said.

Samuel trusted her. He really did. Another cough, another look to Stella. This time her concern didn't stay hidden as he felt her hand on his shoulder. He swung his arm around, grabbed her fingers with his, and gave them a squeeze. She did not smile, so he smiled for the both of them and waited for hers to return. It did. It always did. Not because he believed she believed it necessary, or expected. No, Samuel knew the smile he'd fallen in love with burned within her so bright nothing could contain it. Not even, well, not even.

Samuel shook the thought from his mind and focused again on Abigail. "I know, sweetheart. And I believe in you."

His heart grew as his daughter put the pen to paper. She mimicked his wide arcs and quick backand-forth strokes. She shaded carefully. Samuel appreciated how his daughter made sure each snowflake matched those already created.

And they were in a sort of harmony with those starting to fall outside. Every one different, of course, but illuminated by the bright, multi-colored lights of the building.

Samuel stared out the window at the snow, then past the snow into the holiday-lit town. Then, he gazed further still, the view before him strengthening his belief in the spirit of the season.

Other than family, the magic of Christmas was all he knew he had left.

CHAPTER ONE

Today

Christmas in Winter Glen, like the town itself, hadn't changed very much.

The town, still a modern-day wonderland, brimmed with cheer. In fact, love for the holiday might have even grown. Bigger garland, brighter lights, and the tree in the center of town, the one to be lit by eager Glenners, grew taller each year. Even as adults milled about their daily tasks and students walked to school, no one forgot to change the numbers on the *Countdown to Christmas* sign. To forget would be nothing less than a tragedy.

There were visitors and passersby, of course, who came to marvel at the place which seemed to glow both day and night with Christmas merriment. It didn't take long for one of the locals to overhear a visiting gawker wonder why in the world this place loved Christmas *this* much. Of course, such out-of-towners thought they were whispering, thought they were out of earshot of any who lived in the Glen. And, of course, even as they voiced or thought the unthinkable to many who lived there, the notion of too much Christmas didn't stop them from taking photo after photo of the decorations. They would snap their pictures, find their way to Amy's café for homemade chicken soup, get a small delectable from Betty's Bakery, and then head off to their important meeting or movie or family event. Even as those people made their way out of town, the same local who heard their grumblings would smile, or maybe tip a hat, as they walked by. They would say nothing, but would think the wonderer wondered wrong. The question should be: *Why in the world* don't you *love it this much*?

Anyone who lived there never really had an issue with the question or its answer. They loved their town and they loved Christmas. It meant something to them because it meant something to the man who had helped build the town. Samuel Nicholson. If it weren't for him, Winter Glen, née Glen

River, would only have been a large chunk of land. Dirt and grass with some row houses, an old hardware store, and a rickety gazebo. While others had passed it by, Samuel had seen such promise in the place, and in the people who had stuck it out and made their life there. He'd had a vision, and he'd shared it with everyone. Nothing happened without a consensus. Not a single board replaced, or lamppost put up, or home repainted without the people agreeing on what they hoped to achieve.

Community. It's what Samuel had hoped to create. A place for everyone and where everyone had a place—a purpose. Most people found themselves working for his greeting card company, a homegrown business started by his father's father. When many children were given the keys to their first car, Samuel had received the keys to a company. It had its ups and downs, but hard work and vision were two things Samuel knew much about. Together with his wife, Stella, they'd built the company into an independent giant, with their hand-drawn, homemade greeting cards for all occasions garnering the stamp of small-town approval because each and every card was made in, and by, a small town.

Christmas, the holiday he loved most, had found itself seeping from his spirit into the spirits of those around him. Samuel Nicholson and his company had reshaped and rebuilt the town, and fashioned the season into a time of year overflowing with more joy than anyone could have imagined.

If Nicholsons Cards acted as the brain of the town, the great evergreen in the center of the square held its heart. A beacon waiting to be illuminated in a grand celebration of friends, family, and holiday exuberance. Circling the tree, a small group of children and their parents bundled up in scarves and hats and mittens, pulled tinsel, separated tangled lights, and organized ornaments of every shape, size, and color.

Darla Curtis, the mayor of Winter Glen, held court at the base of the grand Christmas tree. Working with everyone she could wrangle, she brought the tree to life. She looked forward to the task every year. Not a soul could deny if the town had a Christmas queen, it would be Darla. The subject had come up before when the residents wondered if maybe they shouldn't have someone to represent Christmas. A sort of holiday master of ceremonies. The idea had been rejected, not in any negative sort of way, but simply because everyone imagined they were all part of the holiday. Each one of them a piece of the bigger puzzle. Darla understood and voiced complete agreement. Now, that didn't stop her from dressing the part a little more. It seemed she had an unlimited supply of what many would call ugly Christmas sweaters. She, with her trademark smile, would correct people and mention they were, in fact, *just sweaters*. Sweaters with bells, sweaters with lights, sweaters with garland, and sweaters with lights, bells, and garland on them. Whatever the iteration, Darla had it. And if she didn't, she had it made.

She had a certain way about her, people would say. An effervescent spirit, an aura sending out the message to everyone you need a little bit of rain if you want to see the rainbow. What's more, even in the darkest of storms, she would do her best to help them see such colorful light. Darla often told people in her charge: *Don't tell me it can't be done, tell me how it can*. She lived by those words. Such sentiment came from deep down, etched into her very soul from the dirt upon which she stood. A lifelong resident of Winter Glen, even before anybody called it Winter Glen, she knew the town better than anybody. She knew everybody better than anybody. And while there might be places where people don't like someone knowing all of their business, people in Winter Glen were glad they had business with Darla.

One could never tell, but she had worried such feelings of openness and camaraderie with her wouldn't always be the case. Before she became mayor, her husband had served for two, four-year terms. Only after her husband died—an event which affected everyone as if they, too, had lost their husband or best friend—had she taken the mantle, holding the torch, in his stead. An election occurred, as is required, but there were no challengers. No fuss, no muss. If Earl Curtis could do the

job, then without a doubt Darla Curtis could do it twice as well with double the smiles.

Those smiles were a welcome sight to all. Her long, curly blonde hair flipped in the wind when she reared her head back in laughter at one of the pint-sizers' jokes.

Kids will be kids, she thought. Truth be told, she often wished to be a kid again. To be carefree. To be in a snowball fight. To run down the stairs with eyes aglow at the sight of presents under the tree.

The thoughts brought back the nostalgia of her own growing up, when the inside of her house would be bare, not a Christmas decoration in sight save for what she brought home from school, until the night before Christmas. The outside beamed full of life and lights, of course, much like the rest of the town. Inside, however, she'd been told, was Santa's domain.

And on Christmas morning, the man with the bag never disappointed. Running down the stairs, she would see the railing, bare, dark wood the night before, now wrapped in garland. Flying into the family room, she'd gaze at bells and lights and wreaths and the magnificent sight of a fully decorated tree. Brighter than a star, with an angel on top more beautiful than she could ever imagine. Its own blonde, curly hair, placed strategically in front of a halo of multicolored lights, served as the progenitor of her own locks.

Of course, years later, she'd discovered the secret of Santa. Her father in his overalls lugging in the tree. Her mother, covered in flour and sugar and lights and ornaments. They'd worked so hard to make everything perfect. And they had, to both her little-girl self and her big-girl memories. Ultimately knowing Santa might not be coming down the chimney didn't matter. What *did* matter? They were together. Santa, that ethereal entity, that feeling, didn't need eight tiny reindeer or a sleigh. No, he had Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Scarpento. Those two, all for the joy of one little Darla Scarpento, and perhaps themselves a tiny bit if they were honest, pulled a holiday miracle together in one night, in their small house with a big heart.

Right now, Darla's heart was on display in red and green and gold and lights. Not as visible though—her appetite. Trimming the grand tree made her hungry. She looked around, thrilled to see the owner of the bakery, Betty, strolling near. The petite woman with a red ribbon in her hair held a small basket. She pulled back the cloth and let anyone within reach grab a treat.

"Betty, you're a stomach-saver," Darla said as she reached in and snatched a small piece of the day's offering—rum cake. She took a bite and immediately realized, *Wow, that hit the spot.* "This here is a real winner, so make sure to bring plenty tonight."

"Batches are already in the oven," Betty replied.

Darla savored every bite. "Now, if we can talk Carl into brewing up his high-octane eggnog, we might not need electricity to light the tree."

Betty laughed. "I'll let him know." She waved goodbye and headed off as more and more Glenners flocked around her.

Darla watched her, the Pied Piper of baked goods, as she plopped the last morsel of rum cake into her mouth and turned back toward the tree.

She bumped into the town sheriff, Eddie Cass, a man described by most as strapping. Seeing him so suddenly caused her to squeak in surprise, more than a tad embarrassed with her mouth full of food.

Eddie tipped his hat. "Excuse me, Darla."

Darla grinned in response, trying her best to chew, chew, chew.

He wiped small crumbs from her lip. "Got 'em."

Darla thought he seemed nervous. She could sense it. "Aren't you sweet? Have you tried any yet?"

"I had my own morsel issues a block back. I'm beginning to think Betty and Carl have a plan to take us over with their eats."

"Don't let this get out, but I'd be on board."

They both laughed. Then smiled.

Darla realized her look lingered. "Oh, all right. Now, what can I do you for?"

"Wanted to let you know everything's set for the tree lighting."

Darla nodded. "Good to hear. People sure are looking forward to it."

"I know I am," the two said in unplanned unison, then laughed like school children.

"Oh," Eddie said, "we're also ready for Cam's big moment."

Darla found herself equal parts surprised, intrigued, and nervous. If previous attempts were any indication, she had no idea what to expect. "Wait, wait, wait. Big? I had hoped for simple this time."

"I wouldn't call it simple, but I'd definitely call it Cameron." Eddie laughed.

Darla joined in, albeit with half-hearted—and fully nervous—laughter. She could only think of Abby.

"I'm gonna let you get back to it, Mayor," Eddie said. "I'll see you around." He gave a quick wink, turned, and walked off.

Darla smiled and watched as he moved away. He waved at everyone. Smiled at all. It made her content. She knew how important a wave, or smile, even a wink could be, and she never let anyone pass by without offering any number of those things, a gesture to let them know they were thought of, acknowledged. Needed.

Right now that greeting, that need, went to someone walking past. The morning had barely begun and she felt like she'd already had a full day. She turned to those helping with the tree. "Excuse me for a second, everyone. I'll be back soon, so don't go putting everything on the tree before I get back," she told her helpers.

They nodded, and she chuckled at the notion that the Herculean task of decorating the tree would barely be done by sunset, much less before she got back to help them.

"Oh, Cameron, honey," Darla called out to the man with a box of gadgets in his hand.

He stopped, turned. A smile oozed across his face, the game-show-ready kind. "Morning, Darla." He had a smooth, deep voice.

Now, Darla was as faithful as you could get. And while she and Eddie Cass had their share of flirtatious fun, one would be hard-pressed to find a roving eye in Darla. Earl, her one true love, might have passed on, but she had her hands full with love of another kind in the town and its people. Their happiness brought her happiness. At any rate, even faithful Darla Curtis would be the first to admit Cameron Leigh had a certain appeal.

His blue eyes focused on her in the bright day and it never failed to remind her they weren't just blue-blue, but an icy blue. The kind where you have to stare for a moment or two to make sure they are real, then you recognize you're staring, so you stop. Sort of.

Darla pulled her gaze away to look at the box of toys and tools in his arms. A pair of old skates sat atop the heap. "Heading to Larry's to sharpen those up?"

"Huh?" Cameron asked, then realized. "Oh, no. Well, I'm gonna make some modifications in my workshop."

"Modifications?" Darla wondered. She let the question go and began what she believed was a delicate subject. "So, a little birdie told me you were thinking of popping the question. Again?" Her voice rose at the end, even more than she intended.

Cameron winked. "Unless you ask me first."

"Don't tempt me." Darla tilted her head. "Can I walk with you?"

"I'd love that," he said to her.

"Charmer."

"What other way would I be?"

Darla caught no hint of sarcasm in his voice. His kind of thinking mirrored the general philosophy

in Winter Glen. Why not be happy? People had their troubles, of course, but those people came to the help of someone else with troubles and the other person reciprocated. Well, most everyone.

"Lead the way," Darla said as Cameron walked. She hoped he would not notice the concern she couldn't hide. She'd always been terrible at concealing things, especially when they had an air of—if not bad news—not-so-good news. She surmised her timing might not be the best.

"So," Cameron said.

Darla glanced up at him, then forward. She opened her mouth to speak, then stopped. She did it again. "Cameron."

"Darla." He raised his eyebrows. A wisp of his brown hair fell forward.

"Ooh, why do you have to do that?"

He laughed. "Do what?"

"Be so, so—you." Darla couldn't help but smile. She relaxed as they made it to the covered porch of his storefront, Winter Glen Toys. They were met with two tall candy canes standing at each side of the porch railings. Ahead, guarding the door, were life-size nutcrackers. Silver and gold tinsel wrapped around the windows, each frame illuminated with lights.

"You've really made this place your own. Your dad would be proud," Darla said as they walked up the steps.

Cameron shifted the box he held to grab a set of keys from his front pocket. He put them in the door and opened it. "We both thank you. I like to think there's a bit of the world still interested in getting their toys from the little guy and not a corporate giant."

"I do believe you're right."

Cameron set the box on a table at the entrance. "Now, what did you wanna talk about?"

Darla did her best to hide how she wanted to discuss him and Abby. It was never an easy topic, and after seeing how happy the store and talk of his father made him, she decided another time would be best. "Oh, it can wait. You have a store to open and I have a tree to decorate."

"Suit yourself," Cameron said. "I'll make sure to stop by later to help."

"You better. Everyone gets an ornament."

He winked. The charm kept coming. "See ya then."

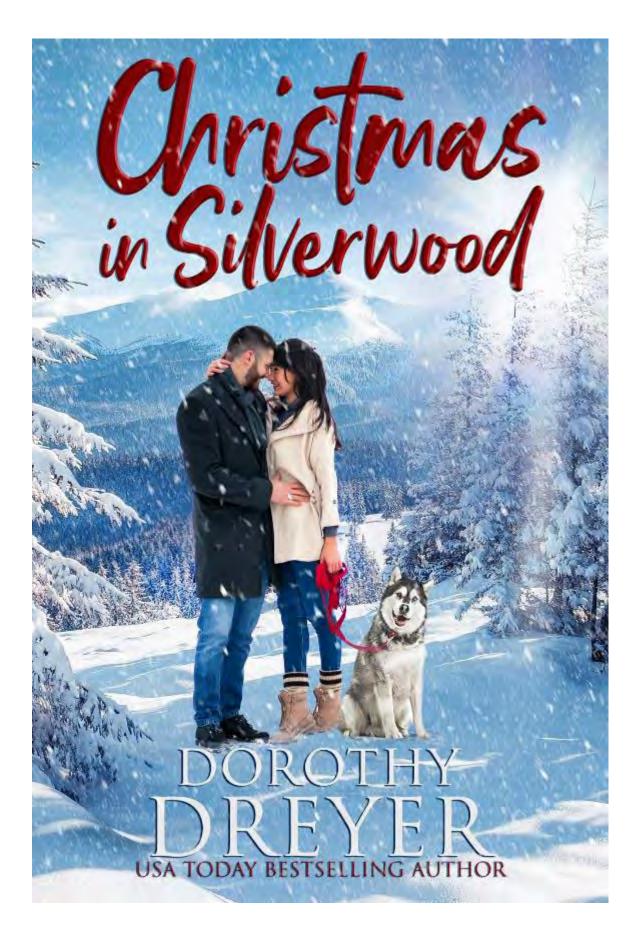
"Bye, Cameron." Darla watched as he went inside the store, turned lights on, and started up the miniature Christmas train. Once he busied himself and could no longer see her, she let her face fall. She did have something to say, and she'd have to say it sooner or later. Even if she knew the answer.

Cameron rapped his knuckles on the little window in the door, pulling her from her thoughts. He smiled and she smiled back as he flipped the "closed" sign to "open." Then, he moved back into the store.

Darla walked back to the town square and looked up. Behind the great tree, almost looming, was Nicholsons Cards. Still the building from decades ago, Darla's heart sunk a bit at its sight. Christmas was nowhere to be found. Everywhere one looked in Winter Glen the holiday appeared, except for there.

Darla grimaced—something she frowned upon, which was ironic, because she rarely frowned. This situation called for a different attitude because the building, once a seasonal beacon, had dimmed. What it meant and what it stood for had somehow vanished.

What always shook her to her not-so-ugly, ugly Christmas sweater core was somehow the structure that had once been a holiday ideal became a sore, Grinch-colored thumb in the otherwise wonderland of Winter Glen.



CHRISTMAS IN SILVERWOOD BY DOROTHY DREYER USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Paperback: 9781645480532 / \$13.95 eBook: 9781645480549 / \$4.99 Pub Date: Nov 9, 2021 Publisher: Rosewind, https://vesuvianmedia.com/rosewind-home/ Buy Links and Book Info: https://vesuvianmedia.com/christmas-in-silverwood/ Distributor: https://www.ipgbook.com/christmas-in-silverwood-products-9781645480532.php

DOROTHY DREYER is an award-winning, USA *Today* bestselling author. Born in Angeles City, Philippines to a Filipino mother and American Father, Dorothy grew up a military brat, living in Guam,

Massachusetts, South Dakota, New Jersey, and New York. Dorothy is bilingual, speaks fluent English and German, and teaches English to children at a multilingual school in Frankfurt, Germany where she resides with her family and two Siberian huskies. <u>https://www.dorothydreyer.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Holly St. Ives clicked the button on the steering wheel controlling the radio and the cheery melody of *Jingle Bell Rock* came to a stop. She bit back a laugh—turning off the radio wouldn't help her concentrate on the road ahead, but she'd had enough Christmas music, anyway. The snow flurried down, and her snow tires weren't exactly reliable. She squinted and ducked her head, as if the movement would help her see the sign ahead.

Silverwood. Silverwood. She hoped she was going in the right direction. If only her navigation system hadn't been on the fritz, she might have a chance at reaching her destination before nightfall. She convinced herself she would recognize the area once she got nearer, but the truth was she hadn't been in Silverwood since she was a teenager. She resorted to following an app on her phone, but there was hardly any service this high in the mountains. *Or this far from civilization*.

A ringtone erupted from her phone, making her jump in her seat. She shook her head as she clicked the steering wheel's control button to answer the call.

She swallowed before she spoke. "Holly St. Ives."

"Hey, Holly-bear." Kim always sounded like she was whining. For the first couple years of their friendship, this annoyed the heck out of Holly. But now she'd gotten used to it. "How's the trip going?"

"Long. These mountain roads are never-ending."

"I know you probably hate that, but honestly I wish I could have left the city with you for a getaway. The construction outside the building is driving me batty. Don't they take a break for the holidays?"

"Not when they're getting time and a half. I guess everyone's got bills to pay." Which is exactly why Holly had left the city in the first place. She just couldn't afford her cushy New York apartment anymore. Things had been great when her paintings had graced the walls of every gallery exhibit in the city. But after a couple stellar years of hitting the big time, Holly found herself in a rut. Long gone was her joy and inspiration in the one thing she had been truly passionate about. Now it seemed as if being in the business was all about the publicity and the money. And that kind of pressure sucked all the delight out of Holly's creativity. Not to mention, her art simply wasn't selling recently. Living as a starving artist just wasn't cutting it.

"Did you call just to check up on me, Kim? Or was there something else you wanted to talk to me about?" Secretly, Holly had been hoping one of the galleries had been trying to reach her. Maybe instead of contacting her via email, her agent had showed up at her apartment building to deliver the great news in person. A last glimmer of hope to have her racing back to finish her dream.

"Well, there was another reason, but I don't think you're going to like it."

Holly grimaced, preparing herself. "Just spill it."

"Grayson dropped off a box of your stuff."

For a moment, Holly was quiet, trying to process the fact that her ex had come by her apartment.

The muscles in her neck tensed, and she pressed her lips into a straight line. "Grayson was there? Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah. I caught him standing in front of your door ringing your bell with a big cardboard box in his arms. So me, being the big-hearted neighbor I am, I told him you were out of town and took the box for you."

"But you didn't tell him specifically where I was going, did you?"

"No, of course not. He didn't call you to tell you he was coming by?"

Holly sighed. "I stopped answering his calls after the breakup. And eventually he stopped calling. I'm surprised he came by."

"So, what do you want me to do with the box?"

Holly worried her lip for a second. "It's probably all junk. You can get rid of it."

"Don't you want to check what's in the box first? There might be something sentimental or ... valuable in it."

A laugh escaped Holly's lips. "Tell you what: you see something you like, you can have it. I really don't want to have anything that reminds me of that dead-end relationship. I mean, he's the one who stopped caring to ask how my day was or treating me like—you know what? I don't want to think about it. You're welcome to anything in there. Merry Christmas."

"Wow. Thanks, Holly."

"Don't mention it."

"Well, I better let you go." There was Kim's whiny voice again. "Don't want to distract you while you're driving. You might end up running over Big Foot or something."

Holly smirked. "Bye, Kim."

As she clicked on the END CALL button, she noticed a sign up ahead where there was a fork in the road. Snow clung to the sign, making it impossible to read. For a split second, she considered stopping and getting out to brush the snow off the sign. But that split second came and went. It was way too cold out to get out of the car. Judging from the look of the two roads, Holly decided to go right instead of left. It wasn't until she was a few miles down her chosen path that she found the road had narrowed to half its size, and the mass of trees flanking her journey grew thicker and thicker. In her head, she fought with herself. Half of her wanted to turn around and take the other road, but the other half of her told her to stick to her decision and follow her first instinct.

She rapped on her navigation device with her knuckles, hoping it would somehow come back to life. But she had no such luck. Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel as she took a tight curve. Up ahead, a big truck blocked her side of the road. The open bed of the truck was filled with Christmas trees. She slowed down and stretched her neck out, checking the road ahead. No one was coming from the opposite direction, so Holly proceeded to steer around the truck.

Something small and fuzzy zipped across the road in front of her car. Just as she instinctively let her foot off the gas pedal, something bigger and fuzzier bound across the road. With a gasp, Holly slammed on the brakes. Her car swerved on the snowy road. She jerked in her seat as the car dipped slightly in the ditch on the opposite side. Her life seemed to flash before her eyes at the sight of the tree her car was barreling toward, until she pulled the handbrake with a scream. She jolted forward against her seatbelt as the car came to a stop.

Frazzled, she fought to catch her breath. She felt as if her heart was in her throat, and she had to swallow hard to get it to go back to where it belonged. Once she got her wits about her, she unbuckled

her seatbelt and threw her car door open. Her foot almost slipped out from under her as she stepped out into the snow. She made a mental note to wear her other pair of boots while up in the mountains. The ones with more traction to keep from slipping. She winced as the cold mountain air slapped her in the face. Holding on to the car, she made her way to the hood to check if there was any damage. The car was intact, and luckily, the roadside ditch wasn't deep enough for her to get stuck in.

At the sound of a bark, she jumped in her skin and turned to find the offender. She could have sworn the large, black and white dog staring at her was a wolf. Its tongue hung out as it panted. She wasn't sure what to do. The dog sat its butt down in the snow and lifted a paw at her, then jumped up and raced back across the road. Her gaze followed its course and found it approaching a tall, fit man lugging a medium-sized, chopped tree toward his truck bed. When the dog barked at the man, he straightened, noticing Holly and her car. Dropping the tree, the man walked toward her with purpose in his strides. He straightened his thick plaid coat and adjusted the wool bomber hat on his head. The dog barked again and rushed back to Holly.

"You all right?" the man asked. His voice was low and soothing.

"Is this your dog?" She hadn't meant to sound so unpleasant, but she was still shaken up from almost plowing her car into a tree. She was surprised she could hear her own voice above the hammering in her chest.

The dog waltzed up to her and tucked its head under Holly's hand before sitting in the snow again and panting at her. Was it actually smiling?

"You weren't hurt, were you?" the man asked, inspecting the position of the car.

"Well, your mutt almost got me killed."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Mutt? Cupid is a pure-bred Alaskan Malamute."

Cupid rolled over in the snow with its tongue sticking out. When it got back up on its paws, it shook to get the snow off its fur.

Holly flinched as bits of snow sprayed up onto her coat. "Oh, excuse me! Maybe you should teach your pure-bred not to chase squirrels across the road. What's he got against squirrels anyway? You'd think a dog named Cupid would have a heart for the poor creatures. What kind of saint is that?"

Cupid proceeded to sit in the snow again, raising its paw. Did the dog want to shake hands or something? She could have sworn it winked at her.

The man let out a small laugh.

"What's so funny?" Holly asked.

"First of all, I think Cupid's trying to offer his apologies. Secondly, I think you're thinking of the mythological god of love and attraction. There is no Saint Cupid. And third, he was actually named after the reindeer. You know, from the Rudolph song?"

Holly scoffed and shrugged.

The man rubbed at his bearded jaw. She'd been too worked up to notice, but now he'd drawn attention to his face. Underneath his wool bomber hat, the man had attractive features. Strong cheekbones, square jaw, and blue eyes that made her think of summer—wait, what was she doing?

"Whatever," was all she could think of to say as she fought off a blush. "Just get your dog out of the road."

"Look, sorry for the trouble. Do you need any help with your car? I've got some tow straps in the truck if you need help getting out of that snowbank."

Holly pursed her lips. "No, thanks. I can manage." She turned to head back to her car but then

stopped. Letting out a frustrated breath, she swung back around to face him. "Can you tell me if this road leads to Silverwood?"

"Oh, you're headed to Silverwood?"

Holly narrowed her eyes at him. "Yeah."

The man smiled. "Yep, it sure does. Just keep following the road about twenty miles down and you'll see the sign."

Holly nodded her head once. "Thank you."

"The name's Nick Mason, by the way," he said when she was almost at her car door.

She lifted her hand but didn't look back at him. She wasn't sure why she was being so impolite to this handsome stranger. At the sound of a bark, she flinched, but refused to turn around. Was she crazy to think the dog was barking goodbye to her, wishing her a pleasant journey? Yeah, that was crazy.

Once she was in her car, she closed the door and turned the ignition key. After shifting into reverse, she pushed on the gas, but the car wouldn't budge. The engine simply revved without the car going anywhere.

"No, no, no." She didn't really want to have to ask Nick for help. She'd already felt like she made a fool of herself by being so rude to him. Glancing down, she realized she'd forgotten to disengage the handbrake.

Letting out a sigh of relief, she sheepishly glanced in her rearview mirror at Nick to see if he noticed. Nick stood where he had been, smirking with his hands in his coat pockets.

Cheeks burning, she expelled a huff of exasperation and drove off.

Once she was safely down the road, she let her shoulders sag and her head fall back against the headrest. Checking her rearview mirror, she caught Nick patting Cupid on the head before heading back to his truck. She shook her head, finding the encounter incredulous. Still, the man had been polite and didn't fight back with her, even though she knew she was the one being inexplicably rude. No, Nick had been a gentleman.

Nick, she thought. That's a nice name.

CHAPTER TWO

The flurries seemed to dwindle, leaving a stray flake or two landing on Holly's windshield. Flanked by rows of snow-topped evergreens, the road widened a bit more, giving Holly a sense of reprieve. The sign up ahead filled her with relief, and she loosened her grip on the steering wheel a bit.

Welcome to Silverwood.

She'd made it.

The sky began to clear to a crystal blue, serving as a gorgeous backdrop to the distant housetops nestled in the cozy, mountainside, forest town. It wasn't until she got closer to the quaint village that she began to recognize some of the buildings and landmarks from the time she spent in Silverwood as a kid. Something bloomed inside her heart, something she hadn't felt in years.

It all came rushing back to her. She knew exactly which road to take to get to her destination. An invigorating feeling filled her as she took the familiar turns up the mountain road. It was as if she was a kid again, journeying up to her family's mountain cabin to tuck away for the holidays. Except now, she was in the driver's seat.

There were more houses now than she remembered, but the landscape mostly looked the same. Gorgeous, just like the picture she had in her mind. It was so serene here, she almost felt as if it wasn't real.

Her heart sped up as the cabin came into view. The charming, one-story home was picturesque, surrounded by pure white snow behind a picket fence. She pulled into the driveway, everything growing quiet as she turned off the car's engine. Holly took a moment, sitting in the parked car, gazing at the place that held so many treasured family memories. She hadn't stepped foot in the place since she was seventeen, and she'd never dreamed she would ever come here without her parents. It was bittersweet. She took in a slow breath and exhaled, feeling a tug at her heart.

"Yoohoo!"

Holly was snapped out of her trance by an older, robust woman in a light brown winter coat approaching her car.

"Holly, is that you?"

Unbuckling her seatbelt, Holly smiled at the woman through the window. The moment she stepped out of the car, she was enveloped in the woman's arms. She almost sneezed when the faux fur from the woman's coat tickled her nose. She patted the woman on the back, hoping she would let her go soon so she could breathe.

"My goodness it's been years." The woman stepped back and looked Holly up and down with a sentimental smile. "You're all grown up."

"Mrs. Miranelli. It's good to see you."

Mrs. Miranelli's smile faded, and she grasped Holly's hands in hers. "Oh, my dear. I was so sorry about your father's passing. Jake was always very kind."

Holly gave her a nod. "Thank you for saying that."

In the two years since her father's death, Holly had learned that it was best to simply thank those who offered their condolences. It kept her from digging too deeply into her sorrow and becoming a sobbing pile of mush.

"Where is Vivian?" Mrs. Miranelli asked.

"Oh, she moved back to the Philippines to stay with my aunt."

Mrs. Miranelli creased her brow. "So you've been living on your own in the states without family?"

Holly smiled at her and gave her a wink. "Yeah. I'm a big girl now."

"I can see that, dear. But are you spending the holidays by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Pretty young woman like you doesn't have a boyfriend to celebrate Christmas with?"

Holly could feel her face falling.

"Oh!" Mrs. Miranelli leaned closer. "I'm sorry for prying."

"It's okay." Holly waved a hand at her. "No, I'm single. And I'm fine."

The thought of her ex made her stomach churn a bit. She let out a breath and told herself to push thoughts of Grayson away.

"Well, that's all right." Mrs. Miranelli placed her hands on her hips. "You thinking of staying in Silverwood for good? You already have a great place to live."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm sort of between career moves, I guess you could call it. I'm taking the holidays to figure out what my next step is. Like a sabbatical. I'm not sure how long I'm staying, and

I might sell the cabin."

"What? No!" Mrs. Miranelli looked flushed. "I mean, far be it from me to tell you what to do, but this cabin is a gem. Plus think of all the memories you had here. Those are irreplaceable. And Silverwood—well there's no better place to live."

Holly wondered if Mrs. Miranelli had ever lived anywhere else to speak with such authority. "I'll think about it, thanks. I should go in and get settled, though. I've still got some things to do."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Something in the corner of Holly's vision caught her eye. "Oh. What, uh, happened to the mailbox?"

The plain mailbox that stood near the front of the property was hanging crooked, propped up by a plank of wood.

"We had a bad storm blow through here last year. Took down some trees and broke our fence. Looks like it got your mailbox as well."

"Looks like someone tried to prop it up, though."

"Might have been the mailman. You know, in Silverwood, everyone is always looking out for each other."

"That's nice." Holly told herself to put fixing the mailbox on her list of things to do.

Mrs. Miranelli patted Holly on the shoulder. "Okay, dear. Now if you need anything, just let me know. The town's grown a bit since you've been gone. There's a bigger grocery store, which I'm sure you're going to want to get to. It's right next to that art school. You remember the one?"

"Yeah, sure. My parents let me do a couple classes there when I was a kid. I know now that it was just so they could get their Christmas shopping done without me, but I, uh, remember those classes fondly."

"Oh, then you should definitely visit Mrs. Weedleman."

Holly felt her face light up. "Mrs. Weedleman still teaches there?"

"Well, not for long. She's going into retirement soon, I believe."

"Yeah, I'll have to pay her a visit. It'll be nice."

"You do that." Mrs. Miranelli looked over her shoulder at her house down the road a bit and across the street. "Okay, dear, have fun settling in. Hop on over if you need anything. I'll see you around."

"Thanks, Mrs. Miranelli. I appreciate it."

Holly turned to the cabin and walked up the front step, telling herself she would deal with her luggage later. A strange chill came over her as she unlocked the front door. Something about the click that sounded as she turned the key woke a dormant melancholy in her heart. This would be the first time she would stay in the cabin without hearing her father's soothing bass voice singing Christmas carols. The first time she would spend time in the family getaway without the people that made it feel like home.

She pushed the door open and switched on the light, thankful the electricity had been turned on like she had requested. She stood in the main room looking around. Everything was in place exactly where she'd remembered them. Memories of Christmases past played out in her mind, with the ghost of her father dominating every scene. Holly let out a shuddered breath and traveled farther into the room.

She took her boots off, remembering how her mother never let anyone walk around inside with

shoes on. That was probably part of the reason the hardwood floors still looked like new. She set them down on the hearth of the fireplace. She made a note to get a fire started after she went through the house. She realized how different the fireplace looked without Christmas stockings hung or one of her mom's beautiful Christmas centerpieces adorning the mantle.

The old couch in the living area was covered with a large white sheet. She braced herself as she removed it, ready for flying dust to attack her. She wrapped the sheet up as she fought off a dust-induced cough. The blue tone of the couch fabric was more faded than she recalled, and it would probably benefit from a blast of fresh air. Though she knew it would be cold, she opened a few windows to freshen the place up.

On her way around the house to slide open some windows, the bare cupboards and empty refrigerator in the kitchen reminded her she'd need to pick up some groceries and other supplies. Heading toward the back of the house, she decided to claim the bigger bedroom—the one that used to be her parents'—rather than the small bedroom with the twin-sized bed she had as a kid. She hoped the sheets in the linen closet were fresh enough, otherwise she'd have to pop them in the washer and dryer before bedtime.

The last part of the house she checked was the garage. As soon as she opened the door that connected the main part of the house to the garage, her eyes widened at the sight of the enormous tarp-covered object standing in place of a car. More memories flooded back to her, this time of all the Christmas holidays her father spent utilizing his carpentry skills.

She approached the tarp with a smile on her face. Standing on her tiptoes, she grabbed a section of the tarp. The plastic material crackled as she pulled it off, blatant evidence that it hadn't been touched in a long time. As the flying sawdust and debris cleared, Holly gazed in wonder at the hand-crafted sleigh. It was one of her father's finest works. It was beautiful, with its perfectly sanded curves and polished rails. She could picture the concentration on her father's face when he'd meticulously weather-proofed it. He was a perfectionist when it came to the sleigh, paying attention to every detail. There was a plump, red cushion on the front bench, big enough to fit two adults. Holly remembered sitting on the bench with her father as he pretended to drive it through the snow—though it had never left the garage. The back compartment was just the right size to carry sacksful of gifts for the whole town. At least, that was how Holly had always imagined it: as the perfect sleigh for Santa. She ran her hand along the wood, wondering what had inspired her father to build it. Of course, spending the holidays in a winter wonderland might have had something to do with it. She felt it a shame that he'd never taken it out for a test run. She knew there were stables not too far away that probably would have been happy to help them out with horses to rein. Instead, the sleigh sat in the cabin's garage for years, untouched.

A cool breeze brushed by her, making the hairs on her skin rise. She rubbed her arms, remembering she'd left a good number of windows open in the house. Grabbing a few logs of wood from the stack in the garage, she headed back inside to warm the place up again.

Once all the windows were properly shut, Holly knelt before the fireplace, making sure the flue was open so she could start a fire. Stacking the wood from the hearth to the metal rack in the fireplace, she was struck with the memory of her father teaching her how to light a fire. He always did the heavy lifting, but he did let her use the fireplace lighter on the fire-starting cubes. The kindling grew bright with flames, and Holly stood back to admire her work. The picture frame on the mantle caught her eye. She reached out and took it down to inspect more closely, running her finger over the images of

her parents. It was taken before Holly was born, and her parents looked like teenagers in the shot. She missed them so much.

After bringing in her suitcases, she pulled out her phone and pressed the contact button for her mother. She'd promised she would call as soon as she got in, and she didn't want to worry her.

"Holly?"

Holly smiled at the sound of her mom's voice. "Hi, Mom. I'm in the cabin."

"Oh, good. You made it. I was worried about the snowy roads. You know how much driving in the snow freaks me out."

Holly let out a small laugh.

"How's the cabin?" her mom asked.

"It, uh, looks the same. Just with added dust."

"I'm sorry I can't fly in to spend Christmas with you, honey. But Auntie Lita needs me."

"No, I understand." Holly plopped down on the couch, pulling a throw pillow onto her lap. "I don't really like to celebrate Christmas anyway."

"What? How can you say that? You used to love Christmas."

"Back when I was a kid."

"No, I remember even a few years ago, you'd get excited when the holidays came. We came to see you in New York, remember?"

"Yeah. But ... that was before dad passed away. Things seem a lot bleaker now."

A silence fell between them for a moment. Holly really didn't want to upset her mother, and she didn't want the conversation to be a downer.

"Guess what's still sitting in the garage," Holly said.

"What could be—No. Wow, I'd forgotten about that sled."

Holly laughed again. "It's a sleigh, Mom."

"Sleigh, right. So, it's still standing?"

"Sleeping in a blanket of dust is more like it. What did he ever mean to do with that thing?"

"Oh, you know. It was just one of his creative projects. You inherited your penchant for art from him, you know. It was probably for one of the town's Christmas festivals. Maybe you could donate it."

"Yeah, sure." Holly could feel the flames of the fire heating the room. She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'll ask around and find out who's in charge."

"Okay, honey. I need to go. But I'll call you on Christmas, okay?"

"Okay, Mom. Take care. Talk to you soon."

"Glad you got back to Silverwood safely. Miss you, baby!"

"Love you, Mom."

As she hung up, her stomach let out a grumble. She needed to figure out her food situation. She decided to shower and change, giving the fire a chance to die down before she headed into town. She felt the need to stretch her legs after all that driving, so a nice walk through the town square and finding a nice place to eat was the very thing she needed.

CHAPTER THREE

Holly pressed the mail app on her phone. It was mostly out of habit, having spent the last several

months waiting for a gallery to accept her work. But it was also out of desperation, wanting to hear good news from her agent. She needed to get out of this rut, and she knew if a gallery would just give her a chance, she could get a second wind and rise above this unfortunate bump in her career.

The only thing she found in her inbox was spam.

Merry Christmas to you, too, Nigerian prince.

Just as she was closing the mail app, she received an incoming call. Her finger was quicker than her eye, and as soon as she accepted the call, she realized too late that it was Grayson. She stared at the screen, hearing his voice floating out from her device as she decided whether or not to simply hang up.

"Holly? Holly, please."

With a scowl, she held the phone to her ear. "What?" she asked through gritted teeth.

He was quiet for a moment. "Don't hang up, okay? I, uh, wanted to talk to you."

"Why?" She released the fist she was making when her nails pierced the skin of her palm. "I didn't think we had anything more to discuss. The last thing you said to me was you were glad things were over because there was some 'hot babe'—your words, not mine—who was dying to get with you."

Grayson scoffed. "Those were just words of anger. Heat of the moment type of thing, Holly. I didn't mean them."

"There's a picture on Instagram that says differently."

"So, you're still checking my Instagram?"

She could practically feel him smirking his stupid, cocky smirk. "Not anymore."

"Come on, Holly. Why don't we discuss this in person? You, me, a couple of mojitos ..."

"No, Grayson. It's over. Besides, I'm not in—" She cut herself off, not wanting him to know she'd left town. The last thing she needed was him following her to Silverwood to try to get back together. That ship had sailed. "I'm busy. You know, the holiday season and all?"

"The holiday season? You? Since when do you care about Christmas?"

She used to. Before it became all about making sales and keeping her name in the papers.

"There are a lot of things about me you never bothered to learn, Grayson." Just saying his name was making her stomach churn. "The only thing you cared about was my status in high society. And then one bump in the road and you suddenly had no time for me anymore."

He scoffed. "But it wasn't just one bump in the road. Was it, Holly? How many years has it been since you've sold even a single piece of art?"

Holly could feel the heat rising in her neck. "What does that even have to do with our relationship? Couples are supposed to stick together during highs and lows. Be there for each other. I went to every work event you invited me to and listened to hours of you and your colleagues drone on about fiscal crap. It wasn't ideal but I was there for you. But you stopped showing up to my showings. And then you stopped showing up, period. Where was the support? You know what? It doesn't matter anymore. I ended this months ago, and it's going to stay ended."

"Wait. No. Holly, don't say that. Listen, why don't I come over to your place and we can talk this over, face-to-face?"

"No, I—"

"Yes. Yes. It'll be good. I've got a bottle of wine. I'm wearing your favorite cologne. I'm hanging up, and I'll be right over."

The line went silent, and Holly stared at her phone. She let out the smallest of laughs. "Good luck

with that."

She immediately went into his contact information and blocked him. There was nothing more to say, and she didn't need that negativity in her life anymore. She then went through all forms of social media she knew of and blocked him there as well. With a cringe, she tucked her phone away, knowing she'd be hearing from Kim about Grayson's attempts to find her. She just hoped Kim would keep her word about not revealing her whereabouts.

Zipping up her coat, she took a deep breath, ready to drive into town. On the dining room table, her camera stared back at her. She really wasn't in the mood to be creative and brilliant at the moment, but she knew inspiration could strike when least expected. Besides, wouldn't it be a kick in Grayson's backside if she got her inspiration back and created a masterpiece? He expected her to remain a failure, and she wasn't about to let him win. It wasn't the best reason to get back in the game, but it was a push, and she was going to use whatever she could to get back on track.

With a frustrated sigh, she grabbed the camera and hung the strap around her neck. *Hello, old friend. Ready to find a muse?*

Her mind wouldn't stop replaying the conversation with Grayson while she drove. She kept shaking her head and telling herself to think about something else, but it was no use. It wasn't until she came upon a truck blocking her side of the road that she finally turned off Grayson's voice in her head.

"Are you kidding me?"

She slowed down, checking left and right as she reduced her speed to walking pace. She didn't want another near collision with that crazy dog. Okay, he was cute, and it was actually funny how he kept raising his paw for her and rolled over in the snow. But she was never going to let Nick know she thought that. As she made her way around the truck, she stretched out her neck to see if she could catch a glimpse of Nick delivering a tree or whatever he was doing. She wasn't sure why he had to take up half the road as if he owned the place. She was willing to bet his big, fat truck annoyed everyone in town.

The sudden blast of a car horn made her gasp and slam on her brakes. She hissed in a breath when she realized she had almost driven head on into another car. With an apologetic wave, she veered back to her side of the road.

Dammit, Nick. Look what you made me do.

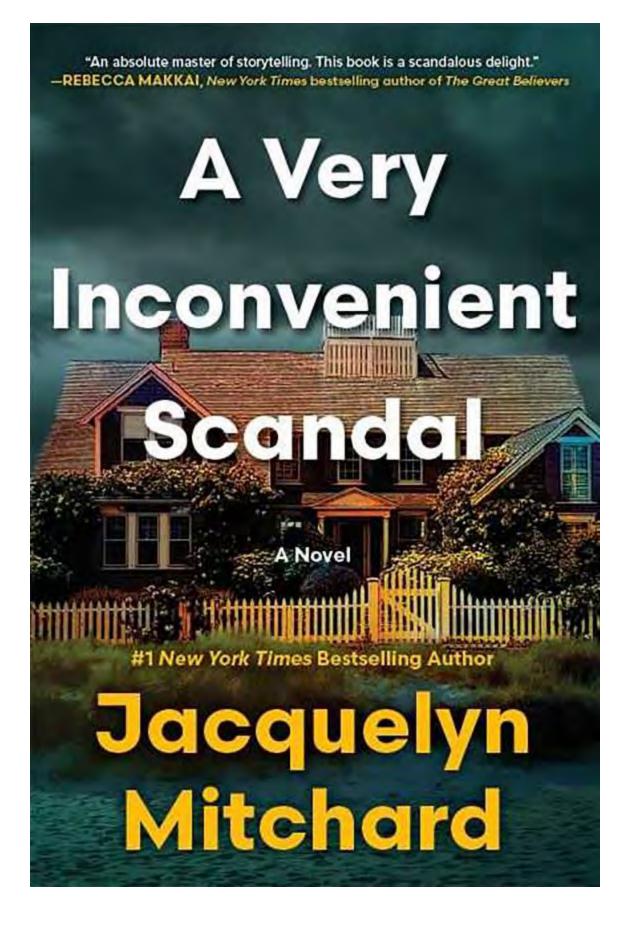
She knew it wasn't actually his fault, but it was easier to blame him. It figured he'd be in Silverwood. Momentary paranoia led her train of thought down a path where Nick had actually followed her after she mentioned Silverwood, but that was a stretch. The tree farm was close to Silverwood, so he probably worked here. Or lived here. She had to stop being so cynical. It was the part of her brain that stopped trusting people that came to assumptions like that.

Grayson had really done a number on her.

Yes, blame Grayson. He's the bad guy.

And she had the emotional scars to prove it.

CONTEMPORARY FICTION & FAMILY DRAMA



A VERY INCONVENIENT SCANDAL BY JACQUELYN MITCHARD #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A page-turning family drama that explores the emotional consequences of loyalty, deception, and jealousy.

Stunned by her recently widowed father's reckless behavior, a young woman must learn to navigate a new world—where the people she should trust the most have become strangers she cannot trust at all.

Frankie Attleboro returns home to Cape Cod with thrilling news. She's met the love of her life, and they're getting married with a baby on the way. That's the moment her father makes his own jawdropping announcement: at sixty, he's getting married as well, to Frankie's best friend, Ariel, who is also pregnant, and due soon.

As Frankie and Ariel struggle to adjust to their new relationship, Ariel's estranged mother, Carlotta, returns after a decade-long absence. She claims to be a changed woman—but is she really? And where has she been all these years? Frankie is suspicious, and as Carlotta's unpredictable behavior intensifies, Frankie must untangle the threads of the past to protect Ariel's future—and her own.

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Hardcover: 9780778369370 / \$30.00 eBook: ASIN B0BTZ16HZP / \$13.99 Audiobook: ASIN B0BYPHTCVS Pub Date: November 14. 2023 Publisher: MIRA (Harlequin) <u>https://www.harlequin.com/shop/brand/mira.html</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.harlequin.com/shop/books/9780778369370_a-very-inconvenient-scandal.html</u>

JACQUELYN MITCHARD is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 23 novels for adults and teenagers, and the recipient of Great Britain's Talkabout prize, The Bram Stoker, and Shirley Jackson awards, and named to the short list for the Women's Prize for Fiction. Her first novel, *The Deep End of the Ocean*, was the inaugural selection of Oprah's Book Club, with more than 3 million copies in

print in 34 languages. It was later adapted into a major feature film starring Michelle Pfeiffer. Her novel *Still Summer* has also been adapted for a film still in production and her teen trilogy *The Midnight Twins*, is in development for a limited series by Kaleidoscope Entertainment. Her essay collection, *The Rest of Us: Dispatches from the Mother Ship*, was drawn from her newspaper column syndicated by Tribune Media. Mitchard's essays also have been published in magazines worldwide, widely anthologized, and incorporated into school curricula. She served on the Fiction jury for the 2003 National Book Awards and was editor-in-chief of Merit Press, a Young Adult imprint under the aegis of Simon & Schuster.

A Chicago native, Mitchard grew up the daughter of a plumber and a hardware store clerk who met as rodeo riders. She is a Distinguished Fellow at the Ragdale Foundation and a DeWitt Clinton Readers Digest Fellow at the MacDowell Colony. She has taught in MFA program for Creative Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts, Miami University of Ohio and Western New England University and was a speechwriter for former U.S. Rep. and Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala. An avid Italian cook, she lives on Cape Cod with her husband and their nine children. https://jacquelynmitchard.com/

CHAPTER ONE

Something terrible had happened, but Frankie didn't know what it was. In her rental car, she pulled up in front of her childhood home. Not a single light. Not a single sound. Was Mack already dead? Was he in the hospital? Please come home, read the text on her phone. Urgent. Today. Here is your ticket number. Her father had made her reservation and paid for her ticket. Everything about it was strange. Mack was not the type to say *please* nor to splurge on pricey airline fares.

And if you were on your deathbed, you didn't send your own message.

So...the *something terrible* must have happened to her brother, Penn. Or her beloved best friend since fourth grade, Ariel, as close as any sibling. All the texts she sent as she rushed through three thousand miles between airports went unanswered. On the drive from Boston to Cape Cod, she hit redial on everyone's number until her phone was out of charge. No one picked up.

She could not bear it.

The last time she'd been here, just over a year ago, was for the funeral of her mother, Beatrice, her rock, her mainstay, struck down overnight from strep at the age of fifty-two.

Oh please, no more, Frankie thought, remembering a line from an old poem her mother used to read to her and Penn. *So far? So early? So soon?*

Exhausted, sweaty, pregnant, thirsty, nauseated, her distended bladder a taut water balloon, she lumbered out of the car and stumbled to the place on the front steps where she knew a key was wedged under the bottom of a big stone planter.

But wait. Where...? The planter was gone.

Frankie went back to the car and flipped on the headlights, then the brights.

Two huge new bright metal planters flanked the entryway, overflowing with the gaudy bells and tongue-like flowers of fuchsia plants. She fumbled in one, then the other, until she located a slim metal magnetized key holder. (Didn't burglars know about these things too?)

The facade of the white house with its three wings and extravagant second-floor porches reared

up before her, summiting a slight rise from the curl and boom of the surf. For the first time since Frankie could remember, the whole place was freshly painted, a door of marine blue and shiny black shutters jaunty as bright lapels on a tuxedo. Still, though the paint might be new, Frankie knew every cleft and corner of this old house, every change cobbled skillfully onto the main building by six generations of her mother's family. Despite her old grief and new worry, she nearly wept with relief. Much as she loved her work, which took her all over the world, there still were many nights when she dreamed that she was eight years old, running from the pond with her brother under the long avenue of smoke trees in all their pink summer finery to this house, which would always be home.

"Dad!" she called, as she noisily unlocked the door and stepped into the foyer, reaching for the light switch, flinching at the glare from a new overhead fixture like a gigantic suspended gyroscope, bright white wainscoting, translucent blue floor tiles... What? More redecorating? From Mack, who had sweatshirts older than his children? He really did have a screw loose. Everything was different—walls, floors, furniture, windows! The only things she still recognized were a gigantic print of one of her own best-known underwater photos—the placid, bemused gaze of a manatee—and Beatrice's big painting that looked like the undulating hills of a desert but was actually a close-up detail of an Angular Triton shell. Such giant close-ups were their art in common.

"Dad!" Frankie shouted, louder. "Dad, are you here?"

No sound except the tinny exhalation of the air-conditioning.

Frankie made her way down the wide dark hall to the closed door of the master bedroom. "Dad! Dad?"

A cough, or a groan, issued from within. That was Mack. He really was sick! She'd arrived just in time. Pushing her way in, Frankie flipped on all the lights. Bare-chested, tanned and fit, Mack sat up. Next to him, pushing her white-blond hair out of her eyes, was Ariel.

Ariel!

The world slipped. A piano fell out of the sky and clanged to the ground, narrowly missing her head.

Frankie screamed. She screamed again.

Ariel rolled out of bed and stood up. Under her huge white T-shirt protruded her hugely pregnant belly.

Frankie ran to the hall bathroom, where she managed to get to the sink in time to throw up. "Frankie, let me in!" It was Ariel's voice. "Let me explain!"

Frankie couldn't answer. She clung to the sink and sluiced her face with cold water. Ariel called, "Frankie! Answer me!"

"Get my brother," Frankie said, through the locked door. "Get Penn. I'm sick."

"She's sick," Ariel said to someone. "I told you that we should—"

Mack rattled the knob. "Frankie, come out right now." Frankie leaned against the door, trying to knit common sense with what she'd just seen. Ariel was, after all, the administrator, and its only permanent employee, of the Saltwater Foundation, the nonprofit organization for the conservation of marine animals, Mack's lifework. Had Mack forced Ariel... Frankie hunched over the sink in a fresh churn of nausea. Or had Ariel somehow... Was Mack suffering from some kind of dementia?

At last, it was her brother's voice. "Frankie, are you okay?"

"Help me," she said. "What the hell? What's happening?" She opened the door and poked her head out. With his curly dark hair stuck up like springs and his skinny legs poking out of his boxers, Penn stood there in his ancient gray T-shirt that read *Sorry, I Can't. It's Shark Week*. In her bare feet, just behind Penn, Ariel seemed even tinier than her five feet two, her long nearly white-blond hair pulled up in a toppling bun, purplish smudges of exhaustion under her eyes.

A few minutes later in the kitchen, Penn sat beside Frankie, ineffectually holding one of her wrists, while Ariel rushed around making her a cup of tea, giving her dry toast for the nausea, as if this were the set of some British TV show instead of her mother's kitchen on Cape Cod—her mother's

very kitchen, from which everything Beatrice treasured had been removed.

"It's a lot, Frankie," Ariel said softly. "I should have told you."

"You think?" Frankie replied. "I'm having a baby. I'm getting married."

Ariel stopped. She blinked. Then she said, "How...how did you guess?"

What? Frankie was confused. "How did I guess what?"

"That I was pregnant."

"You mean before? Or now? Jeez, Ariel! I majored in biology. I have eyes. But, actually, I was referring to myself, you cow! Me. I am pregnant! Almost five months. Even before I got the big emergency text from Mack, I was already coming home, soon, to tell you my big surprise. I never thought you had an even bigger surprise, that you were screwing my dad." She cupped her hand and drank cold water from the faucet. "Is it his? Or, sorry, do you even know?"

"Don't you dare talk to me like that, Frankie, in my own—"

"In your own house? Right, all yours! Not everybody who sleeps with the boss gets a ninebedroom beachfront house, and hey...that's my mom's twenty-fifth anniversary ring on your hand, not bad, Ariel. Trashy girls everywhere are going to get tattoos of you."

"Listen to yourself, Frankie! You should be ashamed of yourself. I already said I was sorry..."

"You should be sorry," Frankie said stoutly, but she thought, *she's right, I really should be ashamed of myself*.

"I'm not sorry for this. I'm sorry for not telling you. That was really dumb and wrong."

Now wearing a pink-and-navy checked shirt, his hair neatly brushed, Mack burst into the room. "Girls, stop. Stop. I'm honestly sorry you found us that way, honey. But of course, Ariel and I are getting married."

"Dad! Have you lost your mind?" Frankie shouted. "You're...uh, with a twenty-seven-year-old? Aa girl your own daughter's age?"

"I don't think of it that way. Ariel is very—" Mack began.

"Yes, apparently."

"Cut it out, Frankie. You're being a bitch because you think you can get away with it," Ariel said. "But you can't. I'm not going to listen to this."

"Ariel is very dear to me," Mack went on. "We're going to have a baby."

Clearly, for Mack at least, this explained matters: Frankie's geriatric father had gotten a girl in trouble. He had to do the right thing by her. Mack turned to Ariel, reaching over to smooth her long summer T-shirt against her bulging belly in a gesture of such proprietary intimacy that Frankie, who thought she was finished throwing up, felt her stomach squirm again. She had to pass between them, their skin smells of soap and salt and something loamy intercut with a bright pin of scent—Joy, her mother's favorite—and then she hung over the sink, humiliated, retching, although there was nothing left in her to heave up. Penn passed her a clean dish towel.

When she could breathe normally again, Frankie said, "You're sixty years old. You're almost sixty-one."

"Plenty of men my age—"

"Creeps, sure. Creeps and narcissists. What if your ages were reversed? Would you think that was okay? Would Mom? Surely you remember her, Beatrice? Your wife for thirty years? Is she just nothing now?"

"Of course not. This is not about your mother."

"What are you thinking?"

"Honey, please, take a breath," Mack said. "This is not healthy."

"I'll tell the whole world it isn't! Dad, I can't look at you. Don't stand there patting her belly. I'll leave, but I have to rest for a while. I couldn't sleep all the way back on the plane. I thought one of you was dying."

"Frankie. Just stay for dinner tonight, so we can talk it over. I'm making steamers and corn. Ariel's

making her famous olive bread. Lie down for a while, and later—"

"We'll all sit down for dinner like a nice family? What about you, Ariel? This is like if you caught me having sex with your mother."

"It's nothing like that!"

"You're right. It's like you caught me having sex with your grandmother! Your mother's a lot younger than Mack."

Ariel's eyes narrowed then, and she visibly drew back, her long graceful neck suddenly suggestive of a bird of prey. Frankie saw the face feared even by the mean girls back in high school. Ariel's long-vanished mother, Carlotta, was forbidden territory. Ariel blew her breath out, very slowly, then she said, in a low voice, "That's not how we see it."

"That's how everyone else will see it," Frankie pointed out.

Mack's face was reddening now, more stroke than blush. When he looked like that, she could tell he was running out of his famously short supply of patience and about to blow. She was, however, past caring. "Go ahead, Ariel, picture that!"

"Frankie, stop it," Penn put in. "This is out of control."

"You knew I was on the way here!" Frankie said to Ariel.

"You weren't supposed to get here until noon or something," Ariel said. "It's five in the morning." "Did you want me to see you two going at it?"

"We were not going at it. We were asleep."

"So obviously you never really cared about Beatrice, who you supposedly loved so much. Do you even care about me?"

Frankie knew she sounded like a child throwing a tantrum, fury pushing her past reason. But the question was valid. Was she invisible? Was she inaudible? Did she know her own father at all? Or Ariel, for so many years her confidante and soulmate? Had she been crazy to think that her father, so eager to showcase his muscled midriff and full head of hair, would cherish her for making him a grandfather? Mack was nowhere near ready to bounce a grandchild on his knee: he wanted to prove that he was still man enough to sire a new line. Carefully, Frankie folded the towel in half and then folded it again. As if it were a weapon, she pointed it at her father.

"And how long has this been going on, anyhow? Was Mom still alive when you started this?"

Mack didn't reply. By the big wall clock, a full minute swept past.

"I won't even dignify that," Mack said, his voice dangerous. "Don't insult me. Don't insult Ariel." "What about me?"

Frankie got up from her chair and slammed her mother's rose-colored teacup into the sink. It broke with a dry pop: she ended up holding only the broken-off handle. Horrified, she gasped. Then, well, *good*, she thought. They could buy new ones. Something tacky, maybe with cats fishing from rowboats. It would go with the rest of the kitchen, now slabbed with tile and stainless steel like an operating room. The huge double wooden shelves above the windows were still there, stripped of their historic amalgamation of odd objects—geodes, a delicate wire sculpture of the Brooklyn Bridge, a life-size velvet rooster Beatrice had made from old quilts. Now they were crowded with paintings of sentimental sunsets, antique Cape Cod Creamery bottles, an old trap with a papier-mâché lobster inside it.

She walked out, not even bothering to close the front door behind her.

"Frankie..." Penn's voice trailed after her.

"Let her go," Mack said. "Give her a moment by herself."

But she heard footsteps behind her, Penn following at a distance. The night was ending. Over the ocean, the first light bloomed from a violet seam in the clouds.

Crashing through a gap in the trees, Frankie veered off the drive and marched up Two Ponds Road, just half a block, to the door of the curious small house she and Penn used to pass every day on the way to the school bus. No confusing planter on this little porch.

Right next to the bright yellow door was a keypad. Frankie punched in 8-8-8-8, Gil's favorite numbers. He thought that eights looked like snowmen.

"Frankie, cut it out! I haven't seen those old folks for months, but there could be an alarm system or something."

"There's no alarm system," she said and stepped inside. As she expected, the place was redolent of lemon, freshly cleaned, the smooth old wooden countertops scrubbed, the windows sparkling. A long arch-backed dark green sofa faced the big picture window, and plumping up a couple of the oldfashioned embroidered pillows, she lay down.

"Frankie," Penn whispered at the door. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Take it easy," she said. "It's my house."

"Your house? Since when?"

"Since June. We bought it. Gil and I bought it."

"You and your boyfriend—"

"My fiancé."

"You and your fiancé bought the Barbie House?"

All the locals called it the Barbie House. It was a turquoise cottage built years ago by an artist, now in his late eighties. He'd decorated it with the fabrics and colors and furniture of his midtwentieth-century childhood, right down to a bright red Kelvinator refrigerator that looked like two bubbles stacked one on top of the other, which he had commissioned a heating-and-cooling specialist to gut and modernize. During college, Frankie had made a series of photographs of the cottage for Yankee Magazine, among her first published pictures. Just after she learned that she was pregnant, Frankie told Penn now, she and Gil agreed that their home base would be in the United States instead of Gil's native Montreal. Only days later, Frankie happened across a story online about quirky houses, listed by state, two in Massachusetts. The one on Cape Cod was none other than the funny beach cottage. Astonished, because what were the odds, she read that the owner, who had no children of his own, was putting the place on the market after sixty years. Frankie pleaded with Gil: she could think of no better place to raise a child than the place she had grown up, close to the sea, close to Ariel, and if she were honest, close to Mack. Never much of a father, he might do better as a grandfather. There were some who did. The house seemed like some sort of sweet omen in service of that hope. Gil had never been south of Boston, and in Boston only once, but he trusted Frankie's stories and her photos. They were the first to make an offer, one Frankie knew was ridiculously low. But the old artist remembered Frankie and her mother, who had taken painting classes from him years before. He wanted Frankie to have the place. He knew she would cherish it. He was even willing to take a modest price for most of the furniture.

"We didn't want to tell anyone until we were sure about everything. We wanted to wait for the amnio results and make sure the baby was okay, and yeah, I know I'm too young to worry much about that stuff, but I also know too much about what can go wrong, so I insisted. And then, we were going to come and make this big announcement about the pregnancy and the wedding and the house, and it was all going to be great. So yes, at least for tonight, this is my very own vintage green couch. Which I must admit is very uncomfortable." She looked up at an old red-and-white tin sign advertising *Carnation Evaporated Milk, Tall Cans 10 cents. The Modern Milkman.*

"And now I guess we'll just sell the place."

"Frankie, don't decide that right now. Remember Mom used to say, one world at a time? So I mean...you...marriage? A house? A baby?"

"I know," she said, ruefully using the heels of her hands to press sudden tears from her eyes. "It was the impossible thing. And then it was all possible. You'd understand if you met Gil."

"It's not like I won't meet him."

"But this was all supposed to be so... After Mom, after everything ... "

"You wanted the baby and Mack and this house to all be here and make it all better," he said. "Like one of your pictures."

"Don't make fun of me, Penn. I thought it was at least possible."

"I'm not making fun of you. But Mack was trying to make it all better too."

"That's different from here to the moon, Penn."

"I know it is. But it's still true." He added, "If you want it to be different between him and you, you have to start someplace."

"Do you want to see the rest of the house?" Frankie tried to distract him from his sermon. She pointed out how its toy-shop appearance belied how sturdy and serviceable it really was, the solid floors and plain pale paint, with a huge bedroom on the first floor and two nice-sized ones upstairs, pristine views of the ocean, along with something no fifties house ever had: central air. Glass sliding doors opened to a small stilted open porch at the back, facing the beach. Two old Adirondack chairs, their oiled wood deeply scarred, were tucked next to the porch railings. They sat down together.

"It's great, Frankie," Penn said. "I've got to get my own place." Penn had a lower-level apartment in the big house, with a separate entrance. Especially since he worked and traveled with Mack, it had been an easy solution, the compensations including the presence of a full fridge and the absence of a utility bill, as well as the chance for Penn to spend time with his mother as he worked toward his PhD. Now, with Beatrice gone and Ariel in residence, Frankie could tell that unease outweighed the ease. "The sooner, the better."

"You never told me anything!" Frankie said then, unable to quell her outburst. "How could you? You lied to me."

"We barely talked the whole year, remember? What, four or five times? I didn't lie to you. I just didn't tell you."

"That's the same thing, and you know it. Did he pay you off?"

Penn flinched. "Who do you think I am?"

"A person with no integrity? A lapdog? The son of Mack Attleboro, famous marine conservationist and pervert?"

"That's harsh. I work for him. You don't. I have to live with him."

"Maybe you can tell me how you stomach it? You dated Ariel in high school."

"Hardly. For a few weeks," he said.

"Did you and Ariel...whatever? Back then?"

"Frankie, no way! I'd probably have to be in a psychiatrist's office right now, and I'm not sure that I won't anyhow." He added, "Plus, even when we did go out, it was always too much like she was another sister."

Which was true enough. When they were in third and fourth grade, Frankie and Penn and Ariel slept like siblings in a tent, on piles of quilts on the bedroom floor. Frankie rested her hot face in the cradle of her cold hands.

She asked Penn, "Do you think they thought she would get pregnant? Do you think she thought he was, like, sterile?"

Penn covered his eyes. "There are some mysteries in the world I never want solved. Imagine me talking dating strategies over with my dear old dad. He was the one who used to give me this stern advice about avoiding what he called *unforeseen consequences*...as if someone who artificially inseminates a manatee is too shy to say, *Hey, son, use a condom*."

"And now, a baby? He's sixty-one."

"Grandpa's eighty-seven, and he's still playing tennis. Mack's got a lot of go left."

"Evidently," Frankie said. She shivered. "I'm going to take a walk. I have to clear my head. I'll just be a few minutes. Do you want to come with me?"

"I'll wait right here."

"You sure you won't be called to do something for the happy couple?"

Penn said, "As a matter of fact, that'll be you, sis, so shut your fat mouth."

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Frankie shrugged and stepped down the four steps toward the beach. The day was coming in essentially Cape Cod, hot but misty and moody, the kind of weather Beatrice had loved. On the beach, the fog still reigned, forming itself into cloud pillars and cloud skeins. When Frankie was small, seven or eight, Beatrice had told her that when the sea fret rolled up from the shore, it brought with it the ghosts of the drowned.

"Are they looking to take people with them?" Frankie asked nervously.

"Oh no," Beatrice said. "They're just looking for company. They want to smell pancakes again."

Oh, Mom, Frankie thought. *Come and haunt me.*

Tomorrow would have been her mother's fifty-second birthday.

Did anyone else even remember?

Life must go on, of course, Frankie thought. But she never expected that, just a year after her death, their mother would be quite so firmly consigned to memory, her territory reimagined, her life, like their childhood, bundled up like the cardboard boxes she'd glimpsed in the hall, with *Give to F* scrawled in marker.

Even Frankie could no longer summon up Beatrice's face. When she tried, she could sustain the vision only for a second, wavering like a single flickering frame from an old movie. A quick smile. A pleased widening of gray-green eyes. Then gone, evanescent, just like the fog on the shore.

Frankie walked into the surf, her ankles instantly numbed by the cold, as always. How could anything so seductive at a distance be so punishing up close? The ocean beckoned land creatures and then showed them who was boss. Beatrice used to turn off their computers and chase them outdoors by telling them that the sea was never the same for an hour and what if something changed and they weren't there to see it?

Something had changed. And Frankie had not been there to see it.

Yet Ariel had been there, or right after. Of course she had.

Sailor Madeira, Beatrice's best friend, who'd been in love with her since they were in high school, was the one who'd found her. He'd dropped by for coffee, as he often did. With Mack so frequently on trips or lecture tours, she was too often alone and delighted by his company. She looked like a queen on her chaise, reclining in her slumbers, rain from the open glass doors spangling her afghan, her cheeks, her arms, her thick silver hair. She was dead, of course, not just sleeping. He couldn't reach Mack or Penn or Frankie, but Ariel had been in the office of the Saltwater Foundation.

That night, sobbing on the phone, Ariel begged Frankie's forgiveness: she had known Beatrice was ill, but Beatrice had played it down...a sore throat, a chill... She promised to see the doctor the next day. Instead, she died of strep, a treatable thing healthy people usually didn't die from anymore, and Frankie was furious, not at Ariel, or only a little at Ariel, but more at Beatrice, who would always put herself last. Beatrice dreamed big, never for herself, but for all of them. Without his tall, elegant, composed wife, and without her father's considerable money, Mack might been just another ill-dressed wildlife biologist with an unruly beard, looming awkwardly in the shot of the faculty picnic instead of posing on the cover of magazines, the American Cousteau. Beatrice sent them all off to ride those dreams, so that at the moment when her coffee mug had slipped from her fingers, Frankie had probably been underwater in the Red Sea, pointing her camera at the just-right tunnel of peachy dawn light, into the deeps where humpback whales three times the size of elephants bobbed like untethered parade balloons.

Who else would ever understand why she felt so privileged, almost anointed, by that sight that she began to cry, fogging her mask?

Only one mother.

The whole world over... She remembered the line from childhood poetry books. When they were

children, Beatrice read poetry to them and forced them to recite from memory. They moaned, and she told them to put a sock in it. Whether you were a bishop or a bus driver, being able to recite poetry a little was like being able to play the piano a little: it made you sound smart. She'd insisted that they would be grateful when they were grown-ups, and they were. (Mack, on the other hand, being informed that Frankie wanted to minor in American literature, asked, *Why not basket-weaving?* And when she took an extra year to study photography, he told her that she could pay for that one herself. Beatrice ended up paying for it, not quite keeping the truth from Mack, not quite revealing it either. "He'll get over it," she said. "He'll be proud of your pictures.")

But would he, ever? And why did Frankie even care?

When Beatrice died, one of the things that Frankie thought was *Who will be proud of me now? Who will I have to impress?* There were other things she thought, not so selfish, about Beatrice's role in the community, her mother's small but serious reputation as a painter. But she couldn't recall them.

Slowly, her cheeks stiff with tears, Frankie made her way back to her brother, who was stretched asleep on the deck with the perfect relaxation of a newborn puppy—or a grown man. Frankie was no slouch at falling fast asleep wherever she had enough space, in a van or a tent or a hammock, but Penn slept like he owned the earth. Kneeling down silently, she whispered, "Don't move, Penny. That spider is huge!"

"Okay," he spluttered. "Okay, is it gone?"

"I think it's a brown recluse..."

He looked up at her. "You are a complete ass, you know that?"

"I thought you missed me."

"I did miss you, until you got here."

Frankie said, "I told you, I just feel so mean. Here I thought Mack was still suffering. He looks like a million bucks. What happened to the Mack who didn't speak at all after Mom died? Who didn't sleep? Who didn't work?"

"All true," Penn said. "But you'd know that if you ever bothered to come and see him, Frankie."

That was true as well. Frankie fought and failed to silence her inner harpy, which flapped out shrieking to make a rationalization. "Who knows? He might even have given a damn." She thought then, but did not say, this brand-new Attleboro baby might rival Penn's relatively exalted place in Mack's life, while Frankie would lose even the small wedge of his regard she'd always competed for.

As if he had heard her thoughts, Penn said, "I know you think Dad was all about me. But not as much as you think." They both knew that Mack had never really *needed* his children, per se. At best, they were a pleasant distraction, at worst a bothersome distraction. Needing Beatrice was another story. "When it came to Mom, we thought that was all on one side. Her side. But it wasn't."

Frankie scoffed, "She was Mack's minion. Remember when we were kids and he used to come home after one of his trips? He would be gone six or eight or ten weeks, and he would just walk in, no warning at all, and expect Mom to have dinner ready?" She added, "I told you, I can't help how I feel. I feel mean."

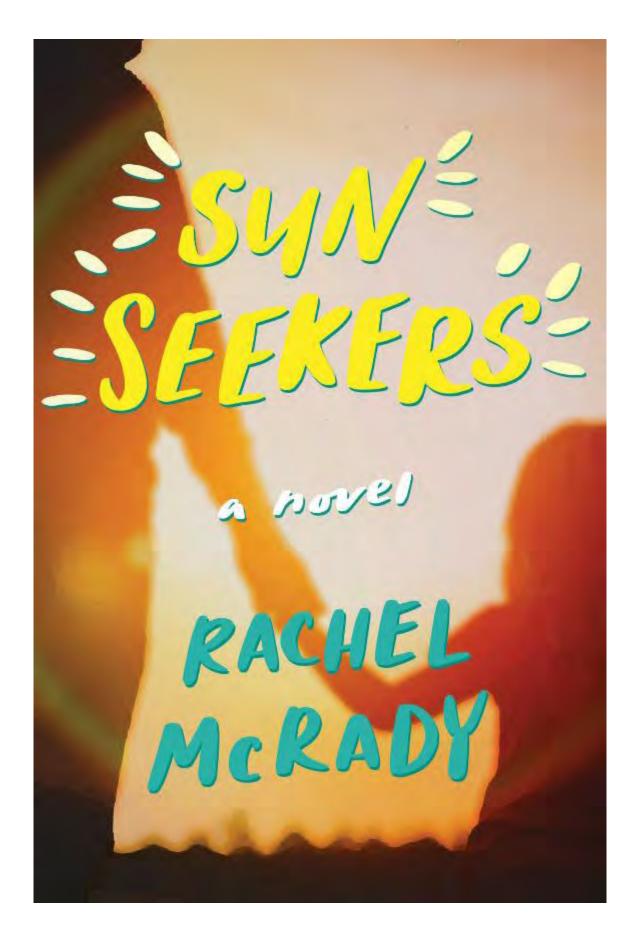
"She loved him," Penn said. "That was just their way of doing that. It wouldn't be yours, but it worked for them."

Mack would throw down his gear, sticky from the mud and the water, and bawl out a greeting, and Beatrice was supposed to come running to exalt him, patient Penelope to his Ulysses. She would quickly banish the children to Grandma Becky's for a week so that Mack could rest and regale her with his exploits, without having to put up with their antics and their chatter.

Only now did Frankie ask Penn what the first days after Beatrice's death were like for him.

"I didn't get any chance to grieve for Mom, if that's what you mean," Penn said. When news of Beatrice's death arrived, Mack and Penn made their way back from Costa Rica, where they were heading up a BBC documentary on the vanishing jaguar. On the plane, in the cars, Mack didn't eat. At home, he sat on Beatrice's chaise, facing the sea, not speaking. Penn had to remind him to shower and dress for the simple service that Ariel had arranged at the Quaker meeting house after Frankie got back from Egypt. In a gentle rain, Frankie and Mack and Penn had stood side by side on the stone bridge at Grace Point, so-called after Beatrice's maiden name, opening their hands to send a silty cloud of her ashes down to the surface of the sea. And then, Mack had gone home and had a breakdown, although no one ever said the actual word. He collapsed, like a wooden bridge in an earthquake. And Frankie simply left. A better daughter would have recognized how much Mack needed her. At the time, she couldn't wait to be away from him. She was too wounded to recognize anything except how much she wished that Mack had died instead of Beatrice. Let Penn, Mack's chosen one, look after him. A year later, Frankie could admit that on some level, she blamed Mack for Beatrice's death. She blamed his constant, self-centered absences that left her mother lonely.

But was she any better?



SUN SEEKERS BY RACHEL MCRADY

From Emmy Award-winning writer Rachel McRady comes a vital, illuminating debut novel of a broken family uniting in the face of terrifying crisis, for fans of *This is Us* and *Parenthood*.

Six-year-old Gracie Lynn is perpetually curious and big-hearted. Convinced she knows how to save her beloved grandfather John from the "worm" that is eating his brain—a metaphor her mother once used to explain John's dementia and sundown syndrome—she helps him break out of his nursing home, and the two disappear together on a quest to chase the sun. But what's an adventure for Gracie is a nightmare scenario for her estranged parents, LeeAnn and Dan. There's no way to predict where John might have taken their young daughter, or if he's capable of keeping her safe.

Jaded beyond her years, and struggling with her own mental health, LeeAnn has no delusions about what might happen if they don't locate Gracie soon. Dan is no less frantic, but communicating with LeeAnn isn't easy, even under the circumstances—too much stands between the hopeful young couple they once were and the people they've become.

An emotionally resonant novel for fans of Fredrik Backman and Mark Haddon, Sun Seekers artfully explores the truths of parenthood, the ways in which we sometimes hurt those we love most, and the universal experience of deep loss—even when the person is still here.

"Rachel McRady's poignant debut novel chronicles a fractured family while spotlighting the fragility of love." -Susan Shapiro, *New York Times* bestselling author

"In her impactful debut, McRady explores the intricate dynamics of a fractured family. Through multiple perspectives, she paints a poignant portrait of the complexities of relationships that resonate with us all." -**Jo Piazza, author of** *We Are Not Like Them* and *You Were Always Mine*

"Sun Seekers is my favorite type of novel: beautifully written prose delivering deep truths about family and the nature of grief. I absolutely loved it. *Sun Seekers* is an incredible debut by a writer to watch." -Brenda Janowitz, author of *The Grace Kelly Dress*

Hardcover: 9781639104970 / \$29.99 eBook: 9781639104987 / \$17.99 Pub Date: January 9, 2024 Publisher: Alcove Press (Crooked Lane Books) <u>https://alcovepress.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/729838/sun-seekers-by-rachel-mcrady/</u>

RACHEL MCRADY is an Emmy-winning writer and editor for *Entertainment Tonight*. She's been writing novels since before she could write herself, dictating stories to her very patient mother on an old computer in the '90s. *Sun Seekers* is her debut novel. Rachel lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her husband, Caleb, and daughters, Iona and Isla. <u>https://www.rachelmcrady.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

"Mama, what's a 'grit'?" I ask, watching the goopy globs falling off the wooden spoon. Mama is standing in the kitchen, stirring the pot with her hand on her hip. She's pinching her side like she does sometimes when she's cranky or nervous.

"For the sake of this conversation, it's breakfast, baby girl," she says with a small laugh, adding, "I can't believe I've never made you grits before."

The grit smells okay, but it looks so gross that I don't know what to believe. But Mama knows what I like, so maybe the grit won't be so bad.

"It looks like something the worm would eat," I say, and Mama goes quiet. Her back is to me, but she gets all stiff and still. I can tell she doesn't like that I brought up the worm.

Grandfather's had the worm in his brain for two years now. That's what Mama says. Most days the worm is sleeping, but it's always there. On the sleeping days, Grandfather tells me he loves me. He brushes my hair back and tells me I'm the most marvelous girl in the whole wide world.

But sometimes, when it's late and the sun goes down, the worm wakes up. When the worm is awake, Grandfather doesn't know my name. Sometimes it's even worse than him not knowing my name—he stares past me like his eyes are covered with a blindfold.

I covered my eyes with a blindfold once at Becky's birthday party. There was a giant horse, and her belly was filled with candy. I know the horse was a girl because only girls have things come out of their bellies. I wore the blindfold because Becky's mama told me that was the way to play the game. But I didn't like wearing it because I always like to see what's around me. How horrible it must be for Grandfather when he can't see.

Last week, after "the incident," Mama told me that the worm is invisible. She thinks the worm will always be there and there's no getting around it, but I know better.

"Mama, what does the worm eat?" I ask her, even though I know she doesn't want to talk about it. Sometimes I can't help it. There are too many questions in my head.

Mama keeps stirring the pot and pinching her side. She still won't turn around to face me. "Umm, brains, I guess?" she replies.

"The worm is eating Grandfather's *brains*?" I shout a little. I picture the invisible worm—or at least its squiggly outline that's shaped like Grandfather's twisty mustache—chomping through his brain. Maybe that's what made him look that gray color the other day. That day he had to sit in the wheelchair after his accident and Mama cried.

"Oh, sweet pea, I'm not sure. I guess the worm lives in Grandfather's brain, but we don't know what it eats," Mama says, turning around and giving me one of her special smiles that she only gives me.

My mama reminds me of the sun. Some days she is so happy and bright. On those days she is the tickle monster, tickling my tummy until I fall on the ground laughing so hard I can barely breathe. On those days, she plays music on her phone and spins me around the kitchen and even lets me wear some of her sparkly eye shadow. But other days it's like there's a storm cloud in front of her, blocking her light. On those days she doesn't wear any eye shadow. Sometimes I just see her sitting there, staring at the wall, and I have to call her name a few times to get her to hear me. One time I asked Mama if she had a worm in her brain too, and she looked surprised and said, "No, baby, I'm just tired. That's all."

But lately it seems like she's always tired. Some days she's too tired to take a shower and she just wears her pajamas all day, and I have to remind her to make me dinner. Some days I make my own dinner. I am very good at making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I can't cut the crusts off as good as

Mama does, but I know what each side of the bread needs—two scoops of grape jelly on one and one scoop of extra crunchy peanut butter on the other.

On the sunshine days, Mama looks like a princess. When I get "old enough" I hope I look like her on her sunniest days. But Mama says looks aren't important.

"Looks can only get you so far," Mama once told me. "And in my case, they sent me in the wrong direction." I know she's talking about Daddy when she says this, but I don't ask her any more questions, even though I have about one million. Mama says lying is bad and that's why Daddy went away, but Grandfather says some lies are necessary. Necessary lies are for when you don't want to upset people. I never want to upset people, so I'll probably have to tell many necessary lies.

Daddy used to live with us in a different house, but then we moved here to Grandfather's house when I was four years old, and now I don't see Daddy very much. We never went on adventures together or even talked about adventures the way Grandfather and I do. It seems like daddies are the kind of people you are supposed to miss, but I don't know if I actually miss him or if I miss being able to talk about him. Some days I forget I even have a daddy. Rowan Frank, from school, says her daddy is a soldier and is saving our country like a superhero. He lives far away and Rowan told me that she gets to call him sometimes on her mom's phone and that she can see him talking to her on the screen. One time I asked Mama if we could call Daddy like that and see his face, but she just got real quiet and then she said her phone doesn't work like that.

Mama scoops some of the grit into the bowl, and I stare at it carefully. I don't trust it yet.

"It doesn't have a very nice-sounding name, 'grit," I say.

"Well, why don't you just try it before you write it off?" Mama says, placing a bowl in front of me. She puts some cheese and butter on top and they melt into the grit. It sure does smell good.

Slowly, I dip my Mickey Mouse spoon into the bowl, picking up a few of the grit pieces. I'm a little scared, but I see Mama watching me, so I put the spoon in my mouth because I know it will make her happy. I might have to necessary lie about liking the grit. It slides in smoothly, and I roll the pieces around on my tongue. The grit is salty and thick, not like the watery mash I was expecting. I pause to swallow.

"Verdict?" Mama asks.

But I'm not ready to give it my approval just yet. I scoop my spoon back into the bowl, getting more grit pieces this time. Now I'm less afraid to put the grit in my mouth, and I open wide. I give Mama a big thumbs up.

"Can I have more grit for my birthday?" I ask her.

She smiles. I know she's happy I like the grit.

"It's 'grits,' baby girl, and of course you can," she says, bending down to give me a kiss on the top of my head.

I turn seven next week. My birthday is on July 5, the day after America was born. I hope by then I will be old enough. Mama is always saying I'm not old enough for things. Mama says she'll take me to Disney World when I'm old enough, and I can't wait because I have never been on an adventure before and that will surely be an adventure. Every year I ask if we can go, and every year Mama says, "When you're old enough." It seems like I'm always getting older, but it's never old enough.

But that's okay. I'm about to go on an adventure of my own. Grandfather says it only takes one day to have an adventure, though I think this one will take longer.

The washer beeps, and Mama flings the wet clothes over her shoulder and heads outside to hang them on the clothesline. I can tell it's already sticky hot outside because Mama lets out a "Jesus!" as she hops down the steps off the back porch.

It's probably good that it's so hot outside. That means my dress with the daisies around the collar will dry in time for tomorrow. I need to look my best for my adventure, and the dryer broke a few months ago. But Mama says there's no use in spending all that money to replace it when you live in Reading.

"Most days it's hot enough to fry an egg on that sidewalk, Gracie Lynn," she says, wiping the sweat bubbles off her forehead. "No idea why I even bother putting on foundation in this town."

Last week was my last day of first grade. Next year I will go to second grade, which might also be an adventure. My report card is coming soon and Mama says if I get an "exceeds expectations" I can get a bonus ice cream—which means two ice creams this week instead of one. We go to Baskin-Robbins for my one ice cream a week because they have pink chairs and chocolate peanut butter ice cream. All ice cream stores should have pink chairs and chocolate peanut butter ice cream, but they don't. When we order, Mama always asks the person with the giant spoon to get me extra chunks of peanut butter because she knows that's my favorite part. Mama knows all of my favorite things.

I think I will get an exceeds expectations on my report card because Mrs. Hoyt says I'm very "advanced" for the first grade. I am already reading chapter books and some of them don't even have pictures—which I like, because that way I get to use my imagination. Mrs. Hoyt says I have an "overactive imagination," which sounds like a bad thing, but I know it's not. My favorite chapter books are called the *Magic Tree House* books. They are about Jack and Annie, who are brother and sister and get to go on adventures through time and visit all these different places. I wish I could go with them.

When Grandfather used to live with us, we would do fun projects and he would read me the comics. Now he doesn't want to do much of anything. He sits in his recliner chair and we talk, and sometimes on good days I ask him to tell me stories of his adventures. Those are my favorite days.

Even though chocolate peanut butter ice cream is my favorite treat, I told Mama that I wanted to go visit Grandfather as my treat for when I get an exceeds expectations instead. We used to visit him every other day when I didn't have swim practice, but we haven't been to see him in the home since the incident last week. That's what Mama calls what happened—"the incident." I tried talking to her about it the other day, but it just made her cry, so now I will call it the incident too because I don't want to make Mama cry. Mama makes me to go to Becky's house to play while she goes to the home and "handles things." I don't really know what that means, but I guess I'm not old enough yet.

"The home" is what Mama calls where Grandfather lives now. He used to live with us here in his real home, but then one day the police found him in the street in his underwear and he got in trouble because you're supposed to wear your clothes in the street. So he had to go to the home. A lot of people live in the home. It smells kind of gross in there, like the cleaning spray Mama uses when I wet the bed, which I only do sometimes when I have my pee dream. I know that can't be what it is because grown-ups don't wet the bed, but whatever it is, it doesn't smell so good.

Grandfather calls it "old people stank."

Aunt Sarah is mad that Mama and I live in Grandfather's real home now, but I don't know why because we take good care of it. I even planted flowers in the back garden and none of them have died even though it's the middle of summer. That's because I have what Mama calls a "green thumb." That is when you're good at taking care of flowers even though it is very hot. It doesn't mean my thumbs are actually green.

Mama says Aunt Sarah is family, but I'm not really sure she is because I thought families are always supposed to be together and we're never together. But I also know that Daddy is family too, and we're never together either. So I guess I don't really know what families are.

I pull my espionage notebook across the counter. It's where I keep all of my clues. "Espionage" is what spies do. They learn secrets just like I learn lessons at school. The notebook is getting pretty full. I write everything down in there. I write down what I have for breakfast—today I write down the grit—and I write down when Mama pinches her side. To a spy, everything is a clue. And since I'm not old enough to know things yet, I'll try to figure them out by putting the clues together.

Mama let me watch the *Harriet the Spy* movie a few weeks ago on Netflix, and ever since then I have been keeping my notebook. I also tried to eat a tomato and mayonnaise sandwich, just like Harriet, but it was really gross, so I'll just write in my notebook instead of eating those. I'm going to

solve all of the great mysteries.

Gracie Lynn and the Mystery of Being "Old Enough." Gracie Lynn and the Mystery of Grandfather's Worm. Gracie Lynn and the Mystery of the Missing Daddy. Gracie Lynn and the Mystery of the Hidden Brown Bear.

That last one was made up. I know where Brown Bear is. I gave him to Grandfather in the home so that he might help the worm to sleep. Brown Bear always helps me sleep. But I don't think that Brown Bear works for the worm, because a few weeks ago Mama got a call in the middle of the night.

Mama wouldn't tell me what happened, but I have written down the clues in my notebook so that I might be able to solve this case sometime soon.

So far I know that Mama got a phone call when it was very dark outside. I know because it woke me up. She said, "What?" and "Are you serious?" Then she said, "How much blood?" I couldn't hear the rest, but Mama didn't come into my room or leave the house, so I don't think it was that serious. The next morning I asked her, "Who called you on the phone last night?"

"It was someone from the home, Gracie," she told me. She looked very tired and didn't have any makeup on, so I wrote down that it was a storm cloud day.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Just some grown-up stuff, sweet pea," Mama said, using her fake happy voice. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"Ummm hmmm," I said very wisely, not letting her know that that made me cranky. Then I pulled out my notebook to take notes on what she said and gave Mama a very suspicious look, just like Harriet the Spy would.

"What'cha writing in there?" Mama asked.

"Just some kid stuff," I copied her. "Nothing for you to worry about."

Mama grinned and kissed the top of my head. "You got me there, baby girl."

The phone call happened exactly six days before the incident, but I don't know if they're connected. Mama said that the incident happened because Grandfather is sick with the worm, but I don't know if the worm has anything to do with the blood. Mostly I think the worm just makes Grandfather confused.

I still haven't figured out that mystery and a few other ones, but now I'm using my notebook for a different reason. I'm taking notes about my plan, so that when Grandfather and I go on our adventure, Mama will understand. I'm sad that Mama can't go with us, but I know she wouldn't want to. She never wants to go on adventures, and she probably wouldn't be too happy about this one because it's about the worm.

Her flip-flops flap against the wooden floors as she comes back in, taking a long drink of orange juice straight out of the carton. I'm not allowed to drink out of the carton like Mama, but I guess I can when I'm old enough.

"Alright, girlie!" she cries, flinging her arms in the air. "Time to go show that pool who's boss."

I slap my espionage notebook shut because I don't want Mama seeing any of my notes, shove one last spoonful of the grit in my mouth, and grab my yellow backpack. My backpack is special. It's covered in patches of my favorite cartoon characters that Mama sewed on even though it was hard and it made blood teardrops on her fingers. She also pinned my swimming ribbon onto it from last week's meet. Maybe if I do well today, I'll get another ribbon. I'm not just an advanced reader—I'm also an advanced swimmer, and Coach Grant said I can be on the Purple Team this summer. Not only is purple my favorite color, but it's also the team for the best swimmers besides the high school kids, so I really want to be on the Purple Team. But I'm not sure if I'll be here this summer. I may not even be here for my birthday. I have to save Grandfather, and I have to do it tomorrow.

"Mama?" I say.

"Yes, sweet pea?" she replies, grabbing her keys and tucking a piece of hair out of her face. "Thank you for my grit."

Maribelle's Shadow

SISTERS SHOULDN'T BE PLAYING THESE GAMES

A NOVEL

SUSANNAH MARREN

MARIBELLE'S SHADOW BY SUSANNAH MARREN

The only thing that spreads faster than gossip in Palm Beach is news of a mysterious death.

As the editorial director of *Palm Beach Confidential*, Maribelle Walker knows what lurks beneath the glittering facade of the moneyed elite on Florida's most glamorous coast. Or does she?

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Paperback: 978-0825310294 / \$16.95 eBook: ASIN BoBZWMJ476 / \$9.99 Pub Date: June 27, 2023 Publisher: Beaufort Books, <u>https://www.beaufortbooks.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.amazon.com/Maribelles-Shadow-Susannah-Marren/dp/0825310296</u>

SUSAN SHAPIRO BARASH is an American author of thirteen nonfiction women's issue books including "Tripping the Prom Queen," "Toxic Friends," and "You're Grounded Forever, but First Let's Go Shopping". She writes fiction under her pen name Susannah Marren. Her novels are "Between the Tides," "A Palm Beach Wife," and "A Palm Beach Scandal." Susan's books focus on the gender divide, how women are positioned in our society and their innermost feelings about themselves as daughters, mothers, sisters, friends, wives, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, rivals, colleagues, and lovers. https://susannahmarren.com

CHAPTER ONE

Maribelle

When is the right time to tell your husband you know he's a cheater? Over breakfast? When he comes home from a business dinner, or he pretends to work overtime? These past few months, I wake in the middle of each night, chilled or feverishly hot, wondering this.

In the predawn, Maribelle walked toward the floor-to-ceiling windows of their living room and looked across the Intracoastal. The darkness mixed with lights to the west while to the east a damp wind blew off the ocean. The only sound was the palm trees stirring along the A1A. The garbage trucks hadn't yet rolled out. No sirens were racing to save a dying soul. Utter calm as high season began in Palm Beach.

By daylight she was in the kitchen, starting breakfast when Samuel ambled in, whistling. The espresso maker hissed; light entered through the slatted shades. Why wouldn't Samuel be cheerful? Maribelle thought. He had come in past midnight, undoubtedly from one of his encounters. Now he watched his dutiful wife beating four egg whites. She whisked too vigorously as she rehearsed her opening line, her segue, what every wife might want to know: *Do you love her? Are you leaving me?* As Maribelle was cutting a slab of clarified butter for the omelet pan, she asked herself, *do I dare risk a confrontation today?*

"Are you heading to yoga?" Samuel was smiling.

"I plan to." She was not smiling back.

"Your favorite way to greet the morning."

Samuel said it like they were still "kindred." That was how he phrased it. They had always wanted each other; the consummate treasure was being together. No wonder Maribelle looked away when Samuel had his trysts. They, as a couple, subsisted on the far side of that. He had always come back to her. They had shed his misdemeanor and gone on together. Until this.

How can you be someone who knows what I care about? A betrayer doesn't get to pose as my best friend, Maribelle wanted to shout. She flipped the omelet over, the pan sizzled. She had burned the bottom.

His hands were in the pockets of his khakis while he jiggled a set of keys. "I might take the boat out."

"Now?" To be with her, why else?

She wanted to ask why this woman mattered enough that their plans were in limbo. Samuel's promise—that they would leave town, start anew—felt squashed. Instead, she lifted her phone from their white quartz counter and opened the weather app. "There's a wind kicking up, it's at sixteen miles an hour."

"I'll be fine, Maribelle." He looked away.

"Except it's going to get stronger, by nine it could be at . . ."

"Not in the next hour or two. I need a quick spin to recover from our marathon fundraising. We hit our goal, but Jesus, it wasn't easy. What a drawn-out night. I want to get out of my head," Samuel said.

"The Literacy Foundation is grateful," she said. "We're doing a piece on fundraisers, and Nadia is thrilled with her interview there."

Maribelle was proud of her husband's dedication to his favorite charities. He meant it. He was a front-runner for causes—a Palm Beach philanthropist who basked in gratitude and praise. She was as enraptured as everyone else; the parts she admired about her husband, she admired no matter what.

"Are they?" He ran his hands through his hair, it sprang back. "That's great. Especially after dealing with fussy Mrs. A and her sidekick, prissy Priscilla. What a committee—old biddies, a group of spoiled young mothers. The men who write the checks are caged animals."

"Samuel, please, don't belittle people. They're your fans, some are true friends. Besides, if you speak ill of them, who knows what you say about me and my sisters."

He paused, laughed quickly. "Yeah, I suppose, in theory. But, c'mon, Maribelle, did you see the look on Mrs. A's face when she presented me with the plaque?" He stood ramrod straight, wobbled his head like a bobble toy, and rolled his eyes dramatically. *"For your meritorious sir-vuce ..."*

Maribelle didn't laugh. "Don't be mean," she said quietly.

She waited for him to resume whistling. His good moods were preferable. She knew better than anyone else.

Wind gusts rustled the banyan trees in front of the house. Along the bulkhead, waves were churning up.

"I don't know, it seems too whippy for a speedboat. Why not something else? How about lifting weights with Travis?"

Still the protective wife, wasn't she? Maribelle realized she should stop this line of talk—her worry about Samuel's safety.

"Ah, a more prudent outlet," Samuel said. "Travis and I will go at lunch time. The gym helps when we're crazed at our desks."

"Good idea."

She was about to accuse Samuel of using Travis, their brother-in-law, as his front. Working out wasn't an outlet—a panacea for a tense day at in the office—it was that Samuel had to be fit. For her, for his mistress.

"We could put a gym into the building," Samuel said. "There's room on the third floor."

She couldn't stand the idea of Samuel bench-pressing while on the premises of Barrows, her family's company. How lucky he and Travis were to run this chain of convenience stores around the country. Clean, modern spaces, some with eighteen-foot-high ceilings. People stopped in for their chai lattes, Polly-O string cheese, Advil. Customers liked the atmosphere; some settled in at the coffee bar and worked on their laptops for hours.

"I'm sure employees would find it convenient."

Maribelle slid the omelets onto their plates. A dainty flowered pattern that she and her two sisters were given by their mother. One of her corny, intentionally sophisticated, if dated, ideas.

"Do you have a few minutes?" She poured espressos into the matching cups.

Samuel filled two water glasses from the filter. "I do. As long as it's not a ploy to keep me from defying nature on the waterfront."

Politely they sat down at their kitchen island. Super Dog came in from the den and circled around Samuel's feet. Two years ago when Maribelle and Samuel had picked her up from Animal Adoption, they had to move quickly. They had gotten the call that morning, and because it was an unusual event to have a purebred yellow Labrador puppy arrive at the center, they cancelled their workday. Only four months old, Supy had slept on Maribelle's lap in the backseat of the car on their ride home—halfway across the state.

"She's super," Maribelle had said as she stroked her faultlessly crafted head and admired her liquid eyes, "Just super."

"That's what we'll call her. "Super Dog—Supy for short."

Samuel's eyes had met hers in the rearview mirror. They were in tandem.

Today their shared dog/child seemed more Samuel's yellow Labrador than Maribelle's. She tried to remember when this happened. Maybe in the past year, when Samuel began walking Supy late at night when she was already asleep.

Supy looked up sweetly. Samuel leaned over to give her a piece of his gluten-free bagel. Beneath

his deep blue cashmere sweater, his arms were strong, brawny.

"Aw, Supy, Super Dog, I'm happy to see you."

In the earliest light, Samuel was as seductive as ever—his voice, how he raised his left hand, and the shine of his wedding ring. A fine gold band with an extra rim of gold below and above. When they had become engaged and were choosing their rings, Maribelle liked the idea of how it encased their love. She wasn't sure why, but she knew she would need it in the years to come. She was bottling her husband up, preserving and securing him for the future.

"I spoke with that broker in LA," she said.

Samuel became wax-like. Without moving, he waited.

Maribelle kept going because he seemed to be listening. "Our house, this house, has to be worth . . . "

"Maribelle, if we leave for a year, we shouldn't sell this. It's home, our base, no matter what." Samuel pointed to the hedges and bougainvillea beyond the terrace. On the ocean side the

bleached out blue-grey waves were rolling in. Supy was wagging her tail.

"Look at what we have. Your work, mine. What about the magazine? What you're doing with it... adding local poets, book reviews, opinion pieces... it's your baby. You need to be present. Isn't that best?"

"Except we have a plan, Samuel. Didn't you and I agree to try LA? I'd explore producing, scriptwriting... maybe I could find a more serious job as a journalist... a managing editor. You'd delve into projects, maybe that food chain start-up you mentioned."

"I care about my work at Barrows, you know that," he sighed. "We're opening—Barrows is opening—three new southwest locations next month." He was quite still, as if bracing himself.

Barrows, Maribelle's family's company. They both knew if her father, Reed Barrows, had not died eight years ago while playing bridge at the Harbor Club, Samuel wouldn't be the CFO of Barrows. Nor would he have his 'toys' such as the *Vertigo*, his Riva Rivamare speedboat. "Isn't that the most expensive of them all?" Lucinda, Maribelle's mother, had asked when Samuel bought it.

Maribelle breathed in. "How you feel about Barrows, how you love it there, well, I'm not sure I'm quite the same. I *like* the magazine, I'm pleased to have the work, to be an editorial director is meaningful. It functions on some level—as a steppingstone."

Samuel came back to the countertop in a sensitive pose. "A steppingstone? Maribelle, you're the architect for reshaping, re-envisioning, making the magazine into something substantial."

Somehow his insistence combined with his body language stopped her from detailing how she really felt. Beyond that, she wanted to leave to further her career and escape her mother—the constant calendar, the vying for social standing. If they left Palm Beach, it would save her marriage. What Maribelle couldn't admit to Samuel was that she had craved exiting ever since she learned about his affair.

Samuel was eating fast, hardly cutting the omelet. Weren't they always rushing toward what's next and better, wasn't that what their lifestyle has done to them? The distance they had come since they danced together Samuel's senior year at Pinestream. He was the most dashing boy in the gymnasium. The wood planked floors were polished for Homecoming, the room had smelled of sweat from pep rallies and basketball games. Twenty-one years ago, Samuel had twirled Maribelle around the night long, dipping toward her to hear over the din. Like they were dancing in a grand ballroom not in a place with dense pine forests and a parking lot filled with pickup trucks.

There were fishing fleets along the Gulf Coast where they had grown up. Samuel's father was a shrimper, and he had two Labrador retrievers. It was no wonder their life today on the Intracoastal entranced Samuel or that they sought the dog they did. When it came to a boat, Maribelle wasn't blaming Samuel for his Riva Rivamare. He had bought it last year after eyeing it for ages. He treated it carefully.

Supy came close to Samuel, nuzzled her face into his palm. Samuel stroked her back lovingly. If Maribelle confronted Samuel, and he decided to walk out, would he take the dog, arguing she was more his than theirs? Then Supy would become the prize of Samuel *and* this woman who imagined herself as the next wife. Maribelle's apprehension was rising, today was the day to speak about it.

Outside the wind rustled again.

"Samuel, it has to be soon. We're not bound to this place. We have no children to keep us tied to anyone or anywhere. You and I could have a splendid run somewhere else. Please don't take our chances away." Maribelle's words sounded high, tight. That this notion was within their reach was heady stuff.

Samuel tipped his espresso cup toward his mouth and finished it off in a one sip. Suddenly he was in his most persuasive mode. His eyes blazed. His shoulders were like barricades, strong. While in private he might have been cynical about people in Palm Beach, in public he offered himself as a known listener, a true friend. Few missed these traits. Maribelle was about to get the polished version of her husband.

"I owe your family so much," Samuel said. "You and I have spoken about this plenty of times. We shouldn't be going anywhere. Not right now. It isn't logical."

"You and I were planning to go until she came along. You and your fantasy girl," Maribelle said softly.

At the same moment, Supy started barking excitedly, begging for another bite of bagel. When Samuel shrugged and passed it to her, Maribelle knew he had not heard her.

She thought about repeating herself, shouting it out. Instead she said nothing. Samuel came over and kissed the top of her head. He thrust his chin forward, he was deliberate about leaving now. She needed to gather herself, she was ready to stand at the front door, angling the question. She had rehearsed it for enough hours, it blistered within her.

"Samuel, there's something else ..."

He smiled ruefully and glanced at his Rolex, the one Maribelle had bought five weeks ago for his thirty-ninth birthday. "We'll talk tonight, Maribelle."

"We have the Artists' Foundation at the Four Seasons at six-thirty."

"Afterward, we will. We'll have time then."

In the wedge of daylight that came into the room, his profile was perfected. A profile that belonged to Maribelle, just as his promises did. *He is my husband, and we share this life,* she told herself. Had she the nerve, she would warn him this woman was nothing but a ragged shadow. Except she wasn't certain it was true. Before her, there were three women. Once while Samuel was in the shower, Maribelle read a text from someone named Rebecca. *Countdown to Thursday. XO.* Once a jewelry store in South Beach called their landline about a pair of citrine dangle earrings that he had special ordered. During his last tryst, he called Maribelle "Honey" twice, then seemed appalled at using the wrong endearment. Gradually Samuel returned to her each time. Now another woman was Samuel's focus—Marielle sensed it made her husband happier and more distant at the same time. When they went places in town, he was only filling a chair. His schedule was wavering, he didn't always have a convincing excuse. He had become preoccupied; a few weeks back, he'd forgotten to pick Supy up at the vet.

"I've got to head out." Again, that smile. Supy barked anxiously, Samuel leaned down to swoop her into his arms. "I'll take Supy with me, I'll feed her on the boat, take her to work."

"Are you sure? I can text Trish. I mean, she's willing to come any hour and walk her," Maribelle offered.

Samuel rubbed Supy's head. "Ready?"

Maribelle remembered how she and Samuel used to agree about such things, including dog care. How life used to be when he thought she hung the moon, when he listened to her.

"Sure, Maribelle," he'd say, "One day we'll leave Palm Beach, we'll go wherever you want." Only last Sunday, during brunch at Longreen's, she was tempted to confess to her mother and sisters: *He's slipping through my fingers. There's another woman. Tell me how to keep my husband at my side.* Another kiss, this time near her mouth. His face up close smelled clean, there was none of the stubble that appeared by the afternoon. Maribelle remained very still, waiting for them to wrap their arms around one another, his face close to the hollow in her neck. They would start sloppy romantic kisses. He would carry her to bed like the old days. Wait, they would stop themselves—was there time? Could they ignore the dog, ditch the boat, forfeit yoga? They would forge on. Samuel would place his hands beneath her thighs like he used to. They would go at it frantically, a quickie. You feel so good, he would say to her. You too, she would whisper back, his body against hers, obliterating all else. All that separated them.

"Maribelle?"

Samuel gathered his briefcase, a windbreaker and a dog leash.

After he walked through the back door into the garage, the room felt chilly. She opened the panel that hid their car keys and lifted hers from a hook. For the briefest moment, before her husband marched back inside with Supy, Maribelle only imagined that he had returned, that he was reconsidering her plea and had noticed her despair.

"The Range Rover, it won't turn over. If we leave now, you'd have time to drop me on the way to yoga. I'll get a lift to the office from the Yacht Club." He appeared calm but beneath that, he was hasty. He was texting rapidly.

She tugged at the waistband of her yoga pants that felt tight.

"Well, I'll need my bag . . ." Maribelle moved quickly toward the hallway.

He was leaning against the doorframe to the kitchen, as important to her as ever. Samuel, who made each person believe she or he was the only person who counted. *Samuel is spellbinding, Mom used to say. Isn't he almost too dynamic? Shouldn't husbands be noticed second, not first?*

Two hours later Maribelle was back from Yoga Sunrise and showered, feeling calmer. She turned on the new flat screen in their "massive suite," as her mother liked to say with a slight dash of disdain. While Lucinda was pleased that each of her three daughters had a "lovely home," she revisited who had what to churn up competition. This morning the square footage of the bedroom shared with Samuel seemed lonely—too long and broad for one childless couple and their ardent schedules. *Morning Joe* came into focus in a millisecond. Maribelle peered closely at Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough, co-hosts. This was her favorite. She appreciated their brand of journalism, how they didn't merely report events but delved deeper. She wanted *PB Confidential* to do a piece on Mika. Maribelle imagined lunching with her at Ta-boo, both in sleeveless sheaths, perhaps in raspberry and teal. They would trade thoughts about how life imitates art, what female agency looks like. Both of them would delight in the idea that featuring Mika could add gravitas and make the magazine less fluffy.

As Maribelle selected her own form of stylish—zipping up a purple print Erdem dress, searching for a cropped cardigan—her iPhone binged, then vibrated. When she picked up, Caroline, her middle sister, asked, "Why is it so peaceful at Barrows before my husband and your husband show up?"

"That's a rhetorical question," Maribelle said.

"I'm only calling about next Friday. Mom's been so intense lately. Let's invite friends to buffer things and move the family dinner out of her house. To a restaurant or Justine's. Yeah, maybe Justine's is better since she's a fan of eating clubs."

Either Maribelle had her volume on too loud, or she needed her pods. She held her phone at arm's length and walked into her closet for a pair of blush suede booties.

"What's scheduled now?" Maribelle dropped a hoop earring. It bounced along the hardwood floor, proving she was unable to dress while getting into the machinations of dinner with her entire family. "You know what—you decide, make Mom happy. We'll be better off."

While they spoke, Maribelle glanced at the mirrored armoire. She was prepared for her day. In fact, for thirty-eight, she looked younger thanks to the many facials, a bit of filler, Botox on occasion. Why didn't her husband appreciate the result?

She shook her hair out of a clip. It fell down her back as if it weren't hers, as if it were her little sister Raleigh's lustrous tresses. Raleigh was ten years younger in every way, including the weight of her gold-brown hair and how taut she would be in the outfit Maribelle had on today. The family creed was that Raleigh resembled their mother, who was only eighteen when Maribelle was born in Kesgrave, a town in the Panhandle.

Another life ago their mother, Lucinda, with great effort, reinvented herself into a classic Palm Beach lady, one who mesmerized whomever was in the room.

Maribelle's doorbell chimed.

"Caroline? I've got to go. I think someone's at my door." "Isn't that unlikely?"

"Let me check." Caroline was right. Who would be ringing her bell in the Estate Section of Palm Beach at eight-thirty on a Tuesday morning?

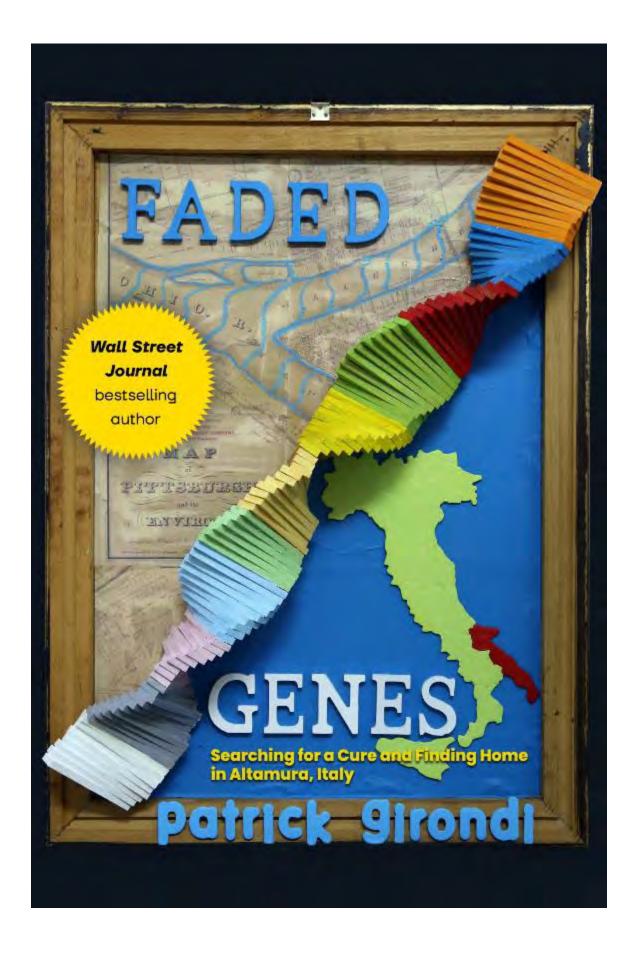
Maribelle swept down the staircase. A storm was kicking up, the wind wrapped around the house from the east. The doorbell rang once more, she looked carefully through the front window.

"Caroline? It's your husband, and he's got our dog. I don't know what's going on—I'll call you back."

When she opened the door, her brother-in-law was ashen. Supy bolted out of his arms. Her coat was drenched, she shook water onto their legs.

"Maribelle, something's happened." Travis half turned away from her. Behind him, a sheriff's car was parked in the portico. Maribelle's skin prickled, her mind fogged.

Supy came close to where she stood and sniffed the tips of her booties. Maribelle kneeled and ran her fingers along the dog's scalp, she whined and stepped back. As Maribelle straightened up, the sheriff walked toward the house, holding down the brim of his Stetson. The sky had dimmed. A pelting rain began.



FADED GENES BY PATRICK GIRONDI SEARCHING FOR A CURE AND FINDING HOME IN ALTAMURA, ITALY #1 WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A 47-year-old Pittsburgh insurance man and his busted nightclub-singing friend go to Italy in the hopes of finding a bone marrow donor.

Danny's life was mundanely ordinary. He sold insurance in the small neighborhood of Fineview overlooking Pittsburgh. His weekdays ended watching all-star wrestling with his mother, and his weekends were spent in bars with PatG, a broken-down crooner, and Kevin, a professional drinker and a sage. Danny is diagnosed with leukemia. There were no transplant matches and little hope. Danny's mother confesses that to avoid deportation, his biological father had taken off for Italy before he was born. Papà has no idea that he has a son.

Danny heads off for southern Italy with PatG. PatG's Italian is worse than his voice. It all makes for a compelling situation in which cultural lines are drawn and broken.

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Hardcover: 9781510778283 / \$24.99 eBook: 9781510778290 / \$16.99 Pub Date: Oct 3, 2023 Publisher: Skyhorse, https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/ Buy Links: https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/9781510778283/faded-genes/ https://www.amazon.com/Faded-Genes-Searching-Finding-Altamura/dp/1510778284 Book Trailer: https://patrickgirondi.com/writing/faded-genes/

PATRICK GIRONDI, originally from the South Side of Chicago, is an Italian American singer/songwriter, author of *Flight of the Rondone*, a #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestseller, and *Diamond in the Rough*. He has released seven albums, and his music is featured in the Award-winning Italian film, *Focaccia Blues*. Girondi and the Orphan Dream Band have been featured in Italian newspapers as well as on television in New York, Chicago, and Italy. He has performed at the Chicago Poor Man Blues

Fest in Washington Park with Coco Taylor and Ronnie Lee Graham; the Harris Theater in Chicago; and the Umbria Jazz Festival. Girondi is founder of San Rocco Therapeutics, a gene therapy company focused on bringing a safe and accessible cure to Sickle Cell Disease and Thalassemia patients. https://patrickgirondi.com/

CHAPTER ONE

Hubble Rubble

A short, somewhat stout forty-seven-year-old man sits at a cluttered desk. Pittsburgh Penguins ticket stubs are stacked in a corner on top of a music CD that reads "PatG." Dozens of pages from insurance policies are sprinkled about in apparent disorder. In the middle of the desk rests a Styrofoam bowl containing a plastic spoon and an empty packet of crackers, its insides dyed red from chili. At the top of the desk is a trophy with a picture of the man resting against it. He is holding a baseball bat with 2022 engraved on it. Hanging on the wall above him is an insurance license bearing his name, Daniel Hubble. He rubs his balding head while analyzing the papers in his hand.

Danny's is the last family-run insurance business on the Hill and one of the few left in Pittsburgh. The office is small, with linoleum floors and brown steel furniture.

Irene, his sixty-one-year-old secretary, enters. "Good morning, Mr. Hubble."

"Morning," he says without looking away from the papers. "Who paid old man Schmidt's policy?" he asks.

"I did," Irene responds.

"I told you not to pay policies with our money unless you tell me first," Danny says.

"I did tell you," Irene responds.

"When did you tell me?"

"Wednesday."

"Wednesday... What was I doing?"

"You were talking to Marsha."

"Marla," Danny says, then hesitates. "Don't talk to me when she's here."

"Yes, Mr. Hubble."

"And tell ole Schmidt to settle up. With his heart condition, Farmers Insurance is just itching to cancel, and if they find out we paid, they'll cancel me."

"Yes, Mr. Hubble."

Irene walks out. Danny puts on his jacket and follows her, passing her desk, which is in a tiny room connected to his office. The floor is the same linoleum as Danny's, and the furniture is made of the same brown steel. Irene's desk faces a large glass window with "Hubble Insurance, since 1969," written in red.

It's a beautiful Pittsburgh day, and Danny walks out and heads down Federal toward Jefferson. He saunters another fifty feet and heads into Rui's Chili House, which occupies a thin slice of a dilapidated building at the bottom of the Hill.

Rui's has been around forever. There are five wooden booths along the wall, a few small tables with red and white checkered tablecloths, and a bar with thirteen stools that predate any of Rui's customers.

Danny grabs the newspaper and one of the chrome stools at the counter. A dark-skinned Nicaraguan, fifty-ish, cleans sugar from the countertop with his hand, and pours it into a large, deep

chili pot resting on the grill. Rui then pours a cup of coffee and places it in front of Danny.

Danny looks at him and raises his eyebrows. "They're going to close you."

"Why?" Rui asks, in a heavy Nicaraguan accent.

"Cause you throw anything in there. Someone said you put lighter fluid in it the other night."

"Rumors. Old Man Flaherty spilled some while refilling his flint striker, but I cleaned the counter before I scooped the crumbs... I think."

"Why do I do this to myself?" Danny shrugs and gently shakes his head.

"My chili's more nutritious than Heinz ketchup." Rui picks up a ketchup bottle. "Monosodium sorbate, I put in coffee. Sulfate potassium 3, I put in donut crumbs. Glucuronic acid, I put in . . ."

"Okay, okay," says Danny.

"Besides," Rui says, "I'm Number One." Rui points to a framed newspaper article hanging on the wall. "Rui's Chili," it reads. "Number One in Pittsburgh!"

Danny takes a swig of coffee, glances at the newspaper article, breathes in, rolls his eyes, breathes out, and then looks back at Rui.

"The college kids line up on Friday and Saturday night to eat my chili!"

"I don't know why, it never tastes the same," Danny says.

"Bingo! You hit it on the top. I give America what it wants."

Danny smirks, "and just what might that be?"

"Diversity," Rui beams.

"I've never seen you eat your chili," Danny counters.

Rui lines his right index finger to his nose. "I'm not American."

Danny stands up and walks toward the door. Rui's coffee was horrible, but Danny was a victim of habit and Rui was a nice guy.

"Hey Danny," Rui calls after him, "I wanted to ask you. You educated man. Is antique spelled 'ea' like a freak or 'ee' like a peek?"

Danny puts two dollars on the counter and doesn't answer. The door closes, and Rui pours what's left of Danny's coffee into the chili pot.

Danny returns to his office. At noon, he sends Irene out for sandwiches, and continues a typical day, shuffling claims and waiting on the phone to speak to insurance companies and delinquent clients. With online insurance, he knows his time is limited, but he hasn't the faintest idea what he'll do when he closes shop. Still, for now, it paid the bills for him and his mother.

At five thirty, Danny stands up and puts on his jacket. There's a softball game he wants to watch at six thirty. He yells into Irene's office. "Did old man Fratto bring my mother's tape?"

"Yes, he did, Mr. Hubble. He says that you're the only people renting DVDs left in the whole United States. Most people just download. He says that it would be cheaper for you to buy all the wrestling videos he has left. He'll give them all to you for \$50. He also says that your mother has seen 'em all a hundred times."

Danny blows out air as he walks toward Irene's desk. "Irene, have you ever noticed that you say the same thing to me every evening?"

Irene concentrates. "Why yes, Mr. Hubble, but you always tell me to give you your messages word for word," she says, then marches on. "He also told me that he didn't want the two-dollar rental fee. He said that you could give him 10 dollars a month and save 40."

"And you told him . . .?"

"I told him what I always tell him—not that it's what I tell him, it's what you tell me to tell him, I mean." Irene clears her throat. "I told him that if he didn't take the two dollars, you'd fire me."

"Good." Danny grabs the DVD and shoves it under his arm with a bunch of office folders and walks

toward the door. He knew that Mr. Fratto would be closing in the near future and that he'd have to learn how to get the wrestling matches from Amazon. Danny hated Amazon and hoped this didn't happen anytime soon.

"Have a good weekend, Mr. Hubble."

"Thanks, Miss Irene. Do you have plans for the weekend?" he asks, smiling purposefully.

"Yes, I'm going to pick up a tub of Rui's chili and head home and watch television," Irene answers. Danny continues to smile, nods and turns to leave. "Good."

"You know, Mr. Hubble, Rui has the best chili in all of Pittsburgh."

Danny turns back, quietly smiles, and exits.

As he heads to his car, Danny passes Rui's Chili House. The place is packed. Danny peers in the window. Rui sees him and winks.

Danny winds up the road past the Allegheny Dwellings, a city housing project. It's the beginning of spring and the trees are budding— a welcome sign after another frigid Pittsburgh winter. He continues up Rising Main and pulls onto his own, Belleau Street.

The road is lined with modest bungalows built after World War II. For decades, Fineview was predominantly German, but in the late 1960s, Italian and Irish folks started making their way into the neighborhood. Like most small communities, it's very close-knit, and news travels like lightning. Danny still lives with his mother, and he parks directly in front of the home that he and his mother own.

He doesn't have a lot of time; he wants to be at Fineview Park by six fifteen. He loves to scout out the new talent and size up the old players. The season began in early April and finished by mid-July so that families could enjoy their vacations. Year after year, Danny noted how players returned with more weight, less hair, or a stronger limp. He noticed every particular; every detail could reveal a man's confidence, response time, and agility. Danny had already promised everyone that this season would be his last and this was why it was so important for him to size up the new talent. His team made the playoffs every year and had won the championship four out of the last ten. It was his strongest desire that this, his last season, would be his best.

There weren't a lot of things to do in Fineview, Pittsburgh's smallest community and an enclave of less than 1,300 residents. Danny was a local celebrity and had become famous for what fans called the "Hubble Rubble." An opposing batter once said, "The ball comes at you like it's been shot out of the ground. You don't know if you should swing or run."

Tonight, the guys from Brighton were playing Perry South—Brighton Park had no lights, so Fineview always hosted them. It was Danny's father who had run the drive to fund the lights sometime in the 1970s, and regardless of who played, the park always filled up.

Danny looks up at the piece of gutter dangling from the white, framed two-story. Old Man Miller had promised to fix it years ago—but, of course, Old Man Miller shouldn't be near a roof or a ladder.

At the end of the gutter sat a squirrel. He seemed to be pondering whether to make the jump to the tree that was at least twenty-five feet away. The squirrel looked down at Danny, seeking an opinion.

"Go ahead, jump. Worst case . . ." Danny starts to say, then hesitates. "If you don't make it, the cats will pounce on and devour you. You only live once," he finishes.

Bridget, Danny's old, white-haired mother, is holding a black cat and gazing out of the second-floor window at him.

Danny pretends not to notice and looks back at the squirrel. Two cats coyly mosey toward the bottom of the tree, wittingly paying the squirrel no heed. The squirrel gazes keenly at them and looks at Danny. Danny nods, and the squirrel returns his gaze to the cats.

Cats are welcome in Pittsburgh: the city has always had an elevated issue with rodents and, according to Orkin, Pittsburgh is among the top ten infested cities almost every year. Most homes have a few cats living in the abode and many people put food out for the strays. The latter is probably not helpful, since the cats won't be chasing many rats if they're not hungry.

Danny's mother notices Danny looking up and speaking. She moves her head and focuses on the top of the window, gazing into the trees. She can't see a thing and can't imagine who or what Danny is talking to, or even looking at. *He was always a peculiar child*.

The squirrel perches on the edge of the gutter; the cats gaze up. The squirrel dives but misses the intended branch and crashes into the arms of the tree, desperately clawing to get ahold of anything that might save him.

Danny stares at the squirrel, mercilessly being yanked down by gravity. He glances at the cats and then back at the squirrel. Within ten feet of the ground, the squirrel clutches at the stem of a leaf. The cats lick their whiskers and move directly under him as his weight tilts the cluster of leaves that are brothers and sisters to the twig that is supporting his life.

The movement stops. The tiny stem resists and the squirrel smiles at Danny, completely ignoring his foes. Danny smiles back. *Sometimes a twig separates life from death*.

Danny walks up the stairs, opens the screen door, and takes out his keys. A calico cat races out as the front door swings inward and Danny drops everything. He kneels to gather his files and picks up the *All-Star Wrestling* DVD. He hides it between the papers.

Shortly after, Danny is sitting in a cluttered kitchen. His mother is smoking as she washes the dishes. "I'm going to get rid of them cats," Danny says.

"Do you want tea?" his mother asks.

As Danny turns to face her, an ash falls onto a plate. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"The little rats pop up everywhere. I'll give Kenny Hess a few bucks to fix 'em," he mumbles.

"I think he nailed Mrs. Hegel's dog to the tree," Ma responds.

"So do I," Danny says.

Danny turns around and looks at a paper on the table. "The old man's dead. No one buys insurance from someone who smells like cigarettes and has cat hairs all over his clothes."

"Drink your tea," Ma answers as if she is not part of the other conversation.

Danny begins removing cat hairs from his suit.

"You look pale."

"I feel weird," Danny responds.

"Go and get a checkup," Ma says as she wipes her hands.

Danny turns and looks at her. "They'll tell me that I shouldn't be living with someone who smokes." He waves a cloud of smoke away as his mother lights another cigarette.

"Did you bring home my video?" Ma asks.

He points to the stack of papers.

She picks up the DVD and glows. "Hulk Hogan and Lex Luger. You're my best," Ma says.

"I'm your only," Danny replies quietly.

Ma's cigarette ash is about an inch long. "You know, that noise your car makes is getting worse. I can hear you from Rising Main."

"Yeah, I know; PatG's gonna fix it."

"Oh, he's a mechanic again?"

"No," Danny answers emphatically. "He's a singer who fixes cars," Danny says, then adds, "sometimes."

Ma walks into the front room and puts the tape into the DVD. She is jumping and swinging at the

wrestlers on the television set. Danny stands and puts his headphones on— PatG's music is finally audible.

"Don't you know 'hind every tree! Don't you know they want to take you away from me!"

Three cats, sitting in various positions— one black, one gray, and one white— watch attentively as Danny heads to his bedroom to change.

The park bleachers are already full when Danny arrives. Several of the spectators notice him and begin whispering among themselves. At 170 pounds and short of 5'5, Danny doesn't make much of an athletic impression. But as far as Pittsburgh softball went, he was tops, and as Freddie Patek so eloquently said, "I'd rather be the shortest player in the majors than the tallest player in the minors."

Danny looks over to Olive's tree. Kevin, an Irish-looking redhead, and PatG, a short, Italian-looking guy, are there. As Danny would expect, PatG's talking to some girl. Most people shunned the tree where Olive hung herself over a Fineview cad some years ago. Of course, time passes and not everyone knows about Olive anymore or what "cad" even means. Kevin could care less about the story, and PatG was a cad and likely felt right at home.

PatG's mother was born in Italy; she married an American, and PatG was born less than a year later. When PatG was four or five years old, his father was diagnosed with a rare nerve disorder. The family lived meagerly as his father could not work. PatG's maternal grandfather, who could barely speak English, took care of PatG while his mother worked. When his mother was home, she responded to her husband's every need. PatG's father was already difficult to put up with. His sickness made him worse. His mother; however, never said a cross word to his father, that PatG could remember. Before PatG's father died, he asked his wife to never remarry. She promised to honor his wishes. PatG was eight years old and never saw his mother with another man. PatG believed that the only explanation for his mother's behavior was unconditional love, whatever that meant.

PatG wasn't really philosophical, but he noted that in modern times, men and women love until the relationship becomes inconvenient. Sometimes, he believes that maybe he's searching for a woman like his mother. He also realizes that each time he finds a woman who he suspects might love him unconditionally, he runs for the hills. He and Danny have done everything in life together— First Communion, Little League— never even having one argument.

Kevin is Fineview's largely unrecognized sage. Most just say he's a drunk but Kevin reads in between the lines of the daily paper, hears the message that the networks are trying not to tell you on the news, and quickly understands the truth in almost any conversation. He's well versed in almost any subject on the planet and can line up complex situations in an organized way within moments. When he spent time in prison, many of the inmates consulted with him as if he were an attorney. Before any of their times, an old radio program called *Amos 'n' Andy* featured a smooth-talking lawyer named Algonquin Calhoun, Jr. Some old timer in the prison gave Kevin the nickname 'Cal,' short for Calhoun. PatG was the only person who called Kevin 'Cal.'

Kevin knew a lot about a lot of things, including disease and medicine. There wasn't any logical explanation. Kevin hadn't made it out of grammar school. But many in Fineview sought Kevin out. Some spoke to him about their symptoms before they went to see their own doctor. Over the years his diagnoses were uncanny.

PatG notices Danny from the corner of his eye. "Danny! We're over here! Hubble Rubble!"

Everyone looks at Danny, who turns red. Many smile, and a couple holler, "Hubble Rubble!"

Danny waves to his fans and walks over to Kevin, PatG, and the girl, watching as the Perry South team takes the field. He believes that by watching an athlete walk out, especially at the beginning and at the end of a game, you can tell a lot about him. You see if he's a hustler, a joker, arrogant, meek, confident, passionate, or just there to eat up a few hours.

The girl smiles, whispers something into PatG's ear, and gets into a red Ford Mustang with West Virginia plates on it. Danny turns away and concentrates on the game. The Perry South Team is slaughtering Brighton, and Danny notes a few hitters whom he will have to be extremely careful of.

Later that evening, in Nick's Club, a dimly lit bar with a small dance floor, Danny and Kevin are watching PatG finish up "Sandra," a song from his latest album. PatG sings blues and rock. He writes all of his own stuff, which likely explains why he's singing at Nick's.

"Yes, folks don't forget. *To stay ahead of trouble, think Hubble*. Our friend Danny Hubble has been serving Fineview and the Hill for over fifty years."

Danny looks at Kevin. "I hate when he does that."

"I think that's why he does it." Kevin tilts his head and sips his beer.

"Everyone here drinks.... Even if they *do remember*, none of my carriers will want to insure them." "It's Friday, Danny boy." Kevin again tilts his head and sips his beer. When he finishes, he takes

the beer out of his mouth. "Aren't you thirsty?" Kevin asks.

Danny rolls his eyes and turns his head toward the bar. "Get Kev another."

Nick, the owner, uncaps a beer and slides it in front of Kevin.

PatG arrives and puts his arms around his buddies. "Hey, goombahs."

"I ain't your goombah. I'm Irish," Kevin says as he throws back another few ounces.

"Hey Nick, back these guys up. On me," PatG shouts.

Nick looks over at him with a frown. PatG looks back.

"Okay, you're right, get them on you."

PatG grabs the wireless microphone and breaks out into another of his songs, "Tampa Day."

"You know, he's the only guy I know that pays to work," Nick says.

Kevin tilts his beer. "He buys a lot of drinks."

"He loves like no one I've ever known." As he speaks, Danny's staring far away. "He loves like a little boy."

Nick watches. Kevin's silence confirms Danny's soft words.

Danny feels Kevin staring at him, clears his throat, and comes back to the bar. He's got a heart of gold," he says abruptly.

"I hope so. That way, at least his tab will get paid when he dies," Nick quips.

Later, when Kevin walks out of the club, Danny's speaking on his cell phone.

"What are you doing?" Kevin asks.

"I'm going by Marla."

"I'm going by my Marla," Kevin puns.

"Don't you ever get tired of hookers?" Danny asks sincerely.

"Nope. I don't think I could get off if I didn't pay for it."

"What's the going rate, Kev?"

"Two bucks, a fin... I remember when some of 'em stopped by just to get something warm in their stomachs."

"Nice."

"A few weeks ago, PatG had the prices jacked. He went with Cherry."

"I don't need to hear this."

"Wait," Kevin interrupts, "big shot finishes and gives her twenty. Word spread, and they all thought they were call girls. He better stay far away."

Kevin stares into Danny's eyes. "I wouldn't pay more than a sawbuck for Marilyn Monroe." "What if she's there when you get home?" Danny asks.

"She'll get three bucks and half a Philly steak." Staring at Danny, Kevin shrugs his shoulders and adds, "That's all I got."

Danny nods and smiles reverently, "And she gets you. Any woman should be so lucky."

Kevin turns and begins to walk away.

"See you, Kev."

Kevin raises his hand and continues to walk straight ahead.

Shortly after, Danny's on the couch in Marla's apartment. Marla's twenty-five but could pass for twenty-six or twenty-four. She has her head in his lap.

"Danny, do you love me?"

"Watch the film."

"I'm tired. Let's go to bed," Marla responds.

Danny and Marla go into the bedroom and Marla quietly shuts the door. Once inside, they move to the bed. Danny takes his shoes off and Marla does the rest.

About three hours later, Danny tiptoes toward the front door of the apartment. A couple is asleep in front of the TV set. Danny arrives at the door and Marla walks to him, rubbing her eyes. She hugs him.

"Bye, Danny." "Bye," he responds. The girl on the floor stirs. "Bye, Danny."

As Danny enters his front room, the first rays of light are sneaking in through the blinds. Ma's snoring. The TV's fuzzy. Danny turns off the television and covers his mother.

She stirs. "Danny, leave money tomorrow."

"Yeah, Ma. 'Night, Ma."

At the same time, a few blocks away, PatG is entering his front room. His mother is on the couch with a rosary in her hands.

"Patti, find a nice girl so I can sleep."

"Ma, women use me for kicks," PatG replies, barely audible.

"You don't give them a chance."

PatG kisses his mother on the cheek and walks into his bedroom.

It's almost noon on Sunday. Danny smiles as he turns into 'Larry's: He's Not Here' bar.

Larry, the owner, is of average height and build. His appearance confirms each day of his fiftyseven years and he is wearing a horrible, light orange-brown wig. The hairs are the same quality as the material you'd find on the head of a five-buck doll. Five regulars are watching the rerun of a college football game as Danny walks in. They're all from Fineview, and Danny knows them all better than he needs to. Each one of them is married and a blue-collar worker.

"Hey, Danny," Paulie says.

"Hey, Danny Boy. You gonna rock East Al with the Hubble Rubble tomorrow?" Markie asks. "Boys, I'm not sure if I still got it, and East Al's got some new hitters that blast the ball."

The bar is silent; everyone's eyes are on Danny as he sits on his stool.

"I'll mow 'em down," Danny says.

The patrons smile and Larry slaps Danny's arm. "Hey man, don't be scaring people like that. You know, there's not a lot of things we got left up here on the Hill."

Larry pours Danny a beer and grabs the remote. "A thousand channels and nothing on."

"Go back to that girly film," Paulie says.

"It's Sunday, you ass. Have some respect," Larry rebuts.

Ralphie nods. "Yeah," he says.

Markie raises his beer. "Praise the Lord. Put on rugby."

"Don't Europeans play any real sports?" Paulie asks.

Larry ignores him and wipes the bar off in front of Danny. "Hard-boiled egg?"

Danny nods. "Give me one of them Freakin' Hot Jalapeno Slim Jims too."

"Breakfast of champions," Markie says as he tilts his glass of beer back.

"Out of Slim Jims, Danny Boy," Larry says.

"Okay, give me a bag of bar-be-que chips."

"In training, Danny?" Ralphie asks.

Larry places the egg and chips on the bar. While the others are watching a beer commercial, Larry addresses Danny. "I seen Ma at Schatzel's. I told her to quit smoking or she'd end up like me."

Larry moves closer and whispers, "Damn, chemo's a bitch." He hesitates and rolls his eyes up toward his eyebrows before continuing. "What do you think about the hair?"

Danny smiles, "Rod Stewart... I like it."

Larry looks at the mirror and raises a closed fist to his mouth. "Maggie, I think I got something to say to you!"

Markie puts his empty beer glass on the bar. "Rod, get me a beer."

PatG is sitting on the steel bleachers as Danny walks toward him, toting baseball cleats and his Fineview Phuckers baseball uniform.

PatG stands, steps out from the bleachers, and walks to meet Danny.

He winks. "You look great, buddy."

"Well, if that's true, then I wish I felt like I look," Danny responds.

A woman stands up on the mobbed steel bleachers. "Danny, get out there and pitch up some Hubble Rubble!"

A man turns to the guy next to him. "Hubble's the best pitcher the Hill ever had. Shoots 'em out of the ground. The batter doesn't know if he should swing or duck."

Danny moves next to PatG.

"How's Marla?" PatG asks.

"Fine," Danny responds. "What did . . .?"

"Got a hummer in the parking lot," PatG whispers.

"Judy?" Danny asks.

"Nah, she's chasing some rap singer." PatG looks at Danny and smiles. His eyes are cringed and his head tilted. "College girl," he says.

Danny smirks. "I remember when they taught science at Pitt."

"I prefer the modern courses, and I'm glad that I'm dark-skinned. I tell some that I'm Spanish. Young girls just gobble up diversity."

Danny pitches the first three innings without giving up a hit. The Phuckers are ahead 8-0 when he pulls himself out. He sits on the bench, studying each and every batter from the opposing team—watching whether they swung wildly, how fast they ran to first, if they got impatient waiting for the right pitch, if they followed their coach's instructions, and what kind of contact they made with the ball. Danny didn't need to take notes. It was all indexed in his mind. He had every player in the league indexed. The Phuckers went on to win the game 11-7.

As the park's emptying out, a woman walks up to Danny. "Danny, how's Ma?" she asks.

Danny turns toward the woman holding onto the fence. "She's . . ." Danny falls to his knees and faints.

PatG kneels next to him. "Give him room!"

Danny's eyes are barely open.

"Someone call an ambulance," PatG yells.

Danny clutches PatG's shirt. "No, I'm fine. Just slipped," he insists and begins to lift himself up. "PatG, get me home."

PatG helps Danny to his feet. "You sure?" Danny slowly winks.

PatG and Danny are in Danny's bedroom. Danny is laying on the bed.

"I don't like the way you look," PatG says.

"I never liked the way I looked."

PatG is uncomfortable, irritated, and scared. "Cut it out," he tells Danny.

Ma walks in. As she hands Danny a cup of tea, a cigarette ash falls into it. "I'll get more," she says. Danny shakes his head and lies back down.

Ma goes into the kitchen. "I got to go to Schatzel's for tea. That was the last bag. I thought we had more. You must be drinking more than usual," she says.

She sticks her head back into the bedroom. "Have you been drinking more tea than usual?" Danny nods his head and Ma leaves.

Danny stares at the window and rubs his cheek. He senses that something's seriously not right. "What's it all about, PatG?"

PatG shakes his head slightly and shrugs his shoulders. "What do you mean, Danny?"

"I mean, what's it all about? What's life about? What's work about? Women? Why are we here?"

PatG looks into his friend's eyes. "Danny, I have no idea. My old man worked like a dog until the day he died. My family's scattered all over the country trying to squeeze out a living."

PatG looks to the side. "I don't know what life's all about, and to be quite honest, I'm not sure I know anyone who does." PatG hesitates and then smiles thinly, "Cal, maybe. You should ask him."

Danny looks at PatG. "I love that guy too, but you, you take it to another level."

PatG smiles broadly. "How can I not? You know what he asked me the other day?"

"No, but I'm sure that you'll tell me."

"The other day," PatG continued anxiously, "he asked me, if feces smelled like roses, would they still call it crap?"

Danny responds with silence. After a few deep moments Danny speaks. "I wish I had a family."

"You do. You've got me... and Ma."

Danny nods softly, "PatG, I'm tired. Sing me "Sweet Memories.""

PatG is softly singing to his music, which is playing on the CD player. "*I don't know if you're that strong… that you can run from my thoughts all night long*..."

Ma has still not returned. Danny's sleeping. The doorbell rings; PatG walks into the front room, opens the window and looks out.

"Marla," he says under his breath, "damn." He closes the window and unlocks the door.

"PatG, I heard about Danny falling. My cousin called and told me. Her boyfriend was at the game." "Relax," PatG says, "he's fine."

Marla begins to cry. "Is he really?" She dabs her eyes with a handkerchief.

PatG sighs, gesturing for her to come in. They've just settled at the kitchen table when Ma enters carrying a brown grocery bag. She removes the contents and puts them in front of Marla and PatG.

"Lipton is Danny's favorite tea," she says as she opens the cabinet and places it on the shelf. Ma starts to fill the teapot. Marla looks at PatG.

"Ma, this is Danny's friend Marla," PatG says.

"I have to make Danny's tea," she replies.

"He's sleeping, Ma. Make it later."

"I'll make it now. Danny likes tea."

Ma turns to Marla. "Who are you?" she asks in the nastiest tone she can muster.

Marla freezes.

"She's Danny's friend," PatG responds.

"I asked the girl, PatG."

Ma fumbles for a cigarette, lights it and inhales. She stares at Marla, smoke exiting as she speaks. "What do you want with my son?"

Marla smiles timidly. "Hasn't Danny told you about us?"

"Who is this girl?" Ma asks disgustedly to no one in particular.

PatG looks at Marla.

Marla looks from PatG to Ma. "I'm his girl. I love him very much."

Ma moves mechanically and glares at Marla. "*I have to give Danny his tea*." She turns to PatG. "You should be out fixing cars." Ma hesitates, "Your mother will die without peace."

Ma works herself up and courageously turns back to Marla. "*And you*, I don't know what you should do. But *whatever it is*, you *shouldn't be doing it with my son*!"

The doorbell rings. PatG rises and returns with Irene.

"Talks all over the Hill about Mr. Hubble falling at the softball game. I came as soon as I heard," Irene says.

"He's fine. I'm making him tea," Ma says, as an attorney would if speaking a statement of fact to a judge.

Marla looks over PatG's shoulder and spots Danny, who is standing in his bedroom doorway, clothed in a T-shirt and boxer shorts.

Danny looks at his mother, rubs his hand over his face and looks at Marla. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

Ma stares angrily at her son. "Danny, who is she?"

Danny buries his face in a chair cover. "God, I want to die," he says. "PatG, why did you stop singing?"

"Danny, who is this girl?" Ma asks more forcefully.

PatG, Marla, and Danny move to the front room. Irene has met Marla before at the office and has known PatG for decades— she follows and greets Marla. Danny sits on the La-Z-Boy with the chair cover still over his head.

Irene walks back into the kitchen. "She's a pretty little thing," she says to Ma.

"She's *not* for Danny," Ma says distastefully. "No one will tell me who she is. Who is she?" "She's very important... When she's at the office, I can't talk to Danny, Mr. Hubble. Did Danny, I mean Mr. Hubble, drink his tea?"

Ma marches into the front room past PatG and Marla. She touches Danny, intending to rouse him for his Lipton tea. "Danny, Danny."

The chair cover falls, revealing Danny's white unconscious face.

PatG is shocked and frightened. "Marla, call an ambulance."



A LITTLE RAIN BY BILL VANPATTEN

Eric Hoffer Award Grand Prize Short List 2023

Sixteen-year-old Alexander Chance's love of another boy has turned into an obsession—and the consequences have pushed his family to the brink. Sitting in a courtroom, he reflects on the past four months and what led him to the present situation. His father watches a quiet and dissociated son during the proceedings, forcing him to confront his own secretive past and the repressed sexuality that destroyed a happy home. Alexander's mother keeps a diary and confesses how her sublimated rage at her ex-husband drove a wedge between her and Alexander, and to a pill-popping, wine-drinking existence. In the end, the judge listens to expert testimony and must determine Alexander's fate. But Alexander is hiding a secret—a secret that would have profound consequences on the judge's decision.

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Paperback: 979-8433460065 / \$9.99 eBook: ASIN B09W41W7M3 / \$2.99 Pub Date: March 21, 2022 Publisher: Independently published Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/Little-Rain-Bill-VanPatten/dp/B09W74GR0F

BILL VANPATTEN is an award-winning author of four novels and three short story collections. As an #ownvoices writer, gay and Latino characters tend to populate his stories. He left a successful career in academia to return to his native California and write full time. On occasion, he still performs standup comedy. He is currently working on his fifth novel. His short stories have appeared in various magazines and anthologies. <u>https://www.billvanpatten.net</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Alex

The day I tried to kill myself it rained.

A canopy of sullen clouds shed millions of tears in the dullness of the midafternoon. They dropped onto roofs, spilling over the edges of houses to carry away dust and soot to pool into puddles that kids would later stomp with galoshes. They streamed along gutters and slid into drainpipes and down into sewers—dark places that only dirty water knew.

The afternoon was uncharacteristically chilly for late November in the San Joaquin Valley. I was dressed in a Giants hoodie and jeans, my feet stuffed into Ugg slippers my mother had bought for me the Christmas before. I leaned against the patio slider that led to the backyard, my cheek and hands pressed against the glass pane, wanting to feel the chill that gripped the exterior of the house. I was surrounded by silence, save for drops pinging against the overhead tiles. My mom was at work, and my dad lived in another town.

I plopped onto the sofa to read. Ever since I was a little kid, I found comfort in books. With just the turn of a page, I sailed to far-off lands, rocketed to other planets, jumped to other times and spaces. I witnessed the squabbles of the Greek gods and goddesses and heard the rustling of trees in a poem. I liked being alone more than hanging out or playing soccer. I was the smart kid—a genius, as some of my teachers suspected. I found it difficult to connect with others. I preferred watching people more than interacting with them. I was the sixteen-year-old kid in the distance, a voyeur, who sat on the bleachers with a book, looking up to catch glimpses of the football players. The one whose gaze would follow them as they hurried off to the locker room after practice, imagining what happened in those showers.

I scanned the page of a Stephen King novel. I took in the lines, hoping to fall somewhere into the words, leave the stillness of the house and its empty white walls. I was twelve when my parents divorced, and my mother removed all of the art, all of the knickknacks, all reminders of our previous life as a family.

"Start anew," she'd said. "That's what we need. A new start."

She had the walls painted the color of snow, blurring the lines between bright and barren. She had needed a new start—and she got one. She joined a religious group and bathed herself in sermons and speeches. She never went on dates but instead attended group meetings for Bible study, occasional teas with other women, and, of course, Sunday services. She tied her long dark hair up in a bun and stopped wearing makeup, letting her pale blue eyes be the only color on her square face.

She forced me to attend services with her and, like a reluctant anthropologist, I observed the church folks as they mouthed the words they were taught, sang the songs from their hymn books, and politely shook hands accompanied by a "peace be with you." She would sometimes ask me how I enjoyed the service, and I would shrug and say, "It was okay."

Perched on the sofa, I looked up at the ceiling and listened to the rain. I'm not sure how much time passed. A few seconds. A minute. A half hour. My mother's penchant for scented candles was evident in the hint of vanilla that wafted through the house. I closed my eyes, drew a deep breath, and when I looked out at the whiteness of my surroundings once again, I knew it was time. I closed my book and strode to the kitchen, where I pulled a carving knife from a drawer along with the sharpening tool. I ran the blade between the wheels of the tungsten carbide repeatedly. I checked the edge on a tomato. Then I slumped to the floor, my back against the cabinets, and pulled up the sleeves on my hoodie. I drew the knife across my wrists and then up my arms. I'd heard that cutting yourself was painful, that it was a terrible way to die. But I wasn't scared. Still, the first slice made me wince.

I tossed the knife to the side and looked down. Blood made its exit, streaming along the length

of my inner forearm. It seeped from my wrists, and I watched as it puddled on the floor like the rain outside. I closed my eyes and recited a poem I'd memorized in the ninth grade.

The day is cold, and dark, and dreary; It rains, and the wind is never weary; The vine still clings to the moldering wall, But at every gust the dead leaves fall. And the day is dark and dreary.

I paused to savor the words, to let them sink in.

My life is cold, and dark, and dreary; It rains, and the wind is never weary; My thoughts still cling to the moldering Past, But the hopes of youth fall thick in the blast, And the days are dark and dreary.

The steady ping-ping on the roof added to the lines.

Be still, sad heart! and cease repining; Behind the clouds is the sun still shining; Thy fate is the common fate of all, Into each life some rain must fall, Some days must be dark and dreary.

I smiled.

I opened my eyes to take in the whiteness of the kitchen walls and cabinets one last time. Then the brightness faded until I was swallowed by the dark.

ACTION & INTERNATIONAL THRILLERS

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A THRILLER FROM THE RED HOTEL SERIES

RED CHADS

RED CHAOS (THE RED HOTEL, BOOK 3) BY ED FULLER AND GARY GROSSMAN

"Be ready to be catapulted into the real world of international intrigue that keeps national security experts up at night." -William Grimsley, Major General US ARMY (Retired)

The Arctic ice is melting, the waters are warming, and Russian President Nicolai Gorshkov is one step closer to monopolizing the oil industry and funding his expansionism plans past Ukraine and Latvia. Russian-backed attacks have shut down the Suez Canal and other key shipping routes, making it nearly impossible for the West and the Middle East to transport oil.

With nothing less than oil futures and the global economy at stake, one man slips out of the shadows to stop Gorshkov's maniacal plans: Dan Reilly, a freelance State Department and CIA consultant. In his attempts, Reilly is drawn into a web of intrigue twelve years in the making, involving the current American president, a United States senator, a Chinese businessman, and the death of a young girl. How these seemingly unrelated elements have a profound impact on Russia's far-reaching plans is what makes *Red Chaos* a thriller to be read like breaking news.

Red Chaos is the third novel in the acclaimed Red Hotel series by thriller masters Ed Fuller and Gary Grossman who America's political and intelligence insiders have noted, "might as well sit on the National Security Council."

"The authors do a good job juggling the various plot lines, including one involving a showdown outside the port of Boston between an American warship and two hostile submarines. Readers will look forward to Dan's further adventures." **-Publishers Weekly**

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Hardcover: 9780825309878 / \$24.95 Paperback: 9780825310416 / \$17.95 Kindle: 9780825308666 / \$9.99 Pub Date: March 7, 2023 / Paperback Nov 14, 2023 Publisher: Beaufort Books, <u>https://www.beaufortbooks.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.beaufortbooks.com/red-chaos/</u>

ED FULLER had a 40-year career with Marriott International, where he served as chief marketing officer, followed by 22 years as president and managing director of Marriott International. He is president of Irvine, California based Laguna Strategic Advisors, a global consortium that provides business consulting services to corporations and governments. Fuller is also a board member of the

FBI National Academy Associates (FBINAA). He served in Germany and Vietnam where he was awarded a Bronze Star and Army Commendation Medal. The plots for *Red Hotel*, *Red Deception and Red Chaos* draw heavily on his experience and exploits.

GARY GROSSMAN's first novel, *Executive Actions*, propelled him into the world of geopolitical thrillers. *Executive Treason, Executive Command*, and *Executive Force* further tapped Grossman's experience as a journalist, newspaper columnist, documentary television producer, reporter, and media historian. Besides the bestselling Executive series, Grossman wrote the international awardwinning *Old Earth*, a geological thriller that spans all of time. With the *Red Hotel* series, his collaborations with Ed Fuller, Grossman entered a new realm of globe-hopping thriller writing.

CHAPTER ONE

STAFFORD, VIRGINIA

"Reilly, get down!"

The volley of automatic gunfire in the hotel lobby made the order almost impossible to hear. But Dan Reilly didn't need any warning from the hotel security assessing his options—if he had any at all.

He breathed heavily. His pulse raced as he rewound the previous minute in his mind, piecing together the events as they had unfolded. He'd seen an older couple checking out. Vacationers with too much luggage. A young woman glancing at her watch expectantly, then opening her purse. Probably for a lipstick touch-up before heading out on a date. A man at the bar working on a Bloody Mary. A seven-or eight-year-old girl wearing a bright yellow dress sitting on a couch, well into her *Goosebumps* book. Two hulking characters flanking her tightly. A boy carrying a skateboard, undoubtedly ready to get away from his parents. A concierge at her desk arranging theater tickets or giving directions. Some twenty other people also in sight, spread throughout the lobby.

Then five men entered. Five huge men with shaved heads, all wearing long, loose-fitting leather jackets. One marched purposely toward the front desk. The remaining four split up and headed directly to the far corners of the lobby.

Reilly watched and concluded, *They're taking up strategic posts*. He tapped the officer beside him on the shoulder and whispered, "Look—there!" He nodded to the near corner. "And there." The opposite corner. "Something's going down."

The officer didn't immediately pick up on his concern. The concern was that Reilly saw people who were armed, and he wasn't.

Reilly took in the entrance in one sweep. A dangerous choke point; poorly designed with two narrow manual doors that would become instantly clogged in a mad rush. Reilly feared that kind of chaos if things truly turned bad. He'd seen it before. Young and old, people died. Just then, a sixth man entered wearing a long leather coat that was definitely not in season. He stopped five steps into the lobby and scanned the space just as Reilly had. He exchanged a nod with the man who had taken up position at the front desk. A signal. A signal that told Reilly the figure who just arrived was the head of the snake.

Reilly glanced back to the front as the man removed what appeared to be an AK-47 from under his coat. Then, without warning, he raised the weapon and fired five rounds into the ceiling.

That was ten seconds ago. Everyone ducked, some faster than others. One of the two men sitting with the little girl on the couch threw his body over her. Reilly dropped behind a couch as the security

officer crawled to the nearest man standing. But not just a man—an assailant with his version of the same weapon as the leader.

For now, there was nothing Reilly could do. That was not his way. Dan Reilly, forty-three, President of the international division of the Kensington Royal Hotel Corporation, was touring the Capitol Hoganville Hotel outside of Washington, D.C.—a friendly visit, though experience told him never to be complacent.

At that moment panic struck. A woman close to the entrance rose and ran toward the door. The leader grabbed her with his left hand and pulled her in. A shield. With his right, he swept his weapon across the room. "You behave, you live," he shouted. "So in the interest of your own health, sit down. Better yet, lie down."

Reilly heard a German or Slovakian accent. It was cruel and dangerous. All too familiar in tone. No one responded. He fired again.

"Have I not made myself clear?" Those nearest offered a meek yes.

"Everyone!" He repeated, "Do ... you ... understand?" punching every word.

He heard compliance except from the young woman at the front desk. From her standing position she slowly inched toward a door behind her as others lay down. The move caught the eye of the corner man near Reilly.

"No!" the gunman shouted. The woman panicked. She turned and bolted. The terrorist closest to her turned and shot her in the back.

Men and women screamed. The security officer with Reilly removed his gun as he knelt. Reilly was surprised he even carried. But aiming quickly, he took out his near-corner man. Then he stood, spun right, and shot the terrorist near the front desk. It would be his last kill. Crossfire over the huddled captives took him down from the other three corners.

His Glock fell three feet from Reilly. He dove for it fast, pulled the pistol in, and rolled to the right against a man lying face down. Reilly caught his breath. He saw the woman who had checked her watch and her purse lying low a few feet away. She gritted her teeth. Reilly put his finger to his lips indicating she should stay still. She blinked confirmation. Reilly controlled his breathing. He knew the room. Where his targets were standing. Where civilians were most vulnerable.

No more than thirty seconds had elapsed since the first gunshots. It felt like an eternity to Reilly. Combat was like that—elongated, exaggerated. "You see what happens when you don't listen," the leader said, stepping further into the lobby and purposely walking toward people to his right.

The terrorist continued to bark instructions, but Reilly shut him out. He had to concentrate and draw on his experience in battle. His mind raced back in time to more than a decade ago, to his service with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan. To an ambush that should have never happened. He lived to talk about it, except that he couldn't. Command quickly clamped down. The mission was stamped classified because of two participants. Very few people knew the truth. He had also been in dangerous situations since. In the past eighteen months, Reilly's work had taken him into danger zones in Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Europe. To hotel bombings, street shootouts, interrogations by rogue military officers. He faced an assassin in Brussels and chased down a killer in Stockholm. He'd squared off with a Mexican cartel leader and stood up to a Russian spy. Not the typical work of a business executive. But Dan Reilly was nowhere near typical.

He remained low, watching the leader's legs as he crossed the room. Reilly figured his best opportunity, perhaps his only one, would come after a few more steps when the gunman passed his position; facing away. He could get him, but he likely wouldn't survive the next round when the three corner men found him in their sights. He might get one. Beyond that? Still, he felt he had to try.

As he began to rise to take his first, and perhaps only shot at the head of the snake, he heard the wail of sirens. Police were on the way. Possibly hostage negotiators or the SWAT team. Now he felt it would be better to wait. *Stay down*, he told himself.

That would have been fine if the next thing didn't happen. The civilian closest to Reilly saw that

he had the security guard's weapon. Suddenly taking him as one of the bad guys, he screamed, "No, don't shoot me!" Acting on impulse, he jumped up and headed for the entrance. Others saw the opportunity to follow. The old man with all the suitcases shouted for his wife to follow. Bloody Mary man rose and rushed forward with the growing crowd. Head of the snake fired and dropped him and the old man's wife. The choke point choked.

Outside, the sirens stopped. Reilly heard doors open, the orders shouted. But getting in would be impossible, and the assailants had multiple ways to leave once their mission, which had become clear to him, was accomplished.

Now with the cover of others standing, Reilly got to his knees, then to full height. He stepped over the woman he had motioned to be quiet, maneuvered around the crowd and found a target. His aim was good. The leader took two hits to the chest. Reilly then found the two corner men at 45-degree angles. He got one. He missed the second.

More screams. More panic.

The last remaining terrorist grabbed the boy with the skateboard and used him as protection. He began shooting indiscriminately. Reilly tracked him. He willed himself to wait for the best shot; a safe kill. *Safe kill.* The phrase had always struck him as such a contradiction in terms. He shook it off. He suddenly had opportunity; a side angle. But as quickly as the opportunity arose, it ended when people pushed against one another and blocked his shot. *Wait ... wait.* The remaining attacker hustled to the office door the front clerk had hoped to make. He pushed the boy down and raced ahead. Reilly steadied his right wrist with his left and breathed in.

A shot echoed in the lobby. It wasn't from Reilly's gun. The young woman he had motioned to remain quiet, the woman with the large purse, large enough to contain a Smith & Wesson M&P T4E, expertly put two shots dead center into Dan Reilly's chest.

LONDON, ENGLAND

The first bullet had been enough. Professional. The second was purely personal. Igor Kritzler fell back onto his bed in his Kensington Royal Mayfair suite in London.

Barely four minutes earlier, Kritzler's two wrestler-sized Russian security officers had cleared a man into his suite who had identified himself as a hotel assistant manager. He had a winning smile, appropriate for a hotel executive delivering an unexpected treat. He was gloved and smartly dressed in a dark suit, wearing a name tag they couldn't pronounce. He looked to be in his late fifties with mid-length wavy gray hair and a close-cropped beard. He rolled a cart with items that seemed absolutely appropriate for someone of Kritzler's stature as a Russian oil magnate—a bottle of Dom Perignon with, as he revealed, an extravagant food plater.

"Compliments of the house," Walter Grün warmly explained with a slight German accent. "May I?"

It was certainly in keeping with what they had seen before. Expressions of hotel staff largesse, including complimentary food and drink, limousines at the ready, and depending upon the country, women waiting for him in the backseat or in his bed upon his arrival.

One guard, the bigger of the two by forty pounds, knocked. A few words were exchanged in Russian without opening the double doors.

"Da," came curtly from inside.

The smaller guard swiped the electronic room key allowing Assistant Manager Grün to enter. "Thank you."

Nods, but no smiles.

Grün pushed his cart forward. He turned, smiled to the guards, and said, "I'll just be a moment." The big guard shrugged and gave him a *whatever* look.

Grün closed the door and saw Kritzler spread across the couch in the huge living room portion

of the suite. He was fat and irritable. He wore a silk bathrobe and mink slippers. Grün assumed he had nothing on underneath.

"Mr. Kritzler, On behalf of the Kensington Mayfair, welcome back.

We've prepared something we hope you'll like."

"Fine, fine," Kritzler said like a man who expected people to lavish gifts on him. "But not here. In the bedroom. I'm expecting someone. Put it on the corner table and leave."

"Of course." The assistant manager replied. He crossed the suite to the bedroom. "A nice nightcap."

"Open the bottle, then go."

"Certainly, sir. But there are great delights. You should come see them."

Grün parked the cart just inside the bedroom, removed the metal cover and described the assortment of cheeses, the truffle pâté, the crispy artisan crackers, strawberries, and fine chocolates from Roast + Conch, one of London's newest shops. "The cocoa beans are from St. Lucia. They're positively delicious."

This brought Kritzler to the bedroom. He reached into the open box, rudely grabbed a handful, and filled his mouth.

"They're really to die for."

"Yay, yay, now finish and go."

Kritzler sat on the bed ignoring the man who was clearly below his station; little more than a mid-level functionary doing his job and talking far too much. No tip for him.

Kritzler found the TV remote, turned the set on, and flipped through the channels until he settled on RT, the English-language Russian propaganda channel. In the background, a report on oil futures. Grün cleared his throat. Kritzler shushed him and turned the sound up.

"I'll pour your champagne!" Walter Grün said, his back now to the Russian lout.

Kritzler ignored him. Grün slowly came around. The television audio drowned out the muffled pop. Not a pop from the champagne. The man posing as an assistant hotel manager held a Makarov 9mm pistol with a suppressor he'd hidden in the cart drawer. The first shot was between Kritzler's eyes. The second was between his legs just because he had been so rude.

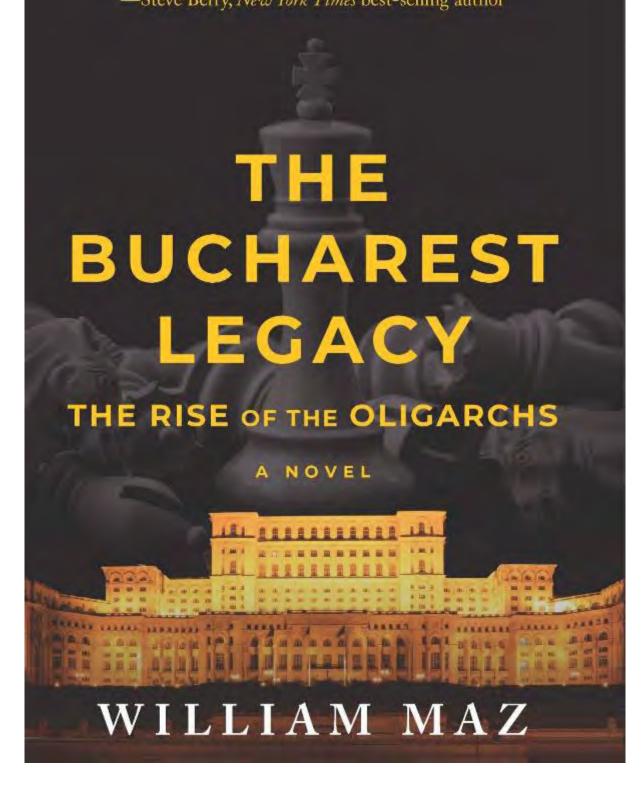
Chocolates oozed out of his mouth as blood leaked from between his legs.

He'd been right; Kritzler had nothing on underneath.

Grün backed out of the suite door, pulling his cart. He gave a pleasant thank you to the guards, wishing them a good night. He was certain it would be anything but a good night when they checked on their boss later. They'd be recalled to Russia and once there likely *questioned to death*.

In the hotel kitchen the killer removed a backpack he had also stored in the cart and casually walked to the service door leading to the loading dock. There, he transformed into a completely different identity by removing his fake beard and gray wig, swapping out his jacket for a London Monarch's football sweatshirt, putting on a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, and popping in an ear pod. All in the shadows; all within thirty seconds. He instantly looked some thirty years younger, now more like a student on his way to a pub crawl in Piccadilly than an assassin leaving a successful job.

"Will keep you guessing right to the end." —Steve Berry, New York Times best-selling author



THE BUCHAREST LEGACY: THE RISE OF THE OLIGARCHS BY WILLIAM MAZ

CIA agent Bill Hefflin is back in Bucharest—immersed in a cauldron of spies and crooked politicians.

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Hefflin is given a chance to prove his innocence by returning to his city of birth, Bucharest, Romania, to find Boris and track down the identity of the mole. It's been three years since the bloody revolution, and what he finds is a cauldron of spies, crooked politicians, and a country controlled by the underground and the new oligarchs, all of whom want to find Boris. But Hefflin has a secret that no one else knows—Boris has been dead for over a year.

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Hardcover: 9781608095681 / \$28.95 eBook: 9781608095698 / \$9.49 Audiobook: BoC7SC2KQH Pub Date: June 20, 2023 Publisher: Oceanview Publishing, <u>https://www.oceanviewpub.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.oceanviewpub.com/books/the-bucharest-legacy</u>

WILLIAM MAZ was born in Bucharest, Romania, of Greek parents and emigrated to the U.S. as a child. He is a graduate of Harvard University, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and Yale residency. During his high school and undergraduate years, he developed a passion for writing fiction. He studied writing at Harvard, the New School, The Writer's Studio in New York City, and with Gordon Lish, and is now writing full time. He divides his time between homes in Pennsylvania and New York City. The Bucharest Dossier is his debut novel. <u>https://www.williammaz.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Bucharest, Romania April 1993

It was a night like any other night he had known in Bucharest, only more so. Three years after the revolution that was supposed to have brought relief to the millions of poor wretches, the city still resembled a celestial black hole rather than a European capital. Other than the central area of the city, the streets still stood in darkness, due partly to lack of fuel and partly to the broken bulbs and smashed lampposts that still awaited replacement or repair. Not much had changed in the past three years. Cousin Irina, the diva actress, had been right. It would take a generation.

So much for revolutions.

But this night the darkness acted as a friend to Bill Hefflin. Even though Romania now classified itself as a democracy and the streets no longer crawled with Securitate, former dictator Ceausescu's secret police, Bucharest had become a cauldron of foreign security forces, racketeers, thieves, and roaming gangs that vied for territory. He had been warned. Still, the days of Cold War espionage were over. Romania was now a U.S. ally, and Russia was beginning to shed its own communist history with the election of Boris Yeltsin.

The defector he was to meet was supposedly KGB, but this was no classic exfiltration. All Hefflin had to do was drive him to the American embassy, babysit him for a few hours, then place him on one of the American military airplanes, which the friendly Romanian government now allowed to land—and depart—on a regular basis. The Agency had asked him for this favor since he had already planned on returning to Bucharest—his first time back since the revolution—to check on his charitable organizations. They were run by his own teams of American personnel. He didn't trust the government to manage the money without their skimming off the top.

Why had he accepted this assignment? After all, he was no longer part of the Agency, not since he had become a billionaire overnight thanks to Boris's recovery of Ceausescu's offshore bank accounts. Boris, his KGB asset, his mentor, practically his second father. He was amused at how he considered Tanti Bobo, the old Romanian gypsy, his second mother and Boris his second father. How many people were blessed with two sets of parents?

Perhaps he just wanted to replay those days again, for nostalgia's sake. This was actually the second assignment off the books for the Agency since his resignation. The first one had been a simple pickup of a package from a train station locker in Berlin. He suspected that the Agency was trying to lure him back, to appeal to his nostalgia, which they knew was his weak spot. His life was full of

nostalgia, though it had been partially cured by his finding his sweet Pusha.

Truth be told, the Agency was strapped for manpower. Bucharest Station had been downsized since the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, an outpost with few risks and fewer rewards, or so he'd been assured. After the Gulf War, Langley's eyes were now focused on the Middle East. Postponing his plans for a few days was no big sacrifice, especially since it allowed him to recapture memories of his clandestine work, which, he had to admit, he missed.

This night promised no such intrigue, however, as he sat in an old Dacia on a cold, gloomy April evening in Bucharest. It began to drizzle. Even though there were no adversaries to elude, he didn't turn on the wipers or the engine, preferring to pretend this was a real operation and thus follow procedure to not divulge his presence. The odds were that the heater of the Dacia wouldn't work anyway. It was the first thing to go, usually within the first month out of the factory, and had to be repeatedly repaired. He had "borrowed" the car from among those parked on a side street and planned on returning it at the end of the night. No one would miss it. Gas was still scarce and expensive.

He spotted a shadow at the end of the street, created not by streetlamps, which were dark, but by the light of the full moon. His glanced at his watch, and it read exactly three am.

The defector is punctual. A good sign.

At first the figure was too far away for its footsteps to match the echoes they created, but as the man drew nearer, they began to sync. He wore a dark raincoat and fedora, as if he had copied an old spy movie. Hefflin had seen the phenomenon before: Mafia leaders spoke like Don Corleone, policemen mimicked New York cops seen on TV series, and lovers emulated seduction scenes from classic movies.

Life copies art.

Hefflin flashed his headlights once to announce his presence. The man quickened his pace. It was just as the man approached his car that Hefflin spotted the headlights entering the end of the street. *What the hell?*

His body stiffened; his instincts suddenly stirred by the rush of adrenaline that made his fingertips tingle.

Could they have followed the defector? Or me?

He turned on the engine just as the man got in. He intended to back up out of the narrow street, but another car now turned into the other end.

A trap? What the hell?

He sat paralyzed for a moment, unsure of his next move, or the rules of this new game. Did the old rules still apply? Was he now expected to act like an Agency field operative? Did he have that authority? He needed to make a decision.

"Get out!" he barked at the defector.

"Why?"

"They followed you. Get out!"

"What are you going to do?" The defector sat frozen, his face contorted in horror.

Hefflin jumped out of the car just as he heard the gunshot, the bullet bursting the car windshield. *These guys are serious.*

His passenger half fell out of the Dacia, and Hefflin pushed him into the doorway of a building, then turned back and plunged his handkerchief into the opening of the gas tank. As he lit the handkerchief with his lighter, a second shot rang out, this time the bullet hitting the side of the building. He scrambled into the doorway, grabbed the defector, still partly paralyzed with fear, and pulled him inside the building.

The hallway was pitch black; the lightbulbs broken. With the aid of his lighter, Hefflin was able to drag the man down the hallway until he found the steps to the basement. At the bottom of the stairs, he pushed through a metal door that led to an alleyway. As they reached the adjacent side

street, he heard the explosion. The building windows burst, shards sprayed both Hefflin and the defector and crackled on the cobblestones like fine sleet. A ball of fire hurtled high above the buildings, followed by the cries of men.

He pulled the defector toward a main street where he knew a payphone stood.

No back-up needed, they said. Just a routine pickup, they said. Christ!

He held onto the man's collar for fear he would panic and flee, then dialed the number he had been given.

"Control," a man's voice answered.

Hefflin spoke his numbered code.

"Confirmed," Control said. "What is your status?"

"Pickup compromised."

"Your location?"

Hefflin gave it to him.

A moment of silence, then, "Go to location Alpha 5."

He tried to remember what that meant. He had previously memorized the pre-arranged pickup spots throughout the city, but that had been three years before, and they were now just a jumble in his brain. Had they even kept the same codes all this time?

"Where is Alpha 5?"

"You are on a non-secure line," Control said.

"Look, the operation was blown. Enemy agents are swarming in the area. Now tell me the fucking rendezvous point!"

There was silence, then Control gave him the intersection of two streets.

Hefflin hung up and dragged the defector onward at a clip.

"Where are you taking me?" the man gasped. Though he was tall and slim, the man now hunched down, his clean-shaven face twisted in fear, like a WWII prisoner being dragged to some Nazi camp.

"A pickup point," Hefflin said. "The embassy entrance will be crawling with KGB, if that's what these guys were. We'll never make it inside."

They picked up their pace. The defector seemed calmer now and was able to keep up, his understanding of the situation having probably eased his fears. Blaring sirens rose to a pitch, followed by fire trucks passing by the main boulevard, then faded again.

"How much farther?" the defector asked. He was beginning to pant.

"A few more blocks that way," Hefflin pointed with his chin, one of the Romanian gestures he automatically reacquired after arriving in his country of birth. The truth was he wasn't sure of the location. He hadn't been in Bucharest in over three years and then only for a few weeks. But the streets sounded familiar from his childhood.

A few minutes later, they reached their destination, a small square where several streets converged. He checked the street signs to make sure. This was the spot. Now where the hell was the Agency team? Then he spotted two cars, idling on different side streets, each with four men inside.

How the hell do they know this pickup location? Were they listening on the phone line?

Another car now approached the square, two men inside. The license plates were of the special format reserved for embassy vehicles. It slowed down to a crawl, the men searching every street corner.

"Is that our car?" the defector asked, the pitch of his voice raised in fear.

The other two cars turned on their headlights and burst toward them.

"It's too late. It's been spotted."

"What are you saying? The car is right there. What are we waiting for?"

"You want to come out of this alive? Then do as I say." He grabbed the defector and pushed him down the dark street away from the square.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Look, the pick-up is blown. This has now turned into an exfiltration. I have to get you off the streets." He didn't know any of the Agency safe houses in Bucharest, but he thought of one apartment, if it was still available. A long shot. He dragged the defector along like a parent pulling his child toward the doctor's office.

"We had a perfectly good car in front of us and you refused to take it," the defector complained. Hefflin remained silent and just kept tugging him along.

They reached their destination twenty minutes later. The building felt familiar, though Hefflin had only been there once, in '89. All the windows were dark, as expected in the middle of the night. The front door was locked. Hefflin removed two pieces of metal from the lining of his jacket collar a remnant from his old days—inserted them into the keyhole, and gently worked them. A moment later he heard the click.

Inside it was pitch black. With his lighter he found the stairs and they slowly climbed to the second floor. He wondered if someone else was living in that apartment now. It had been three years, after all.

Hefflin kneeled and used the same instruments to pick the lock to the apartment. As he silently pushed open the door, the smell of stale cigarettes engendered a warm, familiar feeling. By the moonlight he could make out the piano, the Tiffany style lamps, the red Persian rug. The place had survived unchanged.

He signaled the defector to remain silent, then quietly made his way through the apartment. He hadn't realized how large it was. Besides the living room there were three bedrooms, one of which had been turned into a study, a large kitchen, and a formal dining room where his family's mahogany dining set still stood.

No one seemed to be living in the apartment. A thick layer of dust covered the tables and windowsills. The authorities had forgotten about this place. Many dossiers had been pilfered and burned during the revolution and, apparently, so had the government listing of Boris's apartment.

When he returned to the living room, he found the defector sitting on the couch, smoking a cigarette.

"You lit a cigarette? There might have been someone in here." Hefflin seethed.

"Whose place is this?" the defector asked. "A high-ranking official, by the looks of it."

"An old friend." Hefflin picked up the phone receiver but found no dial tone. At least the telephone department realized no one had paid the bill.

"We'll spend a few hours here, until I decide how to bring you in," Hefflin said. "Hopefully, the KGB will give up searching for you, if that's who they were."

"This exfiltration is becoming a catastrophe," the defector raised his voice. "You don't understand. I have vital information, critical to the survival of your agency. You cannot treat me like this."

"Critical to the Agency's survival? Does the Agency know this?"

"I told them, but seeing how things are turning out, they apparently did not take me seriously. They sent an amateur."

The defector put out his cigarette in the ashtray and stood. "I hope this bungled operation is not typical of the CIA. And you should use the proper term. The KGB no longer exists. The foreign intelligence service is now the SVR." He stomped into one of the bedrooms and slammed the door.

It will always be the KGB for me.

Hefflin lit a cigarette as his eyes drifted to the antique dining room set that Hefflin had grown up with and that his father had sold to Boris when the family had emigrated from Romania. It still stood in Boris's old apartment, shrouded by memories of his childhood that hung like cobwebs.

CHAPTER TWO

Bucharest 1966

He hid under the table, the embroidered tablecloth that hung down almost to the floor making him practically invisible. There he would play with his toys until he heard the footsteps, the women's voices, and saw the painted toenails that would pass by his hideout—red, pink, orange, like lollipops. The women would enter the last room, his father's office, and the moans would soon begin, low and deep, quickly followed by high-pitched screams. His mother told him not to pay any attention to them, that the women were sick and his father was making them well. He hummed to himself so he wouldn't hear those agonizing cries, while continuing to play with his toys.

After some time had passed, the doors would open and his mother would come out pushing a metal cart on wheels. On top of it lay a shiny basin from which protruded several long, metal instruments. She'd roll the basin to the kitchen then return to his father's office and accompany the woman out. Sometimes his mother made coffee for the woman and they'd sit at the table under which he hid, the painted toenails almost touching him.

But this one particular afternoon, a few minutes after the woman left their apartment, he heard a pounding at the door. For a brief moment his parents stood frozen, silent, as if they could pretend no one was home. Then his mother raced to close the kitchen door where she'd rolled the metal cart with the shiny basin.

When his father opened the front door, he saw three policemen in uniform.

His parents stood aside while the policemen walked directly to his father's office as if they knew exactly where to go. When they opened the door he could see bloody sheets on the floor. Another policeman rolled out the shiny basin from the kitchen, then lifted one of the long instruments, its tip red with blood.

"Doctor, I have to inform you that you are under arrest," the policeman said.

His mother burst into tears. His father kissed her, hugged him, then put on his jacket and walked out with the policemen. After a while his mother stopped crying and started cleaning the office and washing all the instruments.

His father returned two hours later and said they just had him fill out some forms, then told him to return in three days for a hearing. His mother said they needed a lawyer. How about Trent, the lawyer who lived downstairs? His father shrugged. What was Trent going to do? The evidence was all there.

Three days later his father put on his coat, kissed him and his mother, and walked out. Several hours later his father returned wearing a big smile.

"A most extraordinary thing happened," his father said. "Trent and I are standing before the judge, the prosecutor is ready to present his case, when a man I've never seen before walks into the courtroom. He has the bearing of someone important. He goes straight up to the judge, whispers something in his ear, and the judge's face grows pale. The man then just turns around and walks out. The next moment the judge pounds the gavel and says, 'Case dismissed due to insufficient evidence.' The prosecutor stands up to object that he hasn't even presented his case yet, but the judge is already walking back to his chambers. And that was it."

His mother dropped into a chair and crossed herself three times. "Miracles can happen even in communist Romania."

CHAPTER THREE

Bucharest

April 1993

The memory had come as a flash, a mote of time. His father was never bothered by the police again. No one ever spoke of that incident, as if it had never happened. From the intel that later passed his desk, he learned that all forms of contraception had been outlawed in Romania during Ceausescu's reign. The dictator had wanted to increase the Romanian population, but birth rates continued to plummet. No one wanted to bring up children in that cauldron of hell. Abortion, though illegal, had become the only option, a routine in every woman's life. He remembered that his cousin, Irina, had once told him that she had had twenty-two abortions that she could remember. Twenty-two, and she was still in the prime of life. He wondered what the faithful in America would say to that.

Hefflin placed the gun on the night table of the second bedroom and stretched out on the bed. He needed to concentrate on the mess he was in, and figure out how to get this insolent defector out of the country. How had everything gone so wrong? The KGB knew the location of the pickup as well as the alternate rendezvous points. The Agency had preset rescue sites throughout Bucharest, the choice based on proximity. Whoever blew this operation, it wasn't an accident.

He slept for a couple of hours like a baby, meaning that he woke up every few minutes, his nightmares replaying the events of that night. When he woke up for the last time, he heard movement in the apartment. He picked up his gun and slowly opened the door. The noise emanated from the kitchen—footsteps and sounds of clanging china. When he reached the door, gun in hand, he found the defector sitting at the kitchen table sipping from a cup.

"I found some Russian tea, old, but drinkable," the defector said. He was fully dressed in a wrinkled, oversized gray suit and gray tie—the uniform of the communist apparatchiks.

Hefflin re-inserted his gun in the small of his back, sprinkled some tea in a cup from the open can, and poured some hot water from the steaming kettle.

"What plans have you come up with?" the defector asked. "There will be SVR at the airports, train stations, and borders. I do not look forward to a jab of ricin from an umbrella."

The Russian was referring to Georgi Ivanov Markov, a Bulgarian dissident who had been murdered by the Bulgarian Secret Service with an umbrella that shot a pellet containing ricin, a deadly poison.

"No airports or train stations," Hefflin said. "I'm betting they expect us to drive to Hungary."

The defector smirked. "With what car? You blew up the nice one we had."

Hefflin felt the urge to smack the arrogant little prick across the mouth, but elected to finish his tea.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Hefflin said. "Just be ready to hop into the car."

The defector spread his arms. "As you can see, I am ready now."

"Clean up the place before you go, including the kitchen." He said good-bye to Boris's prized apartment and the years of memories hiding in its shadows, which Hefflin wished he could garner for himself. "Wait inside the doorway downstairs. When you see me pull up, jump in."

"Da, da, I know the routine."

Hefflin returned forty minutes later sitting in the back seat of a white Skoda, two men in front. The defector opened the back door and got in.

"Who are these men?" the defector asked, as if insulted that strangers had been involved in the operation without his approval.

"Friends of ours," Hefflin said. "Hungarians."

"Balzary?" the defector's voice rose.

"You know Balzary?"

"The Hungarian chief of station? Everyone knows him. A wonderful man. Too good for this shithole of a country."

Hefflin bit his lip. This is my shithole of a country, you KGB scum.

"At least you found a newer car this time," the Russian added. "Please do not blow it up again."

"So this is your package," the driver smirked. He had a Romanian accent. "You should teach him some manners."

"I'm just the babysitter," Hefflin said. "Just get us to your embassy in one piece."

"No problem." The driver chuckled.

Hefflin had called Balzary, his friend from the days of the revolution and a fellow Harvard alum. He had decided to avoid the American embassy now that the operation had been compromised, and the KGB was on the alert for them. They would probably be watching it, maybe even with snipers.

"I'm in the middle of a blown operation," Hefflin had told Balzary from a payphone. "Need immediate pickup."

Balzary hadn't asked any questions. A team met Hefflin a half hour later and drove back to Boris's apartment to pick up the defector. Balzary's immediate reaction didn't surprise Hefflin, for the Hungarian had proven his friendship during the revolution, even saving his life from a Middle Eastern sniper.

They now drove mostly via side streets, avoiding traffic, which was beginning to pick up now that the sun was rising. The Hungarian embassy was about twenty minutes away, and he worried that they would be intercepted. He didn't know how many personnel the KGB had devoted to stopping this defector, or if they had paid off the local police to be on the lookout for them.

When they turned onto Strada Georges Clemenceau and passed by the Romanian Athenaeum, a warmth spread over him. He remembered his parents bringing him to the famed concert hall as a child, when he had been so captivated by the beauty of the building that he hardly heard the orchestra. Opened in 1888, the neoclassical structure was designed by the French architect Albert Galleron. Ionic columns guarded the entrance, a circular dome hovered above the hall like a halo, frescos depicting important events in Romanian history covered its internal walls, and an expanse of marble, upon which he would slide, formed the floors. The building radiated an image of a Greek temple.

As they sped down Strada Rosetti, his memory already fading, they passed a car with two men parked on the side of the road, then, an instant, in which Hefflin made eye contact with the driver. The car screeched and followed. Within minutes a second car burst out of a side street and blocked the road. Balzary's man veered onto the sidewalk, then took a sudden turn into another side street. The two cars followed.

"Don't worry. I'm a native of this city," the driver yelled.

Ahead Hefflin now saw a boulevard with traffic going in both directions—the early morning commute. Their driver stepped on the gas.

"What are you doing, are you crazy?" the defector cried.

Their car plunged through the traffic, over the divider, and into the oncoming lanes. Automobiles screeched to a halt, some sliding into each other, others crashing into parked cars.

"Ha! Our car has steel-belted tires," the driver yelled, "and a super-charged engine."

Hefflin saw the two cars following them try the same maneuver. One crashed into an oncoming car and the other stopped before it reached the boulevard. They now took another turn the wrong way down a one-way street, but another car appeared at the other end. Balzary's man flashed his lights. The oncoming car accelerated toward them.

"Where the fuck did he come from?" the driver cursed. "Put your heads down. The body is bulletproof, but the windows are not."

He accelerated toward the oncoming car, a game of chicken. At the last moment they veered onto the sidewalk. As the two cars passed each other, the driver and his sidekick slouched down into their seats. Hefflin pushed the defector flat in the back seat and covered him with his own body. Three shots rang out. The side windows burst, shards sprinkled Hefflin's back.

"We're a block away," the driver called out. "Hold on. It'll be a short landing."

Hefflin raised his head enough to see the gates of the embassy held open by Hungarian security men. Then Hefflin spotted it, another car speeding perpendicular to theirs, aiming to T-bone them. Balzary's man accelerated, heading straight for the open gate. The other car barreled toward them, ten feet away now. Just as their car entered the gate the other car swished by them and pulled off their rear bumper. The tires shrieked, their car twisted, slid sideways, and came to a stop a few inches from a wall.

"I told you it would be a short landing," the driver said with a chuckle. "All in one piece?"

Aberjan Balzary awaited with open arms and a bottle of *tsuika*, the traditional plum brandy of Romanians and Hungarians.

"I don't want to know how you fucked up your operation or even what kind of operation it was," Balzary declared. "And I certainly don't want to know if it had anything to do with that explosion, which woke up half of Bucharest a couple of hours ago and sent two KGB operatives to the hospital."

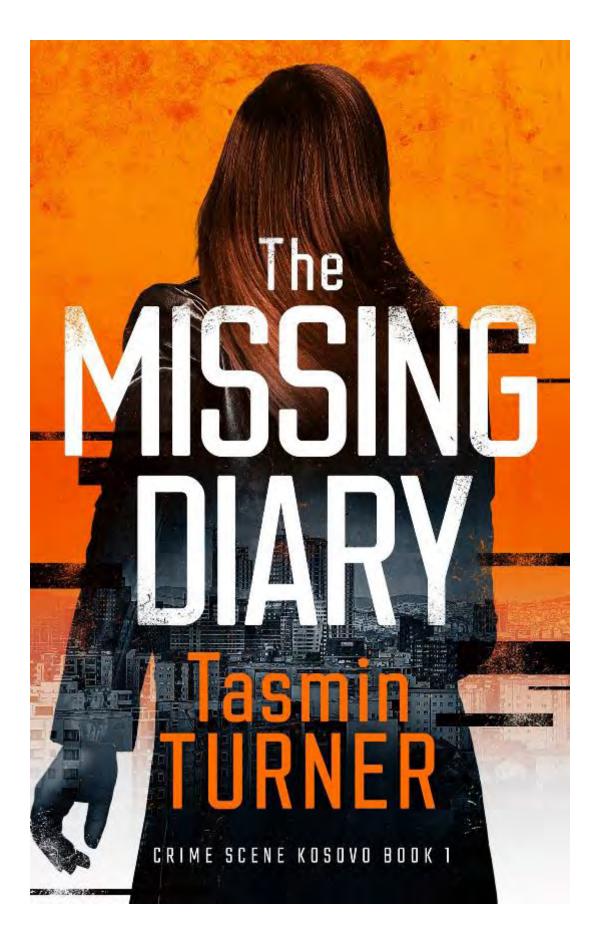
"Good, because I couldn't tell you anyway," Hefflin said. "How the hell are you going to get us to the airport is the question."

"Easy. Nobody messes with official embassy cars, especially those carrying military brass. Your people should have thought of that."

"I was told it was a baby-sitting operation," Hefflin smirked.

"No such thing in this country, even if it's an ally now," Balzary said. "And your Bucharest station is barely able to keep up. They're depending more than ever on our service, but that's another story. We'll need another time to catch up."

Balzary ordered two military uniforms and two diplomatic passports to be created. Within a couple of hours Hefflin and the defector were sporting the uniforms of Hungarian colonels while riding in an official Hungarian embassy limousine with flags flaring, being driven to Otopeni Airport. Hefflin had decided to return to Langley with the defector to figure out how this operation had been so badly blown. They were waved through passport check and boarded the American military plane without further incident. As the plane took off Hefflin had to admit that he owed Balzary yet another favor.



THE MISSING DIARY (CRIME SCENE KOSOVO, BOOK 1) BY TASMIN TURNER

Hidden words, forbidden love, and danger around every corner.

When lawyer Kit Chase loses her job, a three-month job with an international law team in postconflict Kosovo seems like the perfect distraction from the boring comfort of her life—and fiancé in New Zealand. But with her first case, hunting down the head of an organized crime group responsible for the politically motivated sexual assault on a local woman, Kit realizes the conflict in Kosovo is far from over. And she's right in the middle of it.

Kit finds herself caught up in a dangerous investigation and increasingly attracted to the Russian liaison officer, Sergei Sokolov, who's involved in the case. A diary kept by a former Kosovo policewoman holds the key to convicting the crime boss. However, the ruthless killer will stop at nothing to keep the diary hidden, and no one is safe, including Kit and her team.

Her life in New Zealand seems further and further away as a war rages around her. But in a country divided by political intrigue and religious tension, friends can be enemies, and enemies can be friends, and trusting the wrong person can be deadly.

"The first in a series, Tasmin Turner's THE MISSING DIARY (Crime Scene Kosovo Book 1) is a satisfying thriller, confidently written with moments of excellent high stakes drama." *-Kent Lane for IndieReader*

Paperback: 9781991192417 / \$20.55 eBook: ASIN: BoBWBTFMNT / 9781991192400 Audiobook: ASIN: BoCHTY856W / BN ID: 2940159523594 Pub Date: February 22, 2023 Publisher: Wish Books, https://www.wish-books.com/crime-scene-kosovo-series Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/dp/199119241X

TASMIN TURNER has a passion for writing thrilling legal dramas set in locations where she has lived and worked. She has several university degrees including in law, politics, and international relations. She has experienced life first-hand in the places that she writes about, including Kosovo and the Balkans.

She is currently living in New Zealand and writes under a pen name for privacy. As well as writing, she enjoys volunteering for causes that she supports, such as rehabilitation of native bird species. She keeps up her European language skills, such as French and German, and enjoys frequenting the wonderful local cafes in the heartland of New Zealand. <u>https://www.facebook.com/CrimeSceneKS/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

St Heliers Auckland, New Zealand

"You can't be serious," said Xander as he tossed the letter down. The blue logo smacked of it being official. His normally relaxed features were taut. "You're not going."

"Don't tell me what to do." Caitlin's bright blue eyes blazed. "This is my big opportunity," she said, desperate for a new role now she no longer worked as an associate at the Crown Law Prosecutor. "I won't get another chance to be an international prosecutor."

"*Assistant* prosecutor," Xander corrected as he placed the coffee maker on the stove. His large brown eyes with long lashes, magnified by the glasses he wore, watched his fiancée Caitlin, better known as Kit, with caution.

"This could be my only opportunity to work abroad. Maybe get a major war crimes prosecution under my belt. They won't offer a position like this again."

"It's too dangerous." He pointed towards her, seeing ambition in her eyes. "And you know it."

"I'll be fine," she replied dismissively. "I'm always fine." She looked away from Xander and studied the letter again.

Seeing Kosovo appear on a TV news item, Xander picked up the remote control, and sound burst into the room.

"During the 1998–1999 Kosovo conflict, ethnic Albanians opposed the ethnic Serbian government of the former Yugoslavia in Belgrade. Kosovo broke away and sought to set up an independent state, which Serbia did not recognize. Allied forces drove Serbian forces back following a humanitarian crisis. The bombing stopped in June 1999. But a year later, there's still much for international organizations to do here."

Images flashed over the screen of derelict, bombed-out buildings and refugees streaming out of Kosovo. Grim women and children traipsed along country roads with what luggage they could carry. Groups of men accompanied them, carrying weapons and belongings, their faces bitten by the harsh weather. The screen switched to other images of fighters masked in balaclavas and special forces uniforms and toting automatic weapons. Another scene showed a convoy of tanks rolling into Kosovo.

"What did I just say?" said Xander. "It's not safe."

Kit remained by the kitchen table, where light streamed in through the large glass doors leading to the patio, watching the news segment.

"Jacob Mueller, former German ambassador, now heads the Organization for International Development and Coordination in Kosovo, the OIDC." The TV anchor turned to a dignified older man, his features set in a concerned expression.

"Mr. Mueller, as head of the OIDC in Kosovo, can you tell our viewers about the challenges you face?"

Mueller fixed the interviewer with an appraising look. "The OIDC is here to end the humanitarian emergency and put Kosovo on the road to development. We're doing this with the help of the European military and police force, EUFOR. Strategic infrastructure projects are essential to help get Kosovo back on its feet. We support peace by coordinating with the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in

Europe, and other partners."

The pair watched until the programme moved to another topic, and Kit muted the television

again.

"You've never been to a war zone," Xander argued. "You have no idea what you're letting yourself in for, let alone the crime and violence in Kosovo." He wiped his hands and came closer to her.

"Nah," Kit said. "All that's exaggerated. Anyway, it can't be much worse than working in a downtown law firm. You should have seen the bloodshed around the water cooler," she added with a smirk. "Professional reputations were on the line because of office gossip."

Frustrated by her indifference to the dangers, he tempered his approach. "I realise you didn't enjoy working there, but this could be even worse, honey," he pleaded as he rubbed her shoulders.

Xander was right. She hadn't enjoyed her job, but otherwise life was pretty good if she was honest. House-sitting her aunt's restored Victorian villa, which had been in the family for three generations, while she cruised the South Pacific also gave Kit time to enjoy sailing in Auckland's generous coastal waters. But with Xander only working mornings at a suburban accounting firm while studying part-time for his master's in business administration, it'd be ages before they could afford a place of their own.

"I need you here with me." He kissed her neck above the camouflage T-shirt she wore. Still damp from her evening exercise, she pulled away, her auburn ponytail swinging.

She felt energised after her part self-defense, part aerobics. and part street fighting class she took to learn Krav Maga, with a military veteran, to keep fit and focussed.

"It's only for a short time. The letter says the contract is for three months with the possibility of extension. And the job pays well. This'll help us save for the deposit on a house of our own. I haven't been able to find work for months. This is my chance to prove myself."

Trying to avoid a full-blown fight, he reached out again to stroke her hair, lifted a handful to his face, and inhaled. It smelled of candied violets blended with vanilla that lingered from her fragrance. "Foxy lady, don't be upset with me," he pleaded as he softened his voice.

She turned to face him. "I'm not upset with you, but I have to do this. I wish you wouldn't call me that, by the way."

She remembered when they first met. He'd been at the same yacht regatta in the lead-up to the America's Cup sailing off the New Zealand coast. In his early thirties, Xander Willis looked the epitome of the boy next door: round face, dimpled chin, and a wide, friendly smile framed by a full head of glossy chestnut curls. He'd seemed the perfect fit. Then.

"I don't understand how you could walk away from the grand lifestyle we have here to go somewhere like Kosovo," he said in a voice that had hardened.

"Perhaps life is too easy here," she said, looking around at the antique silver tea service that sat on the embroidered lace tablecloth. A bunch of pink and white peonies graced a large crystal vase on the table.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you ever feel you have to make a difference? To be connected with what's going on in the world? And feel like it matters?"

"I already know what's going on out there, and I don't want to connect to it. You shouldn't either." He paused and thought for a moment. "What does your mother think?"

"I haven't told her yet, but I expect her to support me."

Kit's mother Rosalyn had brought up the Kit and her sister single-handed. Rosalyn had persuaded the court that their father, Vernon Chase, should not have unsupervised access to the girls. He lost interest in their family after that, and they heard he had moved to Australia for a position as a defense contractor.

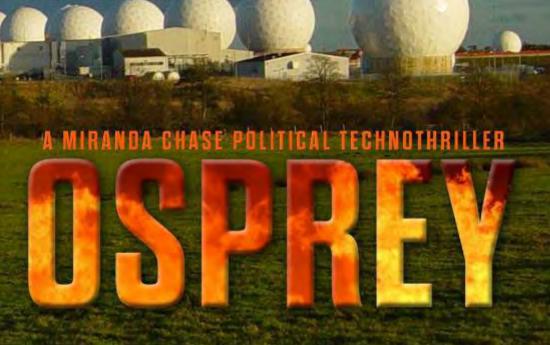
"You've inherited your father's craziness," he snapped.

Kit glared at Xander as he sat down on the couch and turned up the sound on the news. It was showing airstrikes in the Balkans again. She grasped the envelope and marched out of the living room. "I'm going to look at flights," she said. "They need me in Pristina as soon as possible."

Xander was startled when he heard hissing on the stove. The coffee pot had boiled over, leaving spilt coffee sizzling on the glowing element.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR N. L. BUCHMAN

"Tom Clancy fans open to a strong female lead will clamor for more." -Publishers Weekl<u>y.</u> Drone



OSPREY (MIRANDA CHASE, BOOK 13) BY M. L. BUCHMAN USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Russia teeters on the brink of collapse, spoiling for a battle to end all wars. All it needs? One thin excuse.

World War I began with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. World War II launched with the invasion of Poland. As for Russia's invasion of Ukraine...

A Russian flyby of an American CMV-22 Osprey tiltrotor goes desperately wrong over the North Sea. Will the tipping point for World War III break the moment a favored daughter of the Oligarchy goes down in flames?

When the NSA's secret military base at Menwith Hill in the UK needs specialized expertise, they call in Miranda Chase. She and her elite team of air-crash investigators must avert a crisis like none before. A crisis that unravels her past, batters at her autism, and threatens to crush her team in the ultimate grinder of East vs. West.

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"If you aren't a fan, you will be. If you are already of fan of M.L. Buchman, you NEED to read this book." **–Reba K.**

Paperback: 9781637211243 / \$19.99 eBook: 9781637211236 / \$6.99 Pub Date: Sept 26, 2023 Publisher: Buchman Bookworks Buy Links: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/osprey-m-l-buchman/1143729307 https://books.apple.com/us/book/osprey/id6450840976 https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/osprey-6 https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082MGCN9X USA Today and Amazon #1 Bestseller **M. L. "MATT" BUCHMAN** has written 70+ novels, 125 short stories, and 50 read-by-author audiobooks. From the very beginning, his powerful female heroines insisted on putting character first, then a great adventure.

Publishers Weekly said of his Miranda Chase series: "Tom Clancy fans open to a strong female lead will clamor for more." And about his military romantic thrillers: "Like Robert Ludlum and Nora Roberts had a book baby." He is also the founder and editor of Thrill Ride – the Magazine.

A project manager with a geophysics degree, he's designed and built houses, flown and jumped out of planes, solo-sailed a 50' sailboat, and bicycled solo around the world... and designs quilts. He and his wife presently live on the North Shore of Massachusetts. <u>https://www.mlbuchman.com/</u>

(A list of characters and aircraft may be found at: <u>https://mlbuchman.com/people-places-planes</u>)

PROLOGUE

July 17, 1996 8:17 p.m.

The sun hung low among the towers of New York City casting final shadows across JFK International Airport.

At 2017:18 Eastern Daylight Time, Trans World Airlines Flight 800 from New York to Paris was instructed to hold short of JFK's Runway 22R. A landing 757 had kicked up some heavy wake turbulence that would take half a minute to subside. The 747-100, with two hundred and ten passengers and eighteen crew members aboard, held their position for a minute and three seconds.

While idling at the edge of the runway, the cockpit flight crew remained focused on completing the pre-takeoff checklist. The flight hadn't gotten off to a good start and the four men were all glad to finally be on the move.

The 747 had landed from Athens on schedule at 1631 hours. For cabin comfort, the APU— Auxiliary Power Unit, a small engine used as a generator to power the plane's systems—was kept powered up to run two of its three air conditioners to mitigate the heavy heat of the July sun beating down from the partly cloudy skies over New York.

Three of the crew had over sixty thousand hours combined flight experience, much of it in the 747. The fourth was relatively new to the 747, a trainee flight engineer. At twenty-four years old, he had over two thousand hours of flight time as an engineer, but only thirty of those were in a 747. His trainer on this flight was two years from retirement and did his best not to think how much he'd miss the big plane that had dominated his forty-year career.

Over the previous two and a half hours, the plane had been emptied, serviced, and reloaded with passengers and their luggage.

Rather than departing for Charles de Gaulle at 1900 hours as scheduled, there had been multiple delays.

First, a service vehicle had broken down, blocking the plane at Gate 27 until it could be towed

clear.

Once it was clear, there was a further delay as gate personnel insisted that a piece of luggage had to be pulled from the hold because the passenger hadn't boarded. Eventually the luggage and its owner were both located. The owner sat already aboard the plane, seriously considering several scotches once they were aloft. The overexcited high school French class looking forward to their first trip to France were boisterously annoying. It was going to be a long damn flight and scotch was definitely in order. Despite the delays, he'd still be in time for his lunch meeting. The French would just have to take him in whatever state he was in.

The bag was returned to the hold.

Of only slightly more concern, the captain's weather radar wasn't working properly. Maintenance marked it as inoperative and, per regulation, ordered service at the next opportunity within ten days. The copilot's radar was operative, so the flight was finally cleared for departure.

At 2018:21, the tower transmitted final wind conditions and cleared TWA 800 for departure. They rolled down Runway 22R and lifted into the air well before midfield as they carried only two-thirds capacity. The final fuel load had been adjusted downward to avoid carrying any extra weight across the Atlantic. As a result, the large central wing tank sat mostly empty.

Over the next eleven minutes, as air traffic control routed the flight east to higher flight levels through the typical clutter of jet traffic, there was only one unusual comment captured by the Cockpit Voice Recorder.

At 2029:15, the captain remarked, "Look at that crazy fuel flow indicator on Number Four...see that?"

There was no follow-up comment captured by the CVR.

A minute and fifty-seven seconds subsequent to that remark, at 2031:12 after the flight was cleared to climb to fifteen thousand feet, the CVR abruptly ceased operation. For just over a tenth of a second before it did, a *very loud sound* was recorded.

It stopped recording because a frayed fuel gauge wire, probably chafed by a sagging air duct, sparked. The spark occurred inside the nearly empty central wing tank, now primarily filled with a highly combustible fuel/air mixture. The mixture had been further heated and concentrated during the overlong wait on the tarmac by the heat exchangers for the air conditioning units—mounted directly below the tank.

When the fuel/air mixture ignited, an intense explosion sliced the airplane in two, immediately ahead of the wings. This severed the wiring to the flight recorders as well as killing many of the passengers instantly—mostly by snapping their necks. Those who survived in the main body of the aircraft died from inhaling the burning air rolling through the cabin like a roiling wall of death.

Approximately five seconds later, the nose of the plane—including the flight deck and first-class passenger section—broke free and began its long, eighty-three-second fall to the ocean. Based on ocean water found in their lungs, some of these passengers may have survived long enough to attempt a breath after the impact with the Atlantic off East Moriches, Long Island, New York.

The main fuselage and wings of the 747, abruptly lighter in the nose, tipped steeply upward. With the engines still driving ahead at climb thrust, it ascended an additional three thousand feet over the next thirty-eight seconds before the wings broke free from the shattered central wing box that had enclosed the fuel tank. No one aboard remained alive as it too began its long tumble toward the ocean.

During the next four years, the largest investigation in the history of the National Transportation Safety Board recovered over ninety-five percent of the debris and all the bodies from the Atlantic. The plane was reassembled in a hangar piece by piece to determine the causes. Over forty recommendations were sent to the FAA by the NTSB, including several changes to all 747 wiring harnesses.

The most important? All future jets—civilian, military, by every nation—would eventually be redesigned to pump inert nitrogen into their fuel tanks as they empty to prevent the accumulation of

a highly explosive fuel/air mixture. With that single design change recommendation, it is estimated that the National Transportation Safety Board has saved tens of thousands of lives globally.

July 17, 1996 8:55 p.m. CIA Headquarters Langley, Virginia

"Turn on the news."

Ron Klemens looked up from the file that was causing him such misery to glare at his assistant as he hustled into Ron's office.

Bert ignored the glare and hurried over to the television.

Ron must be losing his touch.

The set came alive with a bright red *Breaking News* banner. Some passenger jet had crashed into the ocean less than thirty minutes ago.

What the hell was it with planes going down all of a sudden? His two top agents, he resisted the urge to look down at the file spread before him, had gone down yesterday under conditions that could never be revealed. How was he supposed to explain their deaths?

Even as the Director of the Russia Desk for the CIA, one didn't stroll into the Director's office and announce such a thing without having a solution already in place. The bastard was too busy declassifying the Cold War and damaging the CIA in all sorts of creative ways. Ron couldn't fight back, but he couldn't let *this* get out. No, he wasn't going to the Director until this one was locked down and fully in the bag.

Wait. Did he have to explain it?

He flipped to the front of the file. Damn it. They had a kid, insurance policies, property, any number of loose threads that could never be allowed to be questioned.

The real tragedy? Nothing could be done to plug the massive intelligence hole that their deaths created. They were irreplaceable.

He stared at the screen as dribs and drabs of information were gathered about the air crash. Explosion.

A dead 747 plunged into the water off Long Island.

A French class field trip on its way from JFK to Paris.

"Survivors?" the news anchor asked.

After an explosion high over the ocean? Ron thought the man should be shot for offering false hopes. Nothing but death and confusion would result.

If only he could hide his agents' deaths there, then—

"Bert!" he shouted so loudly that the man less than five feet away jumped.

"Sir?"

"Was the flight full?"

"What flight?"

Ron jabbed a finger toward the screen.

Bert twisted his head like that green Muppet frog-thing, first to the screen, then back. Then he glanced down at the file on Ron's desk that had been giving them both headaches all day.

He bolted for his desk.

He was back less than five minutes later, and he was smiling. "The flight wasn't full. Two hundred and ten people and about three hundred and sixty seats."

Ron felt like a bit of a ghoul as he returned the smile—just another day at the CIA. "Make it two

hundred and *twelve*. Get them confirmed aboard. Alter paperwork, flight manifests, all of it. Fast, before they can absolutely confirm the number."

"Assign seats. First class, I think. Fabricate some luggage and sink it in the recovery area..." Bert kept talking to himself as he hurried away. It was the kind of deep cover that the CIA had a whole department dedicated to creating.

TWA Flight 800 would now have two hundred and *twelve* passenger deaths, not two-ten. The agent's bodies should be repatriated within twenty-four hours. Divers from a Special Activities Division team could quietly insert them into the wreckage, even snap their seatbelts.

He could always wait for the next director before reporting it so that it stayed hidden; the current idiot couldn't last much longer. If he was careful, that director might well be him. Then he could add their stars to the Memorial Wall with no one in the wider world any wiser.

Ron flipped to the first page of Sam and Olivia's file. The emergency contact was some live-in nanny. Close enough.

He dialed the number and listened while it rang in the hell-and-gone Pacific Northwest. As the call was answered, Ron glanced down to find the surviving kid's name: Miranda.

CHAPTER ONE

2,349' (716m) High on Great Shunner Fell North Yorkshire, England Today

"Just look at that."

Miranda Chase did. Again. She still failed to feel the excitement in Andi's voice.

She did feel the cold of the quartering headwind that had been lashing her face all morning. Was her right cheek tingling from incipient frostbite due to windchill on a sunny day—or simply from being battered for the last four hours?

They had spent the whole morning climbing the rocky path up the south face of Great Shunner Fell in England's Yorkshire Dales National Park. Nothing here grew higher than her knees. No bushes or trees. Only scrub grass, brown bracken not yet recovered from winter, sandstone rock (most of it converted to tall walls to border sheep pastures), and the beaten-down footpath often thick with mud.

Many of the stretches were worn calf-deep, which made the grass thigh high rather than knee high. Other stretches were paved with sandstone or limestone blocks, she couldn't tell which, a meter square and ten centimeters thick. She'd measured several and found little variation.

She pulled out a notebook and added Hydrochloric Acid to her list—after she'd turned her back to the wind to stop the panicked flapping of the pages. If she ever came back, she'd be sure to bring a dropper bottle of it. Even a few drops of HCl would fizz on limestone but not on sandstone offering a definitive identification.

Miranda then attempted to calculate how many people must have walked these paths to wear the trench she trudged along. An average human weight would be easy enough to assume, courtesy of the FAA. They provided average combined weight for passengers and carry-on luggage based on gender and seasonality (five pounds more clothes in winter) for aircraft loading estimates.

Should she downgrade the FAA's allocation? Only the more fit people would attempt this hike. Though hikers would be carrying packs: lighter day packs like their own or heavier packs for those hiking self-contained around the four-day circuit of the Herriot Way. No, she'd use the FAA standards: males at a hundred and ninety pounds and women at one-seventy-four. That was inclusive of clothing and typical carry-on weights.

Ratio of males to females? Based on their own group, one-to-three. Mike and Holly were already at the top of the peak. She and Andi were yet a hundred meters from the top. But were they typical? Perhaps a one-to-one ratio would be better. Or were men more likely to set out on the fifty-two-mile walk? She'd have to ask Mike, he understood people better.

Without soil density measurements, calculating the impact of each step upon soil compaction or erosion would be—

"Is something wrong?" Andi had come back down the trail to stand in front of her.

Her hiking pants had a pocket for her phone along the outside of her thigh. That looked very convenient. If she did that, then she'd be able to carry additional items in her vest. "I need pants like yours."

Andi looked down at them, then back at her.

"That's what's wrong?"

"Oh, no." After Miranda had explained the problem with soil erosion and trail-wear mathematics, Andi offered one of her understanding smiles.

"It's been worn down as much as it has by people enjoying themselves as they walk along. Maybe that's all we really need to know?"

Miranda always marveled at Andi's clear view of the world. She herself was far too likely to overcomplicate things. She never remembered to tell her autism to calm down when in the midst of overthinking something. Andi now did that for her.

Hands clasped, they walked up to join Holly and Mike, their boots shushing along together through the taller grass that carpeted the top and blurred the final part of the trail into invisibility.

The top of Great Shunner Fell was marked by a crossed pair of stone walls, high enough to block the wind and let her assess that she wasn't suffering from incipient frostbite. That appeared to be the one great constant of the Yorkshire Dales, a powerful wind. It had measured fifteen to twenty knots, gusting to thirty, since they'd climbed out of the ancient town of Hawes. During each major gust catching her along the steep path, all she'd been able to do was brace in position and wait it out. To lift a foot was to be sent staggering aside.

The air reminded her of home in the Pacific Northwest. Most places she'd been, the air had distinct scents. Of course, at plane crash investigation sites, it was typically the sharp tang of spilled kerosenebased fuels or the char of the fire that had followed. Thankfully, the roasted meat smell of corpses in post-crash fire typically dissipated by the time her investigation team arrived.

In Washington, DC, at NTSB Headquarters, the wind felt as if it had been breathed and rebreathed by every person from the outermost Caribbean islands and up the whole East Coast, starting at the Florida beaches. Humidity and a greasiness like too much sunscreen hung on the air—she never felt clean in DC. At home, the wind off the Pacific Ocean tasted as if it had never been breathed by anyone, scrubbed clean and born anew before sweeping down from the Gulf of Alaska.

The Dales air had that same quality, fresh and clean. No scent of ocean or grass or the sheep they had walked past. That was the other great constant aside from the wind: sheep. Thousands of them. There were no sheep here atop Great Shunner Fell, but she could see whole hillsides dotted white ranging off in every direction.

Walking around the crossed stone walls, Miranda looked in each direction to assess the countryside. Above hung a blue sky peppered with small clusters of scudding clouds, several of which had dispensed a few raindrops on them before hurrying away to the east.

At ground level to the southwest, there was a small clump of trees in a deep valley—*dale* she corrected herself. Around here they were called dales. Just as a hill was a *fell*. To her ear they sounded backwards. A dale sounded high and a fell low, but the ancient bards of Old Norse had never asked for her opinion.

Nothing but vibrant green grass-covered dales and fells were visible along the other seven points of the compass—she resisted the urge to inspect the sixteen or thirty-two points of the compass as being excessively OCD. She patted herself on the back.

"What was that one for?" Mike was the one who'd taught her to remember to congratulate herself every time she made progress on any task—but especially on living better with her own autism with a literal pat on the back.

Andi often had to point out when she'd achieved one, but she no longer had to remind Miranda to pat her back once she understood.

"I'm working on limiting excessive observation segmentation to improve speed of capturing an overview."

"Nice," Mike offered a nod and a smile.

Holly laughed. Her laughs were always friendly, or at least Miranda had chosen to decide so when they were directed at her, and were easy to join in.

"Well done, you," Andi whispered and squeezed her hand.

Miranda scanned the more distant horizon. Nothing but more dales and fells, green below yet still brown along the tops, geometrically crisscrossed by long stretches of rock walls dividing all of it into sheep pastures. The temperature a consistent fifty-three Fahrenheit—eleven-point-six *Centigrade.* She was in England after all. But the wind, still incongruously measured in miles per hour, hadn't slackened here at the peak of Great Shunner Fell. The wind chill factor kept them well bundled up.

"Why are we here again?"

"Vacation," Andi reminded her.

"I thought you said it was so that you didn't have to go to your family law firm's hundred-andsixtieth anniversary party. Aren't you and your mother getting along anymore?"

"No, we're fine. I guess. Finer than we've been since I was a kid, which isn't saying much. Besides, my grandmother bought out the Chens in 1952, renamed it Wu and Wu Law, and changed everything, including firing all the Chens. The whole anniversary thing is phony."

"But it's family. I don't have family anymore. Are you sure you shouldn't have gone to be with yours?"

Andi's face looked...Miranda pulled out her personal notebook and flipped to the emoji reference page...*pained*?

"We're on a vacation," Andi declared in a tone that Miranda didn't recognize but didn't feel inclined to argue with. Like it hurt Andi's throat or something.

"I've never had one of those before." Miranda tucked the notebook into the appropriate vest pocket. She'd done her best to prepare a vacation vest—based on her NTSB work vest because she had no other reference.

Some parts had converted well, like the notebooks and weather instrument. She'd brought along the Herriot Way trail guide and the OL 30 Ordnance Survey map, as well as installing it on her phone. The RSPB's bird guide and laminated quick ID card had only been marginally useful. Even with her binoculars, she'd only logged six species so far: crows, two gulls, ring-neck pheasant, blackbird, and one lone black-and-white wagtail, fishing along a stream in the first mile of the hike. Her sheep reference had only given her a single entry so far, the Swaledale with its white body and black-andwhite face.

"You've never been on a vacation?" Mike squinted at her as if surprised. Or perhaps it was against the wind. It was hard to tell because of the floppy beige sunhat he wore over his dark hair. Holly wore her Matilda's Australian soccer team ball cap over her own gold-blonde, which she'd recently hacked off again to shoulder-length with the kitchen shears. Holly looked rugged as ever. Despite the floppy hat, Mike still looked as if he belonged in an upscale hip bistro...*pub.*

There were benches on the inside of each corner formed by the stone cross.

They chose the angle of the crossed walls that faced the warm sun but protected them from the

wind. Wooden benches had been placed across stone supports built into the wall's structure. Mike and Holly were tall enough for their feet to touch the rocks below, she and Andi were left with their feet swinging in the air.

Miranda didn't know why *not* having a vacation would be unusual. There was always another crash, more information on a prior one, or older reports to study. The aircraft manufacturers also never stopped innovating, and each change required careful consideration and cataloging against a future investigation.

When still thirteen, she was supposed to have had a vacation, meeting her parents in Paris after her horse-riding camp was done. They'd gone ahead early but died when their plane went down.

"Well, Jon and I spent an extra forty-eight hours in Hawaii after a crash investigation, visiting the Air Force base mechanics and—"

"Not a vacay, mate." Holly's Australian accent thickened, which meant whatever she said next would be a tease. "When me and Mikey spent that week there, we spent it on the beaches—"

"And in the bedroom," Mike nudged her.

Holly nudged him back in a way that apparently meant something to the two of them. "Visited a volcano or two. Ate too much good food." She rubbed her stomach as if it yet bulged months after their trip. With Holly's workout schedule, that would be very unlikely mere *days* after their trip. She claimed it was the soldier in her who needed to always be ready to fight or fight. Apparently *flight* was not in the vocabulary of a former SASR soldier.

The top of Great Shunner Fell was at seven hundred and sixteen meters, barely a foothill to Washington State's Cascade Mountains. Her own Washington island rose to a hundred and fourteen meters if she didn't add on the fifty-meter-tall Douglas fir trees. Here atop the fell, the highest point was the head-high crisscross wall of rocks.

"I don't see any beaches, volcanoes, or places to eat food."

"This is more of a hiking vacation. And there's a pub in Keld, or at least there's a restaurant." Mike sounded less than certain.

The trip had come about because Miranda had mentioned she liked watching *All Creatures Great and Small.* She'd read all the James Herriot books, at least the parts about the animals, long before she first spoke at age six. They all watched it together. She wanted to fast forward to the animal parts on the show too, but Andi and the others had protested, leading to them watching each episode of the show in its entirety. She mostly worked on metallurgy reports during the people parts.

At times like that she missed Jeremy. Before he and Taz had left for Washington, DC, to work at NTSB headquarters and the Pentagon, she and Jeremy would often discuss technical details. Holly understood explosives and structure. Mike understood people. And Andi was an expert in helicopters and flight operations. But that left her alone when she had a technical question she wanted a second opinion on.

With Andi on the team, there'd been no need for Jeremy to remain, but that didn't stop her missing him. He would have taken solving the human-footprint-impact analysis of the hiking trail as a challenge. She looked down the path and felt...wistful?

She pulled out her emoji reference page, but none of them were labeled wistful. Besides, she didn't have a mirror to check her own expression for comparison. She tucked the notebook away.

But she'd enjoyed the television show, and Andi had decided that they should go out on Herriot's favorite walk. Now called the Herriot Way, it ran in four stages through the Yorkshire Dales, each leg—still discussed in miles, not kilometers—was twelve to thirteen miles long. The verticals were referred to in meters by most locals.

The English had a very peculiar system. Part metric and part imperial; the latter made her think of the Roman and the *Star Wars* empires at the same time. Even *she* knew that was silly—they used the Hellenic and metric systems respectively.

While still down low on the trail, they had passed occasional farms. Miranda had counted two

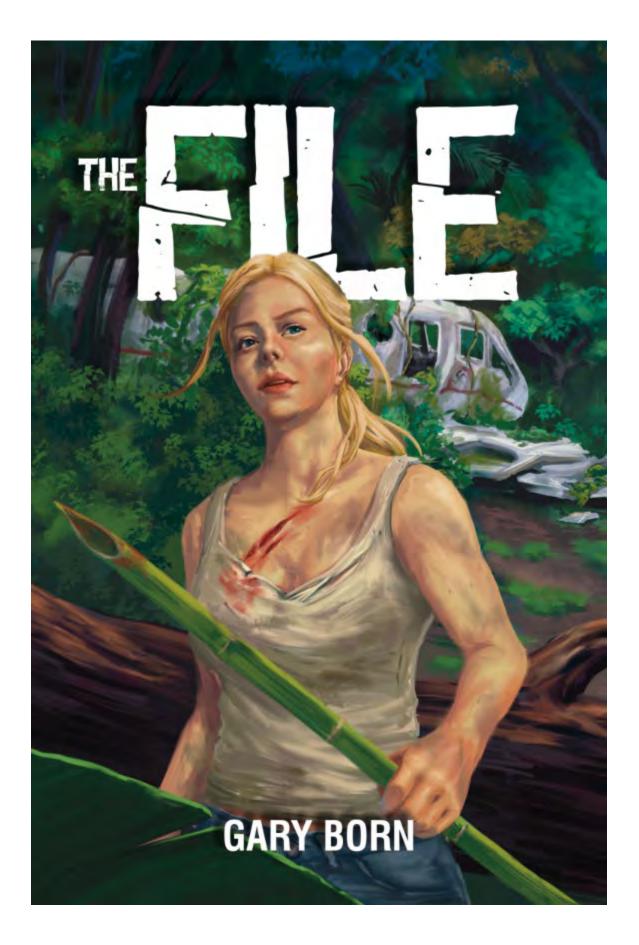
horses, still wearing heavy winter blankets, and one small herd of seventeen cows. Sheep, especially sheep with lambs, didn't hold still long enough to even estimate a count, but it had to be in the thousands.

The lambs almost always came in twins. Perhaps a lone lamb meant another had died. The thought made her feet heavier to pick up each time she saw a lone lamb—or perhaps it was the amount of mud glued to her hiking boots.

Whenever she started to tally, she'd discover a lamb hidden by the mother. Or a whole pile of them sleeping one on the other, abruptly springing up and racing to find their mothers, bouncing more like rabbits than running.

But *no* friendly veterinarians marched over the heath, offering worried looks but friendly smiles. Not a one who she could ask questions about treating the wild sheep and deer who shared her own island.

Miranda still didn't understand the point of their vacation.



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Hardcover: 9781592112050 / \$29.99 eBook: ASIN B0B72ZT3WL / \$9.99 Paperback: 9781592114207 / \$19.99 (May 14, 2024) Pub Date: April 28, 2023 Publisher: Histria Books (Addison & Highsmith) <u>https://histriabooks.com/</u> Buy Link US: <u>https://www.amazon.com/File-Gary-Born/dp/1592112056</u> Buy Link UK: <u>https://www.amazon.co.uk/File-Gary-Born/dp/1592112056</u>

GARY BORN is a distinguished international lawyer and best-selling author. He has represented countries and businesses in nearly 1,000 international disputes around the world, including cases involving Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Yemen. Mr. Born has also published widely on international law, including the leading commentaries on international arbitration and litigation. He has taught at universities in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa, including Harvard Law School, National University of Singapore and St. Gallen University in Switzerland. He lives in London, with two Maine Coons, and travels widely. *The File* is his first novel. <u>https://www.wilmerhale.com/en/people/gary-born</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Sara West

She looked across the lake as the sun began to set. Her eyes were grey, like the waves washing against the shore.

She stood at the window of the hotel room. The windowpanes were dirty, cracked in a few places and never repaired. Thick, rusted bars were anchored into wooden beams at the top and bottom of the window-frame. She looked between the bars, up and down the dusty road, for signs of the men who were hunting her. An old woman, returning home from the market, wrapped in a length of faded cloth, balanced a basket on her head as she picked her way past the potholes. But otherwise, the road was empty.

She opened the window and reached through the bars to close the shutters. They were weathered, with slats missing in a handful of places, and creaked as she pulled them shut. She closed the window and drew the curtain, shutting out the evening light.

She turned away from the window and walked across the room. The concrete floor was rough, and she could feel the grit beneath her feet. The room was nearly empty, the white-washed walls and ceiling barely visible in the half-light. A single cot with threadbare sheets stood against the wall. Mosquito netting hung from the ceiling above the bed, mended in a dozen places and streaked where guests had killed the insects that came in from the lake.

She had found the hotel earlier that day. It was all she needed—it took cash, no questions asked, and had a room with a sink and a mirror. The sink was chipped and missing one of the faucets. The mirror was older, with faded glass. A single bulb was mounted over the mirror and cast feeble yellow light into the darkness of the room.

She turned on the one faucet that still worked and washed her hands, using what was left of the bar of coarse soap to scrub away the mud from weeks in the jungle. When she finished, she dried her hands and opened the backpack that lay on the cot next to the sink. She took out the thick stack of papers that had almost cost her life, and laid it aside. She searched inside the pack, and found the candle and matches. She lit the candle and let wax drip onto the bedside table, before fixing the candle stick upright. Deeper in her pack, she found the medical kit, bright red with yellow Cyrillic lettering, and took out the iodine, bandages, and package with the sterilized needle, then arranged them on the table.

She looked into the mirror above the sink. The girl had thick blonde hair, tangled and dirty from the jungle, pulled back from high cheekbones, still lightly streaked with mud. Her eyes were almondshaped, half-blue, half-grey, wideset, and large. Their gaze was cold and wary, as if they were watching something in the distance. She looked away from the mirror, barely recognizing the reflection.

She wore jeans, torn in a half-dozen places and caked with dirt, rubbed deep into the creases. Her t-shirt was once white, but now grey and brown, mottled with white where her sweat had dried. On her left side, the cloth was dark-brown and stiff.

She took a breath and then lifted the t-shirt up, gently, over her left breast. The gash was twenty centimeters long, starting at the end of her collar bone and running diagonally down to the place where the swell of her breast began. It had been made by a machete, wielded by one of the men who was hunting her in the jungle. The man had barely missed her throat, as she wheeled, cat-like, away from his blade, gleaming silver in the moonlight, pivoting so that he almost missed her entirely. But he hadn't, and instead the tip of his blade had caught her, tracing a glistening slash across her left breast.

She looked back into the mirror, eyes locked in the faded glass, and let her fear rise. She let it wash over her, the way she had practiced, and then steadied herself, leaning against the sink. She put

aside the fear, and the sadness, that had stalked her through the jungle for the last three weeks. She picked up the iodine and drenched the wound above her breast, before swabbing it clean, trying to ignore the surge of pain that followed. There were no more painkillers. She had taken the last of the tablets the day before.

She opened the package that contained the needle, already threaded with a length of surgical thread. She held the tip in the candle's flame, then wiped it clean. She leaned forward further, hips pressed tightly against the sink, and held the top of the wound closed, then drew another breath. She poised the needle against her skin, on one side of the wound, before pushing it in, forcing the metal through her skin, watching the droplets of blood well up out of the puncture. Then she drew the needle slowly through that side of the wound, followed by the surgical thread, before pushing the point of the needle into the other side of the gash and forcing it back into her flesh. She could feel the thread slide through her skin as she pulled it tight, the knot tugging against the wound.

She stopped and leaned against the sink, bracing herself against the pain. Then she rested the tip of the needle against the side of the wound again, less than half a centimeter from the first stitch, and did it once more. She pulled the thread through her skin to finish the second stitch, feeling the pain bore its way through her breast. She stopped again for a moment, to wipe the sweat from her face and the blood from her fingers, then forced herself to take up the needle, and sew another stitch into her skin, and then another.

Twice, she almost cried out, the pain overwhelming her resolve. But each time she caught herself and leaned in against the edge of the sink, forcing herself to stop, to breathe, and, after a moment, to turn back to her task, eyes fixed on her wound in the mirror. She stopped after every few stitches, to dry her fingers on the towel. They were slippery with her blood, making it hard to push the needle through the sides of the wound. Halfway through her task, she had to re-thread the needle, with a fresh length of surgical thread, gleaming white against the blood on her fingers.

In all, it took nearly an hour. Forty minutes of gut-wrenching pain that clawed through her stomach, leaving her panting with exhaustion. Thirty stitches in all, spaced along the gash, closing it tightly, just the way she had learned in medical school. It wouldn't ever be pretty, but it would save her life, letting the wound heal, even in the jungle damp.

When she was finished, she washed her hands again. She used the towel to wipe the blood and the sweat off her breast and stomach, and then to dry her hands. She dripped what was left of the iodine along the gash again, drenching the wound, so that it wouldn't fester. Then she used the bandages from the medical kit, taping them loosely over the wound, leaving it room to dry. Next, she looked into the backpack once more and found her other t-shirt, this one also filthy, but not as badly blood-stained as the one she had been wearing, and pulled it on.

Before she left, she reached into the pack one more time and found the gun. It was an Uzi machine pistol. She had taken it from the man who tried to kill her with his machete in the jungle. He hadn't protested, or even noticed, as she had taken the gun and medical kit from his pack. He had been focused on trying to pull the bamboo stake out of his chest, where she had planted it with all her weight, standing astride him, one boot on either side of his body. He hadn't been able to, and she had left him there, pinned into the mud on the floor of the clearing, as she slipped into the bushes, three nights ago.

She pushed the gun into the waistband of her jeans, where nobody would be able to see it. She pulled her t-shirt out over the weapon, and then picked up her backpack. It was badly worn, but large, with enough room for her poncho and fleece, the medical kit, and the large package of papers. She slung the pack over her shoulder in a single, fluid motion that she had repeated hundreds of times over the past three weeks.

She scanned the room again, to make sure she was leaving nothing behind, then opened the door, and went out into the hallway. It was brightly lit by a bare fluorescent tube attached to the ceiling, and she paused to let her eyes adjust after the dark of the room. Then she closed the door behind her

and headed silently down the hall towards the stairs, to find the men who were hunting her.

COMING OF AGE & YOUNG ADULT

BRAM STOKER AWARDS" NOMINEE

FALLING

How do you survive the worst thing that can ever happen? A Katie McCabe Novel

RAIN FALLING ON EMBERS (A KATIE MCCABE NOVEL, BOOK 1) BY LIANA GARDNER

Bram Stoker Awards® Nominee

How do you survive the worst thing that can ever happen?

When thirteen-year-old Katie McCabe's dad gets sick and is hospitalized, she's sent to live with her uncle in a strange town. But within days of arriving, her dad unexpectedly dies.

Struggling with her new reality, Katie is lost. She doesn't fit in at her new home and never will.

It only gets worse when Katie starts her freshman year of high school and begins to have run-ins with the son of the man who owns the town—a powerful man with ties to her family's past.

Then one day, she is attacked from behind. Blindfolded and slung across the back of a horse, Katie is taken up into the hills. Dumped in the middle of the wilderness in an oncoming storm, she is left to find her way home. **But how will she survive?**

"[With] flawed, fascinating people young readers will relate to and care about, Gardner offers enticing reasons to follow on their paths in future series entries." ~Booklife Review by Publishers Weekly, Editor's Pick

"The author explores the turbulent teen years masterfully, examining numerous themes that will surely resonate with young readers, including bullying, dealing with grief and loss, first love, and finding one's place in the world. Additionally, Gardner does a good job of capturing the personality of a 13-year-old, particularly through the deft use of first-person POV." **~Kirkus**

- "Will keep kids reading and talking. It does an admirable job of balancing heavy topics with a dash of humor and a big dose of adventure." ~*IndieReader* (IndieReader Approved 4.5/5)
- "What might seem like a typical troubled teen story turns into something unique and unexpected. The book has a great climax, and readers won't see it coming." *~Los Angeles Book Review*

"This captivating tale of human endurance is a wonderful read for both young and old." ~Booktrib

Hardcover: 9781645480891 / \$16.95 eBook: 9781645480914 / \$4.99 Pub Date: Oct 3.2023 Publisher: Vesuvian Books, https://vesuvianmedia.com/ Buy Link and Book Info: https://vesuvianmedia.com/rain-falling-on-embers/ https://www.ipgbook.com/rain-falling-on-embers-products-9781645480891.php Media Kit: https://lianagardner.com/media-kits/katie-mccabe-series-media-kit/ **LIANA GARDNER** is a Bram Stoker Awards[®] Nominee and the multi-award-winning author of *Speak No Evil, 7th Grade Revolution, The Journal of Angela Ashby,* and the Katie McCabe Series. The daughter of a rocket scientist and an artist, Liana combines the traits of both into a quirky yet pragmatic writer and in everything sees the story lurking beneath the surface. Engaged in a battle against leukemia and lymphoma, Liana spends much of her time at home, but her imagination takes her wherever she wants to go. Most recently she was titled Lady of Lochaber and Glencoe and was honored with a star named after her in the Andromeda Constellation. Liana is a member of the <u>Society of Children's Book</u> <u>Writers and Illustrators.</u> <u>https://lianagardner.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

I drummed my heels against the bale of hay beneath me. "You know, I'll swear it was all my idea."

"But, Katie, it was." Tom reached behind his back and pulled out a flask. "Except for this."

"Are you getting sly on me, Tommy Wolff?" He never tried anything without checking with me first. "What's in it?" Other than something to get us both into trouble.

He shrugged and leaned back against the side of the shed. "Nothing much. Just a little rum to go with the sodas I brought." He cracked open a can and handed it to me. "Drink some out, so I can spice it up for you."

Tipping the can back, I swallowed as much as I could in a mouthful—no dainty sips for this girl and gagged. The bubbles flew up my nose, triggering a coughing spasm.

Tommy slapped my back until I caught my breath again. "Are you okay, Katie?"

The urge to sneeze gripped me and I held up an index finger. When it came, the sneeze nearly blew me off the hay.

"Next time, give me more of a warning." Tommy stuck a finger in his ear and jiggled it. "I might be deaf."

I wrinkled my nose. "Sorry."

"You're so ladylike." He snickered. "NASA should hire you for testing sonic boom levels."

I smacked his shoulder, then passed the soda back to him. "If Daddy finds out, he's gonna blow a gasket."

Tom's grin faded. "You gotta admit, you make things tough for your dad. I can hear the news at eleven now." He rolled into his impression of a TV announcer. "Tonight's feature is on Sheriff Ron McCabe. Honest and upright, Sheriff McCabe stands for truth, justice, and the American way, keeping our county safe."

I groaned. Trust Tommy to work in a comic book reference.

"But all superheroes have their kryptonite, so let's explore the secret he's hiding." He pulled the corners of his mouth as far down as he could. "While Ron McCabe upholds the law, his only daughter, Katie, is the biggest troublemaker this town has ever seen." Tom burst into laughter.

"Stop, already." I leaned back on the hay and studied the whorls in the ramshackle beam and board ceiling. If I had to hear one more time how I'd compromised Daddy's position as sheriff ... I turned my head toward Tommy and winked. "But you have more fun with me than anyone else."

He snatched up the rum and made his eyebrows dance. "Ready for some fun?"

Laughing, I sat up. "What made you think of this?"

He concentrated on pouring the rum into the can. "If we're going to start smoking, we should mark the occasion with a drink." He doctored his soda and set the flask on the pallet flooring. "Anyway, you're always saying I never come up with my own ideas. So, I did."

"I'll say. And what an idea." I gave him a high five.

A faint flush of pride colored Tom's cheeks. Although the afternoon sun shone bright, the inside of the shed remained dark. The only light filtered through the cracks in the walls. We kept the light off so we didn't attract any attention—not that we would, because a clump of trees screened the shed from the house. Even with the lights on and the door open, no one would see us. Besides, Mr. Pickford rarely ventured far from the house these days. And since I took care of his animals for him, he didn't have any reason to come out to his shed.

Tom held up his can. "Cheers."

I jumped off the hay bale to click cans and knocked the flask over. "Oh, Tommy, I'm sorry." I grabbed it and stood it upright. "I only spilled a little." I bit my lip. If his dad found out, Tommy would catch fire ... more for letting it spill than for taking it in the first place.

"Forget it. I should've put the cap back on." He raised his can. "To our adventure in smoking."

This time we clinked without mishap, and I took a big swig. My first alcohol at thirteen—I felt so worldly. Shivers scurried up and down my spine and heat warmed my cheeks.

Having watched other smokers do it, I smacked the pack of cigarettes on my palm and took two out. I stuck one in the corner of my mouth and handed the other to Tommy. "Light me."

Tom tore out a match. "I'll warn you, my dad smokes strong ones." He struck it and watched it flare. "Here you go." He dropped the matchbook and held the burning flame toward me.

Not wanting to gag, I didn't inhale all the way on my first puff. I had an image to preserve. Tommy struck another match and held it to the end of his cigarette. Though he tried not to, he coughed. I took another drag, a little deeper this time. I'd ease into smoking, one puff at a time. I snatched the packet Tom dropped.

"It's interesting how people get engrossed in watching a flame." I lit a match and stared at it while it flickered. Right before it could burn my fingers, I shook it out and dropped it. Lighting another, I held it in front of Tom's eyes. "What do you think about?"

He gazed at it without answering.

Over the summer, a new Tommy had emerged, and I didn't know exactly how to handle the changes. For instance, he wanted everyone to call him Tom instead of Tommy. Try as I might, the old, familiar name slipped off my tongue before I could stop it. He'd been my best friend since Daddy and I had moved here when I was two, but after he'd turned fourteen, he wanted more, and I wasn't sure I did. Neither of us understood what we were going through. Why couldn't things stay the same?

"Ouch." The flame burned me, so I shook it, and flung the match over my shoulder. I blew on my fingers then looked into Tommy's hazel eyes. "So? What do you think about when you stare at a flame?"

Tom stroked his jaw and gave a little half shrug. "I don't know, I kinda stop thinking. It mesmerizes me." He perched next to me on the hay bale. "Katie, are we still going to be friends once I start high school?"

"Are you kidding? Of course." I hated the thought of being left behind in middle school just because I was a year younger but couldn't fathom life without him. "You're my best friend, and nothing, not even you going to a different school, will change our friendship." I bumped my shoulder against his. "Don't be ridiculous."

Tommy slouched and stared at his sneakers. "But you might make all sorts of new friends and won't need me to hang out with anymore."

Was he nuts? "Hey, look at me."

He gave me a sideways glance.

"New friends? We already know everyone in this podunk place. Any new friends I have will want to be friends with you. You're a great guy, so don't let anyone tell you anything different."

Tom straightened, but then his eyes got big. A crackling noise came from behind us. Smoke overpowered the smell of the cigarettes.

I spun around. The dry hay had caught fire and the flames raged. It must've started from the match I thought had gone out. Grabbing Tommy's hand, I followed my instincts and ran.

I wanted to get as far away as possible, but Tom stopped and faced the shed.

What was he doing? "Tommy, come on."

He shook his head. "We gotta put it out."

"Are you crazy? We'll get caught." We didn't have anything to put it out with. But he had a point. If we let it go, it'd destroy more than the shed. Mr. Pickford's entire farm would be at risk, as well as the whole town if it got out of control. "How? It'll burn down before I can get water."

Tom threw his hands in the air. "How should I know?" He spun on his heel toward me and waved his arms around. "You're supposed to be the brainy one with all the bright ideas."

His words were a slap in the face, but I didn't blame him—his fear bled through the anger. My heart was racing, too. What if we couldn't put the fire out? "I'm thinking." Or trying to. "Call the fire department." *Brilliant.* "Say we were passing by." *Please, whatever you do, don't say I set the place on fire.* "Find a shovel and get back here."

I should've saved my breath. Tommy dashed off before I finished. Facing the burning shed, I took stock. What should I do?

At least the flames hadn't burned through the door. I ran to a young tree and broke off a long, leafy branch. I placed my hands on the outside of the shed door, and the weathered wood still felt cool to the touch. Stepping to the side, I balanced on one foot and kicked the door in, then jumped back. When no flames shot out, I peered inside. An inferno covered the floor. I beat the blaze closest to me.

Sweating from the intense heat, I smacked the flames in a losing battle. My eyes and throat stung, and I felt like help would never come. After the first branch broke, I grabbed another and continued flogging the flames.

Tommy thrust a shovel into my hands. "Someone should be here any minute."

I hurled the branch away and pitched dirt on the flames. Someone better get here soon. No matter how rapidly we shoveled, it burned faster than Tommy and I could keep up with. My muscles screamed for relief, and I drew an arm across my face to keep the sweat from running into my eyes.

The shed wall caught fire, so I whacked the shovel against it. My lungs burned from the smoke, and I coughed with each swing. My stinging eyes gave way to blurred vision from the combination of sweat and smoke. My head ached and I felt dizzy.

A siren sounded in the distance. *Thank God.* My knees buckled and I stumbled into the wall. In moments, the volunteer fire department surrounded us. They put the fire out in minutes. Thank goodness the whole shed hadn't burned to the ground.

I jammed the shovel into the topsoil and took a deep breath of the char-scented air.

"Katherine Elizabeth McCabe!"

Daddy. My heart seemed to stop, and I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Tommy and I should've made a run for it when the volunteers arrived.

I stiffened before turning around.

CHAPTER TWO

People had followed the volunteer fire department and a crowd had gathered near the smoldering shed. Daddy stood, arms folded across his khaki uniform, on the outskirts. I inhaled deeply and trudged stiff-legged through the mob and stopped in front of him. "Little bit of a fire, wouldn't you say?"

Daddy frowned and the grooves in his forehead deepened as I approached. "What did you do?"

"I can't believe you automatically assume I had something to do with the fire." Maybe if I played

enough of the injured innocent, he'd believe it. "What happened to giving someone the benefit of the doubt?" I cocked my head. "Or how about innocent until proven guilty?"

Placing his hands on his gun belt, he pierced me with a look. "Are you through?"

"All right." I shot my arms straight out in front of me. "Cuff me and take me away." Maybe I'd be better off in a jail cell. He'd be on the other side of the bars and wouldn't be staring at me with disappointment. And I could take a nap until he chilled.

He pulled me away from the townspeople. Struggling to maintain some dignity, I yanked my wrists from his grasp.

Sparks kindled in his blue eyes. "Keep a civil tongue in your head." His tight-leashed anger frayed. "Half the town is congregated, and you're flaunting how little you respect me and my position as sheriff. I've had enough."

Oops. I'd crossed the line. Avoiding his glare, I stared at the sharp creases down the front of his trousers. "I'm sorry." I mumbled the apology, then steeled myself for the questions that were sure to come.

He took a deep breath and set his square jaw. "How did the fire start?" He spoke almost gently, but then restrained anger came through. "And don't pad what happened to make yourself or anyone else look better."

He rubbed the area between his eyebrows with his middle two fingers, tipping his Stetson back. "And whatever happened, I know Tom was right there with you."

In other words, don't alter the facts. I'd say one thing for my dad—he knew me well. And he never gave me an inch. "It all started as a kind of experiment."

He raised an eyebrow. "Tell the story straight."

I glanced away. "I wanted to try smoking, and convinced Tommy we'd look cool if we learned how." Daddy'd blow sky high with this one. "So, we met in Mr. Pickford's shed, and when I goofed around with the matches one dropped and lit the hay on fire."

His silence became ominous. The quieter Daddy got, the more trouble I'd be in. I scuffed the toe of my shoe into the dry, weedy grass. "Then, I panicked. I should've put it out, but I ran instead."

If I mentioned the rum, he'd have a heart attack or something. "Everything in there was so dry the fire raged out of control in no time." Would a few tears soften him up?

Not a chance.

"Tommy and I tried to put the fire out." I swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

Daddy's silence deepened as a light breeze ruffled the hair on his forehead. After a few moments, I squirmed.

He pressed his lips into a flat line. "You need to apologize to Mr. Pickford ..."

My favorite thing to do in the world.

His eyes narrowed. "... and tell him you will pay for the damages."

There went my savings. I'd probably have to work off the balance until I graduated from high school.

He sighed. "I have to file the report. Then I'll be home."

And I'll be history.

Daddy grabbed his Stetson by the crown and took it off. His blond hair, cut short on the sides and longer on top, was streaked with sweat. "Then we'll sit down and talk this whole thing out."

Translation, he'd talk, and I'd watch him pace and wave his arms around.

"Now get going." He gave me a swat and set the hat back on his head. "I want to get finished as soon as possible."

After I apologized to Mr. Pickford and promised to pay for the damages, I slogged across the field. I'd never been in more trouble in my life.

Running footsteps pounded behind me. "Katie, wait up."

I stopped to let Tom reach me.

"What's the verdict? I saw your dad with you."

Who hadn't? "I won't be able to do anything for a while." The biggest understatement of the summer. "I'm supposed to go straight home." Part of the punishment was the waiting in agony to find out how much trouble I'd be in.

I gave Tommy the once-over. He looked as grubby as I felt. "Why do we always get caught?"

He shrugged. "Our kind of luck, I guess. Is your dad going to file a report?"

I nodded. "He has to. Destruction of property is heavy duty, even for us."

Tommy slouched. "My old man's gonna love this one. He'll hit the roof, but the only thing he'll care about is who's paying for it."

"Don't worry. It's coming out of my pocket." I glanced around. "Look, I've got to get going or my dad will give me an extra ration for disobedience." One of his watchwords. "I'll give you a call when I can."

Before going into the house, I dusted off my pants and took off my shoes. My clothes were loaded with grime from the fire. I tiptoed across the threshold and into my room. With any luck, I hadn't spread any ash through the house as I moved. I grabbed a change of clothes and went into the bathroom. Not only was soot streaked across my face, but my blonde hair had been darkened a few shades.

The shower felt wonderful. As I scrubbed the ash off, the water at my feet turned black. The tension flowed out of me as I washed my hair. But my thoughts kept floating back to the fire, like I'd forgotten something. A nagging unease crept through my veins. I closed my eyes, tilted my head back, and rinsed the suds out of my hair.

"Oh, no." I snapped my head forward. "The flask." Neither of us had grabbed it before running out of the shed. Daddy wouldn't overlook it for a second. I was in more trouble than I'd bargained for.

My stomach churned. Daddy would either ground me until I turned eighteen or send me off to boarding school. I glanced at the clock. He'd be home any minute.

"*No, no, no, no, no, no, no.*" I threw on my clothes and raked a brush through my hair, ripping at the tangles.

A tiny voice at the back of my brain told me to take off. Not forever, just until his anger subsided a bit. No time to waste, I grabbed a knapsack from the hall closet, and ran to my room. If I stuck around too long, I wouldn't have a good enough head start. I'd made the mistake last time of not leaving soon enough, and I didn't want to repeat it.

After throwing a few clothes and some food in the bag, I took my money out of the shoebox in the closet and ran out the door.

The town was so small it didn't take long to come to the edge. Flat, open country surrounded the town for miles, and it contained no place to hide. If I stuck close to the road, he'd catch me for sure. I had to cross the whole territory before Daddy started searching.

My side ached after running for an hour and my lungs burned with every breath. Each step felt like it'd be my last, but I had to keep going. Still a long way from any hope of a hiding place, I couldn't afford to slow down. The sun sank in the sky, which happened to be the only thing in my favor.

Half an hour later, the sun dipped below the horizon and twilight deepened. The heat of the day cooled. I slowed to a walk, not able to run any longer. Marathons were never going to be my thing. I'd covered a lot of distance, though, but I needed to make it to another town—it didn't matter where.

An uneasy feeling made me turn around. The far-off beam of a flashlight swung across the field. Daddy. I fell to the ground and lay still. Would the tall grass be enough to hide me? If I ran, he'd see the movement and catch me in minutes. My heart raced and my breathing took on a raspy tone. The hay-like smell of the dry brush tickled my throat and my nose twitched. *Don't sneeze.* At the thought, the tickling sensation worsened.

A footstep sounded to my left. Holding my breath, I closed my eyes, willing Daddy to pass by. The flashlight beam on my face shattered my hope. "Get up, Katie." He put his hand out to help me. "Let's go home."

No yelling? No lecture? I must be in worse trouble than I'd imagined. If Daddy were talking, he'd at least be blowing off some steam. We walked back to where he'd parked the car and he drove us home in silence.

"Daddy?"

He held up his hand. "Wait until we get back to the house."

Great. Suffer in silence. He must be furious. When we pulled into the drive, the car barely stopped before I got out and ran straight into my bedroom. Plopping on my bed, I snatched up my teddy bear, Rupert, from his place on the pillow and hugged him tight. I'd never done anything this bad before in my life. I stroked his fur. "What am I gonna do, Rupert?"

The front door closed, and Daddy called me from the living room. "Katie, please come out here." I stuck my hands in my pockets and shuffled toward Daddy. "I thought you'd want me in my room." Where punishment was usually given.

Daddy stood in the middle of the room in his I-mean-business stance. Back ramrod straight, feet apart, hands resting on his gun belt. "Sit down. We have a lot to talk about."

Dumbfounded, I sat on the couch. I might have pushed him too far. Guilt caused my chest to tighten.

He rubbed his temple as if to ward off a headache. "I've been thinking a lot about what's best for you."

Uh-oh. That didn't sound good.

"I've done my best, Katie." He sat in his leather armchair. "But I don't think it's enough anymore." Pain clouded his blue eyes.

A hard knot formed in my stomach as I stared at the floor.

He sagged against the chair and his shoulders slumped. "You must think so too, otherwise you wouldn't have run off."

"Daddy, it's not you." A heavy feeling blanketed me. "I don't know what's wrong with me." My emotions were all over the place lately.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Why did you run off?"

To avoid some hassle. "I don't know."

Daddy waited for me to continue.

"You were angry." I bit my lower lip. "I'd have come home after you cooled off."

He bowed his head. "I always wanted us to be able to talk things out. But if you're afraid of me ..."

"I'm not afraid." The knot in my stomach burned. "I did something wrong." And didn't want to own up. "Sometimes I feel so restless I don't know what to do."

Daddy looked up. "In other words, you're not happy at home."

My body snapped against the couch back and I blinked. "What? No." I pressed a hand against my stomach. "It's this godforsaken hole of a place we live in."

Daddy's face turned into a thundercloud. "I don't like to hear you talk that way."

I hung my head and my cheeks burned. "I'm sorry, Daddy." When would I learn to keep my mouth shut? "I don't want to spend the rest of my life where the biggest news of the week is which way the wind is blowing the fumes from the Farleys' outhouse."

I stood and paced around the room. "I feel like I'm under a microscope. You're the sheriff, so everybody watches everything I do." My chest tightened as I felt the walls closing in. "And I can't breathe. I want to see more of the world than what's right here."

My words were met with silence. They seemed to hover, vibrating, in the middle of the room.

Daddy stared at the rust and gold area rug beneath his feet. Then he sighed and straightened, and the lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth deepened as if they had been etched in stone. "Giving you a broader experience is one of the reasons I'm sending you to live with your uncle Charlie."

CHAPTER THREE

I stopped pacing and my mouth dropped open. Feeling like I'd had the wind knocked out of me, I struggled to catch my breath. Daddy couldn't be serious. He'd never send me to live with an uncle I'd never met. Would he? A scream built inside me, and I wanted to lash out. "Uncle Charlie? Which one is he?" I knew full well who Uncle Charlie was, despite my feigned ignorance. "I can't keep them straight."

The youngest of seven brothers, Daddy had told me stories about them over the years. McCabes stood tall, did the right thing, helped others in need before thinking of themselves, and were kind, gentle, moral, and spiritual leaders wherever they went. All the brothers except for Charlie had scattered from the town where they had grown up, spreading their reputation far and wide.

Daddy sighed. "Charlie's my eldest brother. I've talked about him before." He drummed his fingers on his knee. "You need to be looked after better."

I crossed my arms. "Don't tell me you've been listening to those idiots who think you don't take care of me." Some of the church ladies thought Daddy should resign as sheriff to look after me. But they kept voting him back into office, which made no sense.

He held his hands out in a *stop* gesture. "Simmer down." Daddy stared straight at me—no hint of a smile, not even a twinkle in his eye. "While you know I don't agree with them for the most part, lately I'm beginning to think they may have a point. Let's take this afternoon as a prime example. Accidentally burning down a shed because you're experimenting with cigarettes and alcohol might make some people argue you need a little firmer parental control."

He knows. My knees went weak, and I flopped on the couch feeling as if I'd been hit in the stomach.

"Yes, I found the flask." He stood and rubbed the grooves in his forehead. "Katie, I don't know what to do with you anymore. I tried to raise you with a good, upright background, and you seem to be rejecting everything I ever taught you." He bit his lip. "Maybe a different atmosphere will be better for you."

I felt like crying. "I'll change. Don't send me away."

He shook his head. "There are things I can't give you. And I'm not talking about material things." But I didn't need anything more. I stared through the living room window into the night, searching for a star to wish on. Anything to get Daddy off this track of wanting to send me away.

"My little girl is growing up, and you need a woman role model. If Marie were still alive, things would be different." His voice got kind of choky sounding, the way it did whenever he talked about Mama.

Perplexed, I pulled my gaze away from the window. "But I thought Aunt Liza died in the same accident as Mama."

Daddy's face went blank, and his eyes had a frozen look about them. "She did."

When I was a baby, another driver hit her and Aunt Liza during a storm and they crashed into a tree, killing them both. Daddy had moved us hundreds of miles away to this little town in the middle of nowhere after she died. "Did Uncle Charlie get remarried?"

"No. My brother Shane's girl, Sarah, lives there." A wistful smile crossed his face. "She's been living with Charlie for several years now."

I suppressed an eye roll. Good for her.

He hesitated for a moment and patted his breast pocket. "She'll be a good influence on you."

How did he know? He hadn't seen her since we'd moved eleven years ago. "Let me stay, Daddy. I'll behave. Honest."

"You sure changed your mind in a hurry. An hour ago, you were running away. You couldn't wait

to get out of here."

I stood and walked over to the picture of us on the mantle. Daddy had been giving me a piggyback ride, my cheek laid next to his, both smiling and happy. "That's different." My voice had a harsh edge to it as I choked back tears. Crying meant weakness, and I didn't want to be weak in front of him. Not now.

I took a slow, deep breath and traced the wooden frame with my finger. "I only wanted to give you a chance to get over your anger." My control became firmer as I continued to rub the picture frame. I faced Daddy. "There wasn't anything to do, and I wanted to try something different."

Daddy frowned. "Boredom doesn't excuse your actions. You've got a good brain in that head of yours, and lately you haven't been using it."

"I never said boredom was an excuse." I hated when he put words into my mouth. "And I did use my brain."

"Really? Let's take a look at the results."

"I know what happened." My anger smoldered. "I didn't think I'd burn the shed down. It was an accident."

He threw up his hands. "Exactly what I'm telling you. You're not thinking through the consequences." He slapped the back of his hand on his outstretched palm. "You are a McCabe and you've got to start acting like one. For once, take responsibility. I can't do it for you."

Something in me snapped. "I never asked to be a McCabe and I wish to God I was never born one." Life certainly would've been easier. "It isn't fair I have to be a certain way because of my last name." I wanted to hurt Daddy, so I pointed at the ceiling. "Someone up there screwed up when they sent me to this family."

"Enough, Katherine." Daddy spoke softly, but his tone was anything but.

I slumped against the mantle. "You don't understand. I'm never allowed to just be Katie. On top of being a McCabe, you're the sheriff, so no matter what I do, I'm measured by a standard I can't live up to."

The overwhelming emotion of the moment choked me. I swallowed hard as I stared at the floor. "I don't want to leave you, Daddy." I loved him too much. "I'll even try to be like a McCabe if it will make you love me enough to keep me here."

Daddy's eyes softened and a tremor ran across his cheek. He reached out, took my hands gently in his, and pulled me closer to him. "Sweetheart, it's *because* I love you—more than I have words for—I want you to live with your uncle Charlie."

Tears welled in my eyes. "I can't believe you don't want me anymore."

He hugged me close and stroked my hair. "I do want you. This has been the hardest decision I've ever had to make."

When he released me, he took my hands again. The skin around his eyes bunched as if he were in pain.

"I need you to listen ..." He broke off and his mouth turned down. "This is so hard for me to say." My knee rapidly bounced and try as I might, I couldn't keep still.

"Your behavior isn't the real reason I'm sending you to live with Charlie."

My heart stopped. I didn't want to hear anymore.

"I haven't been feeling well, so I went to the doctor last week, and he sent some blood tests for analysis. He gave me the results today and they aren't good." He took a deep breath. "The doc needs to put me through a bunch more tests, and I'll have to spend some time in the hospital. I need someone to look after you while I'm going through all of this, because I won't be able to." A single tear rolled down his cheek. "Please trust me. This is the best for you."

I pulled my hands from his grasp and took a step back. "But if you're sick, I should be with you. I can take care of you." *This couldn't be happening.*

His lips trembled as he pressed them tightly together.

Tears spilled over, and I grabbed him and buried my head in his chest. "Couldn't I go for a visit instead then, until you're better?"

"The tests are only the beginning, and it's going to take time. School starts soon, and I want you enrolled."

I pulled away from Daddy and plopped down on the couch.

"Sulking won't do you any good. Charlie suggested you go live with him over a month ago. He thought it'd be a good idea for you to get settled in before school started, but I didn't want to let go of you yet."

"You've known for over a month you were going to send me away, and you didn't tell me? How could you?" A lump formed in my throat and I bit my lower lip. The secrecy might be the worst hurt of all.

He knelt in front of me. "Let me explain. Your uncle suggested the move when I talked to him about how wild you've been getting, but I told him no. Charlie told me to think about it." He brushed the bangs away from my eyes. "As I felt worse and worse the summer, Charlie told me the offer was still there to give me a chance to get back on my feet."

I can't handle this. Daddy can't be that sick. Can he?

Daddy stroked my cheek. "I couldn't face letting you go. But after the preliminary test results, I had to face it. I need to know you are being taken care of by someone who loves you, so I can concentrate on getting better for both of us."

We argued back and forth. Or I should say, I argued, and Daddy stayed calm, but didn't budge an inch.

"You'd better get packed. We have to get to the bus stop. And you're going, whether I put you on the bus kicking and screaming or not."

When Daddy got a certain tone in his voice, and his jaw looked like it'd been carved in granite, it was useless to put up a fight.

My packing consisted of throwing some clothes into an old, battered suitcase. *Do I need anything else?* In my room I had very few things, but an overabundance of one. Books. My bookcase bulged with them. I'd put shelves on the walls to hold them, and even then, they overflowed. I had to take some books with me, in case Uncle Charlie didn't have any I liked. I quickly pulled down five favorites, put them in the suitcase, and closed the lid.

I stomped into the next room dragging my suitcase behind. I wasn't sentimental but looking around the room brought a lump to my throat. My gaze slid over the worn, faded couch where Daddy and I spent many hours together, the fireplace where we'd toasted bag after bag of marshmallows, and the plaques Daddy earned from the town. Everything looked worn, perhaps a little shabby, nothing new or shiny, but homey and loved.

I stopped scanning the room when my gaze landed on Daddy sitting in his chair with his eyes closed. His face was gray and wrinkled, and a shock ran through my body. Had I done that to him? Was it his illness? Why hadn't I noticed it sooner?

When younger, I used to think God must look exactly like my daddy; big, tall, blond, with a twinkle in his eyes, and a smile on his face. His very presence seemed to make trouble disappear. Daddy could do any and everything. Daddy was my hero, stronger than Hercules, mightier than Superman, yet more gentle and kind than all the superheroes put together. In my eyes, Greek mythological gods lacked sparkle next to him.

I wished I could turn back the clock to when I was young enough to climb into his lap. He'd hug me and suddenly whatever had been wrong would be washed away. He wouldn't be so worn and gray. But I couldn't alter time. Why had I spent so much time arguing with him instead of holding him tight and telling him how much I loved him?

The sky grew misty gray with the arrival of dawn, and it was time to leave. When Daddy drove me to the bus station, the silence between us hung as heavy as a steel anchor. Neither one of us said

anything until the bus rolled in.

Daddy broke the silence first. "Do you have everything?"

I nodded.

"Here's your ticket." He held it out to me. "Have Charlie give me a call when you get there." The bus horn honked. "This is goodbye for now. Be good. I'll come to your uncle's as soon as all my tests are done, to check on how you're doing." He hugged me tight.

I twisted out of his grasp, grabbed my bag, and stalked on to the bus without a word. I wanted to run into his arms, cling to him, and never let go. I wanted him to tell me everything was going to be okay. If I waited any longer, it would've been too hard to leave. My throat constricted so tightly I couldn't speak. Besides, white-hot anger burned inside me and nearly drowned out the fear. How could I have so many emotions flooding through me at the same time?

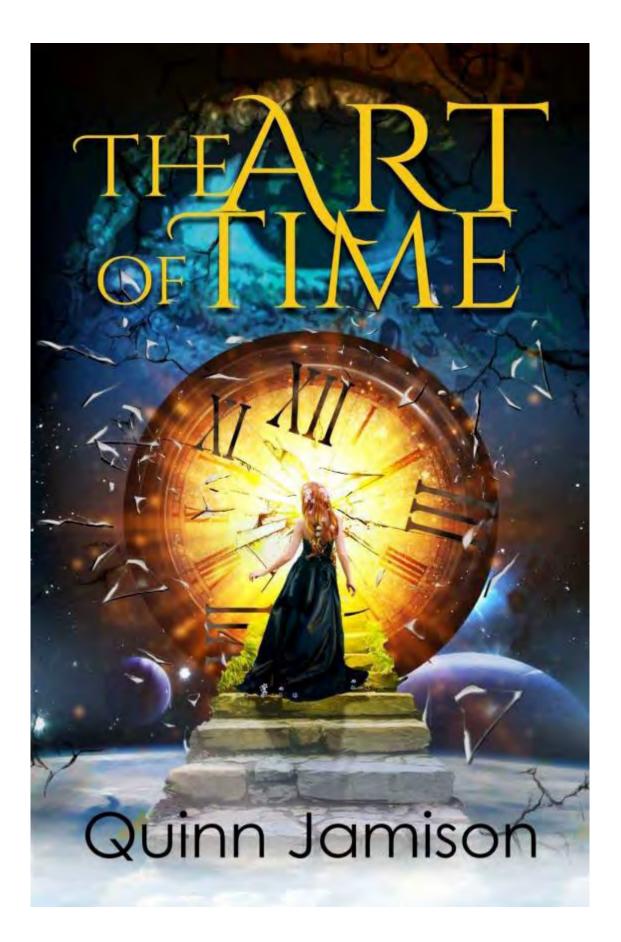
As soon as I found my seat, the bus pulled out of the station. Miserable, I stared out the window until Daddy became a tiny speck on the horizon.

The bus rattled and bumped its way down the road, the seats creaked, and the sides seemed to groan more with every mile. The windows didn't stay shut, so my mouth felt as dry as cotton from the dust pouring in, and the heat of the day made the bus feel like the inside of an oven. My eyes felt gritty and burned from the dust and I was cranky from lack of sleep.

At least I had the seat to myself. No one would chatter away and interrupt my thoughts through the long ride. What a sight I must have been for the other passengers, my arms folded, a scowl for an expression, and my long, blonde hair hanging in my face. I crouched low and thrust my knees against the seat back in front of me. I didn't want to make this trip and didn't care what anyone else thought about me either.

How could Daddy send me away, especially when he was sick? What if he doesn't get better? I didn't even want to think about the possibility. He had to get better, he just had to.

The motion of the bus, along with my sleepless night, soon lulled me to sleep.



THE ART OF TIME BY QUINN JAMISON

While on a trip to Rome, Italy, nineteen-year-old Lavinia Melrose visits the museum of her dreams, clueless that the intriguing famous painting she sets her eyes on will cause a monumental turn in her life.

In time, she realizes why the masterpiece struck her so hard. One touch of that painting, and she's somewhere she never imagined, leaving everything and everyone she's ever known behind. The face she has tried to escape is now right in front of her, and she has no desire to let him slip away since they've met. He'll forever be instilled in her mind. Thus begins a romance between an independent, modern woman and a knight-to-be.

In *The Art of Time*, we find danger and excitement in Lavinia's story. Simultaneously a sweet romance and a thrilling adventure, the tender moments are worth shedding a few tears.

"A whirlwind adventure of heartbreaking romance that will leave readers begging for more. Jamison crafts a timeless love story that will make you both laugh and cry. If you enjoy a good historical romance (especially one with a time slip trope), then you're sure to enjoy *The Art of Time*."
-Booktrib

"Extremely talented author. Literally started and finished it in a week [and] recommended the book to everyone." –**Amazon Reviewer**

> "I cried both happy and sad tears and didn't want the story to end. Bravo!" -Amazon Reviewer

Hardcover: 9781639889280 / \$24.99 Paperback: 9781639885602 / \$18.99 eBook: ASIN B0BHR3CJSY / \$8.99 Pub Date: October 8, 2022 Publisher: Atmosphere Press, https://atmospherepress.com/ Buy Links: https://www.amazon.com/Art-Time-Quinn-Jamison-ebook/dp/BoBHR3CJSY https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-art-of-time-quinn-jamison/18822706?ean=9781639885602

QUINN JAMISON's first novel, *The Art of Time*, was written in three months when she was sixteen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Quinn has been dancing from the time she could walk and discovered her love for writing and books along her journey of being a dancer. She enjoys writing historical romance the most but sometimes explores other genres. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, her family is the most important thing in her life, and she is very close with her sisters and parents. <u>BookTrib</u><u>Interview</u>

PROLOGUE

CALIFORNIA January 29th, 2017

Psychology says something along the lines of, when one is genuinely in love, there isn't another who will hold their interest but that particular person; if one catches themselves captivated by others, they aren't exactly in love. This assertion wasn't always difficult to believe, yet I never thought I would actually find the person designed *for me*. I was raised to be independent and strong-willed. I chose to believe in myself and other people. I saw the good in everyone but knew when to draw a line in the sand. And soon, in due course, that first statement about love turned out to be true.

Before that, though, I was born. I grew up, and I lived a little. I loved and was loved back. I got knocked down. I pushed myself to the top and lived some more. Then, I was knocked down again and many times later.

The point I'm coming across might sound somewhat familiar: I loved, and so I lived on.

That was when something finally happened.

I was given a chance, and I took that chance. I was *there*, I was back afresh, and no one would be able to change my mind the second it was decided.

I decided that I would save him.

Somehow.

Some way.

It didn't matter.

I would.

I hadn't come across that chance yet, though.

My granddaughter, Stella, stared into my warm eyes with big doe ones of her own, clutching onto her quilt. I knew from that look what she was going to ask me.

"Will you tell me a story, Grandma?" she said in her sweet voice. I tucked her little five-year-old self in tight under the covers for bed. "And not one of those silly stories you always tell me. A real one!"

I chuckled. "Silly stories? They aren't silly." I shook my head. "Yes, they are!" she argued.

"They are kind of silly, Momma," I suddenly heard my son say. I directed my attention to him, and he leaned against the door frame, all too like someone I used to know.

"Way to side with your old mom, *cuore*," I joked with him playfully.

He chuckled deeply, eyes crinkling at the corners and dimples displayed. "Eh, you're not too old, not yet." I gave him a sharp glare, then turning to his daughter, I sighed. "What story would you like me to tell you, sweet girl?" "What's something that you know actually happened?" Stella asked me in a tiny voice.

"Why don't you tell her that very special story you've always told me?" my son suggested, sending a small and knowing smile. "As well as you can, at least."

"Hmm." I paused, humming to myself and considering it. "All right, Stella, I think it is time you've heard it." I let myself fall deep into incredible and unforgettable memories.

CHAPTER ONE

Green Eyes and Whispers

ITALY 1989

The painting was simple but stood out to me like a shark in a stampede of buffaloes. It was a strange comparison since it was impossible ever to find a shark on land, let alone see one running. Yet, accurate in a sense; the eye would naturally fix on the shark before any single buffalo, just as my pair of eyes had instantly sought out the breathtaking masterpiece before any other in sight. Its look was rather incomparable to the rest and from a whole different world to wonder about.

It was a full-length portrait of a man, a young one. He was leaning against a sizable evergreen cork oak tree, and every detail the artist captured was perfect. Even his eyes, which were alight with the most profound green color I had ever seen, were depicted flawlessly, staring directly and reaching deep into my soul. Yet, the part that struck me the most was how drawn I was to it without any idea of knowing the reason.

I puffed out a short breath. *Who am I kidding?* I thought to myself absurdly, *This is just an old painting*, shaking my head.

I lowered my line of sight to see what was written in the bottom-left corner of the frame. It read in handwriting that was decent, smaller than most, and a little messy, yet still legible:

Armond Cornelius Dante Alessandro

Looking more closely, I could see the end of the first name was smudged, and even then, it was still clear.

Hmm, I contemplated. I didn't recognize the name. Sometimes artists signed their work, but there was no clarification of who the artist even was. My eyes drifted back to those eyes. *Maybe he's in the painting*, the thought immediately shot into my head.

"These paintings represent the very finest of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," the male tour guide informed the rest of the group and me coming to see all the inspiring art. This place was *the* museum I had always dreamed of visiting in Rome, Italy, ever since I could pick up a paintbrush.

The sound of the tour guide's sleek shoes clacking as he neared me during his introduction slightly brought me out of my reverie. I discreetly glanced at him.

Mr. Vulcan, the tour guide, was lean-framed and relatively short compared to the average man, but not quite shorter than me, with slicked-back blond hair that didn't have a single lock out of place. In my opinion, the sheen given off by the shiny helmet-like 'do appeared greasy. I watched as he pulled a comb out of nowhere and passed it through his hair, speaking to the crowd and winking at a few young ladies. I shook my head at him.

He's even a multi-tasker. Impressive, I thought sarcastically. I wondered if he loved his hair more than his job, seeing that he spent more time utilizing every hair product he could put his hands on rather than practicing being an interesting tour guide. The only *interests* he seemed *interested* in capturing were of the group of women.

"Many enthusiasts and critics debate which one is the most beautiful," I heard him continue. Honestly, I hadn't been listening to half of what he was saying after I had turned back to the masterpiece. I was too enthralled by the sea-green colored eyes of the man depicted inside the frame.

"Definitely this one," I said in answer unintentionally. The words were out of my mouth before I knew it. Immediately, the crowd gawked at my audacity, swallowing me whole with their insolent glowering. Most of the laser-beaming gazes were from those women who wanted to cast an evil spell, most likely on me for interrupting the apparently charming Mr. Vulcan. Except, in my opinion, I wouldn't say he was particularly charming. I cleared my throat awkwardly. "I mean, that's just what

I think," I muttered, sparing a glance down at my feet and sighing in embarrassment. I never liked being the complete center of attention, and I had attracted all eyes possible to me.

I could feel Mr. Vulcan's searing and somewhat intimidating gaze. Reluctantly, I lifted my eyes to see that I was right; he was staring at me rather intensely, along with the women, whose intensity of gazes increased tenfold. Surely the spell would have been cast on me by then.

Mr. Vulcan clearly had a question glinting in his steel-blue eyes. "May I ask why that is, miss?"

"Well ..." I cleared my throat once more and shifted my eyes to the painting again. "For starters, it captures emotion and personality perfectly. It has aesthetic qualities, beautiful two-dimensional visual language, and leaves many clues to a story. Not to mention the use of color; you said these are all from the seventeen hundreds or eighteen hundreds, so I'll take your word for it, but it's different somehow. I think—" I stopped myself abruptly. I was rambling. Everyone stilled in place to stare at me and our interaction; people mainly perceived it as an interruption. "Erm, I'm sorry. This is your tour, not mine that I'm free to give all of you," I apologized to everyone.

Good. Now take your advice and be quiet!

"Ugh. Why me?" I muttered. Then, inwardly, I cursed myself. Although, that probably wasn't such a wise idea, considering the girls did, too.

The large crowd erupted into a small, quiet round of laughter. Both gleeful chuckles and snorting chortles showed that everyone enjoyed watching me wallow in self-humiliation.

Mr. Vulcan suppressed a laugh with a cough. He was amused, and I detected he was also impressed. "You seem to know your art. Are you an aesthetician, miss?" "Not particularly, sir, but I do appreciate art."

"Painter, maybe?"

"Um, not a professional one," I admitted.

Why do you want to know? I would really appreciate you not wanting to know! Maybe you should pay attention to one of the evil cursing ladies who wish they were me right now!

I would have given anything not to be me at that moment, so I gave him my best blank face. However, I planned to attend an art school when I returned home to California. This trip was supposed to be my big break before going to college. I wasn't going to tell him that, though.

"Hm ..." he hummed and didn't question me further, continuing his presentation.

Thank you, merciful God! I cried mentally. I thought he was never going to finish with his inquisition.

"Any questions?" he asked the group as he finished. I did have a question but didn't want to ask him. I would, though. *Later, I will regret this.*

At least, that was what I thought at the time.

I raised my hand.

"Yes, you." Mr. Vulcan pointed in my direction. "Miss ..." He paused. "Please, tell me your name."

"Melrose. Lavinia Melrose," I informed him, James Bond style. "Uh, who is the artist of this painting? It does not say." I motioned with my hand to the man with green eyes. The tour guide walked over to me and examined the painting with creased brows.

"That's because it's unknown," he replied, and his voice took a darker, pondering tone.

I turned my gaze back to the masterpiece.

"What about the name there?" I pointed to the script in the corner. "Shouldn't that mean *he* is the artist of this?" "Usually, but there have been suspicions that the name is not the true artist."

I nodded. That upped my chances of being correct. *Whoever it may be, they were extremely talented,* I thought wonderingly.

It had been a long while since Mr. Vulcan had last spoken, and I hoped he had already left when I heard him talking again. "By the looks of it, my guess is that he could have been an influential painter."

I jumped at the sound of his voice.

It was wishful thinking.

Mr. Vulcan was nice. I just enjoyed being left alone to admire paintings myself.

I cleared my throat awkwardly again. "You assume it was a man?"

"There weren't many female artists back then. Who else?" he asked like he was certain. *Who else?*

I didn't answer.

"What do you think?" he wanted to know.

My eyes flitted over to him. His eyes conveyed his curiosity. "Think of what?"

"Do you think it was a woman?" he rephrased. That was a good question, one worthy of an answer. I contemplated for a moment; it didn't take long to set on an honest reply. "Maybe it was, and she decided to go anonymous to protect herself."

"Perhaps"—he narrowed his eyes at me—"you are right." I shrugged. I couldn't have known if it was a woman. Like he proposed, most likely it was not. "If it were me, though, I would have proudly made my name known or used a pseudonym."

"You'd be surprised how many people did use one." "It's not surprising if I already know."

I heard his breathy laugh. "Of course. Any other questions for me?" he asked politely.

"Oh, yes. Where is the bathroom?"

Mr. Vulcan gave me directions, and I followed them there after giving the painting one last extensive examination. Along the way, I heard quick footsteps come up from behind and furrowed my brows.

Someone was following me.

I spun around quickly, ready to talk to the person, yet I didn't see anyone. I searched the expansive space, only seeing some groups of families and friends, instinctively gulping. It was probably kids running around, or I could very well have been hearing things. When I turned back, a woman was in front of me.

I jumped out of my skin and said with relief, "Oh my, you scared me."

She pushed back one of her straight and dark short hairs. "So sorry. I was just going this way ..." She sidestepped and walked around me.

I rubbed off the peculiar feeling, thinking I was only being paranoid, and rushed to the bathroom. As soon as I left the stall, I walked up to the wide mirror, staring into warm cognac eyes, my blonde waves disheveled from sleep. I spotted the small beauty mark just above my upper lip on my left and then sighed. After washing my hands quickly, I shook them out and wiped them off on the paper towels, throwing them directly into the trash can from a far distance.

"Yes!" I jumped up and threw my hands in the air. I ignored the lady who had come in and was throwing me an odd look.

Eventually, I left to go back to the hotel I stayed in while in Italy. Hailing a taxi had never been easy for me since I never used them, but I lived in an area where they were popular and, at first, didn't realize the ones in Italian cities weren't at your beck and call. So, I promised myself that I'd never again make the mistake of waiting for a taxi in Italy to take service with a wave of my hand. I did that initially, and it was ... *Not a good idea.*

Lesson learned; I called this one beforehand, and I had to take one if I wanted to get around from place to place or go back to the hotel.

"Dove ti sto portando?" a voice had asked me sweetly as I hopped in the back seat of the taxi.

For this trip in particular, I expanded on my knowledge of Italian. I had understood most of it well before because my father used the language often, but my primary language was always English, and I never learned to speak Italian. So, I deliberately took many classes, knowing someday I'd be in my dream place, and luckily, I knew exactly what he asked me. "*Al Gran Hotel Romano, per favore,*" I answered like a pro.

"You know, it was not always hotel," the middle-aged man informed me in broken English with

a strong, thick Italian accent.

I chuckled, astounded. "How did you know I was American?"

"Call it lucky guess," he said with a small, friendly smile. "Anyway, the place you are staying at was not always hotel, you know? And it is very old place," he continued.

"Really?" I asked him in interest. I had always loved history since it had a lot to do with art, and therefore, he had me hooked on his words.

"Sì, it used to be a villa known as *I'l Villa Romano*, estate of some noble family … I cannot remember which. Maybe it was …" He paused to think, rubbing his stubble chin but shaking it off when he still couldn't remember. "I don't know."

He shrugged. "Anyway, they transformed it into hotel so people could stay in historical place for enjoyment. A lot say it is haunted. I say that's why people keep going."

What he was telling me was very interesting, but one word stood out from all the others.

"H—haunted?" I stuttered, suddenly filled with worry. *How come I'm just now hearing this?*

"Sì, yes, especially at night. I hear stories of peoples' stays there," he confirmed for me.

I gulped down the lump that was in my throat.

I wouldn't like to encounter any ghosts.

Paranormal activity happens in all kinds of places. Medi ums can see ghosts. Sometimes, people see objects magically move. I have never seen the former or the latter, but I just didn't know if I could handle any of it. I shivered.

I might run screaming, terrified.

The man caught my nervous expression in the rear-view mirror and frowned, bushy brows furrowed. "I am sorry I didn't mean to scare you, but do not worry, *mia cara*. I promise they are just stories, and it is safe place. No one I know surely experienced anything not normal." He offered a reassuring smile.

I nodded warily and looked out the window, admiring the beautiful city of Rome. I'd never become tired of it, but my thoughts were elsewhere, focused on the haunted hotel. Frankly, I didn't want to go back and would have felt better not knowing. Ignorance really is bliss.

Calm down. You've stayed there a night already. It's fine. It's safe. Right. It's safe; I tried to convince myself. Despite my attempt at reassurance, I didn't believe it for a second.

I decided to think about something other than screaming and running for my life, and my mind drifted to the mysterious green-eyed man in the painting.

Yes, that's much better.

Oddly enough, I never found this strong fascination and obsession with any singular painting. I've had interests in them, and they were what made me become an artist in the first place. They always inspired me to create something unique and beautiful. But never had I had a favorite before. So far, *Non Vedo L'ora*, which literally means "I don't see the hour" and was the name of the painting of the green-eyed man, had won my appeal. Italians expressed the phrase as "I can't wait." I thought it was intriguing as a title. It meant to me, at that moment, that time was of no importance.

The taxi pulled up in front of the large fountain with an iconic angel in the middle. Clear water spouted out of the top and flowed down in glorious ripples. Beyond it was the stunning hotel with an opulent exterior constructed in rough faced, square stones. A wide staircase led up to the entrance with a low, broad, rounded Roman arch over the doorway. Massive walls and patterned masonry arches were above the windows. The round towers and cone-shaped roofs, gigantic columns, and pilasters alone gave the hotel its name, but the spirals and leaf designs were what gave them an extra beautiful touch. It was a grand sight and a luxurious place worth visiting, yet I was still worried.

"That would be two liras, mia cara."

I gave him the money, bid him goodbye, and strode up to the doorstep. When I entered my room, I saw it comprised of blue and golden walls and antique furniture. The bed covers were in blue and gold embroidery. I loved the bay window and Roman-decor marble fireplace the most. I plopped down onto the bed and closed my eyes. Instantaneously, the sight of a pair of green ones flickered behind my eyelids. I grunted, standing and bringing myself over to my paint supplies. I could always take my mind off things while painting a canvas. So I began, not really paying attention to what I was painting, humming one of my favorite songs. It turns out my mind didn't stray that far. The white canvas had two green orbs on it.

I gasped. "Bah!"

I threw the paintbrush in a cup of water, deciding to lie in bed and watch the television. It was all in Italian, and even though I understood, I'd rather it had been in English. Soon, in the twinkling of an eye, sleep welcomed me.

"Lavinia." What? "Lavinia." Who? "Lavinia," a silvery, smooth voice whispered for the third time. Wait, that's me.

I bolted upright and scanned the room for the source of the voice. The cold room chilled me to the bone, and I shivered. "Who's there?"

Nothing.

Was I dreaming?

"Vieni da me."

There it was again. The same voice with different words. Vieni da me? I asked myself.

"Lavinia, vieni da me."

Come to me. That was what it meant.

"Vieni da me," it whispered again.

Fear laced up my spine, and I shuddered; the temperature in the room dropped even further and became colder. *Oh, no,* I thought. *This is what I was afraid of, and now a ghost was summoning me. Great.*

A breeze hit me, and I realized the window was open. Disinclined to move, I quickly slipped out of bed, and there was another gust before I shut it. That wasn't open before I fell asleep. A nervous pang twinged my heart; its pounding beat faster against my chest.

Suddenly, I heard the TV switch on, but the only thing I could hear was static. So, I walked over to it cautiously and pressed the button on the side to turn it off.

"Lavinia!" The once softly spoken voice became slightly louder. My body shook from fear and the coldness of the room. *"What do you want, ghosty?"* I asked precariously. The TV flickered on again with the same static, and I backed away from it, hitting the foot of the bed, my eyes wider than two coins.

"Vieni da me!" the disembodied voice spoke even louder. "No!" I shouted. "I will not come to you! That's creepy!" *"Lavinia!"* The call reverberated.

The room door flew open, and the voice became booming. Penetrating. Much more repetitive. *"Lavinia, vieni da me! Vieni da me! Vieni da me!"* In the doorway, I could see the dark outline of a tall figure. That was when I totally and completely lost it.

"Stop!" I screamed, squeezing my eyes shut and covering my ears.

Immediately, there was nothing but silence, as if it had never happened. Then, slowly, I peeled open my eyes and observed the room to see the TV off and the door shut. *Okay, I'm officially freaked out. I hadn't even heard the door shut.*

Stumbling over to the phone, I dialed my mom's number. "Hello?" I heard her sweet, confused voice. I already felt better at the sound.

"Mom." I sighed with relief.

"Oh, Vinnie! How are you doing?"

"Er—I'm ... I'm okay."

"Isn't it night over there? Why are you awake?" I could tell she was bothered by my tone. "Jet lag," I lied.

There was a pause, and then, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to call because trying to watch something to fall asleep won't cut it."

"Well, I'm always glad to hear your voice," she assured me. I sense her smiling softly on the other end.

"Me too."

"I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"I'd love to stay on the phone, but it's early morning over here, and ... I have work," she hesitantly told me. *Ah, yes. My mom. The scientific achievement-award winning surgeon Kathleen Melrose.*

"Of course. Right. Well, I love you."

"Love you too, Vinnie. Are you sure you're all right? You sound ... like a ghost gave you a fright." *Not that far off, Mom,* I thought.

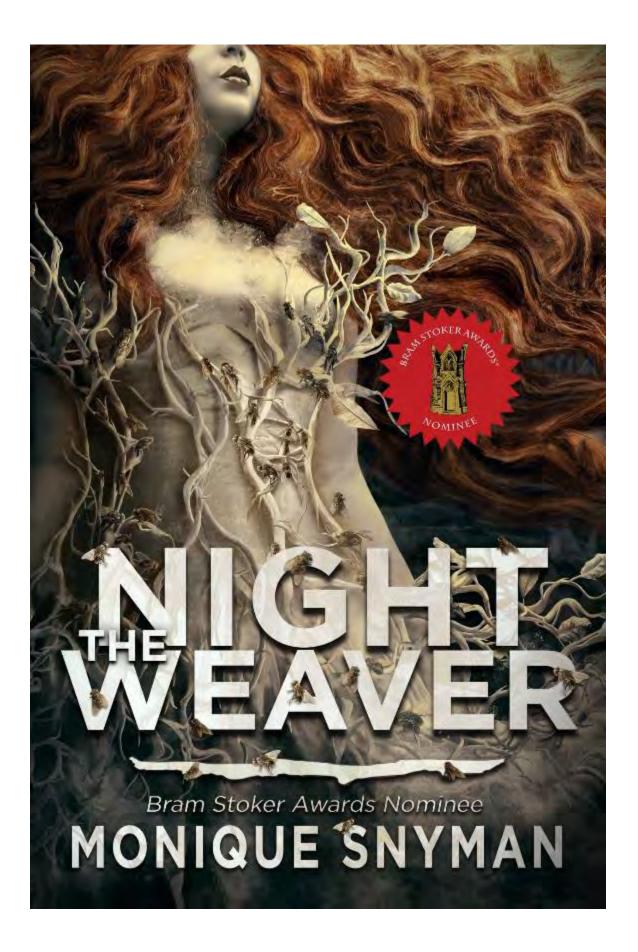
"Don't worry. I'm all right. Tell Dan and Mark I said hi." Dan was my mom's new fiancé, and Mark was my older brother.

"Okay, I will, bye."

"Bye, Mom." I hung up the phone.

I might have felt slightly better, but nothing would calm that unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach and the anxious weight on my chest.

The rest of that night, I did not sleep.



THE NIGHT WEAVER BY MONIQUE SNYMAN *Bram Stoker Awards® Nominated Novel*

Something dark is waking up in Shadow Grove, and one teenager has the determination—and the family legacy—necessary to set things right.

Shadow Grove isn't a typical town. Bad things happen here. Children disappear, one after the other, and nobody is doing anything about it. Parents don't grieve, missing posters don't line the streets, and the sheriff seems unconcerned.

Seventeen-year-old Rachel Cleary lives on the outskirts of Shadow Grove, next to the creepy forest everyone pretends doesn't exist. Usually the forest is filled with an eerie calm, and unmistakable graveyard solemnity. But the trees have started whispering, forgotten creatures are stirring and the night feels darker than ever.

Something is stalking the residents of Shadow Grove, changing them into brain-dead caricatures of themselves. It's up to Rachel to find a way to stop the devouring of her hometown before all is destroyed and everyone she loves is forever lost.

"Stephen King's *It* meets Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*... a frightening story of horror and fantasy woven together to create a delectable tale of the macabre. Snyman's storytelling will have people lining up for the next book." ~*School Library Journal*

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"With its boogeyman-like creature based in lesser-known folklore, *The Night Weaver* is unique, as well as creepy and unsettling. It introduces a world of myth, intrigue, and darkness with considerable technique." ~*Foreword Reviews*

Hardcover: 9781645480068 / \$16.99 eBook: 9781645480075 / \$6.99 Pub Date: Oct 15, 2019 Publisher: Vesuvian Books, https://vesuvianmedia.com/ Buy Links and Book Info: https://vesuvianmedia.com/the-night-weaver/ Distributor: https://www.ipgbook.com/the-night-weaver-products-9781645480068.php?page_id=21

MONIQUE SNYMAN is an editor and the author of Bram Stoker Award® nominated novels, THE NIGHT WEAVER and THE BONE CARVER, as well as the South African occult crime/horror series, DARK COUNTRY. Monique was born in Pretoria, South Africa and grew up on the western edge of the city during the post-Apartheid Era when the ideological dreams of a Rainbow Nation were at

their height. As a result, she was fortunate enough to be exposed to various cultures, languages, religions, and class differences from a very early age. While Monique's first language is Afrikaans, she dedicated her career to specializing in English creative writing. Monique resides outside of Johannesburg with her husband and daughter. <u>www.MoniqueSnyman.com</u>

CHAPTER ONE

A Perfectly Pleasant Town

At the road's end, a weathered ACCESS PROHIBITED sign stands sentinel at a narrow opening to the dark, Maine wilderness. Beyond the sign is an ancient beech tree, its thick branches reaching to the sky. White ash and red oaks flourish behind the tree; flora grows densely around the trunks but never seems to cross the invisible boundary beyond the signpost. The valley farther on is an almost circular basin enclosed within a mountainous range and a radius fifteen miles wide.

The sound of a faint, unnerving scream echoes through the labyrinth of trees. Fear prickles the back of Rachel Cleary's neck. She listens, certain she saw movement even if *nothing* ever moves in the forest. The wind itself seems wary of the place. No critters or birds make the forest their home. There are only trees, flowers, and shrubs. And now, a scream ...

An out-of-tune honk startles Rachel back to reality. She pivots. The Honda Ballade is waiting in Mrs. Crenshaw's driveway. Black plumes of exhaust rise as the vehicle idles. In the driver's seat sits the elderly woman, her shock of white hair pulled into a neat bun—*it's God's natural facelift, my dear*. Apart from rouge dabbed onto her cheekbones, Mrs. Crenshaw has made no attempt to hide her age.

"See something interesting in there, Rachel?" Mrs. Crenshaw asks by way of greeting.

"Maybe," Rachel says. "It's probably just my imagination, though."

Mrs. Crenshaw fixes her gaze on Rachel, crow's feet emphasizing the narrowing of her eyes. "Sometimes there are things in there ... *interesting* things." She lets the vague words hang between them before reversing out of the driveway and shifting into first gear. She calls out a deceptively upbeat, "Hop in." Her expression makes it clear that Rachel has no choice but to go along.

Rachel reaches out to find the passenger door already unlocked, climbs inside, and pulls the safety belt over her body. The Honda sputters forward.

"Where are we going, Mrs. Crenshaw?" Rachel asks when it becomes clear her neighbor isn't going to elaborate.

"Shopping," Mrs. Crenshaw says. "My grandson is coming for an extended visit sometime tonight and I haven't the foggiest what teenage boys eat these days."

Rachel's eyes widen. "You have a grandson?"

"I have four grandsons, two granddaughters, and three great-grandchildren." Mrs. Crenshaw glances in Rachel's direction. "Surely I've told you?"

"No." Seventeen years of living across the road from Mrs. Crenshaw—the same woman who'd babysat her, who'd taught her how to tie her shoes, who'd gifted her a ten dollar bill every birthday and Christmas for as long as she can remember—and Rachel never suspected Mrs. Crenshaw had children at some point in her life. "You don't have any photos in your house of them."

"Well, they aren't anything to brag about," Mrs. Crenshaw says, the beginnings of a deep crease

forming on her forehead. "Where do you think I go during the holiday season?"

"I don't know. Florida?"

Mrs. Crenshaw shakes her head. "Can't blame you, I suppose. God knows the only time I ever see my children is when I visit them."

"Why?"

"You're curious about all the wrong things today." Mrs. Crenshaw keeps her eyes on Griswold Road. Desolate, as it often is, the road twists and winds through Shadow Grove's undeveloped lands. "Neither Matthew nor Sophie will set foot in this place. They ran off as soon as they turned eighteen, claiming they didn't want to get stuck in a small town like their daddy had. It's my own fault, of course, but it's such an inconvenience."

The conversation halts as they approach Eerie Creek Bridge, its barrier created from slats of wood haphazardly nailed together and painted over in a neutral white. Mrs. Crenshaw leans forward, squinting hard at something beside the road. Rachel follows her gaze to where Maggie Dawson and Eddie Roberts run up the creek bank, giggling all the way, their clothes soaked through. Rachel doesn't look for long, although she has half a mind to shout at them to get a room.

Mrs. Crenshaw turns onto the bridge and inhales deeply, relaxing against her seat as soon as the car crosses into the suburbs of the small town, where boxy, symmetrical homes line the street. Here and there a wrought-iron fence surrounds a property. A decorative balustrade becomes a feature point, setting the fraternal houses on Eerie Street apart. Every garden is maintained—green, lush, and overrun with a variety of flowers—in accordance with the strict homeowners' association guidelines.

The suburbs are pretty, no doubt, but a tad too utilitarian for Rachel's tastes.

Mrs. Crenshaw slows and turns her car onto Main Road, where colonial buildings have been repurposed to house Shadow Grove's thriving small businesses. Alice's Vintage Emporium, which sells upmarket fashion from yesteryear, is neighbor to a quaint sit-down coffee shop called Café Grove—where the who's who of Ridge Crest High usually hang out.

"Did you notice there isn't a single missing person flyer posted anywhere in town?" Rachel asks, remembering the scream she'd heard—or imagined she'd heard.

"Yes, I have."

A shudder runs down her back. "It's weird, right? I mean, if this was any other town, people would've immediately formed search parties to look for the missing kids. Not to mention, their parents would've approached every newspaper and news station in the state by now. At the very least, we'd have gotten word of there being a Facebook group, or seen posts on other social media sites. Hashtag where are they?"

Mrs. Crenshaw grimaces. "I s'pose."

Rachel places her hands in her lap when Mrs. Crenshaw's response doesn't meet her expectations. Where is the outrage? Little kids are going missing and nobody over the age of eighteen seems in the least bit concerned. In fact, the Sheriff's Department is making it sound like there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for the disappearances. Take, for example, eight-year-old Dana Crosby, who went missing on her way home right after Christmas break. She'd stayed after school later than usual, according to her teacher, because she'd received detention for speaking out of turn. A day later, when folks were becoming antsy about Dana's safety, Sheriff Carter released a press statement implying the girl was prone to throwing temper tantrums and running away when she didn't get her way. She was, presumably, a troubled young girl, and she would, most likely, make her way home when she was good and ready.

Two weeks after Dana Crosby supposedly threw a tantrum and ran away, four-year-old Eric

Smith was snatched out of his mother's backyard around dusk. His mother said he'd been playing in his sandbox, driving his cars across the snow-capped sandy hills he'd created.

"I only looked away for a second, I swear!"

Mrs. Smith's public breakdown in Café Grove hadn't changed the town's indifferent outlook on the situation.

Somehow, Sheriff Carter convinced the poor woman that her son had been taken by her estranged husband. He'd even gone so far as to tell her Eric's father was well within his rights to take their son because there weren't any explicit custody terms in place. The logic behind his proclamation was flawed, but Eric's mother didn't officially pursue the matter any further.

Two months later, as winter began to thaw and the world renewed itself in spectacular fashion, twelve-year-old Becky Goldstein, an avid birdwatcher and budding artist, vanished near Eerie Creek. Her sketchbook was found on the creek bank a few days later, a drawing of an evening grosbeak still unfinished, along with her binoculars and pencils.

"There is no evidence of foul play in Becky Goldstein's disappearance. We have reason to believe she ran away from home after we found and read her diary, which explicitly states: 'I wish I could live in New York forever. One day, if I'm ever brave enough, I'll run away and live beneath the lights with an artist.""

Becky Goldstein, contrary to Sheriff Carter's statement, was not the runaway type. Rachel should know because she'd babysat her on occasion. The girl came from a good home—her grades were outstanding, and she didn't hang around with the wrong crowd as everyone was led to believe. The girl was an introvert, happiest whenever she had those binoculars against her face, sure. But Becky wasn't socially inept either. She had plenty of age-appropriate friends who didn't get into any trouble. Furthermore, those diary entries Sheriff Carter loved to quote were the shared fantasies and dreams of every prepubescent girl in today's society. No names were mentioned, no plans were made, no way had she left everything she knew and loved behind.

Then nine-year-old Toby Merkel was gone, followed by six-year-old Michael O'Conner.

One after the other, kids vanish into thin air, and every single time Sheriff Carter finds a reason *not* to investigate their disappearances.

There were other incidents, of course, and other cover-ups unrelated to the mysterious disappearances, but the issue of the missing children is the most disconcerting matter now.

"You'd be out there looking for me if I went missing, right?"

"You know I would, dear." Mrs. Crenshaw's tone doesn't leave room for doubt.

Rachel gulps down her emotions, grateful that someone, anyone, would remember she existed if she's ever taken against her will.

An awkward silence stretches between them as Mrs. Crenshaw maneuvers her vehicle around the park, heading for the Other Side of town, which is no more than a euphemism for the so-called less-desirable residents and businesses in Shadow Grove. Hidden away from the tourists' eyes, trailers and smaller houses stand alongside steelworks and other closed down factories, just beyond the now-defunct train station. Ashfall Heights—a neglected, solitary apartment building, built just before the Great Depression when a mediocre population boom made the town council worry about a future housing problem—stands nine stories high, and is mostly surrounded by undeveloped wilderness.

The Other Side is also where the more popular chain-stores find themselves.

Rachel says, "You know what Sheriff Carter said when I asked him about what he's doing to find the missing kids? He said if anything's amiss, it doesn't fall into his jurisdiction anyway." She picks at her thumb's cuticle with her index finger, a nervous habit, and barely feels the sharp pain as she digs

too deep and draws blood. "What does that even mean? What's the deal with Bulltwang Bill al—"

She cuts herself off, realizing her mistake.

"Who now?"

Rachel's face warms. "Sheriff Carter."

Mrs. Crenshaw's lips tug into one of her secretive smiles, then vanishes. "Have you spoken to your mother about any of this?" There's both sympathy and regret in her voice.

Rachel barks a humorless laugh. "Every time I bring it up, she changes the subject."

Mrs. Crenshaw exhales loudly, shaking her head as she turns onto 7th Avenue and drives into the chain supermarket's parking lot. She parks in one of the empty spaces nearest to the automatic sliding door. The Honda's engine wheezes from the six-mile drive, rumbling with gratitude when she turns the key in the ignition. Mrs. Crenshaw's knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel, liver spots paling quickly and wrinkles smoothing.

Maybe this issue is affecting her more than she lets on?

"I don't get it," Rachel says. "There's likely a kiddie-fiddler on the loose, possibly one with a tendency to kill his victims, but people aren't freaking out. What's wrong with this town?"

"It's not my place to tell you why this town is the way it is." Mrs. Crenshaw sounds older than her seventy-two years; her icy blue eyes hold too much wisdom for one person to have collected in a single lifetime. "What I can tell you is that when I struggle to understand the present, I tend to study the past. I try to piece things together by sifting through the chaos.

"The usual avenues hold no answers, though; libraries, archives, even digital sources have been manipulated to help with Shadow Grove's long-term rebranding plan. If you want answers, you're going to have to get creative and dig real deep. You'll need to find unaltered history.

"If I were you," she continues in a conspirator's whisper. "I'd find my clues where the really old stuff is kept—"

"I'm not breaking into the museum," Rachel interrupts.

The old woman cackles like a witch, her frail shoulders shaking underneath her silk blouse. She releases her grip on the steering wheel, visibly relaxing. "I should hope not," she says between her fits of laughter. "No, sweetheart, I don't mean the museum—it's under town council control anyway. Listen to me: when I struggle to understand the *present*, I tend to study the *past*. I try to piece things together by *sifting* through the *chaos*."

Rachel frowns.

Mom always hides the Christmas presents in the cluttered attic, near the trunk with the box of old kitchen utensils in it. Does she mean Dad's old stuff?

"The attic?" she asks, unsure.

Mrs. Crenshaw raises her hand and touches her index finger to her nose, eyes gleaming with mischief, before she reaches between the seats to find her purse.

Relieved, Rachel releases her seatbelt. "Was that so hard?"

Mrs. Crenshaw opens the driver's door. "Instead of sassing me, run ahead and get us a shopping cart."

"Whatever happened to bribing me with ice-cream to do your bidding, huh?" Rachel tuts and shakes her head, hiding her smile with a forced frown.

"I think there are laws against that type of thing now," Mrs. Crenshaw responds under her breath, making Rachel laugh as she walks off to find a shopping cart.

CHAPTER TWO

Small Town, Big Problems

After spending the better half of an hour listing the disappearances in chronological order, Rachel comes to the conclusion that her detective skills aren't nearly as good as she'd hoped, and her natural talent for research only goes as far as the available information. Nevertheless, she's certain there's more to the story. Call it instinct or wishful thinking, but an inexplicable gut feeling tells her those children were taken for a reason.

The reason is important.

"But why?" she asks herself, frustration threatening to overpower her determination. Any answer would do at this point. She's been putting off a trip into the attic since the previous evening, not completely in the mood to rummage through generations of accumulated junk.

Her attention moves toward her bedroom window and the gleaming forest beyond, where emerald leaves glitter in the mid-morning sunlight. The world outside is as quiet as the house itself— motionless, devoid of life. The forest always reminds her of a graveyard, unsettling in its solemnity. These days, it also *feels* different, like something is watching ... waiting.

Waiting for what?

Rachel shudders, uneasy at the thought. She pushes herself out of the chair and crosses the room. With a last, quick assessment of the area outside, she shuts the curtains and stands there, fabric clutched in her hands.

What if something is watching me? What if it's the same something that took the children? What if I'm next?

Rachel talks herself out of peeking through the crack between the drops of thick fabric.

Be reasonable. The kids who've been taken were between four and twelve years old. You're seventeen, Rachel. You're too old.

The creepy feeling is replaced with a frisson of intense fear.

Still, what if I'm wrong?

"Nope. Nope. Nope."

Rachel turns on her heels and heads for the door, repeating the word under her breath until it becomes an irritating mantra she can't stop uttering. She makes her way through the hallway, toward the staircase, and descends two steps at a time to put as much distance between herself and the window. By the time she reaches the first floor, she's ready to sprint across Griswold Road, toward the safety of Mrs. Crenshaw's house.

She uses too much strength to pull the front door open and the momentum drags her off balance. Before she can begin to understand what's happening *outside* her own mind, a shriek tears out of her as she locks eyes with an unexpected, auburn-haired stranger, his fist still raised to knock against the now-open door. Rachel clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle her cry of surprise. The guy lowers his fist.

He's tall, towering over Rachel's five-six, and brawny enough to make her not want to mess with him. He doesn't appear to be much older than her. She'd wager he's nineteen or twenty, maybe. His icy blue eyes have a familiarity she can't seem to pinpoint. It's as if her fear has rendered her deduction abilities moot, leaving her completely defenseless.

"Ye look like ye have the devil chasin' after ye," he says, peering around Rachel to study the area behind her. He turns his attention back to her. "Nan asked if ye wanted to come plant some eggs with us. I'm not sure what the old witch meant."

"What?" Rachel's confusion is muffled behind her hand.

"My Nan-" He gestures across the street to Mrs. Crenshaw's house with a thumb over his

shoulder.

Rachel slips her hand away from her mouth as her mind connects the dots. Those ice-blue eyes belong to Mrs. Crenshaw, and that particular shade of auburn-colored hair is similar to her own. There's no doubt in who he is, weird accent or no. "Oh. You're Mrs. Crenshaw's grandson?"

"Aye," he says, sighing. "Are ye comin' then?"

She steps outside the house and pulls the door shut behind her. Whatever it is Mrs. Crenshaw wants them to do is infinitely better than being alone, especially being alone in a house that's being watched by... well, by whatever is inside the forest.

They walk down the porch steps, Rachel leading the way. Silence hangs over them, one full of unasked questions like: 'What's your name?' and 'Sorry for the freak-out, but did you perchance see someone peeping through my bedroom window on your way over?' Before she can ask him anything, Rachel spots Mrs. Crenshaw in the distance, near the forest entrance. The old woman sits in a lawn chair, beneath the shade of a faded pink umbrella, her sunhat on her head and the bottle of sunblock within her reach. She looks so tiny these days, so much tinier and more delicate than she was a year ago.

"I'm Rachel," she says to the herculean guy when they reach the lawn. "Rachel Cleary."

"Nan said as much." He pushes one hand through his thick, wavy hair. "Dougal Charles Mackay." He pronounces his name *Doogle Charls Meckeye*, melodic vowels and throaty consonants rolling off his tongue.

"Nice name." Rachel crosses her arms just to do something with her hands. He tilts his head in her direction. The warmth of a blush comes without warning, heating her cheeks. She clears her throat and says, "So, what exactly are we going to do at Mrs. Crenshaw's?"

He shakes his head, hair falling over his forehead. "I dunno. Somethin' about plantin' eggs."

Rachel frowns, struggling to decipher his words. "Planting eggs?"

"Aye."

"As in, she wants us to dig a hole and put a chicken egg into the ground?"

Dougal purses his lips as his brow furrows before he slowly nods. They reach the sun-bleached asphalt. He looks toward the forest entrance, to where his grandmother sits, before his gaze slips to study the road.

"Weird," Rachel says. "Mind you, your grandmother always occupied my time with odd activities."

"What's taking you so long, Dougal?" Mrs. Crenshaw shouts. She stretches her neck to look over her shoulder. "Stop dawdling and fetch the basket of eggs on the kitchen counter and the shovel at the back door. We have a lot of work to do today."

"Lord, help me," Dougal says, speeding up.

Rachel snickers as she watches him go.

"Are you sassing me, boy?" Mrs. Crenshaw asks in a stern voice, the same voice Rachel used to fear as a kid. "Don't think you're old enough not to get a paddle to the butt!"

"I wasn't sassing ye, Nan," he says loud enough for her to hear.

"You'd better not be. Also, you can tone down on the Scots already. I've heard you mocking your mother's accent enough to know you can speak passable English," Mrs. Crenshaw calls as Rachel hurries to the old woman's side, glad not to be on the other end of this particular conversation. "When he sulks, I can barely understand him."

"I was having some trouble in that department myself," Rachel concurs.

"You'll get used to the accent after a while, but I can't say the same thing about the bagpipes at five o'clock in the morning. I swear, whenever I go up to Scotland, his father plays those damned bagpipes on purpose just to get on my nerves."

"Please tell me Dougal doesn't play bagpipes."

"That miscreant? Ha. He doesn't have a musical bone in his body, thank the heavens."

Rachel sighs in relief.

"Listen," Mrs. Crenshaw changes her tone to match the seriousness gleaming in her eyes. "I'm sure you've noticed or have already suspected, but it deserves mentioning anyway. You and Dougal are *not* to get romantic in any way."

"The hair kinda gave it away," Rachel says.

"Good," Mrs. Crenshaw says. "I'm yet to broach the subject with him about you two being related. Hopefully, Sophie got around to it before she put him on the plane."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Crenshaw," Rachel says, unable to keep herself from grimacing at the mere thought of her and Dougal being anything more than friends. "He's not my type anyway."

"Keep it that way." Mrs. Crenshaw glances over her shoulder again. "Dougal, what's taking you so long?"

Dougal appears on the porch, holding a basket filled with eggs in one hand and a shovel clutched in his other hand. He crosses the distance, sets the basket beside the chair, and plants the shovel's blade into the earth. He leans on the handle, waiting for direction.

"Now we can plant some eggs." Mrs. Crenshaw rubs her hands together.

Dougal opens his mouth to protest—or ask a question—and Rachel gestures for him to stop by waving her hands around behind his grandmother's back. If there's one thing she's learned about Mrs. Crenshaw, it's that when she's in one of these moods, it's best to keep quiet and go along with her whims. Dougal shuts his mouth but raises an inquisitive eyebrow at Rachel instead.

"Dougal, you're going to dig some holes. They need to be about one foot deep and a yard apart. Begin at the edge of the MacCleary property and work your way to the end of mine, past the ACCESS PROHIBITED sign. Rachel, you're going to *carefully* put the egg into the hole and cover it with soil. Don't plant a cracked egg. Be gentle with them." She claps her hands, signaling the beginning of the workday, one in which she won't be participating.

Rachel stands, grabs the egg basket, and falls into step beside Mrs. Crenshaw's sullen grandson. "Is Nan always like this?" Dougal asks when they're out of earshot. "Ye know her better."

"Not *always*. She tends to get peculiar around this time of year, but it's not harmful or malicious—

just strange."

For the most part, the MacCleary land is relatively big but remains unused. The border of the property follows one curve of the mountainous range holding the forest, the rocky terrain steadily becoming a steep cliff looming over the farthest edge of the property. Across Griswold Road, the Fraser land is a mirror image, laid out in an identical way against the other curve. The only difference is the houses' façades and the additions built in the past to accommodate the growing families. Both families had been large once.

When Rachel and Dougal arrive at the border of the MacCleary property, he tests the ground with the shovel. The blade penetrates the soft soil with ease but stops when it slams against a rock hidden within the earth. He wiggles the shovel around to loosen the rock from its hold, before moving the first bit of ground to the side.

"About eight years ago, around the time my dad died, your grandmother came over with a boxful of saucers and a crate of milk," Rachel says.

"Whit wey?"

"Huh?"

"Why?" Dougal clarifies.

"Oh. Well, Mrs. Crenshaw doesn't tell me why we do half the things we do. It's easier not to ask questions when it comes to her eccentricities. That day, the two of us filled the saucers with milk and lined them up in this exact way. I told her all of Shadow Grove's stray cats would come over and we'll never get rid of them again, but she shushed me and told me to get back to work."

Dougal stops his shoveling, his expression turning concerned rather than curious. "Did the cats come?"

"No, but each and every one of those saucers was empty the next morning." Rachel picks the first egg out of the basket. "That hole looks deep enough."

Dougal grunts in affirmation and moves a yard over, giving Rachel enough space to start her part of the assigned work. She scrapes the loose soil over the egg, covering it as instructed, and picks out the next egg. The process is repeated a couple of times, the silence between them growing again.

"Mah maw—" Dougal begins but stops himself. He clears his throat, cheeks reddening. "My ma used this place as a threat when we were weans, tellin' us if we were naughty, she'd send us to Nan."

"Doesn't sound like much of a threat," Rachel says. "Granted, you flew across the ocean to plant eggs, so it seems like your mom doesn't make empty promises."

His lips curl up into a sheepish smile. "Aye. First time she's followed through, too. She isn't like Nan."

"Nobody's like Mrs. Crenshaw, I assure you. She runs this town."

"I believe ye. Nan's the only person my da's scared of; says the fair folk don't come near the house when she visits."

Rachel can't contain her smile as she imagines Mrs. Crenshaw ordering large Scottish men around and having them obey her. If anyone can do it, it's that tiny, old lady, after all.

Their conversation continues, the topics leaning toward the mundane. The almost rhythmic digplant-cover-repeat soothes Rachel's worries from earlier, back when she'd been alone in her bedroom, and slowly Dougal becomes chattier. Sweat trickles between her shoulder blades as the sun reaches its apex, her muscles ache from the unnatural exercise of having to plant eggs along the invisible border.

When they reach the ACCESS PROHIBITED sign, around one o'clock in the afternoon, Mrs. Crenshaw is nowhere to be seen. In her place sits a tray, though—a jug of lemonade and two tall glasses, along with a plate stacked with sandwiches.

"Time for a wee break." Dougal's relief is evident. He stabs the shovel's blade into the ground and holds a hand out for Rachel. She contemplates his offer, studying his calloused palm, before accepting the help. He pulls her to her feet, looking deep into her eyes, and says, "I understand why Nan's fond o' ye."

Rachel swallows hard. "It's probably because she helped raise me."

Dougal releases her hand, and she moves toward the lawn chair. "Yer not what I expected, Rachel Cleary. I thought ye might be one of them spoilt American lasses that talk too much and do little else."

"That's mildly racist," Rachel says.

"Only mildly? Och! I'm already losin' my touch."

She laughs as she pulls the insect net off the tray, picks up the lemonade, and pours them both a drink. He accepts a glass and takes a seat on the grassy lawn, stretching out beneath the umbrella's shade.

"So, how long are you staying?"

"Nan didn't tell ye?"

"I didn't even know Mrs. Crenshaw had kids or grandkids until yesterday."

Dougal exhales loudly through his nose. "I got lifted for stealin' a car."

"I only understood about seventy percent of that sentence. Try again."

He rolls his eyes. "I went out to the pub, got really wasted, stole a car, and wrapped it 'round a tree," he explains slowly, his brogue still there but his enunciation better suited to the untrained ear. "Ma decided then and there I wasn't gonna end up like my cousin, who's servin' time in a Texas prison for somethin' or other. So, she bought me a one-way ticket to Shadow Grove and said I was gonna finish high school here, under Nan's keen eye."

"Wait, you're still in high school?"

"Aye, I'm seventeen," he answers. "Ye thought I was older?"

"Yeah."

Dougal shrugs and reaches for a sandwich.

"Was it bad? The accident, I mean."

"Aye," is all he says.

She takes a sip of her lemonade, enjoying the sweet coolness running down her dry throat, hoping it'll keep her from being rude and blurting out the questions she's dying to ask.

Their respite is interrupted by a rustle—no more than a dry whisper of foliage moving around, but it's enough to catch them both off guard. A sudden gust of wind rushes from the forest's entrance, chilling the sweat clinging to Rachel's body. With the wind comes the sound of laughing children. Ethereal echoes blow onto Griswold Road. Rachel snaps her attention toward the fleeting shadow, moving from one tree to the next, hiding. She searches for whatever lurks just beyond her sight, scans the edge of the wood for a trace of any kids who might've snuck inside the infernal place to play.

Rachel stands from her perch on the lawn chair's armrest, ignoring the way her bones click from misuse. Her muscles scream for mercy as she takes a step forward, examining the trees ahead and the spaces between them.

Dougal is by her side a moment later, staring into the dense woodlands where the sun barely penetrates through the thick canopy of leaves.

"Did you hear that?" she asks.

"Sounded like weans playin'," Dougal says. "Did ye feel it?"

First the faint scream yesterday, and now this? She doesn't want to admit the truth, not to a person she's only met, but she can't deny her unease anymore either. The way her hair stands on end, how her adrenaline spikes.

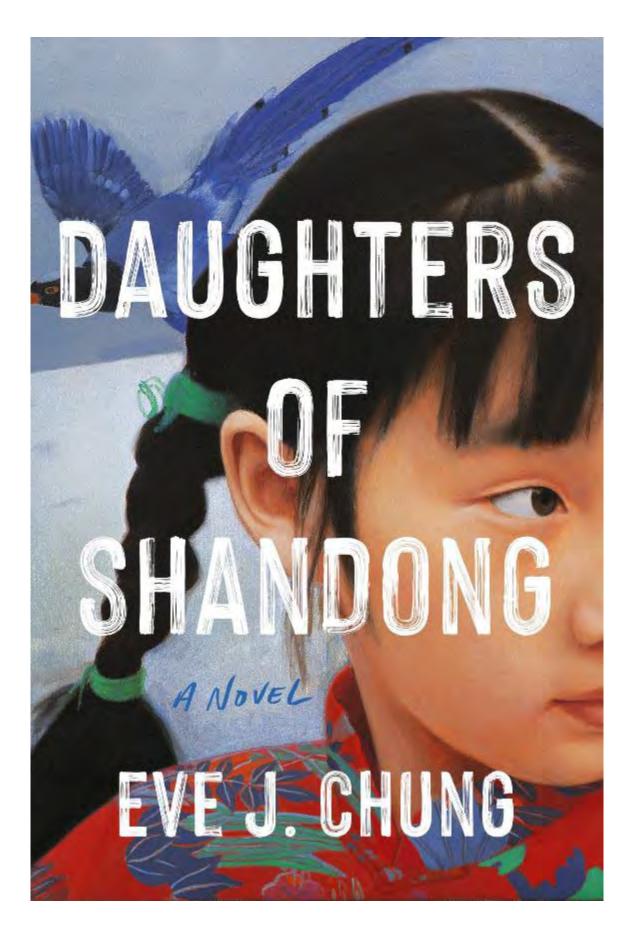
Her fear increases.

"Yes."

Without looking her way, his tone too casual under the circumstances, he asks, "If ye don't mind me askin', why did ye look so scared earlier?"

"There's something wrong with the forest," she whispers. "It's waking up."

HISTORICAL FICTION



DAUGHTERS OF SHANDONG BY EVE J. CHUNG

A propulsive, extraordinary novel about a mother and her daughters' harrowing escape to Taiwan as the Communist revolution sweeps through China, by debut author Eve J. Chung, based on her family story.

Daughters are the Ang family's curse.

In 1948, civil war ravages the Chinese countryside, but in rural Shandong, the wealthy, landowning Angs are more concerned with their lack of an heir. Hai is the eldest of four girls and spends her days looking after her sisters. Headstrong Di, who is just a year younger, learns to hide in plain sight, and their mother—abused by the family for failing to birth a boy—finds her own small acts of rebellion in the kitchen. As the Communist army closes in on their town, the rest of the prosperous household flees, leaving behind the girls and their mother because they view them as useless mouths to feed.

Without an Ang male to punish, the land-seizing cadres choose Hai, as the eldest child, to stand trial for her family's crimes. She barely survives their brutality. Realizing the worst is yet to come, the women plan their escape. Starving and penniless but resourceful, they forge travel permits and embark on a thousand-mile journey to confront the family that abandoned them.

From the countryside to the bustling city of Qingdao, and onward to British Hong Kong and eventually Taiwan, they witness the changing tide of a nation and the plight of multitudes caught in the wake of revolution. But with the loss of their home and the life they've known also comes new freedom—to take hold of their fate, to shake free of the bonds of their gender, and to claim their own story.

Told in assured, evocative prose, with impeccably drawn characters, *Daughters of Shandong* is a hopeful, powerful story about the resilience of women in war; the enduring love between mothers, daughters, and sisters; and the sacrifices made to lift up future generations.

"Spellbindingly transportive." -Thao Thai, author of *Banyan Moon*, a *Today Show* Read with Jenna Book Club Pick

"One of those rare works of fiction that entertains, educates, and inspires." -Jamie Ford, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Many Daughters of Afong Moy*

"Eve J. Chung takes personal family history and spins it into pure gold in her haunting first novel... A powerhouse debut from a major new talent!" -Kate Quinn, New York Times bestselling author of The Diamond Eye

Hardcover: 9780593640531 / \$28.00 eBook: 9780593640555 / \$14.99 Audiobook: 9780593826164 / \$16.99 Pub Date: May 7, 2024 Publisher: Penguin Random House, <u>https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com</u> Buy Link: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/736378/daughters-of-shandong-by-eve-jchung/

EVE J. CHUNG is a Taiwanese American human rights lawyer focusing on gender equality and women's rights. She lives in New York with her husband, two children, and two dogs. https://evejchung.com/

EXCERPT

When I recall my birthplace, Zhucheng, Shandong, I think first of our *shiheyuan*, the traditional courtyard home that I grew up in. Within the white walls that housed my family for generations, I smell my mother's cooking and hear my sisters sing.

Zhucheng today is famous for dinosaurs, but back then their skeletons slept, undiscovered beneath fertile farmland. As a child, I tumbled through fields, dancing ignorantly above these giants. I leaped along our town's outer wall, chipped away by time, a stone mouth with jagged teeth. Though bombs left our landscape pockmarked, we endured. We regrew and we rebuilt.

Peace was slippery, quick inhalations between violent tides. When war came again, we held our breath as it dragged us into its ebb and flow. It swallowed our people. It claimed our homes.

The China I knew ached, and the hometown I knew bled.

Yet still, I close my eyes and see curving rivers and wildflower fields. Soft clouds caress stalwart mountains. Our temples stand, defiant and holy.

I carry that land in my blood, in my bones, and in my memories. From across the sea, I draw strength. In my present, I feel warmth. Most important, I choose to remember love. Wherever I am in this world, I remain as I was, and always will be—the wheat that bursts through Shandong soil, and the Northern flowers that bloom in snow.

Zhucheng, Shandong

CHAPTER ONE

Heirless

Nai Nai said whores weren't allowed in the house, so she kicked Mom out, slamming the wooden door shut with a clatter that startled the birds. We didn't know where my sister Di was, but Three and I sat beside Mom as she leaned against the courtyard wall of our *shiheyuan*, hands red and chapped from washing dishes. "Don't worry," she said to us. "She'll calm down when your father comes home." Nai Nai was a small, thin lady with ebony hair, birdlike hands, and dainty bound feet. Yet, even as she tottered in her small silk slippers, she had the presence of a warlord and a tongue like a whip. I was eleven, and old enough to know that no one could calm her after such a rage, not even her first and favorite son.

It was fall, and dried leaves swirled in the chilly wind, skimming yellow grass that swayed gently.

Luckily, the harvest was finished and most of the workers had gone home. Mom didn't want reports of this shameful spectacle to make the rounds—the peasants hated Nai Nai as much as they loved gossip, and this story would have spread like a wildfire. We lived in rural Zhucheng, a small town where my family reigned. For generations, our men had excelled in imperial exams, earning prestigious government positions and building an empire through renting land and running businesses. Our palatial *shiheyuan*, with its gleaming orange tiles and wooden latticed panels, was an ostentatious testament to our wealth. Magnificent stone lions framed the entrance of the courtyard, which was large enough for a lotus pond full of shimmering koi. They swam in circles lazily, eyes globular, and gulped at two-year-old Three as she peered into the water.

Nai Nai had a nose for lies and could almost always tell when a secret lurked inside her walls. Still, Mom had been hiding her pregnancy for weeks. "It will be a boy this time. I can feel it, Li-Hai," she said to me repeatedly, as though her anxious mutterings could manifest a son. As soon as I was born, I was a disappointment. When Second Sister arrived one year later, she was a failure. Father wistfully named her Li-Di, since *di* meant "younger brother." Then Third Sister came along, a catastrophe so horrific that she got only a number: Three.

Three girls rattled the Angs enough for Nai Nai to take drastic measures. Though she watched every coin like it was a fragment of her soul, she decided to trade an ounce of gold for a glimpse into the future. Together, she and Mom went to a famous fortune-teller in a neighboring town and asked if a male heir was forthcoming. Mom wrote down the date and time of her birth as he examined the lines on her palm, reading it like it was a map of her life. Handing Mom an amber amulet for protection, he declared solemnly that Mom would not have a son until she turned thirty-six.

Mom was only in her late twenties then, but Nai Nai came home giddy, delighted that an heir would arrive eventually. She ordered my parents to sleep in separate rooms and forbade them from having intercourse until Mom's thirty-sixth birthday. Lauding herself for her ingenuity, she boasted, "This will save us the expense of raising additional daughters!" After all, girls were nothing more than wives for other people's sons.

Father obeyed and set up his own bedroom, but he told Nai Nai that fortune-tellers were a scam. "We make our own fate," he insisted, a feeble protest that she ignored. At night, Nai Nai remained a vigilant guard, monitoring the hallway with bizarre frequency. Despite her enthusiasm, even the fiercest dragon succumbs to slumber. A few months later, Mom became pregnant for the fourth time.

"Don't tell anyone," Mom whispered to me, and continued her chores as though nothing had changed. Every morning, she woke up at four a.m. to cook breakfast for about eighty workers who lived on and tilled our land. They began work at dawn, so Mom had to grind flour by lamplight. She was a fantastic cook, and made buns and dumplings like they were art. With deft hands, she could roll dough thin like paper for butterfly wontons, knead fluffy, airy dessert bun clouds, and pull springy, chewy bread that rose like soldiers saluting in the steamer.

Despite our wealth, Nai Nai watched the pantry with military precision. Every evening, she weighed the flour to make sure that Mom wasn't being too generous to the workers. The food was never enough, so Mom snuck extra helpings where she could. Through practice, she learned to spin white lies that squeaked under Nai Nai's shrewd radar. Once, Mom made pork buns for a worker's sick child and told Nai Nai the meat was gone because it had spoiled. She passed extra noodles to everyone, and then claimed that mice had broken into the pantry. The workers appreciated Mom and understood the gravity of these risks, because they had a saying: "Wild dogs are dangerous, and ghosts are scary, but nothing is more terrifying than Madame Ang," my Nai Nai.

Nai Nai could have hired servants to help Mom with her tasks, but she considered frugality a pillar in sustaining the Ang fortune. Also, she detested Mom—first, for marrying her son, and second, for having large feet. My parents had been betrothed as infants, and Mom's family, the Daos in Rizhao, were *biao* cousins of the Angs. *Biao* cousins had different surnames and, at that time, could marry one another, but *tang* cousins, who shared the same surname and family tomb, were akin to siblings.

The Daos owned the majority of the ships in Rizhao's waters and prospered through maritime trade. A wealthy girl like Mom should have had properly bound feet, and my Lao Lao had tried to bind them—she had wrapped Mom's feet early on, insisting that a happy husband was worth the agony of broken bones. In Lao Lao's world of silk and porcelain, the freedom to walk was an acceptable price to pay for a man's affection. The Nationalist government, however, had banned foot binding, and their campaigns against it grew increasingly aggressive. After a few years, Lao Lao grudgingly cut Mom's bindings. The damage, however, was irreversible. For the rest of her life Mom hobbled, her feet having been molded flat on the bottom with a pronounced arch at the top.

Nai Nai, meanwhile, had remained defiant before the Nationalist prohibition. She was proud of her three-inch lotuses, and no government lackey could scare her into relinquishing thousands of years of tradition. "Large feet are for peasants," Nai Nai said with disdain when seventeen-year-old Mom arrived for the wedding. "If you aren't a proper lady, you might as well be useful!"

I wished that young Mom had heeded that red flag and fled back to Rizhao, begging her parents for another match. Instead, she went ahead with the ceremony, cutting ties with the Daos—a bride's mother used to throw a bucket of water out the front door after the wedding to symbolize that her daughter, like the water, could never return.

Salivating, Mom told me that her parents sent crates of crabs for that banquet, which ended up being her last special meal. In our *shiheyuan*, Mom was not allowed to eat crab, because Nai Nai reserved delicacies for the men. Instead, Mom had to crack open the shells and pluck the soft flesh into bowls for Father and Yei Yei. She might have snuck a bite here or there, but it was a great change from her childhood of abundance to her married life, taking a quick morsel while hunched over a counter, with one eye on the door. In her own house, my mother was a thief of minuscule riches, eating these stolen tidbits not only for the taste but for the evocation of childhood memories, the only luxury that she could keep for herself.

On the morning of our eviction, Mom had been in the kitchen poaching eggs for Nai Nai's breakfast. As she filled the sink with water, the smell of dirty dishes triggered a bout of nausea and she vomited. Sirens went off in Nai Nai's head, and she launched her accusations like cannonballs. "You're pregnant, aren't you?" she cried, upending the remainder of her soup, white threads of egg sloshing all over the table. Mom should have lied, but she was too sick to think straight and crumbled under Nai Nai's glare. She nodded.

Grabbing Three, I dove underneath the table as Nai Nai began yanking bowls from the cabinets. Angry Nai Nai didn't care about wasting money, which meant she didn't care about anything. Screaming, she hurled the bowls at Mom, who covered her head as they shattered like ceramic bombs against the wall. Sharp shards scattered across the floor as Three shook in my arms—she knew better than to cry when Nai Nai was in a mood. "My son would never disobey me!" Nai Nai shrieked, her aim worsening with her mounting fury. "You must have had an affair. Tell me who it is. Is it one of the workers? Whoever it is, I'll find out!"

Her tirade lasted at least ten minutes and ended with "Whores go to hell!" and the three of us outside without our jackets. As I wrapped my hands around my bare arms, I wondered what Nai Nai would have done if the fortune-teller had said that Mom would never have an heir. Would she have killed her? Sold her? It was hard to say. I'd lived with Nai Nai all my life, and I wanted to believe that there was a limit to her cruelty. However, the old lady continued to surprise me.

From across the koi pond, my cousin Chiao stepped into the courtyard, clutching a toy sword in his sausage fingers. "Auntie! Hi, Auntie!" he yelled, skipping toward us, his round belly bobbing. "Look what Yei Yei brought me! Hai, wanna play bandits and warlords? You have to be the bandit since you don't have a sword."

Before I could reply that bandits have swords too, Mom said, "Chiao, run inside and get some warm clothing for Hai and Three. It's getting colder now that the sun is setting. When you are back, you and Hai can play."

"Okay!" Chiao agreed cheerfully, not bothering to ask why we were stuck outside. Within our *shiheyuan*, Chiao was in his own bubble of favor, and it did not occur to him that we were being punished. After all, he was the coveted son of Father's younger brother, Jian, and the only grandson in my generation. He got the best of everything—including crab! Nai Nai gave him crisp fried dough for breakfast and slabs of soft braised pork belly for lunch. Yei Yei said only boys got gifts, and he returned from Qingdao with trinkets for Chiao, while Di and I watched, empty-handed. Girls were lucky to be housed. We were lucky to be raised. We were lucky to be fed.

I was jealous of Chiao, but I knew that only men could worship our ancestors at the family tomb; only Chiao could provide for Nai Nai and Yei Yei, and my own parents, in the afterlife. Di and I were taught to pray for Chiao's success, and I did, because Mom's welfare in the spirit realm would depend on him one day. *Zhong nan qing nu*, an idiom that meant, "Value men and belittle women," was embedded in my understanding of our world.

It was almost sunset when Father came home, a leather bag on his shoulder, Mom frantic at the gate. Three and I waited outside as Father went to find Nai Nai and confess his complicity in the betrayal, his wife trailing small in his shadow. Mom said that once upon a time, Father loved her; I was just too young to remember it. Maybe it was true, but I saw my parents as a land animal and a sea animal chained together, forced to remain on the water's edge—each surviving but neither thriving. When they were younger, Father supposedly snuck Mom pork hock stew from the kitchen and brought her flowers from the field. He changed after he went to study literature at university in Qingdao, shortly before the Japanese invasion. To escape the Japanese bombs, we temporarily moved farther north, to Weihaiwei, a former British territory on Shandong's coast, while Father remained in school. His education transformed him into a man who spoke in proverbs and dwelled in the realm of poetry. After the war, he returned to a wife who knew only cooking and farming. Once surrounded by inspirational teachers and like-minded scholars, at home he found himself in a vacuum of silence, which gradually filled with his resentment. Filial piety, however, required him to produce an heir. His misery—and hers—were irrelevant.

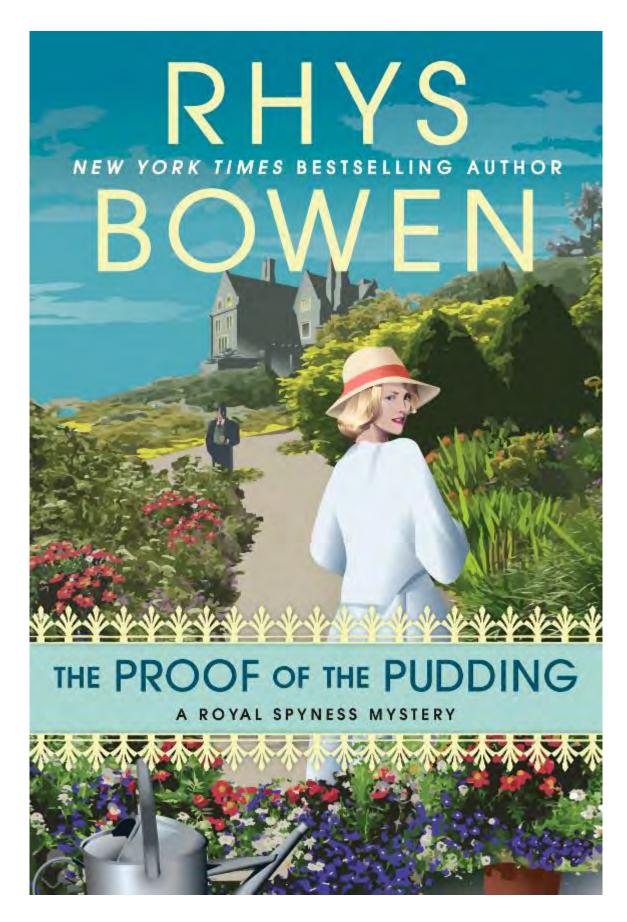
Father opened the door, and Three and I entered the kitchen to find Mom sweeping up the broken bowls. Nai Nai sat red-faced at the table, simmering. "Six more years! All I asked you to do was wait six more years! Now there will be another useless mouth to feed!"

"You can't take the fortune-teller so seriously," Father said quietly. "It could be a boy."

Nai Nai was unmollified, but she couldn't stay mad at her son. Instead, she focused her ire on Mom, blaming her for being a temptress. "I told you not to fight fate, but you didn't listen," Nai Nai said angrily. "Your arrogance has invited misfortune, and your daughter will be a blight on our household!"

That evening, while Father ate the dinner that Mom had cooked, Mom had to kneel on the floor— Nai Nai's favorite punishment to mete out. I grew up watching my mother on her knees, sometimes for an entire evening, for minor transgressions, like spilling soup. Solemnly, I looked at her, but she would not meet my gaze. Small, shiny teardrops fell from her eyes like pearls, shattering as they hit the tile. *I hope that when I grow up, I can have a son*, I thought, seeing my own future in her helpless form.

Life was unfair, but Mom said that it could always be worse. "Be grateful," she told me. "At least you were born to a good family. You will likely marry a rich man and have a comfortable life." I dreaded marriage, but it was as unavoidable as death. If I was lucky, maybe I would pair with a man with a kind mother—or a dead one.



THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING (A ROYAL SPYNESS MYSTERY) BY RHYS BOWEN NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lady Georgiana Rannoch is looking forward to her first ever turn as hostess for her very own house party when the festivities lead to murder...

Georgie, back home at her estate in Eynsleigh, impatiently awaits the birth of her baby. But she has plenty to occupy her: her new chef, Pierre, has arrived from Paris, and Sir Hubert, who owns Eynsleigh, is back from his latest expedition. It's time for Georgie to throw her first house party to celebrate his return and show off her new chef. The dinner party is a smashing success. Sir Mortimer Mordred — famous author of creepy Gothic horror novels — is one of the guests. He recently purchased a nearby Elizabethan manor because it has a famous poison garden. After the dinner, Sir Mortimer approaches Georgie and asks to borrow her new chef for his upcoming party, and Georgie and Darcy, her dashing husband, are invited!

The tour of the poison garden is fascinating, as is Sir Mortimer's laboratory. Shockingly, just after the banquet several of the guests become sick. And one dies, apparently poisoned by berries from the garden. But how could this be when they all ate the same meal and the same delectable dessert? Georgie has to find the culprit to save her new chef and her own reputation—all before her bundle of joy arrives!

Bowen's work has won many prestigious awards including the Agatha Award for both Best Novel and Best Historical Mystery, the Anthony Award for Best Historical Mystery, and she is an Edgar Award nominee for Best Novel.

Hardcover: 9780593437889 / \$28.00 eBook: 9780593437896 / \$14.99 Pub Date: November 7, 2023 Publisher: Penguin Random House, <u>https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/690306/the-proof-of-the-pudding-by-rhys-bowen/</u>

RHYS BOWEN, a *New York Times* bestselling author, has been nominated for every major award in mystery writing, including the Edgar®, and has won many, including both the Agatha and Anthony awards. She is also the author of the Molly Murphy Mysteries, set in turn-of-the-century New York, and the Constable Evans Mysteries, set in Wales, as well as two international bestselling standalone novels. She was born in England and now divides her time between Northern California and Arizona. <u>https://rhysbowen.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

June 25, 1936 Eynsleigh, Sussex

Excited and nervous about the impending arrival. Oh golly, I hope it goes well. I hope Queenie behaves herself and doesn't make things too difficult.

You have probably heard that Darcy and I were expecting a baby in August, but that wasn't the arrival I was nervous about at that moment. It was still sufficiently far away that I was not considering the implications of childbirth. Every time I thought about the baby, I imagined holding him or her in my arms and seeing that adorable little face looking up at me—maybe with Darcy's blue eyes and dark curly hair. I had pushed images of the actual delivery and what that meant into the dark recesses of my mind. Actually I knew little about it. One isn't educated in such matters at school. Mummy had once said it was absolutely the worst thing one could imagine and she decided on the spot that she'd never do it again, but then Mummy did tend to be overdramatic about most things.

The arrival that was concerning me more at the moment was that of our new chef, Pierre. We had been living at Sir Hubert Anstruther's lovely Elizabethan house called Eynsleigh for almost a year now. Sir Hubert is my godfather and one of my mother's many husbands. As he spends most of his time climbing mountains, he invited Darcy and me to move in. It was a lovely invitation and we jumped at it, since we were both penniless and had been looking at ghastly flats in London.

After a rocky start we had loved living there. I've always been a country girl at heart, having grown up in a castle in the Scottish Highlands (my father being the Duke of Rannoch). It suited me well to look out on acres of parkland and to walk my dogs every morning. There had been a servant problem when we moved in, but luckily the former housekeeper, Mrs. Holbrook, had agreed to come back and take care of the place so that it now ran like clockwork. We had acquired a housemaid and a footman/chauffeur, a personal maid for me and a gardener, all of whom were local folk and most satisfactory. But the one thing we still didn't possess was a proper cook.

So far our only cook had been my former maid Queenie. Yes. That Queenie. Those of you who have been following my exploits might remember that Queenie was a walking disaster area. When she was my lady's maid she ironed my one good velvet dress and burned off the pile; she lost my shoes on my wedding day. In fact there were more disasters than I could now recall. I kept her on because she had been jolly brave on occasions and I knew full well that nobody else would ever hire her. However, as it turned out, she was not a bad cook. So she had taken over the kitchen at Eynsleigh and so far she hadn't burned it down. However, her cooking was limited to dishes that she knew from her Cockney upbringing, so we tended to eat a lot of suet puddings, toad-in-the-hole, shepherd's pie. Hardly the sort of elegant fare that one would expect at an upper-class household. One could not really entertain local gentry and serve them spotted dick.

Darcy had been pestering me to find a proper chef but I had put it off. I'm not very good at hiring servants. However, recently two things had happened: we had received a letter from Sir Hubert to say he had finished climbing everything in the Andes and would be coming home in time for the impending birth, and we had just returned from Paris, where I had met a chef in need of employment. Pierre had been acting as a waiter when I met him, unable to find a job as a chef in the competitive market of Paris. So I offered him the job at Eynsleigh. This was a bit of a risk, as I hadn't actually tasted his cooking. But I decided that anyone who had been to a culinary school in France would know how to cook better than Queenie. Frankly I didn't think he'd take the job, as he was an avowed communist, but he'd agreed and would be arriving shortly. There was only one problem, and that was Queenie. When she heard I was bringing in a French chef she got very upset. She didn't want no foreigners

cooking foreign muck in her kitchen, she said. She was hurt that her cooking wasn't good enough for me. She thought I liked her cakes and biscuits. I seemed to tuck into them readily enough!

I did, I told her. She was good at baking and her cakes were delicious. But when Sir Hubert came home he would want to hold dinner parties. There was no way that Queenie would be able to create a multicourse meal for twenty, was there?

She agreed that she'd probably find that a bit beyond her, especially if they wanted fancy muck like that cocky-van she'd had to cook at Christmastime. Then she told me she wouldn't mind so much if I got in a proper English cook, a nice lady like that one we had worked with in Norfolk. But not some foreign bloke who was going to boss her around.

"If he comes, then I quit," she said.

Oh golly. That did put me in a bind. I wouldn't actually be sad to see her go, in many ways, and she could now probably get a job as a cook in someone else's house, but then she changed her mind. "I'll just go back to being your lady's maid," she said. "You can tell that Maisie girl that she can go back to dusting and sweeping, or she can be the scullery maid in the kitchen and wait on the foreign bloke."

Then she stomped off, making the ornaments on the shelves jingle and rattle as she passed. She was a hefty girl and she always walked as if she were an advancing army. I went through into the drawing room, hoping to find my grandfather there. He had been staying at Eynsleigh for a while following another attack of bronchitis, and I had persuaded him to come and be looked after. He had taken a lot of persuading, as he felt ill at ease in a great house, especially with servants waiting on him. It was quite out of character for a former Cockney policeman. And in case you are wondering why I had a father who was a duke with a castle and a grandfather who was a Cockney, I had better explain that while my father was Queen Victoria's grandson, he had married my mother, who was a famous actress and beauty but came from humble beginnings (which she now chose to forget).

He had been reading the local newspaper when I entered the room. He looked up and saw my face. "What's wrong, ducks?" he asked. "Your face looks like you could curdle milk."

"It's Queenie." I sank into the armchair opposite him. "What's she done now?" He looked amused. "Forgotten to put the toad in the toad-in-the-hole?"

I sighed. "She hasn't done anything, except for making it quite clear that she will resign as cook if I bring in Pierre from Paris."

My grandfather continued to smile. "Well, that's not the worst thing in the world, is it? I don't think she'd be too great a loss. And didn't you tell me that those relatives of Darcy's thought a lot of her? She could go back to work for them."

"That wasn't all she said." I gave another sigh. "She said she'd just have to go back to being my lady's maid and I could get rid of Maisie." I gave him an imploring look. "What am I going to do, Granddad? I don't want her as my maid. I like Maisie. She's sweet. She's efficient. The only thing wrong with her is that she won't leave her mother, which makes it hard for me when I travel, but I'm not going to be going anywhere with a new baby, am I?"

"Then you have to be honest with Queenie," he said. "You tell her that you are quite satisfied with your current maid and have no plans to replace her." He reached across and patted my knee. "You are the boss, after all, ducks. You show her who's in charge."

"I know," I said. "I'm just not good at ordering servants around. I know it should come easily to people like me, but it never has. My sister-in-law, Fig, thinks nothing of bossing everyone, but I always feel guilty."

"You're too kindhearted," he said. "You get that from me. Although your mum don't seem to mind bossing everyone around either, does she?"

I had to laugh at this. "She certainly doesn't," I said. "She makes the most of being the dowager duchess, even if she isn't officially entitled to call herself that any longer."

Granddad frowned. "Well, that's one of the things she'll have to give up when she marries that German bloke, won't she? She'll be plain old Frau. And I won't be going to the wedding, that's for sure. Not to some Kraut. I think she's making a big mistake, don't you?"

"I do, actually," I said. "I quite like Max, but I don't like what's going on in Germany these days. You should have seen the Germans I met in Paris, Granddad. When Mummy went shopping she had a minder—a terrifying woman who watched over everything she did."

"Nothing good ever came out of Germany," he said. Rather a sweeping statement, as I happened to like quite a few German wines and composers. But Granddad was biased, as his only son, my uncle Jimmy, whom I had never met, had been killed in the Great War. "I don't know why she wants to marry this bloke. She's quite happy living in sin with most of them, isn't she?"

"It's Max," I said. "He's very prim and proper and wants to do the right thing."

"She'll regret it, you mark my words," he said, wagging a finger at me. "When she becomes Frau whatsit she'll have to give up her British nationality, won't she? And then she won't be able to leave even if she wants to."

"Oh golly. You're right," I said. "I wouldn't want to be trapped in Germany right now, even if she will be one of the favored few." Granddad gave a sigh. "Not that she'll listen to any of us. She never has done so up to now. Is she coming over for the birth of

your baby?"

"She promised to."

He chuckled. "I can't see her being any use as a grandma. Never lifted a finger to take care of her own child, did she? I think she was back in the South of France right after you were born."

I thought about this. I had few recollections of my mother, certainly none from the days when I was in the nursery. It was Nanny who took care of me, who tucked me in and sang to me. Thank heavens she was a kind and loving woman, or who knows how I would have grown up. I planned to be much more involved with my own child.

Granddad folded his newspaper. "So when's this Froggy bloke arriving?" he asked.

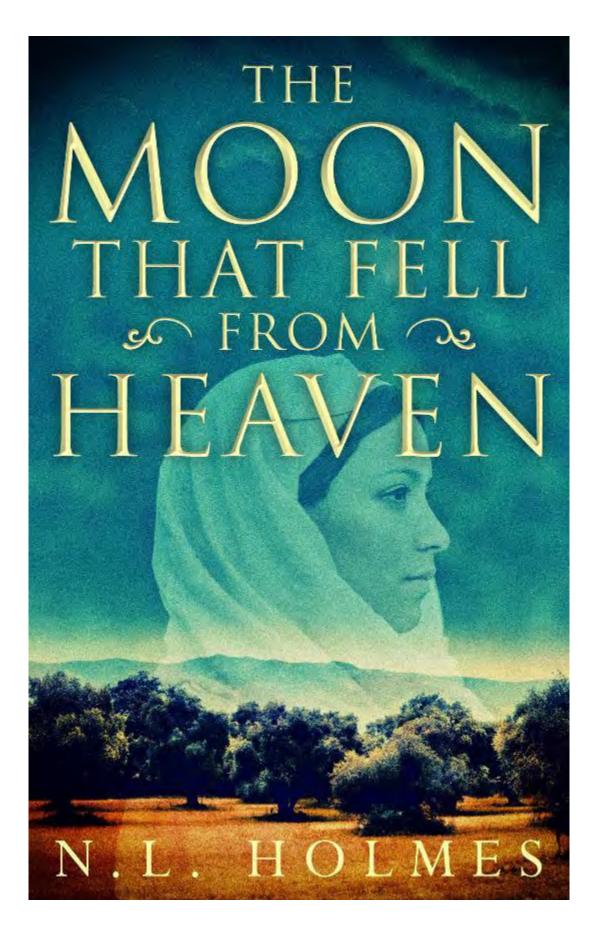
"By the end of the week."

"And would you want Queenie to stay on in the kitchen, as his helper?"

"That would be ideal," I said. "I can't expect a proper chef to do all his own preparation and cleanup."

"So you'll be reducing Queenie to scullery maid?"

I stared out of the window, watching the trees in the park dance in the stiff breeze. Why did life have to be so complicated?



THE MOON THAT FELL FROM HEAVEN BY N.L. HOLMES

When Ehli-nikkalu, the Hittite emperor's daughter, marries the king of a vassal state, she doesn't expect to be marginalized and taunted for her childlessness. She finds herself isolated in a miserable life. But new friends and a surprise role in diplomacy teach her "exile" may not be so bad.

Ehli-nikkalu, eldest daughter of the Hittite emperor, is married to a mere vassal of her father. But despite her status, her foreignness and inability to produce an heir drive a wedge between her and the court that surrounds her. When her secretary is mysteriously murdered while carrying the emperor a message that would indict the loyalty of his vassal, Ehli-nikkalu adopts the dead man's orphaned children out of a guilty sense of responsibility.

A young cousin she has never met becomes a pretender to the throne and mobilizes roving armies of the poor and dispossessed, which causes the priority of her loyalties to be even more suspect. However, Ehli-nikkalu discovers a terrible secret that could destabilize the present regime if the pretender ever learns of it.

With the help of a kindly scribe, her brave young ward, and an embittered former soldier trapped in debt and self-doubt, Ehli-nikkalu sets out to save the kingdom and prove herself to her father. And along the way, she learns something about love.

"Ehli-nikkalu and other major characters in this book are real, and the author does a great job of taking a reader back in history to Syria in 1213 BCE. *The Moon That Fell from Heaven* is without a doubt a masterpiece that showcases the proficiency of women in defending civilizations and cultures." *-Goodreads*

Paperback: 9781958231340 / \$14.49 eBook: 1230006774554 / \$9.99 Pub Date: September 20, 2023 Publisher: Red Adept Publishing, https://redadeptpublishing.com/ Buy Link: https://redadeptpublishing.com/new-release-the-moon-that-fell-from-heaven/

N.L. HOLMES is the pen name of a professional archaeologist who received her doctorate from Bryn Mawr College. She has excavated in Greece and Israel, and taught ancient history and humanities at the university level for many years. She has always had a passion for books, and in childhood she and her cousin used to write stories for fun. These days she lives with her husband, two cats, geese, and chickens in France, where she gardens, weaves, dances, and plays the violin. <u>https://www.nlholmes.com/</u>

CHAPTER ONE

Ehli-nikkalu told herself she had many reasons to be proud and happy. She was a princess—in fact, the eldest princess, the Great Lady—of mighty Hatti Land. As of seven years ago, she had been the king's wife of the rich little maritime state of Ugarit, her father's vassal. She was thirty-five years old and healthy.

And yet, frankly, she was miserable.

Every time she thought about her lot, she wanted to gnash her teeth. Even though she had been educated to sit on the throne beside her husband and help him formulate policies, she had been reduced to ceremonial roles. That's what a Hittite princess was trained to do—be a coruler. Who knew if she might not find herself tawananna or whatever the local equivalent was in the country where she married? And maybe someday she, Ehli-nikkalu, would be elevated to that role in Ugarit.

But for now, her mother-in-law held the post, and Sharryelli was only three years older than Ehli-nikkalu herself. It would be a race to see who died first. Sharryelli would delight in living to a doddering old age just to thwart the ambitions of her son's wife. More galling still, Ehli-nikkalu's husband, King Niqmaddu, held her in contempt despite her higher rank. He had left word—sent a slave to tell her, if you please—that he was coming to talk to her, and so she had to wait, as if every word from his mouth were a priceless gem.

Her face blazed with fury and humiliation at the thought of him. *He complains that I've borne him no children, but how many times has he deigned to grace my bed, the hypocritical snake?* She fought down her anger. It wouldn't do to let Niqmaddu know how much his disdain ate into her equanimity. Ehli-nikkalu prided herself on her self-control. Her father was famous for never breaking his calm, and she was determined to follow his example. To do otherwise would be to surrender, to submit to her husband's superiority. And he was *not* superior, by all the gods.

The door clicked, and she looked up at the panel as it opened quickly, without a "May I?" or an "Are you decent?" It was the king. They faced each other, and the hostility filled the air like smoke from tinder that had caught—not yet a blaze but smoldering. She backed against the heavy table, as if to find a defensible position, and lifted her nose slightly. The armor of dignity.

The king said nothing, just stood there with his swaggering good looks, and the corner of his mouth began to curl, a caustic smile. His black eyes seemed to penetrate her. He knew exactly what she was thinking, she suspected—it cost her considerable effort not to snarl "What do you want?"— and he, too, had his pose of supremacy to maintain. Ehli-nikkalu found her face growing hotter and hotter. Still biting her tongue, she forced herself to bow, infusing it with as much sarcasm as a humble gesture could bear.

"Well. We're in a respectful mood this evening, are we?" Niqmaddu asked, approaching. But then he passed by her without a look, as if she didn't exist, and took up a seat in the heavy carved chair. He leaned back and stretched out his legs. "I have something to tell you, and I didn't want anyone else to hear me."

"You do me too much honor, my lord."

The king smiled coldly. "Your father's emissary is making a visit in a few weeks, and I just wanted to make it clear that you need to be a loyal queen of Ugarit. No telling tales, no whining about how everybody is cruel to you. Understood?"

"Perfectly," she said. "I lie."

Niqmaddu's eyes narrowed, and he said pointedly, "But no one is cruel to you, you know. It's all a story you've told yourself to feel above us. Have I ever struck you? Are you lacking for clothes or jewels or food? No." He tilted his head as if to consider her from another angle. "Have I ever called you barren in public?"

She clenched her fists in the folds of her skirts, the better to control some menacing gesture she might regret. "It's my understanding that a woman cannot conceive without the intervention of a

man, my lord. Since you so rarely condescend to visit my bed, it isn't much wonder that I haven't given you an heir."

Niqmaddu laughed. "I guess I must admit my capacity for self-sacrifice has its limits. Couching with you, my dear, has all the charm of tupping a hedgehog. You are very sharp—and I don't just mean your tongue."

Ehli-nikkalu expelled a carefully controlled breath through her nose. She knew she wasn't beautiful. She was tall and thin and angular, with a long, equine face—very much her father's daughter. It was a measure of her husband's shallowness that he hurled this at her so often. *So that he can blame me for his lack of a first-rank son.* So that, perhaps, he could express his contempt for his suzerain, the Great King of Hatti, through her own pierced self-confidence.

"Well, that's neither here nor there. We don't have to love each other. Fortunately, I have another wife if I want children. Pu-haddu has provided me with the heir you seem unable to manage, even if her rank is lower than yours. But then, whose rank isn't lower than yours, the Great Lady, with her ancient birth and imperial aura? I just want you to understand that if you enter the emissary's presence, you will mind your manners, or there will be consequences." He fixed her with a frigid smile that had in it much menace.

"I will behave myself with appropriate dignity," she said through clenched teeth. "I suppose you will inform him of all the disloyal overtures you're making toward Mizri."

Suddenly his cool facade dropped away, and he sprang to his feet with a snarl. "What would you know about my policies? All you do is sew." He seemed to recover his aplomb and said more calmly, "You have a reputation for being overzealous, my queen. Who is going to believe yet another of your wild-eyed accusations? Can you offer any evidence? I think not."

She smirked at him, letting him wonder what evidence she could offer. His discomfiture pleased her. It was so rare that she could ruffle his air of indifference.

Niqmaddu strode past her to the door, and she noticed a small clay tablet had dropped from his sash into the cushioned seat of his chair. She dragged her eyes away from it, burying her face in a deep bow. "I thank my lord husband for his gracious visit."

He shot her a dark look and let himself out the door. Ehlinikkalu listened until his footsteps died away through the outer chamber and down the corridor. Then, much as she wanted to scream and slam something breakable to the floor, she tiptoed to the chair and, heart pounding, lifted the tablet. It was in Akkadian, she saw, the formal diplomatic language that united every kingdom. Something to or from a foreigner, then. Not just a billet-doux. Although Ehli-nikkalu had a degree of literacy in the simplified script of Ugarit, this was written in a system that required a lifetime to learn and was hence inaccessible to all but a small class of professional scribes.

She pressed the tablet to her heart and stared into space, thinking hard. *Who can I find to translate it? Who can I trust?* Her secretary might or might not be sober at this hour, but at least she felt he was loyal. "Pidaya," she called to her handmaid, who was spinning in the antechamber. "Go find Hattatamu. I need to see him immediately, even if he's drunk."

The slave nodded and backed from the room, and Ehli-nikkalu heard her rapid footsteps fade away. The queen turned on her heel and began to pace up and down, her nerves so taut she was almost twitching. What did this letter mean? It might be nothing, or it might be the evidence she needed to prove her husband was betraying Hatti Land behind everyone's back. Finally, she sank into her chair and spread her hands on her thighs.

It seemed an age later that a knock on the door proclaimed the presence of Hattatamu. As she had feared, he was unsteady on his feet, but at least he could stand. *The poor fellow*, she thought. *Nobody else would keep him in their service. And where would a man his age go then to find work?* But it made her correspondence trying.

"My lady wishes to dictate something?" the secretary asked in a thick-tongued slur. An attempt at a bow ended in a stumble, and the queen herded him to a chair in front of her big table, setting a damp, blank tablet and a stylus before him. He reeked of wine and sweat. He had stopped taking care of himself again, she observed with pity.

"Read this letter to me, Hattatamu, and keep your voice down."

Having squinted at the tablet then adjusted its distance from his eyes, he started to read aloud words that meant nothing to her. He looked up apologetically. "It's in Akkadian."

"I know. I know. Translate it. Can't you do that?" Ehli-nikkalu's flesh seemed to crawl with urgency. She could have shaken the secretary in frustration.

"In response to your inquiry," he began, stammering though an experienced translator for all that. "We will ready the ships and meet you at Gubla by the end of the month, as we decided before. See to it that the soldiers you promised are here by New Year's Day. The Great King's viceroy will be presiding, and that would be an appropriate time to seize the port, while everyone is in the courtyard for the ceremonies. Your master will find he has many loyal subjects already in the city, for the king of Hatti's exactions fall heavily on our people, especially the merchants who form our ruling class. Don't correspond again unless it is necessary. Niqmaddu son of Ibi-ranu."

Hattatamu looked up at her, his red-rimmed eyes bleary. "The king's seal is set at the end, my lady."

The hair stood up on Ehli-nikkalu's neck. This was more than proof—it was damnation. "My father must know of this at once!" she murmured in a voice trembling with excitement. "Niqmaddu is getting ready to sell the city to Mizri! Who else would be strong enough to stand up to us like that?"

She advanced on her secretary and seized him by the shoulders. "You must write a letter to my father then take it and this vile thing to Rab-ilu."

Rab-ilu was an emissary, the only man in the chancery she was sure she could trust. He was incorruptible—he alone among the lords of Ugarit who groveled before the king and his mother.

"Yes, my lady," Hattatamu said uncertainly, fumbling in his sash for his writing tools.

Ehli-nikkalu pushed them toward him over the tabletop. Wine fumes enveloped her. She held her breath until she had withdrawn from his proximity, and it was all she could do not to make a sour expression. "Take dictation, Hattatamu: 'My Sun and Father, I greet you and pray that all is well with you and our land. Alas, all is not well in Ugarit. The king has made concrete overtures to Mizri to overthrow your rule—'" She paused. How to make this pressing? "'With violence. I attach for you the very letter which Niqmaddu intended to send to his collaborators across the border. May it please you to act swiftly and forcefully, my dear father. Your Loving Daughter' and so forth. Do you have all that?"

Hattatamu, who seemed to be rubbing out and rewriting quite a lot, his mouth hanging open, finally looked up from the tablet and replied, "Yes, my lady."

She thrust at him the tablet the king had left behind, and when he seemed at a loss for what to do with it, she stuffed the two patties of clay into his sash. "Be careful with this. It's still damp, and you don't want to rub anything off. Take them to Rab-ilu. You know where he lives." He nodded, struggling for the words to answer. "Then go. Go. Waste no time. We must have this on the road to Hatti before the king realizes he's lost it."

Ehli-nikkalu watched him get unsteadily to his feet, and fear and irritation got the better of her control. "By all the gods, Hattatamu. What use are you, you hopeless drunk? After all I've done for you," she cried in exasperation. Then she made her tone milder. "Can you walk? Can you perhaps run? This is urgent. Urgent."

He bowed, one hand steadying himself against the table, and departed with a suspiciously careful tread. As he passed into the darkness of the vestibule, Ehli-nikkalu clutched her head, half mad with frustration. The handmaids, whom she had banished to the outer chamber with their spinning, looked up, curious, but she hastily closed the door in their faces. They were all meddlers and, no doubt, spies for Sharryelli. Crackling with nerves, the queen parted the shutters and stared out the window into the night garden, where a full moon was rising over the wing of the palace opposite, bathing it in a

bleached brightness. Good. Hattatamu needed all the light he could get. The wretched creature, she thought, fighting off hopelessness. Please to the gods he can make it to Rab-ilu's house without falling down drunk in the street somewhere. How infuriating to have to lean on such a frail reed for a matter of such importance. But that was her life. Niqmaddu could say it was all in her mind, but she had been surrounded by disloyal bearers of tales until there was no one left for her to confide in but these incompetents. She was isolated, alone. And that, she pronounced bitterly, is cruelty.

All at once, she saw Hattatamu's unsteady silhouette tottering through the garden on the way to the service exit. Except there was no exit from the garden other than the two that led back into the palace. *Dear gods, he's taken a wrong turn. This will cost him precious time.*

The shadows of palm fronds danced on the path until even she might have stumbled, unsure of what was darkness and what was a rut. Then another man's shadowy form stepped out before the secretary. They seemed to exchange some words. She heard a peal of deep laughter.

Oh, no. It's Shipti-ba'al, the king's brother-in-law. She saw Shipti-ba'al gesture widely then poke a finger at Hattatamu's chest. *What are they talking about? I hope Hattatamu has the judgment to keep quiet about his mission.* Her stomach clenched with sudden anxiety. *Don't let Shipti-ba'al invite Hattatamu for a drink somewhere.*

But after a moment, the two figures separated. Shipti-ba'al moved off toward the interior of the palace, while Hattatamu was soon lost in the shadow of the garden wall. He would have to enter through the garden kiosk then follow the service passage to the gate. Ehli-nikkalu murmured a prayer. If the secretary didn't get through to Rab-ilu with her message and Niqmaddu found out what she was up to, her life would become even more of a misery. A faint sound of a gate being unbarred reached her through the hush of the night air. Then silence. Hattatamu had at least made his way out into the street. The letters were on their way.

#

Amaya was combing out her hair, preparing for bed, when she heard a knock at the door. Since her mother's death, she had become the mistress of the house for her father and little brother and sister. It was her duty to greet and offer hospitality to any who might visit, no matter the hour. The knock came again, louder and more insistent. Footsteps thudded from the back of the house, marking the approach of Karranu, the steward. Amaya hastily knotted her hair into a braid and pinned her cap back on. She needed to see to this. Karranu would have to ask her what to do anyway. Having just arrived after a grueling two weeks on the road, Papa was asleep and not to be disturbed.

Amaya slipped on her shoes and descended the stairs as quietly as possible. Karranu, an oil lamp in his hand, was standing in the open doorway, his broad back to her. "Do you know what time it is, man?" he said to whoever stood in the street outside, his voice sharp with annoyance and still pasty with sleep. "Give me the letters, and I'll pass them to Lord Rab-ilu in the morning."

"Who is it, Karranu?" Amaya called.

The steward turned to her, exasperated. "It's some fellow who says he's the queen's secretary. He says he has a message that has to go off to Hatti tonight. Frankly, I think he's just having drunken delusions, my lady."

Amaya swept him aside. A heavy middle-aged man with red cheeks stood swaying in the dark shadow of the house against the moonlit brightness of the wall across the street. "Enter our house, friend. Can I offer you some... some dates?" She had a feeling he didn't need anything else to drink. Turning to the slave, she said quietly, "That's all, Karranu. I can take care of this."

Something in Amaya wondered if it were proper for an eighteen-year-old girl to receive an unknown man at night like this, but she had the duties of an adult now. And this fellow didn't seem like he was in much shape for aggression. She seated him and brought a dish of dates. If I were a good hostess, I'd wake one of the girls and have her wash his feet. But she really just wanted him to conclude his business and go so she could get back to bed.

She seated herself across the table from him. "Now, tell me who you are and what brings you

here at such an hour."

"I am the young queen's secretary, my lady," he said, extending toward her two clay tablets he produced from his belt with a trembling hand. "She has an urgent letter for the Great King in Hattusha. It has to get out tonight." As if he realized she might not trust that he was who he said he was, the man pointed to a bar of raised images at the end of one of the documents. "See? There's Lady Ehlinikkalu's seal."

Amaya stared at him in disbelief. "Tonight? There's no way my father can take it tonight. He's just returned from the northern frontier and needs to sleep first. Don't worry. I'll see to it that he delivers this as soon as he recovers from the journey." She rose.

But the man, looking panicked, reached out a hand to hold her back. "Oh, my lady, the queen says it's urgent. It has to go out right away, before the king realizes he lost it."

What's this all about? Amaya asked herself, uneasy. She stood in perplexed silence for a moment, staring at the two tablets and wondering what she should do. *Mother, what would you do if you were you receiving this man?*

"Very well. Wait here, and I'll see if my father wants to talk to you."

She turned and made her way up the stairs, again on tiptoe so as not to waken the children. She hesitated before her father's door. The corridor was faintly lit from the full moon shining through the open door of her own room, and her hands looked as white as bone. She knocked. At first there was silence, then a growl that might have been "Who's there?"

"Father," she whispered. "There's a man here to see you from the queen. He has a message to go to the Great King."

After a moment, Rab-ilu opened the door and stared blearily down at his daughter, still halfasleep. His hair stood out in all directions. "Have him leave the message. I'll take it in the next few days."

"He says it's urgent, that it has to go out tonight—"

"Tonight?" he cried then lowered his voice. "What sort of message is this?"

"He said it has to be en route before the king finds out he's lost it." Amaya felt almost ashamed of herself, rousing her weary father for such a lunatic mission. But he could make his own judgment. With a sigh, he ushered her ahead of him and started down the stairs in his bare feet. By the light of the guttering lamp, he saw the secretary slumped over on the table, asleep.

"Just what I'd like to be doing," Rab-ilu commented dryly.

Amaya's father reached out a hand to the fresher of the two tablets and drew it toward the light to read. His face grew grave. He took up the second tablet and, a moment later, heaved a reluctant sigh. "He's right. These must go now."

"Right now? Oh, Father, how can you? You just got back and haven't had even a night's sleep." Amaya put a hand against his chest as if to stop him physically.

"I can sleep somewhere on the way, my love, but these letters must be out of Ugarit by daybreak."

Rab-ilu turned and pounded up the stairs, where he left her in the hallway as he disappeared into his room. Amaya was so disappointed she felt tears prickle in her nose. For her father's sake, she didn't want him to go so soon—but also for her own. It was lonely work being a parent and a householder all by herself when she was scarcely more than a girl. She and the children hadn't seen him for weeks, and now, without so much as a day with the family, he was off once more for over a month. Hattusha, their suzerain's capital, was weeks away. *Don't go*, she pleaded silently. *Please don't leave us again.*

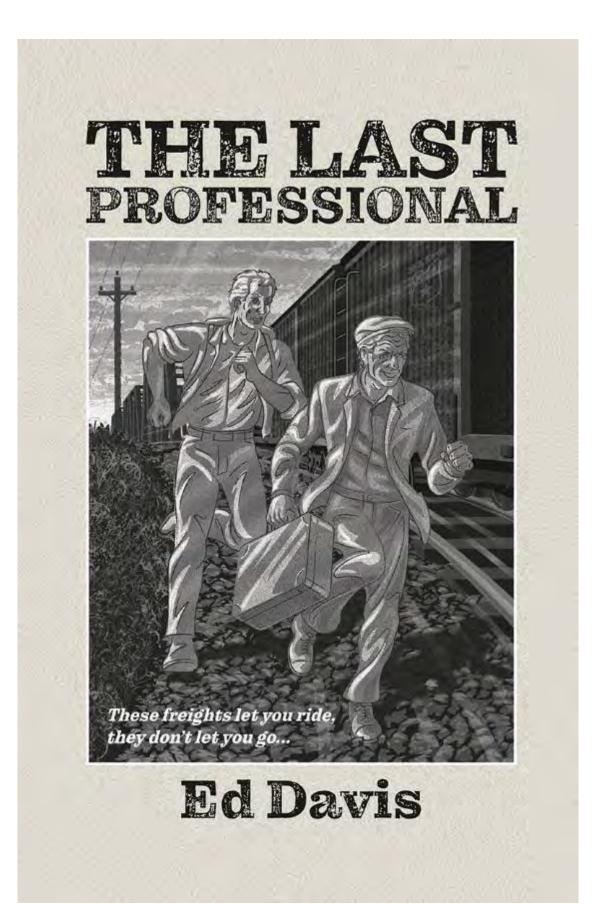
But Rab-ilu reappeared in the doorway, dressed, a sword at his hip and his traveling basket in hand. He put his arm around her shoulders and bent to give her a quick kiss. Then, as if he, too, realized how long it might be before he saw his daughter again, he took her in his arms and held her tightly against his chest for a moment. "I'm sorry, little girl," he whispered. "Tell the children where I've gone. I don't know what I'd do without you."

She dashed away her tears and tried bravely to smile. "I'll take care of everything until you're home, Father. The slaves are getting to the point where they'll actually obey me."

He clattered down the stairs to find the queen's secretary snoring on his arms folded over the table. "Come on, old man. Time for you to go home."

Rab-ilu lifted him to his feet and helped him on his unsteady and uncomprehending way to the entrance. Amaya threw open the door, and her father pushed the secretary gently out into the street. "Go home and sleep this off, Hattatamu." Turning back to his daughter, he said, "Be brave, Amaya. I love you."

Then he was gone into the night, heading for the stable and his chariot, and Amaya was left staring at the empty doorway and the small orange glow of the lamp's flame on the pavement.



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Paperback: 9781951122256 / \$15.95 eBook: 9781951122348 / \$7.99 Audiobook: 9781951122409 Pub Date: January 25, 2022 Publisher: Artemesia Publishing, http://apbooks.net/ Buy Link: https://www.amazon.com/Last-Professional-Ed-Davis/dp/1951122259 Book Info: https://www.eddavisbooks.com/the-last-professional/

ED DAVIS began his writing career forty years ago, pausing in boxcars, under streetlamps and in hobo jungles to record the beats and rhythms of the road as he caught freight trains and vagabonded around the Pacific Northwest and Canada. His latest novel, *The Last Professional*, began

in a boxcar, and was awarded The American Book Fest award in the General Thriller category. His novella, In All Things, and collection, Road Stories, are both Amazon Top Ten bestsellers. https://www.eddavisbooks.com/

EXCERPT

So pay attention now my children And the old story I will tell About the jungles and the freight trains And a breed of men who fell. ~Virginia Slim

A four-lane highway passed over the Sparks yard at its eastern limit. The highway bridge had pedestrian spirals at each end and a jump-proof fence all across both sides. From mid-span, looking west, Lynden and The Duke could see the entire layout—freight cars hulking in the darkness, car-knocker's lanterns bobbing like fireflies as they checked the couplings. A switch crew was making up a train at the west end, and on the main line a string of power units waited, ready to roll.

"That'll be our ride." The Duke pointed at the engine marker lights. "Chances are she's the same one we drug in on."

"How long till it leaves?"

"Could be anytime. That engineer will hit the horn, then goose the throttle. After that, it's up to us."

"And the bull?"

"He's out there. And we won't see him until he wants us to. But once we're on that train, we're gone. I ain't seen em stop a freight to catch a hobo in better than thirty years."

"And if we don't get on?"

The Duke wasn't listening. His ears were tuned toward the yard, toward a sound he could hear that Lynden didn't. Then a change in the monotonous droning of the engines, a shift in pitch more than volume. He saw that Lynden could hear it too.

"Is that us?"

The lead engine's tracer light flashed on, its swinging beam splashing against the overpass. An unseen hand moved on the throttle. As one machine, three giant power units revved their huge engines.

Triple columns of hot smoke and spark shot up into space.

The diesel horn cried out, then again and again.

A low, vibrating groan. The engines lugged, caught, and the train began to roll.

"That's us. Just watch me. Stay close, and we'll grab this sucker by the tail."

The kid made ready to run.

"Easy," The Duke cautioned. "There's nothin to ride on the head end anyway, and no sense tippin the engine crew we're around."

They walked off the bridge and ducked under it, watching as the power units rumbled by.

"When do we go?" The freight was picking up speed, and already moving faster than at Roseville. "Don't worry, there's still plenty of train."

Seconds ticked past. The cars began rocking gently back and forth, each faster than the last. Lynden watched them anxiously, watched The Duke.

"You ready, kid?"

"Ready!"

"There's our car." A gondola was coming up fast. "Make for the front ladder on that gon and run like hell!"

They raced forward, Lynden and The Duke side by side.

A wide concrete bridge support separated them from the tracks. The kid dodged quickly around it and out to the cars.

Behind him, The Duke stopped. Some crude writing on the support caught his eye, some chalk scribbling on the face of the concrete slab.

He was almost past when the letters had connected in his mind, connected to form words, a name.

Short Arm.

Beneath the name was a date, two days old, and under it an arrow. Short Arm was eastbound. How was that for hobo luck? The man he'd been running from for the last two weeks, the man who meant to kill him if he caught him—his old partner—had slipped by and was now waiting somewhere out across the desert. The Duke had seen it play out like this before. Sure, it was a wide country, but the rails were narrow and connected—a steel ribbon that always wound back on itself. No matter how hard you ran, if you stayed on those rails long enough, your past would catch you.

He hadn't seen Short Arm in more years than he could remember, was sure he was dead. Then two weeks ago in that jungle outside the Colton yard, there he was—still alive, but changed. Short Arm had been glad to see him. That was a surprise, considering the way they'd parted. And his old friend was eager to demonstrate a new talent—something he was sure The Duke would appreciate. That demonstration ended with one man murdered, and The Duke running for his life.

The old hobo couldn't move. Two days earlier and Short Arm would have caught him right there—would have stepped out from behind that pillar and ended it. Somewhere ahead he was waiting. In the dark, in the shadows, waiting. The Duke's skin was pimpled with cold. He could head back west again, maybe south to Mexico. Anywhere but right on Short Arm's heels and he'd be safe, at least for a while.

He turned to leave.

Lynden reached the train, looked around, but the old man was gone. He glanced frantically both ways on the tracks.

The Duke was nowhere in sight.

What he did see was a pair of headlights bouncing violently as they sped straight at him out of the yard.

The gondola rolled by. He could still catch something, maybe, or search for The Duke, or face the bull and his gun.

"Fuck!"

He didn't move.

The Duke burst out from behind the pillar, saw the headlights coming, the train going, and Lynden caught motionless in between. "Go for the flat!" he yelled, then yelled again to be heard over the freight noise. He saw Lynden turn toward him, looking confused. "That flat right there!" He pointed to a flatcar just a few lengths up and coming fast.

Lynden saw it, faced it, and broke into a run.

Twenty cars back the caboose was clearly in sight, the bull's headlights seconds behind it. Both men hit the flatcar's front ladder at the same time.

Lynden grabbed hold.

The Duke faded back, going for the rear ladder. Rapidly the car slid by him. He wasn't going full speed yet, but he knew what full speed was, and knew he'd need all of it.

The car was halfway past when he quickened his pace. The lumber flat had headboards at both ends and the rear board was almost on him. Between strides he tossed his bag up, then the bleach jug, and saw them roll to a stop at the back of the car.

With his hands free he hit full speed, his body balanced and natural. Fifty years of chasing trains had taught him how to run. Arms reaching, legs stretching, hands clawing the air, running flat out.

It wasn't enough.

The train was going too fast.

He saw his gear sliding by. The ladder was just above his shoulder. His only chance.

Surging forward he reached out and grabbed.

The shock was so stiff it popped all his knuckles.

His arm jerked tight. His shoulder stretched.

He held on.

The tips of four fingers were all that gripped. He reached with the other hand, found something to grasp, and instinct took over. His legs still ran, his feet still hit the ground, but with each step his strides grew longer and longer till he was leaping, yards at a time. Then a spring and a pull.

The Duke was on.

Lynden wasn't on.

He had the ladder with both hands, but his feet were moving so fast he couldn't push them off the ground.

Out the corner of his eye he'd seen The Duke hoist himself onto the train. He tried it, stumbled, caught himself.

He had to get on, let go, or run until his legs gave out.

The train was flying. He concentrated. Took an extra-long step.

As he pulled up, the searchlight hit him.

The bull was abreast of their flatcar, hacking the blackness with the blinding beam. It hit Lynden like a blow, shocking him at the instant he jumped.

The coarse gravel roadbed seemed to shift beneath him, pulling his feet away.

For a second, he hung in mid-air.

Then, instead of running, he was being dragged.

His hands slipped, held—then slipped again.

At the bottom rung he hung on, his body suspended inches above the scouring gravel. Feet skittering across the rocks and ties, screaming muscles stretched tight. The hungry jaws of the flatcar's huge wheels were pulling him in. A whisper away.

The bull's spotlight carved jaggedly through the rushing dark.

A hand grabbed Lynden's forearm.

"Pull yourself up!" The old man was leaning out over the ladder, the bull's light slashing across him. "Use your arms! Forget about your feet!"

Lynden's arms wouldn't move. He hung there, his backpack swinging from his shoulders like an anchor.

"Let it go! Let the damn thing go!"

It was the only way.

He released the ladder with one hand and his body dropped down even lower. The pack jerked violently. He twisted, shucking off a strap. He switched hands to free the other arm. The pack caught the ground and shoved him headfirst toward the pounding wheels.

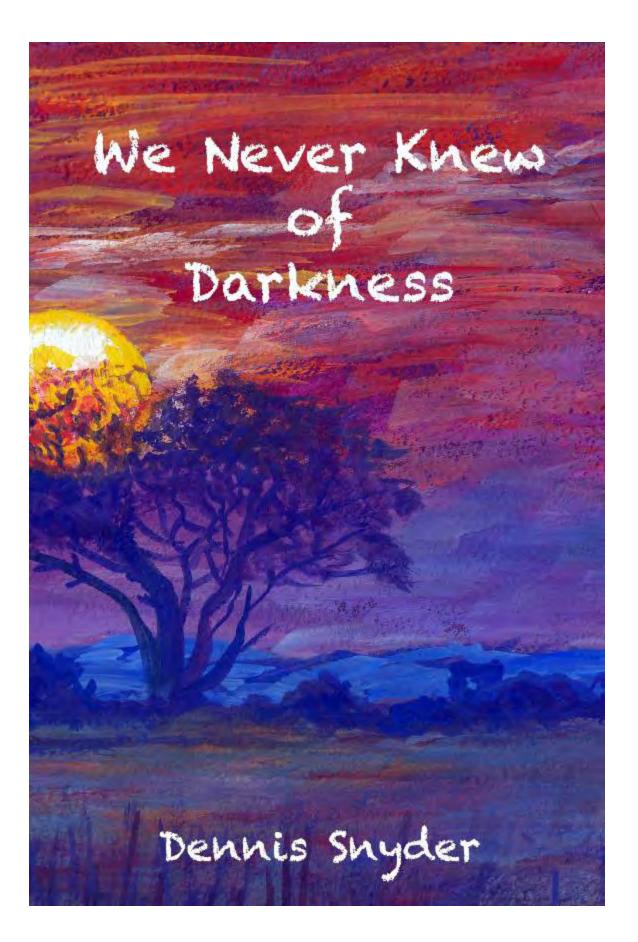
He closed his eyes.

The backpack bounced free, flew up, then was sucked under the train and was gone.

Both hands on the ladder again, Lynden began to climb.

The Duke reached down, grabbed his shirt, and pulled him onto the car.

The last the bull saw of them, Lynden and The Duke were hugging, screaming, and beating each other's backs as they disappeared into the Nevada darkness.



WE NEVER KNEW OF DARKNESS BY DENNIS SNYDER

In 1994, Hutu extremists - known as the Interahamwe, or those that work together - assassinated Rwanda's president, and then embarked on a campaign of ruthless genocide against the minority Tutsi population. Elijah Mutabazi, a sergeant in the Rwandan army, finds his younger sister dead on her apartment floor, having been gang raped and slaughtered by the Hutu-led Interahamwe. Over the ensuing months, Elijah spends his every waking hour caring for his grievously injured father, and protecting their village, Imaniku, from attack.

Upon returning to active military duty, Elijah learns that the international community, including the United Nations, had not come to aid those who had miraculously survived the genocide, but rather to ensure safe passage for the Interahamwe overlords. Elijah, unhinged by this revelation, deserts his army post and enters a world of reckless abandon via heroin, psychedelics, and grain alcohol, existing in a delusional state until a stint in a Burundian prison compels his sobriety.

Once a free man and reunited with his father and older brother, Cedric, Elijah's singular mission becomes one of vengeance against an active Interahamwe cell and its maniacal leader, Callixte Mbrushimana, who one served as a captain in the Rwandan Army and had been Elijah's mentor and commander.

Cedric, who years earlier had moved to the United States as an exchange student and had been spared the horrors of his country's genocide, had returned to his homeland with a group of medical volunteers to bring desperately needed surgical care to the children of Rwanda. Elijah, surrounded by healers for the first time, comes face to face with his past - and with the choice of being either an angel of death or an angel of mercy. That decision, one that would determine the course of this life, comes while staring his mortal enemy in the eye.

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Hardcover: 9798369262320 / \$24.99 Pub Date: June 19, 2023 Publisher: Barnes & Noble Press Buy Link: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/we-never-knew-of-darkness-dennissnyder/1143766917 **DR. DENNIS SNYDER** is one of the founders of Medical Missions for Children (www.mmfc.org), a volunteer organization that provides free surgical care to children with severe congenital deformities, facial and neck tumors, and burn injuries. Dr. Snyder led the first medical team to visit Rwanda following the 1994 genocide, setting up an operating room and initiating a pro bono surgical program in the town Gitwe. Since that time, Medical Missions for Children has completed twenty-five missions at multiple sites in Rwanda. Dr. Snyder is a clinical professor at Harvard Medical School and Tufts University School of Medicine and has led/participated in 170 volunteer surgical missions over the past 30+ years.

One hundred percent of the royalties from We Never Knew of Darkness will be donated to Medical Missions for Children, which carries out over twenty volunteer missions per year in eleven different countries. <u>http://www.neverknewofdarkness.com</u>

CHAPTER ONE

May 1994 - Imaniku, Rwanda

Packed two dozen or more onto the flatbed truck, the adolescent killers came close enough for Elijah Mutabazi to hear their furtive whisperings.

Crouched low beside the road, he had spotted the creaky vehicle silhouetted against the rows of poplar trees as it coasted down the narrow dirt road from the canyon's rim, the driver having cut off the engine and headlights.

Elijah knew the militia's Hutu commander, seated next to the driver, wanted the transporter to roll downhill as slowly as possible along the inner slope of the long-extinct volcanic crater. This would allow his band of juvenile thugs to savor their silent approach to Imaniku, the centuries-old Tutsi farming village where their senses would soon be overrun by the simple and now familiar task of slaughtering innocents with the ease of mowing through a field of wheat.

For Elijah, the impending attack had a deeply personal meaning. Imaniku—the name literally meant "God's thumbprint" in the native Kinyarwanda language—was Elijah's ancestral home.

As the vehicle rolled past, the gentle night breeze brought the rancid odor of sweat and stale blood saturating the clothes of the boys jammed between the rails of the truck. The Hutu militia approaching his village were part of the Interahamwe, the so-called brotherhood of "those who work together." The goal of their "work" was simple: the annihilation of every Tutsi citizen and Hutu sympathizer in Rwanda. After carrying out their butchery, they did not clean their blood-soaked clothes. They proudly wore them caked in Tutsi blood like ghastly uniforms adorned with military decorations, to be removed only when a soldier needed to relieve himself, or while waiting in line to ravage his next female victim.

Under the starry sky, with smoldering revenge against the Hutu in his heart, Elijah watched and waited for the moment to signal the attack.

Five weeks earlier, while stationed at a military hospital in the capital city of Kigali, Elijah had heard breaking news reports of their nation's president having been killed in a plane crash.

The world soon learned it had been no accident.

On the evening of April 6, 1994, the plane carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana—an ethnic Hutu—had been shot down on its approach into the Kigali airport, killing all on board. Investigators were never able to determine who fired the deadly missile. But within hours of the president's assassination, Hutu extremists began a long-planned and wholly orchestrated rampage of mass killings against those they held responsible for the death of their leader. The Hutu, who represented a majority of Rwandan people, quickly set about filling the power vacuum in the country. Hutu military leaders, soldiers, police, and government militia became de facto Interahamwe executioners, ramping up their recruitment of tens of thousands of spiritless boys who were suffused with a doctrine of racial hatred.

The recruits were as young as eleven years old, and their rapid transformation into Interahamwe soldiers gave them purpose, power, and a license to kill. The self-anointed adult commanders oversaw the indoctrination of what soon became a legion of pubescent followers, including a murderous initiation rite certified by each recruit's proficiency in wielding his bush machete. Those deemed capable became part of a singular brotherhood, each member linked by their abiding bond of obedience to their overlords. Those who proved incapable became the first victims of those whose allegiance had already been proven.

Within an hour after news of the president's assassination had blared over radio and television, Elijah heard the rattle of gunfire ringing out from all angles. A stream of anti-Tutsi epithets bellowed from the hospital's PA system. Despite his rank as a first sergeant in the Rwandan Army, Elijah knew he was marked for death just like every other minority Tutsi. His only concern now was to protect his father and sister, who shared an apartment in the center of Kigali. They, too, were targets for immediate "cleansing" by the Interahamwe.

Elijah hurried down eight flights of stairs and broke into the hospital supply room. He madly stuffed his jacket pockets with as many medications he could carry, including antibiotics, antiinflammatory agents, and narcotics. After covering his face with a bandana, he exited the hospital by acting the part of a Hutu rebel, with cries of fanatical hate against his own people and firing his service pistol into the air.

When Elijah reached his family's apartment, he found a sight beyond his capacity to grasp and a moment of stark terror that would define every day of his remaining life.

His sister, Carene, lay on the floor, her arm severed at the shoulder, her body marred by grotesque hack marks. At age seventeen, she had been savagely murdered. Her torn dress and bruised legs told Elijah that before they killed her, the Interahamwe thugs had used Carene the way they used every Tutsi woman of any age. Her cherished oval-shaped harp, called an inanga, lay beside her, smashed. Eli had given his sister the inanga on her ninth birthday. She adored music. She told him it was the most beautiful gift in the world.

The hand of her amputated arm still held a piece of instrument string between two fingers.

From the next room, Elijah heard a low moan. He found their father, Sentwali Mutabazi, alive but barely conscious, bleeding profusely from a bone-deep scalp laceration that extended across the top of his head from his right eye socket. Elijah had no doubt that his father had been left for dead by the invaders who had hurried away to continue their savagery in another innocent dwelling.

In that instant, Elijah, possessed by unfathomable grief and searing anger, denied himself any show of emotion. Carene was gone. Thank God his older brother, Cedric, was safe in the United States. Neither despair nor enmity would save the life of his father—only swift action.

Elijah tore a length of fabric off a bed sheet and wrapped it several times around his father's scalp. With one kick, he broke through the locked back door and hoisted his father out onto a narrow alley. Looking down the alley, Elijah spotted a car idling half-way outside a makeshift garage. The car's rear window was blown out and the driver was slumped across the front seat, dead from multiple bludgeon wounds to his head. The car's engine was still running. Elijah unceremoniously dragged the man's body out of the car and loaded his father into the passenger side, applying another

layer of pressure dressing to his father's scalp by ripping a sleeve away from the dead man's shirt.

From there, Elijah raced to Imaniku, avoiding Interahamwe patrols by taking abandoned rail lines, horse paths, and traversing open grasslands that only locals knew.

For the next five weeks, Elijah spent every waking hour caring for his father and training villagers to stand guard for any sign of Interahamwe approach. He assigned each sentry a lookout point along the canyon rim, sending a replacement every twelve hours. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, there were no fires, visible lighting, or audible human noise anywhere in the village. When necessary, an infant or small child was given one of the medications Elijah had swiped from the hospital in order to suppress a cry, scream, or cough. Parents knew the danger of administering a narcotic or powerful sedative to their child, but they also knew that the slightest sound could serve as a death sentence for all. If an attack was imminent, any villager not on active defense would run to a predetermined place to hide. Mothers would be charged with the dreadful task of carrying their stuporous children across their shoulders, racing out of the only home they had ever known to hole up in a place where death was more likely delayed than averted.

Although Sentwali had been blinded in one eye and was weak from his injuries, his mind remained vigorous, and he slowly recovered. He was a career educator and professor of history at the National University of Rwanda. More than ever, Elijah recalled his father's many teachings—the same lessons and wisdom he imparted on his students for two generations:

In reality, he had told Elijah again and again, Hutu and Tutsi were indistinguishable. For centuries they had shared the same genealogy, language, religion, heritage, and codification of law. The designation between the two groups had been fluid, relating only to one's immediate socioeconomic fortunes. Being a Hutu citizen or Tutsi citizen meant nothing more. There were never two races; they were forever one people.

But the colonial regime in Rwanda did not share Sentwali's generous views on the two Rwandan ethnicities. In 1933, when Sentwali was eight years old, their Belgian overlords announced that nearly every Rwandan citizen, no matter what their age, was to be identified as either Hutu or Tutsi. Sentwali and his parents and his nine siblings were handed identification cards that said they were Tutsi. From that moment, each became a member of a patrilineal caste system, a designation that preordained all descendant generations into one of two classes, each of which had a status in a social hierarchy frozen in place, immutable, and forever static.

According to the "scientific" rationalization of the colonial powers, several supposed differences between the two African peoples existed: their physical habitus, skin tone, migration patterns, and agrarian history. All such distinctions were baseless European inventions. Each of these "racial divergences" was referenced after the fact, a thinly veiled attempt to bolster the concept of a dichotomy that never existed. Colonial rulers institutionalized racial supremacy in Rwanda, fomenting a legacy of hatred based on an ethnic schism they had devised for their own ends.

Imaniku had precisely one line of communication to the outside world, a discarded military issue short wave radio that one of the villagers had discovered and then repaired. The unit functioned well enough to intercept international news broadcasts for an hour or more daily. Throughout the bloody spring and summer of 1994, as Elijah heard the stream of international news reports, he saw the radio as more of a curse than a blessing:

The death toll from the Hutu extremist campaign has already exceeded that from the violence in neighboring Burundi in recent years.

This meant that in the past month, at least 300,000 Rwandans had been massacred.

A measured and appropriate response by the international community remains unclear at this time.

The only immediate initiative taken by Western powers had been the hurried evacuation of its own citizens stationed in Rwanda—to them, nothing more than an inconsequential post-colonial backwater landlocked in central Africa. Rwanda had no large oil reserves, and there was no political,

economic, or strategic advantage to be gained by coming to her aid.

Access in of, out of, and between the districts within Rwanda remains a challenge.

Rwanda had one airport and it was closed, each of its runways barricaded by the Hutu insurgents. Roads and railways within Rwanda were barely above primitive to begin with, and all existing infrastructure was now under Interahamwe control.

At no time did any world power, including the United States or the United Nations, refer to the "situation" in Rwanda as genocide. This deliberate omission obviated any pledge by the UN Security Council member nations to intervene. Furthermore, to the extent that the Western press had more than a cursory knowledge of whom they labeled as "a band of domestic terrorists," they referred to the perpetrators as savages. Elijah found a certain morbid amusement whenever he heard this word, "savages." To be a savage, you had to be human, Elijah reasoned. And Hutu Interahamwe soldiers had long since lost their humanity. They were reduced to little more than mechanized swatters, deprogrammed of any last vestige of their innocent adolescence. The only wiring within them was an immutable link to the bottomless racial hatred of their blood-lusting commanders—men who could only try in vain to disguise their true nature behind a human mask.

On that starry night in May, as Elijah crouched in the tall grass on the side of the road to Imaniku, nothing mattered more than staving off the bloody invasion of his village and seizing his opportunity to defend his home and exact his revenge against the boys and men who had butchered his sister and grievously wounded his father.

Hidden from the eyes of the men and boys on the Hutu patrol truck, Elijah's sentries, posted every half-kilometer around the crater's rim, waited vigilantly for his signal. Along with an old rifle, Elijah carried a six-foot cord of tannin-soaked rawhide with a lead weight in a pouch in the middle. As the Hutu truck rolled into range for an attack, Elijah grasped the two ends of his shepherd's sling in one hand and spun it at arm's length over his head, gradually increasing the rotational speed. When he changed the cord's spin direction 90 degrees, a whirling sound, eerily like that of a flock of nightjars arching low to the ground, penetrated the air of the canyon below.

This noise was the signal every family in Imaniku prayed they would never hear, even though they all knew that one night an Interahamwe patrol would find them.

With time, the trucks and their cargo of killers found even the most remote Tutsi village. Since the president's assassination one month earlier, most Rwandans were either running for their lives or hiding, or hunting down their former neighbors who were running or hiding. If one chose to hide, the greatest threat was not the machete or the bludgeon. It was the rifle with its attached bayonet. With ammunition nearly impossible to get, many rifles had been abandoned. But any Hutu killer using an empty rifle with an affixed bayonet could root out those in hiding with mortal efficiency. Laying waste to a woodpile or haystack with a swinging machete would get an attacker nowhere, and using a machete blade to chop up a dung heap or a latrine pit would send missiles of stale shit splashing on everyone around you, including your commanders. But a bayonet could be effectively employed to pierce through straw, high piles of animal dung, rotting wood, and wall crevices. And using a bayonet to pierce the flesh of hiding Tutsis required no more strength than that of the average pre-adolescent child.

At this moment, if Elijah and the sentries failed to act, the Hutus would hack every man, woman, and child to death in less than an hour. The youngest children and the elderly would be first. The girls and young women would be gang-raped before being killed. Once their work was complete, the militia would take all the food and fresh water they could carry.

From the outset of the terror that now engulfed Rwanda, Elijah knew that no one would come to Imaniku's aid. No one. Ever. Survival depended on maximizing the villagers' every advantage, and none compared to the skill of the slingers. By the age of seven, every boy in Imaniku had learned to master the shepherd's sling. Most could bullseye a tree knot from twenty paces. A ten-year-old could hit one from forty paces. Teens competed for accuracy at a full fifty meters. For Elijah and his seasoned sentries, their aim was as accurate in scant starlight as in the midday sun. Slingers loaded the leather pouch with anything they could find: buckshot, ball bearings, marbles, nails, lead shards, and baked clay fragments. In an instant, they could spin and launch their projectile, a rapid-fire process many times faster than it takes for even a highly trained marksman to reload a shotgun.

Putting together a shepherd's sling cost a young boy nothing; each was its owner's prized possession, an unassuming heirloom made from scraps. Rwandan males used the sling for target practice, hunting, village competitions, and childhood mischief. Exceptional skill with the sling could secure the slinger not only local bragging rights, but also a reputation passed down for generations.

The humble shepherd's sling gave the sentries and their families the best chance possible to live another day.

Once Eli's signal echoed into the night air, the sentry nearest Elijah promptly signaled to the next guard and the next. In less than a minute, every guard had been alerted to the Hutu threat. Elijah continued the same sequence of spinning and twisting the leather cord, leaving no doubt where defenders were to gather. All other villagers—the children and their mothers, the aged or infirm—would take cover under floorboards, in latrine holes, inside haystacks, and under dung heaps.

The voices from the boys in the truck grew louder, and shifted cadence into a low chant. Elijah knew this was a deep, visceral mantra, one now more familiar to the assassins than their own names, which they had long since shed in service of their righteous cause:

"Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi cockroach! Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi cockroach!"

Suddenly, the huddle of Hutu militia in the back of the truck fell silent.

Elijah knew the Hutu killers were listening and watching to learn if the inhabitants were gone from the village or hiding within. The possibility of attacking an armed village—its men with weapons loaded and at the ready, emerging from the dark to surround their ranks—was the Interahamwe soldiers' and commanders' most acute fear. They had no training or preparation for facing a military challenge or engaging in combat. They had no capacity to fight. They did not want a fight. They wanted to slaughter defenseless people.

Their capacity for butchery, Elijah knew, was surpassed only by their cowardice.

There was movement. The man in the truck's passenger-side front seat emerged and clambered onto the roof of the cab, his legs spread wide and arms crossed. Against the night sky and a scattering of unalloyed starlight, the tall, chiseled figure looked like a statue of a soldier at a war memorial. For the briefest moment, Elijah considered the utter perversion of this man, who appeared for all the world as a brave warrior about to be felled by enemy fire in the field of battle, a soldier's ultimate sacrifice forever commemorated in bronze.

In addition to his shepherd's sling, Elijah had one of the few working rifles in the village at his side. He considered picking it up and aiming just below the man's oversized belt buckle. With the slightest squeeze of his finger he could blast the commander's manhood into the trees and watch him die an agonizing death. This man and Carene's murderer were one and the same. They both killed her. They all killed her. Theirs was the same unforgivable sin.

But he held himself in check. He knew that somehow the right time would present itself. And that time was not now.

The man behind the wheel turned on the headlights and activated the high beams. With this signal, the boy guerrillas began to rattle their weapons against the truck's side rails, resuming the low rumble of their demonic chant.

"Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi cockroach! Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi, Tutsi cockroach!"

This cacophony was the enemy's most potent and maniacal overture, one intended to elicit the sound most likely to betray the villagers' presence: the sounds of prayer. Petitions to save their collective existence would at first be silent, with quiet supplications, hands clasped together, eyes shut, heads bowed, begging the Almighty above for earthly salvation. The Hutu killers hoped the prayers of the pitiful Tutsi families would then grow more desperate and louder, giving the killers

the answer to their question.

But there was nothing. Not a single human utterance.

"Little Tutsi, small Tutsi!" the Hutu commander called, swinging his torchlight from side to side. There was a deliberately mocking humor in his voice. "There must be cockroaches in these trees! I hear you. We all hear you. Cockroaches, we know you are there. We will find you, little rats we shall split in half one by one. First, our work is in your homes—very quick work. Run if you can. If you had bullets to kill us, you would have."

He was right, Elijah thought.

The commander lit a kerosene lamp, giving a full view of the clubs, machetes, spears, and rifles held aloft by the puppets under his charge. When Elijah saw the light reflecting off the bright steel daggers affixed to the rifles of the soldiers, his blood ran cold. It was time to act.

Eli gave the signal: Seizing his rifle, he turned it skyward and fired three shots. He had two rounds left, should he need them.

In an instant, the band of Tutsi sentries used their slings to fire off rounds at the Hutu raiders, loading and firing faster than they ever had in their lives. Buckshot pellets and metal shards clattered against the sides of the truck, with the slingers following Eli's orders to deliberately avoid direct hits on the attackers. Hit the enemy, he instructed, and they will know your weapon is meager. Barely miss, and your enemy's fear of future pain becomes your greatest weapon.

The Hutu commander scrambled back into the relative safety of the truck cab, madly gesticulating for the driver to turn around. With a grinding of gears the driver manhandled the truck on the narrow road while the makeshift assault continued. Packed into the flatbed like livestock, the young Hutu terrorists huddled in fright as projectiles rained down upon them.

Slowly the truck rumbled up the hill. The barrage of stones and bolts dwindled as the Tutsi defenders melted back into the deep shadows of the bush.

Imaniku was safe for the night, but three other villages were close by—Kinaza, Nyanzi, and Nguma. Any one of them was a likely target for the humiliated but no doubt enraged commander and his band of teenage murderers. There was no easy way to warn them: All communication lines in and out of Imaniku had been cut, and wireless links, to the extent they existed, were trusted by no one.

If the Interahamwe thugs were successful, within a couple of hours, well before dawn, no one would be left to bear witness in any of the three villages. The killers would go from one to the next, adding to the statistics that the rest of the world might one day itemize; but the Interahamwe cared only about one number: zero. This was the number of Hutu they would leave alive. Their creed allowed for neither mercy nor opposition, and their work would only be complete when no more Hutu "cockroaches" soiled their landscape. Then the Interahamwe and the nation of Rwanda would become one, pure, and singular in force and rule.

The single dirt road in and out of Imaniku was rutted and rife with branches and fallen rocks. Elijah knew he could run to any of the villages in less than half the time it would take the transport to arrive, but he had no idea which village the killers would target next. If only he knew, he could reach them with enough time to evacuate the villagers through the hillside paths that he knew blindfolded. At the same time, he could send out runners to warn the other two villages. Some of the inhabitants—the sick, the elderly, the infirm—would surely die in all three villages. They would insist on remaining behind, imploring their families to run, and after that, to run further, never to stop running. Those chronically ill or otherwise debilitated would spend their final hours in prayer, begging for their family's deliverance, and that their own death might be swift.

Eli's father had taught him every footpath in and out of Imaniku; he knew the shortcuts to all the neighboring villages. By the time Elijah started school, he had memorized the wisdom of his father's words:

"Usiku ni rafiki yako"— "The night is your friend."

Seasonal rains, moonless nights, windstorms, flooded rivers and streams—none of it mattered.

Let your feet and your senses guide you. Elijah learned to trust the ground before him, the sounds of the night, the motion of the trees, and the flow of water channels. If your way depends upon the sun's light and only what your eyes see, you will never venture far.

Elijah quickly found two of his sentries. A decision had to be made. He sent one to Kinaza and the other to Nyanzi. He himself would run to the farthest village, Nguma.

Jogging along the dirt road away from Imaniku, far ahead he could see the red taillights of the Hutu truck as it slowly climbed the hill. With its heavy human cargo, its progress was slow. At an acacia tree near the side of the road, Elijah entered a path, worn to dirt by generations of feet. The path lead downhill, twisting and turning. He navigated a series of terraces before crossing a dry stream bed and ascending a tree-covered hill. At the top of the hill he cautiously paused by the side of a road.

Headlights pierced the gloom. Elijah retreated behind a portion of an old stone wall.

Crouching behind the wall, Elijah watched as the truck inched closer. He saw the mob of teenage killers crammed into the back, their machetes and bayonets gleaming in the starlight. Again he smelled the stench of dried blood and heard the sound of their furtive whispering.

Elijah waited for the truck to pass. Suddenly the brakes squealed, and the vehicle stopped in the middle of the road. A jolt of fear shot through Elijah's body. Had they seen him? If so, his only choice was to run. His muscles tensed as he prepared to flee for his life. One more second—just one more second and he would turn and head for the safety of the dark forest.

To his astonishment, the young Hutu thugs did not leave their flatbed pen. As the vehicle idled, the door to the cab swung open and the commander stepped out onto the road. He said a few words to the driver before turning and sauntering into the shadows of the tree line, not twenty feet from where Elijah crouched.

Elijah then realized that he had not been spotted by the Hutu patrol. The patrol's commander, fresh off his ignominious defeat by a group of invisible peasant dirt farmers who had somehow feigned both their number and their might, brought his truckload of minion killers to a halt for another reason.

He had to take a piss.

There was no time to hesitate. Creeping away from the wall, Elijah picked his way through the bushes until he saw the silhouette of the commander standing near a tree. In a low voice, the commander was singing to himself an old tune about being a brave lion hunter.

A swelling breeze rustled the leaves on the trees, providing a sound cover. Now was the time!

Elijah deftly stepped forward and snapped his rawhide cord around the commander's neck. "I thought nothing could cut off a good piss midstream," Elijah whispered into the man's ear. "Tell me the next village, and I will let go. Where? Where next?"

The commander's eyes bulged from the force of the cord and he struggled to speak. Elijah let off just enough pressure for the man to breathe and utter two strained words.

"Kutomba wewe."— *"*Fuck you."

"Hardly original," Elijah began. "But gutsy for a man with a noose around his neck. I'll give you that." He wrenched the cord tighter. The whites of the choking commander's eyes glistened in the starlight.

"How's that?" Elijah asked, torquing the line enough to pierce the skin on one side of the commander's neck. Blood pooled above the man's collarbone before it dribbled off onto his exposed genitals.

"This is aged hide. Tanned it myself," Elijah continued. "It's got all kinda uses, I'm sure you know. If you thin out the hide real fine and wind it in a spiral, you can use it as an instrument string. Just right for the inanga. Makes a beautiful sound when played correctly. Have you ever played the inanga? How about your sister? She ever play the inanga?"

"Josiah!" one of the Hutu soldiers called out. He was standing on the truck's passenger side

runner. "Let's get moving!"

"Well, my sister did," Elijah continued, undeterred. His fist was now at the base of the man's skull. "My little sister—my only sister. She had one of these in her hand when she died. Her hand still gripped the inanga when I found her. But her arm was on the other side of the room from the rest of her body. Now you will tell me, Josiah? Tell me which village your men are going to next, and I just might let you live."

With another angled twist, Elijah could feel the man's top cervical vertebra grind against the bony prominence of his skull base. The man's legs began to flap, his eyes nearly swollen shut. Elijah let off enough pressure for the man to gasp for air.

"Josiah!" the soldier called out again. "Where the fuck are you? Get your ass in here, or you'll have to run to Nyanzi."

"Nyanzi!" Elijah whispered, looking over at the truck. The unknown soldier's voice was oddly familiar to him.

While still looking at the man calling out the commander's name, Elijah twisted his wrist half a turn. The soldier peered intently into the shadows, and Elijah wondered if the snap of the commander's cervical spine had been loud enough for him to hear.

"That was for Carene." The commander's body convulsed before finally going limp.

The man at the truck held a lantern above his head, searching the shadows. He panned the light slowly along the side of the road, and on the third pass, Elijah saw his face.

There was no mistake. The man holding the lantern was Callixte Mbarushimana.

Captain Mbarushimana had been Eli's commanding officer for over two years while the pair were stationed along Rwanda's border with Uganda, several hours north of Kigali. Mbarushimana was not only Elijah's leader and mentor, but he was also a true lodestar to every man under his command. Mbarushimana had, more than anybody else, turned Elijah from a boy into a soldier. It was Mbarushimana who had promoted Elijah to first sergeant. And it was Mbarushimana who taught him that, above all else, honor reigned supreme.

But that was a lifetime ago. Now, a patrol of butchers followed Captain Mbarushimana's every order. Once a decorated officer who had sworn lifelong allegiance to his homeland and its people, today he was an Interahamwe commander. All across the land he had once taken a vow to defend, Mbarushimana directed his boy soldiers to rape, ravage, and murder.

Eli released the commander from the clutches of his rawhide, wanting more than anything in his life to use it on Mbarushimana. But Elijah knew that his time was not tonight.

"I will find you, captain," Elijah whispered, staring at Mbarushimana through the dark. "I will wait, but I swear, I will find you."

Elijah then looked at the dead body lying at his feet.

"The devil's been waiting for you," he said. "And he's got you now."

With one kick, Elijah sent Josiah's body into a shallow ravine just off the side of the road. Let Mbarushimana figure out what happened to his fellow thug!

Elijah ran along the old stone wall until he came to a path. He paused to listen. He could hear the voices of the killers calling for Josiah. Good—the delay was helpful. He scrambled up a nearby rock ledge and looked north, in the direction of Nyanzi. There were no visible lights anywhere in the distance, and Elijah wondered if the Nyanzi villagers had heard gunfire minutes earlier and already abandoned their homes. More likely, they had simply doused any lamps or candles and were going about what they did every night, which was praying that their lives didn't end before dawn. Elijah knew every rock, rut, and clearing between Imaniku and Nyanzi, and despite the lack of light, he made it there in less than fifteen minutes—half as long as it would take to drive a car, not to mention a rickety flatbed truck heavily laden with people.

He began banging on doors, waking the villagers as quickly as he could.

When Elijah heard someone approaching from behind, he turned and saw a lanky teenager

coming after him with a baseball bat-sized tree limb. Elijah grabbed the boy's forearm and spun him around, using his other hand to cover the teen's mouth. With a single arm-twist upward, the boy let out a muffled grunt and dropped the homemade weapon. Elijah turned him back around and pulled him in, grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

"Now you listen, *hungu*. You got no idea how deep the shit is under your feet. You are hearin' me?"

The boy nervously nodded.

"You are going to run. You're gonna run your balls off 'til you get to that next village," Elijah said, letting the boy go and pointing down the road. "When you get there, you start kicking doors, because they need to know that in less than an hour, the devil himself will come calling. Then you find someone with a skinny ass like yours to run to the next village, and then the next, and then the next. And you got just one message, and that's to hide. Hide anywhere you can. You got that? You followin' me, son?"

The boy nodded again.

"Now run, goddamn it. Run."

The boy tore off into the night.

Two Nyanzi village sentries recognized Elijah, and in less than a minute there was enough commotion to awaken every family in the village. A light rain began to fall, and Elijah hoped in their prayers all the villagers would be pleading for more rain, making footsteps into the tree cover harder to hear and more difficult to follow. But if the Interahamwe took to the nearby forest with lanterns, it would little matter. Every family was now left to fend for themselves. Elijah could do no more. No one could.

By the time Elijah returned to Imaniku, dawn had not yet brightened the horizon. After a brief search, he found Josiah's body lying in the ravine, and he covered it with loose dirt and tree branches. Given his choice, he would have left the corpse exposed for the buzzards to find, but if the Interahamwe patrol doubled back to search for the missing commander in daylight, they'd notice a flock of birds picking at something. Although Elijah had taught his sentries that to be an Interahamwe militiaman, you had to be all hate and no balls, he couldn't risk the commander's strangled body being found. He knew that no lives would be spared by testing his enemy's resolve or seeing how much shame that enemy might tolerate.

The killers never returned to Imaniku. The only incursion was on a June morning, when one of Elijah's sentries spotted what he assumed was an Interahamwe militiaman wandering below the south rim of the canyon. The sentry used his sling to knock the man off his feet, hitting him square in the back of his head with buckshot. When Elijah heard a loud cry, he ran to the scene and found the sentry beating the unconscious man over the head with a club. Elijah pulled the sentry off, grabbing him at the waist to avoid the wild swings that didn't stop. He held the sentry down until he heard the club hit the ground. When they both stood, Elijah recognized Mihigo, one of his trainees. Mihigo looked at Elijah for a brief moment, wide-eyed and dazed, and then looked down at the dead body in front of them. Neither man said a word.

Mihigo was his parents' golden child, the son who tended their small family farm seven days a week, cultivating the terraces of cassava, potatoes, beans, and corn. They had agreed to let Elijah train him to help protect their village, and for sixteen hours a day, every day, Mihigo had stood guard over his family and every relative and friend. Mihigo means "promise" in Kinyarwanda, and at age fourteen, he was the oldest child in his family.

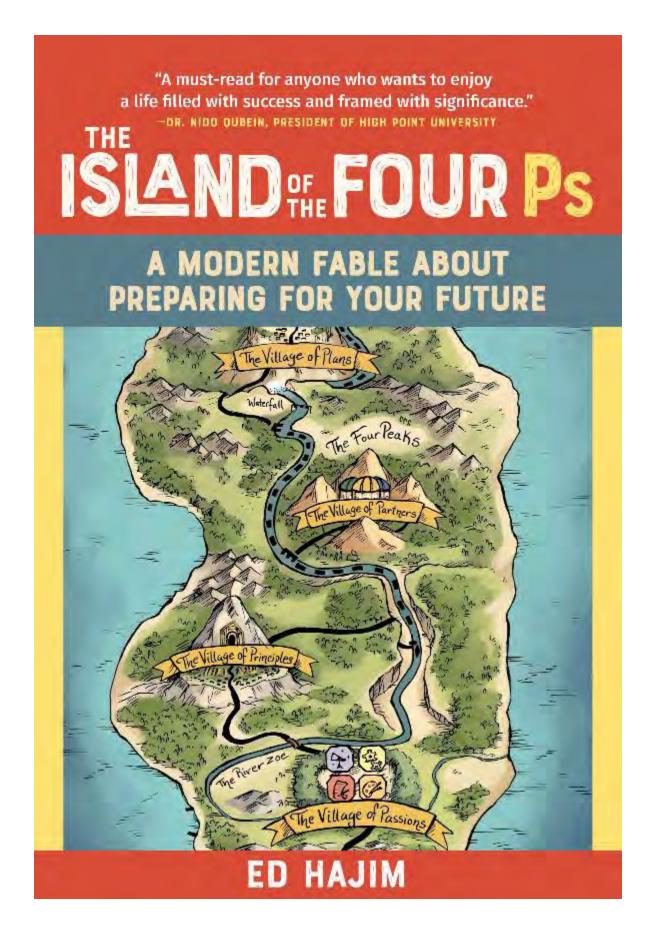
Mihigo's eyes remained fixed on the man he had just killed, his look a distant, shadowy stare that Elijah had seen many times on the face of men—and boys—who had just ended the life of another man. Without looking back at Elijah, the teenaged sentry turned and ran, his pace seemingly faster with every step, until he disappeared into the morning fog that hung over the canyon rim.

Elijah rolled the dead man over, inspecting his clothes and what little he was carrying. Besides a

large hunting knife that the man had tucked under his belt, Elijah found no other weapons. He may have been a sentry from another village, a farmer looking for medicinal herbs, or a rancher in search of a lost animal. Or he may have been an Interahamwe soldier on reconnaissance, who would soon to report back to his commander that he had located a "cockroach nest." Elijah would never know. No one would ever know.

After Mihigo ran away that morning, he was never seen again.

SELF-HELP



THE ISLAND OF THE FOUR PS BY ED HAJIM A MODERN FABLE ABOUT PREPARING FOR YOUR FUTURE

The Island of the Four Ps is a story told in two parts. The first is a modern fable, inspired by that experience, and the second is the author's personal story, which draws upon his own hard-won life lessons.

The Island of the Four Ps, a spinoff of Ed Hajim's bestselling memoir On the Road Less Traveled, is a modern fable about a young man, Marketus, who leaves home for the first time and travels to an island on a quest to answer some of life's basic questions. The book, a conversation with the hero's inner voice, is divided into four fundamental sections—passions, principles, partners, and plans—the key ingredients to making a successful life, says the author. This magical trip takes Marketus and his guide to four villages named after the four Ps. As he enters each place, Marketus places a green pea into a special device, which allows him to store his thoughts, retrieve them, and integrate them. This engaging tale features full-color illustrations throughout, this parable comes to life in the most unusual way. Perfect for those looking for inspiration in an ever-changing world, Marketus and the Four Peas offers a timeless message for everyone.

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"This wonderful fable draws on the hard-won life lessons of fabled financier Ed Hajim. Ed, a modern-day and very real Horatio Alger, identified his passions, principles, and partners so as to shape a plan for his life's purpose. For those on a similar quest, let Ed be your guide through reading this allegorical tale. It informs and inspires." **-Mark Zupan, president of Alfred University**

Hardcover: 9781510776173 / \$24.99 Kindle: 9781510776180 / \$16.99 Pub Date: April 4, 2023 Publisher: Skyhorse Publishing Buy Link: https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/9781510776173/the-island-of-the-four-ps/

ED HAJIM is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir, *On the Road Less Traveled*: An Unlikely Journey from the Orphanage to the Boardroom. The son of a Syrian immigrant, he is a seasoned Wall Street executive with more than 50 years of investment experience. He has held senior management positions with the Capital Group, E.F. Hutton, and Lehman Brothers before becoming chairman and CEO of Furman Selz. Hajim has been the co-chairman of ING Barings, Americas Region; chairman and CEO of ING Aeltus Group and ING Furman Selz Asset Management; and chairman and CEO of MLH Capital. He is now chairman of High Vista, a Boston-based money management company. In 2008, after 20 years as a trustee of the University of Rochester, Hajim began an eight-year tenure as chairman of the university's board. Upon assuming that office he gave the school \$30 million—the largest single donation in its history—to support scholarships and endow the Edmund A. Hajim School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. Through the Hajim Family Foundation, he has made generous donations to organizations that promote education, health care, arts, culture, and conservation. In 2015, he received the Horatio Alger Award, given to Americans who exemplify the values of initiative, leadership, and commitment to excellence and who have succeeded despite personal adversities. Married for 57 years, Ed and his wife Barbara have three children and eight grandchildren. www.edhajim.com

INTRODUCTION

Let's be frank: we live in unusual times.

The future "normal" is going to be very different from what most of us have experienced. It's going to be even more dynamic and perhaps less certain. We'll see enormous changes in our culture, our economy, and our day-to-day lives.

From the vantage point of 2023, some of those changes will be driven by our new understanding of what the word "pandemic" means. But the drivers of change will be far broader. In the next decade, digitization, artificial intelligence, and automation are going to fundamentally change what work, community, career, and success mean for most people. In fact, many of the jobs that American workers will perform in the 2030s haven't been invented yet. At the same time, the many effects of climate change will force us to consider new ways of interacting with the world around us and conducting our day-to-day lives.

How do you prepare yourself to deal with that kind of change? How do you learn to cope with the uncertainty and fear that often come with waves of change?

Here, in basic terms, is my answer: First, you learn *who* you are—what you believe, what motivates you, what scares you, and what will help you realize your full potential. Second, you learn to identify the good things about change. You eagerly ask, "What's next?" and seize the opportunities that come down the road. My purpose in this book is to help you take those two steps by applying the lessons I learned through my own scary and difficult personal experiences, which you'll read about in part 2. The instability I felt at that time had everything to do with my quest for a purpose in adulthood. Scary as my circumstance might have been, they ignited in me a desire to find my purpose and plan for the future I wanted.

That's why I wrote this book—so you can use my experience to help you navigate troubled waters. No matter what your profession or stage of life, there are moments when you will need direction—a compass that leads you to what's next. I've always depended on that in my career on Wall Street.

But as you'll see, *The Island of the Four Ps* is not a how-to business book. It is a think-about-it book in the form of a fable. As Tony Robbins has often said, people understand concepts and learn best when they are emotionally affected by a *story*, in this case a fable.

Why a fable? Why not just set out the key ideas and say, "Do it this way"? Because I don't believe there's only one way to deal with life transitions. And even if you accept my ideas wholly, there is no single right way to put them into action.

The Island of the Four Ps is a fable about the huge, scary challenge we all face: carving our path

to success and happiness. It uses fiction to capture the truth of human experience—our striving and yearning, our courage, joys, and fears. So as you read, join along in the quest. Think about ways the fable might reflect your own life. Take a journey of the imagination and consider your day-to-day experience in a new light.

I hope you will find this book easy and entertaining to read. But as you'll see, there are life lessons built into the story. So don't just glide through it. Put a little energy into pondering the ideas it offers—accepting, modifying, or rejecting them as you think best. Read *The Island of the Four Ps* one chapter at a time, then answer the few questions I pose at the end of each one. Or read the book through from start to finish, then come back and answer the questions chapter by chapter.

You'll be rewarded for taking your time. I hope *The Island of the Four Ps* will prompt you to contemplate who you are and what you want in life. Ideally, it will spur you to action—helping you engage fully in life, pursue new experiences, and surf the waves of change.

PART ONE

The Fable

CHAPTER ONE

A Quest Begins

A young man, Marketus, stood on the prow of a small boat. For several moments, he watched green tips of forested mountains rise slowly from the horizon. Then he called to the boat's captain and navigator. "Look! I think we're almost there."

The captain glanced ahead with a smile, pleased by the enthusiasm in the young voyager's voice. Turning to her partner, the navigator, she said, "It is an extraordinary view, isn't it?"

"Yes," the navigator replied, "and after all these years, I still remember the mix of emotions I felt when I first arrived. Excitement, energy, and a little fear."

"It feels good, helping this young adventurer begin his own quest," the captain said as Marketus joined them at the wheel. The three stood together and watched as the land appeared. First, a ridge of mountains surrounded by heavily forested hills. Then a thin ribbon of beach connecting forest and ocean.

Looking back over the distance they had crossed, Marketus saw many other boats spread across the waters behind them. Most carried families accompanying other young voyagers. But Marketus's sole companions were the captain and navigator. They'd recognized something special in him and generously offered to transport him to the Island of the Four Ps.

Marketus knew that the other young voyagers all came from a wide variety of backgrounds. And once they reached their destination, each would embark on an individual quest, at his or her own pace. This would not be some kind of race.

"Though your paths may cross," the navigator had said to Marketus, "you must undertake this quest independently. The lessons you learn must be your own."

"However, that doesn't mean you'll be alone," the captain noted. "We've arranged for someone to accompany you. His name is Archimedes."

Marketus asked, "Wasn't Archimedes the ancient Greek mathematician who invented ways to accomplish difficult things easily—like lifting heavy objects and pumping water from a deep well?"

"Exactly," the navigator replied. "Like his Greek namesake, our Archimedes will give you tools to

make your work easier and more effective. But you must make the effort yourself."

An hour later, Marketus stood alone on a gently sloping beach, carrying only a backpack, a compass, and a book. The captain and navigator waved a last goodbye and backed their boat away from the shore. They knew that when they saw Marketus again he would be transformed: a little wiser, more mature, and more confident about his future.

Marketus felt a twinge of regret about this parting, but he also felt the exhilaration that comes with new-found freedom. For the first time in his life, he held his destiny in his own hands. He was ready to explore the uncharted territory before him.

The mountains rose from the beach in fits and starts: forested hills led to valleys, then higher hills eventually rose to form a range of peaks. The forests were deep, broken now and then by fields of wild grasses, broad lakes, and swiftly flowing rivers.

Marketus wondered if he was destined to climb those peaks. What might lie beyond them? More important, where should he begin? He scanned the tree line ahead for a clear starting point. But everything appeared dark and a little foreboding.

Then a man emerged from the trees. Dressed in simple clothes, he had a satchel slung across his shoulders. The man walked into the sunlight and stopped, basking in the warmth. He wore the broad smile of someone returning to a well-loved spot. After a moment, he turned and walked directly toward Marketus.

"Hello, Marketus. My name is Archimedes," he said.

"Hello," Marketus replied. "The captain and navigator told me to expect you." Then he asked, "Are you an inventor, too, like the other Archimedes?"

"Nowhere near as accomplished as he was, but I have invented this," Archimedes said, taking from his satchel a small item wrapped in cloth, which he handed to Marketus.

Unwrapping it, Marketus found an oblong metal object. Depending on how the light struck it, it looked to be made of copper, silver, or gold. It was flat on top except for four deep indentations set around a raised circle. Rounded on the bottom, it fit easily in his palm.

"It is a *tessares makhana*," Archimedes said. "In Greek, that means 'a machine of four elements." But for simplicity, I just call it a Tessamark."

"What's it do?"

"At the moment, nothing. By the time we reach the other side of that mountain range, though, you will see what it can do. In fact, learning to use the Tessamark is key to your quest's success. For now, put it your pocket and keep it safe."

With that, he settled the satchel on his shoulder and gestured toward the trees. The two companions started walking.

At the tree line, Marketus paused to look back. Farther down the beach, a handful of boats were drawing away from land, each having deposited a lone voyager. "Will all those voyagers have a guide, too?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Archimedes answered. "Many will wander about fruitlessly and miss out on the knowledge this land offers." Then he walked into the dense forest, and Marketus followed. As they walked, they fell easily into conversation—about Marketus's life, his friends, the fact that he was an orphan, and his most memorable experiences. In the quiet moments in between, Marketus looked closely at the environment around them. From time to time, he used the compass to check their direction. But he soon realized it was purposeless. Although their first destination was, Archimedes said, due east of the beach, the winding trails hit all points of the compass. There were many intersecting and inviting paths, some of which they followed, some of which they walked past. Even after careful observation, Marketus couldn't say what made the paths they followed the right ones.

Marketus was so engrossed in the journey and the conversation that he was surprised when Archimedes stopped and said, "Several hours have passed. It's been a long day for you, and the sun will soon set. We'll rest here for the night. You will want plenty of energy for tomorrow."

Then he showed Marketus a nearby stream of crisp, clean water. He demonstrated how to create a comfortable sleeping place from the moss growing beside the path. Then he went to gather fruits and nuts from the surrounding trees for the next day's breakfast.

When Archimedes returned, he opened the satchel full of newly gathered food and took from it a small loaf of bread and a triangle of sharp cheese. He and Marketus ate their dinner of bread, cheese, and ripe blackberries as the sun set.

By the time they'd finished, the forest was dark, lit only by a quarter moon and a sea of stars. Marketus lay down and studied the patterns in the sky.

"What do you find yourself thinking about?" Archimedes asked.

"How many paths there seem to be. Where they go. Where this quest will take me," Marketus answered. He hesitated, then asked, "Are you going to stick around for my whole journey?"

"I will be with you long enough for you to become your own guide," Archimedes said.

"I'm not sure what that means," Marketus said.

Archimedes smiled but offered nothing more. So Marketus took the Tessamark from his pocket and absently ran his finger over the strange object while he thought about what might lie ahead.

Archimedes watched Marketus's deep contemplation for a few minutes, then said, "Congratulations."

"What for?"

"For discovering the first purpose of the Tessamark: reminding you to stop and think—to reflect on your experiences and the lessons they offer."

"That doesn't seem like such a big deal."

"No, it doesn't seem so," replied Archimedes. "Where you come from, people want to do things as quickly as possible—even several things at once. They often believe that simple thought and reflection are a waste of time. But your quest will be much more useful if you occasionally take a break to contemplate your experiences and the world you are traveling through."

Marketus indicated that he understood. A few minutes later, he dropped off to sleep.

LESSON:

Always remember to stop and think—to **REFLECT ON YOUR EXPERIENCES** and the lessons they offer.

CHAPTER TWO

The Village Of Passions

Marketus woke the next morning just as the sun broke the horizon. He felt refreshed, with a clear mind, ready to resume his journey. Archimedes laid out the remainder of the nuts and fruits he'd gathered the night before, and the two ate. Then they set off again, walking at a leisurely pace. After an hour, they reached a wooden bridge over a shallow stream. Archimedes pointed to the water and said, "That is the great River Zoe."

Marketus laughed. "Your great river looks more like a nice little creek."

Archimedes smiled. "True. I should have said that this stream *becomes* the great Zoe, the grand and challenging river that courses through the heart of this land." He paused, then continued with quiet intensity. "Our journey will take us through the heart of this land, too. Along the way we will explore four villages. In each, you will be offered something of great value. Observe closely. Listen carefully. Take time to think about what you have seen and heard. Remember: the success of this quest—and of your many future journeys—depends on how well you use what is offered in these villages."

"I will do my best," Marketus replied.

"The entrance to the first village is just down this trail. Before we visit it, I have something for you." Archimedes reached into his satchel and took out a small silk bag tied with gold thread, then handed it to Marketus. "Take care: what is inside is very small and very precious."

Marketus opened the bag and stared at its contents. "A pea?" he asked. "A dried green pea?"

"No normal pea, I assure you," Archimedes said. "Take out the Tessamark and carefully place the pea into the small indentation above the center."

Marketus did as instructed, then gasped in surprise as the indentation closed tightly around the edge of the pea—which then looked like a glowing green pearl.

"I know you have questions, but for now," Archimedes instructed, "place the Tessamark back in your pocket, and let us venture into the first village."

Marketus did as Archimedes advised. "What is the name of this village?" he asked.

"It is called the Village of Passions."

Marketus laughed. "The Village of Passions—where your wildest fantasies come true?"

"Sorry, no," Archimedes replied. "Passions as in: What motivates you? What ideas and activities energize you?"

"That's less enticing," Marketus quipped.

"Nevertheless, how would you answer those questions?" Archimedes asked.

Marketus considered. "There are lots of things I really like to do. I've never thought of them as passions."

"Then we are in exactly the right place. For it is your true passions that will drive you forward in life. They will be the basis for goals you set. And the energy and determination you derive from them will enable you to overcome many obstacles and disappointments," Archimedes said.

Then he and Marketus crossed the bridge and followed the path over a hill and around a bend. Before them stood a tall stone arch that marked the beginning of the Village of Passions. They stopped to admire the arch and the scenery around it.

Just then a woman emerged from an adjacent small building, smiling broadly when she saw the travelers. Archimedes smiled back.

"This is the Village Guide," he told Marketus. "She will offer valuable advice as you begin your explorations."

"It's nice to meet you," Marketus said.

"I'm glad to meet you, too," she responded.

Then Marketus took a closer look at the arch. He noted that it was covered in detailed carvings, each representing an area of human activity or enterprise. There were symbols for almost every undertaking or occupation Marketus could think of. "Somebody certainly put a lot of time and energy into these carvings," he observed.

"It's how we do things here—with commitment and vigor," said the Village Guide. "Are you a first-time visitor?"

"He is indeed," Archimedes replied. "We wish to explore your village and observe the passions prevalent in its residents' lives."

"Allow me to give you a map to guide you," the woman said. "The village is much larger than you might expect." She ducked into the building, brought out a thick parchment, and unrolled what proved to be several yards of an intricately drawn map. She pointed out the village's primary streets and lanes and some of its scenic spots.

Then she said to Marketus, "I suggest, young man, that on this first visit you skip the neighborhoods marked in blue ink."

"Why?" Marketus asked.

"There are many kinds of passions," the woman explained. "Those that are productive and constructive and those that are not. There are passions one controls and directs, and then there are those that are difficult to control, even addictive. As an ancient sage once said, 'Some passions nurture and feed; some passions know only greed.' The blue-ink neighborhoods are those where people pursue negative passions. Another time, when you have more knowledge and experience, you could visit those areas."

"You are wise and good-hearted," Archimedes said to the woman. "Guiding people is clearly one of your own passions."

In reply, the woman simply smiled, bowed, and directed the visitors toward the village's main street.

The village was organized as a series of neighborhoods, each comprising clusters of houses, communal spaces, and workplaces. And each was populated by people whose lives revolved around a single passion—one that gave them energy and that they were deeply committed to. Archimedes and Marketus spent a few hours in each of these neighborhoods, closely observing the residents and their activities.

In the first neighborhood, people were passionate about science. Some wanted to know how light rays moved; others wanted to know how chemical elements interacted; still others wanted to know how the human body performed its many functions. Each group had erected a building dedicated to its particular field of interest or area of scientific inquiry.

In a nearby neighborhood lived engineers who were passionate about applying scientists' discoveries in practical ways. Marketus was fascinated and might have spent a whole day among them had there not been so much else to explore.

"Engineering may prove to be one of your passions," Archimedes said. "But our purpose now is to explore the broad range of passions, not to dive deeply into any one of them."

Leaving the engineers' realm, they entered the neighborhood where people created visual art. In one building, artists painted every subject imaginable. In another, they sketched intricate drawings with pen and ink. In another, they sculpted huge figures made of stone, and in another, they blew delicate glass figurines.

In a nearby neighborhood, Marketus found buildings where musicians played trumpets and violins, sang songs, wrote symphonies, made recordings, and built musical instruments. After listening to a group of a cappella singers improvising a tune, Marketus said, "I love listening to all

kinds of music, but I don't think I've got any real talent for making it."

"I share your predicament," Archimedes replied. "In fact, there are several things I feel passionately about but haven't pursued because I have no particular aptitude for them." He hesitated. "Or maybe I should say that I'm not passionate enough about those things to keep focusing a lot of energy on them."

"Interesting. I never thought about it that way," Marketus said.

"Some people are lucky enough to find a perfect match," Archimedes said. "They are passionate about one thing in particular, do it well, and live in a place where they can earn a living doing it. For those people, many of life's choices are clear.

"But things are more complex for the rest of us," he added. "We have several different passions that grow and diminish over time. Our talents don't necessarily match our passions. And our communities may not reward our specific passions. So the first step for you is to be crystal clear about the things that are most important to you—beginning with recognizing your true passions."

"How do I do that?" Marketus asked.

"I'll explain soon enough," Archimedes said. "But for now, let's call it a day."

Indeed, the sun was low in the sky. Archimedes guided Marketus to a small lodge—a cozy and inviting wooden cottage nestled in a grove of trees—where they had a hot meal and slept in real beds.

Over the course of the next two days, they visited many neighborhoods, observing villagers engaged in a seemingly endless variety of passions—including many that Marketus never knew existed. Just seeing the huge variety was an education in itself.

On the third afternoon, Archimedes pointed to a spot on the map and said, "Marketus, you deserve a little respite. Let's wander over to this neighborhood."

"What's the passion there?"

"Desserts," Archimedes said, patting his stomach with a chuckle.

Half an hour later, sitting in a building where people cooked every conceivable kind of sweet treat, Marketus had wolfed down three fruit pastries before Archimedes had finished his first one. Then Marketus stood and said to his companion, "Take your time and enjoy your pastry. I'm going to explore on my own a little."

Archimedes gave Marketus a searching look, then returned to his pastry.

Two hours later, Marketus returned. Archimedes was not surprised to see a pained look on the young man's face.

"You visited one of the neighborhoods of addictive and unconstructive passions, didn't you?" Archimedes asked in an understanding tone.

Marketus simply nodded and sat down.

"You were not prepared for what you saw."

Marketus shook his head.

"People like to believe that they can fully control every choice they make. But that's not always the case," Archimedes observed. "Sometimes our passions override what logic and experience say is best. That's part of being human."

The two sat silently for a bit. Then Archimedes said, "Put this behind you for now." He unrolled the map to its full length across the floor. "We've only visited a fraction of the village. But a fraction is enough to help you realize how many kinds of passions there are. And to see that one can pursue almost any passion, if one is willing to invest the time and energy."

"I'm beginning to understand," Marketus said. "More than that, I can see that I've ignored some of my own passions—"

"Or simply didn't recognize them," Archimedes interjected.

"Right. Because I didn't know what to call them or how to act on them until I saw people pursuing them."

Marketus thought for a bit, then said, "You know, it just occurred to me: Do these people spend all their lives in one neighborhood?"

"Ah, an excellent question," Archimedes responded. "Some people have a passion that's so fulfilling that they do stay in one neighborhood. However, most of the residents of this village have more than one passion. So they move from neighborhood to neighborhood every few years or just divide their days or weeks among several neighborhoods.

"That's what's wonderful about the Village of Passions," Archimedes continued. "There are no expectations and no restrictions. Residents are free to pursue whatever activity motivates them as long as it doesn't harm another person. And all residents are guaranteed the resources needed to pursue their passions. So here, there are never too many pie makers or bankers or soccer players."

Marketus shook his head. "It's not like that where I'm from."

"True. In your land, there can be many barriers to pursuing your passions. Ultimately, the most important barrier is that there's simply never enough time. So you must prioritize.

"Now, you may feel that setting priorities limits your future opportunities. But not setting priorities often leaves you just meandering from path to path—never feeling satisfied with what you're pursuing, always thinking you should be pursuing something else."

The two visitors spent another day wandering through the village, guided solely by what appealed to Marketus. Several times, they returned to neighborhoods he'd found particularly interesting and wanted to explore further. He would ask the residents which other neighborhoods they frequented and how they balanced—or combined—their several passions.

Finally, the sun fell behind the surrounding hilltops, and Archimedes said, "It is time to continue our journey." They left through a gate on the opposite side of the village from the one through which they'd entered.

From there, they followed a trail that brought them to a broad, gently flowing river that reflected the orange-red sunset. "It's beautiful here," Marketus said. "Is that the River Zoe?"

Archimedes chuckled. "Yes. Remember the little creek we crossed a few days ago? This is what it looks like after it's been fed by a series of underground springs."

Archimedes took from his satchel a ball of thin twine, a leather pouch containing three fishhooks, and a small piece of bread he had saved from their morning meal to use as bait. "Fishing is a passion I can only rarely indulge. But tonight, passion and necessity come together: I will catch our meal while you build a fire."

As Marketus gathered firewood, Archimedes prepared his fishing lines, and soon the two sat beside a small fire while their meal cooked. "All in all," Marketus said, "I would love to live in a place where I could pursue all my passions as often or as seldom as I want—as soon as I figure out what they are."

Archimedes said, "Well, the first step in that process is straightforward. Ask yourself four simple questions: First, what activities make time pass quickly? Second, what subjects do I hunger to learn about? Third, what tasks do I pursue with commitment and energy, without hesitation? And fourth, what do I daydream about?"

Marketus repeated each of the questions. Then he said, "Yup. That's pretty simple."

"Important questions aren't necessarily complicated," Archimedes responded. "It is in answering them that complications begin."

"But don't other things matter, too, besides my passions? Like what I'm good at? What I believe in? My personality?"

"Those matter a great deal," Archimedes replied, "especially as you make choices about which passions to pursue, how much energy to devote to each, and what trade-offs you'll accept in order to pursue them. But the starting point is *identifying* your passions."

"You're saying that passions are more important than strengths and weaknesses, skills and talents?" Marketus asked.

"They're more fundamental. Passions, skills, and strengths are often inextricably linked, like the chicken and the egg. It's hard to know which comes first. But where they diverge, you must start with passions, which will always be your most powerful driver. And you must always be aware of what you're giving up in not pursuing a passion."

Marketus considered his point, then asked, "What if my answers to those four simple questions change over time?"

"Inevitably, they will. As your life progresses, some passions will remain; others will evolve or even dissolve completely and be replaced by new ones," Archimedes answered. "Some passions you are born with. They're in your genes and will stay with you. Others you will discover in your future journeys— much like the fruits we've encountered in our walks through the forest. And throughout your life, the way you view your passions will be affected by your environment—by the culture and society and economy that shape your day-to-day world. We'll talk more about all those things as this quest goes on. But regardless of the changes that take place within or around you, simply answer the four questions as honestly as you can, based on what you know at the time, and act on those answers."

Their conversation paused while they ate the fish and a loaf of bread they had bought in the village. After dinner, Marketus rummaged through his backpack and pulled out the Tessamark. "I've been wondering about this," he said. "When will we turn it on?"

"It's been working since you placed the first pea in it," Archimedes replied. "The Tessamark is a nexus. It gathers the intellectual energy created when you consider important questions or when something powerful motivates you. Then it can read that intellectual energy back to you in a clear and organized manner."

"How can it 'read' back to me?" Marketus asked.

"See for yourself," Archimedes responded. "Place your finger on the Passions Pea and think about what you have learned and experienced in the Village of Passions."

Marketus did as he was told. After a moment, the Tessamark vibrated slightly, then projected a vertical screen of light directly before him. On the screen were the thoughts he'd just had in his mind:

I have a passion for music—but no real talent.

I may have a passion for engineering—but I need to explore it more.

I like exploring new places—but is that a passion?

I really like collaborating on projects with other people—but how does that fit with my other passions?

"Wow! It reads my mind!" Marketus said.

"It gathers thoughts in which you have invested intellectual or emotional energy," Archimedes explained. "Initially, it will help you view, consider, and compare all the passions you've identified. In the next stages of your quest, you'll place three more peas in the Tessamark. Then you will really see what it can do."

"Pretty cool," Marketus said as he turned the Tessamark over in his hand. "Where does its power come from? Some tiny battery?"

Archimedes laughed. "No battery. The Tessamark is driven solely by your intellectual and emotional energies. And as you pursue this quest, you'll see it grow in power."

With that, Archimedes turned to check the fire. Then he lay down, using his satchel as a pillow. "I suggest that we get some sleep. Tomorrow will require a strenuous hike—not the leisurely walks we've enjoyed so far."

Principles of Decision-Naking and People

From a Soldier's Perspective

Warren S. Pennicooke

PRINCIPLES OF DECISION-MAKING AND PEOPLE: FROM A SOLDIER'S PERSPECTIVE BY WARREN S. PENNICOOKE

A blueprint to help any person or company succeed in business and in life, taken from the experiences of the author's many positions, locations, and battles as an Army leader.

The most effective leaders are alike in one critical aspect: they all tend to have exceedingly high degrees of emotional intelligence. Being the best trained, having a sharp analytical mind, being the most astute, and even having an endless supply of brilliant ideas will not make you a great leader without EI. But those with it, and some of the other qualities mentioned, are on their way to becoming memorable leaders.

In the author's world, poor decision-making has severe ramifications and often can result in the loss of lives. *In Principles of Decision-Making and People*, Pennicooke gives examples of how to apply them to their own worlds and lives. While the dangers might not be as disastrous, the lessons are just as sound and strong.

"A single point of failure can be the demise of the entire system," writes Pennicooke. *Principles of Decision-Making and People* is written to ensure that doesn't happen." -<u>BookTrib</u>

Paperback: 9798369233009 / \$20.26 eBook: ASIN BoC547SRW5 / \$8.99 Pub Date: June 3, 2023 Publisher: Barnes & Noble Press Buy Link: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/principles-of-decision-making-and-peoplea-soldiersperspective-warren-pennicooke/1143383107

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS WARREN. S. PENNICOOKE retired after twenty years of Army service, including four combat tours to Iraq. In addition to Iraq, he served tours in Fort Devens, Massachusetts; Grafenwöhr, Germany; Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Camp Casey, Korea; Fort Knox, Kentucky; and finally, in the 2nd and 3rd brigades of the 25th Infantry Division, Hawaii. He has also served in various positions as an Academy Instructor, Training Observer Controller, Battle Staff Instructor, Squad Leader, Platoon Sergeant, Operations NCO, Truckmaster, and First Sergeant. His service medals include four Bronze Star Medals, the Meritorious Service Medal, and four Army Commendation Medals. He is a member of the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club and holds a Graduate Degree in Liberal Studies with a Graduate Certificate in Homeland Security from Thomas Edison State University. Currently, he works as a military consultant in training the future Army force. He is married to Dr. Caitlin Pennicooke, an officer serving on active duty. In his free time, he enjoys running, fishing, and hanging out with their Golden Retriever pup, Arya. https://www.linkedin.com/in/warren-pennicooke-71337922/

CHAPTER ONE

"A Good Plan, Violently Executed Now, Is Better Than a Perfect Plan Next Week." —General George Patton

Setting Conditions: The Military Decision-Making Process and Troop Leading Procedures

Processes and systems have relevance but are useless and unproductive without human interaction. For this reason, their importance cannot be overstated despite to which school of thought you subscribe.

Before we can ask others to do something, we must be at least willing to do that thing ourselves.

That is the predicate on which cohesive teams should have their inception. But how do teams arrive at this point?

What is the secret to building a team whose performance exceeds the sum of its disparate members who are fundamentally and markedly different yet just as distinct in character and attributes.

The answer is cohesion.

Cohesive teams perform better and stay together longer than non-cohesive teams.¹ Teams can absorb more demanding tasks, perform with fewer errors, and exceed performance based on linear composites of individual inputs.

This was the first conclusion that Gerald Goodwin, Nikki Blacksmith, and Meredith Coats highlighted in their review of six decades of military-team research. Specifically, they emphasize the importance of cohesion and the benefits that solid teams can provide to an organization.

We must pose several other questions before answering how we develop cohesive teams. How do we develop leaders who become potential team leaders? And what will they look like compared to their parents and grandparents of generations ago?

That depends on whom you ask and in what context they respond.

Retired Lieutenant General James Dubik, *Commander of the Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq*, once wrote, "*Trust and confidence result from how confident soldiers are in themselves, their individual and unit training, their equipment, their leaders.*"

In short, leaders today have to set those conditions through their actions and decisions. If there is a willingness to learn, then junior leaders will grow from those earlier planted seeds.

Yet, it is not enough to espouse the benefits and highlight the talking points needed for cohesive teams and team building.

They must be predicated on and built on pillars that serve as tools for the team. That is to say, the team must serve as a sum of its parts.

One fails, and the team fails. As such, the people in the group become focus number one. The remaining two composites of processes and systems can be more seamlessly employed by investing in people.

As will be highlighted later, the errors many corporations, businesses, and governments make are their inability to realize this fundamental interplay in which management makes a system work — which is essential. But leadership builds systems and transforms old ones. A necessary skillset aggressively sought after in today's fast-paced, changing world. With that in mind, let us explore this concept as we look deeper at the first tenet: people.

Evidence shows that when leaders fail at change strategies, they inherently have neglected to recognize, encourage, inspire, and give latitude or autonomy to their teams to help them grow. And to their and the organization's demise, stagnation and complacency take effect. Meaningful change is never successful unless the complacency level is low.

That means leaders must motivate and inspire at every opportunity because a high urgency rate helps enormously in completing all the stages of a transformation process.

Said differently, if the rate of external change increases, then equally, the motivation and energy rate must remain either constant, median or rationally increase.

Vacuums are created in politics and the military when these change strategy failures occur. These lacunas or empty spaces have many causes, including ill-advised decision-making and other misaligned inputs that hamper effective decision-making.

For countries with unstable governments and thus unstable militaries, specifically in dealing with combat, the mistake of vacuums created by poor decision-making sadly equates to the loss of lives.

There is an old belief in the United States Army that we can reset you in training but not combat. This thinking is not just a feeling.

It is real.

On that premise, the military prides itself on its processes where decision-making and input to decision-makers are second to none.

The process is not just about getting the correct answer for the leader but empowering the team to unmask themselves and show their true potential. It allows team members struggling with interpersonal issues to embrace and deal with them. Conversely, it places those who would choose to spotlight themselves over the team on notice.

The Army uses key developmental positions, or progression benchmarks, to help develop the interpersonal skills necessary to accomplish the mission. Success occurs through collaboration and the influx of different perspectives during the various stages.

This process is fed by officers and non-commissioned officers, creating cooperation and leading to individual and group growth. The key here is that along with working independently, all participants must collaborate and work as a group or inherently fail.

It does this by providing and demanding a process wherein all the team members' inputs are given equal weight, considered, gamed, and questioned by their peers in real time.

Even with remote work, these teammates and the military had to conduct their missions leveraging the internet and approved social media platforms to maintain their readiness edge.

I do not have to tell you that this is a transformation in real-time, and the military had to transform or be left behind.

And I do not have to elaborate on the costs of being left behind.

Then, what makes the Military Decision-Making Process different from the boardroom? When you peel the onion back, the typical boardroom process does not differ much contextually from that of the military. You will find in the corporate boardroom that decisions are sectionalized.

That is, they fall under a three-level system. The first level is the strategic level. These are decisions the board must make. The second is tactical decisions—those needing more input and time, and last, operational decisions, the ones made by management and, as its name implies, drive daily operations.

As you may have noticed, this system is episodically designed.

Studies have shown that repeating a process over time makes it more seamless and streamlined.

Therefore, the significant difference between the Military Decision-Making Process and the corporate boardroom is that the boardrooms' processes are more event-based. They occur only when needed or necessary in saying that, as with all things, there is a time and place for all processes.

In that respect, the military is more constant, static, and outside the specific individual things to be done at each stage; overall, it is more team-empowering. It, too, is purposefully designed. It is built into military doctrine.

Doctrine, like the MDMP, is a guidepost. "A way" of sorts, or recommendation in "how to."

Consider it this way: the central guidelines of an Army are known as its doctrine, which, to be

sound, must be based on the principles of war (to which there are several schools of thought on how many principles exist) and which to be effective, must be resilient enough to accept transformation true to a change in circumstances.

In other words, it requires the input of official and command guidance in setting definitive parameters per each theory. Still, it requires judgment in its application because of those changes in circumstances to which Major-General John "Boney" Fuller inferred when he said, "In its ultimate relationship to human understanding, this central idea or doctrine is only common sense—action adapted to circumstances."

Within this paradigm, team empowerment is even more effective because it forces them to use multi-communication platforms and judgment to Fuller's and my point. But more importantly, two-way communication. It drops the perceived downside belief to two-way or other communication in which the feedback may suggest that the leader has an ineffective plan, or that in-progress projects or products need reformulation.

Military leaders want their teams to provide information and help them turn it into actionable knowledge through visualization. Said differently, they want people who will give them the "so what?" What about these bits and pieces that make them worthwhile and useable?

Armed with these actionable bits and pieces, the leader can then address making sound and prompt decisions. In doing so, they can ensure assigned tasks are understood, supervised, and conducted and, more importantly, employ their teams to leverage their capabilities.

The leader is allowed this flexibility to seamlessly complete their tasks because the team reframes the problem with recommendations from the bits and pieces. Said another way, they broaden and stretch the problem by applying multiple dilemmas to see all the variables. It is time-consuming and deliberate.

Like the boardroom's decision-making process, it is also tedious by nature and design. In this internal portion of the process, contingencies and redundancies are discussed and added. Ownership of specific tasks begins to materialize.

If not done this way, leaders risk soldiers getting seriously hurt or, worse yet, dying because the first project or plan fails, which anyone who has served will tell you always happens. *The first plan never survives first contact.* The model requires, no, scratch that. It demands contingencies and redundancies built into any project.

Ponder this example: Let's say Sam had a late product launch for reasons at first unknown. Indeed, the competition may have beaten him at the top and bottom lines. But consider if they rushed the product to market to beat Sam.

Consider even further that now they are facing lawsuits because of faulty production.

Conversely, now consider that Sam was using and ultimately reaping the benefits of a more robust, deliberate process with people in the right places.

People properly positioned and tasked with the right tasks launched a similar product: a better product, one not recalled six months later for faulty design like the competitors.

The corporate world, for its part, and though it has improved, still reveres individual accomplishments over teams,' which creates sub-groups.

Not the subgroups in integrated communities that play a crucial role in cultivating interrelatedness and exchanging professional and scientific knowledge, but the kind that breeds envious, self-serving behaviors.

To exploit this perceived opportunity, too many teammates see a chance to highlight their individuality. Which, on the surface, is not immoral, unethical, or even illegal.

What it is, is witnessing the erosion of the existing culture. Or worse yet, the setting of new, lower standards.

The benefit of being deliberate and putting people at the forefront of building a change initiative, launching a new product, or preparing for combat is monumental and ought to be.

Failure here has considerable implications in an ever-transforming world. I am no fan of cliches. However, here, *"failure is not an option"* is prudent. That makes the positioning of people the impetus for the success of the decision-making process.

As such, this concept and skill of having the right people at the points of friction alleviate single points of failure. Which, in the private and public sectors, is often the result of a single person behaving criminally and is not usually associated with the company's core culture.

In the military, where the opposite is accurate, and the cultures are built around the leadership at all levels, if not checked, single points of failure can become a part of the culture. The outcomes of this can be very problematic regarding readiness.

The more significant point here is that, by definition, a single point of failure in any context can be the demise of the entire system, which makes their alleviation from your culture paramount.

And yet, in all things people-centric, there will be anomalies. Anomalies in this context represent consideration of all the properties of the human psyche. Psychologist Carl Jung ⁶ famously described it this way, *"by psyche, I understand the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious."*

Then, his thinking and that of anyone using the reasonable person standard removes any notion that the Military Decision-Making Process is a panacea.

However, the Military Decision-Making Process, if not the gold standard, should be considered in that conversation. It puts the correct principals in the right environment with the right strategies and systems to solve challenging problems.

Its iterative planning method forces and facilitates collaboration and builds a shared understanding across all sections and departments. This is achieved through active participation in courses of action development and conflict resolution before the dissemination across the enterprise of the final plan.

It is not a knee-jerk reactionary process. It can be used deliberately, and where and when appropriate, such as combat, be abbreviated.

However, the basic principles that drive the process are not lost when shortened. At worst, time and space are its Achilles heel.

Where communication gaps exist because of time and space, liaisons bridge those gaps. More on them and their significance shortly.

Until then, we can agree that leadership is a procedure whereby an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal, where affecting people is at the core.

It is equally plausible to assert that the solution to business transformation is not entirely built on technology and platforms but on people.

As I said at the outset, good leaders recognize the importance of the three tenets of people, processes, and systems. The benefits of preserving, nurturing, and advocating for them in your organization will pay dividends.

Although the MDMP is more noticeable at the command level because of increased staffing requirements, the procedure still occurs across all command echelons, from the senior general officer levels to the platoon leader conducting troop-leading operations.

And even though an eight-step Problem-Solving Process also exists in the military, it is more prescriptive than that of the MDMP, which I find to be more descriptive and, therefore, more people-centric.

As you may observe, any excuses to avoid conducting deliberate planning are removed no matter what version of the model is used.

It forces leaders to become better time managers by triggering and assessing redundant plans and or highlighting the need for them.

In lieu of the staffing requirements at smaller units and those at the tactical level, the MDMP is scaled down, resulting in the less rigid TLPs, or Troop Leading Procedures.

Despite this, let us focus more on its parent, the MDMP, which, as you will find, encompasses the others, and its private and public sector applicability starts to uncoil.

Through real-world events, you will see the results of the process come to life at the organization's lower levels. Additionally, it will illuminate that planning this deliberately removes single points of failure and finger-pointing.

NON-FICTION



THE POLITZER SAGA BY LINDA AMBRUS BROENNIMAN

After a housefire in 2011, the contents of a box that survives become the catalyst for a quest whose seeds were planted in 1983—the day Linda Ambrus Broenniman learned that her Catholic father was Jewish and what little family history she knew was a lie.

Searching for truth, Linda pieces together the astonishing story of her Jewish ancestors—the Politzer family—their remarkable lives lost to her father's secrets. From the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1700s to modern day Hungary and America, she finds her family: doctors and lawyers, entrepreneurs and industrialists, writers and musicians, artists and art collectors. She learns of their resilience in surviving religious persecution, wars, epidemics, and economic upheavals. Finding her roots brings Linda a new sense of who she is and a peace that now she can honor the memories of her family.

In helping Linda find her family, András Gyekiczki wrote, "I hardly know any non-fiction sagas to better exemplify Hungarian Jewish fate of the past 300 years as this Politzer story."

Illuminating the destructive power of hatred, dehumanization, and injustice, this powerful story encompasses issues that still echo today. *The Politzer Saga* is the subject of an Exhibition at the Rumbach Synagogue, Budapest, Hungary.

"Utterly enthralling ... *The Politzer Saga* is a rare piece of historical masterwork. Part historical biography, part memoir, and part informational narrative, Broenniman writes a book that respectfully details the modern Hungarian Jewish experience through her family's perspective. But it's more than that. *The Politzer Saga* celebrates human resilience and courage in the face of danger, prejudice, dehumanization, injustice. It's a story that will not easily be forgotten." - <u>The Bookish Historian</u>

"The book's beautifully crafted narrative, combined with meticulous research and compelling storytelling, makes it a must-read for lovers of historical sagas and those seeking inspiration from the triumph of the human spirit." -*TheJ.ca*

"The Politzer Saga" reads like a detective story that connects the dots, pulling together pieces of a puzzle in a wonderful, suspenseful way... But it is not a book of fiction. It is the record of her quest to uncover the secrets of her family's 300-year-old history." -*The Daily Press*

"I was blown away. There are several places in the book that brought tears to my eyes." -In Conversation... with Frank Schaeffer

Hardcover: 9781736777374 / \$39.95 eBook: ASIN BoCHSYMWVD / \$9.99 Pub Date: September 12, 2023 Publisher: Bethesda Communications Group Buy Link: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-politzer-saga-linda-a-broenniman/1143911000 **LINDA AMBRUS BROENNIMAN** grew up in Buffalo, New York. She is the middle child of seven born to Hungarian physicians who survived World War II and started their new life in the US in 1949.

Linda graduated from Swarthmore College with a BA in psychology. Several years after getting her MBA from Carnegie Mellon, she left mainstream corporate America to follow her path as an entrepreneur, building companies in technology and biotech. She let her passion for uncovering hidden potential in unexpected places guide her. And she allowed this passion to fuel her search for her hidden family. Linda lives in Great Falls, Virginia with her husband of 28 years and their dog, Juno. https://www.politzersaga.com

CHAPTER ONE

Family Secrets

Longing for the Truth

I am the middle child of seven American children born to Hungarian physicians, Clara and Julian Ambrus, who survived World War II and began a new life in the US during the 1950s. We were raised Catholic in Buffalo, New York and attended church regularly with our parents. It was a happy childhood. A charmed life. But there were secrets.

In my late twenties, (in the early 1980s), the godmother to my oldest sister revealed, through a slip of the tongue, that my father was Jewish. I began to wonder what else I might not know. Not long after that revelation, in 1984 and 1990, I learned more about my parents' past when I traveled to Budapest with them. Yet larger truths remained hidden.

One such truth emerged in 2006: We received news that the Israeli Government was honoring my Catholic mother as Righteous Among the Nations, an honor recognizing non-Jews "who acted according to the noblest principles of humanity by risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust." Her name is inscribed on the wall at Yad Vashem (the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel) along with more famous names, such as Oskar Schindler, Raoul Wallenberg, and Irena Sandler. My mother risked her life to save Jews, my father and my grandmother among them. I was so proud, but also stunned to realize how little I knew of my parents' true history. And that I knew nothing about my father's Jewish family. My Jewish family. Or about my own grandmother – my father's mother who escaped Hungary during the 1956 revolution and came to Buffalo to live with and help care for us, her grandchildren. She was big-hearted and spoiled us. Like my father, she was an expert storyteller, but she never revealed anything about the true history of her life.

After the ceremony that honored my mother, I broke the unwritten rule that governed discourse at our house: no questions about the past. My father continued to deflect until his death, and my mother was in the later stages of Alzheimer's. On one occasion, though, my mother's answer surprised me. She responded that a box with documents held answers. My quest for the truth about my family began at that moment.

Truth in the Ashes

I was amazed she remembered this detail when she remembered so little. But when I could not find such a box anywhere, I began to wonder if the box had existed only in her imagination.

In February 2011 my parents' home caught fire. My father survived with minor burns. My mother, after 12 excruciating days in coma, succumbed. I presumed the box she remembered had burned, if it ever existed.

Five years after the fire, my sister Madeline called to say she had found a box among the items rescued from the fire. She was sending it out the next day.

It arrived looking like any U-Haul moving box. I opened it nervously. Its musty odor reminded me of an attic closed off to fresh air for decades. It was filled with dog-eared files stuffed with papers and manila envelopes of photos. The documents were mostly in Hungarian or German. Most were dated from the 1930s and 1940s; some photos, postcards, and documents bore dates from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Amazingly, they had survived World War I, World War II, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the fire in my parents' home.

Buried deep within the box I found a black marbled composition book, bearing the words "Our Family Tree" on the cover. No author was identified. Much to my relief, it was written in English. Ábrahám Politzer (1797-1854) began the list of names. The irony of his name did not escape me - Abraham was the first patriarch in the Old Testament, progenitor of the Jewish nation. I had found our own Ábrahám, a Jewish patriarch in my family. Names, dates, and relationships were listed. Occasionally a brief description was included. It identified Politzer descendants through six generations, including me and my six siblings. I wondered who had written it as I read and leafed through the handwritten book.

I learned that in the mid-1800s Ábrahám and his wife Karoline raised a large family of fourteen children. Many more relatives followed. By the time I finished putting them into my newly purchased ancestry software (Legacy and ancestry.com), I had discovered over 300 names. The descriptions, though meager, made them come to life for me, but also left me yearning to learn more.

I was almost certain that Gábor Virány, my father's cousin had compiled the book. Gábor had a remarkable memory and was fluent in English. Growing up in Hungary, my father and Gábor, both only children, were like brothers. They lived in separate apartments in the same building on Teréz körút (körút means boulevard) in Budapest.

Gábor was autistic. He remembered everything: names, relationships, birthdates, marriage dates. He remembered dates of any significance and those that were not. My parents and I visited him in Budapest in 1984 and 1990. Asked about an event like a concert from decades ago, he recounted the weather, food served, music played, and what guests wore. As I later learned, when Gábor died in 2005, his niece sent his belongings to my father. The box my sister sent included some of the items Gábor had kept throughout his life. Without it, I could not have pieced together our family history.

History: Lost and Found

The contents of the box would bring me closer to the truth about my family, but the path to discovery is rarely a straight line. There are twists and turns, and disappointing dead ends. It requires a relentless commitment to finding answers and overcoming obstacles, especially when the lights at the end of the tunnel are answers to questions that no one wants to ask.

Using Microsoft translator, I was able to identify birth certificates, marriage certificates, and death certificates. But even simple translations were far from perfect and often created more questions than answers. Searching for help, I was introduced to Anna Bayer, a Hungarian Jewish expat who lived a half hour's drive from my home in Virginia. Anna was passionate about Hungary and Hungarian Jewish history. When she opened the door, I was instantly drawn to her enthusiasm and warmth. She took me to her basement where three large cloth panels were displayed. These had been used in an exhibit organized by András Gyekiczki to showcase the vibrant pre-war Jewish

community in the town of Pápa, Hungary. Of the 3,600 residents, only 200 survived the war.

The next six hours were enlightening and deeply emotional. Anna's descriptions provided a rich subtext to the documents. Some of them, including letters written to government officials, were historically significant and important to research. I would need much more than a translator. I needed to find someone who understood historical context and meaning. She said she would introduce me to András, her trusted friend. András had degrees in law and sociology. In the post-communist era and the early formation of a democratic government after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, he had held various government positions, including chief of staff to the Minister of Interior of Hungary and chief of staff for the Mayor of Budapest. He was a disciplined researcher with the skills to help me find my family.

Connecting the Dots

Anna was right. András was an amazing sleuth, a master of connecting the dots to lead us to more discoveries. From the names and dates on gravestones, he explored birth, death, and marriage records, most handwritten in ancient registers.

Ironically, cemeteries became the place where my family felt most alive to me. Their names were etched into the gravestones with dates, names of spouses or other family members, an epitaph, or some remembrance written by a loved one. Proof that they had lived and died. That they had really been of this place.

Each clue led to the next. András uncovered century-old donation books and tablets, tax ledgers, land certificates, election registers, school reports. He found newspaper advertisements, articles written by or about a relative, a name mentioned in a book, or a book written by a relative. He found documents in unexpected places.

Just locating names was no small task. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, educated Jews typically spoke three languages: Yiddish amongst themselves, Hungarian when chatting with their neighbors, and Austrian (German) in front of the authorities. A fourth, Latin, was also spoken. To my surprise, until 1844, Latin had been Hungary's official language.

When recording a Jewish birth, marriage, or death, any of these languages might have been used, resulting in different names for the same person. For example, a certificate found in the box was dated November 7th, 1941, signed by Rabbi Dr. József Borsodi of Kecskemét. He confirmed that in various registers the family name "Politzer" was recorded in several different ways: Pulicer, Puliczer, Pulitzer, Pollitzer and Pulliczer. András checked and rechecked such details to ensure the accuracy of his findings.

Treasures from the Past

András also pursued the living, tracking down the descendants of relatives and friends mentioned in books and letters. He visited with Gábor's niece, Kati Erényi, at her home in Budapest. Her gift of two books greatly enriched our findings.

The first book, typeset and written in German, was titled *Die Geschichte unserer Familie (Our Family History*). Written by Zsigmond Politzer (1842- 1920), the second youngest of Ábrahám's fourteen children, it tells the story of the Politzer family beginning in the early 1700s with Ábrahám's grandfather, Eisik, and ending with Zsigmond's own story. From the book, I learned about seven generations of my Politzer ancestors, including those Zsigmond would have known who were born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I.

The second book, titled *Az újabbik Balogh* (*The new tailor Balogh*), was written by Gábor and translated by András. It chronicles Gábor's experiences from the middle of 1943 until the summer of 1945, after the end of World War II. It is a window into the world through the lens of a nine-year- old

autistic boy. Embedded in his detailed descriptions of clothes and food, Gábor reveals the lives of the Politzer, Misner, Ambrus and Virány families during World War II and the toll the war took on them.

Survival: A Family Saga

These books coupled with András' research provided a rich history of Jewish survival in Hungary in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Politzer, Misner, Glück, Háy, Morgenstern, Rosenfeld. These are family names I came to learn about. They are not well-known names like Rothchild, Arnstein, Pulitzer, Soros. Yet, my ancestors crossed paths with those famous families. Their status and achievements, however, did not insulate them from historical events. Over and over again, they were battered by religious persecution, wars, epidemics, and economic upheavals that almost destroyed them. I learned of their struggles, their bravery, and their accomplishments. Of their generosity of spirit and remarkable resilience.

András once wrote to me, "I hardly know any non-fiction sagas to better exemplify Hungarian Jewish fate of the past 300 years as this Politzer, Misner, Ambrus, Virány story ... All those sufferings, torture and misery they went through."

A Gift of Truth

It wasn't enough to find the family my father never spoke of. I needed to write their stories. It was a way to connect to their lives and to make them even more real. By writing about them, I began to understand where my siblings and I came from.

With this book I honor our ancestors' memory. And I experience the true meaning of the Jewish statement of condolence (often expressed after the death of a loved one), "May their memory be for a blessing."

NEVER SAY WHATEVER

HOW SMALL DECISIONS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE



RICHARD A. MORAN, PhD

NEVER SAY WHATEVER: HOW SMALL DECISIONS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE BY RICHARD A. MORAN, PHD

Life Is Choices. Make Them.

Calling in late to a Zoom meeting with kids playing in the background. Avoiding optional meetings. Dodging low-profile assignments. Giving H.R. lunch-and-learns a hard pass. There are countless ways we've become the apathetic version of our corporate selves—dismissing what seems unimportant with a big shrug emoji. Whatever. Who cares?

In *Never Say Whatever*, veteran author, radio host, and former college president Dr. Richard Moran reveals with stunning clarity why you should care: The W-word is a career killer. In fact, he likens it to the similarly NSFW F-bomb. It can be a whole sentence, an attitude, an "OK," or nothing at all. It's a word that comes in handy and can be habit forming, but the consequences of using it as your fallback response can have drastically negative results over time.

The numerous daily decisions we make, both at work and in life, are small chances to make big impact. Understanding this—and banishing that "meh" attitude—is key to success.

Written with unflinching honesty, humor, and interviews with corporate decision makers, *Never Say Whatever* offers a blueprint to help everyone understand why and how the choices we make, even the minor ones, are in fact pivotal to professional development and career trajectory. For young graduates just starting out to seasoned professionals seeking ways to reenergize their careers, it's a timely call to get on track, and stay on track, with boosted productivity, an impressive personal brand, and a fortified gameplan for a supercharged career.

"In today's ambiguous, rapidly changing, and sometimes brutal workplace *Never Say Whatever* should be required reading." -Kerry A. Dolan, Assistant Managing Editor at *Forbes*

"After reading Never Say Whatever, your life will never be the same. With a perfect mix of common sense and humor, Moran has designed simple ways to find satisfaction at work and beyond."
-Dave Kerpen, New York Times bestselling author of The Art of People

"I once referred to [Moran] as the Mark Twain of business books. This time around he's more like Ben Franklin, creating an almanac of big-little ideas that will enable you to make better decisions throughout your life and career. *Never Say Whatever* offers practical wisdom with huge impact."
Jim Kouzes, coauthor of the bestselling *The Leadership Challenge*, and Fellow, Doerr Institute for New Leaders, Rice University

Hardcover: 9781264769643 / \$25.00 eBook: 9781264773565 / \$25.00 Audiobook: 9781638413189 / BN ID: 2940178020623 / ASIN B0C37ZP8DJ Audio CD: 9798212632447 / <u>Blackstone Libraries</u> Pub Date: April 11, 2023 Publisher: McGraw Hill, <u>https://www.mhprofessional.com/</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.amazon.com/Never-Say-Whatever-Decisions-Difference/dp/1264769644</u> <u>https://bookshop.org/p/books/never-say-whatever-how-small-decisions-make-a-big-difference-richard-moran/18962120?ean=9781264769643</u>

INTRODUCTION

THE ANTI-WHATEVER EVANGELIST IS BORN

Your destiny lies in your hands and can be molded with each passing day by the choices you make. —SUNDAY ADELAJA

"Saying 'whatever' is like saying the F-word. It can mean almost anything you want," a confident teenager told me as she enlightened me about the "whatever" word. She went on, "Whatever' can be a whole sentence. It can be a curse, an attitude, an OK, an insult, or a nothing-word all at the same time. It especially comes in handy when I want to say I don't care." With that simple description of a word so often used, my approach to both management and an examined life began to change. My teen friend was right: "whatever" is a word that can come in handy, although it can be habit forming, and the consequences of regularly using it can be negative and dramatic.

THE WHATEVER SURVEY

Does it sound like I am talking about others and not you? Think again. Before you start criticizing others, think about just a few workplace activities that may apply to you:

- Have you ever left that stack of dirty dishes in the company kitchen right under the sign that roars, "Clean up After Yourself! The Maids Are Gone."
- While on your way to work, have you ever told yourself, "I'm not going to do anything today, I don't feel like it."
- Were you ever mean to a coworker or customer just because you could be? Did you have a temporary asshole attack and regret it later?
- Ever wear a hoodie on a Zoom call?
- Do you take the newspaper with you to the bathroom and stay there for a long time to hide from your coworkers?
- Do you ever avoid the difficult emails you've received, afraid to address the tough issue?
- Do you oversleep all the time and dread going to work?
- Do you wear the same clothes for more than two days at a time?

- Do you have that weird feeling that something is bothering you, but you don't know what it is?
- Do you hang around with friends whom you don't like?
- Do you schedule or attend meetings to kill time?
- Do you eat second helpings even when you don't want them?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are guilty of "whatever." Read on.

PERSPECTIVES ON WHATEVER

MICHAEL HUERTA

former administrator of the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA), board member, aerospace industry leader, mentor

As the former head of the FAA, Michael Huerta understands the importance of small and large choices. He was the longest tenured leader of the FAA in US history and was appointed by the US Congress. He remains a teacher and a mentor.

"We had a very simple measure at the FAA," Michael savs. "On any given day if the same number of planes landed as the number that took off, it was a successful day. There was never any lack of clarity about how we made decisions."

Wouldn't it be a happy world if all organizations had such simple measures? Any sense of "whatever" is just not part of the DNA at the FAA. Michael chuckled and laid out a scenario, "Imagine being on an airplane, list- ening to the channel on in-flight entertainment where you can hear the pilot talking to air traffic control (ATC). It's the channel full of static where the pilot and ATC are chirping back and forth about turns, checkpoints, run- ways, weather, and traffic. You know your own flight number, so you can track what your pilot is saying. After a directive from ATC, your airplane pilot responds, " 'whatever!' " He went on, "That will never happen."

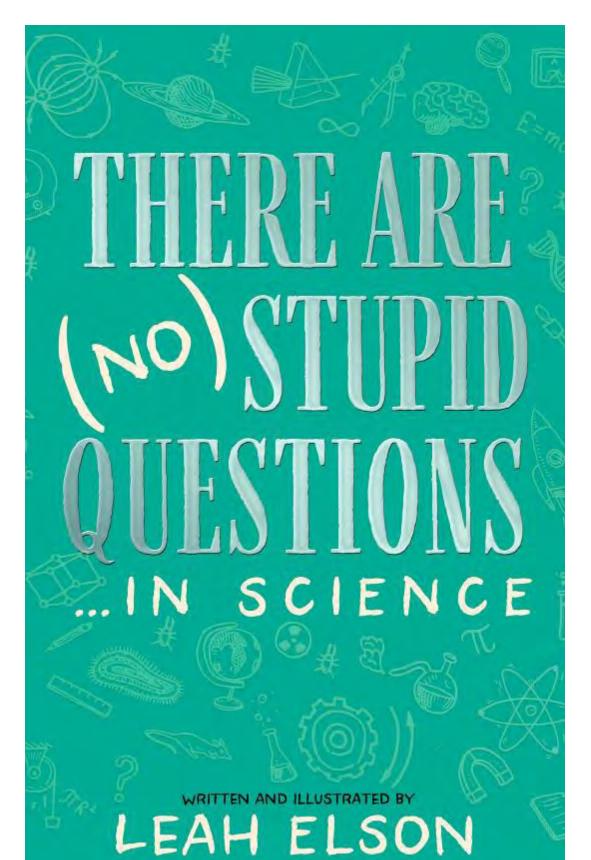
He laments the fact that although the FAA was nimble when it came to making decisions, the rest of government was not. Delay tactics were common, which meant decisions were not ever made. "At some point, it doesn't matter what the decision is, let's just make one and move on. Sometimes you reach a point where you just will not learn anymore, and it is time to decide.

"When dealing with following long and complicated policies, even in government, sometimes people would throw up their hands with a spirit of resignation, a sort of collective 'whatever.' That's a sign that a decision is probably overdue, or the policy needs to be changed or simplified. If the outcome of implementing a policy is not clear, why bother? Both clarity and outcomes need to be a part of decisions. Within the FAA we had clear policies and people were good at implementing them. If something didn't work, we changed it and moved on. We had an informal slogan of, 'Just deal with it.""

Michael's career is one that has always been goal driven, and he has made thousands of decisions to achieve those goals. If he said "whatever" along the way, he doesn't remember saying it.

WHATEVER WISDOM

When it comes to safety and other important decisions, "good enough" should not ever be one of the choices.



THERE ARE (NO) STUPID QUESTIONS ... IN SCIENCE WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY LEAH ELSON

A Barnes & Noble Bestseller *An Audible Pick of Science & Technology New Releases* *A Kobo Pick of New Audiobook Releases in Nonfiction* *An Audiobooks.com Pick of the Week's Best Books*

Leah Elson draws upon her wildly popular web series, 60 Seconds of Science, in this highly entertaining and visually appealing giftable book of real-world scientific questions and answers.

How does DNA work? Does chicken noodle soup actually help with being sick? When cats purr, what is actually making the noise? Does singing to plants really help them grow? Is it possible to clone a woolly mammoth?

In the vein of Randall Munroe's What If? and perfect for readers of Neil deGrasse Tyson's Astrophysics for People in a Hurry, Leah Elson's There Are No Stupid Questions ... in Science covers biology, chemistry, physics, human physiology, and space—providing easy-to-understand, delightfully cheeky answers to over one hundred common questions, from the age-old, to the ridiculous, to the sublime.

"Science can be wonderfully silly, occasionally bizarre, but always awe-inspiring."—Leah Elson

"What I'm loving about this book...is that it has a very user-friendly vibe. It's the opposite of a heavy, dense scientific manuscript." **-Talk Nerdy podcast**

Hardcover: 9798200864935 / \$24.99 eBook: 9798200864959 / \$9.99 Audiobook: ASIN BoB8P73TCV / 9798200860326 / 9798200860272 (CD) Pub Date: June 27, 2023 Publisher: Blackstone, https://www.blackstonepublishing.com/ Buy Link: https://www.blackstonepublishing.com/there-are-no-stupid-questions-in-sciencef62p.html#541=2054349

LEAH ELSON MS, MPH has been obsessed with the sciences since childhood, pursuing her lifelong passion through premedical sciences at Harvard University, a graduate education in biotechnology at Johns Hopkins University, and a second graduate degree in biostatistics and epidemiology from the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. She recently entered her

fourteenth year as an academically published medical researcher. Currently, Leah has more than eighty-seven published manuscripts and supplements, over one thousand indexed citations from other published investigators around the world, and an active scientific profile on ResearchGate, where her published manuscripts generate two to three thousand reads per week. https://www.leahelson.com/about

INTRODUCTION

The idea for *There Are (No) Stupid Questions... in Science* was actually conceived six years ago. But to understand its strange, slightly dangerous inception, I'd have to take you back much, *much* further.

You see, dear reader, I've always been a bit of a hambone. When I was growing up, my report cards read the same: "Brilliant student, but very poor citizenship. Talks too much." (However, I'd like the record to show, as I also tried to explain to my parents back then, that "too much" is quite a subjective assessment.) But to be perfectly honest with myself, and you, not much has changed. My superiors in science might likely draft a similar report card for me today if given the opportunity. And this overflow of curious energy brings me to the book you're holding now. This introduction is the chaotic origin story of a scientist you never needed or wanted.

So six years ago, during a live video feed on Facebook, I placed a string of Christmas tree lights in the microwave and fired it up. Why? To confirm a theory that they would illuminate. And also, to make people laugh. Through an electric cascade of sizzles and pops, I explained to my internet onlookers the electromagnetic rationale for why the bulbs lit up when the microwave was running. After the smoke cleared (both the literal and metaphorical kinds), I took my fledgling steps in a journey through science communication.

As the experimentation featured in the live videos became more grandiose, I was urged by my growing group of avid viewers to take the science instruction public. After reconstructing a tiny dualphase rocket engine model in my bathroom, and accidentally torching a cloth shower curtain to ashes, I decided to move my content to a public platform (in a less flammable capacity). On Instagram I developed my next generation of science outreach, called *60 Seconds of Science*. Under the username @gnarlybygnature, I blazed through easy-to-digest explanations of scientific or medical topics in under sixty seconds. After the initial episodes, viewers began to submit requests for clarification on topics ranging from human disease to the origins of the known universe. With the page's growing popularity, I decided to give full control to my follower base, allowing them to suggest topics and subsequently vote on impending episodes.

There Are (No) Stupid Questions... in Science adopts the same premise of that popular series: inform the public by teaching them *exactly* what they want to know. Therefore, the content of this book is made up of 103 explanations to *real* scientific questions, submitted directly to me or harvested from Yahoo! Answers. Topics are separated into five sections: biology, chemistry, physics, human physiology, and space.

Since the dawning of my career in science communication, I have always maintained the same goal: present science in a rapid and digestible way, and demonstrate to any audience that science can be wonderfully silly, occasionally bizarre, but always awe-inspiring.

This book is meant to educate and bridge disparities in science literacy by encouraging any and all questions. Unlike many books, this one welcomes topics from *all* major fields. Being a scientist, I understand implicitly the vastly important and monumentally positive impact that asking questions can have on the human connection to the physical world. Throughout history, insatiable curiosity is

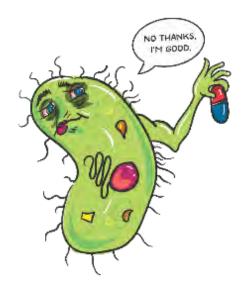
what has driven the fundamental discoveries that have shaped our understanding of the world today.

So! In an effort to provide some much-needed clarification to our most humble human quandaries (which, paradoxically, happen to elicit some of the most profound answers), I have decided to embark on this journey. In this book, you will find a collection of real questions from around the world, and the most curious corners of the internet, answered in full and painfully researched detail. From the gaping maw of space to the most intimate crevices of human physiology, we will embark on this quest together.

I am damn determined to prove to you there are (no) stupid questions ... in science.

BIOLOGY

"Every time I hear a politician mention the word 'stimulus,' my mind flashes back to high school biology class, when I touched battery wires to a dead frog to make it twitch." **-Robert T. Kiyosaki, author of** *Rich Dad Poor Dad*



HOW DO BACTERIA RESIST ANTIBIOTICS?

Starting this book off with one of the gravest concerns among public health officials? I would expect nothing less from this motley legion of curious minds.

Let's cover a few of the basics.

There are multitudes of molecular means that we can employ to take out a battalion of bacteria different antibiotics utilize different mechanisms. For instance, we can destroy their protective cell wall (penicillins and cephalosporins), we can metaphorically castrate them and quell their ability to reproduce (fluoroquinolones, metronidazole), or we can knock out their capacity to manufacture certain molecules that may be essential to their survival (trimethoprim). In any case, whether we obliterate individual cells or their ability to make more of themselves, we use antibiotics to effectively terminate bacterial production, allowing your immune system to clear out the stragglers and make you feel all better.

But as simple as these organisms are, bacteria have become quite good at evading our molecular assassination attempts. Some of these bacteria may alter their own surface proteins so that the antibiotic compounds can no longer dock onto them, rendering them ineffective. Or they may even develop molecular pumps that literally shuttle the antibiotic compounds out of the cells as soon as

they enter (which I've always found to be kind of hilarious—it's like a bacterium saying, "Sorry, can you send this back to the chef? I didn't actually order this.").

Now, you're probably asking yourself how the bacteria know how to do these things—do they hold microscopic OSHA meetings and determine that antibiotics don't provide them with a safe workplace? No. It honestly comes down to a game of genetic chance and a roll of the evolutionary dice.

Contrary to the enduring colloquialism, evolution is *not* "survival of the fittest." In actuality, evolution is more like "survival of the organism that can make the most babies." The word *fittest* is kind of a misnomer. Because bacteria divide so rapidly, there are plenty of opportunities for random genetic mutations to occur. These mutations either harm the bacteria or, quite often, are completely inert. But every great once in a while, a mutation will come along that confers an extra advantage by sheer dumb luck. In the context of antibiotic resistance, this may present as a physical change to the bacteria that disallows the antibiotic from doing its intended job. These bacteria can survive longer and thus reproduce much more effectively. As a result, they pass those same mutated-but-super-effective genes down to their progeny, forming a veritable army of resistant cells.

Even weirder is the fact that some bacteria can share trade secrets with other bacteria. So rather than conferring resistance only to its own offspring, a bacterium can also share with its neighbors! This is called "horizontal gene transfer" and is the sharing of genetic information *between* bacterial cells. The way this happens is either by direct injection of genetic material from one cell to another (called "conjugation"), a virus that picks up genetic information from one cell and transfers it to the next cell (called "transduction"), or a bacterial cell randomly chancing upon a chunk of genetic information that may be floating around (called "transformation").

Regardless of *how* these bacteria become mutated, antibiotic resistance is actually a pretty scary thing. I would be remiss in my duties as a scientist—and considering that one of my graduate degrees is in public health and epidemiology—if I didn't end on a PSA.

[Taps microphone for incoming PSA]

When humans expose bacteria to antibiotics unnecessarily, we unknowingly give them the cheat code to our defense systems. Today, antibiotics are overutilized; more often than not, a case of the sniffles is caused by a virus, the infection of which will rectify on its own in a few days. So, when people take antibiotics during these infections, not only are they *not* doing anything to help the course of their ailment (antibiotics do not work against viruses), but they're also giving bacteria one more chance to find resistance. Currently, antibiotic resistance is on the rise, and if you come into the hospital with a resistant strain that thwarts everything that can be given? There's really nothing that medical professionals can do for you, which can quite easily become a lethal situation. More and more of these bacterial strains are cropping up every year. So if you've got a case of the drippy nose, consider taking vitamin C and chicken noodle soup in lieu of penicillin... probably tastes a bit better, anyway.

HOW DOES DNA WORK?

Imagine the grandest library, dripping with French baroque. Its cavernous halls contain miles of the most precious human knowledge, organized into incalculable rows of tidy shelving. Due to the importance of the information contained within these books, very few people have access to the library, and clearance protocols are exceptionally stringent. No books are allowed to leave this place, only delicate photocopies of selected pages with explicit prior permission.

What you have just imagined is analogous to the nucleus of nearly every cell in the human body.

The nucleus is a small hollow pocket inside of the cell, specifically designed to safely house your entire genome. Every nucleus, inside of every cell, contains a copy of all your DNA—regardless of cell

type and regardless of which parts of the DNA are being used by the cell. Each strand of DNA is a fraction of the width of a human hair and approximately six feet in length when fully stretched out.

Typically, the length of DNA is wound tightly around biological spools called "histones" to maximize space efficiency. But if you were to link every strand of DNA in your body end to end, from your trillions of cells, the total length would be approximately sixty-seven billion miles long.

... I know. Stunned me the first time I heard it, too. It's a staggering amount of information. So, how does this little library of immense human information work?

The genome is a sacred library—it is a repository of how-to manuals, which contain all the schematics and instructions for building every protein in the human body. The genome provides the cell with blueprints for how to build little proteins, big proteins, proteins that can help perform chemistry (enzymes), structural proteins, and proteins that link up with other proteins to form complex molecules that can carry oxygen through the blood or facilitate the electrical current that courses through neurons, or, hell, even proteins that help copy the entire genome itself. In essence, the genome contains the blueprints for You.

Just like a sacred library, the information contained within your genome is protected and neatly categorized. Say I wanted to locate information on how to build a transport protein. Well, I would unfurl the DNA molecule to expose the section that codes for transport proteins (find the correct bookshelf), find the gene for the specific protein I need to construct (select a book), scan the gene for the information applicable to the specific protein I'm building (flip to the appropriate chapter), find the segmented genetic units associated with the protein build-out (locate the step-by-step instructions), and begin the process to create mRNA (photocopy the step-by-step instructions).

Information that leaves the nucleus may only be a *copy* of a section of DNA—never the DNA itself, which is important for protecting this all-important biological archive. This is the purpose of the mRNA photocopy—it acts to provide the instructions contained within DNA to the construction crew of the cell, which subsequently utilizes these instructions to build the associated protein outside of the nucleus. These proteins are assembled based on the instructions, piece by piece, until completion.

The process of reading DNA and the associated protein build-out is a bit like building IKEA furniture... if the instructions could occasionally be tens of thousands of steps long. And if incorrectly reading a step or two resulted in catastrophic failure.

So, yeah, I take that back—it's *exactly* like assembling IKEA furniture.

DOES CHICKEN NOODLE SOUP ACTUALLY HELP WITH BEING SICK?

The origins of chicken noodle soup can be traced back as far as the twelfth century with roots in multiple cultural cuisines from around the world. While I can't be certain, I'd also be willing to bet that mothers have been prescribing it to sick kids for just as long.

In many cases, cultural proverbs like "Chicken soup will make you feel better" hold little or no bearing in real-world application; they've become more of an expected verbal courtesy for the afflicted. However, you'd be surprised to learn that this salty broth may be implicated in immune support after all.

Several small studies have examined the impact of chicken noodle soup on the mitigation of upper-respiratory symptoms related to the common cold. Many of these studies have heralded some curious findings. One of my favorite studies was published by a research team at Nebraska Medical Center.

This team evaluated the effect of chicken noodle soup broth on neutrophil chemotaxis (or in other words, whether the soup changed how neutrophils migrate). Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell—frontline soldiers that play an integral role in early immune system response. They arrive

at the scene of infection, driven by distress signals from other cells, and once on-site, they launch a tiny war against invading microbes. But the chemicals released during this cellular battle cause inflammation. In the case of a viral common cold, the neutrophils begin to flood the lining of the respiratory tract, and mucous production ensues. So, this team of researchers from Nebraska wanted to know if exposure to chicken noodle soup somehow helped reduce this neutrophil-guided inflammation. Their lab findings demonstrated that the soup did, indeed, significantly reduce the ability of neutrophils to find their target area. During the throes of the common cold, this might potentially contribute to a temporary reduction in neutrophil-related sniffles, snot, and coughing.

The best part about this experiment? The research team, within the methodology section of their manuscript, saw fit to include the detailed recipe they used for their lab soup. This was comprised of the ingredient list (which specified, among other things, three onions, several parsnips, and a sixpound stewing hen), cooking instructions, and "salt and pepper to taste." The team's technical name for it was "Grandma's soup," listed next to the lab protocol for neutrophil chemotaxis evaluation. And so, Grandma's soup lives on into perpetuity within the hallowed halls of peer-reviewed scientific literature.

WHEN CATS PURR, WHAT IS ACTUALLY MAKING THE NOISE?

If you were to ask me, personally, why I think cats purr, I would say that it's some sort of lowfrequency waveform produced from the animal's direct contact with a parallel, demonic dimension.

As you may aptly guess, dear reader, I am not a cat person.

If you were to ask feline experts why cats purr? You'd probably get multiple different answers, such as an expression of contentment, a social signaling attempt, or a mode of self-comfort. The truth is experts have no unified understanding of why cats purr.

Regardless of the rationale for the rumbling, the physiology that drives the purring mechanism is actually an intricate coordination of muscular contraction. Signals originating from the central nervous system are shuttled to muscle tissues located in two primary areas: the larynx (located in the throat and alternatively known as the "voice box") and the diaphragm (located at the base of the chest cavity and used to aid in the expansion and contraction of the lungs). The signals elicit rapid muscular contractions from both implicated muscle groups. These muscular contractions flutter at a speed of approximately 25 to 150 oscillations per second.

As the cat breathes, air moves past the vibrating structures in its throat and subsequently becomes disturbed at the same frequency. This is why you can not only feel the purring mechanism at work, but you can also *hear* a vibrating noise as well. This air disturbance is audible during both the inhalation and exhalation periods of the cat's breath cycle, which also gives the purring mechanism its distinctive continuity.

All that being said, I'm still going with the theory that cats are probably evil interdimensional travelers using their purring to lull us into a false sense of comfort.

"Girondi's resilience benefits our entire field." -MICHAEL CHAMBERS, Founding CEO, Executive Chairman at Aldevron

#1 Wall Street Journal bestseller

High School Dropout VS Big Pharma: The Fight to Save My Son's Life

Patrick Girondi

FLIGHT OF THE RONDONE BY PATRICK GIRONDI HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT VS BIG PHARMA: THE FIGHT TO SAVE MY SON'S LIFE

#1 Wall Street Journal Bestseller

A true, rags to riches tale the New York Times says is "meant for television."

The protagonist, a high school dropout, is nicknamed in Italian U Carneveil (Walking Circus) for his entertaining and eccentric nature. Patrick Girondi starts his career shining shoes, stealing car parts, and escaping life-threatening situations while outwitting the Chicago police. He claws up to being a famous success story on the Oprah Show. His fortunes quickly change when his eldest son, Santino, is diagnosed with a fatal blood disease. Girondi hunts for a cure in a drama that has boundless implications in the world of gene therapy. As Girondi writes, "I'd been strangled, shot at, skated more than twenty arrests, made it through 3 FBI witch-hunts and went from the docks to trading and big money. I would see my son cured. How hard could it be?" After decades of struggle, he delivered the world's first commercial batch of vector with the potential to cure Sickle Cell Disease and Thalassemia. But again, the success of the cure—and the fate of his son—is imperiled, in a world of lab jackets, mysterious deaths, and cut-throat Wall Street banksters.

This is a story of love, beating the odds, or as Girondi calls it, pure luck. It is a gritty and realistic tale told with little regard for empire or etiquette.

"A worthy read if you have any interest in seeing underdogs achieve, well, anything." -Dr. Christopher Ballas, Senior VP of Manufacturing, Innovative Cellular Therapeutics

"This is one of the most amazing stories I have ever read. It is rare that a non-fiction book reads like a novel, but [Girondi] is a talented observer and captures this amazing story as well as any Pulitzer Prize winning author I have read." **-PatZi Gil, Joy on Paper radio**

Hardcover: 9781510772199 / \$26.99 eBook: 9781510772205 / \$16.99 Audiobook: ASIN BoB858KYS5 Pub Date: May 24, 2022 Publisher: Skyhorse, https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/ Buy Links: https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/9781510772199/flight-of-the-rondone/ https://www.amazon.com/Flight-Rondone-School-Dropout-Pharma/dp/1510772197

PATRICK GIRONDI, originally from the South Side of Chicago, is an Italian American singer/songwriter, author of Flight of the Rondone, a #1 Wall Street Journal bestseller, and Diamond in the Rough. He has released seven albums, and his music is featured in the Award-winning Italian film, Focaccia Blues. Girondi and the Orphan Dream Band have been featured in Italian newspapers as well

as on television in New York, Chicago, and Italy. He has performed at the Chicago Poor Man Blues Fest in Washington Park with Coco Taylor and Ronnie Lee Graham; the Harris Theater in Chicago; and the Umbria Jazz Festival. Girondi is founder of San Rocco Therapeutics, a gene therapy company focused on bringing a safe and accessible cure to Sickle Cell Disease and Thalassemia patients. https://patrickgirondi.com/ https://patrickgirondi.com/writing/flight-of-the-rondone/

PROLOGUE

"Put your hands in mine... close your eyes."

I took Santino's tiny hands into my own hands and observed him. "Tired of playing?" I asked.

He shook his head. I took stock of his condition as best I could through sight alone.

His forehead and cheekbones protruded—pushed outward by an overactive bone marrow that struggled to raise his blood levels. He was out of breath from running around with Nico and Enzo. Their hemoglobins were fourteen; his was nine.

"Put your hands in mine," I said.

He did. We never questioned each other.

"Close your eyes," I said as I squeezed Santino's hands, tighter and tighter, pausing for fifteen seconds. *"Figlio mio* (my son), when I let go, you'll be charged with energy from Papà. You'll be able to fly like the rondone."

I released his hands, easing the pressure slowly. We breathed. The aroma of Panificio Santa Chiara's wood-fired focaccia filled the piazza, where I sat, and Santino leaned against me with his eyes closed.

My solution wouldn't cure his Thalassemia. But it would let him go back to his friends.

He gazed at his freed hands. "Pà, they're tingling."

I nodded. "Now go. Fly like a rondone!"

Santino shot away. "Papà! I can fly! I can fly!"

There are no words for the happiness I felt as I watched him dart back into his world—Piazza Duomo, Altamura. He dodged in and out of the crowded square to rejoin his friends, his paisans, his compatriots.

Piazza Duomo is its own universe. Built in 1200, the stone cathedral has witnessed centuries of comings and goings across the white stone streets. Altamura, and all of Eastern Italy, was at one time a crossroad for African, Arab, Asian, and European cultures, and as a result, many Italians are a darker shade than their African relatives, and many Italians have bluer eyes than people on their northern borders. I find it tragically funny when seemingly intelligent folks identify cultures with Crayola colors—as if it were that simple.

Minutes later, the kids dashed toward me.

"Papà!" Santino screamed.

"Signor Girondi!" Enzo yelled.

They got within a few yards. Santino was holding a *rondone*—a bird, also known as a swift.

Concerned and wide-eyed, the kids gushed ancient Altamuran words that could easily be mistaken for Arabic.

Rondoni (plural for *rondone*) arrive in late March from Southern Africa. They travel thousands of miles at speeds up to 140 miles per hour. The female rondoni lay eggs in the tiled roofs and crevices

of the ancient town center. Catching insects for off-spring, they swoosh round and round in precise patterns. When the rondoni depart in August, mosquitoes move in and retake the piazza.

Rondini are as strange as they are fast. Their long wings prohibit them from taking off from the ground. If they don't want to get stuck, they must take off from high elevations so they can throw themselves into the air and take flight again.

Occasionally, rondoni collide with something solid and fall to the earth. That must have been what happened to this one, I thought.

I didn't hesitate. I took the young bird in my hands, and threw him into the air with all my force. The higher I could propel him, the better chance the creature would have of spreading his wings again, of saving himself, of soaring, of living.

It was a good throw. The power of the launch took the winged marvel almost to Doctor Alberto's third-floor windows.

But the rondone began falling, faster and faster. The eyes of everyone in the piazza were on the bird. Each of us secretly, solemnly prayed for his wings to carry him to salvation. A moment of hesitation would smash the swift onto the white stone.

I had done my part. Now the rondone was on his own, alone in descent, within inches of the end of his life. I turned away, like most of the others did, not wanting to witness the almost certain loss of life.

I barely saw, and almost missed what became of the mystical creature. But as I turned my head, from the corner of my eye, I saw him swoosh upward.

The boys had not turned away. Their eyes were wide. They shouted and marveled at what they saw.

The rondone took flight.

A few of the spectators cheered and clapped. Relieved, I nodded gently to myself. I understood.

I was there to save the bird because, in much the same way, others had intervened to save me. The fact that I was there in the piazza, at that moment, was a living tribute to the many people who had launched me back into life's wind and returned me to the world.

I took Santino's hand in mine again. He looked up at me and smiled.

CHAPTER ONE

Bliss

Every so often, when I was growing up, I'd find Grandpa Santino sleeping on our couch.

I wasn't sure where he lived. His face was gentle and kind. Sleeping there quietly, he reminded me of a little homeless boy. And I knew that when I woke to find him there, he would soon rise and disappear to his favorite part of the house—the kitchen.

If I woke up later than he did, I would be enraptured and dragged out of bed by the scent of Grandpa Santino's *sugo*. About once a month, he'd serve his treasured tomato sauce for our sacred dinner. I helped him make it, when he let me.

One Sunday, when I was maybe seven, I walked into the kitchen with its ancient wooden table and wobbly chairs. The cabinets were metal, painted brown, and the floor was clothed in a worn, stained linoleum. The original pattern was white with gold swirls. The white had turned off-white and then gray. The only thing resembling gold about the swirls were mustard stains that couldn't be scrubbed out of the cracks and crevices.

The kitchen was ten by twelve feet. The table with the six wobblies situated around it looked like they had come directly out of a scene from a film made about a secondhand store.

Grandpa stood with a wooden spoon in his hand. He was slender and all of five feet, two inches tall. His full head of hair was turning from black to silver. As he chopped the garlic, he seemed to look right through it and into another world.

He had seen so many things in his life. He had made the voyage to a new land. He had survived. There was a unique sense of satisfaction on his face. It seemed that simple accomplishments such as chopping garlic gave him a profound sense of purpose.

Grandpa's mother, Angela, always made the Sunday *ragu* or *sugo* with neck bones. Grandpa Santino was certain that they were an important part of the magic.

From time to time, Grandpa told stories about growing up in Puglia, his family, the olive trees, and the feast days dedicated to saints. I'd seen some photos with the various members of our extended southern Italian family. I envisioned myself with my hooked nose, wearing a cap, on a ladder leaning against an olive tree, gently raking the leaves, causing the green and black treasures to fall into the net placed on the ground.

Somehow, back then, in the strangest way, I was already a part of those trees, those olives, those saints. I had never really lived in America. The most formative years of my existence had been passed in an Italian ghetto, thousands of miles from home.

My mother's parents arrived in Chicago from Modugno, a town near Bari, in southern Italy, in the state of Puglia. Santino, my grandfather, dreamed of singing opera. Soon, Angela was born, then Maria, Vittoria, Vincenzo, and finally my mother, Sara. Antonia, my grandmother, disappeared shortly after my mother's birth, and was not seen again for more than thirty years.

Grandpa's steadiest income came from singing in bars. Ma grew up in foster homes. The bliss continued when she married my father, a proud Irish Renaissance man, dockworker, thief, and all-around gangster.

I was named Patrick, after the patron saint of Ireland. Ma decided I would be a physician. Soon I was joined by my brother and sisters, Greg, Marie, and Katy, all of us born twelve to fourteen months apart.

Our neighborhood was Little Italy on the South Side. 67th and 71st Streets, Ashland and Damen were the boundaries. The Saint Rocco Feast at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church on Marquette (67th Street) was the highlight of our year. Each family saved for stylish clothing, and Grandpa practiced "O Sole Mio," "U Sorrento," and a half dozen other Italian tunes for his chance to exhibit his pipes.

Grandpa's gaze moved from the garlic to the window. I looked but all I saw was our neighbor's dirty windows. I was sure he saw much more than that. He was transported; he was somewhere else.

I purposely made a sound with my shoe. Grandpa looked to the side, and then at me, standing in the doorway, rubbing my eyes.

"*Prova*," he said gently, as he handed me the wooden spoon filled with the red elixir. The smile on his face emulated the warmth of the Mediterranean he came from, and in one action, one grin, he beamed more tenderness than my father had transmitted in his entire lifetime.

Grandpa's stay in Chicago was marred by a stark reality. It appeared that the stories told in the piazzas of Italy about streets paved with gold were mostly cruel jokes. Still, the US became an alibi for every Italian who did not arrive where he wanted to go in life, saying, "Had I only gone to America, I would have been a famous artist, chef, soccer player ..."

Does anyone really arrive where they want to go?

The day before, Grandpa had sent me with a quarter to Sarli's Butcher on 69th Street to buy neck bones. Rosario Sarli was a sweetheart, and it was hard for me to imagine that he spent a great part of his life butchering animals. Mr. Sarli turned and smiled as I walked in. Mrs. Clemente was being served. Mrs. Scalise and Mrs. Fiore were waiting impatiently. It was almost five o'clock, and Rosario was happy about that. Saturday was the busiest day of the week.

Rosario Sarli was a kind man. He extended credit, and had a list of debts that he erased at

Christmas for widows and single mothers. We were often recipients of his kindness. Today, he felt more generous than usual. Cassio's grocery store, across 69th Street, had opened a meat counter eight months prior, and officially closed it the previous week.

I returned home, gave Grandpa his quarter, the neck bones, and a warm salutation from our paisan, Rosario Sarli.

Looking up lovingly at Grandpa, I heard a noise at the front door. My body froze. Disaster would replace my Italian paradise if my father walked in and found Grandpa cooking. Matty, my father, despised the smell of garlic and hated anything Italian.

I also wasn't sure where my father lived. He showed up when he liked and we hadn't seen him in a couple of weeks. The house had been peaceful in his absence.

When he did show up, he helped himself to whatever he wanted, conducted his personal reign of terror, and then, after a few hours or days, disappeared again, back to wherever he came from.

He reminded me of the Loch Ness Monster—he reemerged into our lives as mysteriously, ominously, and unpredictably as that creature rose from its lake—but the beatings and torment were much more real than the fabled lake leviathan.

The noise subsided and no one arrived. My body relaxed and I scooted myself on the countertop next to my tiny Grandfather.

Grandpa looked at me sternly. "Scendi di la," he said.

I smiled and we both pretended that he had not told me to get down. I watched his face. He knew he was being observed but he concentrated on his artwork. Grandpa's skin was olive-colored and smooth with no wrinkles. His eyes were soft and brown. His nose was that of a movie star, pronounced yet dignified.

After a few moments, he turned to me. "Sei un brave uaggnone."

I loved when Grandpa spoke to me in the Barese dialect. He was telling me that I was a good guy, and the sincerity with which he delivered his message almost convinced me that he was right.

I learned so much more than Italian from him. We once sat in my and my brother Greg's bedroom when my parents argued. "*Silenzio*," he hushed, as he raised his finger to his lips.

My mother was in the kitchen, screaming at my father about his unwanted visits, how he terrorized the village and went riding off on his horse, shooting his pistol in the air. My mother was standing up for herself—finally.

But it was short-lived. My father gave her a backhand. Her little body flew against the wall and slouched to the floor.

The Old Man grabbed her purse and walked out of the house.

Grandpa gently shook his head. We sat and waited, not wanting to walk in and further humiliate his daughter, our mother.

Grandpa told me stories of Italy, and the extended family, made up of "*compari*." Pronounced "gombody," it is the title used for extended family members who baptize, confirm, or serve as testimony for wedding ceremonies. Persons also become compari through great acts of kindness.

Grandpa's favorite compari were Compare (singular for compari) Ciccio from Bitritto and oneeyed Compare Uncle Mike from Carbonara; both towns were walking distance from Modugno, Grandpa's town.

Grandpa's favorite moments were spent with his family, *compari*, Father Angelo from Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the local hoods (hoodlums), and the congregation, who often sat on my Aunt Vittoria's porch, reminiscing about their past in Italy and their brave plans for an American future.

Ma arrived like a lightning bolt out of nowhere, and I jumped off the counter. I didn't know it, but she must have had work that morning. I wasn't sure where she'd go. In the past, she was employed at IBM, Bays English Muffins, and as a helper to different families who needed someone for housework and or babysitting duties. Wherever she went, she'd get mass in. Ma knew where all the churches were and what time the masses were, not only on Sunday but every day. Inside her purse there were never less than ten saints' holy cards and novenas. On the bus, and on her breaks at work, she prayed.

Ma always had a determined look on her face. Today was no different. I believed that much of Ma's determination came from her belief in "good." The saints were historical pillars of our church and our faith. They may have not been perfect, but their stories were inspiring. Ma made sure that there were always books about the saints in the house. Many of them were kids' books, and she insisted we read them. My knowledge of and therefore the presence of the saints were critical at all the important times in my life.

Ma was four-foot-eleven, but had the presence of someone over six feet tall. Her black hair was more of a mane, and it shook as she walked.

Ma had beautiful teeth and a divine smile. Her body was lean and proportioned as a beautiful Italian woman's should be.

She smiled to see me next to my grandfather, happy that I had jumped off the counter before she scolded me.

She looked at Grandpa sternly, correcting him for allowing me to sit there. She knew that Grandpa and I had a relationship that was different from any that he had with his other grandchildren. She approved, and hoped that his gentle ways might someday become my own.

Grandpa offered her a taste of the sauce.

Ma sipped from the wooden spoon. "Mmm, Pa, this is delicious. I got to run, save me some."

Grandpa smiled and Ma kissed my cheek. It just didn't get any better than this.

Raising four kids by herself, Ma accepted acts of kindness and borrowed money from friends, the church, and even neighbors. She was a stark contrast to my father, Matthew, who most called Matty. Matty would never accept charity but took what he wanted, whenever he wanted it.

Matty was a hard and good-looking Irish man with a scar from his right ear to the right side of his mouth. He was almost six feet tall and had curly brown hair that was always gelled. He had a smile that could melt a glacier or befriend a cougar, before he killed and gutted it.

My father was a South Sider from Canaryville, a neighborhood on the eastern front of the Stock Yards. He was a gangster and he liked being a gangster. He walked the walk and talked the talk. I witnessed him getting into fistfights with complete strangers. He always won.

I'm not sure if he did it purposely, but he spoke like the actor James Cagney. In fact, I often pictured my father squashing grapefruit in someone's face or getting blown up on the top of a gasoline holding tank, screaming, "Ma, I'm on top of the world!"

The Old Man and his colleagues from Teamsters Local 714 primarily worked at the McCormick Place, the Amphitheater, and the Hilton Hotel. They helped themselves to everything that wasn't nailed down and some things that were. His Ford van was always filled with everything from electric toothbrushes to ashtrays and rugs. His house was literally full of stolen duct tape—his solution for cracked walls, cups, windows, and shoes. The teamsters from 714 only worked when there were shows. How else were they supposed to make ends meet?

I don't recall ever making a conscious judgment about my mother or my father. There were attractive things about both of them.

Like so many South Siders, I also did not pronounce my H's, so like my fadder, the number three became "tree." It wasn't a conscious choice on my part to emulate him. It just happened.

We were often between homes. When we vacated one place, in search of another, we loaded up Ma's beige Rambler station wagon and headed out. Sometimes we'd have to sleep in the car.

Sadly, the Old Man never showed up when we desperately needed someone.

I deduced, early on in life, that stealing was something the Old Man and I had in common. For as long as I can remember, I felt the obligation to help my mother out. I shoveled snow, raked leaves,

washed cars, and robbed garages and the occasional house. I even delivered newspapers, until I found that I could make almost the same amount of money by stealing them and selling them for scrap.

I think I preferred honesty, actually—but there just wasn't a lot of opportunity for that. I decided to shine shoes, but got caught stealing polish from a drugstore. The owner called the police, and when they arrived I squirmed and feigned the grief of a mother whale whose calf had just been devoured by sharks.

My mother never found out. I should have won an Academy Award.

Ma disappeared from the kitchen, headed for work, and Grandpa turned to me and smiled. Few people ever smiled my way. Ma insisted that I was misunderstood, but the nuns and most of the neighbors had a low regard for me, a classic juvenile delinquent.

The neighbors weren't all wrong to see me that way. Some of them had been my victims, and I had shoplifted more times than I could remember.

I looked at my grandfather, not knowing if I had any right to smile back at him. If I smiled back, was I confirming that I was a good boy when I knew that I wasn't?

Grandpa read my mind and looked sternly at me. "Per tua madre, devi fare bravo."

It wasn't so easy for me to be good for my mother, or anyone else, for that matter. I'd seen her grovel and get beaten to the ground many times. I would not live her type of existence and I resented having to watch her live it.

Grandpa smiled tightly, as if my silence were the confirmation of our mostly telepathic conversation. He offered me another taste from the chipped wooden spoon.

I hesitated in another speechless gesture. Then I took the spoon, and the pact was finalized, as I let the tomato sauce roll on my tongue, past my tonsils, and down to my stomach. It made no sense for me to elaborate. At that moment, I was Grandpa's quiet, good grandson, that *brave uaggnòne*.

I guess it was okay for him to believe that.

Grandpa Santino looked at me softly and said nothing. He rolled the neck bones into a frying pan and cut up more garlic. He took a pinch of salt from the box and squeezed his fingers to distribute it evenly. The neck bones and garlic cloves began sizzling in the heated oil. I loved watching '*u* maestro' create his succulent potion.

Somehow, word spread whenever Grandpa cooked. Cousins and guests we hadn't seen for months miraculously showed up at dinnertime, and in good Pugliese tradition, everyone ate their fill.

Grandpa turned his attention back to the deep pot of tomato sauce. He stirred it lightly. It seemed that everything he did was done tenderly. He began singing, "*Al di lá; del bene più prezioso, ci sei tu. Al di lá; del sogno più ambizioso ci sei tu!*"

"Al Di La" is a song dedicated to a love so strong that after all, after life itself, survived. Although Grandpa never made it to perform in the lyric houses of the world, the performance that he gave me those mornings are documented forever in my heart.

In neighborhood bars, Grandpa sang for change they'd leave in his cap or throw at his feet. Any pay was meager, compared to the satisfaction he received from performing for others.

"Volare" and "O Sole Mio" were two of my favorites from his *repertorio*. It wasn't just that his voice was so lovely and fine; it was that his life was so tragic and coarse, and he was still able to sing. As I stated prior, his wife, my grandmother Antonia, disappeared not long after my mother was born, and for decades, no one knew where she was. The family wasn't sure if she had gone back home, was living a life of amnesia, or was dead—yet Grandpa sang. All of his children struggled day to day trying to make ends meet. Violence, alcohol, and drugs damaged each of their lives, and yet Grandpa sang.

I was putting the jigsaw puzzle together in my mind when out of nowhere my father's voice broke the heavenly flow of Italian music. I desperately hoped that my brain was toying with me.

It wasn't. The Old Man, a whiskey guy, who usually rolled to the runway on beers, was recovering from a night out with his friends in Canaryville that probably included a fight, a stickup, and/or

someone being seriously injured.

He resented Italians in the worst way. I often thought it might be because there were some of them he could not bully or berate, and maybe this was why he was so adamant about slugging my mother and belittling my grandfather.

He often told me that I was Italian, not white. I wasn't sure what he meant. I had never seen a white person and I, myself, was tan. Most Italians I know don't know what you mean if you tell them they're white. A young Italian girl once told me, "Paint and paper can be white, but not people."

He referred to my clan as either degos or spics, and the way he slithered those words actually made me proud to belong to the group.

As soon as he entered the kitchen, the Old Man said firmly, "I told you, I didn't want you cooking that smelly shit in my house."

Grandpa grew silent, and I felt him step closer to me. Maybe it was I who stepped closer to him. At any rate, at that moment, we were inseparable.

"Why'd you stop singing, greaseball?" the Old Man taunted ("Greaseball," another of his favorite words, should have been included with "dego" and "spic," above).

There was an ugly stillness. The only sound was the sizzling of neck bones and garlic cloves in the frying pan. It was time to pick a side.

I didn't move and did the most ill-advised thing that I could have done. I stood my ground and looked into my father's eyes.

He stared back at me. "C'mere."

I didn't have the courage to say no, nor would my heart allow me to leave Grandpa's side. We were in Hadleyville and it was *High Noon*. Hours passed in those next moments, as all three of us realized that something would follow the end of the music.

Out of nowhere, a piece of gristle cracked and shot out of one of the neck bones. The first shot, although completely irrelevant, was fired—and it was all Matty needed to lurch into action.

He jumped at us. Grandpa gave no resistance as my father grabbed him by the neck, lifted him, and pushed him against the wall.

Grandpa couldn't breathe. His feet performed an arrhythmic ballet below his legs.

"No!" I screamed as tears flooded my eyes.

Grandpa's eyes softly communicated *cheet*, the word that told me to remain still and quiet.

My father then grabbed Grandpa with the other hand and dragged him to the back porch door. My father tugged him down the back stairs, Grandpa's body dangling as if he were a rag doll. I watched grandpa's feet as he panicked to stabilize his body weight.

For a moment my gaze locked in on Grandpa's grief-filled eyes. At the last stair, my father took my grandfather under the arms and threw him into the yard.

I watched from the back porch window, relieved that it was over.

It wasn't over.

Still in a rage, my father arrived at the top of the porch steps with the deep pot of sauce. Matty's eyes were filled with contempt. He wasn't only striking out at the tiny man, he was battling something much larger, his determination awe-inspiring, like he was in the twelfth round of a championship fight.

I looked at Grandpa and at my father's back. I wondered what I'd do if I had a gun.

With a Herculean grunt, my father jerked the pot, sending the sauce flying into the air. It sailed as if it were a flock of geese, and I watched the red splash and recalled that blood and sugo are the same color. I watched as hot red streaked Grandpa's face. He didn't move a centimeter.

My father threw the empty pot at him. Grandpa didn't flinch as it landed on the grass next to him.

The Old Man attempted to spit at my grandfather, but nothing came out. He zoomed past me as if I were no one. And in fact, I felt like less than no one.

Back in the house, Matty wanted to have some fun with my mother. When he couldn't find her, he left, like a hurricane, leaving damage in his path, yet nowhere to be found.

I ran into the yard to help Grandpa up. He shook his head and pushed me to the side. "*Ti* sporcherai."

He didn't want me to get dirty, or so I understood. He took the garden hose and washed himself without even removing his shoes. It wasn't cold out, but it wasn't warm. Grandpa seemed unconcerned.

When I got into the house, the neck bones, garlic, and oil were burning. I turned them off and went back to the yard, to give Grandpa towels. He dried himself off as best he could, and then, hand in hand, we walked solemnly through the gangway and out to the street. I figured he didn't want to dirty the house with water and sauce. Maybe his pride kept him from wanting to enter the scene of his humiliation.

There were so many things I wanted to tell him. I could not help but believe that there were many things that he wanted to tell me.

Grandpa stopped. We gazed into each other's eyes. "Vattene a casa."

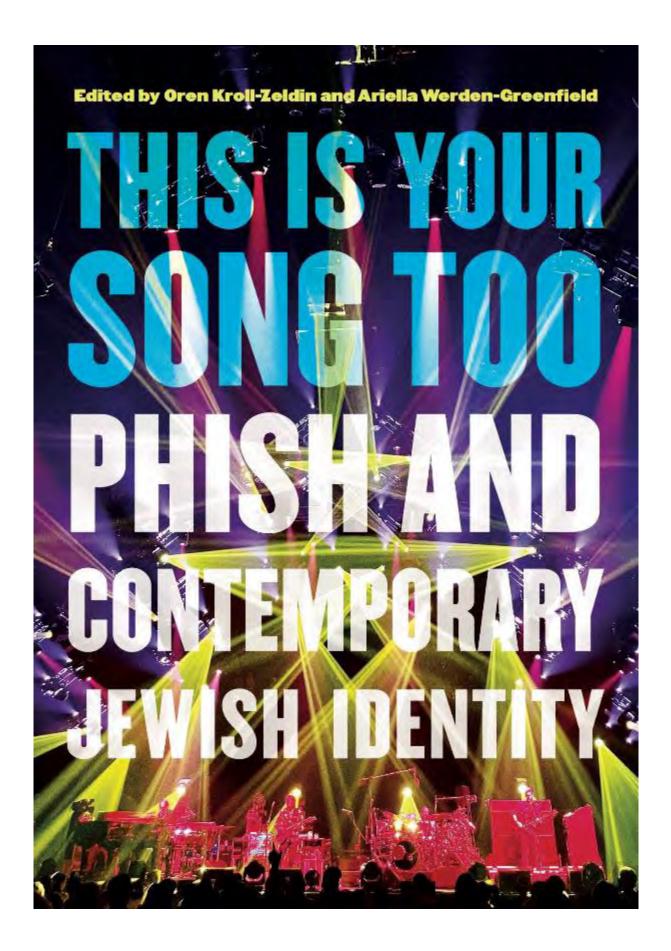
I would listen and go into the house, but for now I paused and watched his back until he turned the corner.

My mother's unbending faith already had its grips on me. I didn't hate Matty. I was already prepared to forgive him, to look to the saints for strength in the face of what he'd done.

But I wasn't a pushover. Seeing the things my father did, and seeing so much more, in the neighborhood where I grew up, I learned to detest the strong who feasted on the weak. I had plenty of rage for them stirring in me, and stored up vengeance that I would gladly deliver in return for such cruelty.

Grandpa didn't come around much after what happened with my Old Man. I barely knew my father's people, and the world around me continued to be an Italian world.

Looking back on those years, I can truly say that, despite its drawbacks, life was full. And a full life to me is a blissful life.



THIS IS YOUR SONG TOO, EDITED BY OREN KROLL-ZELDIN AND ARIELLA WERDEN-GREENFIELD PHISH AND CONTEMPORARY JEWISH IDENTITY

Phish has a diehard fan base and a dedicated community of enthusiasts—called Phishheads—who follow the band around the country, some fans attending every show. What may be surprising is that a significant percentage of Phishheads are Jewish.

Two members of the band—bassist Mike Gordon and drummer Jonathan Fishman—were raised in Jewish households, and Phish has been known to play Hebrew songs in concert. At live shows, many attendees, some wearing T-shirts emblazoned with "Phish" written in Hebrew letters, express feeling something special—even distinctly Jewish—during their performances. As this book shows, Phish is one avenue through which many Jews find cultural and spiritual fulfillment outside the confines of traditional and institutional Jewish life. In effect, Phish fandom and the live Phish experience act as a microcosm through which we see American Jewish religious and cultural life manifest in unique and unexpected spaces.

Featuring an interview with Mike Gordon and a collection of fascinating photographs, *This Is Your Song Too* is an in-depth look at Jewishness in the Phish universe that also provides a deeper understanding of how spirituality, ritual, and identity function in the world of rock and roll.

In addition to the editors, the contributors include Evan S. Benn, Dean Budnick, Jacob A. Cohen, Benjamin David, Jessy Dressin, Josh Fleet, Mike Greenhaus, Joshua S. Ladon, Noah Munro Lehrman, Caroline Rothstein, and Isaac Kandall Slone.

"Readers will gain a more nuanced, appreciative understanding of both Jewish and Phish communities, with their deep histories, their varied constituencies, and their rich implications for identity formation—whether readers are insiders to these communities or outsiders looking in with interest." -Dr. Jnan A. Blau, Associate Professor of Communication Studies, California Polytechnic State University

Hardcover: 9780271095660 / \$37.95 Pub Date: September 5, 2023 Publisher: Penn State University Press, <u>www.psupress.org</u> Buy Link: <u>https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-09525-7.html</u>

OREN KROLL-ZELDIN is Assistant Director of the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice and Assistant Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Francisco.

ARIELLA WERDEN-GREENFIELD is Associate Director of the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History and Special Advisor on Antisemitism at Temple University.

INTRODUCTION

The People of the Helping Friendly Book

Oren Kroll-Zeldin and Ariella Werden-Greenfield

A massive kosher hot dog hovers over the atrium of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, greeting visitors to the building's central lobby. The airborne frankfurter, topped by classic yellow mustard and relish, earned its place in rock and roll history on New Year's Eve 1994 (fig. 0.1). As midnight loomed, Phish glided around the Boston Garden atop the formidable wiener in an iconic gag that stands out amid the band's storied tradition of annual New Year's Eve antics.

In the days leading up to the concert, bassist Mike Gordon invited a rabbi to bless the now famed hot dog, thus making it proverbially kosher. The blessed, encased meat that soared above the crowd was not the only perceivably "Jewish" element of the Phish show that New Year's Eve; in the second set the band played a rendition of "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav," a popular Hebrew folk song. Though most of Phish's listeners are likely unaware that the hot dog is kosher, the band's ride above the Boston Garden is part of their fans' lexicon. Since then, the hot dog has also become a relic of rock and roll, one that offers a taste of Phish's unique balance of humor and musical expertise and of the complex relationship between the band Phish, the live Phish experience, and contemporary American Jewish identities.

Years later at Phish's New Year's Eve concert at Madison Square Garden in 2017, observant Jewish fans gathered during a set break for evening prayers, as they often do, most frequently at venues along the Eastern Seaboard. After the "set break minyan" concluded, the group danced and sang upbeat and joyous Hebrew songs, filling the lower-level concourse of MSG with sounds and movements associated with synagogues, not concert venues. While the initial group who gathered for prayer was small, their song and dance captivated Jews and non-Jews alike who happened to walk by. Word of the gathering spread around the arena, drawing a crowd of participants and observers. On that particular New Year's Eve, fans carried a profoundly Jewish encounter with them as they headed back to their seats for Phish's next set.

Phish is wild, wacky, and incredibly innovative. Although they infuse each show with a touch of theatrical absurdity, it is on New Year's Eve that the band most fully embraces playfulness through extravagant gags. Indeed, exactly twenty-three years after riding through the Boston Garden on a flying hot dog, the band's passion for theatricality emerged in a particularly elaborate visual display. As the clock approached midnight, Phish transformed Madison Square Garden's stage into an immense pirate ship as the band belted out heartfelt lyrics to a new song called "Soul Planet": "Everyone is together in this great big ocean / And the ocean is love." Attendees enjoyed a graphic depiction of the high seas (plate 1). Yet it was the band's message of together-ness that made this New Year's Eve particularly meaningful. As fan reflections on this New Year's out-at-sea reveal, the Phish experience is fun, but it can also be emotive, love-filled, and personally transformative for those in the crowd. As 2018 arrived and fans danced in the "ocean of love," the stage crew loaded cannons with blinking disco ball bombs, which exploded above the crowd in a confetti-filled countdown to

2018.

Phish does not limit their use of outlandish props or goofy hijinks to New Year's Eve. Drummer Jonathan Fishman wears a blue and red donut-patterned muumuu whenever playing with the band. He also occasionally solos on the Electrolux vacuum. Bassist Mike Gordon and guitarist Trey Anastasio jump on trampolines and perform elaborately choreographed dances from time to time. Such moments exemplify the band's whimsical persona, one that has endeared them to fans since 1983.

Live Phish

Though listening to a recording or reading about the band can provide a window into the world of Phish, the best way to fully understand the Phish phenomenon is through the live experience. A Phish show is more than a concert; it is a performative spectacle, one that invites attendees to become participants. Phish shows pro-vide an opportunity not only to see and hear a talented rock band play exceptional music, but also to immerse oneself in a carnivalesque atmosphere that eschews the normalcy of everyday life. Some fans dress in elaborate costumes and some paint their faces. Others wear their most sparkly attire. Some sport dreadlocks and patch-work clothing, though admittedly less frequently today than in the 1990s when the band experienced a stratospheric rise to fame. Instead of strapping on high heels or loafers, fans don their favorite "kicks" for a night of dancing. Even those who wear street clothes to shows might opt to add an element of festive attire before heading to a concert. Others are gifted flair midshow from people they have never met. Fans bestow strangers with gifts of decorated Uno cards, homemade stickers, and pins as they pass joints and vape pens. Concertgoers share glowsticks and bags of white powder with friends old and new in an environment where excess is the dominant mode of being.

The visual impact of the crowds and their embellished outfits is enhanced by the smells of a Phish show. Cannabis smoke fills the air and comingles with the scent of sweaty, gyrating fans, many of whom wear patchouli oil or natural deodorant, if any at all. The prevalence of mind-altering substances is in and of itself jarring. Drug and alcohol use are rampant at Phish shows, as many fans indulge to enhance their musical and bodily experience. People move in uninhibited ways, twirling and bopping in freeform step. For such fans, drugs encourage such release. Others need no chemical encouragement to shed the expectations of general society and join the Phish experience.

The carnivalesque essence of a Phish show extends beyond the walls of a concert venue. In the parking lot before and after, fans sell everything from T-shirts to grilled cheese sandwiches and veggie burritos along "Shakedown," the main thoroughfare of "the lot." Colorful tie-dye banners draw customers to makeshift booths where vendors, who travel from show to show to sell their wares, peddle handblown glass jewelry, fan concert art, and vegan *bánh mì* (fig. 0.2). You might hear calls of "Molly!" and "Doses!" resound through the busy marketplace as dealers promote their goods in a shockingly public way. After a show concludes, such calls are drowned out by the hiss of nitrous tanks filling up balloons. The party doesn't stop when "the lot" is shut down. You just need to know which hotel lobby or campsite to visit.

Phish regularly turns cities and small towns across America into music-loving utopias and havens of countercultural activity. Hotels accustomed to hosting staid business luncheons during working hours become late-night discos. Attendants at gas stations for miles around are left wondering about the people inundating their usually quiet businesses. Even after fans leave the concert venue or festival field, their presence reverberates through communities who benefit from the financial boon of Phish's presence while recoiling from the fans themselves, who are often judged too liberal, too hairy, and too smelly. Undeniably, sometimes Phish and their throngs of fans wear out their welcome, as they did in 1996 in Morrison, Colorado, home of the famed Red Rocks Amphitheatre. The band returned only in 2009 after a thirteen-year ban due to fans' unruly behavior.

While admittedly boisterous, Phish concerts are unique ephemeral spaces wherein enjoyment, freedom, and connection reign. Coupled with fans' deep love for the music itself, the visual, olfactory, and auditory experience draws fans to the band, helping to establish their incredibly large and loyal following.

"We Are Everywhere"

In the 2002 *Simpsons* episode "Weekend at Burnsie's," Homer is issued a medical marijuana card by his unnamed home state. He quickly becomes a pro-marijuana activist when his access to medicinal cannabis is put in jeopardy. Homer plans a rally to garner support for the cause and hires Phish to entertain the crowd. The band, who gladly guest-starred in the episode, plays "Run Like an Antelope" on a stage deco-rated with marijuana leaves, closing out their set with a bit of the secret language they developed with fans in the 1990s. Anastasio plays a few measures of the series theme song, which cues fans in the audience, of whom there seem to be many, to shout in response Homer's catchphrase, "D'oh!" It is easy to miss this cartoon con-versation between band and audience. Most viewers likely chuckle about the episode's prominent association of Phish with marijuana and recognize that the band plays *The Simpsons*' main title theme. But only Phish enthusiasts know the secret language for what it is: Phish having a private dialogue with their fan community. Though not the first time the cartoon referenced Phish, upon the episode's release fans were thrilled by the band's involvement and by their quiet nod.

Phish's musical prowess and their ability to create a boisterous and free-spirited atmosphere that actively engages their audience has created a devoted fan base who use the band as a point of connection and community building. To this end, fans are delighted by references to the group. Similarly, they thrill in identifying other fans in contexts beyond Phish concerts. Though infrequently, Phish occasionally appears in major network programming, including on NBC's *Community* and Comedy Central's *South Park* and *Broad City*. Fans relish such instances, even those that poke fun at their favorite band. On occasion, parents watching *Sesame Street* with their children excitedly note a red-and-blue circle-patterned muumuu magnet hanging on Elmo's fridge, which they then mention on social media as proof of the band's ubiquitous albeit sometimes discreet presence.

Enthusiasts react similarly when Phish's music plays during major sporting events as a transition to commercial breaks; they share the news eagerly via Face-book and Twitter, accompanying their announcement with the proclamation "We are everywhere!" borrowed from the dedicated fan base of the Grateful Dead. The phrase is not unique to jam-band fan bases, as it is often used by minority communities to indicate their integral presence in the American mainstream. In noting the ubiquity of Phish enthusiasts in public spaces, the saying creates an insider-outsider dichotomy, enabling fans to feel as though they are in on an incredibly special joke and to connect with one another in meaningful ways.

Most sports viewers don't know that they are hearing Phish. But Phish fans celebrate the occasion as proof that they really are everywhere, even in the Fox TV production booth, where Phish fan Jake Jolivette programs music for live broadcasts. MSNBC news correspondent Katy Tur is conceivably the most lauded publicly facing Phish fan, however. Her Phish references are blatant and her lyrical inclusions inconspicuous. During her final broadcast of 2020, Tur included lyrics from Phish's "Julius," "Sample in a Jar," and "Down with Disease" in her closing remarks, the latter of which was playing in the background as she spoke. The average MSNBC viewer might likely find Tur's language poetic while missing the Phish references included in her end-of-year message. Tur's broadcast contained multiple levels of meaning, one of which is intelligible only to the Phish insider.

Fans, along with their beloved band, have fashioned a unique language all their own, one built on participation in the Phish cosmos. Individuals mark themselves as part of the in-group when they, like Tur, include lyrics in their speech or excitedly share her most recent Phish reference with friends. They mark themselves when they wear Phish-related clothing and when they adorn their vehicles with donut bumper stickers. They mark themselves as insiders when they join chat boards and social media groups focused on the talented foursome from Vermont. In defining them-selves as fans, they declare their love for a band and also their participation in the accepting, debauchery-filled, and freeing world of Phish.

Though Phish fans may be everywhere, the band is decidedly not for everyone. Their songs are lengthy, and many of them, especially the classics, boast nonsensical lyrics and exploratory improvisational sections that render them unfit for commercial radio play. Phish fans who try to hook others on the band are often rebuffed by hesitant or confused listeners turned off by a song's lengthy instrumental sections. A recent episode of FXX's hit show *Dave* involves such a scenario. In the episode, titled "Hypospadias," Mike, who is a major Phish fan, shares a live stream of a Phish con-cert and some marijuana with GaTa. GaTa, who has never heard the band, affirms that he likes what he is hearing before asking "But when they gonna stop warmin' up, though?" Even the most devoted Phish enthusiast can understand GaTa's confusion. Yet Phish fans enjoy the exploratory musicianship so deeply that the mere mention of the band's name evokes a palpable excitement that echoes the energy of the concert venue.

Jewish Identity and Phish

Over the past four decades, Phish has developed a diehard fan base with a voracious appetite for all things related to the band—concerts, musical recordings, films, articles, internet memes, books, and more. It is not unusual to meet a fan, or "phan," who has attended hundreds of the band's concerts. And much like the followers of the Grateful Dead, a dedicated community of Phish enthusiasts follows the band around the country, attending *every* show. Even when fans can't attend shows in per-son, they often stream concerts through the band's LivePhish website, enjoying what they colloquially refer to as "couch tour" and the creature comforts that come with it. Though streaming a concert from the friendly confines of one's home is quite different from being at the venue, "couch tour" allows individuals to feel connected to the Phish community even when they cannot be physically present.

Despite the many benefits of a couch tour, fans generally do their best to make it to as many shows as possible. Some worry that if they skip even one, they could miss an elusive song (known among Phish fans as a "bust out"). People attending the Phish show at Alpine Valley in East Troy, Wisconsin, on July 14, 2019, were treated to one such track. The band played "Avenu Malkenu" for the first time in almost four years—a 147-show gap—proving the popular Phish fan adage "Never miss a Sunday show."

"Avenu Malkenu" is a classic Jewish prayer whose hauntingly beautiful melody and somber words express submission, service, and dedication to God. When Phish plays the prayer, they honor the composition's traditional melody and message while reshaping it with funky rhythms in an arena rock setting. Hearing Phish play "Avenu Malkenu" is exciting for most enthusiasts due to its rarity. But the experience can carry special significance for many Jewish fans; a Phish show momentarily trans-forms into a synagogue, a sanctuary filled with collective, joyous prayer. For some Jewish fans, the occurrence of catching "Avenu Malkenu" feels special and familiar, while for others it feels no different from hearing any other rare Phish song. But there are also those Jewish Phish fans who describe hearing Phish play the prayer as a powerful spiritual experience.

Beyond the band's performance of Jewish songs, there are numerous elements of the musical, communal, and sometimes transcendental world of Phish that can be interpreted through a Jewish framework and offer Jewish meaning. Two members—bassist Mike Gordon and Jon Fishman—were raised in Jewish households.

Jewish fans celebrate that heritage with great excitement. Phish concerts attract people from particularly privileged socioeconomic situations and geographic areas, a reality that encourages a

Jewish presence at Phish concerts and increases the chances of Jews enjoying concerts in the company of other Jews. At shows, Jewish fans engage in Jewish activities as varied as praying during set breaks, as at the 2017 New Year's Eve show, and donning shirts with "Phish" written in Hebrew script. Although most Jewish fans do not wear Jewish- and Phish-themed clothing, nor do they pray while at shows, Phish has nonetheless amassed a considerable Jewish following over the course of their career. For some Jewish fans of the band, going to Phish shows is actually part and parcel of what it means to be an American Jew. While poet Andrew Lustig does not self-identify as a Phish fan despite having attended numerous shows, his notable poem "I Am Jewish" includes the line "I am going to all three Phish shows this weekend." Phish is an important aspect of the Jewishness of many in his community, and so Phish attendance is, for Lustig, a fundamental aspect of his American Jewish identity.

To that end, this book asks a simple question: "What is the connection between Phish and Jewish identity?" Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer is not so simple, as a complex mosaic of religious and cultural ties link the band's music with Jewishness. As evidenced by the chapters in this book, Phish shows are alternate sites of Jewish cultural production and religious connection. So too, Phish is one of many avenues through which Jews find Jewish cultural and spiritual fulfillment outside the confines of traditional and institutional Jewish life. Put simply, in and through Phish, a multitude of Jews are creating innovative Jewish rituals, building Jewish community, and engaging with and producing Jewish culture. Phish fandom and the live Phish experience act as a microcosm through which we see American Jewish religious and cultural life manifest in unique and disparate spaces.

For much of the twentieth century, American Jewish life centered around institutions, including synagogues, federations, and community centers. In recent decades these mainstays of Jewish institutional life have become less attractive, in particular to younger Jews. Today, fewer American Jews identify as "religious" than in decades past and fewer American Jews belong to synagogues. American Jews are increasingly choosing alternative Jewish spaces and seeking new and meaningful points of Jewish connection or eschewing Jewish connection altogether. As a result, innovative and adaptive American Jews have created new models and organizations for engaging Jewishly. The past two decades have seen a proliferation of niche organizations offering opportunities to participate in Jewish life. Contemporary Jews have the freedom to choose from a wide tent of Jewish activities, institutions, and approaches, all of which offer Jewish cultural and/or religious connection.

For example, Wilderness Torah and Hazon structure their environmental activism and outdoor education on a Jewish ethical foundation, while Bechol Lashon and Jews in all Hues advocate for a full recognition of Jewishness that includes and celebrates Jews of Color. Organizations such as Moishe House and Tribe 12 offer social opportunities for Jews in their twenties and thirties as a means of fostering community and lifelong engagement. Even beyond these groups, American Jews craft Jewish experience in independent ways, carving out their own unique forms of Jewish expression. Younger Jews in particular are increasingly seeking out exciting and hip ways of being Jewish. Many want to connect to a Jewish past, to Jewish community, and even to Judaism and religious belief in ways that feel fitting and culturally relevant within their contemporary lives. They may embrace pickling, or perhaps they bake artisanal challah and post pictures on Instagram. They may be active in a Jewish a cappella group. They might meet weekly with their Jewish improv troupe, or monthly with their women's circle. Or maybe they gather with Jewish friends when-ever they have the chance to see their favorite band. Though at first glance some of these activities might seem devoid of Jewish significance, for those engrossed in them, they represent methods of engaging with and performing Jewish identities in deep and meaningful ways.

These robust points of Jewish connection allow Jews to engage in Jewish life in ways that feel personally relevant. Indeed, there are myriad ways in which Jews live meaningful Jewish lives outside the auspices of Jewish legacy organizations and synagogues. Attending Phish concerts is one such method. As the relationships between Phish and Jews exemplify, younger generations of American

Jews are connecting Jewishly in unexpected ways and in unexpected places, a reality that shapes the ways in which Jewish fans listen to and participate in the Phish experience.

Using a broad and inclusive understanding of Jewishness, this book counts all who identify as "Jewish" as Jews and all who identify as Phish fans as such. For some who identify as both, the experience of attending Phish shows feels distinctly Jewish, while for others it does not. Yet even Jewish fans who don't feel Jewishly inspired at Phish are often aware that Jewishness permeates the Phish experience for those who choose to seek it out. For many Jewish Phish fans, the band's music and the surrounding scene serves as a space within which to connect with other Jews, celebrate tradition, and even engage in behaviors typically associated with the synagogue setting.

In recent years, Jewish studies scholars have expanded understandings of American Jewish identity and religiosity, thereby providing a framework of analysis for examining Phish shows as a site for cultural connection and religiosity. As Rachel Gross proposes, "American Jews participate in a broad array of ostensibly nonreligious activities... that are properly understood as religious." According to Gross, nostalgic activities that take place outside of traditional Jewish spaces like synagogues and JCCs should be understood as religious endeavors. The appreciation of such "unrecognized religious practices of American Jews," and the unexpected places in which they can occur, such as Phish concerts, expands conceptions of what Jewishness looks like while "complicating notions of a divide between Judaism, the religion, and Jewishness, the culture."

Our position is that religion and culture are inseparable from each other. As such, this book offers an expansive and inclusive understanding of lived expressions of Jewish religious and cultural identity in and through Phish. At the same time, we recognize the value that Jewish Phish fans place on these categories, and thus we use them as an analytical tool to understand the relationship between Phish and Jewishness. Phish concerts and the Phish scene offer opportunities for Jewish connection for those that seek it out while also functioning as an attractive and comfortable space for non-affiliated, unaffiliated, and self-identified "secular" Jews to connect both Jewishly and in other ways. A point of connection with other Jews might not be a driving force behind a fan's decision to attend a show, while for others it might, as Phish is an intrinsic part of their relationship to and experience of Judaism.

When Jewish fans listen to Phish play "Avenu Malkenu" and then discuss their feelings about the rendition outside of the concert setting, they reshape Jewish practice and identity. So too do the Jewish members of Phish when they play the prayer at one of their concerts. Further, when Jewish Phish fans have Jewish experiences at Phish shows, they define what Jewishness can look like, urging us to reconsider how we understand contemporary American Jewish identities. Concert attendees foster new forms of Jewishness at Phish shows, forms that feel authentic and that match personal identifiers beyond just "Jewish."

In his 1981 hit "You Can't Kill Rock and Roll," Ozzy Osbourne declares rock as his religion. Some Phish fans do the same, noting that their relationship with the band fulfills that which childhood religious affiliation left wanting, a perspective that confirms the power of fan communities while affirming the work of notable scholars of popular music. Yet, for many Jewish fans, Phish is far from a surrogate for traditional religious belonging. Instead, the band and the world surrounding it foster distinct Jewish meaning-making. For many, the Phish phenomenon amplifies and enhances Jewish identification and spirituality.

Origins and Intentions

In May 2019, just months before Phish played "Avenu Malkenu" in Alpine Valley, over three hundred people gathered at Oregon State University for a three-day multidisciplinary conference dedicated to the academic study of Phish. The brainchild of Stephanie Jenkins, it was the first academic conference to focus solely on the broad Phish ecosystem. The tremendously successful conference drew

attention to the academic study of Phish and encouraged the inquiries included in this volume. This book is an extension of a conference panel titled "The People of the Helping Friendly Book: Jews, Judaism, and Phish," organized by Oren Kroll-Zeldin.

We intend for this book to give readers a window into the remarkable depth of Jewish themes within the Phish ecosystem. Bringing together notable Phish fans, academics, clergy, and journalists, *This Is Your Song Too: Phish and Contemporary Jewish Identity* provides an in-depth analysis of Jewishness in the Phish universe while also pursuing a deeper understanding of how spirituality, ritual, and identity function in the world of rock and roll fan communities more broadly. The title of this book, *This Is Your Song Too*, derives from the lyrics to Phish's "Joy," which invites listeners to embrace happiness as indicated through the band's direct appeal in the song's chorus, "We want you to be happy / Cause this is your song too." The presence of the word "too" in the band's lyrics includes listeners as participants in collective delight. The presence of the word "too" in this book's title alludes to Jewish inclusion in a countercultural space. Indeed, this book is about finding a joyful source of Jewish connection.

The title of this introduction derives from the eponymous book in Phish's fictional "Gamehendge" saga and draws on the colloquial name of Jews as "the People of the Book." Phish's musical canon includes numerous tracks that playfully whisk listeners away to the mythical land of "Gamehendge," where the prophet Icculus wrote the "Helping Friendly Book," a sacred text that "contains the secrets of eternal joy and never-ending splendor." Almost four decades after Anastasio wrote about the pursuit of happiness, Phish continues to sing about finding gratitude and bliss in "Joy." As this volume shows, many Jewish Phish fans locate a distinctly fun and spiritually significant Jewishness in and through the band.

This book contributes to the nascent academic field of Phish studies, a subject area that takes seriously the investigation and analysis of Phish's music and fan community. It represents the first scholarly investigation of the wide-ranging connections between Judaism and Phish. As such, we anticipate that readers will come to understand some of the myriad ways that Phish can be understood, experienced, and analyzed through a Jewish framework. Jewish meaning-making occurs at Phish concerts and in the fan community, which, in turn, impacts the religious and cultural identities of Jewish fans.

Structure of the Book

This book's structure mirrors that of a Phish concert; it includes a first set, a second set, and an encore. The first set centers on Jewish culture, while the second focuses on religious identification. We recognize that religious and cultural categorizations are arbitrary, as is the dichotomy between cultural and religious behavior and belief. Nonetheless, Jewish fans making Jewish meaning at Phish generally identify their connection to Phish as cultural and/or religious in nature. As such, we embrace these dominant modes of identification as they provide a framework through which to explore how Jewish fans connect to Phish while demonstrating how permeable these categories can be. The first two sections are followed by an encore that features prominent members of the Phish scene who each provide valuable insight into the world of Phish. The sections of this book each incorporate unique voices, much like Trey Anastasio's set lists, which habitually include varying types of arrangements. Our contributors come from diverse professional and personal backgrounds. And yet, a love for Phish and a fascination with the Phish phenomenon draws together a wide-ranging group of academics, rabbis, journalists, musicians, and music industry insiders who each offer their thoughts to this conversation about Jewish identity, music, and popular culture.

Set 1 introduces readers to the ways in which Phish concerts and Phish culture more broadly can foster Jewish cultural connection. Kroll-Zeldin begins the first set with an opener that traces Phish fans from Jewish summer camps to summer tours. He introduces five key factors that contribute to disproportionate numbers of Jewish Phish fans relative to the general population in the United States. Jacob Cohen then considers the fan experience of hearing Phish's rendition of "Avenu Malkenu" and the consequent sense of belonging it provides for Jewish audience members. In chapter 3, Evan Benn moves from the auditory world of Phish into the culinary realm with a personal reflection that navigates the relationship between Phish, food (and Phish Food), and Jewishness. Thereafter, Isaac Slone explores dance as a means of connection, offering powerful reflections on movement, queerness, and Jewish masculinity while problematizing the male-dominated nature of the Phish concert experience. In chapter 5, Caroline Rothstein negotiates troublesome elements of the Phish experience in her reflection on whiteness, Jewishness, and privilege at Phish shows. Rothstein wrestles with the tensions inherent in recognizing something problematic about a situation that serves you—or about a band that you love—while also celebrating the work being done by social activists in the Phish scene who work to make Phish shows a safe space for all. Finally, the set concludes with Ben David's personal reflection on the healing effects of Phish's music and the live Phish experience. Together, the chapters in set 1 demonstrate that Phish concerts, the surrounding Phish culture, and Phish's music itself offer multiple possibilities for Jewish connection, identification, and healing.

Between the first and second set, we invite the reader to wander around the "venue" of Phish fandom through a selection of poignant and playful images that summon readers further into the Phish cosmos to a vantage point from which meaningful Jewish experiences during the live experience make sense.

Imagine the lights dimming and a cacophony of cheers as you turn the page to begin the book's second set. The contributions to set 2 address some of the innumerable ways in which Jews connect and engage religiously through the live Phish experience and subculture. In the opener, Ariella Werden-Greenfield explores the religious roots of songs in Phish's repertoire and reflects on fan responses to their rehearsal. Werden-Greenfield reasons that the significance that Jewish fans assign to Phish's renditions of Hebrew songs is distinctive and demonstrative of a desire for societal acceptance and religious self-determination. Mike Greenhaus interrogates some of the ways in which Jewish faith and religious practice inform the lives of fans and the band itself. In Jessy Dressin's contribution, she compares the rituals and routines of a Phish show to those associated with the ancient Israelites' sacred pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. The second set continues with Josh Fleet's reflection on Shab-bat observance, religious obligation, and the live Phish experience. While Fleet centers on halachic regulations and the logistics of attending shows as an observant Jew, Joshua Ladon considers how impactful the live Phish experience can be in the religious lives of ritually observant Jews. Ladon argues that such experiences can inform how Jewish religious and cultural leaders shape their own religious communities. Noah Munro Lehrman closes out the set with a poetic reflection on Phish tour and Torah, a piece in which he offers both textual exegesis and lyrical analysis.

Even after two sets of music, the crowd's anticipation builds as they wait impatiently for an encore, giddy with the promise of a favorite song or a rarely played tune. This volume's encore includes interviews with individuals worthy of similar excitement and anticipation. Shirley Halperin of *Variety* describes helping Phish learn "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" and shares stories from her time in Israel with drummer Jon Fishman; Rachel Loonin Steinerman discusses her love for Phish and the challenges and joys of attending shows as a religiously observant person; Marc Brown-stein of the Disco Biscuits reflects on Phish's influence on him as a young musician; Jonathan Schwartz of SiriusXM shares insights about the music scene; and Mike Gordon, Phish's bass player, shares his thoughts about Phish, Jews, and Judaism in chapter 17. In the volume's afterword, Dean Budnick reflects on Jewish identity in the Phish ecosphere. Our inclusion of an afterword is an homage to the elusive second encore.

Some of the sentiments encountered in the following chapters may seem repetitive. Contributors

to this book, much like other Jewish Phish fans, frequently cite their experiences with "Avenu Malkenu," discuss the Jewish identity of band members, and recount chilling, thrilling moments from concerts. These reflections and the voices of contributors echo one another, as they do the voices of other Phish fans, strengthening the claim that Jewish meaning-making in and through Phish is a significant form of contemporary Jewish practice. We anticipate that readers will approach this book in various ways. For that reason, this volume's contributions sometimes share thematic elements and are in conversation with one another. Some might read *This Is Your Song Too* cover to cover, while others will read chapters in a non-consecutive order. Both approaches introduce readers to the phenomenon of Phish-infused contemporary Jewish identity.

Each chapter reveals Jewishness in and around Phish. Readers will encounter celebrations of the band's renditions of Jewish songs by Jewish fans as well as Jewish- and Phish-inspired merchandise available for purchase both outside of concert venues and online. From concertgoers gathering for prayer during set breaks to participating in Jewish fan groups on social media, Jewish fans are engaging in distinctly Jewish behavior as they celebrate their favorite band. The contributions to this volume individually and collectively explore Phish as a site for cultural connection and religiosity. Together, they beg you, our reader, to consider what Jewishness looks like, what constitutes religion, and how transformed we can be by rock and roll.