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MYSTERY, THRILLER, & SUSPENSE

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WRITING AS JOHN LANGE



SCRATCH ONE

SCRATCH ONE

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Michael Crichton (1942–2008) is one of the most prolific bestselling authors of all time with over 200 million copies sold worldwide, in forty languages, including *Jurassic Park*, *The Lost World*, *Sphere*, *Next*, *Prey*, *Disclosure*, *Eaters of the Dead*, and *Congo*. His books have been adapted into fifteen films, most notably *Jurassic Park* directed by Steven

Spielberg which launched one of the highest-grossing entertainment franchises of all time. A remarkable and versatile talent, Crichton wrote and directed several films including *Westworld*, *The Great Train Robbery* (based on his novel), and *Coma* and created the television series *ER*. He received his MD from Harvard Medical School and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies. After writing novels under the pseudonyms John Lange and Jeffery Hudson while he was still a medical student, his first bestseller as Michael Crichton, *The Andromeda Strain*, was adapted into a classic film.

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FOREWORD

by Sherri Crichton

It is such an honor and pleasure to see the John Lange books freshly and newly published by Blackstone, to reintroduce these books to fans and also present them to a whole new generation of readers.

My husband, Michael Crichton, put himself through Harvard Medical School in the sixties by writing pulp fiction novels. He wrote them as John Lange and Jeffery Hudson before he was published under his own name with *The Andromeda Strain*.

The John Lange books are adventure stories, and you can start to see in them the genius that would, only a few years later, become so apparent. While later in his career Michael made a point of separating his identity from these novels, I suspect he had a lot more affection for them than he showed.

The books are set in the late sixties and seventies and were his tribute to Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and to one of his favorite Alfred Hitchcock films, *To Catch a Thief*; the books are about secret treasures, heists, archaeology, unlikely heroes, seductive and at times treacherous lovers, classic villains, and much more.

I look at these John Lange novels with great affection as I picture Michael studying medicine day and night and writing these fun books over school breaks and holidays. Becoming an author was his dream—not being a doctor—and the John Lange novels truly are a testament to his exotic imagination, places he dreamed of visiting, and above all, they show the birth of Michael as an author.

In an interview from December 2000, Michael shared details of the beginning of his career in the sixties.

His comments reveal how he went from John Lange to Michael Crichton:

I was one of those kids who seemed to know very early what I wanted to do. I was driven to writing. I did a lot of it starting around the third grade, when I wrote this enormously long puppet show that had to be typed up by my father with carbon copies so that all the kids could have their parts.

At that time most of the third graders were writing a page, and I had written this very long thing. But I just wanted to do it. I don't know how to explain it any differently.

When I was thirteen or fourteen, I had visited a place in Arizona called Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument; I thought it was extremely interesting and relatively unknown. I complained that people didn't have more knowledge about this place, and my mother and father told me, "Well, why don't you write an article?" I said, "I can't do that." And they said, "No, no, the *New York Times* accepts articles in their Travel section from all kinds of people." So I wrote an article and they published it. I'd read that only two hundred people in the United States were able to support themselves full time writing books. I thought to be one of two hundred people in the entire country seemed

a very difficult group to join. And six thousand doctors graduated every year. That seemed much more doable. But while I was in medical school, I began to write to pay the term bills. I wrote under a pseudonym because the grades you got in those days were very dependent on the evaluation of your teachers, and I was quite convinced that if they knew I was running off to write books, they would think less of me.

The names I chose were John Lange and Jeffery Hudson. John Lange, I drew from my own first name, which is John, and I thought of these books as James Bond thrillers, fairy tales for adults. I associated the books to Andrew Lang, who was an author of Victorian fairy tales, and Jeffery Hudson, who was a little person from the court of Charles I of England and a great adventurer. I thought it would be very entertaining for me to have the name of a little person since I am six nine.

The book I wrote under the name Jeffery Hudson, *A Case of Need*, was optioned for a movie and eventually made by Blake Edwards. It made my life very strange because I was sometimes going to California to talk to the screenwriter, then I'd come back and put on my whites to be in the hospital. There's a bizarre difference between being an impoverished student and then having these periods where I got into limousines and drove around Hollywood. It made me a little crazy. Yet, even when *A Case of Need* won the Edgar Award for Best Mystery and I had to go down to New York to accept the award, no one in the medical school ever found out, which was odd. It showed me how self-centered the institution of medicine really was.

Eventually, I was going to write a nonfiction book, which ultimately was published as *Five Patients*, and I had to go to the dean to get permission to skip certain classes to do this book. He said, "Well, writing a book is very difficult. Do you realize how difficult it is? Have you ever done anything like that?" And at that point I finally thought it was okay, and I said, "Yes, actually, I've written several books."

My next novel to be published was *The Andromeda Strain*; I wrote it in secret, and when [director] Robert Wise bought it to make it as a film, it got publicized that there was this kid in medical school who had sold a book to the movies for a lot of money.

My picture was on the wire services. The story was officially out. Everybody knew. But looking back on it, it was a very free time.

Chapter 1

monday: principauté de monaco

Victor Jennings, tanned and very fit, walked down the steps of the casino into the cool night air. They were already bringing his bloodred Lamborghini around from the lot. It was a new car, and Jennings was pleased with it—Carrozzeria Touring body mounted over a 3.5 liter V12 engine that ran smoothly at 240 kilometers an hour. It was a hardtop, of course. Jennings loathed driving fast in an open car—unless he was racing—and he had rolled enough cars to have a healthy respect for solid protection overhead.

People were gathering to admire the car as he came to the bottom of the steps. It was only natural; the car had never been produced prior to 1965, when old Ferruccio Lamborghini, the tractor and oil burner tycoon, had established a limited production shop in Cento, just a few miles from Ferrari's plant at Maranello. Three hundred Lamborghinis were made a year, so it was still quite a rarity. It had cost him \$14,000.

As he made his way around the crowd, he answered their questions with smiles and a slightly bored voice, then got in behind the wheel. He was a jaded man, and so felt only mild pride, but it was sufficient to make him forget—momentarily at least—the ten thousand dollars he had just dropped that night at baccarat, in a particularly poor run of luck.

He started the engine, listening with satisfaction to the bass growl from the twin exhausts. The crowd parted, and he reached down for the lights. His hand flicked on the windshield wipers, and he had a twinge of embarrassment. Damn! It was painfully obvious that he'd owned the car just a week. He bent over to peer at the switches.

At that moment his windshield shattered in front of him.

The crowd gasped; somebody screamed. Another shot, and Jennings, who had immediately dropped as low as he could, felt pain in his right shoulder. He turned on the lights, released the brake, and put the car quickly into reverse. Still hunched over, he roared backward, sat up, spun the wheel around, and tore off into the night. Air blew through the gaping hole in his windshield, and he swore to himself.

Victor Jennings was a man accustomed to attempts on his life. There had been four in the last two years. None had come close to succeeding, though he had a slight limp as a result of the second. In a strange way, he did not mind the assassination attempts—they were part of the game, one of the risks in his line of work. But he hated to see his new car damaged. It would take weeks, now, to get a new windshield fitted properly.

As he drove through the dark streets of Monaco toward the doctor, he was so furious that he did not bother to reflect that, had he known how to work his lights, he would probably be dead.

tuesday: cairo, egypt

One of the Arabs held a gun. "It will not be long now," he said pleasantly.

In the back seat of the taxi, the European stared at the gun, at the Egyptian holding it, and at the back of the neck of the driver. They sped through the dark streets of the city.

"Where are you taking me?" he said. He was French, and spoke Arabic with a slurred accent.

"To a meeting. Your presence is desired." "Then why the gun?"

"To assure ... punctuality."

The Frenchman sat back and lit a cigarette. He remained cool; it was part of his training. He had been in tight situations before, and he had always managed to escape safely.

The car left the city and headed south, into the desert. It was a moonless May night, black and cool. The Frenchman could see the outlines of the palm trees that lined the road.

"Who is this person I am meeting?"

The Arab laughed softly: "You know him."

They drove for ten minutes, and then the Arab with the gun said, "Here."

The driver pulled off the road, onto the sand. The Nile was a few hundred yards away.

The car stopped. "Out," the Arab said, motioning with the gun.

The Frenchman got out and looked around. "I don't see anybody."

"Have patience. He will be here soon." The Arab drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and handed them to the driver. To the Frenchman, he said, "If you please. Our man is rather nervous. This will reassure him."

"I don't think—"

The Arab shook his head. "No arguments, please."

The Frenchman hesitated, then turned and held his hands behind his back. The driver clicked the handcuffs shut.

"Good," said the Arab with the gun. "Now we will go to the river, and wait."

They walked silently across the sand. No one spoke. The Frenchman was worried, now. He had made a mistake, he was sure of it.

It happened with lightning swiftness.

One of the Arabs tripped him, and he pitched forward on his face into the sand. Strong hands gripped his neck, forced his head down. He felt the grainy sand on his lips, in his eyes and nose. He struggled and kicked, but the Arabs held him firmly. His mind began to reel, and then blackness seeped over him.

The Arabs stepped back. "Stupid fool," one said.

The driver removed the handcuffs. Each man took one leg, and they dragged the body to the river. The Arab put his gun away and held the body underwater with his foot until it sank. It would rise to the surface later, when it was bloated and decomposing. But that would not be for several days.

The body sank. A few final bubbles broke the calm water, and then, nothing.

friday: estoril, portugal

The man walked across the rocks in his bare feet, looking into the setting sun. The waves of the Atlantic crashed into the rock. He was an American, a minor consular official attached to the office in Barcelona. He had received news of his transfer to Nice just three days before, and had decided to relax for a few days before moving. He was accustomed to traveling, and did it easily, so there were no major preparations to look after. Lisbon had been the perfect choice for a short break. He had been here during the war, and loved it deeply. Particularly this stretch of coast, west of the city, past the point where the Tagus River emptied into the ocean.

He smiled, breathed deeply, and reached in his pocket for cigarettes. To his right, the rocky shelf leading up from the sea ended in a sloping pine grove; to the left, the water rushed up against sharp, eroded stone. He was alone—few people came here at evening, this early in the season. He felt relaxed and cleansed after the bustle of Barcelona. The match flared in his hand, and he touched it to the cigarette. What the hell was he going to do in France, where cigarettes were so expensive?

Offshore, a fishing boat started its motor, and he listened to its faint pattering as it pulled away. He would have lobster tonight, he decided, in a little place in Cascais. Then he would return to his hotel and compose a letter to his girl in Barcelona, explaining that he had been sent away, suddenly, and was returning to the United States. The Spaniards were accustomed to hush-hush, sudden maneuverings among any kind of government officials; Maria would take it well. And although he would miss her, he was confident he could find a suitable replacement on the Riviera. Hell, if you couldn't find a girl there, you couldn't find one anywhere.

Behind him, there was a sharp *crack!* It was a sound he did not hear, for by that time, the bullet had entered the back of his head, smashing the occipital bone and burying itself deep in his cerebellum. He felt a momentary twinge of pain, and was pitched forward onto the rocks. His face smashed down hard, breaking the bones of his nose and jaw. Blood flowed out.

Two other men, neatly dressed in sport clothes, viewed the fallen body with satisfaction. The tide was coming in; within an hour, these rocks would be submerged, and the body carried out to sea. It was a good, clean, neat job. They were pleased.

Chapter 2

saturday: københavn, denmark

Per Bjornstrand, a Norwegian, checked into the Royal Hotel at 4:00 p.m., and went immediately to his room to shower and change. He had just arrived at Kastrup Lufthavn on a direct flight from Oslo, and it had been a tiring trip—the plane was delayed in Oslo, and there had been considerable turbulence for over an hour in the air. He felt better after cleaning up, and went down to the sleekly modern lobby. He dropped into one of Arne Jacobsen's egg chairs and ordered a martini. They were a bad habit, martinis, which he had picked up from his British business associates, and they, no doubt, from the Americans. So many of the world's habits were American, these days. He lit

a Lucky Strike filter cigarette and looked across the room at the slim blonde behind the reception desk. She was a rather elegant creature, with hair upswept, and high cheekbones.

Whenever Per Bjornstrand came to Copenhagen—which was often, since his business demanded it—he stayed at the Royal. He could, of course, stay with his sister-in-law in Hilleröd, but he always told himself that this was too far from the center of town. The truth was that he loathed his sister-in-law, a mindless childbearing creature. And besides, the Copenhagen girls were too much to pass up.

He sat back in the chair, which encircled him like a womb, and puffed on his cigarette as he ran over his schedule for the next two days. Tomorrow he would be relatively free and would have lunch with Jörgen, an old friend from the war. On Monday morning he must see the shipping agents and arrange for transfer of the consignment from Copenhagen to Marseilles, and for storage there. He should, of course, spend Monday afternoon shopping for anniversary presents for his wife; the smart shops along Amagertorv would be filled with things she'd adore. But it was still cold; outside, along Hammerichsgade, the wind whistled bleakly, pounding rain against the glass walls of the lobby, and he couldn't imagine he'd feel much like shopping, even by Monday. His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a new girl, dark and long-limbed, dressed in a tightly belted trench coat which emphasized her fine legs and narrow waist. She had very blue eyes, and a wide smile which she lavished upon Bjornstrand as she passed. He smiled back, let his eyes flick quickly over her body, and observed that she was alone. That was significant. He would ask at the desk about her later, and phone up to suggest she join him for a drink. There was no sense being alone on a cold, rainy evening. After all, he thought, breathing deeply to expand his chest, he was only forty-five, still virile and still handsome. It wouldn't last forever.

His mind, reluctantly, returned to business. He was a dealer in armaments, and—in a small way—a manufacturer. He now had a surplus of automatic rifles and assorted small arms which the Norwegian Army was selling as it upgraded its own issue, and a buyer in southern France had contacted him. The shipment was required quickly, so Bjornstrand had come to Copenhagen to manage the details himself. It was a lucrative business, and very enjoyable.

The waiter came with a small bowl of hors d'oeuvres, and the martini. "Your check, please."

He signed, adding the tip. "And your room number?"

He scrawled it, and returned the slip. The waiter left him, and Per Bjornstrand picked up the martini. The outside of the glass was suitably frosted. He took a tentative sip. Very dry, pleasantly cold—the liquid ran down his throat and caught fire in his stomach. But it was also bitter, strangely bitter.

For a moment, he wondered why. Then, a giant hand gripped his innards, choking him. Per Bjornstrand coughed once, and made gurgling sounds as he fell back in his chair and died.

saturday: paris, france

Inspector Edgar Duvernet followed the doctor down the aseptic white corridor. Duvernet was a short man, and he resented the doctor's long, easy strides; it was unbecoming for a member of the police force to puff along at a taller man's heels. They came to the door.

"I warn you, he does not look pretty," the doctor said. Duvernet thought he caught a hint of condescension, an anticipation that he, Duvernet, could not take what was coming.

He snorted. The doctor opened the door. The patient was alone, on his back in bed. One arm was extended, strapped to a board; a bottle of liquid was dripping into the hand, through a needle inserted in a vein. The hand was swollen, the veins bulging. For a moment, this was all Duvernet could see, and he did not find it alarming. He stepped closer.

Then he saw the face. It was covered with a plaster guard, to protect it, but much of the flesh of cheeks and jaw were visible. It was horrible, and despite himself, Duvernet gasped. The skin had the color and texture of a half-deflated football. The purple-black eyes were puffed shut, and a neat suture ran across the nose, then around one eye,

terminating in a straight line down the cheek. "You should have seen him before," the doctor said. "Bad?" Duvernet asked, still looking at the patient.

He did not trust himself to face the doctor just yet. *Mon Dieu*, it was stuffy in here! He was feeling suddenly nauseous.

"The whole right side of his face was caved in, and his right eye nearly scooped out of the socket. It was an inch lower than his left, when we got him. His jaw was broken and his nose crushed, his upper lip torn badly in two places, several teeth gone. We had to—"

Duvernet wobbled, and tottered over to a chair. The doctor quickly opened a window, and passed smelling salts under the policeman's nose. New to the job, he thought. "I don't mean to bore you with technical details," he said.

"Not at all," Duvernet said, jerking his head up from the ammonia odor and looking quickly at the doctor, searching for signs of amusement. He was relieved to find none. It's because I am new to my job, Duvernet thought; only that. In a month or two, such things will not bother me.

"Is he all right?" Duvernet asked, looking at the floor. "He'll survive, though he's lost a lot of blood. We're trying to see that he doesn't develop meningitis, that's the big worry." When the man broke his nose, he had shattered his ethmoids, exposing the dura mater covering the brain. It made things very touch and go, the doctor knew, particularly when resistance was severely lowered.

He frowned. "Any idea how it happened?"

Duvernet shook his head. "None at all. We were hoping he might be able to tell us."

"Not for weeks, I'm afraid. He'll be under heavy sedation for some time, and his jaw is wired shut. Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes. Just tell me: where is the nearest telephone?" "At the end of the hall. In an emergency, the desk will give you an outside line."

"*Bon. Merci.*" Duvernet stood, shook the doctor's hand, and sat down again, very shaky. He looked for a long time at the patient's feet, and then at the bottle of fluid, with the tube going down to the hand. He breathed deeply and shortly began to recover.

This man was Jean Paul Revel, an exporter from Marseilles. Perfectly straightforward and honest. He had come to Paris on business—his wife had verified that, in a telephone call—and had arrived on the 7:14 train at the Gare d'Orléans. He had left the station and entered the Metro station, carrying a small suitcase. Somehow, M. Revel fell forward from the platform into the path of an onrushing train. Observers stated that he flailed his arms to regain his balance, and some quick-witted person grabbed his coattails. Probably he would have escaped injury entirely, had not the train come along at that moment and smashed into his face and chest. He suffered a broken collarbone, two cracked ribs, and a badly battered face which had been immediately operated on.

The police were interested in questioning him, and normally would have been content to wait until he had recovered. There was, after all, no indication of foul play. But the call from the Deuxième had been put through that morning, and so here he was, Edgar Duvernet, on the job.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew his pistol. He flicked off the safety and placed it carefully in his

lap. He had five hours before the second shift went on. Duvernet looked around the room, hoping for something to read, seeing nothing. Outside, it was raining, the chilly drops falling slantwise against the window, streaking the view of the newly green trees.

saturday: nice, france

Dr. Georges Liseau, looking slim and elegant, strode into the room. The five men collectively known as the Associates stood as he entered. Like himself, many had the swarthy complexions which betrayed an Algerian birth; one or two had knife scars on their faces, but otherwise they were unexceptional, respectable-looking. One would never suspect that they were all Arab agents. "Sit down, gentlemen. This isn't a board meeting." Dr. Liseau's voice was mildly sarcastic.

As usual, he took his seat at the head of the table, and did not remove his sunglasses. He surveyed the men in the room, then said, "Any explanations?"

There was a general rustling of paper and shifting of position, but no one spoke.

Liseau sighed. "Our record," he said, "is not very good. The Jennings business was executed quite badly. The attempt in Paris was amateurish. I understand the man is alive, and expected to recover with nothing more than a few scars on his face. The arms shipment may not be delayed. We shall have to improve our efficiency."

Liseau sat back and allowed his words to sink in. The five men were staring at their hands. Well, what did they expect? Congratulations?

"It is true," he continued, "that the efforts in Lisbon and Copenhagen were satisfactory, but there have been too many mistakes. The use of strychnine on Bjornstrand was inane; the autopsy will certainly show he was poisoned. Gallamine would have been far preferable." Gallamine was like curare, a potent muscle relaxant. Overdoses produced such severe relaxation that the patient could not breathe and went into shock. But it looked natural, that was the point—it could be heart failure, anything. Liseau sighed.

"Time is running out, gentlemen, and we cannot afford more bumbling. There are two new developments about which you should be informed. First, the assassin from America is coming, as expected. He left New York yesterday, and is now in London. Presumably he is being briefed by the Paris head, a man called Amory. We know Amory left for London this morning. The Consulate here is expecting the American to arrive in Nice tomorrow. He must be dealt with."

Liseau paused to light a cigarette.

"Second, I have called in outside help—someone who will, I hope, make no mistakes. The man is Ernst Brauer."

The reaction to this was immediate. The men looked up, puzzled, concerned. And with good reason—Herr Brauer was widely known as a cleanser of organizations, a ruthlessly efficient hunter of traitors.

"You are displeased?" Liseau asked mildly.

The balding Italian answered. "It is not that," he said, gesturing helplessly with his hands. "But there is some question of Brauer's activities in Berlin in '58 ..." Liseau waved a slim, impatient hand. His hands were beautiful, one of the first things one noticed about him. They moved gracefully when he spoke, skillfully when he held a scalpel. The fingers were long and strong, and beautifully groomed. "You are too polite," Liseau said. "What you mean is that he may have gone double in Berlin."

The Italian shrugged, noncommittal. "It was a rumor."

"It was a fact. Herr Brauer is motivated only by money. In our case, we will see that he is amply paid."

"Have you met with him?" another man asked. "Yes," Liseau lied. It was better to present these men with a fait accompli. "Yes, I met with him yesterday."

"So long as you are satisfied."

"I am." It was a quiet statement, but definite. Nobody questioned him further.

"What about this American killer?"

Liseau smiled. "He will not trouble us, I assure you. A reception for him has been planned, a quite satisfactory reception. He will never get off his plane."

I wish I could be so confident, Liseau thought. And I wish I knew what was being discussed at that briefing. He glanced at his watch, and stood. It was almost time for his appointment with Brauer.

saturday: london

They met for dinner in a private room above a restaurant off Tottenham Court Road. Amory, the Paris man, arrived first, and viewed Morgan with deceptively casual interest as he came in. They shook hands.

"Drink?" Amory asked.

“Fine,” Morgan said. “Dry vermouth on the rocks.” Amory ordered. It was an interesting drink, he thought—alcoholic, but weak. It fitted a man whose business was killing. When they were alone, he said, “It could be messy, very messy.”

“I expect so. It usually is.” Morgan had a childish, pudgy face. He looked rather cherubic—not like an angel, really, but more like a satyr or a practical joker. There was a disarming air of amusement about him which made his hard, flat statements incongruous. He doesn’t talk the way he looks, Amory thought. Not at all. Amory was interested in Morgan; he was a rare type—an American killer with none of the cheap gangsterish qualities of so many American hired men. There was something about the American personality which precluded the possibility of a cool, sophisticated murder.

The Europeans were much better at it, and Amory, in his work, generally relied on Europeans.

“I’m afraid this briefing will be rather lengthy. It’s a woefully complicated business. How much have you got already?”

“Just the bare outlines. A shipment of guns that Washington would like to see delivered, and that some others are anxious to stop.”

Amory nodded. “I wish it was that simple. The guns are automatic rifles and small arms, Norwegian surplus. The Norwegian army is updating its issue, and these weapons were auctioned about three weeks ago. The whole lot was bought up by a man named Bjornstrand. I just received a call that he died four hours ago in Copenhagen.”

Morgan did not seem startled. “Any details? Autopsy?”

“One is being performed, and we are trying to get a preliminary summary. But it has to go through the Danish and Norwegian governments before we can get our hands on it, and I don’t think we’ll know for two weeks. It might have been natural—he died right in the lobby of his hotel—or it might have been very daring.” The drinks came, and conversation broke while the waiter was in the room. When they were alone again, Amory said, “Maybe I had better start from the beginning.” He took out a pocket notebook and thumbed through it. “I couldn’t bring the file, so I won’t be able to give you all the minutiae, but basically it goes like this: in March of this year, the Israeli government approached several people about the availability of new automatic weapons. It was a panic move, initiated by a leak that Czechoslovakia was supplying automatic stuff to Egypt and Syria. At that time, in March, nothing was around. Then, very conveniently, the Norwegians decided to unload all their equipment. An arrangement was set up through a fellow named Victor Jennings. He’s an American who lives in Monaco and has been supplying armaments for years to everybody. Did it for Sukarno; did it for the Turks, and the Venezuelans. He’s a strange type, purely an intermediary—he has no stock of his own, he simply buys and resells. His passion is automobile racing, and fast women, and he’s been married—”

“I’ve heard of him.”

“Ummm. Well, anyway, Jennings was to arrange for a shipment from Copenhagen to Marseilles, and from there to Israel. All hush-hush, since the Arabs would go through the ceiling if they found out beforehand. We initially favored—unofficially—this transaction. We even put up some of the capital,” Amory added, slightly embarrassed.

Morgan sipped his vermouth slowly, and lit a cigarette.

“Now it gets sloppy,” Amory continued, consulting his little notebook. “Monday night, an attempt was made on Jennings’s life. Then on Tuesday the Egyptian police recovered the body of a French businessman outside Cairo. This fellow’s job, actually, was to discover if the Egyptians had any inkling of the impending arms sale. He was being paid a per diem rate.”

Morgan knew what Amory was saying. The Frenchman had taken on a very risky job.

“Then we had a bad day yesterday: a man in our organization was being transferred to Nice, to help out. He was killed in Lisbon. No details. Now the Norwegian intermediary dies in Copenhagen. Very messy, and it gets worse.

“This morning I got a panic memo from Washington. It seems that a visiting committee from the International Atomic Energy Commission has been looking over the new Israeli reactor, the one we helped build, the only one in the Middle East. It was supposed to be a research reactor. But it is now geared for making plutonium.”

"I don't think I follow you."

"It's really very simple, and very serious. The Israeli reactor is churning out the raw materials for an atomic bomb."

"I see. And the Arabs haven't got a reactor?"

"No. There are only sixty-eight reactors in the world, and only ten countries have them. The United States has the largest number, twenty-four; Russia has eleven. There's no point in worrying about the big countries. It's the little ones we have to sweat."

"Is Israel actually making a bomb?" Morgan asked. "Now *that*," Amory said, "is anybody's guess. They're certainly going to be hard put to find a test site. But they might, that's the point."

"And the Arabs are shaken up?"

"To put it mildly. Look at it from their position. They see that we've helped finance a reactor for Israel.

We say we didn't know they were going to use it for a bomb, but you can't expect them to believe that. Now, they hear of a big arms shipment. Their panic and mistrust could explode into a war."

"What's Washington want done?"

Amory threw up his hands in irritation. "Well, we've screwed it up already. Washington is committed to the arms shipment. We can't back out without appearing to let down our ally, Israel. And we can't go forward without appearing to be engaged in a subversive plot against the Arab world. Washington has decided to push forward with the shipment anyhow and try to present it as a *fait accompli* to the Arabs, who have not yet formally announced that they know of the shipment. In fact, they don't seem to intend to announce it—they're going to try to stop it on the sly. They've got a group in Nice working on it. We have to knock out that group."

"Arabs?"

"In Nice? No. Frenchmen—old Algerians, I think. Professional people. Their leader is a surgeon." "Sharp?"

"Very sharp."

"You want him killed?" "Yes."

"And the others?"

"If possible." He handed Morgan a packet. "This is our file on the group, the Associates. It has pictures. All you'll need, I think."

Morgan did not open it.

"Do they know I'm coming?" he asked.

Amory folded his hands in his lap and smiled grimly. "I wish I knew," he said.

saturday: nice

Liseau, wearing his sunglasses, examined his visitor. God, he's ugly, he thought. He looks just like a pig, with that round face, upturned nose, and narrow, squinting eyes. "You have impressive credentials," Liseau said, picking up a scalpel from his desk. As a surgeon, he enjoyed scalpels. He liked to have them in his hands, to play with them, to sense their sharpness. He watched the pig-faced man, Ernst Brauer. Brauer did not blink, though his eyes followed the scalpel.

"Your nerves are good, *deutsche schwein*."

Again, the man did not blink. You could not startle him, Liseau saw, you could not insult him. He was entirely impassive, a great blond murder machine. The surgeon looked at the body, the bunched muscles in the shoulders and forearms, the heavy, bulging calves and thighs. There was power and endurance in him, no doubt of it. If there was discipline as well, he might be ideal.

"You speak languages?"

"French, English, Spanish, and German."

Liseau smiled thinly and drew a cigarette from an inlaid box on his desk. He did not offer one to Brauer, nor did he light his own. He waited.

“Is there anything you do not do?” “Yes. I do not kiss my employer’s ass.” “Very wise.” Liseau lit his cigarette.

So the insult had shown through, after all. This man had a limit, a final point beyond which abuse was intolerable. That was reassuring: Liseau did not want a totally unfeeling automaton around him. Somewhere, there must be an end to detachment and efficiency, and a beginning of passion.

“How is your tongue?”

“Silent enough,” the German grunted. When he grunts, he is even more like a pig, the surgeon thought. Liseau stood up from behind his desk, looking slim and dark—just the reverse of the blond chunk of muscle he faced.

“Good. I believe we can do business.”

Ernst Brauer nodded. He knew that Liseau regarded him as an animal. Most people did—Brauer had long since grown accustomed to the reaction of people to his physical appearance. But he knew something about Liseau, and what he knew disturbed him.

Liseau was very good at his job. In appearance, he was elegant and imperturbable; his manner precise, his movements calculated and economical, his speech careful. He gave the impression of a man who makes no mistakes, and that was a good impression for a surgeon to give.

But Brauer knew some less elegant and aristocratic facts about Liseau. He had been born in Algiers, the son of a French doctor and an Algerian beauty—which no doubt accounted for his dark skin and his ascetic face. During the Algerian War, he was rumored to have helped the OAS, as a torturer. Brauer loathed torture. In his own direct manner, he found it repellent. He was willing to kill a man, if he was paid enough, but he would not prolong the agony for any reason. His every instinct was toward swiftness, sureness. He was not a sadist, though God knew he looked it.

But this one, he thought, smiling blandly at Liseau. This one is dangerous. He never loses his temper, never speaks loudly, never falters in his control. It is the legacy of his training, and the inclination of his personality.

He is like a cobra, Brauer thought. Haughty and aloof, able to strike with startling precision. I am sure, he thought, that he does not trust me. We are too different. “But you would not object, I hope, to a small demonstration of faith?” Liseau asked.

Brauer shrugged. It was, for him, a massive gesture. He barely listened to the conversation; he was wondering why Liseau wore sunglasses all the time. Perhaps he had weak eyes. Perhaps it was a trick, a way to disconcert people, to draw their attention away from other aspects of him. It was effective, Brauer had to admit that.

“Good,” Liseau said. “There is a man named Revel in Paris, in a hospital. I do not care how you do it, so long as you are not caught. Shall we go over the details?”

“All right.”

Liseau sat down again and offered Brauer a cigarette.



**WHEN
SHE WAS
GONE**

WAS SHE TAKEN ... OR DID SHE RUN?

**SARA
FOSTER**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *YOU DON'T KNOW ME*

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Sara Foster is the author of acclaimed dystopian thriller *The Hush* and seven bestselling psychological suspense novels: *You Don't Know Me*, *The Hidden Hours*, *All That Is Lost Between Us*, *The Deceit*, *Shallow Breath*, *Beneath the Shadows*, and *Come Back to Me*. Two of her novels have been optioned for television, and *You Don't Know Me* was adapted into a chart-topping drama podcast series by LiSTNR. Sara has a PhD in creative writing (studying maternal representations in fiction) and lives in Perth, Western Australia, with her husband, two daughters, three cats, Luna the cavoodle, and Sunny the bearded dragon.

[Website](#)

PROLOGUE

london, 2002

When the call came in, the neighbor reported screaming, but by the time Rose and Tristan pull up, number 39 is silent and dark. They had been the closest team available, just finishing a routine welfare check a few streets away, so they'd hurried over, keeping the sirens off.

On the surface, nothing appears out of the ordinary. The suburban street features a row of nondescript terraced houses with drab, redbrick facades, architectural leftovers from the seventies that no one has yet had the good sense to knock down. Each one has a small front garden with a path and a gate, the hip-high walls a clear designation of boundaries but a feeble barricade to the outside world.

Only last week Rose had visited this address with another constable, after a complaint about a screaming row, but Joseph Burns's wife, Natalie, had refused to make a report. She'd sat on a cheap, sagging gray sofa feeding her baby, her eyes downcast as though that might avoid Rose seeing the one that was purple and swollen, or the dirty bruising across her neck. However, without a witness, if she was unwilling to make a statement there was nothing they could do. So they'd left her and the baby, a sweet nine-month-old boy called Dax who had gurgled and grinned at them. They'd known that it would probably not be their last visit, but had been unaware of how quickly things would escalate. And now, here they are.

"I can't believe social haven't been here and collected this kid yet," Tristan grumbles as they get out of the car. In the darkness of the early evening, rain is falling, but so gently that Rose can hardly see it, except for a shimmer of misting droplets visible beneath the orb of the single streetlight. Her face is damp, and a steady wind presses the cold of the encroaching winter firmly against her skin.

Tristan is hungry and irritable, and Rose understands why. As an experienced constable he should have been back at the station doing paperwork. He's only out here because the early flu season means half the station is off sick. Rose is grateful for his experience on this particular house call, since she's still getting back into the job after an unexpected

maternity leave. She thinks of Louisa now, tucked up in bed with her grandma watching over her, waiting until Henry and Rose come home from work. A lucky girl, born into a different world than the poor little mite inside this house.

It's not easy to leave baby Lou for the long periods of shift work, but Rose has wanted to be a police officer for as long as she can remember. It's her way of trying to make a difference in the world. Tristan understands. He has three young boys at home, and he'd spent their shift asking about her baby and regaling her with horror stories of toddlers that left her chuckling nervously.

Joseph Burns is well known to them. He'd joined the army as a teen and seen one tour in the Gulf before being thrown out. He took to fighting in the street instead, making his money from drugs and stolen goods. The time he'd spent in prison had only made him harsher, with better criminal connections. Natalie is a quiet, sweet woman as far as Rose can discern, but a wife and kid haven't managed to subdue Joseph's dark temper.

As they approach the front door, they realize it's slightly open. There are no lights on inside, and Tristan makes a gesture to Rose to go slowly and carefully, before he pushes back the door and calls, "Hello?"

No reply. There's a crackle of energy running through the stillness.

Rose senses there are people watching from behind curtains and doorways. She can feel the pulse of their adrenaline alongside her own.

The corridor is dark, but once inside they hear the baby wailing upstairs. Tristan indicates that Rose should go up, and he hangs back by the doorway. She climbs steadily to the second-floor landing, finding all the rooms unlit except one, which has stars and moons projected on the walls, whirling slowly around as a nursery rhyme plays.

She inches forward until she can see inside.

Natalie is lying face down, motionless, blood pooled around her head. The baby has pulled himself to a stand in the crib. He clutches at the bars, wearing only a nappy despite the cold, his face a mess of snot and tears. He is screaming while somehow managing to keep his pacifier from slipping out of his mouth. When Rose comes in, his eyes remain fixed on his mother.

Rose moves fast, checking for a pulse she knows she won't find. She depresses the orange button on her jacket, automatically silencing other radios so all officers in the area can hear her.

"Urgent assistance. This is three five nine tango x-ray. Backup required at thirty-nine Amersham Street."

She scoops up the baby and runs down the stairs, toward the front door, instinctively looking around as she does so, surprised that Tristan hasn't come to find her.

"Stop!"

The voice comes from the darkness behind her, cold and commanding. She turns.

Joseph's hand is gripping Tristan's shoulder, a large kitchen knife pressed to the constable's neck. Tristan stands motionless in the dimly lit corridor, his arms in the air in surrender. His eyes are white with fear.

"Give me my kid," Joseph yells.

Tristan keeps his eyes trained on Rose, and gives a small shake of the head.

"Give me my fucking kid!"

"I can't do that until you put the knife down, Joseph," Rose says steadily.

She sees the gratitude in Tristan's eyes, knows that it was exactly the right thing to say. Sirens wail in the distance, swiftly closing in. Joseph hesitates, and Tristan lunges. The two men wrestle as Rose stares in horror, clutching the child, holding his little face against the crescent of her neck to shield him as much as she can.

Tristan frees himself and stumbles forward toward Rose, as Joseph raises the knife. Rose glimpses a large tattoo shaped like an hourglass on Joseph's forearm, gone in a flash as he brings his fist down hard. There's an arc of blood and Tristan falls to the ground face-first, his body limp by the time he hits the floor.

Rose screams.

Joseph looks up and meets her eyes, stepping over Tristan, the knife dripping crimson in his hand. She moves the child around further on her hip, trying to protect him, but the baby writhes, pummeling Rose with his tiny fists. Joseph's attention snags on his son, as Dax lets out one long, furious wail.

The sirens are getting louder.

The strike is so fast she doesn't see it coming. She reels backward from the punch, choking as her nose fills with blood, the baby ripped from her arms. Her knees start to buckle as she watches Joseph and Dax disappear into one of the darkened rooms at the back of the house. Tristan is motionless, blood pooling beneath his abdomen. Rose collapses to the floor, kneeling in front of her friend, trembling as she reaches for his pulse, searching for life in his clouded eyes, his slack and ashen face.

CHAPTER ONE

LOUISA

kardanup, western australia, present day

“Nineteen ... eighteen ... seventeen ...”

Honey's pudgy little hands are over her eyes as she counts, but Lou isn't concentrating. She's staring at the path that leads away through the bushland on the beach's southern side, wishing Fabien would come back. She's furious with him for spoiling everything when the week had been so perfect. His secret visits to see her each morning had felt deliciously wicked, not least because she knew her bosses would be outraged, and she hates them both right now.

It's obvious that Kyle and Frannie think they own her. They are as bad as each other, and their fight last night had terrified her: the two of them screeching and growling like wildcats, insults and accusations flying, threatening to kill one another. It had been such a relief to get the little ones down to the beach early this morning, and she really doesn't want to go back to the house. Every day she thinks about quitting, but whenever she looks at these two small children, the thought of never seeing them again—of abandoning them to their toxic parents—is awful. It's hard enough to leave at the end of a nannying contract, even when the parents aren't a pair of vindictive arseholes. She'd been devastated on her last job when she'd had to say goodbye to baby Luca. They'd glossed over that part in the nanny training.

This early-morning beach time has become an essential part of Lou's routine. It's picture perfect here, the gentle arc of the coastline sheltering it from much of the harsher weather and strong winds that Western Australia is known for. The sun is soft at this hour, the air crisp and clean. The water laps quietly at the shore, its shallows a bright, clear turquoise, perfect for little legs to wade in while shoals of tiny fish, almost invisible against the sand, skitter and skim at their heels. Further out the ocean surface darkens; occasionally they glimpse a flash of a dolphin's silver fin. Lou always wishes she had her camera—the light is incredible—but she'd restrained herself, knowing she couldn't focus properly on taking photographs and watching the kids at the same time. Anyway, it's good just to breathe and relax without anyone nagging or giving her a task. Spending time here helps her hold off the brooding thoughts that gather like storm clouds later in the day, when she's tired of wrangling the kids while Kyle and Frannie shout their orders from the pool deck. Not to mention all the extra jobs they dole out to her—loads of washing and serving drinks and anything else they care to come up with. As soon as she'd started working for them, they wouldn't let her take any time off unless they had another nanny on hand for the children, and they'd demanded she pause all social media and use a different phone, which had pretty much cut off her contact with the outside world. At first she'd respected their rules, understanding the restrictions as a desire for privacy, but now she sees these orders as part of their narcissistic need for control. This week she's also been expected to look after two older children, belonging to Kyle and Frannie's closest friends, while the four adults drink themselves into a stupor. Luckily the older kids don't like getting up early, otherwise she would have had to bring them down here too—and that would have blown her secret trysts with Fabien.

She'd been desperate to see him. Until they hatched this plan, they hadn't spent time together for nearly six months. Fabien could only snatch a few days of leave, and there was no question of Lou getting time off, so they'd decided he would have to sneak in to see her. She'd checked

out the beach on her last visit here a couple of months ago, and found the path that ran through the bushland to the road. The whole thing had worked like a charm, since Kyle and Frannie rarely got up before eleven. Fabien would hang out on the beach with Lou for a couple of hours each morning, then he'd head off to surf with his friends in nearby Yallingup and she would continue her day with the kids.

However, today, before she could even tell him about last night, he'd tried to persuade her to quit.

"You hate this job, Lou." He'd sat close to her, stretching his deeply tanned legs out against the soft sand, running a hand through his dark-brown hair, pushing it away from his light-green eyes. He was so handsome that she melted a little each time he looked at her.

"I know." She'd kept her eyes on the children. "But I have to work. I have no savings and I can't stay in the country without a visa. Besides, the kids really need me. They're so little."

"Really? So you're going to work here until they're eighteen?" He'd laughed at her, shaking his head. "You can't help them, Lou. They're not yours to save. And you'll find another job."

"You don't understand," she'd insisted, angry with him for making her feel silly, even though she knew he was speaking the truth.

He'd thrown his hands up in response. They'd stopped talking, watching the kids play until Fabien said he had to go. She'd kissed him on the cheek and then he'd walked away, rubbing the back of his head as though pained. She'd wanted to chase after him, but she couldn't leave the kids.

Damn, she thinks now. *Why couldn't he just be understanding?* But if he doesn't come back, she might not see him again for months. Can they part on a quarrel for that long, or is it over? There's a lump in her throat at the thought.

Honey opens her eyes. "You didn't hide him," she cries, snatching the bear from Lou's hand with a frown. Lou can see the tantrum brewing, the little girl's right foot lifting off the ground, ready to stomp her frustration into the sand.

"Sorry, I got distracted," Lou says, quickly grabbing the scruffy blue teddy. As Honey counts again, she heads across to the jetty and tucks Valentine into one of the deeper crevices. The little girl never tires of this game, racing up and down on the soft white sand, shrieking with delight as she finds her favorite toy. There aren't too many places to hide Valentine on the open expanse of beach, so Lou is forced to get ever more inventive, while baby Kai sometimes gives the game away by pointing and giggling from his lofty position on Lou's hip, particularly now he's learned that this makes his sister scowl.

Sometimes Lou imagines running away and taking the kids with her, to a quiet island where she'd teach them to enjoy simple, earthy pleasures rather than becoming the spoiled little shits they're destined to be with parents like Kyle and Frannie. It's disappointing, seeing the kids' open, trusting faces turning toward wariness around their parents, their soft hearts hardening each day, aware of what is happening around them even when the grown-ups are too drunk to notice. Honey already runs to Lou when she's hurt, despite the fact it makes Frannie's face darken. The child's small, spongy brain has absorbed the unspoken dangers of her mother, although fortunately Honey is usually in bed by the time Frannie's drunkenness turns sarcastic and maudlin. It's Kyle who receives most of Frannie's spite, and he rises to every bit of the bait. There's a pent-up fury in him that Lou has come to fear; his fists and jaw clenching ever tighter as the weeks go by. She prays she won't be around when he finally unleashes, and she's learned to get out of the way pretty fast, but no amount of pillows over the head can smother the sound of the couple's furious arguments. It's confounding and unsettling how the next morning they often wake up as though nothing has happened, joking together and discussing the day's plans, even as they set about their hair-of-the-dog hangover cures and begin the whole cycle again.

Honey runs back across to them. "I can't find Valentine, Lulu," she says, pulling on Lou's hand, her little voice breathless. "I need a clue." Lou smiles at her. "He's in a hard place, for sure," she says. "Can you see anything hard on the beach?" She nods to the rocks that form a groin at the northern end.

Honey beams and runs over to the steep pile of weathered granite stone, scampering up there as adept as a mountain goat and then disappearing over the top.

"Not so far!" Lou calls. "You don't need to go—" But the little girl has already gone.

Lou sighs, raising her eyebrows complicitly at Kai, who giggles as he sits on the blanket, only eleven months old but fully aware of his sister pushing the boundaries. She's hurrying over to the rocks when there's a high-pitched scream from the other side. Lou stiffens. This is exactly what she's dreaded. It would be a disaster to go back to the holiday house with Honey wailing from a fall, no matter that cuts and scrapes are part of childhood. It doesn't take much to turn Frannie's polite charm to cold fury. She casts a nervous glance back at Kai, who is still sitting on the blanket, and decides that if he sets off at a crawl she could get back to him before he reaches the water. So she turns and breaks into a run toward the sound, calling, "Honey? Are you okay? Did you fall?"

There's no answer.

She hesitates, envisioning telling Frannie and Kyle that one of their babies has been hurt on her watch. They would kill her. Literally. All that crushed, compressed rage would be released onto her. She wouldn't survive it.

She shudders and checks back again. Kai is still on the blanket, head turned toward her, watching, his expression solemn now, his back straight and alert in his little romper suit. She climbs the rocks, terrified of seeing Honey sprawled out and bleeding.

But when she gets to the top and looks down, it is much, much worse than that.

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE DROWNING

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* * *

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Jonas Saul is the bestselling author of the Sarah Roberts Series—more than two million sold!—and has written and published over sixty thrillers.

Jonas is regularly invited to be a guest speaker, teacher, or workshop presenter at international writing conferences and film festivals worldwide. He hosts an annual writer's retreat in Greece, where he currently lives. He focuses his teaching on how to get tension and emotion in every scene, on every page, how he made it as a creator/writer, the path to success in this business, and the pitfalls to avoid.

Jonas is also a professional freelance editor.

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[Website](#)

CHAPTER 1

DARIUS SHAW SAW THE headlines and wanted to be a cop more than ever.

Someone was killing their women—well, two women so far this year. The news didn't report on the cause of death yet, but Darius was already jumping to conclusions. It was probably death by strangulation, like Angela Booth, who was murdered several months back. They found her body in a bush beside Lake Charming on the east side of Shadow Bay. On the west side, Perch Lake now contained the second body found in six months. And, as cliché as it sounded, a jogger found the second body.

Darius parked in his usual spot beside the janitor's truck at the side of the Shadow Bay Recreation Center building. From the breast pocket of his slash vest, he fumbled with his Sonim phone, dropping it on the console where it bumped his coffee cup, spilling some.

“Shit.” He pulled a Finn's Diner napkin from the glovebox of the Prius and wiped up the coffee, then leaned down far enough to retrieve the Sonim from the passenger side foot area.

He typed in the recreation center code, hit the button to start a tour, and the phone shut down.

“What the hell?”

The stupid phone rebooted most of the night randomly, making him wait up to five minutes to get back into TrackTik, the system he needed to perform his job as a security guard.

The job sucked sometimes. But what job didn't? And he needed this job if he ever expected to make it as a police officer one day.

The phone's screen lit up. He checked the clock on the dashboard. Basically still on time. They had two mobile units in Shadow Bay working all night and one mobile unit throughout the day. Darius was mobile eight, or as dispatch called it, M8, which sounded like "mate," the moniker for his run. M8 was also the run that led to the supervisor position, which was something Darius wanted to improve his résumé. But since Safeguard Surveillance Security had four employees locally, he doubted advancement was a possibility. This was a satellite office, with their corporate head office in New York. Dispatch was in New York, as was his boss. Supervisor meant he'd have to move, and Darius was not interested in moving from Shadow Bay, as he wanted the chief of police's job one day.

He signed into the tour for the recreational center and saw the forty tokens button. Surrounding the exterior of the building, there were small circular tokens—sometimes called pogs—on all the doors that led into the Shadow Bay Recreation Center. He had to tap each one with the Sonim to prove he was there, which sent a tour report to the client, which in this case was the Town of Shadow Bay.

Once out of the vehicle, he locked the doors and headed inside. The head janitor, Tim Skylar, was in the lunchroom briefing his one staff member on their night's duties.

"Hey guys," Darius said as he passed the open door.

A couple of *heys* floated out of the room as Darius made his way to the changing rooms near the pool area. It had been six months since SS Security took on the recreation center contract. A couple of people overdosing in their change rooms was enough for the town to call in the local security guard—or security *officer*, as head office referred to them—to clear the building upon closing, so their cleaning staff wasn't exposed to any sort of danger.

"M7 to M8," his radio squawked.

Darius entered the men's change room that led to the pool, yanking his radio out simultaneously.

"M8, go ahead."

"You clear of the rec center yet?"

"Negative. Just starting closing procedures."

"10-4. Coffee at one? Finn's again?"

"Copy that. I'll be there."

"Copy."

He slipped the phone back into his slash vest and checked the showers. After locking the door, he walked to the exercise room, glanced inside the pool area, and finally walked up to the women's changing room. The rec center was closed for the night. Everyone would've been warned to leave by 22:00 hrs.

He knocked on the women's change room door, then opened it a notch. "Security," he shouted through the crack. "Anyone in here?"

When he received no answer, he entered and scoured the area to ensure no one was passed out, foaming at the mouth. He shook his head at the thought that the opioid crisis had come to Shadow Bay. How was that even possible? Little Shadow Bay was a resort town, a small place to come and relax, not get high or fucked up.

Yet, people still came from the city and juiced their veins.

Moments later, he exited the room, locked the door, and made his way to the main entrance to ensure those doors were secure, then stopped at the lunchroom.

"Hey, Sky," he mumbled. "Where's Donovan?"

Tim looked up from his laptop. "Sent him to grab coffee before we start for the night."

"Easy night ahead?" Darius asked as he stepped inside to take a seat opposite Sky. His name was Tim Skylar, but everyone just called him Sky.

"Yeah, it's a Monday. A lot of the weekend campers and tourists are gone. Mondays aren't so bad. And with most of the town up at the county fair, we've been dead here."

"What were you working on?" Darius gestured at the computer.

“Just rereading something I wrote last week.”

Darius sat back, the chair creaking under his two hundred pounds. “One of these days, you’ll have to let me read something of yours.”

Sky smiled. “Oh, I will.”

“You ever talk to your brother?”

The smile faded, then disappeared. “No, he’s an asshole.”

Darius sat up and placed his arms on the table. “What kind of asshole?”

Sky frowned, then closed the laptop. “What do you mean, what kind of asshole? He’s just an asshole.”

“What, because he beats his girlfriend?”

“You know about that?” Sky asked.

“Everyone knows about that, man. C’mon, we’ve all seen the bruises. You know what Lisa goes through with him.” Darius shook his head. “I don’t know what she sees in him. And she’s got a son, too. A kid named ...”

“Michael.”

“Right, Michael. I’ll tell you something. John starts in on Michael, his teachers will see it, and then he’ll get arrested. The Chief of police is fixing to arrest him as soon as Lisa says she’ll press charges.”

“Yeah, but that’s the problem. Lisa will never press charges.”

Darius studied Sky’s face for a moment, seeing the concern creasing his forehead.

“Sorry, man, I guess I should be more sensitive when discussing your brother. You know, family shit. None of my business.”

“It’s cool. I just didn’t sleep well today, and now my boss said he wants to come down from Albany next week to meet the new guy, Donovan.”

“Meet him? Why’s that?”

“To see if we need two people on all night.”

“Of course you do. How do they expect you to mop all the floors and clean the pool area yourself?”

“I used to do it alone. But that was in the winter when we weren’t so busy.”

“Is there any job in this town that’s worth having?” Darius’s tone revealed the disgust he felt. Shadow Bay wasn’t the place he thought he’d spend the rest of his life, but he couldn’t leave for some reason. Maybe it was that police chief job he wanted.

Sky shook his head. “Not really.”

“They found another body,” Darius said after a minute.

“Saw that.”

“Scary stuff.”

Their eyes met. “You think it’s someone local?” Sky asked.

Darius shrugged. “Could be. Probably. I mean, some dude is gonna drive up here, kill a girl, dump her body, then drive back to wherever the hell he lives? That’s a big commitment. One would say a *killer* commitment.”

“Kinda freaks me out.”

“Freaks *you* out?” Darius pretended to be offended. “Shit, man, I gotta walk around alone in the dark all night.”

“Whoever it is, they’re not killing guys. I think you’re safe.”

“Not if I find a dead body, I’m not. I’d have to live with that for the rest of my life.”

Sky frowned. “Didn’t you say you wanted to be a cop?”

“Yeah, a cop. Not a coroner.”

“But cops deal with dead bodies all the time.”

“Homicide does.”

“Not in little towns like this. Chief Martin handles everything.”

“See, that just proves my point. There isn’t a job in Shadow Bay that doesn’t suck.” He checked the time. “Look, I gotta run. I still have to do the entire tour outside the building before I leave, and then I have to go to the Bay Motel for my 23:00 hrs tour.”

“Everything good inside?” Sky asked, nodding toward the door and the recreation center beyond. “No one around? All cleared out?”

Darius nodded. “No one around. There never is.”

“Except that one time.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t here then.”

“True, and that’s why you’re here now.”

Darius smiled, knowing full well why he was in an SS Security uniform—who called their company SS Security anyway?—and walking the grounds of the town rec center. He was there for a paycheck, first and foremost. Money made the world go around, and once you had some, you could open your mouth to talk and eat. Without money, you were nothing. Or a *vagrant*, as the security company called them. Most people just called them homeless or bums. It got worse from there. Online, he’d seen them called “waste of space” and “pieces of shit,” but a lot of that was anger on Facebook, where people posted photos after having caught a homeless person prowling in their yard.

Darius pushed back his chair and got up to leave. “I’ll be back sometime after two in the morning for another walk around the outside. I’ll stop in to say hello.”

“I’ll be here—”

A door slammed shut somewhere in the building.

“You hear that?” Darius asked.

Sky nodded. “Of course, I heard that.” He chuckled. “Relax, it’s just Donovan coming back with the coffee.”

“Oh, right.” Darius stepped into the corridor and looked both ways. It was empty. “Have a good night, Sky. See you in a bit.”

Sky mumbled a farewell, and Darius started for the side exit where he’d find his first token of forty.

He’d left his coffee in the car. It was probably warm now or even cold. At the break, when he met Travis, he’d just buy another one. Until then, he had no coffee because he didn’t want to get behind on his run.

The slash vest was warm over his security shirt, making him sweat uncomfortably. He wore it in case he ever bumped into a user. They may have needles. The vest wasn’t Kevlar, not bulletproof, but apparently, it would protect him from a knife. Although when he was issued the slash vest, they told him it wouldn’t stop a direct stabbing motion. It would only save him if someone *slashed* at him, hence the name. He’d worked for SS Security for almost six months now, and no one had ever attempted to slash at him with any sort of weapon. Yet, even after convincing himself he didn’t need the vest, that it was nothing but an uncomfortable encumbrance, always making him sweat and stink, he would never take it off because the breast pockets were perfect. They held his work phone, personal cell phone, and pen. And the vest made him appear bulkier, too. If he were ever up against a formidable vagrant who suddenly wanted to fight, at least the vest offered more protection than not wearing one.

Each token bleeped on the Sonim and turned from a red dot to a green dot with a check mark. He was back at the front doors on his fifteenth token, but outside now. He pulled on them to confirm they were secure, then continued, approaching the exit doors by the pool area.

A single vehicle drove by on Main Street toward the highway that led to Albany. Other than that, the night was quiet. He hit the token by the first set of double doors, then moved on as there were no exterior handles on these doors, only interior ones. When he approached the second set of doors exiting the pool area, his attention was drawn to a vehicle in the parking lot.

He’d rarely find a car parked in the lot overnight, but when he did, it was never parked like this one. From a distance, he guessed the vehicle was an old red Aveo. It was parked sideways across two spaces. What was odd and sent a stab of worry through his stomach was that the car’s doors were wide open, but no one was around. He checked

behind him, then along the side of the building. The interior of the rec center was empty, he'd seen to that himself, and as far as he could tell—so far, at least—the outside was void of people, too.

“What the fuck?” he whispered to himself.

What if the car was stolen? What if the murderer was still in town, and while Chief Martin was dealing with the body, busy with the investigation, the murderer was at it again?

Some killers could do it again and again. That was a fact. He'd watched *Dexter* and that documentary on Ted Bundy.

Cautiously, he moved to the next token, the last one of the doors that led from the pool area, his eyes and ears open, goosebumps on his arms. What spooked him exactly? He had no idea. There was a car with its doors open, parked at an odd angle, and no one around. He was supposed to put a parking notice on cars that attempted to stay overnight, as this was town property. They didn't want the liability or something. But the way he was feeling, he wasn't prepared to approach that empty vehicle. Maybe on his second round. Who knows, by then, they might have left anyway.

He slipped the work phone into his vest and his hands into his pants pockets.

Should he cancel the tour or walk around the back of the building?

Alone. In the dark.

Or should he see if that door slamming from earlier was Donovan coming back with coffee?

Wait a second. If Donovan had come back with coffee, where was his car? Darius couldn't recall what Donovan drove, but it wasn't an Aveo, as far as he could remember.

Further spooked, he convinced himself to sign out of the tour and just leave. He had to get to the Bay Motel anyway. Taking his time, chatting with Sky, and now standing there for several moments had cost him dearly.

In security, timing was everything.

Someone called his name. He spun sideways and saw Sky coming out of the front entrance.

“Darius?” Sky shouted.

“What?” Darius yelled back, startling himself with how loud he was in the stillness of the night.

“Did you see Donovan?”

Darius shook his head. “No.”

They looked at each other across about a hundred yards of a concrete walkway, probably thinking the same thing.

Who slammed that door if Donovan wasn't in the building?

The darkness in the trees, the vehicle in the lot, the calm, quiet on any given night was now a darkness that frightened him. Even though Sky was a hundred yards away, Darius felt alone and exposed.

He turned to the door beside him, but there were no handles. Inside the pool area—a small Olympic-sized pool for short races at twenty-five meters in length, with stripes separating only six lanes—the emergency lights were on, giving off an eerie red glow to the water.

Something glinted in the back left corner. Darius leaned in closer to the door's window and placed his hands on either side of his face as Sky yelled something back at him.

In the back corner of the pool area, the door that led to the lifeguard change room, separate from the public ones, was sitting open. In the semi-darkness, it looked like the small square glass window in the door was broken.

“What the hell?” he whispered, that stab of worry from earlier turning to fear. Should he radio Travis for backup? What if he did, and it was just Donovan, already looking for a broom to sweep up the mess he had caused?

He eased his work phone out of his pocket. Having it in his hand always made him feel safer.

Sky shouted something again. It didn't sound frantic, more like a question, like he was asking what Darius was doing.

Darius ignored Sky and dialed Travis's number, but didn't hit the send button. He had to wait to be certain. Otherwise, why call Travis? Why not call the station and get Chief Martin down here?

Because Chief Martin would be handling a murder investigation, a little broken glass and an abandoned Aveo wouldn't be top on his list to investigate at the moment.

He checked on Sky, who was still watching him from the main entrance. He turned to the car. Still there, doors wide open, just like moments ago. Nothing else moved, not even the wind.

Darius shivered in the stillness.

Something was definitely wrong.

He turned back to the window and looked in at the pool.

Something floated on top, near the deep end. Was that their cleaner doohickey? Sky explained once that it was like a vacuum, running along the bottom of the pool, cleaning as it went.

If so, why was it floating?

Darius had had enough. He stepped back from the window and started toward Sky.

But Sky was gone.

He must've stepped back inside when Darius ignored him.

Not running, not even jogging—because he knew what jogging meant—Darius fast-walked to the entrance and used his fob to gain entry.

“Sky?” he called. “Where are you?”

“Down here.”

Sky was at the entrance to the changing rooms.

“Where are you headed?” Darius asked, already trotting toward him.

“I heard another door slam after you stepped outside. I called Donovan's name, but got no response. Thought you'd want to come to check it out with me, but you ignored me.”

“Yeah, that car spooked me.”

Sky frowned. “The car?”

“Well, that and the door in the pool area.” Darius slowed, then stopped a few feet from Sky.

“What door?” he asked.

“The lifeguard change room door is sitting open. From outside, it looks broken.”

“Maybe that's what we heard.”

“And I think your pool vacuum thing is broken.”

Sky was opening the door again. “How so?”

“I saw it floating in the pool.”

Sky stopped, released the door, and turned back to face Darius. “I haven't started using it yet.”

Darius took a step backward. “Wait, what? How's that possible?” Then it dawned on him. “Oh, I get it. Donovan slammed the lifeguard door, broke it, and is cleaning it up. He must've put the vacuum on inside the pool.”

“Hey guys,” a man said behind them.

Darius and Sky jumped and spun around. Darius almost dropped the work phone he still had in his hand.

Donovan stood twenty feet away by the lunchroom.

“Donovan,” Sky shouted. “You scared the shit out of us.”

“Oh, sorry. Couldn't find you. Brought coffee.”

“Did you just get back?” Darius asked, already supposing the answer.

“Yeah, why?”

Darius and Sky looked at each other. Darius couldn't contain the shudder that vibrated his shoulders.

“Then who is in the building?” Sky asked under his breath. “You cleared it, right?”

Darius nodded.

“Everything okay, guys?” Donovan asked.

“No,” Sky said. “Come on down here.”

When Donovan approached, he said, “What's up?”

“We think someone’s here,” Darius said.

Donovan shrugged like it was no big deal, and it probably wasn’t.

“So, ask them to leave.”

Darius’s phone dinged as it rebooted. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Restarting again. I hate this thing.” He jammed it in his vest pocket.

“C’mon,” Donovan said, pushing past Sky to enter the men’s changing room. “Let’s go find whoever’s here.”

They followed him inside, but the changing room was empty.

“Did you put the vacuum on in the pool?” Sky asked.

“Not me,” Donovan said. “Haven’t been down this way yet. After showing up for work, you sent me for coffee.”

Sky produced his master keys and unlocked the door that led to the pool. He flicked on the lights, and they all followed him inside.

Darius turned toward the lifeguard change room door at the back corner of the pool area, then looked directly at what was floating in the water.

Two square formations were at the end of the pool. His intuition yelled at him to turn around and walk away, but curiosity, the need to know, forced him forward. Step after step, he knew what he was going to see but kept moving anyway.

Sky stopped walking, then Donovan stopped alongside him, and both men released an odd gasp like someone had punched them in the gut.

“Darius,” Sky whimpered.

Fifteen feet away, ten feet, and then Darius saw the arms, the legs dangling.

There were two people in the Shadow Bay Recreation Center pool. Both were dead, their backs floating near the surface, their limbs and heads underwater. Something had happened to their bodies. The more petite body looked feminine, and chunks appeared missing from her back. Blood was splattered in a couple of spots from the lifeguard door to the pool.

Darius stopped walking, his legs shaking. He’d never seen anything like it. Fear disabled him; death paralyzed him. At that moment, he didn’t know what to think, what to do, or who to call. He just knew he needed to leave. Get away, get far away.

He shouted something unintelligible as he turned back toward the janitors and started to run. They yelled something, too, and ran away from him.

It was like death was contagious; unless they got out of the room in record time, they would be the next victim.

Darius slammed through the changing room door, past the lockers and the showers, then out into the corridor, where he almost bumped into Sky, who had his phone out.

He bent over to collect himself, to breathe, but then fell to the floor and curled up, whispering *no* repeatedly.

Sky dropped his phone, snatched it up, then dropped it again.

“What the fuck was that?” Donovan said at the top of his lungs.

The man had turned as white as ash, his eyes bugging out.

Sky was crying. “I don’t know, but will someone fucking dial the cops. I can’t stop shaking.”

Donovan snatched the phone from Sky and looked at it. “Your phone’s dead.”

“Shit.” Sky turned to Darius. “Use your phone.” Even his voice was shaking now.

Darius tried three times to get his phone out of the vest pocket. Once he did, he saw that the work phone was off, still rebooting. He dropped it on the floor beside him, still gasping for air, then retrieved his cell phone and was able to dial 911. Not trusting he’d be able to hold it to his ear the entire time, he hit the speaker button.

“911, do you require fire, police, or ambulance?”

“Police,” Darius could get out of his mouth between breaths.

“Which city or county?”

“Town of Shadow Bay.”

“Connecting you now, sir.”

After a moment, a woman answered. “Shadow Bay police chief’s office.”

“I want to report—” his breath caught in his throat.

“Hello?” the operator said.

“People are dead,” Darius cried into the phone.

He’d broken out into a full-body sweat, and his hand was shaking so much that he thought he’d drop the phone. Whoever killed those people could still be in the building.

“Could you repeat that, sir?” the woman on the phone said, but this time her voice was tentative, cautionary. It was as if she had heard him the first time, but she needed to confirm she had understood what he said.

Darius glanced up at Donovan, who was watching him wide-eyed. Sky leaned against the wall, head down, his chin on his chest.

With the phone close to his mouth, he said, “We found two bodies in the pool at the Shadow Bay Recreation Center. They’re dead. Please, just send someone.”

There was a gasp on the other end of the line. They all heard it because Sky lifted his head and looked at Darius’s phone. Donovan stared at the phone, aghast. Darius didn’t know what else to say. He just watched the other men and waited.

“I can’t take this anymore,” the woman on the other end of the line said, but it didn’t sound like she was speaking to Darius because her voice was distant, as if she was moving away from the phone when she spoke.

“What the hell, lady. Aren’t you guys 911?”

A man’s voice broke in on the line. “This is Officer William Hill. Who am I speaking with?”

“Darius Shaw. I’m with Safeguard—”

“I know who you are, Darius. What’s up?”

“I just told your operator”—he swallowed, breathed in deep to collect himself—“that we have two bodies in the pool down here at the recreation center.”

Sky and Donovan both stared at the phone in Darius’s hand.

“Say again. Two bodies?”

“That’s correct. Two.”

“Shit. Okay, don’t touch anything. We’ll send someone down. Just stay out of the pool area. Look, is Sky with you?”

“Yes, and Donovan.”

“Okay, no one leaves, and promise me you’ll all stay together, but stay out of the pool area.”

“Okay. We understand. No problem.”

“Sorry about Mary.”

“It’s okay,” Darius said, finally getting his breathing under control. “Answering calls like this must be hard.” He leaned up on an elbow, ready to get to his feet.

“It’s not just that. Mary can handle emergency calls.”

Darius frowned. “Then what was it?”

“This is the third call about dead bodies in the last half hour. People are drowning all over Shadow Bay. We have seven dead since ten this evening, counting your two. Just stay put. Lock the doors and only let my crew and me inside. I’m calling Chief Martin now.”

The line died.

The shock set in.

"Another Otho Eskin thriller that delivers double the trouble,
twice the action, and quadruple the enjoyment."

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OTHO ESKIN

YOU WILL FIND ME HERE, BUT YOU WILL NEVER ESCAPE

BLACK SUN RISING

A MARKO ZORN NOVEL



BLACK SUN RISING
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* * *

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OTHO ESKIN served as a US Foreign Service officer for over twenty years with assignments in locations across Europe and the Middle East. He was involved in negotiations on the United Nations International Conference on the Law of the Sea, the International Space Station, and the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. Upon retirement, Eskin became an internationally produced playwright and a thriller novelist.

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Chapter One

The bomb explodes at 8:42 a.m.

Windows rattle. The Homicide Branch bullpen shivers. Two detectives across the room look up from their coffees and Danish. Latasha Powell, my new partner, rises to her feet. The Style section from today's *Washington Post* lies open on her desk, the crossword puzzle partially filled in.

Latasha's cool. Nothing rattles her or dampens her sunny disposition, but for the moment, she's tense. She looks at me as if I have an answer.

I've experienced explosions before. I know the sound. I know the feel under my feet. The feel in the air. My heart sinks. "That came from far away." I keep my voice calm, reassuring. No point in panicking people. Not yet.

We're in no immediate danger, but this brings back *that* memory: The burning of the Pentagon, the horrific destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, and how close we came to the destruction of the United States Capitol Building just a few blocks from where we are right now. Everyone who was in Washington that day knows the feeling. If there's an explosion somewhere, the sound of a low-flying plane, or sirens wailing over the city, we stop whatever we're doing, and we wonder: *Is this it? Is the city under attack?*

There's no need to evacuate our building. We are, for the moment, safe. But I know others somewhere in the city aren't. This was a massive explosion. There will be casualties.

We wait, breathless.

The building alarm goes off, shattering the silence. Red emergency lights pulse throughout the bullpen. There's a citywide emergency now. Outside, sirens shriek over the city.

"Let's go!" I yell to the detectives. "Collect your gear. Coats, hats. It's cold out there. Bring your weapons."

"What's happening, Marko?" Latasha says, securing her police-service Glock 26 in her belt holster.

Latasha knows I never carry a gun. But she doesn't question me. She knows that refusing to use a gun is personal for me. It's complicated.

"Something bad. Something very bad," I say.

“We’ll get through this,” she says. “We’re a team, Marko. Right?”

The corridors are filling with people, mostly in uniform, mostly armed, shrugging into their heavy winter coats, putting on gloves and hats. Latasha and I take the stairs. The elevators are too slow and crowded. When we reach the ground floor, Frank Townsend, commander of the Homicide Branch and our boss, is organizing the troops, getting police officers onto waiting buses. There’s no time to ask what happened or where we’re going. Nobody knows anything. We’re all operating on adrenaline and years of training.

The sky is gunmetal gray, promising more snow, and we button up our coats tightly. The air is filling with acrid smoke, and flecks of ash burn our eyes. Alarm sirens throughout the city deafen us, and Latasha puts her hands over her ears to muffle the sound.

And then the sirens stop.

Chapter Two

A bus filled with armed SWAT units pulls away. Latasha and I board a second bus—green, with DC Metropolitan Police painted on the side. We sit in the front as we leave headquarters.

Latasha is tense but in control. She’s a young Black woman, usually calm and upbeat. Before joining the Metropolitan Police, Latasha served in the Army military police and has been my partner for less than three months. She’s been a full-time homicide detective for only two years, but what she lacks in experience, she more than makes up in smarts and determination. I can see worry in her eyes. She’s scared. We all are.

The bus takes us into the southwest part of the city not far from the waterfront on the Potomac River. We’re stopped at a police checkpoint several blocks from the site of the emergency, and a senior sergeant checks our credentials.

“Marko Zorn. Homicide.” I show him my police ID, and he waves me through.

Latasha follows, and we go the rest of the way on foot, trudging through the snow from last night’s storm. A police captain organizes us into groups. Because we’re from Homicide, Latasha and I are sent directly to the site.

We’re frozen in horror. Before us, a large building is partially collapsing in black smoke and flames. The front of the building is a gaping, smoking hole. Whole floors are exposed.

“God in heaven,” Latasha whispers. She has a hard time speaking. Her eyes glisten with tears.

Until a short while ago, this was Friendship House, a sanctuary for the poor and desperate. At the beginning, it was mostly used by African Americans in need of food and shelter and medical help, but is now used by immigrants, too. More recently, it’s become a temporary home for runaway kids and for members of the LGBTQ+ community—or any desperate or marginalized person in need of help.

I’ve visited this place before and twice met with Dolores Pine, the founder and director of Friendship House. She’s a tall, imposing Black woman and the only person I’ve ever met whom I’d describe as a saint. Of course, in my line of work, I don’t get to meet many saints.

I think about those who were inside the building when the bomb went off and I feel like I’m going to be sick. But I’ve got work to do. I’ll throw up on my own time.

Firefighters are pouring water from coiling black hoses onto the flaming ruins while emergency medical workers remove the dead and injured. Those who managed to escape the inferno lie crumpled and broken on the sidewalk and street. As we near the bomb site, another part of the building collapses in flames.

Latasha briefly squeezes my hand. To reassure herself that we would be okay? To reassure me? Then she’s gone, rushing into the crowd to help the medics and injured.

More police and firefighters are arriving from other parts of the city and from surrounding jurisdictions. Helicopters appear in the sky to patrol the area and to medevac the wounded. My eyes sting from the smoke.

Surrounding me are people yelling, some screaming in pain, some asking for help. Some weeping. Many lie stiffly on the ground, in the snow, silent. Their bodies are smeared with soot and smoke and blood.

I stop for a moment near the wreck of what must have been a truck. The panels and windows have been blown out. All that's left is the twisted steel frame and the bent driveshaft.

I move through the scene in front of the destroyed building, helping where I can. I join an EMS group taking bodies across the street into a temporary shelter. Many victims are dressed in street clothes. One dead woman is still clutching her handbag. A young man, who looks Hispanic, is holding a brown paper bag in his fist. His lunch? He'll never get to eat it.

I trip over a scorched and twisted wheelchair. More ambulances arrive. People in scrubs rush through the crowd. Dr. Celia Moore, the police department's assistant medical officer, hurries by. We nod to each other but don't stop. There's no time for words.

I spot Latasha standing near a temporary emergency shelter, her face and arms smeared with black soot and spattered with dark-brown stains. Over her shoulder, I see the United States Capitol Building, with its reviewing stands under construction for the presidential inauguration only weeks away. Above, the sky is dark and foreboding. Snow is coming. An icy wind picks up.

More helicopters are arriving. Police. Media. Medical emergency vehicles. Several military craft circle at a distance.

One large chopper lands in a vacant lot a few hundred yards away. The hatch is flung open, steps lowered, and six heavily armed uniformed men and women leap out, forming a phalanx around the ramp. They're followed by a man in a three-piece suit; he's wearing glasses and carrying an umbrella. Finally, a tall, gaunt woman emerges and is helped down the steps by the guy in glasses. She's immediately joined by DC Police Chief Kelly Flynn and, a moment later, by Carla Lowry, the head of the FBI's National Security Branch. They stand close to one another and talk urgently among themselves.

The press corps, their trucks and vans encrusted with TV antennas, is pressed behind temporary wooden barriers.

Snow begins to fall. Big flakes, white and wet, and, for a moment, the carnage at Friendship House lies hidden beneath a blanket of snow. The ground soon becomes a sea of mud and ash.

The air is shattered by the sound of squawking feedback from a public address system a few hundred feet away from me. The mayor is about to give a press briefing. I can't see her from where I stand, but I can hear her clearly. Her voice is full of rage and grief. She speaks of the horrific event that has just happened and she extends thoughts and prayers for the victims and their families. "I promise, my administration will use every resource to bring those responsible to justice. Chief of Police Flynn has committed the full resources of the Metropolitan Police Department to investigate this crime. I spoke by phone with the president just a few moments ago, and he has promised the full support of the federal government to investigate this tragic event. Agents of the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are already on the scene. Secretary Fletcher of the Department of Homeland Security is here and has committed the full cooperation of her agency."

The mayor turns the press conference over to Police Chief Flynn.

"At approximately 8:45 this morning, a bomb exploded in front of Friendship House. It has basically destroyed the building and caused multiple deaths and injuries. We do not yet have the number of injured or the fatalities, but our initial estimate is that there will be several hundred. Many of the wounded are in critical condition and they are being taken to local hospitals. More information about the number and names of those killed or wounded will be provided as soon as available."

Flynn's voice is measured, intended to reassure the people here in Washington, around the nation, and around the world. Her job is to convince them that everything is under control and that there's no need to panic.

"We have no information about who the perpetrators of this horrendous act are and no information about their motivation, but we are certain this was an act of domestic terror. It is clear that this tragedy was carefully planned and

intended to inflict the maximum damage possible. This was not just an attack on property. This was an attack on people.”

Flynn turns to one of the men standing behind her. “Leonard Silver from the ATF will provide what details there are.”

He describes the explosives and the truck they were packed in. An FBI agent whose name I don't catch says his agency is devoting full resources to the investigation. There have been no known threats against Friendship House.

Bottom line: No one knows anything—or, if they do they're not saying.

Other speakers take the microphone, but I miss what they say. I'm distracted by something else.

Carla Lowry, from the FBI, and Chief of Police Kelly Flynn are in deep conversation with the tall woman who arrived on the white helicopter. The three women turn and stare. But not at the mayor. Not at Friendship House. They're staring at me. Carla Lowry seems to be pointing at me while she speaks urgently to the tall woman. This can't be good. Then they're lost among the surging crowd of medical personnel and police. It's snowing heavily now.

I know there's nothing I can do here to help the dead and dying. But there is one thing I can do. I don't know who did this horror, but my instincts tell me there's someone in the crowd connected to the bomb, someone watching this minute. I know what they're feeling. What they're thinking. This bomb attack took weeks of careful planning. You don't just walk away from the scene you've been dreaming of. You need to see it up close. How many people did you kill today? How many have you wounded and maimed? Of course, you can learn the details later on the news or online. But that's not the same as seeing the carnage with your own eyes. Feeling the heat from the flames. Hearing the screams of the wounded. The TV isn't enough. People who do this need immediate gratification.

I'm certain that at least one of the people who planted the bomb is somewhere nearby, in the crowd, watching. Listening. Maybe they're only a few feet from where I'm standing. They'll be just behind the yellow police tape, close enough to see the horror. Close enough to hear the announcements from the mayor and public officials. Maybe close enough to see the dead and wounded loaded into ambulances. With any luck, they're close enough to hear the cries of their victims. Maybe even get some good pictures.

I walk along the yellow police tape, staring into the crowd. What am I looking for? I'm not sure, but I'll know when I see it. I study the faces of dozens of onlookers. Clusters of people are gathered to watch—to experience—the horror, many taking pictures with their smartphones. Probably most are from the neighborhood. Maybe some are ghouls who monitor the police band radio and are here for the thrill. They always show up.

At least one of them is here with a mission.

At first, I see nothing unusual. There's a group of high-school kids, two elderly couples looking dazed. Some middle-aged men in business suits, maybe on their way to a meeting, clutching expensive briefcases. Three Black ladies staring in shock. One seems to be praying silently. A woman with white hair. A small crowd of teenage boys holding skateboards. A couple of men pressing against the yellow tape, glancing quickly at their cell phones. All of them are watching Friendship House collapse into a fiery heap.

Then I spot him. I know in my bones I've got my man.

A single white male, wearing a blue hoodie pulled over his head, is speaking into a cell phone. Every moment or so, he points the phone camera toward the burning ruins, medics, and police. He takes a picture, then quickly resumes speaking. He's talking urgently. I know absolutely the man in the hoodie is the one I'm looking for.

He's young, in his twenties. A little chunky with a round baby face and full lips. He's wearing large headphones.

I duck under the yellow police tape and walk up close. His eyes are pale gray and bright with excitement. He looks like a hundred other losers I see on the streets every day. There's a sour expression on his face. He's wearing mustard-colored Air Jordan high-top sneakers. I've seen them before. On dead bodies at the police morgue. The sneakers are the kind of footwear you kill for. Or die for. They're kind of unforgettable.

The man talks intensely but softly into his phone and pays no attention to me as I approach. I know the fucker is reporting the carnage to somebody. Maybe others higher up in his group are listening, celebrating their triumph.

“Did you get a good look?” I say.

He doesn't hear me because of the headphones.

I pull them from his head. "Are you happy now?"

Rage and fear distort his face. He drops his smartphone into the snow. "Fuck off, asshole," he says, whining.

"Now that's rude." I grab him by the lapels of his coat. He struggles to escape, but I have a firm grip. I look into his pale, dead eyes. "I'm the police. Talk to me."

"You can't make me."

"Wanna bet?"

There's a look of feral terror in his eyes. He glances over my shoulder as if searching for help. Who's he looking for?

"I'm arresting you on suspicion of multiple murders."

"You can't do that." He struggles to twist out of my grasp. "You'll be sorry if you do."

"Who's going to make me sorry, you piece of shit?"

"Black Sun," he says in a gasp, almost inaudible. "Black Sun will smite you.

Smite?

"Black Sun is watching you right now." He's almost breathless. With excitement? Terror? "Cyclone has come. Our time has come."

Next thing I know, I'm on the ground, my face in the cold, wet snow. I struggle to my feet. I can't seem to focus.

"You okay, mister?" a woman asks. I think it may be the lady with the white hair. She offers her hand to help me stand. The man in the mustard-colored high-tops is gone. I touch the back of my head. It's sticky with blood.

There's no point in going after him. I'm seeing double and I'd just stumble and fall and embarrass myself. I search for the dropped phone, but it's gone. Someone has already taken it. I gather snow and rub it on the back of my head. That doesn't help.

I found the man I was looking for. And now I've lost him. Not my finest hour.

There's nothing more for me to do here. Now it's up to ATF, the medics, and mortuary personnel to do their jobs and the bomb experts to complete the investigation. The press is leaving with their trucks and vans. Another news day. The helicopter that brought the tall woman has gone.

"We're going to find out who did this," Latasha says when we meet. "We're going to see they're brought to justice."

Some of her optimistic enthusiasm is rubbing off on me, softening my standard cynicism. Maybe a bit. "Sure," I say. "We'll find them."

Someone calls my name. I tell Latasha to go on ahead and meet me at the office.

Carla Lowry, the head of the FBI's National Security Branch, is waiting for me a few yards away, standing next to a black SUV guarded by two big men, obviously FBI security. Carla steps away from the SUV so we can speak in private and pulls her coat tightly around her shoulders.

"Carla, have you seen the casualty list? Dolores Pine, the Director. I was wondering ..."

Carla's face clouds over. "Dolores didn't make it."

"Shit. I didn't think it could get any worse."

"I'm afraid it's going to get even worse. I hear you tried to arrest someone, and you let him get away. That was careless." Her two bodyguards watch us from a distance.

"Do you know what's going on here?"

She shakes her head.

"Did you get any warning?"

"Nothing. Liz Fletcher may know something. But I don't."

"Who's Liz Fletcher?"

"The Secretary of Homeland Security. Don't you read the papers?"

"Is she the lady with the helicopter?"

"Yes. And she wants to see you in her office this afternoon."

“Why?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. Only that it was important she speak to you in person. A word of warning, Marko. Don’t mess with her. She’s a major player in this town. Everybody’s afraid of her.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“It’s that attitude that always gets you in trouble. And she’s already taken a personal dislike to you.”

“We’ve never met. How can she already dislike me?”

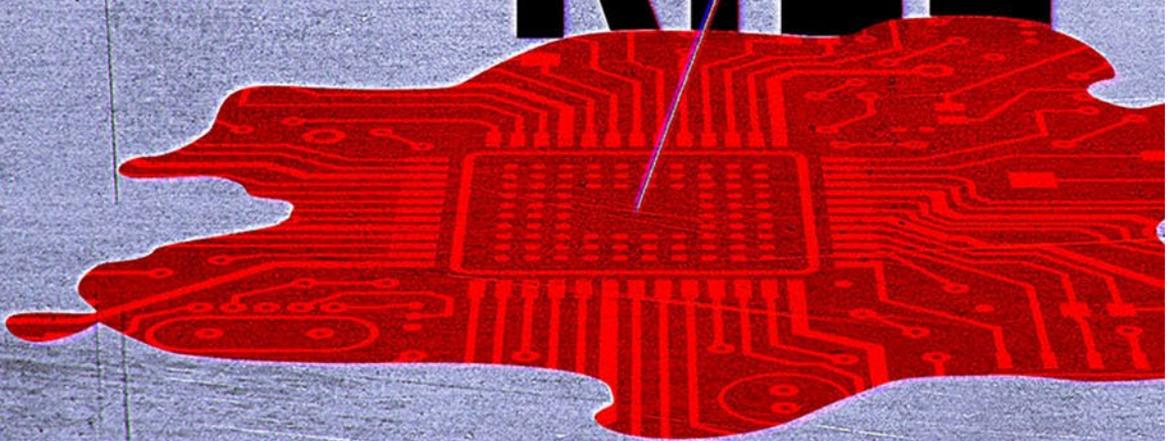
“For the same reason so many powerful people in Washington dislike you, Marko. Be nice when you meet her. I know that’s hard for you, but please try. And no jokes. She doesn’t have a sense of humor. For once, don’t be a dick.”

“What’s really going on?”

“I’m sorry, Marko, I can’t explain. There’ve been some developments I’m not free to talk to you about.”

Carla reaches out and briefly squeezes my arm. “Marko, be careful. Don’t do anything stupid, please.”

CODED TO KILL



A TECHNO-MEDICAL THRILLER

MARSCHALL RUNGE, M.D.

CODED TO KILL

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* * *

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Marschall S. Runge, M.D., Ph.D., is the executive vice president for Medical Affairs at the University of Michigan, dean of the Medical School, and CEO of Michigan Medicine. He earned his doctorate in molecular biology at Vanderbilt University and his medical degree from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, where he also completed a residency in internal medicine. He was a cardiology fellow at the Massachusetts General Hospital.

He is the author of over 250 publications and holds five patents for novel approaches to health care. As a Texas native who spent fifteen years in North Carolina and an avid thriller reader, Runge has experienced so many you-can't-make-this-up events that his transition to fiction was inevitable.

[Website](#)

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, May 8

6:00 AM

Durham, North Carolina

Jesse Gutierrez was the last man standing from the construction crew now almost as invisible as the high-tech bunker they had built. But his time was running out—a team in that underground facility was recording his every move.

Gutierrez's commute to Drexel Memorial Hospital took him over a backcountry two-lane bridge that spanned a stretch of deep water. The investigators would find multiple contributing factors. Gutierrez worked long hours and was probably fatigued. His cell phone would show that he had received a robocall which would appear to have originated from Malaysia just moments before impact. The accident reconstruction team would conclude that the curving road, dew-slickened pavement, sun in his eyes, and distraction of his phone caused Gutierrez to crash into the guardrail.

What they wouldn't find was that the guardrail had been modified to crumble through the application of organic acids and other reactants.

And they would never learn of the panel truck, commanded by an expert driver who knew how to force another vehicle off the road without making contact. The computer models said that as long as the truck swerved at just the right time, Gutierrez's car would crash through the weakened guardrail, clear the bridge, and fall into the water, sinking to the deep bottom in ninety-three seconds.

The highly choreographed attack on Jesse Gutierrez was complicated, but worth it given the enormous stakes.

* * *

A satellite 430 miles above beamed real-time images to the underground conference room with large monitors on the walls. Hugh Torrence rarely attended terminations. His presence was further evidence of its importance.

Decades of experience in the military—and later the NSA—had honed Torrence's attention to detail. He considered every possible outcome of an operation, analyzed the results, then rethought the plan. There was no substitute for disaster awareness and disaster mitigation in his line of work. Evil abounded. On this brisk Sunday morning, he was ready, as always.

Twenty-three-year-old IT wunderkind Benny Rasinko adjusted the images on the screen from his black Aeron chair. Beside him stood Torrence's unflappable second in command, Hasan Saied.

At precisely 6 AM, a muscular man wearing a brown Drexel Memorial Hospital polo and blue jeans appeared on the screen. He exited the front door of his small townhouse and climbed into a blue Honda Civic.

"Subject is en route to Drexel," Benny announced.

Two minutes later, Gutierrez pulled onto a two-lane blacktop. He had so many questions, and the peaceful drive down a rural highway gave him time to think. His mind kept returning to the construction job he'd worked on a year ago, building a tricked-out underground bunker in northern Virginia

His misgivings intensified as he learned that other workers—all, like him, unmarried Spanish-speaking men—had been meeting untimely ends. Drunk-driving accidents, barroom fights, drownings and drug overdoses. Each one seemed legit, but so many? A year ago, he wouldn't have cared. He hadn't cared much about anything after the meaningless carnage he'd seen in Afghanistan as a member of the Special Forces. But he had slowly rebuilt his life after leaving the service, taking on any job or opportunity that came his way, and his old instincts began to kick in. Building an underground bunker in the middle of nowhere made no sense. Nor did the passing mention of Drexel Hospital and electronic health records by the boss of that job—a sixty-something man known as El Jefe. He wondered, *is that the key to those deaths?*, and his own fate.

His antennae started ping-ponging on high alert a few days before when he sighted a familiar face across the hospital parking lot: Dr. Mason Fischer. They went way back. *No way Fischer was at Drexel by accident.*

"Subject is two miles from Jordan Lake Bridge," Benny called out. Torrence glanced at Benny, saw the boy's energy drink sitting nakedly on the workstation, and placed it on a coaster before looking back to the screen.

* * *

On any other day, the oversized panel truck tailgating his car would have irritated Gutierrez. Damned civilians. But not today. He considered slowing down just to annoy the jerk, but decided, *Why bother?* His phone rang. As he looked down to grab it, the panel truck whipped out across the double yellow line. *What the hell?* The truck was beside him in the oncoming lane as they crossed a bridge.

Suddenly it swerved toward him once, then twice. Gutierrez was all instinct and adrenaline now. The guardrail would save him. He'd slide into it at twenty-five-miles-per-hour, puncture the airbag, grab his Sig Sauer P226, and see if the bastard wanted to dance.

He slammed on the brakes, but instead of stopping his motion, the guardrail gave way like a bullfighter's cape.

His head hit the steering wheel, and the Honda plunged into the water.

The guardrail on the north side of the bridge, where the acid had been applied, was in shambles. The Honda Civic was no longer in sight, sinking to the bottom of the lake. The panel truck moved slowly, then accelerated off the bridge. A mile away, an empty eighteen-wheeler waited to swallow it. No record of it would ever exist. "Operation complete," Benny declared. Torrence smiled.

* * *

What Torrence and crew couldn't see was the small boat underneath the bridge, where a man was sleeping amidst the sloshing remnants of a Coors Light twelve-pack and a fifth of Old Crow before a violent splash awakened him.

The man considered doing nothing; every movement caused a ripple of pain that intensified the throbbing in his head. He heard a car door slam, an engine rev, and tires squeal from above. *They're going for help*, he thought, *and don't need me.*

Then he saw the black car beginning to sink and the outline of a man, solid and immobile. His conscience kicked in. He jumped in the water, swam to the car, unlocked the door, and grabbed for the seat belt. He found the latch and

unsnapped it. The victim slid out with little effort. The strength that comes with panic enabled him to drag the victim towards the shore. Another creaking movement and the car turned downward. In five seconds, it was gone. The vortex nearly sucked them both down.

The victim was badly injured. His right leg dragged at an awkward angle. He moaned indecipherable words. The deep gash on his forehead gushed. His savior gently laid him on a flat spot that some fisherman had cleared out. He removed his shirt, ripping off a sleeve to make a bandage for the man's head. He couldn't find his cell phone. He scabbled up the bank in time to see a car speed by. So did another, and another, until an elderly farmer in a pickup full of vegetables pulled over. The farmer had a phone. In minutes, the ambulance arrived and soon raced away, its lights flashing and sirens screaming.

* * *

Gutierrez was still unconscious when the ambulance reached Drexel's emergency room. His heart was racing, his blood pressure perilously low. His ribs were broken, his femur shattered. Doctors, nurses, and technicians descended upon him in Trauma Room One, working with crisp efficiency.

In an instant, his clothes were cut off, and the blood-soaked bandages were removed. The cuts on his forehead and deep wounds on his right leg were scrubbed clean with Betadine and re-banded. Anxious residents and nurses who weren't assigned to his case peered into the room before huddling in the corridor as they talked about his accident. It was a bad one.

"He works in Physical Plant," said one nurse. "One of the guys down there said he's working full time and trying to get a voc-tech degree. Now this."

"Scary," said Dr. Carrie Mumsford, a resident physician. "Could be any of us, as little rest as we get. I was still half asleep when I hit the road this morning."

An emergency medicine resident rushed out of Trauma Room One and was immediately collared by the others.

"What's the story?" Carrie demanded.

"Bad. The attending says it's touch and go. He's bleeding internally, but they can't figure out where. His leg is mangled, maybe an artery was severed. The EHR shows some sort of weird rhythm on his EKG. Are any of the cardiologists down here?"

"There's an acute MI in Critical Care Room Four, Mas ..." She stopped herself. "Dr. Fischer's there," said Carrie, referring to one of the newer cardiologists, Mason Fischer.

The emergency room resident hurried down the hall, an EKG in hand.

The emergency room crew threw everything at Gutierrez, but for each step forward, he took two steps back, toward the grave. Within ten minutes, Gutierrez had his third cardiac arrest.

"It's got to be the damned ventricular tachycardia," yelled the ER attending physician. "Get a cardiologist. Now!"

"He's here!" shouted the nurse in charge.

Dr. Mason Fischer read the initial EKG as he ran down the hall to Trauma Room One. It did not show ventricular tachycardia or any dangerous cardiac rhythm, just the very fast heart rate of a very stressed man with multiple injuries. A path to Gutierrez's side cleared as he rushed into the room.

He took one look at the man and did a double-take. The EHR data record open on the computer and the hospital ID band on his wrist read Jesse Gutierrez. *No way.* The man on the stretcher was an old friend, Longorio Cabreja.

They'd met at Fort Bragg. At 251 square miles and a population that ranges up to 50,000, it was the largest military installation in the world. Cabreja was a Delta Force commander when Fischer was assigned there, fresh out of medical school. They weren't quite twins—both were about six feet tall, with neatly cropped hair and lean, athletic frames. Maybe brothers from another mother. Fischer was fair with blue eyes and sandy-colored hair. Cabreja, his parents from Mexico, had brown eyes and dark brown, nearly black, hair.

They'd bonded over ice-cold bottles of Pabst Blue Ribbon and stories at the local dive bar. It turned out that Cabreja had grown up about an hour from Mason—little more than a stone's throw in central-west Texas, where goats and cattle far outnumbered people and the mesquite, live oaks and prickly pears coexisted with native grasses, at least in the years when there was enough rain to sustain something besides the scrub brush. After about six months, Cabreja shipped out for another tour in Afghanistan. That was a dozen years ago. Mason hadn't heard from him since. He'd assumed his friend was still in the game, or dead. That was the life of Delta Force soldiers.

The EHR said that the man on the ER table worked in Physical Plant. If that was all there was to it, Mason thought, what a terrible waste of the singular skills of a pinnacle warrior. Cabreja was clearly in extremis. A cursory exam revealed significant lung congestion, particularly on the left side, and crepitus, a grating sound consistent with rib fractures. He glanced again at the huge monitor hanging above the bed. The chest X-ray and CT scan were normal. No fluid, no fractures. That couldn't be right. Vital seconds ticked by.

"This guy's problem isn't cardiac," Mason said. "This looks like a severe deceleration injury. Rib fractures, fluid ... probably blood in his left lung. He may have a torn aorta. He needs to be in the trauma OR, not here!"

The attending physician was confused. "The chest X-ray and CT were normal."

"Those imaging studies have to be from another patient." Mason grabbed the other doctor's hand and pressed down on the broken ribs.

"Get the trauma team here," yelled the emergency medicine doctor. "Use the overhead. Where the hell are they?"

"Three minutes," was the response.

Mason looked back at the man. Was it really Cabreja? His friend had identifying marks. Not unique, but close to it in combination. Mason saw all three: the faintest outline where the tattoo had been, a coiled rattler ready to strike that had been lasered off, per Delta protocol to prevent enemy identification; a jagged appendectomy scar from a surgery done by a Delta medic in the mountains of Afghanistan; and a long scar along his left upper arm, a sign of his trade. *It's him*, Mason thought.

Then he heard a loud beep. Cabreja's blood pressure dropped again.

"Hang two more units," Mason instructed. "He's bleeding out."

Cabreja's eyes snapped open. He was awake and confused. A breathing tube connected to a ventilator precluded clear speech. Still, he tried.

Mason looked at him intently. Even in his critical condition, Cabreja's eyes smiled. Mason smiled as well as he grasped his shoulder.

"You're hurt bad, man. Broken ribs, bleeding ..."

Cabreja waved him off and tried to quickly speak—which was impossible with the endotracheal tube. When Mason shook his head, Cabreja slowly mouthed several words. It was clear Mason didn't understand what he was trying to say, but before Cabreja could continue, the monitors blared again. Mason looked up. The heart rhythm was unchanged, but the blood pressure had dropped again.

Cabreja was fading fast. He had to get the message to Mason. He tightened his jaw and slowly mouthed short syllables.

"Guv op ..." Guiterrez then mouthed the last two words of his life while holding up a single finger. "Our north."

"Government operation an hour north?" asked Mason. Cabreja gave a short nod, and then was out.

"Flatline. Defibrillate!" shouted the ER attending. "All clear."

Mason stepped back. The defibrillator fired. Cabreja's body jolted. The monitor was unchanged.

The trauma team arrived in force. "OR One is open," said the lead surgeon, "but I'm going to have to open him here." If Cabreja had any luck this day, it was that Drexel was one of the few hospitals that had a highly specialized critical care facility within the emergency room. Critical Care Room One was as fully equipped as any ICU room, anywhere. It could even be used as an operating room.

In less than a minute, Cabreja's chest cavity was visible. The surgeon recognized an enlarged and misshapen aorta, indicating that the accident had caused a tear between the layers of the aorta. The injury led to nearly 100 percent mortality within hours.

"He's got a big dissection. Jesus Christ, how did that get missed? And how did he hang on so long? He's dumped ten units of blood in his chest."

It was too little, too late. Half an hour later, they called it.

"Time of death is 8:38 AM."

Jesse Gutierrez, or Longorio Cabreja, was dead.

BETH H. MACY



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Beth has always wanted to write a spy novel that has a greater degree of humanity than many currently in the market. She has succeeded with her first book in the Moscow Nights series, *Moscow Nights Return*, by bringing forth a collection of realistic, complex individuals. Beth, through her years as a therapist, her background in the Navy, her work with corporations, her extensive travel, and her eclectic background, brings us into the book and the lives of the characters within.

Beth continues to write and has finished the sequel, *Moscow Misdirection*, the third book in the series, *Moscow Madness*, and book four, *Moscow Moles*. Book five, *Moscow Lost*, is with her editor. The books are published and available on Ingram Sparks, Amazon, Apple Books, and other platforms, as well as in the Jabberwocky Bookstore in Newburyport, MA.

Beth is evenly right brained and left brained and has tested as “cerebral.” She comes from a family of artists. She has had a career as a Mathematics teacher, an officer in the US Navy, Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), an ACE Certified Personal Trainer, a programmer, an artist, a videographer, and an author.

Beth has been a successful consultant in the high technology sector, having worked for such companies as Lotus Development, Apple Computer and IBM. She is a talented artist with her works in collections from New York to Australia. Beth's creativity extends into many areas: writing, videography, stained glass, oil painting and acrylics. Beth is focusing on her creativity as she transitions into her next stage of life.

Beth states: “As an artist, I like to bring to life the world around me, whether it be through the visual arts or the written word. It is my hope that my books help bring joy and greater vision to others.”

[Website](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Elda Ainsworth tore through the woods. The sun painted dabbled spots of brightness on the underbrush, making it more difficult to see ruts and holes. The sound of her feet crushing branches and leaves echoed loudly in her head, as her lizard brain urged her feet along. She skidded to a stop for a brief moment and listened. *Yes*—she could hear the distant din of muffled directions and broken twigs, revealing her chasers crashing through the woods behind her.

Speeding up, she wove between trees, to not leave a direct trail to follow. She careened around a sapling, tripped over a root, and jerked to stay upright. Her foot crushed a branch, and the sharp sound of the dry wood breaking reprimanded her woodsman skills and Native American heritage. If she could hear her pursuers, then they could also hear her. She ripped off her boots, tied them around her neck, and continued in her stockings. As she raced on, she could feel the twigs and branches scraping the bottom of her feet, but the sound was muted and she left fewer markers to follow.

Blood oozed from the swollen gums around her new crown, which hid a securely embedded microdot. She resisted the urge to spit out the metallic taste of blood and instead forced herself to swallow and not leave a trail. The pain in her mouth throbbed in time with her heartbeat and offset the pain in her feet. Her toe hit a hidden rock. She went

down, barely suppressing the sound of the air leaving her body. She pulled herself up into a quick squat and jerked all the way back upright, moving her feet before she even reached fully vertical.

Her pursuers were gaining on her.

Spying a hollow behind two trees, Elda willed her body toward it. Sweat ran down her face and along the sides of her body. She dove into the hollow and covered herself up with dirt, leaves, and twigs. Her heart pounded in her chest as she slowed her breath to a whisper. She was grateful that she was wearing dark clothing that would blend in well with the forest undergrowth and debris. She took a deep breath and pressed her head down into the dirt below.

Two hunters raced by, dressed in camouflage and carrying black, steel OTs-02 Kiparis semiautomatic machine guns. The large magazine capacities, laser pointers, silencers, and steel butts folded up against the guns told her all she needed to know—these men knew what they were doing. They stopped a short distance away. Elda could hear them arguing in Russian over which way to continue. Closing her eyes, she silently recited the Lord's prayer. She prayed that she would deliver the vital information she carried, knowing it would save many lives. Desperate for air, she slowly turned her head to take in shallow breaths, keeping her body perfectly still. After what seemed like an eternity, the two men started up again. She could tell from their retreating footsteps that they had veered off in the direction she needed to head.

Elda waited until she could no longer hear any sounds, forced herself to count to sixty to ensure all was clear, and lifted her head up. She rose and took a moment to orient herself. Realizing that the two assassins had gotten ahead of her now—and that others could follow—she calculated a different route to the extraction point. She took off at a rapid but quiet pace, perpendicular to her previous path.

Elda sat in a small interior room with a bright light focused on her face. She braced herself to handle the agony that would soon ensue. The man came closer to her with a set of dental instruments.

He stated, "I'm sorry that we do not have the facilities here to properly numb your mouth. We will need to yank the crown off and remove the information beneath it. After doing that, we will replace the crown."

Elda nodded at the embassy doctor, closed her eyes, and mentally transported herself to a different world. She tensed her neck to keep her head from turning as he twisted, and braced her head against the back of the chair to combat the yanking. As the pain intruded on her thoughts, she focused on it, softened it, breathed deeply, and allowed herself to float back to a state of lower pain. The grinding sound reverberated in her head as the doctor wrenched the crown off. The crown clinked into a metal tray—the first half of the procedure was over.

An intelligence officer standing by the doctor murmured his approval, as he collected the tiny data-chip in a small cup. He left to clean the chip and gather its information. The sharp smell of dental adhesive assaulted Elda's nostrils as the doctor pushed again and again on her jaw, forcing the crown back on.

"*Finito.*"

Elda opened her eyes and took a deep breath. She waited a few minutes to ensure she could stand without showing signs of weakness. "*Grazie.*" She shook his hand and checked her watch. *Just enough time to make it.* She jogged out of the room, her mouth pounding with each step.

She dashed out of the embassy and flagged down a taxicab. "*Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, per favore.*" As she hopped out of the cab, having thrown a generous tip in with her payment, she pulled the bloody cotton wad out of her mouth and tossed it into a nearby trash receptacle.

"*Stiamo chiudendo!*" a guard shouted to inform her the museum was closing. Elda brushed by the guard and rushed to get through the doors before they shut. He shouted, "*Fermati o sparo!*" and reached for his sidearm.

The angry words floated up to her, causing her to stop in her tracks. She turned, looked at the guard beseechingly, and showed him the palms of her hands to signify she wasn't a threat, while adding her most engaging smile, "*Si, Si.*"

Cinque minuti per favore. Voglio vedere Maria Maddalena.” She held her hand to her heart, cocked her head and raised both her hands in front of her chest, fingertips touching, as if in prayer.

“*Si.*” The guard, recognizing the imitated stance of Donatello’s statue, smiled at her and waved her on.

Panting from her dash into the museum, Elda stood admiring her favorite piece of art, the wooden Donatello statue of Mary Magdalene. Years of deprivation and suffering were etched on her craggy, but beautiful face. Standing there, for a brief moment Elda felt understood and accepted. Her own physical pain temporarily eased. Then, she tamped down her feelings of peace and assumed her mantle of alertness and callousness. She wished she could stay longer, but she had to return home and face Dawn.

Elda grabbed a taxi to the Florence airport and boarded the Alitalia flight to Boston. Once seated, she checked the backdated stamp on her passport. If Dawn checked that passport, it would show that she had been in Italy the entire time. She hated lying to Dawn. Elda’s restricted clearance forbade her from sharing information with those who did not have the same access. The fewer details Dawn knew, the less likely she could become a target, and the safer she would be.

Elda snapped to a sitting position in bed, panting and in a cold sweat. Her hands shook. She glanced to her left and noted that her partner, Dawn, was soundly sleeping. Dawn’s short, brown hair was tangled from their bedtime activities just a few hours earlier. Her hands were folded across her chest. As Elda looked at Dawn, her heart filled with warmth.

She envied Dawn’s ability to sleep so soundly—*when had she last been able to sleep through the night?* She wondered if she should try that meditation class Korinna and Dawn kept asking her to go to. It just seemed so frivolous and 1970s-style hippy-ish to Elda.

The aches from her trip still present, Elda slowly crawled out of bed. Dawn stirred and reached for her. Elda patted Dawn’s hand and murmured, “Go back to sleep, honey.”

Dawn groggily replied, “Dear, stay in bed. You were gone for days on your Italy vacation.”

“I can’t sleep. But I wish you liked to travel more. I’d love to show you Italy.”

“You know I hate flying. Move it closer to us and I’ll go.” Dawn rolled over and was immediately back to sleep.

Elda whispered, “I so wish I could fall asleep like that. Sleep well, honey.” A wave of guilt washed over her. She justified in her head that she didn’t *actually* lie to Dawn. After all, saying that she’d love to show Dawn Italy *was* the truth. She had left her duplicate passport out on the counter when she returned home. When she went to put it away, it had been moved slightly. Dawn must have checked the stamp on it.

Feeling better after her rationalization, Elda grabbed a black and red flannel shirt to put on over her T-shirt and padded barefoot down the oversized wooden stairs to look for something to distract herself from her memories. Her feet recoiled at each step as the hardwood met the bruises from her escape through the woods. The clicking of nails on the floorboards brought her attention to her small black and white dog, Vee, trotting behind her, happily wagging her tail. At the foot of the stairs Elda glanced at her Garmin GPS watch. It was only 22:00. She hoped she could get back to sleep after drinking a cup of warm milk. Perhaps a Tylenol would also be in order.

She strode across the wide planks of the well-worn wooden floor and across the tan-and-brick-colored natural stone tile floor in the kitchen. She flung open the stainless-steel refrigerator, grabbed the milk, and filled and heated a cup in the microwave. Stepping into the living room, she threw together some crumpled newspapers and small twigs and laid on top three small logs in a teepee position to start a fire in the fireplace. Once the fire was roaring, she plopped down onto the well-worn brown leather couch with her Apple MacBook Pro laptop.

Elda sipped her warm milk and logged in over the secure VPN into the government network to check her encrypted messages. One stood out—a high-priority message sent that morning from her boss in DC, Ed Wilson, 1 March 2019 at 18:00. *Darn it.* She opened it and read, Call me the minute you read this, no matter what time of day or night. It’s urgent.

She scratched her head and frowned. There went tonight's sleep. She snuck over the creaky old pine floors to the spare room downstairs, so she wouldn't wake up Dawn by using the secure phone in the bedroom.

Walking past the mirror hanging over the bureau in the room that contained her tiny makeshift office, Elda caught a glimpse of herself. Her naturally curly hair was all askew, jutting out at right angles from her head, and her brown eyes were wild, reflecting the red from the rim of her glasses and appearing more sunken than usual, due to her prominent cheekbones and the lighting. *Gads*, she looked rather scary.

She settled herself into her chair. Vee jumped up, placed her small white paws on Elda's thighs, and licked her hand.

"Mommy needs to make a call, Vee." Elda scratched Vee on her head while dialing a number on the secure hotline.

"You're going *where*?" Dawn shrieked at Elda.

Elda braced herself against Dawn's angry tirade and assured her, "Just to DC, honey. Ed needs me to consult on something."

Dawn shook her fist at Elda. "Damn it, Elda. You told me you were retiring. I never get time to do things with you. I feel as if I am all alone in this relationship." Dawn's lower lip started to quiver.

Elda took a deep breath to calm herself and avoid escalating the discussion into an argument. "I know I said I was retiring, honey. I am *really* trying to do that."

Dawn snarled, "Don't you 'honey' me, Elda. You *always* say you're going to retire, but you never really do. You promise me again and again, but then Ed calls and *off* you go again. You just got back from vacation, too!"

Voices raised, Elda and Dawn faced off at opposite ends of the kitchen table. Dawn, still in her PJs, had her hands on her hips and scowled at Elda. Elda, freshly showered and dressed in a button-down shirt and jeans, just stared at the ceiling, as if to find her answer for Dawn there. Vee lay on a small rug under the table, her head on her paws, watching the well-known routine with soulful brown eyes.

"You *were* on vacation, weren't you?"

Elda opened her mouth to speak, shut it, glanced briefly at Dawn and then at the floor. Pain shot up her jaw and into her skull as she clenched her teeth to keep from retorting something she'd later regret.

"Oh *no*, don't tell me you weren't! What did you *really* do in Italy?"

Elda grimaced. "You know I can't tell you that, honey."

Dawn tensely shook her finger at Elda. She glared and breathed heavily. She slammed her foot down, spun to leave, and then turned back, her face reddened and blotched. She pointed at Elda and yelled, "Damn it, no! Don't tell me. I don't want to know." Dawn stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

Elda sadly watched her go, took a deep breath and then a sip of her now lukewarm coffee to wash down the bile in her throat. Her head pounded and her stomach churned as her body fought the war inside. She weighed years of devotion and service to her job and country and being of aid to many others, even saving lives, against her own happiness and relationship. Her heart clenched. She sighed deeply and looked down at Vee. "Should I follow her or just let her cool down, Vee?"

Vee popped up, wagged her tail, and then ran off to get a toy to cheer her mummy up. Elda patted Vee on the head when Vee plopped a well-chewed ducky on top of her foot. "Okay, Vee. I'll play with you. I'll give her some space."

She shook off the pain and loneliness that had flooded her and watched Vee run after the toy. She wondered if all relationships were this complicated. Vee trotted back and plopped Ducky down again. "Good girl, Vee. Your other mommy will come around, right?"

Silence filled the room.

Toshchiy Chelovek held tightly onto the edges of his leather seat as the chopper spun out of control, careening toward the earth. *Govno. Shit. This is it. This is how it all ends*, he thought. Sweat beaded up on his forehead, but his face showed no sign of distress.

Silent and focused on his instruments, the pilot tried to start the engine, which responded by sputtering and dying again. The chopper yawed, pitched, and rolled as plummeted downward. Tosh could feel his heart in his throat. He concentrated on his breathing, willing himself to stay calm. Checking the radar screen, he tried to see where the airplane that shot them down had gone. The screen didn't tell him much, but Tosh knew the enemy would return to ensure they had killed everyone. The pilot's hands flew over the instruments. The blades caught. And then stopped. Started. Died. The chopper bucked up and down. Gasoline vapors permeated the cockpit.

Suddenly the engine coughed back to life. The blades reengaged, and the craft stabilized and rose upward. The pilot fought with the controls to level the helicopter and get more altitude. He grazed the tops of the trees, battling to reach an opening in the sea of trees below. The chopper bucked and the engine sputtered, but the blades whirled and caught the air. The pilot brought the copter safely down with a jolt, barely missing the surrounding trees.

He cut the engine and turned to Tosh. "I apologize. I almost lost the craft." A strong smell of oil lingered in the air, and whiffs of dark smoke seeped from the engine.

Tosh grabbed his handkerchief and patted his brow. His fingers were still white from gripping the seat so hard. But his voice was steady. "No, no need to apologize. You saved our lives. I owe you one. Now, quick, let's remove the portable radio, survival gear, and torch the craft so it appears as though we crashed."

Tosh grabbed the survival kit and the pilot hefted out the portable radio. They both jumped out of the chopper. Tosh leaned back in and threw everything flammable in a pile on the pilot's seat. The pilot added some dry kindling he had gathered and then threw a lit flare from the survival kit onto the pile. The pyre went up with a whoosh.

The two men jogged a short distance on unsteady legs and threw themselves onto the ground in the woods. Behind them, the helicopter ignited in a ball of fire, and thick black smoke spiraled upwards through the air.

Tosh ordered the pilot, "Erase our footprints and burrow down into the forest floor. We will cover ourselves with leaves and hide until that plane passes by and reports our demise. Then, we will hop on our lift home." He took a shovel from the emergency kit and dug a hole to hide the portable radio. Meanwhile, the pilot had smoothed the ground where their feet had disturbed it and returned to Tosh's side. Tosh handed the shovel to the pilot, who dug himself a shallow ditch and then crawled into it, covering himself with dirt and leaves with Tosh's assistance.

Breathing deeply, Tosh savored another chance at life, then went to work digging out a grave-like trench of his own. He had barely crawled in when the buzz of an approaching low flying aircraft filled his ears. Tosh lay there, breathing in the musty scent of leaves, for what seemed like an interminable time. The plane made two passes over the site before wheeling around and heading back to its home base. Tosh popped up, yelled an all clear to the pilot, and, using his bare hands, dug the radio out. "Hurry! We don't have much time. They will send a search party to go through the wreckage. We need to be gone by then."

Tosh powered up the radio, spun the dial to a frequency only Tosh and his support team knew and started broadcasting. "Mayday! This is Toshchiy Chelovek. My helicopter is down. We need immediate pickup."

Static filled the air—a voice answered. "Do you have your coordinates?"

The pilot grabbed the microphone and stated the coordinates. The voice on the other end repeated them and added, "We will be there in one half hour."

Tosh took out his black, semi-automatic SR-1 Vector pistol, popped out the cartridge and counted the rounds of body-armor-piercing ammunition that he had for it. The Vector was so perfectly proportioned, like a solidly built athlete, with the tapered line leading out from the grip to the barrel. After relishing the familiar heft of his gun, his hand hugging the ribbed grip, he slipped it back into his side holster. He then dug into the survival kit and found a

rectangular, semi-automatic PYa pistol with two additional magazines of ammunition and handed them to the pilot. “I assume you know how to shoot?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Save the last bullet for yourself. Know that if you falter, I will be saving *two* bullets.”

The pilot nodded and hefted the gun, checking the sights. He and Tosh stood behind a small grove of trees watching the chopper burn in the glade. After twenty-five minutes, they heard sounds in the distance—an enemy recovery team bushwhacking their way through the dense undergrowth.

Tosh turned and pointed his gun toward the noise. “I calculate we only have a few minutes before they get within range.”

“*Ser?*”

“Yes?”

“If it comes to a choice, I will cover your escape.”

“I will keep that in mind, but I have *never* left a man behind.”

Overhead, they heard an unmistakable *whoop-whoop*. In seconds, a black helicopter swooped over them and dropped the end of a rope ladder into the clearing. “*Run!*” Tosh yelled as he fired a blast of warning shots behind him. “*Go!*”

Tosh and the pilot sprinted across the clearing. Bullets sprayed from the woods. They both leapt onto the ladder and were lifted up into the air as their pursuers emerged from the woods and sprayed bullets at them. The two men scrambled up the ladder to reach the floor of the helicopter.

Once inside, the pilot collapsed. Tosh tore open the pilot’s jacket, only to see blood spurting from his chest. A round had torn through his back and left a gaping hole in his torso. The pilot smiled weakly at Tosh. “I did well, didn’t I, sir?”

Tosh paused briefly to ensure his voice was steady. “Yes, you did. Go in peace now. We will take good care of your wife and son.”

The pilot breathed deeply and gurgled. Blood gushed out of his mouth and his eyes rolled in his head. Tosh reached out and gently shut the man’s eyelids.

The next morning, Tosh jerked awake. He had kicked off his covers and was clenching his pillow. He took a moment to orientate himself to his bedroom and looked over at his partner sleeping peacefully on the other side of their bed. Quietly he snuck out, taking care not to jiggle the mattress. He stood up and felt his muscles complain about yesterday’s activities. A sharp pain shot through his neck, which seized as he turned to grab his black and white checkered robe from the back of a nearby chair. He massaged his neck and slipped his robe over his plain black pajamas. His hands smoothed down the sides, feeling the cozy softness of the material. Well-made utilitarian clothes were a weakness of his. He did consider the pattern to be a bit garish, but it was a Christmas present last year, which meant he needed to wear it or fess up that he didn’t much like the design. Wearing it was much easier than any discussion. Tosh was a man of few words, and he chose those few carefully.

He ran his hands through his short cropped gray hair and shook his head, attempting to clear the physical sensation of spinning out of control toward death. He lifted his laptop from the bedside table. He plodded barefoot over the linoleum floor to the kitchen, to make himself a cup of tea and read any messages that may have come in during the night. He glanced at his Apple watch while walking, noting that it was 06:00 and the time he would normally rise.

He sipped his tea while rocking back and forth in a straight back wooden chair at a small metal table in the kitchen. He thought that he really should get new chairs. This one was rather wobbly.

He held his hand to the pulse in his throat and registered that it was rather rapid. Breathing deeply to lower his respiration rate and blood pressure, he opened his Toshiba computer and logged in to his secure network. One message was flagged as urgent.

He felt his pulse quicken with anxiety. Wondering how long the message had been sitting there, he checked the header and saw that it was sent on that morning, 2 March, and sighed from relief that he hadn't missed it. "*Govno*. I have to call the Kremlin and see what's up," he muttered to himself.

He recognized that it was unlike him to swear anymore. It seemed that the near crash had him more upset than he realized. He strode over to the brown-and-white tiled linoleum and down the hall to his study. There he reached across his wooden desk, picked up the secure line, and dialed a private extension.

Tosh arrived punctually at 07:30 at Alexei Alexeev's office in the Kremlin. The musty smell of the anteroom assaulted his nostrils. Alexei's secretary, who appeared sunk in her chair for eons, lethargically waved him on. Tosh strode forward and opened the inner door to Alexei's office. The smell of stale sweat and old coffee floated past Tosh's nose.

Alexei pulled his six-foot two-inch frame from behind his large, highly polished, wooden desk and lumbered over the aged oriental rug to shake Tosh's hand. Tosh noticed that Alexei had sucked in his paunchy gut as he stood.

"*Prevet, Tosh. Pozhaluyta sidet.*" Alexei motioned to the rigid wooden Mission style guest chair and settled his large body behind his desk into his high-back leather office chair. He smoothed the top of his greying hair and adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. "We have a need for you and your team. Are they ready?"

"Yes sir, they are," Tosh replied confidently.

Alexei narrowed his eyes and inquired, "Who are you planning to use?"

Having been told that Alexei liked to let his subordinates know he was in charge and micromanage operations, Tosh informed him, "I think you are familiar with them. Anatoly Petrov, Snezhana Chelovek, and Yuri Kuznetsov."

Alexei nodded. "Anatoly is a good choice. I understand that he is KGB and GRU trained and an excellent assassin?"

Suppressing his impatience at the waste of time taken to fill this man in, Tosh flatly replied, "Yes sir. He is an expert at many weapons, accomplished at assassination with his bare hands, and overall is a killing machine."

Alexei smiled a thin smile. He continued probing, "Good. And Yuri was on your last operation, wasn't he? Didn't he used to work with the Americans?"

His grey eyes steely, Tosh continued the game, "Yes sir. He has had an assortment of training by the Mafia, KGB and GRU, but is not of the right temperament to be an assassin. He is a master of logistics and was very useful to the Mafia in their drug running business."

"Interesting choice ... Chelovek ... That wouldn't be a relative of yours, would it?"

Tosh willed his jaw muscles to relax enough to speak without clenching his teeth. "Yes sir. She is my sister's daughter's child. She has inherited my photographic memory and has an interest in the business. I am giving her a limited trial, since she is smart, trainable, and may be useful with her ability to manipulate others, especially men."

Alexei snorted.

Tosh ignored Alexei's disdain and responded, "I believe, that with Anatoly, Snezhana, and Yuri, I can win at anything. We are ready."

MEMOIRS & NON-FICTION

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HIS ART
KEPT HIM ALIVE.

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BAU
ARTIST
AT WAR

J O S E P H B A U

FOREWORD BY CLILA BAU-COHEN AND HADASA BAU
INTRODUCTION BY SEAN MCNAMARA, DIRECTOR OF THE FILM *BAU: ARTIST AT WAR*
AFTERWORD BY INBAR LAVI

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“Sensitive and highly readable, this is an important addition to the literature of the Holocaust.”

-*LIBRARY JOURNAL* (STARRED REVIEW)

* * *

A classic memoir that is both an inspiring true love story and a historical espionage thriller, *Bau: Artist at War* comes at a critical moment when the last survivors of the German concentration camps are dying and the Holocaust is slipping from memory. Includes a foreword by Clila Bau-Cohen and Hadasa Bau and an introduction by Sean McNamara, director of the major motion picture of the same name.

In a memorable scene from Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*, viewers the world over witnessed the clandestine marriage of two Jews in the Płaszów concentration camp: Joseph and Rebecca Bau. At once a tale of horror and beauty, *Bau: Artist at War* is one man’s memoir of a miracle: the bloom of love in the depths of a Nazi concentration camp.

In his painstaking prose, Joseph Bau also shares his experience of other wartime traumas—the bombing of Kraków, the brutality of the ghetto, the harsh last days at Oskar Schindler’s factory—with surprising wit and irony, a tone enhanced by his brilliant black-and-white drawings. Above all, Bau’s story is a celebration of his wife, Rebecca. Married in secret, they had a mutual devotion that fueled their humor, resiliency, and ultimate triumph in the face of unspeakable evil.

“One of the most incredible memoirs to come out of the Holocaust.”

-*BOOKLIST*

Paperback: 9798228017566 / \$18.99

eBook: 9798228017542 / \$9.99

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Joseph Bau (1920–2002), a Polish-born Israeli painter and animator known as “Israel’s Walt Disney,” was a renowned artist, philosopher, inventor, comedian, author, poet, and Holocaust survivor who helped save hundreds of lives.

FOREWORD

BY THE BAU DAUGHTERS

We could tell many stories about our parents, but no story could ever fully describe their love, humanity, and extraordinary personalities. We came into this world from the greatest love. Throughout our lives, our parents shared everything they had endured during the Holocaust. But Dad would also invent jokes and tell them to Mom. And Mom ... she would laugh. She had a laugh that could lift the ceiling. Anyone around her couldn't help but laugh along. They were so happy, and their happiness enveloped us.

We lived in a very small apartment—just two rooms. My sister and I shared one room, which had a door leading to a tiny kitchen where only two people could stand at once. The refrigerator wouldn't fit there, so it stayed in our room. The second room served as the living room. At night, the sofa would open up into a bed where Mom and Dad slept. Mom also worked with clients in that room as a medical cosmetologist. The table was for manicures, meals, and homework. We had a garden where Mom grew medicinal plants for the creams she made, along with vegetables, many flowers that she loved, and fruit trees.

“Why do we live in such a small apartment?” we sometimes asked our parents. “Maybe we should move to a bigger place?” “We are happy,” they would reply. “Will another room make us happier?”

They were right.

Our home was always full of people who loved to visit. Mom always welcomed everyone with a glass of carrot or apple juice, sweets, and sandwiches. Such hospitality wasn't found in other homes.

Our parents' love was very simple and evident in the small things.

When Mom was pregnant with Hadasa in Poland, Dad came home and saw Mom washing the floors.

“I'm leaving you!” Dad shouted.

“Why? What happened?” Mom asked, alarmed.

“Because you're washing the floors. That's a man's job. If I ever see you doing that again, you won't see me anymore!”

For the rest of his life, Dad did the floors, dishes, and grocery shopping. Dad always wanted other men to learn from him, as he believed the greatest love wasn't about money or trips abroad but the small, daily acts that build the beauty of a relationship. This, he said, would keep a couple happy and together for life. Mom understood Dad, and Dad understood Mom. They were a very wise couple.

Dad would open his studio at eight in the morning. At two p.m. he would come home for lunch and take a ten-minute nap—to recharge his battery. At precisely four o'clock, he would return to the studio and work late into the night. Today, we understand that he could have eaten at the studio. But it was important for him to have lunch with Mom and us. He always asked about our day at school and what we were learning. He explained anything we didn't understand. In essence, Dad was our “Google.” We didn't need to look things up in an encyclopedia because Dad loved explaining things to us.

When our parents arrived in Israel, they were alone. Both of their families were murdered in the Holocaust. They came without a penny, as they weren't allowed to bring money, and they didn't speak a word of Hebrew. Upon arrival, they were placed in a transit camp. Living conditions were very hard, and they slept in a tent. Later, they lived for several years in an apartment shared by three families.

We found a letter that Dad wrote to his uncle in which he said, “There are people who have a big house and a car, and look at their faces, they're always sour, always complaining. We lived in an apartment with three rooms, with

a different family in each room, sharing a kitchen and bathroom, and we are happy to be in our wonderful country. This is the best place to raise our girls. They are happy here.”

For our parents, theater, galleries, and museums were more important than buying clothes. Every Saturday we went to galleries and exhibitions, and Dad would explain the painters and styles to us. Our parents sent us to all the children’s movies and plays, unlike other kids. Dad would wait outside because there wasn’t enough money for another ticket. When we came out, he always asked us questions: “How was the scenery, their diction, the lighting? Did it feel like a play, or did it seem real?”

Our parents were our real teachers for life. We don’t remember them ever spending money on themselves—everything was for us. From a young age, we had notebooks that our parents bought, and they taught us to do a good deed every day and write about it. Dad always said, “What’s important is that you are kind and help others.”

When it rained and Dad saw people waiting at the bus stop, which didn’t have shelters back then, he would pick them up for free and take them all the way to their workplace. One day, he received a letter from the bus company that they would sue him for competing with them. Reluctantly, Dad hung a sign on the car window, and when he passed the bus stop, he pointed to it and apologized that he could no longer take people.

Mom also helped everyone. When she saw a poor woman, she would approach her, ask how many children she had, and get her address. Then she would gather clothes from the neighbors and send them to her. She also sent packages to people in Poland who had helped her. Mom never forgot them. She sent them used clothes, which they sold. This was during the Communist era, when they didn’t have any money.

Since Mom was a nurse, the whole neighborhood knew that before running to the emergency room, they should first ask Rebecca what to do, and she would help.

Mom and Dad believed in miracles. Each morning, Mom would wake up and say, “Every minute is a miracle. Thank you for this new and beautiful day.” Then she would give milk to the cats, give water to the dog, and wet some dry bread for the birds (they would fly right to her).

In many homes, parents would rest on Shabbat and do nothing with the children, but we would go on trips all over the country and take our friends. Dad, who was also an artistic photographer, always loved to photograph and film us. None of our friends have as many pictures, and who else had sixteen-millimeter staged films from the age of three? Sometimes, Shabbat would turn into filming day, and our home would be transformed into something else each time.

Dad would make us posters for school during the holidays on topics we were studying. He didn’t sign his name; he wrote “Hadasa’s dad” or “Clila’s dad.” When we were in second grade and received our Torah books, he drew a huge poster with Moses holding the Ten Commandments. The teachers hung Dad’s paintings every year, even in other classrooms.

Dad used to go to schools to talk about the Holocaust and brought his striped uniform. The students sat wide eyed. Dad told stories with humor so that the children wouldn’t be too scared to listen.

People asked him, “How do you dare write with humor about the Holocaust?”

“I’m allowed because I was there, and I want young students to want to read about it. Humor is the way they’ll be able to read and learn.”

Dad was right. Many schools have bought his book for their students.

Our parents spoke about the Holocaust very openly. We grew up with the stories. Many people told our parents not to tell us, but they didn’t listen, and we are very proud of them. This is the reason we are continuing their work.

As children, we shared what we heard at home. Neighbors would come to our parents and say, “Clila and Hadasa are telling horrible stories; tell them to stop immediately.”

“But we have to tell what we went through,” Mom and Dad said. “They’re not making anything up—it’s the truth. What will happen in fifty years if someone says the Holocaust never happened? It’s our duty to tell.”

One thing our parents didn’t tell us—that they saved hundreds of Jews, risking their own lives.

Mom secretly wrote diaries titled *In the Name of God*, which we found after her death. She detailed how she saved many in the ghetto and concentration camps, which we didn't know. As for our dad's memoir, *Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?*, he didn't tell how he'd saved hundreds of Jews—we heard about that from others.

People talk nowadays about being part of the second generation of Holocaust survivors.

Many ask us, "Do you feel that way, too?"

At first, we didn't even understand what they were talking about. We were told that in other homes, the Holocaust was not discussed, and parents were sad and nervous. The children sensed something was wrong but didn't know what. In our home, they told stories and encouraged others to do the same. They were not ordinary parents at all. They were so open.

They were the best parents and our best friends, always knowing how to give support, advice, and encouragement. Our parents' motto was that in every bad situation, you can find something good, and everything should be done with humor and laughter. We could go on telling stories for days and always remember more. Friends from the past have told us that they don't remember many homes from their childhood, but they will never forget ours and our extraordinary parents.

We consulted with Mom about every problem, and she always had a good solution. To this day, when we don't know what to do, we wish we could consult with her. She had blue-violet eyes—kind, incredibly wise eyes.

Mom knew nine languages, which saved her life during the Holocaust, so she decided to teach us. She taught us both Polish and taught German to Hadasa.

Mom was the backbone of the family, encouraging everyone. She always saw the good in everything. Her motto was "*Będziesz wszystko dobrze*," which means, "Everything will be fine." Dad's motto was "Whatever you see, do it differently." From our parents, we learned to love people.

When Dad was in the hospital, he contracted an infection. Despite all the suffering and pain he endured, he didn't stop making the doctors and nurses laugh.

Someone asked, "Joseph, where did you find the strength to save people during the Holocaust, and now you're suffering so much but still have the strength to tell jokes?"

Dad replied, "'Strength' is not the right word; 'love' is." That was Dad's last sentence before passing away.

We can define our parents in one word—legends!

—Clila Bau-Cohen and Hadasa Bau

INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to the idea of making *Bau: Artist at War* as a feature film in 2019. Deborah Smerecnik had written an incredible screenplay about Joseph Bau's life and his wife, Rebecca. What struck me at first was that I felt I knew this story. Indeed, I had seen a glimpse of it in Steven Spielberg's classic *Schindler's List*. They were the couple that married inside the Płaszów barracks in Kraków, Poland. I asked if the material was based on interviews or a biography. Deborah quickly sent me Joseph Bau's memoir, *Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?*, and it changed my life forever. The book led me to make the most important film in my life. It helped me find the artist that was lurking just below the surface of my soul. The artist that strives to change lives for the better through inspiration.

Before I read the book, I paged through and looked at Joseph Bau's illustrations in every chapter. I would stare at them for long periods of time over the next few months, realizing what an incredible artist Joseph was. The fanciful drawings spoke to me.

Black-and-white charcoal masterpieces, mostly from his time in the concentration camp. They were a lens into his soul, which I suppose as artists we all strive to create. These drawings wrecked me and inspired me at the same time. You will see them as I did in the pages of this book.

From the cover illustration of Jews lined up to enter the camp—only to leave as smoky spirits marching into the sky—I found myself at a loss to describe an artist who expresses his life like blood cut from his wrist onto a canvas. His memoir moved me to believe that this film could change lives. Starting with me. But how could I ever tell Joseph Bau's story? How could I ever become the artist he was to express what I felt on-screen? To this point, I had led a charmed life in Burbank, California. I grew up pretty normal without a care in the world. My dad gave me my first camera on a family trip to Ireland. I'm the typical story of a director who films what he sees and first entertains his family and his friends, then eventually an audience.

What I always loved about being a director was that I had a little secret. I could work with real artists on the crew who knew everything about their skill. A cinematographer, a production designer. A costume designer. Editors, composers, and of course the incredibly talented actors I've been blessed to work with. I knew a little about what each did. I was a "jack-of-all trades and master of none." I learned from the best. I told stories about surfer girls and families with funny kids, as well as inspirational tales of people who would come back from huge losses. I was unaware of the truest artist I would ever meet, Joseph Bau, through his art and his children.

The Bau production team flew to Poland and to Israel to do research in March of 2020. I met Joseph and Rebecca's daughters, Clila and Hadasa, and they led me into their father's museum, where he created most of his art after the Second World War. It was magnificent. Now I saw Joseph's work that he had made in Israel in color. They were the most beautiful paintings I'd ever seen. Such color. Such vibrancy. A deep message with comic overtones. I wanted to make movies like Joseph could draw with the flick of his wrist and a paintbrush. I was humbled. I was enamored. I fell in love with the artist whose work was speaking to me. Yelling at me, "Make something important and worthwhile."

The art: A woman with lipstick that looked like a bullet, wearing a vest with more colorful bullets. A man picking flowers. Political drawings about the USA and Israel. I loved them all. Tears literally came to my eyes as I looked at every painting. I am not worthy to tell the story of such an important man. A man who saved lives. A man who risked his life for others.

And on that day, I prayed. I asked Joseph to guide me. I said, "I will tell your story through your art." On that day, I decided to use as much of Joseph Bau's art in our movie as I could. I wanted the world to see it. Hopefully, when people watch the movie, they will look deeper on the internet or possibly travel to Tel Aviv to see his museum in person. They'll be happy they did. When I made the movie in 2023, I thought I was making a film about a terrible event eighty years ago. Then during postproduction, the horrible events of October 7 transpired, and I realized the story was just as true now. The antisemitism that existed so long ago is still here. I could not believe it. I realized the horror that Joseph and Rebecca lived through, and six million Jews died for, has not left this world.

It is more important than ever for artists to stand up and use their art to change the world. To protect and focus a lens on the terrible and beautiful things that happen every day around each and every one of us. To stand up to injustice through whatever art is yours. Paintings, songs, poems, and films.

I hope I conveyed one-tenth of Joseph's genius and brilliance as an artist and savior of so many innocents. May many more stand on his shoulders.

We can change the world. A charcoal drawing. A watercolor. A sculpture, or a movie made by a director whose only dream in life is to inspire the artist in all of us. I really do believe that hope and kindness are the keys to the future. I learned that is possible from the incredible art gifted to us by Joseph Bau.

—Sean McNamara,
director of *Reagan*, *Soul Surfer*, and *Bau: Artist at War*



In the middle of the summer of 1939, I went with my mother to the market to shop for fruit. After carefully examining almost every stand, Mother stopped at one presided over by a rather corpulent woman and asked, “How much for these apples?” Despite her sumptuous build, the woman quoted a lean price:

“Twenty groschen a kilo.”

Since it was customary for the vendors there to inflate their prices in order to leave room for bargaining, Mother assumed she was expected to follow the ritual. “Won’t you take fifteen groschen for these rejects?” she asked.



The fat woman rose from her stack of sacks, lifted her pudgy hands toward the cloudy sky, and intoned a prayer: “O God, who art in heaven, pour down a hail of fire upon these terrible people.”

Overcome by fear, we ran home with empty shopping bags. A few weeks later the war broke out, and bombs started raining down on Kraków from the sky. As Mother collapsed in terror, I asked with unconcealed irony, “Well, Mom, did it pay to bring about all this calamity for your five groschen?”



THE HOUSE THAT WAS

There was a house once, and in this house each tenant lived in a private world, where secrets and memories crowded within decorated walls ...

Until the strangers came to destroy this world. They tore off the roof and, without anesthetic, began to yank the walls apart, brick by brick.

Doors stood agape in confusion, windows were blinded in their sleep, electricity died in a tangle of copper wires, walls collapsed and ceilings plunged down, corners vanished, and the streets were strewn with priceless heirlooms and the souls of battered relics and heaps of possessions laden with memories.

People rummaging in the rubble for past worlds spread their arms in helpless sorrow:
“Where are our treasures now?”

Men wept and women, their young clinging to their skirts, scratched away at the mounds with their fingernails to recover some precious remnant.

Nearby houses looked on with indifference, as one of their own was wiped from the map.

Neighbors scoured the texts of the sages to find some reason or rhyme for one building's destruction, hoping the sacrifice would serve their salvation. And no man tried to intervene, for fear of risking his immunity ...

Until the strangers rolled up their sleeves outside his house.



It happened in occupied Kraków some two years after the start of World War II. Having removed the Jewish population from the protection of the law, the Germans proceeded toward their Final Solution of total annihilation. A curfew was enforced between the hours of nine p.m. and six a.m. Jews were banned from trains and streetcars and ordered to wear armbands with a blue Star of David on a white background. The children were expelled from the local schools, and every Jew had to carry a *Kennkarte*, a yellow identity card issued by the police.

Yet some Jews were denied these cards, which made them subject to immediate deportation by way of the infamous “transports.” My brother Marcel and I belonged to this group. With the aid of pull and a large sum of money, our father managed to procure forged cards for us from the regional council in Olsha, a village on the outskirts of the city. These would pass casual inspection, but if they were discovered to be fakes, we would incur the usual punishment—a bullet in the head.

After a frantic search for lodging in the village, we arranged for the use of a couch in the home of a Christian chimney sweep, at an exorbitant monthly rent. However, this was available only between nine p.m. and eight a.m. In the daytime, we were forced to roam Olsha’s lanes and byways.

The locals regarded us with a mixture of fear and outright hostility. Their fear was due to the danger to their lives should they be found aiding or cooperating with Jews. On the other hand, the proximity of a military air base caused them to mistrust strangers of any sort. No one bothered to ask for our identity or place of abode, but we were aware of people’s scrutiny at our every step.

It was an unusual winter. At times, a frosty wind covered the ground with sleet; on other days, our wretched world was engulfed by a cold Siberian gale that spread mounds of snow and thick layers of solid ice. We envied the fortunate ones who were safely in their homes.

With no place to seek shelter until the night, Marcel and I were forced to stay outdoors. Soaked to the bone and shivering from cold, we trudged through the snow and limped over the sparkling ice, until we felt our brains solidify from the frost. To keep our spirits up, we chatted about the pleasures of life before the war. We tried exchanging jokes and even managed to laugh a little. However, the bitter reality soon overcame our attempts at levity and turned them into macabre jests, too gruesome for words.

Each afternoon, we lingered behind a kiosk, opposite the last streetcar stop, to await the arrival of our younger brother, ten-year-old Iziu, who would bring us a pot of soup and a summary of the latest news. He didn’t look particularly Jewish, so he didn’t stand out among his fellow travelers. However, a sudden check of identity papers or a denunciation by some suspicious passenger could easily have cost him his life.

After we had endured the freezing outdoors for three months, Iziu came with the usual pot of soup and some disturbing news—all the Jews were being ordered to move into the ghetto. Our parents asked us to come home in order to help pack what was left of our possessions.

That night, in violation of the racial laws and the curfew, we removed the Star of David armbands and boarded a streetcar. Marcel sat in the front row behind the driver, while I chose the last row, near the exit. That way, at least one of us would be able to jump out in the event of a Nazi trap. Ordinarily, the ride into the city took no more than half an hour, but on that particular night, time seemed to be standing still, and the streetcar, as if in cahoots with our persecutors, traveled at a snail’s pace. I tried staring out the window, but all I could see was the reflections of the other passengers and the car’s interior. Behind my calm facade, my heart was in my throat, and only the sound of the wheels on the tracks was louder than the throbbing of the blood in my veins.

Oh, how we longed to see Mother, Father, Iziu, and our apartment! At home, they welcomed us back like brave heroes—not with medals but with an avalanche of kisses. For the first time in three months, we enjoyed the luxury of a home-cooked meal and the ecstasy of a warm bath.

After two years of German plunder and confiscations, there was precious little to pack. Nevertheless, it took a whole night and day to prepare our memory-laden household for the move. Father was spared much of the unhappy chore, since he went out before dawn to look for transport. If only he could find a way to move the beloved coziness of our youth to the ghetto!

This was turning out to be a lucrative season for those who owned some means of transport. They turned the Jews’ misfortune to profit, and no price was too high; no conditions were unreasonable. That evening we carried our dearest belongings downstairs and loaded them into a farm wagon that was attached to a miserable, bony nag and normally used to haul manure to the fields. We bade a hasty goodbye to the apartment, and without the appropriate eulogies, Father surrendered the key to the caretaker. Such was our parting! A few more words, a few tears, another

look at the third-floor windows, and a few final kisses, perhaps really final—who could know? A long, gloomy night lay ahead of us, without the prospect of any improvement in the morning ...

Mother, Father, and Iziu trailed behind the squealing, smelly wagon, as if forming a funeral procession for our relics on their last journey, to the Kraków ghetto. Marcel and I discreetly removed the armbands from our sleeves again and boarded a streetcar. Our return trip was uneventful. Afraid of being caught by the approaching curfew, we replaced the armbands as soon as we got off and hurried toward some relief on the rented couch, at least until the morning.

Just then, a Jew, thoroughly soaked, darted out of the darkness and, without stopping, warned us that an SS man was posted on the bridge ahead and was plunging any Jew who wanted to cross into the deep waters of the river. Without asking for details, we hastily reversed direction and began to run. All at once, it dawned on us that we had no place to go. The apartment was no longer ours; it was locked and the key in the hands of the caretaker, who had never been fond of Jews. Our family was by now in the ghetto, which it was impossible to enter at this late hour, especially without proper documents. We found ourselves on a strange street, with the curfew breathing down our necks.

Instead of achieving the hoped-for security of our rented couch, we were obliged to remove the armbands again and risk the consequences. We desperately needed an alternate route to our village. In order to avoid suspicion, we proceeded at a leisurely pace. On entering the first side street, though, we became engulfed by total darkness and quickly lost our sense of direction.

One thing was certain: We couldn't risk the danger of asking anyone for help. We had to find another bridge, if one existed, and keep away from the air base.

In order to be taken for local residents, we decided to act like a couple of drunks, reeling unsteadily and shouting curses and obscenities at each other. Marcel walked ahead; I trailed behind. The black darkness, our utter confusion, and the fear of encountering antisemites helped us to express ourselves in a most foul and disgusting manner.

"Drop dead, you dirty sonofabitch, but first give me back the money you owe me," I yelled.

"Screw you, you crazy bastard. Shut up before I bash your goddamn head in," Marcel countered.

This is only a weak translation from the Polish, a language blessed with Russian expletives that are almost impossible to render into English.

All at once, without warning, we were confronted by a band of young thugs brandishing sticks and clubs. Their apparent leader turned the beam of a flashlight in my face, which was still contorted by the words I was mouthing, and, manifestly satisfied, shouted to his gang, "Look, boys, these can't be dirty Jews—they're just like us. Let them go!" It had worked! Relieved, we continued to stumble and curse, blessing our intimate knowledge of obscenities.

Wearily, we kept lifting our tired legs, not knowing where they would lead us. Only by the rustling of the reeds and the sloshing of the mud under our feet did we know we had left the main road and entered an open field. Nearby, we could hear the sounds of the river, whose banks were caressed by the flow. It seemed so near but beyond our reach in the starless night.

Ready to leap back to safety at any sign of danger, I pressed forward, gingerly placing one foot ahead of the other and testing the ground. Marcel trudged behind me, still cursing at the top of his lungs while trembling with fear: "Cruddy river, you sonofabitch, I hope you dry up and die of thirst! I hope the goddamn fish drink you up to the last drop!"

Soon we heard a hum of motors and the muffled voices of the workers in their shops. Through the fog, we perceived that we were close to the air base, which seemed to be full of activity. Suddenly, we saw in the distance a faint light trying to pierce the darkness.

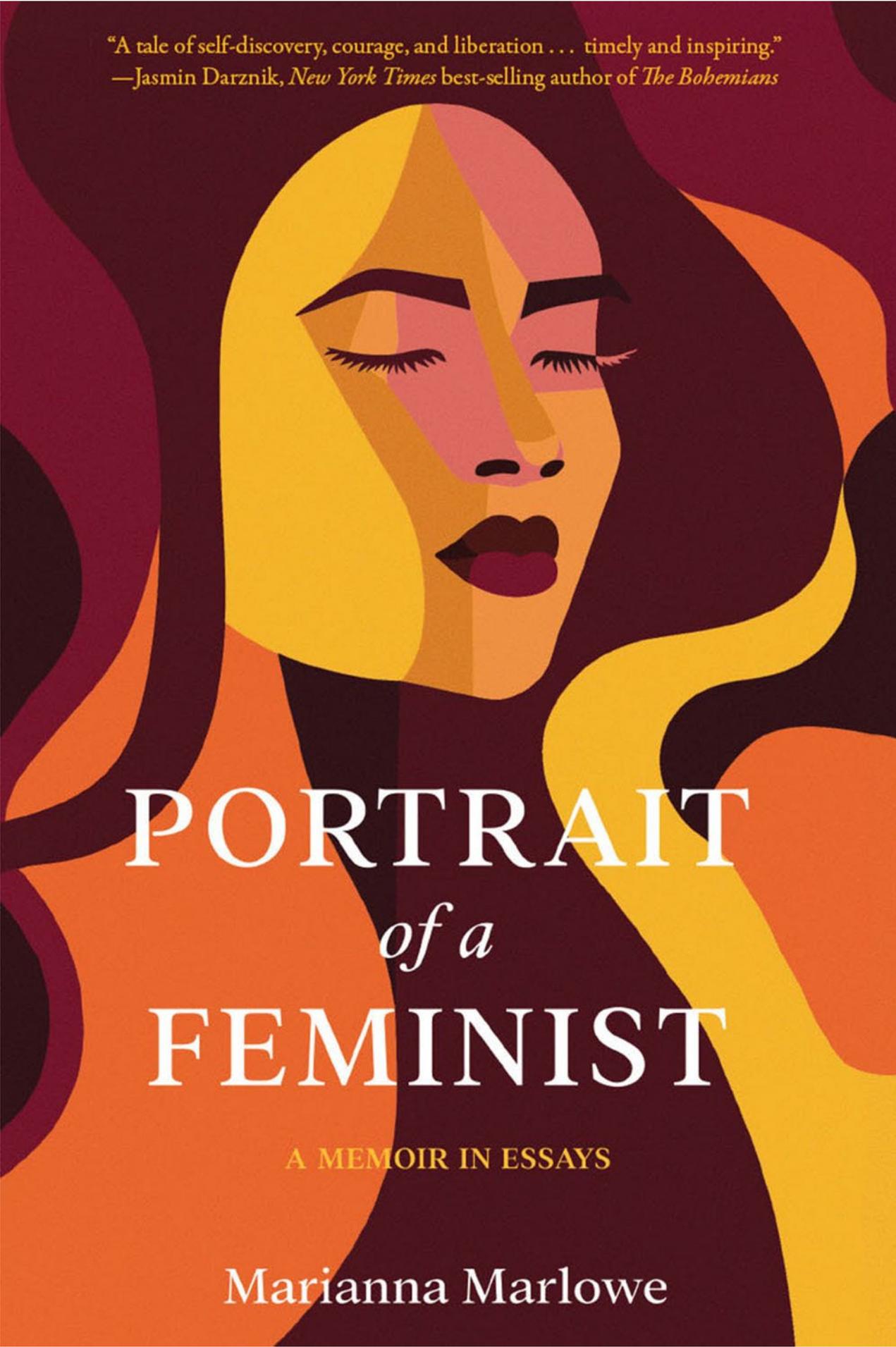
Like a sailor in the crow's nest of his ship, I began shouting, "Land ho! Dry land ahead!" We were beyond caring what lay behind the flickering light. Our only thought was to end our impossible predicament, to emerge from the dark belly of the whale that seemed to have swallowed the entire world. With our last ounce of strength, we advanced toward the beckoning gleam. "Look, I can see a pair of candles," I exclaimed. "If I'm not mistaken, this is the first night of Hanukkah. Maybe we've reached a Jewish home." With the echoes of a distant past sounding in my ears, I

began humming the melody of the prayer “Ma’oz Tsur Yeshu’ati,” a melody long forgotten, which brought a spark of life to two young men on the edge of despair.

We reached a fence and slowly circled the house behind it. Then wonder of wonders! We were at the house of the chimney sweep whose couch we were renting. A tall man whose face bore a mustache opened the door and expressed surprise at our late arrival and mud-soaked condition.

Then he added, “There’s been a power failure in the village tonight. Go to the kitchen and take one of the lit candles.” To this day, I’m unable to explain how we managed to reach that house in the gloomy night, how we crossed the river and the air base without being aware of it. After the war, I returned to the place several times, trying to discover the route that had led us toward the two burning candles, but my efforts were to no avail. The mystery can only be explained as our private Hanukkah miracle.

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Portrait
of a
Feminist

A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS

Marianna Marlowe

PORTRAIT OF A FEMINIST
A MEMOIR IN ESSAYS
BY MARIANNA MARLOWE

A BOOKLIFE (BY PUBLISHERS WEEKLY) EDITOR'S PICK

“Marlowe’s world travels and sharp eye for social nuances, combined with her gracefully lyrical writing, construct a smart interrogation of masculine/feminine norms—and how these shift between different cultures.”

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* * *

Infused with a passion for justice, this sublime, expansive memoir by a Peruvian American feminist will appeal to fans of *Crying in H Mart* and *How to Raise a Feminist Son*.

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Marianna Marlowe is a Latina writer who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. After devoting years to academic writing, her focus now is creative nonfiction that explores issues of gender identity, feminism, cultural hybridity, intersectionality, and more. Her short memoir has been published in *Narrative*, *Hippocampus*, *The Woven Tale Press*, *Eclectica*, *Sukoon*, and *The Acentos Review*, among others. Her second memoir in essays, *Portrait of a Mestiza*, will be published in March 2026.

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Prologue: Feminist or Not?

(California, 2013)

I scan the formal dining room. Twelve young faces look back at me, expectant. The group is all girls, all of them long-haired and most of them pony-tailed, all but one white. This is a National Junior League meeting a friend of mine asked me to lead. Her daughter, blonde as well as long-haired and pony-tailed, sits among the others at the polished mahogany table. I have two hours to teach them about media literacy.

What I'm desperate to teach these girls is how to read the "texts" surrounding them every day and everywhere: the advertisements, romance novels, billboards, songs, and music videos, the movies, television shows, fashion magazines, Super Bowl commercials, and makeup tutorials, the Barbies and dolls and mannequins that each and every one contains coded and uncoded messages about them—how they, young women, should look and behave, what they should want, what they should put up with, why they should be ashamed. I want them to see the ever-present influences of our patriarchal culture, the ones working their spells, saturating every part of our social ecosystem like powerful dye tainting a bowl of water—or, even more fittingly I think, like toxic bacteria colonizing a host body.

I start by asking the question I used to ask my college classes at the beginning of each semester: "Who here is a feminist?"

Almost immediately, a hand shoots up. It belongs to the stocky, athletic girl at the table. After a moment's hesitation, during which they see this first girl's hand in the air, two more girls, still tentative, raise their hands.

My eyes scan the group of young women once again, hoping for another hand. No one else moves.

I sigh—but only on the inside, of course. I'd hoped that in the ten years that have passed since I taught undergraduate courses, the culture would have changed more than it has, much more than three raised hands, two of which are ambivalent.

Regardless, I do what I always do, I do the only thing I can think to do: I launch into the lesson.

Part I
|SEEDS PLANTED

In the Beginning

(California, 1971)

I sit on the toilet seat in our Jack-and-Jill bathroom, writing as furiously as a five-year-old can write. I'm in a hurry—worried and sad. I clutch at the crayon, pressing hard on the unlined paper. It is a letter I'm writing. What heading do I give it? *Dear Aunt Clara?* *Dear Tía Clara?* *Dear Clara?* Probably the latter. Because I live in the US, speak English, and never learned to call my Peruvian aunt “tía”—despite my mother speaking only Spanish to me—it must be *Dear Clara*.

I'm halfway through the scrawled letter when my mother comes into the bathroom to find me.

My mother always knew, even if vaguely, where I was. She was attuned to me, just as I was attuned to her. Not quite at the same level, to be sure, for I was a vibrating antenna, always pointed in her direction, registering her whereabouts, her activities, her moods. And she, by that time, already had another child who needed her love and attention.

When she sees me on the toilet seat, writing instrument in hand, she gives a little exclamation of surprise and pulls the paper gently from my fingers. It only takes her a few seconds to get the gist of the contents, to understand that her young daughter has been writing to her sister who lives thousands of miles, a different hemisphere, and a three-hour time zone away to ask for money. I'm asking for money, she reads, because she, my mother, needs it. She needs it because my father won't give her any.

Did I write *Papá* or *Father* or *Daddy*? Of course Daddy. At five, and speaking mostly English, why would I think to write anything else? That's what I called him then. Although now, whenever I think of him in the past, I think of him as “my father,” and have called him “Dad” for years. When I look back at him as the father of my childhood, he is a tall, quiet presence in my life, serious and authoritarian, a man with whom rules are to be followed, chores to be done, orders to be obeyed.

“Daddy” won't give “Mommy” the money she needs. I can hear them out in the kitchen, beyond the closed door of the bathroom. They are fighting. They always argue in Spanish, which is the language of their marriage. I'll learn later that once my American father became engaged to my mother, he traveled to Peru to take a crash course in her native tongue, and always spoke it with her thereafter.

Although I choose not to speak Spanish most of the time, I can, and am fluent in understanding it. So I know my mother wants cash from my father, who controls the money and makes all the final decisions about finances. In this instance, he doesn't feel she has a good case. She doesn't need the money, only wants it. And they are on a budget. “The house” cannot afford it. It is clear to my mother, as she tries to convince my father to give her some, that she won't get it.

I hear from the tone of her voice that she really needs it and Daddy won't give it to her because ... I don't know why, but I think in my head that he is mean. He's so *mean*. He's mean to my mother and my mother is sad and she needs the money. But my aunt has money. I know because I'm familiar with her house in the suburbs of Lima. I've watched from the backseat as the guard runs to open the gate when he recognizes my aunt at the wheel, and seen the cars and the servants and the fountain and the silver. I've looked on as she's sorted through her jewelry in the wide shallow drawers designed for easy access; I've watched her spray herself with the perfumes lined up on the bathroom shelf. She is rich. I'm sure she has extra money to give to my mother.

Could she send some right away? *¿Por favor?*

My mother laughs a little laugh of shock and gratification as her eyes finish scanning the creased paper. “*Ay, mi vida,*” she says. “¿*Qué estás pensando? Tenemos suficiente plata. No te preocupes.*”

And she keeps the paper, my messy, half-written letter, and crumples it up, and throws it away.

My husband hears me talk about this long-ago event when I sat in the single bathroom of my family’s cottage, on the toilet seat, trying to craft a letter to an aunt I saw as a rescuing angel.

“That’s impressive,” he says. “You have such a good memory. How can you remember so far back?”

I think for a moment. “Because I was traumatized,” I finally say.

I was traumatized by watching my mother’s pain, by feeling responsible for alleviating it, for taking it away, for finding a solution. And the enemy, the source of the problem, always seemed to be my father. I saw it in the bickering and arguing and fighting, I felt it in their silences and dagger-eyes and stony faces. I knew it for sure when my mother complained to me about him, her rigid and implacable Anglo husband, using me as a sounding board and best friend and confessor.

If Spanish was the language of my parents’ marriage, then in those days, when I was a young child, during the time of my earliest memories, the kitchen was the room of my parents’ relationship. The wooden table where we sat together for our meals as a family could have worked as a metaphor except that my parents’ marriage needed more space to manifest itself, to show how it functioned—its push and pull, friction and conflict. And in that kitchen I was the sponge that wiped up the mess and absorbed the tension and got squeezed into the sink to slide down the drain, and I was also a container that received the matter, the material, of my parents’ anger and held it, tight and safe, keeping it for my mother. My parents’ dissatisfaction with each other dripped and fell and spread over the surfaces, the wooden table, the laminated counters, the vinyl floor. Someone had to clean it up, and the task fell to me—or I accepted it, maybe even embraced it, grasping it to me and hugging it tight.

I was the oldest child, and so close to my mother that sometimes I didn’t know where I ended and she began. When her voice broke, my heart constricted. When she was sad, I cried. When she was in trouble, I wrote a letter to her sister, her older sister who was rich and powerful and loved my mother without bossing her around or denying her anything. I was the sponge, I was the sink, I was the drain, I was the container—the pitcher or the bucket or the tub—the final resting place of my mother’s frustration and powerlessness in the face of my father’s stubborn need to control.

For years I babysat for a young family with an only daughter, starting when she was a few months old and continuing into her tweens. Her mother, who for a while dabbled in Jungian psychology, commented often on my family’s dynamics.

“You and your sister are way too close to your mother,” she’d say. “You’re too old to be so enmeshed. You need to have more boundaries.”

I would look at her as she spoke, oh so confidently, about my family that, yes, she knew fairly well, but which she judged from an alien perspective, from the viewpoint of a diametrically opposed culture. *Ha*, I thought to myself, *you don’t know what you’re talking about. Even though you were one of eight children, you spent your adolescence alone in boarding school on the East Coast. No one cared about you the way my mother, who is warm and loving and Peruvian, cares about us.* And I was smug and satisfied in our lack of boundaries, in my closeness to my mother, in her vast, unconditional love for me and my sister and my brother.

I know now I am more like my father, in personality and even in looks, but my entire childhood was my mother’s. I belonged to her—body, mind, and soul. I was making myself into her image. Watching and waiting and wanting, observing and emulating. As the birthdays passed, numbers six-seven-eight-nine, her tastes became mine, her values my own, her desires always my commands.

My father was the Other. He was the opposite of my mother, her antithesis; all of their differences were polarized for me as a child. If, when I was young, I’d had to choose between my mother and my father in any scenario, from

sleeping in the same bed or driving around with them on errands to divorce or a sinking ship, I would have chosen my mother. Every time. It took years into adulthood for me to see my father as an individual free from the mantle of my mother's desires and disappointments.

I would say, if it were possible, that I was born a feminist. I feel it in my bones, in my core, in my very Self. Because mine is a feminism that cannot bear injustice, it was my defining identity growing up, in school, out clubbing, as a graduate student, dating and courting and marrying, as a wife and mother, an intellectual and scholar. Watching my parents interact, sensing the tension between the easygoing extrovert who felt comfortable in domestic chaos and rejuvenated by parties and music and dancing versus the introverted loner who needed everything neat and tidy and quiet regardless of his wife's desires or children's personalities, served to feed that feminism like fresh soil around a plant and sharpen it like a blade on a stone. Growing up, I felt as if I were watching a game, or a boxing match, and my mother was clearly the underdog. She didn't hold the purse strings and therefore she didn't hold the power. My father's word was, without exception, the last; it was his way or the highway every time. I'd watch and root for my mother, demonizing my father as her opponent, especially when, as I grew into adolescence, I jumped into the ring to defend her—always to no avail.

The thing is, I was my mother's second-in-command, her assistant coach, her Girl Friday. Also her therapist, priest, and best friend. If early experiences shape a self, guide a growing, developing identity, then my mother, my parents, and, most of all, their relationship to each other, shaped me. Their marriage took my feminism, that innate sense of justice untempered by rationalizations, excuses, lies, or obfuscations, and shaped it through the template of their relationship, ultimately as witness for and defender of my mother.

Our skin sloughs off day by day and month by month until seven, perhaps ten years later we are totally different people: hair, skin, nails, all new—nothing left over from the past. Recently there has been scientific talk of our changing in more essential ways throughout our lives, not just surface characteristics but also outlook, values, sense of self—our very subject-ness. Like a snake, but in much slower time, we shed not only our skin but also our old selves, our former personas, including our ignorance, our biases, our humiliations, and our embarrassments. I resist this, however compelling it is to believe in continuous opportunities for renewal and redemption. I need to feel I have a core, an essence, indelible and unassailable. I hold on to this belief even if by doing so I condemn myself to the initial molding of my childhood, when my parents and their personalities, their interactions, and their marriage branded me in ways that will forever mark me—how I think, the nature of my feminism.

My mother, if asked, would have rejected outright the label of "Feminist." She would have thought feminists then, in the seventies, weird white women—American, loud, and unfeminine. She still calls opinionated women "*sargentos*" and protesting feminists who behaved "*como hombres*" fit this definition, shouting in the streets with their signs and their slogans. My mother had an aunt who advocated bra wearing rather than bra burning. She advised wearing a bra twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, even to bed, in order to keep the breasts high and perky in defiance of nursing and gravity. My mother followed this advice for many years, as did I, having also in my late teens received the lecture on the power of the brassiere.

Yet my mother did not remain passive in the face of my father's dominance. She fought for control, trying to seize agency in the areas that mattered to her most. She wanted a say in the finances, for example, in the ways my father's salary was budgeted for the household. With a keen eye for real estate, she wanted to invest in certain properties and loved the idea of the fixer-upper long before it became a trend. She wanted to buy herself and her daughters new, fashionable clothes more often. She wanted to spend money on airline tickets, to visit her sister. But my father allotted an allowance for himself and his wife, refusing her access to the bank account.

I, like many others, was fired in the clay oven of my nuclear family. It was because of them that I entered the world, finally, as an adult, the way I did. These true stories reflect that early molding, and also bear witness to the myriad other influences in the continuing evolution of the feminist I am today. I can never be sure how much of

myself was modeled and framed, measured and cut by growing up in my particular family, observing my parents, loving my mother, and how much by the combination of other factors in life—a specific set of genes and a collection of experiences unique to me.

In trying to envision the ways my feminism developed, starting from my very first memories, there first comes to mind, sadly, the image of a gauntlet run: veering from, sometimes colliding with, unhappy moments and flagrant unfairness. But there are also the more pleasing, more satisfying images of the mosaic and the stones, the collage and the pictures, and, ultimately, the narrative and the words. Selecting the words, creating a narrative. This time with penned notes or typed documents rather than crayon on scratch paper, and at a desk or on a couch or in my bed rather than on the closed seat of a porcelain toilet. Writing for myself this time rather than on behalf of my mother.

Thinking about my past, pondering why I remember what I do, and examining those memories is a journey. The words, the paragraphs, the essays make up my path. Any answers, regardless of how incomplete or continuing or exploratory, to how my feminism developed, what is its complicated and shifting nature—the holy grail.

"Susan Shapiro Barash tackles a deep and significant issue for women of all ages. Women will be empowered and will love this book!"

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ESTRANGED



How strained female friendships
are mended or ended

SUSAN SHAPIRO BARASH

AUTHOR OF *TRIPPING THE PROM QUEEN*

ESTRANGED

HOW STRAINED FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS ARE MENDED OR ENDED

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO BARASH

RECIPIENT OF THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY MEMBER'S EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP AWARD

FIREBIRD BOOK AWARD WINNER

FEATURED IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, *WALL STREET JOURNAL*, *ELLE*, *MARIE CLAIRE*, AND ON THE *TODAY SHOW* AND *GOOD MORNING AMERICA*

“Tackles a deep and significant issue for women of all ages. Women will be empowered and will love this book!”

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When life gets hard, we turn to our female friends. Husbands, partners, and jobs come and go, but close friendships are our bedrock. Until they're not.

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This cutting-edge book offers an empowering path forward: learning to prioritize self-worth, stability and authenticity over loyalty to friendships that no longer serve us.

“I've come to believe every woman has experienced, or will experience, being abandoned by a close female friend.

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SUSAN SHAPIRO BARASH has written more than a dozen nonfiction books including *Tripping the Prom Queen*, *Toxic Friends* and *You're Grounded Forever, but First Let's Go Shopping*. For more than 20 years she taught gender studies and Marymount Manhattan College and has guest taught creative nonfiction at the Writing Institute at Sarah Lawrence College. Her fiction is published under her pen name, Susannah Marren.

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PREFACE

Has She Changed or Have I?

Sometimes when I have insomnia, I count the close friends I've made and lost along the way. I see them in a sort of receiving line of missing friends, waiting for me to figure out what went wrong, how our relationships played out, who was at fault and why things soured. At the end of the line is my former best friend, Paulette, who altered the course of my life. The friend who lied about the man I wanted to marry. The friend who stole my chance to be with a person I loved.

Paulette and I had met when we were eleven at a ski resort in Vermont. When we were in graduate school, we lived together. During this time, Jake, my college boyfriend, walked away. No one understood my mourning and sadness as well as Paulette. No one listened to my heartbreak and soothed me more than she. He promised to call only when he was ready to make a commitment. Back then Paulette and I had one black rotary phone in the kitchen. There was no answering machine. We were both on red alert for the Jake call. I still loved him. As far as I knew that call never came.

A year later, I was engaged to someone else. At the rehearsal dinner the night before my wedding, Paulette cornered me. She confessed that Jake *had* called—he had asked her to relay a message and she had decided I didn't need to know. In her opinion, I had moved on. I had begun to date the man I was about to marry. My first reaction was to flee, call the wedding off. Then I thought of my fiancé/soon-to-be-husband, his trust in me. I thought of Paulette, who was my best friend, wasn't she?

The next day she was in my wedding.

The baffling part is that I still wanted Paulette in my life, as close as ever. I somehow excused her, our friendship was that significant. But shouldn't I have left Paulette—weren't her acts flagrant enough? Instead I wasn't able to claim how deeply I was wronged and yearned for her company.

A Road Map for Female Bonds

I'm not the only one who has clung to a close friend, a best friend who has been destructive and unreliable. There are plenty of women who are heavily engaged in their female friendships and have been blindsided. These are serious, significant friendships, not merely 'medium' friendships, as Lisa Miller identifies them in her essay in the *New York Times*, "The Vexing Problem of the 'Medium Friend'." What she writes about are bona fide friends but not inner sanctum friendships. We have fewer rules and expectations for our casual friends and don't hold the bar as high.

For *Estranged*, I am focusing only on women's experiences and only with their most meaningful friends. After all, we view these alliances as a refuge, a 'found family,' a sisterhood built on choice, not assignment. This is where women feel understood, safe and accepted. Each of us knows which friend to seek out for career advice, a medical emergency, for an adventure or a shoulder to cry on. The modeling is everywhere and comes from every direction—our mothers, mentors, celebrity influences, social media, novels, film, and podcasts.

As I began this project, interviewing one hundred and fifty women, diverse in terms of age, race, religion, ethnicity, education, earning power, I realized our deep regrets and how much these friendships matter. And how often women cling to unproductive friendships despite rejection, double-crossing, and misery. Sisters too have their own dramas. Although sisters are from the same family and therefore 'assigned' to each other, while friends choose each other for a variety of reasons, our relationships with our sisters mirror the complexity and depth of our relationships with our friends. The acute sense of loss we experience when a sister bond fractures is the same. Some women report a severed tie to a sister makes their female friendships all the more important with the hope it can fill the emptiness of the estranged sister. Therefore, I have included a sister narrative per chapter of this book.

The strife between female friends starts early. By first grade we know who can be trusted versus who will spill our secrets. As the years go on, who will pilfer your love interest, job or other best friend, who will ditch you to be with the right crowd or for her partner's sake. Over time these disappointments, antagonisms, and hostilities settle in and wind into replay. After a falling out, a betrayal, an aggression, there is still the second-guessing. *That's because the message remains that female friends are worth holding onto.*

There is no official way to end a fruitless friendship. We have been encouraged by our families, mentors and peers to seek out a best friend and close friends to confide in and count on. Famous female feuds have always piqued our interest for that very reason. For example, as reported in the tabloids, Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato, Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, Katy Perry and Rihanna, Katy Perry and Taylor Swift, Kylie Jenner and Jordyn Woods. Rivals in their careers, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera's first falling out as tweens was over Justin Timberlake.

Gossip swirled around the split of Meghan Markle and her best friend Jessica Mulroney. According to *The Daily Mail*, Jessica was Meghan's confidante when she and Harry became engaged and a 'key player' at their 2018 wedding, yet she did not appear in the couple's 2022 docuseries. When news of the *Vanderpump Rules* affair surfaced and Tom Sandoval's and Raquel Leviss's tryst became public, there was great sympathy for Ariana Madix, the injured party.

According to *People* magazine, Madix had considered Levis a friend until the betrayal. In a *Us Weekly* piece, “Taylor Swift’s Celebrity BFFs Through the Years” staff editors refer to an ‘exclusive squad’ that existed in 2010 and how by 2019 she realized some of the friendships were ‘situational.’

Decades ago, in a classic public defriending, Elizabeth Taylor and Debbie Reynolds, famed film stars of the 1950s, fell out after Taylor had a fling with Reynolds’s husband, Eddie Fisher. Taylor and Fisher married and the two female friends did not reconcile until 1996, according to elizabethtaylor.com.

Sister clashes can mirror best friend clashes. Sam Kashner reports in *Vanity Fair* that Jackie Kennedy and Lee Radziwill were cohesive and competitive. Lee had been in a relationship with Aristotle Onassis for six years only to watch Jackie marry him.

Whatever our reactions for women in the public eye, we can relate to their experiences. How we are drawn to our closest friends echoes a love interest. These bonds offer not only comfort and shared interests, but also a refuge. There is a sense of endless support, a form of unconditional love.

Only these friends will get us through. Until they don't.

She Said/She Said

For the past six years I’ve been listening to women who dread losing these connections, even if the friend has stolen a friend or work idea or is envious or harshly critical. The friend might have opposing values or be involved in unacceptable behaviors. She may disregard the friendship or allow a stranger to interfere with the bond they share. Some spoke of being in sub-optimal friendships as worse than being defeated in a romance. For others, worse than a divorce. Yet we know the 21st century stats—that our marriages have about a fifty percent chance of survival. We’re savvy about the fluidity of relationships—we have finessed changing jobs, lovers, colleagues. We know not to expect things to go on endlessly. Still, we believe it is the female friend who is meant to last. We have been persuaded by societal messaging to be patient and forgiving in these friendships.

Red Flag Friendships

The fact is that friendships shift over time. A treasured friend becomes unavailable, a solid friend seems shaky, differing perspectives become an issue. Still, we are invested in the relationship, we keep at it. As I pulled my notes together, I found seven classic scenarios that lead to disappointment, loss or a breakup:

1. **A Faithless Friend:** This is a friend who was always available but a third party or a circumstance is driving you apart. The friend becomes distant.
2. **A Wayward Friend:** In these distressing situations, women describe the challenges of standing behind a friend who is involved in questionable, possibly dangerous behavior.
3. **A Diametrically Opposed Friend:** Being with a friend and no longer sharing the same values can be slippery. Lately we’ve seen it in terms of politics, personal beliefs, and worldview.
4. **A Flippant Friend:** If a close friend shows little respect for a particular friend, it’s a problem. She could be hierarchal, viewing other friends as more important.
5. **A Disparaging Friend:** Even constructive criticism is hard to handle, but the friend who is deprecating spawns an infective environment.
6. **A Green-eyed Friend:** A friend who is jealous or envious does not wish her friends well. Women say they live

in dread, hoping she won't hear their good news, downplaying rather than sharing any successes.

7. **Thieving Friend:** When a friend steals from us, be it a person or a creative idea, it's a multi-level betrayal, one that harms the soul of a friendship.

Awakening

Within this wide sweep of behavior, we come to understand what an ailing, unrewarding friendship can do to our own mental health. There are those of us able to extricate ourselves without remorse or balking. Yet for the most part, women haven't been good at these clean breaks. More likely they become stymied, worrying that a breakup smacks of failure and loss.

We've been encouraged to see what is favorable in these bonds. Shelley E. Taylor, a social neuroscientist and author of *The Tending Instinct*, views women's friendship as having a mitigating effect on stress. Women in beneficial friendships have lower blood pressure, their immunity is boosted and they heal better.

The training for females feeds into this—we're expected to be grateful for these ties. We're taught to avoid conflict at any cost, to be demur. It's better to salvage what was once of value. Since there is simply no official way to end a futile friendship, we soldier on, in unfulfilling or even injurious situations. We are without the notion of an 'adult time out' or a recognized form of detachment (as divorce is to a deficient marriage). There is no 'how to' manual that would ease our misgivings and self-blame. The idea of losing a friend creates great anxiety; it's a tough concept to digest. We need these ties and when they go astray, we suffer.

To this point, it's no surprise that traditionally, women have hung in, willing to ignore grievances big and small. Obviously, based on my friendship with Paulette—one that spanned decades before the denouement that I'll share with you in the coming pages—I had contorted myself to keep it going.

The idea of escape, of ditching unsatisfactory female friends, has been in the ether. Today, in a bold step, we are amplifying our desire for rewarding friends. This shift has occurred in several phases. Partly it accelerated as a Covid 'wakeup' and a mode of self-care. Yet it had been in the works before that. As women have flourished in their careers and have grown more confident in their romantic lives, they have become less vulnerable. As they have celebrated their achievements and earning power, they have become less needy with more clarity.

Although few of us want to be without our closest friends, there can be simmering injustices and recurring dramas in the mix. Women report imagining life without the friend who churns up trouble and causes psychic pain. Our efforts to escape an outright end might include avoidance, making excuses, ghosting and a slow fade. And friends who instigate the break-up report being as anguished as the friends they leave behind. What is in play is the risk of leaving versus the risk of staying.

The Best Path Forward

Most recently I have been hearing from women who let go of suboptimal friends and did this with confidence, protecting themselves and overcoming the misery as they moved on. Instead of the usual rationalizing—a fear of cancel culture and separating—they thoughtfully distance from the friendship without severing themselves from it. They remain in contact but not close. This step taken is a survival mechanism, a form of resilience that sets them free to develop rewarding future connections. For others estrangement becomes the answer. In this study we will consider how each action affects us. The outcomes are that women leave with a sense of purpose. My research reveals:

- 88% of women have had a problem with a close friend.
- 75% feel more obligated to stay with a female friend than a partner or husband.
- 61% have had a friend who has done something terrible to them.
- 63% have had a friend break up with them.
- 67% have wanted to leave a friend behind.
- 75% have left a friend and felt relieved.
- 72% have had the courage to break up with a female friend.
- 79% found that becoming estranged is positive.

Estranged offers steps toward a future with sturdy bonds and self-respect. I have detailed the repercussions and advantages of estrangement, after women emerged more in touch with their own needs and expectations.

By looking beyond the conventional view, where women feel wounded and defeated, there is a sense of victory and agency. In this paradigm, women carefully instigate and finesse the procedure and result. They make the decision to renegotiate, regroup or move on. Bypassing the consequences of a rift with a female friend, they have the guts to exit, if they so choose. They've navigated this difficult task and have kindly shared the details.

No wonder I was compelled to write this book.

Chapter One

A Faithless Friend

- Are you on edge at times because the friendship doesn't feel secure?
- Is this friend someone who is there for you unless something more important comes along?
- Do you second-guess yourself when you are with her?
- Can she be icy out of nowhere?
- Have you noticed how you rationalize both her behavior and yours?

If this is the case, then you are in a friendship where you have considered leaving but have resisted:

You should have seen it coming, you've suspected your best friend for some time. The past six months she has cancelled plans repeatedly without a credible excuse. Although you have been friends and had the same values all along—and your mothers were childhood friends—lately there is the sense that this friend has moved on. She has social aspirations and you realize she has become a materialistic person. In truth, she always was and you have overlooked it. Today, with her husband and children she has moved to a nearby suburb. Her friendships there are transactional—based on what someone can provide for her. No longer does time that you once shared—a shopping spree, a weekend getaway, dinner out—seem important. Her way of dealing with this is to be detached. What is most painful is that she will bow out of last minute dates with excuses that aren't credible.

Once she said she had a school conference for her twelve-year-old and you ran into her with two of her new friends. The idea that this friend would lie is disturbing, yet you've decided not to call her out. It has become obvious she would rather be with people she feels are important, even useful. Based on her texts about her calendar, there is no time left for you.

The final straw was when this friend announced she couldn't come to your son's middle school graduation party. You confronted her and she feigned nothing was wrong. That she simply had a conflict and sent an expensive gift. As if you can be bought when you were once so close. This superficial gesture has actually made you feel worse.

Today you and this friend are hardly in touch but have not severed the tie. You are the one who experiences a void. It makes you wonder what future there is for the two of you as friends.

Fracturing

Who hasn't had a close friend withdraw while we still are emotionally involved in the relationship? Often, as in the above composite, choices shift for one friend and that creates a wedge. It makes sense that the one who is left behind suffers.

Women describe feeling empty when the circumstances that united the friendship are altered. For the friend who is moving on there may be little or no upset, and this disparity makes it complicated. It also causes a power play. The friend who is disengaging and onto other experiences has made her choice, no matter how she handles it. While it might be awkward, common reactions include avoiding the friend or postponing plans.

As a result, the friendship teeters. Women of all ages in my study report that new priorities—including a love interest or work schedule or family requests and lifestyle choices—are frequently named as the reason for the rift. In later chapters we'll explore major deal breakers that are more obvious, for example a friend who steals her friend's job or concept at work, a romantic partner or another best friend. The interviewees in this chapter are dealing with an instability that seeps into their friendships. They are in agony over the beginning of the end. A difficult aspect of a friend slipping away is how it plays out. Because as females we historically have not had the voice or courage to make a clean break, the jilted friend is left in the lurch. For the friend who detaches, she leaves behind a friend who is baffled and hurt by the result.

Georg Simmel, the sociologist, believed that for pairs of friends there is an equal dependency. When one of the female friends moves on, often by partnering or by finding a new experience, the dynamics are no longer the same between them. Once their commonalities are not similar or shared, it can limit or reposition the relationship. As Rebecca Traister reminds us in her essay "What Women Find in Friends That They May Not Get From Love," "divides can creep in between friends just as easily as they do in marriages."

As evidenced below, a **faithless friend** is one who initially represented a safe haven, a friend we could count on who fit into the center of our lives. In the narratives to follow there is the view of the friend pushed aside and the view of the friend who distanced herself from the relationship. Notably, the friend who is sidelined feels deceived and saddened—we've all endured this at some point in our lives.

"The entire concept of someone not wanting to be your friend anymore cannot be simplified or generalized," Seth Shulman, a therapist who practices in Southern California, tells us. "We cannot box in how it played out or ended. The recovery is an ongoing process that often makes us question ourselves, no matter what happened."

Consider the following situations:

Shunned

Fifteen years ago, one of my closest friends and I co-hosted a Sunday brunch for mutual friends. It went very smoothly and then she avoided me. She was living in another state and I thought doing this meal together meant something. She stayed with me, we had a great time. After that I texted and called and she barely got back to me. I wondered what I had done. One of our shared friends said she had begun an entirely different life two hundred miles away. To this day I feel I've lost out. —**Ella, 47, a paralegal living in Memphis, Tennessee**

I heard I wasn't invited to my friend's wedding through mutual friends. It was a second wedding and I was really surprised. I am the one who fixed her up with people when her husband walked out. I'm the one who tried to make her happy when she was so down and out. The weekend of her wedding was very hard for me. That's when I realized she didn't want to be my friend. I had to face that. I'm not sure what I did, or if I did nothing at all, but she excluded me. —**Sorrel, 33, a publicist in St. Petersburg, Florida**

Set Free

Janie and I have been best friends since we were kids. Our mothers had been best friends so everything we did was a foursome growing up. When Janie went to medical school while I was trying to figure out my career, things changed. I was married first and it was like I won that round, but it came between us. Today we have little in common and I honestly don't need to be in touch. I feel pressured to see her so I do but as little as I can. We get to leave old boyfriends, don't we? —**Laila, 40, a financial planner, relocating to North Carolina**

I didn't speak to my best friend for thirty years over a man. I was dating him but he was interested in her. I was very hurt and completely shut down. It wasn't about the man but about what she had done. I stopped the friendship, at the time I had to let it go. I look back and realize this friend did not deserve what I did. Recently she found me on LinkedIn and reached out. We live in different countries and I had chosen to be apart from her. But whatever had happened, I knew we could be friends again, on another level, without men involved. —**Natalie, 56, single, in government, originally from Munich, living in Ohio**

Fictive Family

When I think about what happened in my friendship with Paulette, I realize how much I wanted her to be a sister substitute for me. It filled a void, it gave our friendship an extra gloss. Women talk about it a lot, how a best friend that is like a sister means nothing could be closer or more honored. At least when it comes to rewarding sister bonds. For this reason, I'll include a few actual sister tales, where their relationship is in jeopardy and there is strife and drama, much like the friendship dyads in this book.

The attraction of a fictive family is that friends provide what is missing in our families of origin. A close friend can offer the deep connections that we long for and are missing in our families. A different kind of family—based on mutual esteem, interests, and aspirations, not blood ties or through marriage—becomes a family of choice. Think Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, acclaimed actresses who are friends both on and off screen. They've worked together for decades, from their 1980s film *9 to 5* to their recent work that defies ageism against women, *Grace and Frankie* (2015 to 2022), to *80 for Brady*, and *Moving On*.

Then there's *Sex and the City* where from 1998 to 2004 four single women, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Cynthia Nixon and Kristen Davis, support and buoy one another. There is no family to speak of (except when Miranda's character deals with her mother-in-law) and so the four friends are stand-ins for a family unit. In the 2021

version of the series, *And Just Like That*, three of the four friends, decades older and having weathered the ups and downs of life, remain each other's stalwarts. Yet Kim Cattrall's character, Samantha, is notably absent, the story line is that her character had moved to England. In June 2022, *Entertainment Weekly* quoted Sarah Jessica Parker, "It's so painful for people to keep talking about this 'catfight.' I've never uttered fighting words in my life about anybody that I've worked with ever." In June 2023, it was reported Kim Cattrall would have a cameo on the second season. Beyond this, the theme throughout the spinoff series echoes *Sex and the City*. Friends provide protection and understanding in a 'friends as family' mode.

For real life women as well, a fictive family is gratifying and a self-selected 'togetherness' that works as opposed to being assigned one's family. We hope these friends can be substitutes for our family, often for a sister, who is detached or estranged, and this creates very high expectations.

The Let Down

But even a fictive family can disappoint us. A fraught 'fictive sister' twosome has the markings of a faithless friend dyad.

As Giselle, 37, in advertising, living in Texas, reports her devastation, she and her best friend/fictive sister were torn apart by the demands of life:

My whole life my best friend was like a sister. I was married first and once that happened, I couldn't do what I usually did with her. She didn't understand how my time had changed and having a baby changed it more. Then this friend married, had two children and got divorced. Before her divorce, there was this period when we were both married and had little children. I thought we were on the same page, we'd be fine. What is crazy is that during that time she still wanted too much of my attention. She didn't think my husband needed it—she understood the kids did. She is someone who wanted a lot of energy from me and I didn't have it to spare. For years what we had in common, our race and the way we were raised, worked. Later, there were too many other things, obligations that went beyond that. She wanted us to be family to each other when we both had young families 24/7.

I apologized for my reality, hoping she'd come to accept my life, if not her own. So maybe we could come back together and resolve our differences. At the moment we're in separate places.

In contrast is Lindy, 53, an attorney living in the twin cities with three teenage sons. Her best friend since law school doesn't appreciate her efforts to make her part of the family:

I have never wanted to let this friend down. We were both far from home when we met and gave each other such support. We purposely moved to the same city and both of us work at big firms. Since my boys were little, I included my friend in whatever we did together. She decided not to be married, not to have children. Those were her choices. She is an aunt, a godmother to my boys. She has filled in for me for their school events and has been there for me. I've been there too—I am her family and she is part of ours.

When she first pulled away, I was traumatized. I still think about it every day. She stopped spending time with my kids, after she saw the mothers who help each other and help me out—football moms and soccer moms. She assumed I didn't need her, she thought it was a way of pushing her out. Why not think how good it is for me to have this lineup of mothers for carpooling and sports? That she didn't understand makes me feel drained. I wish someone could tell me how this can be better, why it happened. I am very sad and sorry. It causes anxiety.

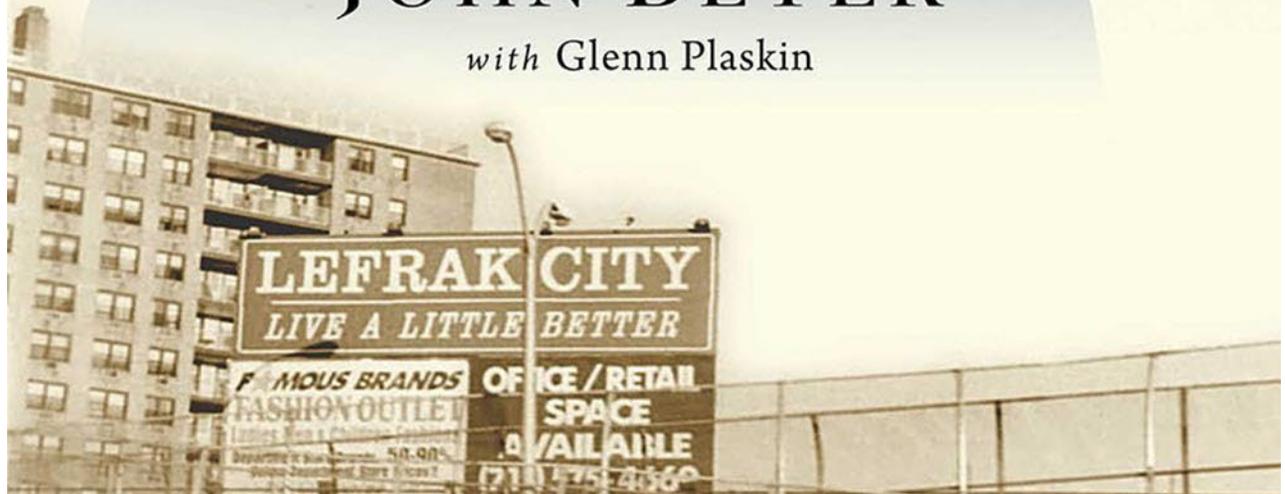
Eighty percent of the women in this study believe their closest female friends are able to save them from anxious moments. It's a tall order yet throughout this book women describe looking to their female friends for a safe haven and often over amplify what a friend can do. According to psychologist Abraham Maslow's famed "Hierarchy of Needs," the category of love/belonging encompasses friendship and family and sexual intimacy. This is placed in the middle of his five-point pyramid. The need for friendship and family is situated above physiological needs (ranked the lowest and most basic), then safety needs (ranked second from the bottom). Friendship and family and love interests are situated below self-esteem (ranked number four) and the final need, which is self-actualization (ranked number five). The third level is critical because it is after we have each cared for ourselves physically (physiological then safety) that we aspire for intimacy with friends and our families. This underscores how much we value our friendships and how devastating it can be when the relationship goes awry.

LIVE A LITTLE BETTER

One Man's
Journey of Survival,
Sobriety, and Success

JOHN BEYER

with Glenn Plaskin



LIVE A LITTLE BETTER

ONE MAN'S JOURNEY OF SURVIVAL, SOBRIETY, AND SUCCESS

BY JOHN BEYER WITH GLENN PLASKIN

Singer, Songwriter, Contemporary Rock Musician

****New York Times* bestselling co-author***

“[John’s] honesty, resilience, and the deep heart he brings to every page left me in awe. Through the Twelve Steps and an unwavering commitment to growth, John shows us what real transformation looks like: raw, powerful and profoundly human.”

-Annaleigh Ashford, Tony Award winner and Emmy and Grammy Award nominee

* * *

In *Live a Little Better*, John Beyer shares his extraordinary journey from a troubled childhood and struggles with addiction to becoming a successful entrepreneur and devoted parent, offering an inspiring story of perseverance, transformation, and hope.

“When you pack up all your personal belongings and move to a new place, you’re not just changing locations. You’re changing yourself.” -John Beyer

John Beyer is the founder and owner of Men on the Move, one of the East Coast’s premier moving and storage companies. But although John’s journey to the top of the moving game has brought him incredible success, the ride up was a bumpy one. From the secret stairwells of LeFrak City to the discos of 1970s Manhattan to the dive bars of Long Island and the truck cabs of a man on the move, Beyer’s highs and lows have been as extreme as the personality that got him in and out of trouble along the way.

Live a Little Better is the story of a talented kid in an alcoholic household, an alcoholic young adult turned entrepreneur, a recovering addict whose life was saved by AA, and the devoted parent of a child with special needs. Above all, it is a story of perseverance, discernment, and transformation.

If you have ever struggled with addiction, directly or indirectly, *Live a Little Better* speaks to you as a peer. Beyer will make you believe in success against the odds, in hope in the face of catastrophe, in rising above a broken home. You never know what crisis will teach you. No matter your circumstances or mistakes, John Beyer’s incredible life is proof that you too have every chance to live a little better.

“*Live a Little Better* is more than John’s story—it’s an honest, inspiring look at how he turned life’s toughest challenges into opportunities for growth. His resilience is admirable, and this book shows just how powerful it can be to choose growth, no matter what life throws you.”

-Jim McCann, Founder and Chairman of 1-800-Flowers.com

“From the start of *Live a Little Better*, you are on a roller-coaster ride taken through the lowest parts of John’s life to watch as he rises to great heights. He shows that you can never give up because life has more in store for you, and you have more in store for life.”

~Joanne Gerenser, PhD., Executive Director of the Eden II Programs

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John Beyer is the founder and president of Men on the Move, a top moving and self-storage company on the East Coast, and a dedicated advocate for autism awareness and support. Starting his career with a single ad in 1985, Beyer grew Men on the Move into an industry leader. Alongside his professional success, John has been deeply committed to autism-related causes, serving as Chairman of the Long Island Chapter of Autism Speaks, Founding board member of Spectrum Designs Foundation, and a founding member of the David Center. He has championed autism awareness through various efforts, even using his company vehicles to spread vital information and donating services to various autism organizations. As the father of a child with special needs, John brings a personal dedication to his advocacy work. His story of resilience and transformation, from childhood trauma and neglect to his struggles with addiction to his recovery and success in business, inspires countless others to live a better life.

[Website](#)

PREFACE

Moving through Life

I have been in the moving business for almost forty years. For me, moving is a metaphor for life.

I’m not sure when this first sunk in. I’ve done a lot of thinking about actually moving belongings from place to place and the concept of moving from one stage of life to another, moving forward and moving on.

When you pack up all your personal belongings—your furniture, all your *stuff*—and move to a new place, it is more than a mere change of location. You’re changing *yourself*. You’re starting all over again, the choices go beyond what items to take, what to discard. There is a duality of leaving things behind while also moving forward.

Whether you’re moving three thousand miles to another town or just across the lobby, the process of dismantling one home and creating another is a gargantuan physical and emotional job.

I watched the faces of countless clients as the boxes were packed and then unpacked. I saw the fear and excitement caused by a big life move. I was witness to all the disruption and upheaval, all the uncertainty of starting over—

not to mention the second-guessing about how it will all turn out. The feelings of loss and sadness mixed with hope and optimism were always too big to fit in any boxes. Although I own a moving company, I see moving beyond a business. To me, moving represents the strong human need to change, to shed, and to grow. Moving creates forward motion that generates momentum and change.

When I was in my twenties and physically doing the moving jobs myself, I found out firsthand that moving was strenuous work. Most people watching movers do not fully appreciate the strength and endurance needed for twelve- to fifteen-hour days, or the planning required to get all the items packed and unpacked. There's a method to our madness as we wrap the furniture, stack the boxes, and plan the sequence of what comes out of the house to get loaded first, second, and last. Though it's not rocket science, it requires strategic planning and execution, just as does life.

I recall as the unloading of a truck progressed, I could start to see one or two more "tiers" before I got to the attic (the part of the truck that extends over the cab). I couldn't wait until I got there, because that meant it wouldn't be much longer until the job was all done.

When the last few pieces were finally brought into the new home, there was a huge sense of relief. Yet we were not yet 100 percent finished. There was still the assembly of tables, desks, beds, and dressers, more details, then you had to fold all the blankets, stack the dollies, and make the truck ready for the next move.

The work of being a mover is physically exhausting. There were jobs that never ever seemed to end. Even when it was getting dark and cold outside, and the skin on my hands would be cracking and bruised from gripping the wood furniture. Stopping was not an option, I had to keep going, giving up was never allowed. The next day my hands ached and my back burned, but those physical pains were eclipsed by the sense of accomplishment. Looking back, I now see each moving job was an exercise in the discipline of seeing something through from Point A to Point B, to the very end, no matter the challenges. The entire process was an example of perseverance.

Each of those thousand moves taught me how not only to start and complete things but also how to navigate the challenges, to pivot, and to always move forward. Each day and with every move, the job was never done until it was truly done.

In my personal and professional life, I've experienced many moves; life transitions that led me from place to place, or stage to stage, until I ultimately arrived to where I am today. There are some dark parts to my story—pervasive alcoholism being the overriding challenge I faced, from my parents down through myself. That does not make me special, because we all struggle with *something*. Life comes at us all. Each of us faces trials and tribulations, adversities and conquests. No one is exempt. To process what we experience and to "move on," we have to go *through* it, not *around* it.

My goal in sharing my journey is to shine a light on the human condition, to capture the raw pain and incredible strength that it takes to move through and move forward in each of our lives.

That's what moving is all about: tackling the unknown and moving forward. Even when we're disappointed or sad, we have to accept reality and move on. Moving is uncomfortable. It is unnerving. It is about change. But the change forces you to develop new habits, new friends, new relationships, and even new goals. It fosters growth. My experience taught me that moving isn't at all about reaching the destination. It's about what happens on the journey itself, which is often the more significant.

As you turn the page, I invite you to enter my world. Writing this book is not about detailing my accomplishments, while I have accomplished a lot, and you will see how I did it and why I was motivated to succeed financially. But my life is no longer about personal gain or material possessions. My burning desire is to leave a legacy of good works. I want to give back to society, to help others with little or less opportunity, and to help motivate them to move forward.

I want you, the reader, to experience what's happened to me during the last sixty-plus years. I hope you will gain something from reading the story of how I moved through life. As in every story, there are ups and downs, good luck and bad, disappointments and triumphs. There were some mornings when I woke up that I did not think that I would be able to move forward, but I did. I hope my journey will inspire you to move forward.

CHAPTER 1

Moving Apart

Moving day was here.

Saturday, April 20, 1968, a date I will never forget. My first actual move. I was eight years old. That was the day my family moved from a luxury high-rise apartment building in the upscale Bronx suburb of Riverdale, New York, into a huge working-class housing complex fifteen miles away, in Queens.

Gone would be the full-time doorman and a white-gloved concierge—a uniformed attendant who held the door open for a kid like me as I got into the back seat of our family’s Buick Electra 225. No more full-service deliveries and laundry pick-up and delivery downstairs, unless it was my mother.

On that spring day, instead of playing outside with my friends, I was inside our house, watching our furniture go out the door and into a moving truck. In retrospect, it was also my life as I knew it moving out that door, and I was moving into the unknown.

“Finish packing the boxes and close them up,” my mom told me and my two older sisters, Denise, thirteen, and Cherie, eleven. All three of us were jolted by the emotions of this day. Denise and Cherie had close friends in their Riverdale school and didn’t want to say good-bye. It was the same for me, torn away from my school and my old neighborhood. For the three of us, this was a move that meant leaving so much behind.

Moving is scary. It means change. It creates doubt. It can make you feel insecure. And, as I would later understand, when it comes to physical moves, you are either moving up in life or you are moving down. In our case, this was a move down.

Though unspoken, my sisters and I totally understood that this move was a fall from grace.

I asked myself over and over, *Why is this happening to us?*

I was a kid. I just didn’t understand.

* * * * *

The events of April 20, 1968, were years in the making.

How Mom and Dad met had everything to do with their respective parents’ immigration to the US. My maternal grandparents, Charles and Margaret Jessel, were French-born, raised in Alsace-Lorraine. They settled in Harlem in the early 1940s. Charles worked as a waiter and remained in the restaurant business for his entire life. (When he died, he got quite a write-up in the paper for being a famous waiter and a wine expert.)

Charles was an alcoholic. And from what I was told, he was physically abusive to my grandmother. (I never met either one of them, as they were long gone before I was born.) My mother— Germaine, nicknamed Gerry—told me her father used to physically hit her mother. Even more disturbing, he used to molest my mother’s sister, Margaret.

Thinking of what my mother must have gone through with an abusive alcoholic father, I can imagine why she might have needed a way to numb herself with alcohol as an adult.

Coincidentally, my paternal grandparents, Andy and Mae Beyer, came from Alsace-Lorraine as well. Our family name, Beyer, was a common German name.

My grandfather, Andy Beyer, was a tall, hulky man who worked as a butcher. Nobody in the family talked a lot about him. There was something mysterious about it. I guess all families have these enigmas. In any case, I never met him. He died in his fifties of colon cancer.

The only grandparent I ever *did* know was my paternal grandmother, Mae (who looked quite German, with a Roman nose and icy steel-blue eyes). She was a stern, cold, and removed kind of woman, the mother of three: my dad—John George Beyer—his sister Lynn, and his brother Andy Jr. Mae was a distant mother except when it came to her absolute favorite child, my father. She idolized him and lavished him with affection. Just as on my mother's side, alcoholism was rampant in my father's family too. I don't know if my grandfather Andy drank much, and I know that Mae was not an alcoholic, but Andy Jr. became an alcoholic just like my dad. Andy's son (my first cousin) was also an alcoholic.

As fate would have it, when Andy and Mae Beyer migrated to the US, they moved onto the *same block* on 125th Street in Harlem as my mother's family. Like a storybook, my parents met at the corner candy store. It was kind of meant to be. They were in their late teens or early twenties at the time. I don't have a lot of details about how they met or their romance. That's the sad truth. I don't remember them ever talking to me about it. I recall having a sense that they were happy for those first years after they married and started having children in the mid-1950s, building a business and a family.

The early 1960s were good for my family. My dad was a very successful photographer. His company, Chester Studios—located in the Bronx, near our apartment—contracted to take the black-and-white school pictures for the entire New York City public school system. It was a monumental responsibility and a hugely lucrative account.

Dad was very gregarious, a *big* personality. When he walked into a room, people noticed him. He was about five feet eleven but looked even taller, with very broad shoulders, long arms, and piercing steel-blue eyes—a magnetic, confident presence. By the time he turned thirty he lost most of his hair, so he looked older than he actually was. But he was totally engaging, good-looking, and strong. And he had a vice grip handshake that never weakened. Even as he got older, he could still grab and crush my hand in a handshake. It was always intimidating, especially for his son.

When it came to my father, there was something all-knowing and wise about him and his demeanor. He had a command about him that I think, to some extent, I inherited. He was very smart and worldly, and he could converse about anything. If you wanted to fact-check something, you asked John Beyer. He read the paper and followed the news and was also a voracious reader. He would always have three or four novels going at the same time, with books strewn all over our house, the pages all flipped open, in various stages of completion. He took his knowledge out into the world and always seemed to be in command of the situation. He knew where he wanted to go and who he wanted to talk to.

With Dad's personality and skills as a photographer, Chester Studios was booming. When color photography was exploding in the sixties, Dad and his partner, Murray Rosenthal, invested too heavily in the all-new color-film processing machines. The stress caused by this investment would eventually take a toll on both my father and Murray, physically and financially. Taking pictures in color motivated the parents to buy more photos. Everyone was excited about this new color technology. The bright yellow-and-red Kodak logo is emblazoned in my memory forever.

Although my busy dad was doing well in business, he was not taking good care of himself. He was a heavy drinker and a chain smoker. Dad not only smoked cigarettes but he sat at home reading smoking Omega Little Cigars. They were dirty and smelled awful. He also ate all the wrong foods—a steak and potato guy, living in the culture of the time. It was all about drinking and no exercise. Both Dad and Murray Rosenthal were overweight, particularly Murray—though Murray didn't drink heavily or smoke.

In 1965, both Murray and my dad suffered massive heart attacks that landed each of them in the intensive care unit of Montefiore Hospital. Dad was only forty-one at the time, and he was not expected to live. But after two long months in the hospital, Dad was released—weakened and depleted, but alive. Murray survived too. But Chester Studios did not.

As a result of their heart attacks, Dad and Murray could no longer meet the daily demands of running Chester Studios. The business was too big for them to manage, and they just couldn't do it anymore. I do not know why they did not try to sell it; all I remember is that one day it was there and one day it wasn't. Everything folded. My father was ultimately hired as an executive at Walker Color of New York, in Yonkers, another photography company.

Despite his heart attack and long hospitalization, Dad went right back to drinking, which further diminished his health. His heart muscle was so damaged that he was declared legally disabled. After his heart attack he received both Social Security disability and private disability insurance for the rest of his life. My father's weakened physical condition did deter his drinking. Dad was a functional alcoholic, a daily drinker who could get through the day conscious and get back home in one piece.

Dad's heart attack was not only the beginning of the end of his business but for my parents' marriage as well. My mom was a striking woman. She was a very attractive redhead, bearing a resemblance to Lucille Ball. Lucy and Mom were both five foot seven. Lucy had blue eyes, but Mom had beautiful brown doe-like eyes, which I inherited from her. Mom did her hair up high in the popular bouffant style of the time and looked great when she was all dressed up. Dad loved having her on his arm. But she was no ornament. Mom was very bright; she had a sense of humor and could be very goofy at times.

My early childhood memories include Dad going out at night and wanting my Mom to go along with him. My mother was also a heavy drinker and a chain smoker too. But unlike Dad, Mom did not want to go out every night. She had the responsibility of being our primary parent. That did not stop her from drinking at home. Without Mom as his drinking companion, Dad looked elsewhere for company. I was very young, but I do remember there were numerous "girlfriends" and nights out when he didn't come home at all. I also remember how this hurt my mother and her being enraged by his disloyalty. This just made my mother drink more.

When Dad finally did come home, my sleep was interrupted by drunken brawls between my parents that went on into the early morning. As time went on these fights got worse and worse: clothing was tossed out windows, liquor bottles were broken, there were screams in the night, and the police were called, disturbing the calm luxury of our apartment building.

While these fights went on, my sisters and I huddled together, unable to sleep, scared by these violent arguments, wishing that they would end.

My parents' alcoholism was causing complete chaos in their lives and in ours. Neither of them had the capacity to get the help they needed. Worse than that, neither of them even recognized that they needed help.

My dad's heart attack, his losing his business, and his diminished income compounded his stress, leading to even more drinking. It was a vicious cycle. The more he drank, the more his life became unmanageable. His tenure at Walker Color of New York came to an end too. The money dried up; my parents' marriage unraveled.

My parents legally separated. And that's when my mother, sisters, and I moved—without Dad—to LeFrak City.

In the 1960s, if you were driving along the Long Island Expressway, you could not miss the huge billboard advertising LeFrak City. The LeFrak slogan, "Live a Little Better," remained up on that sign for decades. As I said, LeFrak was a community intended primarily for working- and middle-class families who were interested in modern facilities but unable to afford Manhattan. Built in 1962 on forty acres of what was previously marshland, the community was the brainchild of New York real estate tycoon Samuel J. LeFrak.

Sam was a New York-born real estate developer with a reputation as a tough guy, and his company ranked forty-fifth on the *Forbes* list of the top five hundred private companies. There is no doubt that none of his millionaire friends would have wanted to live at the gargantuan cookie-cutter complex with 4,605 apartments, built alongside the Long Island Expressway in Corona, Queens, that we were moving into. Over fifteen thousand people lived there. It really was a city within a city, each of the buildings named after a country. Our building was called *The Panama*. And our apartment, 5M, was a two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath unit. The best part of the apartment was the terrace, which became my regular refuge, a safe place where I could escape the insanity of my mother's drinking and listen to music on my black-and-gray Panasonic cassette radio. I would tune in to Cousin Brucie on 77 AM. And when a favorite

song came on, like Stevie Wonder's "Superstition," I immediately pressed record. I always missed the first few bars of the song but tried my best to capture it. Music became my refuge, and I wanted to record my favorite songs so that I could listen to them when I needed them. Music was a source of comfort that I could rely on, unlike my parents.

My world was not confined to the terrace. Most of the time, just walking outside was an instant escape. To a kid, LeFrak City was like moving into a theme park. The complex was entirely self-contained, home to its own shops, including a beauty parlor and barbershop, a dry cleaner, a TV repair service, a drugstore, and a big luncheonette. The mall that housed all these amenities was the heart and soul of the community. The sheer scope of the place and the constant activity in it distracted me from the painful memory of moving.

LeFrak was like the day of the locust. There were people everywhere, and I mean everywhere—in the hallway, in the elevator, in the lobby, and of course in the mall. The playgrounds were packed. There were monkey bars and seesaws being used every day. It was really a kid's paradise, all of us running around the mall and outside in the parks, playing basketball, trading baseball cards, and playing Ringolevio in the streets.

As much as I had been sad about leaving Riverdale, LeFrak turned out to be fun for me. I picked up a new passion, basketball. I spent hours dribbling the ball even in the rain. I got pretty good. The first friend I made was Alan Weinman, a tall, skinny, lanky kid who was a decent athlete, a fellow basketball player. He lived in the building next door to us, called *U.S.* My second friend was Richie Weintraub, a very good-looking kid with a personality and a half. Richie was witty and smart, and people loved him. He lived just upstairs, in apartment 6C, with his mother, Elaine; his dad, Lenny; and his brother, Kenny.

Our moms got to know each other in *Le Girls*, the beauty parlor in the mall, which was always packed on Saturdays. Mom was a terrible binge drinker, and she could not hide this. The other women in the building, including Richie's mom, could see this. She could drink herself into a blackout or go extraordinarily long periods when she would literally stay drunk for weeks on end. These benders were marked by very few breaks from the bottle. When she drank, it wasn't pretty. Because she was unable to control her drinking, her habits were visible to everyone in the building. In addition to drinking, she smoked one cigarette after another, burning holes in pillows and mattresses, and also damaging the mahogany furniture in our apartment. There were times that she staggered into the lobby, completely drunk; she was routinely found on the floor of the elevator after falling down drunk. Everyone saw her in this condition—the security and maintenance staff, the neighbors, and my friends, including Richie and his mom. It was embarrassing and scary for me to see. Other times she would suddenly pull herself together and stop drinking for a while until she fell off the wagon again.

At the same time, Richie and I had become inseparable. We were both on the same Little League team and in the bowling league. We also played Wiffle ball outside in what was called the "red rink" playground. Right next to that rink were the basketball courts where we spent hours together shooting hoops.

Richie was my childhood best friend. We had many sleepovers: Richie's mother would invite me to stay at their apartment because his mom could see that things were unraveling in my household as my mother's drinking got worse and worse. It was evident to everyone in the building. Even if it wasn't so evident, it felt that way to me.

The biggest change for me after moving to LeFrak is that I didn't see my father very often. From the ages of eight to thirteen, my world consisted of my friends, mom, and two sisters. Dad just wasn't there. After we moved, Dad became a part-time bartender at the Midland Bar, located at the 179th Street subway, the last stop on the E and F trains in Jamaica, Queens, which then, and today, was and is at the crossroad where the socio-economically diverse of New York City would convene in the same place to share a drink or a story. A left out of the bar took you to an area of mini-mansions that were the homes of the haves and a right took you to an ethnically diverse neighborhood of small homes where the have-nots lived. The Midland was the meeting place that drew this diverse racial and economic crowd. There was a dynamic sense of community that brought everyone together and it was the booze that held them there and kept them coming back, my dad included.

Dad had a side hustle as the neighborhood bookie working out of the Midland, making money as a bookmaker and small-time loan shark. While it was a big comedown from the days of owning his own photography business, Dad

still controlled the room and commanded respect in this bar community. At the Midland, Dad was a big shot, a big fish in a very small pond. Everybody knew him. He was like the mayor in the bar, but as a father he was absent. Even when he was physically there for a quick visit to see us, he really wasn't present. I never felt that he truly wanted to spend much time with me or my sisters.

* * * * *

One day, after Dad started working at the Midland, much to my surprise, Mom announced, "Dad is going to take you to the Yankee game this Sunday. And he's picking you up at twelve, so be ready." I was ready at 11:00 a.m., baseball glove in hand, bouncing a baseball against the inside wall of the lobby. Finally, I was going to be with my dad—at a Yankee game!! I was super excited.

But noon came along, and Dad wasn't there yet. I strained my neck toward the street and thought to myself, *He'll be here soon*. At 12:15, I was still nervously bouncing the ball off the lobby wall, but there was no sign of Dad. I was getting anxious. I buzzed my mom on the intercom from the lobby and as soon as she answered, I blurted out, "Did Dad call!?"

"Yes," she answered. "He's running late. He'll be here soon."

Ten minutes later, I buzzed her again. "Did Dad call back? Did he call!?"

"No, he didn't." Even at this age, I could hear Mom's voice changing.

I thought to myself, *We are going to miss the first inning*. I went back to the intercom and buzzed again. To this day I can clearly picture the old, aluminum metal frame of the intercom that was bent and decaying; our apartment number, 5M, was faded and almost worn off. The neglect was symbolic of the neglect that I was experiencing day in and day out.

At this point I was having a conversation with myself, *Should I buzz again? No, I'll wait*. But I was so impatient I buzzed anyway. This time it took longer for Mom to answer. In my head, I can still hear her slurred words. Without me even having to ask her anything, she uttered, "No, he didn't call." There was no need to say anything else. She just hung up.

I was crushed. By 1:30 I came to the realization that Dad might not be coming at all. But I waited anyway, holding onto a shred of hope. At 2:00, I buzzed up again. This time, no answer at all. I waited some more. I again stretched my neck to see the cars coming around the block. No sign of Dad.

Of course, he wasn't coming. He never even called. Eventually I went upstairs, seeking some comfort from my mom. But her eyes were only half open. She was totally drunk. I grabbed my Panasonic cassette radio and went onto the terrace, which didn't have much of a view, as it faced the parking lot. I heard the announcer shout as Yankees outfielder great Roy White stole home. I listened to the game as tears poured down my face, thinking, *I'm supposed to be there, in the stands with my dad, watching this happen*. To say I was disappointed is an understatement. I was devastated. I felt invisible. And I didn't have anyone to tell.

After my father's disappearing act, I didn't hear from him for a week. When he finally called, he made a lame excuse, just a passing remark, like, "Something came up." Then he changed the subject. Unfortunately, this would not be the first or the last time Dad would make a promise and break it.

DESIGN

For Your Mind



HOW A FAMILY CAREGIVER AND MENTAL HEALTH
THERAPIST RENOVATED HER HOME TO RECHARGE HER LIFE—
AND DIDN'T BREAK THE BANK.

ANNIE GUEST

DESIGN FOR YOUR MIND
HOW A FAMILY CAREGIVER AND MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST
RENOVATED HER HOME TO RECHARGE HER LIFE—
AND DIDN'T BREAK THE BANK
BY ANNIE GUEST

“This book serves as a powerful reminder that small, thoughtful changes in our surroundings can significantly enhance our ability to care for others—and ourselves.”

~**SUSHMA KOLA, MD, DIRECTOR OF INTEGRATIVE NEUROSCIENCES, MOVEMENT DISORDERS SPECIALIST,
ALLEGHENY HEALTH NETWORK, PITTSBURGH, PA**

* * *

Make room for your brilliant life.

Design For Your Mind by Annie Guest is a refreshing look at how we can create spaces to support our emotional and intellectual needs—now, and for the rest of our lives.

Annie Guest tells how she drew on her background as a mental health therapist to renovate her house and recharge her life after years of family caregiving. She takes us through her process, room by room, always with an eye to pursuing the purpose of the room and its potential to support creativity and focus and promote healthy living. Annie shows how she achieved big results without spending a fortune. The book is filled with some 95 'Before' and 'After' photos and stories, and discussions of the science behind good design are lively and easy to follow.

Design For Your Mind is an absorbing dive into what we humans need to thrive, and it's sure to spark ideas for meeting those needs with design choices you make for your own home. Whether you're designing rooms to promote your focus and creativity, creating a space that helps you stay organized and productive, or switching things up to give yourself a lift, *Design For Your Mind* is the guide you need.

“Guest astutely recognizes that knowing a little something about how our brains work can be a game-changer when it comes to creating a space we truly love.”

~**ANNE WILLOUGHBY, DESIGNER, PORCHLIGHT HOME INTERIOR DESIGNS**

“The reader can literally feel the grand old house shake off its lingering sadness and become a sanctuary of hope, renewal, and positive energies.”

~**GINA LEATHERMAN, AUTHOR OF *WHAT DOES A FRIEND LOOK LIKE?***

“A testimony to life, loss, acceptance and rebirth.”

~**CHRISTINE HAYTHORN, CEO OF PARKINSON FOUNDATION WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA**

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Annie Guest had a varied career in book publishing, advertising, and law, before she took another jump to work as a mental health therapist and publish her first book. In *Design For Your Mind*, Annie combines her passion for people and their potential with her love for interior design and her appreciation for the design choices that support mental health.

[Website](#)

PREFACE

After I finished writing this book and sent the draft to my editor, I dared myself to give the type of design I describe here a name. I decided to call it Benessent Design after the Latin phrase for well-being, *bene essere*. Naming something that had no name might seem presumptuous. It feels presumptuous. But I feel so strongly about the benefits of addressing design from this perspective that I'll name it to give it a place in our language and in our awareness.

Benessent Design, as I envision it, is about designing spaces to support the emotional and intellectual needs of real people, so they have what they need to thrive as whole human beings. For centuries, rooms and furnishings have been designed to support people's physical needs. Wingback chairs, for example, helped contain heat from a fireplace and shield sitters from drafts so they could stay warm. Canopy beds provided warmth and privacy to a house's lord and lady back in the days when their attendants and servants slept in the same bedroom.

Now, when most of our physical needs have been met through central heating, indoor plumbing, electricity, and refrigeration—and we realize the destructive and often multigenerational consequences of poor mental health—we're becoming more aware of the needs of our minds and less shy about discussing them. Today, we know an enriched environment that includes social support, regular aerobic exercise, good nutrition, and high-quality sleep helps protect our minds against anxiety and depression. These four pillars also support our executive functioning, so we can focus, plan and organize, regulate our emotions, and create.

All four are also crucial to keeping our brains healthy for life. Such an enriched environment helps our brains continue to grow and develop, even as we age. Creating this lifelong capacity is a crucial area of study as our population grows older. It's also encouraging news: we can take steps now to help us stay "sharp as a tack" and age happily in place.

Benessent Design honors two design approaches that have been celebrated for years: *wabi-sabi*, the centuries-old Japanese aesthetic concept that finds beauty in imperfection, impermanence, and simplicity; and *hygge*, the Danish cultural emphasis on choices in daily life that bring quiet comfort.

But Benessent Design goes further in its deliberate focus on promoting all aspects of mental health from an evidence-based perspective, as well as from empirical and artistic ones—as it fosters executive functioning; feelings of comfort and safety; intellectual and creative stimulation; and lifelong brain health through good nutrition, regular exercise, sleep, and an enriched environment.

Benessent Design treats our mental health needs as no less important than the needs of the rest of our bodies. Such an approach may even lead us to become better—more creative, more focused, and more productive—and help our brains continue to develop over our lifetimes.

In *Design for Your Mind*, I show how I approached these mental health goals in the house I renovated, and I hope it fires ideas for your own home. Above all, I hope this book leaves you with a lens through which you can view design—a tool that's most valuable when it helps us thrive as whole people and as individuals. Make room for your brilliant life.

INTRODUCTION: WHY DESIGN?

I have a personal stake in design. During my parents' final years, my father fought a fierce battle with Parkinson's. Meanwhile, my mother—a brilliant, self-taught pianist—was drifting away. Mom had spent years in a wheelchair, and now her mind was fading. I am their oldest child, and a daughter, and I lived in the house next door.

During the years of Dad's 3 a.m., insomnia-fueled phone calls (his wee-hours call list included the bishop and the local police), nights in the emergency room (often after a fall when Mom or Dad had been doing something they had promised not to do), and weeks of visits to rehab (the consequence of said falls), I began to lose myself. Between my parents' health and my job, I had little space to think beyond my immediate responsibilities and little time or energy to maintain my home or my relationships with the outside world—or even with myself.

My siblings and I would spend hours in conference calls, discussing our parents' current conditions and brainstorming about how we might persuade them to accept the help of a paid caregiver, even for a few hours a week. We would cheer when they relented, only to learn our parents had fired the new caregiver within a couple of days. Mom and Dad felt affronted by advice from their children, so as their conditions advanced, any protection we provided—even to members of the driving public and pedestrians—was choreographed after exhaustive sibling discussions.

Those years have left me feeling a bond with other family caregivers and an understanding of the costs and rewards of this journey. In my case, the rewards were abundant. When my parents finally stopped driving, I would take them to church on Saturday evenings. We'd have dinners during the week—often at Subway. I would fetch our tuna melts, and we'd eat them in the car as we watched the trains go by.

When Dad progressed to using a feeding tube—because Parkinson's, with its implacable indifference, continued to come back for more—my parents and I would camp out on their huge bed and talk. That is, until Parkinson's took Dad's voice.

I knew those times would never come again, and I also knew sharing those times with them was a gift. I surprised myself with a new patience I'd thought was beyond my reach, and I realized that joy and sadness can live together in the same heart. I hope this book speaks to people who are dealing with similar challenges and rewards. And I hope, as we come through this experience, we know we're enriched by it and not diminished.

If you're an empty nester; newly widowed, divorced, or single; a young adult moving into your first apartment; or anyone else making a new beginning, this book is for you, too. We can all create spaces that express and empower and support us as we move ahead.

Dad's mind remained clear until two weeks before he died. He'd been a hard-charging captain of industry, a risk-taker, and a dynamic leader. My siblings and I would sit beside him as he lay in bed and talk with him about work. Until Parkinson's stole his voice, Dad would still give us advice.

Then, early one morning, unbeknownst to the caregiver on duty (and for reasons we still don't understand), Dad went down to the basement. We suspect he was feeling in the dark for a light switch when he fell. The paramedics came, and we lost him ten days later.

Over the next four years, Mom's light continued to dim. My brothers would drive from out of state to be with her. And, when it came time for hospice care at home, my sister and I would sit by Mom's bed in shifts. We were grateful she never forgot our names or failed to recognize us. She told us often that she loved us, even if, in her final days, only with the touch of her hand. She was our mom to the end.

After Mom died, my sister and I spent more than a year sorting through our parents' belongings and arranging for their distribution while the estate went through probate. My parents left their house to me. I decided to reimagine it in ways that would help me remember the whole of my parents' lives—not just those sad final years—as I rebuilt my own life. The process has helped me work through my grief over my parents' final struggles and appreciate the fullness of their lives. It has also helped me take stock of my own life and find my way forward.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Since I was a child, I've had a passion for creating spaces that are both beautiful and livable: spaces that stimulate and inspire, soothe and welcome. I started with my half of the bedroom that my sister and I shared.

One day, when Mom came home from the thrift store with an old privacy screen, a new age dawned. My sister and I would have our own rooms—one-half each of the bedroom that we shared.

One side held the closet, and the other side the door. After two rounds of Rock Paper Scissors and some tears, we negotiated the precise footpath that the interloper would be permitted to travel to and from the door or the closet. The result was a milestone: each of us had a space to call our own. To arrange and decorate and fuss over. To take pride in.

For me, the room was an oasis of privacy, a refuge where I could think and read and write. During our mandated afternoon naps, I wrote and illustrated my first book. It was called *Lost*, about a girl who is shipwrecked on an island and survives by making friends with the animals. On the other side of the screen, my sister would count the pennies in her piggy bank.

WHY WE NEED PERSONAL SPACE

I also have a professional stake in design. I'm a mental health therapist. I know that healthy mental functioning requires space to think one's own thoughts and express them and build a relationship with oneself. In childhood and

adolescence, the essential developmental tasks are to build autonomy (or the experience of oneself as separate from one's primary caregiver) and self-efficacy (or confidence in one's ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment).

These are the fundamental building blocks of a healthy personality. They're essential to resilience, focus, critical thinking, healthy relationships, emotional regulation, self-discipline, problem-solving, creativity, a sense of mastery—in short, everything that equips us to handle life's challenges and thrive.

WE ALSO NEED ONE ANOTHER

At the same time, we all need social support—the acceptance, encouragement, stimulation, and learning that we give to others and others give to us. We need safe spaces, and we need the confidence to leave our safe spaces to take risks, to have adventures. We need social support to learn the skills to communicate in constructive ways, however imperfect our efforts might be. That's how we grow.

Designing spaces that foster our mental health has become more important as many of us work from home. And it can be even more important for young people who lack the ability to roam alone and explore the world outside that many of us enjoyed growing up, or who may not be able to leave home. Designing one's space can offer an additional freedom: one can take risks without threatening one's safety. And one can exercise agency: we design the set and direct the production.

Psychologists speak of the *locus of control*. It's the degree to which people believe that they, as opposed to external forces beyond their influence, control the outcomes of events in their lives. The theory holds that our sense of well-being is tied to the degree to which we believe we have control over our lives and our environments. The more remote that control is from us, the more distressed we feel.

If your experience as a caregiver or your experience in another role involved loss of control over your privacy, time, decision-making, and sense of well-being, you can take steps to reclaim it. I hope you find that expressing yourself through interior design helps you discover your power, explore your creativity, and strengthen your voice. I hope you can hear your own voice and believe in it. And I hope you love creating spaces that support and stimulate you as you move forward into the rest of your life.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

I was cleaning out a closet in the house during the renovation when I discovered some of my grade-school report cards my mom had stashed away. The teachers' comments reacquainted me with a child who devoured books with joy, but who nonetheless left authority figures disgruntled. I was polite and well-behaved, they said, but I daydreamed in class, and sometimes, I'd have to stay after school to complete classroom assignments.

I was too ashamed to tell my parents why I daydreamed. I'd become discouraged because teachers sometimes frowned when I put my hand up in class. "Let's hear from somebody else," they'd say, and I'd interpreted their response as a scolding, a message that I had done something wrong. Over time, I disengaged. I let my mind leave the classroom and go elsewhere. I had no reason to plan and organize, and I even cultivated a sweater-losing forgetfulness, making me a problem of another sort.

After a couple of years, my parents moved my sister and me to another school, where I fell in love with every class. I was motivated to plan and organize because I found my classes exciting, and I knew planning and organizing was key to doing well in them. Mrs. Salvati's English class was heaven. She would assign a creative writing topic and then give us forty-five minutes to write an essay. We would turn in the finished work at the end of class, and the following week, she would choose one of us to read our essay to the class.

All this came back to me as I went through the records my mom had kept. I wished my parents were still with me, so I could talk with them. Their decision to move my sister and me to the new school changed our lives. As a grown-up, I understood that it had been a big financial commitment, and I wished I could thank them in person.

The planning and organizing I practiced in that classroom are part of our executive functioning skills. Also included are the skills we use to solve problems, schedule appointments, finish assignments, and meet deadlines. And we use our executive functioning to keep track of ideas when we create. These skills are the scaffolding that supports our other abilities, and we depend on them to function effectively in the world. They provide us with structure. We can think of them as the table of contents or the index in our mammoth mental reference book. Executive functioning skills make our thoughts easier to navigate and manage, and we spend our lives refining them.

Our executive functioning skills also help us regulate our emotions and control our impulses. So, when our executive functioning is impaired—because of stress, lack of sleep, distractions, or anything else—we're more likely to forget to pay our bills on time, lose our tax paperwork, show up late, and otherwise let ourselves and others down. It's not a fun way to live.

For people who live with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), executive functioning is a particular challenge. That's because, with ADHD, the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for executive functioning) needs extra support.

Specialized advice for designing spaces for people living with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or sensory processing disorder is beyond the scope of this book. But, in general, tools we can use to moderate stimulation include weighted blankets, dimmer switches on lights, window shades and curtains, music, muted colors, and soft textures. A low clutter, well-ordered environment supports executive functioning and helps prevent overstimulation. Aim to designate specific places in your home for specific tasks, and to ban from the bedroom online activities that might interfere with sleep.

Executive functioning can also be a challenge for neurotypical people who are inclined to ponder, and for lots of other people. Designing a space that supports our executive functioning can make a big difference to our productivity and our sense of well-being and confidence. Throughout this book, we'll talk about ways to do that.

OUR LIVES: LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD

Designing our homes to support our mental health now is only part of the story. We can also take steps to help our brains remain healthy in the future. Studies suggest that the same choices we make to enhance focus, productivity, and mental equilibrium today can slow or prevent our cognitive decline over the years to come.

As our population ages, scientists are exploring ways to design environments to help prevent memory loss and other changes associated with our older years. The COVID-19 pandemic also spurred interest in this inquiry. The lockdown brought extreme and extended social isolation that affected the mental health of people young, old, and in-between.

Many of these people were residents of senior living facilities who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. Loss of face-to-face contact with their loved ones and other normal social stimulation deepened their loneliness and, in many cases, accelerated their mental deterioration and physical decline. COVID-19 was a tragedy of human suffering, and the consequences of the lockdown drove home the crucial importance of social support and an enriched environment, not only for people experiencing cognitive decline, but for those who choose to work to prevent or mitigate it.

The human brain has a trait called neuroplasticity. That's the brain's ability to change its function and structure in response to our experiences. We associate this ability with children as we watch them absorb new information and acquire new skills at an accelerated pace. But, in fact, our brains retain much of their neuroplasticity throughout our lives.

Not only can we keep our brains stimulated during adulthood to keep our mental functioning sharp, but we can also develop and strengthen our brains. Writing stories, taking up a new musical instrument, learning to play chess, and learning a new language are among the activities that increase our brains' neuroplasticity. These activities build our brains' cerebral reserve, or resilience capacity, that helps our brains remain functional as we grow older.

Throughout this book, we'll discuss design choices that can benefit us now and also keep our brains healthy over the years.

But we can summarize those long-term benefits here. Our brains are helped by:

- Enriching our environments with colors, textures, and shapes
- Kindling our memories with furniture, photos, or recipes passed down by loved ones
- Surrounding ourselves with art, music, and nature
- Designing our spaces so we can get together with friends on short notice, making social connections easier and bringing us its stress-buffering benefits
- Designing our spaces so we can create music, write stories, and paint, providing us with stimulation, novelty, and cognitive challenge
- Designing our bedrooms to make sure we get good-quality sleep that promotes our ability to process learning and memory and restore our brains' plasticity
- Setting up an area in our houses where we can exercise, regardless of weather conditions or time of day, to encourage aerobic exercise for reasons that include increasing blood flow to our brains
- Setting up our kitchens to make cooking healthy meals easy and fun, and protecting our brains with foods that reduce oxidative stress and inflammation

The design choices we make today deliver returns today. But they're also investments in our healthy mental functioning for the rest of our lives.

TRASH AS TREASURE

When my sister and I were little, Mom gave us chores. My favorite was emptying the wastebaskets. I would stand at the trash cans and go through the contents of every wastebasket, fishing out things I thought could be salvaged and repurposed for something else. I'd come back to the house with old lampshades, empty thread spools, pieces of fabric,

an empty cardboard toilet paper roll—anything I thought deserved another chance. Mom threw up her hands and gave wastebasket-emptying duties to my sister.

Decades later, I still see throwaway stuff as material for something else. And I save things—old letters, books, cards—anything that preserves a record or a memory. So as I planned to renovate the house, I knew I'd find a way to repurpose, upcycle, donate, or recycle everything deemed unwanted. As we go along, I will let you know the uses I found for discarded items, and maybe you can find homes for some of your own.

Seeing the value in these things and giving them new life—as I worked to give new life to the house and to myself—was part of the joy of the renovation.

ABOUT CLUTTER

As you may guess, my “saving” tendencies tee me right up for a tendency to accumulate clutter. And clutter is a big deal. In recent years, clutter has been the subject of research that explores its impacts on executive functioning and decision-making, stress levels, self-esteem, energy, overeating, and other behaviors related to our mental and physical health. Research suggests that when our environments are cluttered, our ability to focus is restricted because every item in our cluttered environment is competing for our attention. As a result, we're distracted, and being distracted limits our brains' ability to process information. We focus on tasks better in an uncluttered and organized environment. And our executive functioning skills perform better.

Because controlling clutter is so important to our mental health and to our quality of life, I'll provide links to a few articles on the subject in the footnotes. I like to understand the “whys” of human and animal behavior, and I'm guessing you do, too. I zeroed in on articles that broaden our understanding of the effects of clutter on our brains and don't insult our intelligence by stating and restating the obvious. Reducing clutter doesn't always mean getting rid of things. Some articles offer tips as simple as setting up easy and attractive ways to store items so they no longer bombard your senses and create visual chaos when you walk into a room. Others show you how to manage the things you own so you can find them easily and use them right away. It might be as easy as organizing your books by categories so you can find and read the books that interest you. And eliminating clutter doesn't mean making your environment sterile. You can design an environment that holds memories and meaning without creating clutter.

WHAT I HAD TO WORK WITH

The outside of the house and every room inside needed work, and I knew costs could spin out of control if I didn't have a plan. I used the free technology that's widely available to hatch ideas for modestly priced changes that would have a big impact. I auditioned paint colors for free on the Benjamin Moore website, and I collected ideas on Pinterest (also free). I ordered many of the goods online through Etsy, eBay, AptDeco, Poshmark, and other affordable outlets. I also found some cool things in thrift stores and tackled some DIY projects.

STARING AT THE WALLS

But my most valuable resource—also free—is my imagination, as it is yours. I would sit and stare at a space, or at a photo of a space, and think about how I wanted to use the room and how I wanted to feel when I walked into it. In time, I saw shapes, colors, and textures in the space. Then I thought about what I could use in that space that I already had, could make, or could find on Etsy or eBay that held the shape, color, or texture I envisioned.

I thought about how the eye moves through a space, and I designed each room to direct that movement. I combined stimulation with comfort. Stimulation might spring from a surprising piece of sculpture or other art, or a “warm” color like red. Comfort might come from the soothing textures of a throw pillow or rug; “cool” blues with greens, and plants, neutral colors, glass, stone, wood, and other natural materials. I combined family antiques with modern furniture and other modern elements, so neither my guests nor I would feel stuck in an era.

This book will take you, room by room, through the renovations I made, but my overall approach was not one room at a time. I directed my physical labor to one room at a time, but I would also be firing up ideas for others. I used a notebook to keep track of the paint colors I was considering, and I created separate boards on Pinterest for each room and would capture ideas as they came to me. Ideas would announce themselves in my sleep, on a walk, and at other times when I wasn't aware I had been thinking about a design challenge. I kept all these ideas organized, so I could come back to them when I was ready to start my physical work on a particular room.

Pursuing a creative challenge in this nonlinear fashion has its advantages. First, your imagination has a mind of its own. It doesn't care if you're carrying groceries to your car, working out at the gym, or doing laundry. Once you give your imagination an assignment, it will get to work and come back to you with solutions, even when you don't have a free hand to write them down.

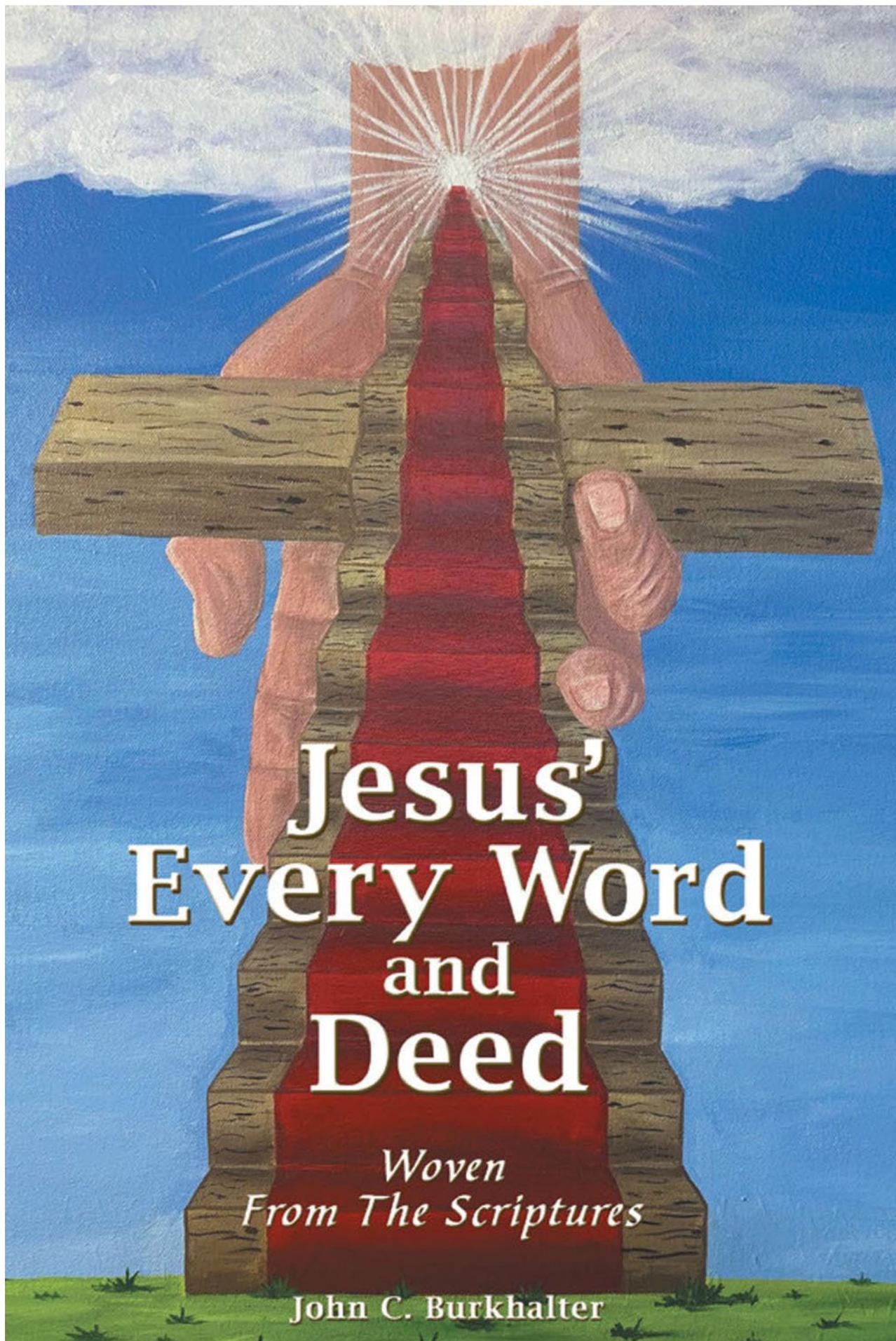
But your imagination needs time to come up with the best solutions. Posing challenges to it from the beginning will spare you the stress of starting with a blank slate when you turn your attention to the next room. The nonlinear approach might also fuel the best solutions because you can give every solution you consider ample time to germinate. You'll develop your ideas and improve on them every time you think about them.

When we think creatively, multiple regions of our brains are coordinating their work: our executive control network handles the planning, organizing, problem-solving, and decision-making. Our default-mode network is activated, looking for ideas as we let our minds wander. Our salience network is sensitive to the feelings we associate with rewards, such as knowing that we have created something inspiring or soothing or well-organized. All this busyness is going on as our brains generate possible solutions to each creative challenge (known as divergent thinking) and zero in on a final solution to the problem (known as convergent thinking). Other regions of our brains are involved in creativity, but basically, our brains are having a blast. Working on design challenges is exuberant mental exercise.

A word about stress. Reimagining spaces in your home is a gift you give yourself and your loved ones. You're doing this to create a home that helps take care of you. So I hope you let this work be fun and not a headache. The process is a big part of the gift, and you'll learn a lot about your eye and the way you approach challenges and create. When you encounter delays and frustrations, you can jump to plans for another room, whether it's exploring paint colors or looking for new dish towels online. There's always something you can do to move forward.

Another thing: our houses will never be “done.” Don't wait until yours is a finished masterpiece to invite your friends over and have fun in it. If your friends are like my friends and me, we love seeing works in progress and cheering one another's hard work and ingenuity.

This is your home. If you stay playful and see the beauty in its progress, I think you'll be happier with the results.



Jesus'
Every Word
and
Deed

*Woven
From The Scriptures*

John C. Burkhalter

JESUS' EVERY WORD AND DEED WOVEN FROM THE SCRIPTURES BY JOHN C. BURKHALTER

“Finally there is a resource that combines the four Gospels into one continuous and compelling account that makes the story of Jesus even more accessible to those who seek Him. I commend Burkhalter for his labor-intensive effort that promises much reward for those who engage with it.”

~**TONY PERKINS, PRESIDENT, FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL, WASHINGTON, DC**

* * *

The complete life of Jesus, using only the exact words from the Bible, woven together to seamlessly read like a book. This extraordinary work combines the four unique eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life into a single, unified and harmonious narrative of Jesus' Every Word and Deed. Fifty-nine Old Testament prophecies are also included where fulfilled in Jesus' life. Students and scholars alike will enjoy this easy-to-read but comprehensive work that offers insights for everyone. The entire teachings and actions of Jesus are recorded in this easily readable format, which also contains a mirrored Scripture Reference Section in the back showing where every word is found by book, chapter and verse. The eBook version allows the reader to easily toggle back and forth between the book and reference sections. No "artistic license" is taken, and the entirety of the work stands alone in describing the acts, wisdom and teachings of Jesus in a complete yet concise format. Separately, a Readers Theater version of Jesus' Every Word and Deed presents the work in an interactive medium for verbalizing all the roles in bible study groups, podcasts, plays and more.

“This work melds the four eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life into a single version to provide a concise perspective.”
~**DERREL EMMERSON, ORDAINED PASTOR (RETIRED); CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY, VIENNA, VA; MINISTER OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH; CHAPLAIN, US ARMY; PROFESSOR OF PASTORAL MINISTRY OF EVANGEL SEMINARY, HARRISONBURG, VA**

“Have you ever finished reading the four gospels and thought 'I wish someone would weave all four together so it would read as a complete story as if by a single author'? Look no further.”
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John C. Burkhalter was active in leadership and governance roles of multiple churches for 30 years while employed in the insurance industry. He retired as President of THI Holding Company, a subsidiary of Nationwide Insurance Company, and for a period, he evaluated the effectiveness and finances of Christian ministries worldwide for prospective donors. He spent the last 13 years assembling the scriptural weaving and associated parts of the book *Jesus Every Word and Deed*, subtitled “Woven from the Scriptures,” as well as a variant subtitled “Readers Theatre Version” for potential play/screenplay use.

[Website](#)

Chapter 1: Jesus, the WORD of God Became Flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and Truth. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the One and Only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Luke’s Intro to “Theophilus” (Which Means Friend of God)

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless, because Elizabeth was not able to conceive,

and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Then the angel left her. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!"

And Mary said, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

The Birth of John the Baptist

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said: “No! He is to be called John.”

They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us – to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

The Birth of Jesus

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said: “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel” (which means, “God with us”).

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**Prophecy Written About 700 Years Before Christ
from Isaiah 7:14**

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel.

— + —

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

— + —

Prophecy Written About 700 Years Before Christ

from Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

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**The Genealogies of Jesus
From the Legal Line of Joseph
(From Abraham to Jesus)**

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of **Abraham**: Abraham was the father of **Isaac**, Isaac the father of **Jacob**, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of **Jesse**, and Jesse the father of King **David**. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud, Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of **Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus**, who is called the Messiah. Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

**From the Blood Line of Mary
(From Jesus Back to Adam)
(*In Non-Patriarchal Cultures, this would read
"Son-in-Law" i.e. Heli, was Mary's father)**

Now Jesus was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son* of Heli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melki, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Naggai, the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Joda, the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, the son of Melki, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of **David**,

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**Prophecy Written About 610 Years Before Christ
from Jeremiah 23:5-6p**

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land... This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

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the son of **Jesse**,

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Prophecy Written About 700 Years Before Christ from Isaiah 11:1-2p

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might . . .

— + —

the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, the son of Nahshon, the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob,

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Prophecy Written About 1400 Years Before Christ from Numbers 24:17p

...A Star will come out of Jacob; A Scepter will rise out of Israel...

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the son of **Isaac**, the son of **Abraham**, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of **Adam**, the son of **God**.

Simeon and Anna See the Infant Jesus

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived. When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord. And the child grew and became strong.

The Coming of the Magi and Herod's Wrath

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

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Prophecy Written About 730 Years Before Christ from Micah 5:2

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

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Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the

house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

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Prophecy Written About 722 Years Before Christ from Hosea 11:1p

... Out of Egypt I called my son.

— + —

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

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Prophecy Written About 600 Years Before Christ from Jeremiah 31:15

This is what the LORD says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

— + —

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in their own town of Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets that he would be called a Nazarene.

Jesus as a Child

And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was on him. Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Festival, according to the custom.

After the Festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." **"Why were you searching for me?"** He asked. **"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"**

But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

The Ministry of John the Baptist Begins

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.' "

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Prophecy Written About 700 Years Before Christ from Isaiah 40:3-5p

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together..."

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Prophecy Written About 433 Years Before Christ from Malachi 3:1p

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me..." Says the LORD Almighty.

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And so John the Baptist appeared, a man who was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay."

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

A FAMILY OF THE OLD RUSSIAN EMPIRE



STANISLAS M. YASSUKOVICH

A FAMILY OF THE OLD RUSSIAN EMPIRE BY STANISLAS M. YASSUKOVICH

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In the wake of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, a young noblewoman in the Russian Empire makes the bold decision to stay behind, while her family scatters across the globe. Her brother flees with the White Russian emigration to New York, while her mother and sister escape to Poland. Strangely, her brother leads his American family to believe that his sister, along with her husband and daughter, vanished during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) and are presumed dead. But this is far from the truth.

Although his other sister's life in Poland, marked by tragedy during World War II, is well known, the fate of his sister in Russia remains a secret. In reality, he has secretly maintained contact with her, even sending financial support. Her story is one of immense suffering and resilience, enduring exile to Siberia and eight years in a brutal Gulag, branded as a "former person," a Soviet term for those of noble birth and supporters of the old regime.

This is a poignant saga of loss, survival, and astonishing strength in the face of unimaginable adversity.

“The historical information notwithstanding, the story is told in a moving narrative that will linger as it fleshes out forgotten tragedies and triumphs.”

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Stanislas M. Yassukovich was born in Paris to a Russian émigré father and a French mother. The family went to America in 1940, and Stanislas was educated there at Deerfield Academy and Harvard College. He served in the United States Marine Corps and then moved to England in 1961, where he pursued a distinguished career in the City of London, becoming known as one of the founders of the international capital markets. On retirement, he moved to the Luberon region of Provence in Southern France, and he now lives in the Western Cape, South Africa. For services to the financial industry, Stanislas was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of

Arts and a Freeman of the City of London. His previous works, *Two Lives: A Social and Financial Memoir*, *Lives of the Luberon*, *James Grant, a novel*, *Short Stories, a collection*, *A Cape Town Decameron*, and *A Third Collection of Short Stories*, were published by Austin Macauley Publishers in 2016, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. Stanislas is married to the former Diana Townsend of Lowdale Farm, Mazoe, Zimbabwe, and they have three children: Tatyana, Michael, and Nicholas.

[Website](#)

I

The House at No. 6 Shpalernaya Street and No. 16 Kutuzov

Many a story begins with a house. From a house we begin our daily peregrinations and, as a child in a house, we begin our life's adventure. Our primitive ancestors considered their caves or shacks as central to their existence. Children's fairy stories revolve around a dwelling, whether it be the princess in a castle or Hansel and Gretel in the witch's gingerbread house in the forest. And how often our dreams in later life take us back to the home of our childhood. So I begin a tale of my aunt Irina and her family with the very large house in St Petersburg which occupies a block between the Kutuzov Embankment, known previously as the French Quay, for the Embassy just behind it—and Shpalernaya Street, which runs parallel to the Embankment. There are two entrances, and therefore two addresses, and a very large courtyard in the middle, where carriages could enter and turn. In the 19th century, the house had been divided into large, high ceilinged apartments, and on the first and second floors lived Mikhail Stanislavovich Yassukovich with his wife Marie Dimitrievna, née Erassi (and formerly Dillenius), and their three children: Irina, Marie Magdalena, and Dimitri—my father. The family were resident there from some time in the 1890s to 1917. It is now known that a daughter of Marie Dimitrievna's first marriage, Natalya Jacovlevna Dillenius, lived with them until her marriage in 1908 to a Baron von Ringel. Here was an early example of a rather central family fact never mentioned by my father—half-brother to Natalya.

The location of this house was then, and would still now be considered prime. In the inner city, on the left bank of the Neva, it is in the Liteinaya Quarter, where the most fashionable residential streets were to be found. The Summer Gardens nearby are an important amenity. In the old days, also within walking distance, was the district court, the Austrian embassy, the barracks of Household Troops and of the Horse Guards, the Cathedral of St Sergius and the Stroganov Palace. The house itself has an interesting history. Built between 1807 and 1809 by the Titular Counsellor Ivan Pavlov, it had housed the Department of Water Communications—a key ministry in a city of river, delta and canals. In 1813, the eldest of the five daughters of Marshal Kutuzov, the great hero who saw off Napoleon, purchased the house for one hundred thousand rubbles. She sold it in the 1840s to the builder Kosikovsky, whose daughter Olga rebuilt the house in a more contemporary style in 1859, before selling it to the merchant

K.I. Sinebryukhov, It seems it was a real estate investment, because he rented it out and may have been responsible for subdividing it. He secured some celebrated tenants. From 1872 to 1875, Modest Mussorgsky, the great composer, rented the 3rd floor of the part looking on to Shpalernaya Street, and today a memorial plaque with his head sculpted and “Mussorgsky lived here” is to be seen on the Embankment facade. Furthermore, the composer Rimsky-Korsakov lived in the next door apartment—but the dates are uncertain, and he does not seem to have merited a plaque. He was a close friend of Mussorgsky. Naturally, in the Soviet period, the mansion housed an unknown number in multi-room, communal apartments. But the musical heritage was revived more recently, as in the mid-1990s, the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, known to his many friends as “Slav”, and his wife Galina Vishnevskaya bought first all three

floors on the Embankment side, and then all the seven rooms in which Mussorgsky had lived—undertaking a reconstruction of its decor at the time. Galina even found a wallpaper factory still operating from the old times and had the original paper reprinted. She also commissioned a copy of Mussorgsky's portrait by Repin, painted shortly before his death. The couple lived there until Rostropovich's death in 2007, and their daughters are there now—still owning Mussorgsky's 3rd floor apartment.

St Petersburg, at the time the Yassukovich family lived in Shpalernaya Street, was one of the most beautiful and intriguing cities in Europe—and, for many, it still is. Those of us who suffer from the disease of nostalgia naturally entertain a somewhat wistful view of its past. As to its famous beginnings, many with a cynical bias would claim, with some justification, that Peter the Great secured the foundations in the swampy delta with the bones of the hundreds of thousands who died building the city. The climate of St Petersburg is raw and damp, rain and snow falling about 200 days a year and winter lasting six months. Immediately before 1914, the population was just over two million, which compares with 192,000 in 1784 and 860,000 in 1881. Always cosmopolitan, at the outbreak of the First War there were over 11,000 Germans, 2,400 French and 2,100 English living in St Petersburg. That would not include the very large number of Baltic noblemen in the service of the Tsar, particularly well represented in the diplomatic service. (The Russian Ambassador to the Court of St. James at the time was Count Benkendorf—a fiercely loyal Russian with a German name). St Petersburg was very much a capital city—the seat of government, the site of the military headquarters and several Imperial palaces. It boasted an extraordinary range of museums, galleries, theatres, pleasure gardens, churches, private palaces and other places of interest. The Hermitage was then, and is now, perhaps the most famous art gallery in the world. The celebrated German publisher of guide books, Karl Baedeker, published his guide to Russia in 1914—with what might seem in retrospect to be very bad timing for launching a tourist handbook. Some suspected that it was at the behest of German military intelligence, already preparing for war. In addition to a wealth of general information, it contains 14 pages on the Hermitage, with room by room, detailed descriptions of every single painting hanging on the walls.

Perhaps the Yassukovich's, essentially a military family, might have been blazé at this cornucopia of culture—as would have been many of their class. I know they went to the theatre and the opera, because my father told me that when he arrived in New York in 1919, his father took him to the opera, and he was shocked to find themselves in the stalls, whereas at home they had always been in a box. But their city, whilst modern by the European standards of the time, was still highly distinctive and reflected strong national characteristics. In Russia then, a large proportion of the male population was in uniform permanently, even when on holiday. The military, of course, but also civil servants, domestics, students, school boys, porters, minor municipal officials, down to the policemen in black and with green facings—all were in uniform. Little Dimitri Mikhailovich was in a sailor suit almost as soon as he left his crib, and then in the uniform of the First Cadet Corps from the age of eight. Even wet nurses were in a bright national dress—in blue for those nursing boys, and pink for those nursing girls. Tourists were always struck by the mass of uniforms in a country not seen as militaristic as Prussia. Although they were slowly disappearing, before 1914 there were still street vendors, also in characteristic costume, selling Kvass, with pail and glass jugs on their heads, itinerant cooks selling pirogi, kisel malinovi, and blinis. Ragged pedlars (*raznoshtchiks*) selling old clothes—and their cries would echo through the streets: *tzvety, tzvetotchki!*(flowers), *kartoffel!* (potatoes), *ruiba zhivaya!* (live fish) *apelsini, limoni khoroshiye!*(oranges and lemons). English tourists, the first to notice such things, were always struck by the excellent condition of the many horses employed in different roles in St Petersburg. In winter, troikas and carriages on sleds dashed through the streets at speed.

There were two close relatives of the family in Shpalernaya Steet living nearby in St Petersburg at the time. Until his death in 1909, Great-Grandfather Stanislas Ignatievich Yassukovich, a military engineer, who had served on the staff of the Inspector General of Military Engineers, and retired as a Lt. General in the Guards Sapper Regiment, lived with his French wife in a villa on Vassilevski Island—the principal of several islands in the delta of the Neva. Their address was 11th Line, House 24. There is some confusion over the spelling of his wife's maiden name. She was called *de Billot*—or it might have been *Billaud*, or simply *Billo*. Having been transliterated from the Roman to the Cyrillic

letters and then back again, the uncertainty is not surprising. Transliteration is not a precise linguistic discipline—which is why so many Russian names turn up with different spellings in Roman letters. In his retirement the general served on several boards and also adjudicated disputes arising from railway accidents—presumably due to his engineering credentials.

His brother Ignatii Ignatievich had great fame, at least in industrial circles, having been the architect of one of the greatest iron and steel monopolies in Eastern Europe. So vital has been the role of Slonevski's biography in establishing contact with my long lost, and presumed deceased Aunt Irina, that I must dwell on Ignatii's story. He was educated as an engineer and in official documents is referred to as "hereditary nobleman engineer—technologist Ignatii Ignatiievich Yassukovich"—not a description you would find in many European countries, where the professions are largely reserved to the middle class. The Yassukovich family's first entry into the professions was in the law. Ignatii Andreevich had been chairman of the investigatory council of the civil court in Kovno, now Kaunas. His son Ignatii first worked in railway development but was soon engaged by the Belgian interests which created the Société Metallurgique Dneiprvoise du Midi de la Russie as managing director of its plants at Kamianskoe on the Dnieper river. The principal partner of the group was the steel company John Cockrill S.A., thoroughly Belgian, but founded by a Scottish Ironmaster of that name. Kamianskoe was a quite ancient port town on the Dnieper river, one of the main trading routes, in the Ukraine region of Russia. Ignatii Ignatievich proceeded to build a huge company town there, complete with workers' housing, churches, recreational facilities and even a yacht club on the river. He employed a number of Polish technicians and general workers. The Roman Catholic church he built (together with a new Orthodox Church) is now a central place of worship for Catholic Ukrainians. Ignatii eventually conglomerated some 80% of the metallurgical and steel industries of Eastern Europe into a monopoly called Promed. Ignatii married a lady from the Labunski family. They eventually spent most of their time in St Petersburg, in Gogol Street—until Ignatii's death in 1914. His career is well chronicled in Alexandr Slonevski's biography Ignatii Jasiukowicz—a Name in History. But some mystery surrounds the last times of this enterprise, after Ignatii's death. Professor Slonevski has a copy of correspondence dated 1916, between an employee of Prodamet and one Ignatii Kasimirovich Yassukovich, a technologist, who would appear to have been seeking re-employment. You will learn more of this relative in the appendix. The letter informs him not to count on joining the company again because no member of the Yassukovich or Labunski families will be taken on as long as a Mr Paul Theakston is the managing director. (This gentleman belonged to an English family settled in Russia after their ancestor Josiah Theakston had been employed in 1726 as a gardener on the Imperial estates at Pavlosk and Tsarskoe Selo.) Had Theakston drawn the line on the considerable nepotism previously practised? Ignatii did employ several of his wife's Labunski family, and his brother-in-law Ivan Ivanovich Wilga, husband of his sister Marie, had a senior management position. Was there some sort of management shakeup after Ignatii's death? Prodamet would not be the first conglomerate where management successors turn their back on the founder. It was all nationalised in 1918—there can be few records to consult. Perhaps uncomfortable with all this nepotism, Stanislas (name very current in the family), son of the great industrialist Ignatii Ignatiievich, was not to follow his father's career path. Born and first educated in St Petersburg, he was a first cousin of the children in Shpalernaya Street. He inherited his father's estate Chodow in Poland, and went on to have a distinguished career as a Polish statesman—eventually martyred when the Soviets re-incorporated his country into their evil version of empire.

Not surprisingly, Mikhail Stanislavovich, the pater familias in Shparlernaya Street was educated as an engineer. He began his schooling in the 1st Cadet Corps, but then entered the Nikolaev Engineering Academy, situated in the old St Michael's Castle, as a "Junker, rank of private", indicating a noble student beginning a military career at the bottom of the ladder. Students in military colleges were naturally in uniform and were promoted as they proceeded through the course—Mikhail first to corporal in 1889, sergeant major in 1890, and finally commissioned as a 1st lieutenant on graduation in August 1891 (the same system applies at West Point, the US Military academy). Mikhail was initially assigned to the 10th Sapper Battalion but soon transferred to the Guards Sapper Battalion and permanently assigned there in December 1892 (The Imperial Guards were army strength, rather than only brigade—as in the British Army). Mikhail's military career was to be dominated by academic assignments in his ten years at the

Nikolaev. This institution had a long history and was the result of a merger in 1855 with an engineering school and therefore combined the function of senior staff college for military engineers with a technical academy and school. Mikhail was approved as a teacher at the Academy and the School in March of 1902, when he had attained the rank of Captain. Interestingly, many years later his daughter Irina was to remember her father's role as a lecturer more vividly than his subsequent accomplishments leading to his promotion as a general officer at a young age in 1916. As we know, engineering ran in the family. And, as I will explain in due course, it was Mikhail's prowess as a military engineer which led to his decorated accomplishments in the First War, and—even more critically, to his fortunate presence in the United States in early 1917.

Mikhail was one of the first in St Petersburg to own a motor car and the family coachman trained as a chauffeur. That individual was to play a vital role in the family history. No doubt Mikhail would have used his new motor car to drive the short distance to the Engineers Castle, near the Mikhailovsky Gardens. Known also as the Old Michael Palace, it was built in 1800 on the site of the summer palace of the Empress Elizabeth and turned into an engineering academy in 1822. But its place in Russian history is assured because in 1801, the Emperor Paul 1st was murdered there by a group of officers, not with the connivance of, but in favour of his heir Alexander I (who was in the palace at the time). My grandfather (who in later life was always referred to in the family as "the General"), was a complex character. I learned little of him from my father who, as I will refer to more than once, told my sister and I almost nothing about either of his parents. And we learned even less from our stepgrandmother Antonina Syromyatnikovna, who, as his second wife, some 20 years younger than the General, we knew well until her death in 1969.

However, Tonia, as we always called her, told us almost nothing about her own background. In New York, she became the head of the international department of the New York Public Library. I used to call on her often, and, as she had no children, she was very close to my sister Ariane and I. She had every opportunity to tell us all about herself and my grandfather. But we were far too shy to interrogate her. She did say she had a brother in St Louis. He turns out to be a half-brother, and I am in touch with one of his descendants and, through him, learn only now about our stepgrandmother Tonia. She was one of two sisters born to a French mother and a Russian father. The great reunion also reveals her history which I will treat further on—without being able to shed light on why she did not recount it when she spent welcome time with my sister and me.

That the General was brilliant is obvious from his military and academic career. He was also extremely personable and eloquent. He was much in favour with the Grand Duke who was Inspector General of Engineers, as indicated by his frequent trips abroad on so-called official engineering business, and rather gratuitous assignments. But Tonia would tell us—with a twinkle in her eye, that he was very much a ladies man. In fact, he was notoriously unfaithful with a variety of paramours—not even sparing maids and nannies. He was also something of a spendthrift, an inclination my father suffered from in New York, in the early 1920s when his modest weekly salary from a Wall Street job would be gobbled up in nightclubbing sessions with the General. *Et faites suivres* (keep them coming), was his expression when ordering champagne. But I must recount his true history—as my father hardly did.

My story will be peppered with inexplicable omissions, and even distortions, which ran through the minimal family information, imparted infrequently, and often as causal asides, which my father left as a most unsatisfactory legacy. Even the most intimate family circumstances—the fact that his mother had been previously married and he had grown up with a half-sister, and his parents separation in 1909, were never alluded to. Of course we were aware they had eventually divorced, as we knew and loved our stepgrandmother Tonia. But he seemed extremely proud of his father's career. Why then would he fail to mention its highlights, and refer inaccurately to his position in the United States? As mentioned above, Mikhail Stanislavovich was already lecturing at the Nikolaevski Engineering Academy as a Captain in 1902 and was soon a Lt Colonel at the end of that year (there was no rank of Major in the Imperial Russian Army), and a full Colonel in 1906. By 1913 he held the rank of Extraordinary Professor at the Nikolaevski—the principle staff college for military engineers.

The truth of the General's subsequent career, I was able to learn from research organised by one of my new cousins in modern St Petersburg—Alexandre Semenov. He commissioned Nicolai Bogomazov, an historian specialising in the

period, to search archives in Moscow to find evidence of the exact nature of the General's assignment to America. My father frequently mentioned that his father had gone to Washington after the US joined WW I as head of a military mission—the Allies exchanged such diplomatic bodies in wartime. He even supplied this information to the obituary editors when the General died in 1942. But I could find no evidence that the Provisional Government had reciprocated a mission from the United States, headed by Senator Elihu Root, which arrived in Petrograd in June 1917, two months after US entry into the War. I also found it incredible that the Provisional Government would send a recently appointed Major General (December 6th 1916), with no diplomatic experience, on such a critical mission. The truth turns out to be rather different. The General did become chairman of a Russian committee in New York—but not one with any diplomatic mandate.

I have strayed somewhat from my account of the household at Shpalernaya Street because Grandfather Mikhail's departure for New York, and his presence there during the Bolshevik revolution in October, is so central to the separation of the family, to the good fortune of my father and his offspring, to the tragic fate of his two sisters, and to the lengthy interlude before happen-stance intervened to reunite us. For this reason I was determined to run to earth the true story of Major General Mikhail Stanislavovich Yassukovich.

Much of all this raises the question of the finances of the Yassukovich family, comfortably settled in a posh section of the city, with a holiday villa on the Kerala coast of Finland, a motor car, and all the appurtenances of a prosperous family of the Imperial Russian establishment. Great-grandfather Stanislav Ignatievich (1839–1907) retired from army service on permanent sick leave—with “pension” and “uniform”, as is military record states. He was 61, and he couldn't have been that sick because he then served as a non-executive director on three boards. He and his wife Varvara lived mainly in a dacha on the Vasylevsky Island which separates the two delta branches of the Neva, with one side looking across to the Winter Palace. To my contemporary financial mind, it seems inconceivable that he would not have had shares in his brother Igantii's great creation and stock exchange blue chip SRDMS—later Promed. But his biographer Slonevski finds no evidence of this. This is particularly surprising because Ignatii, who was frequently in St Petersburg, had accommodation in Gogol Street, No. 12, near Palace Square, until his death in 1915. So he certainly would have been in contact with his brother. Stanislav had a penchant for gambling—one of the few things my father told me about him. Apparently, he frequented Monte Carlo, and had owned, or rented, a villa on the Lac Lemane in Lausanne to drop his wife Varvara and the children Evgenia and Mikhail, whilst he went on to fondle the chips at the casino in Monte. But it would seem that he left no fortune, because one thing our father did tell us—and which stuck in my mind, was that our grandmother Marie Dimitrievna had the money in the family. There was also a very slight hint that grandfather had married her for her money. But if father knew the origin of his mother's fortune, he never mentioned it.

Not enough is known about the background of my grandmother Marie Dimitrievich, whose maiden name was Erassi. Father did tell us she was of Byzantine origin from a Greek Phanariot family. The conquering Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II in 1453 had maintained the Greek civil servants to help rule the vast portion of his empire which was Greek speaking, and they lived near the old lighthouse in Constantinople (fanari is Greek for lantern or lamp). Thus the designation Phanariot for those Byzantine Greeks, who the Sultan also appointed as governors of his Danubian provinces Moldavia and Wallachia—and thus their subsequent dispersal into Romania and Southern Russia. But, one of the most extraordinary revelations of our newly discovered cousins, a significant fact our father never told us—was that his mother had been previously married, and had a child from that marriage. Neither my sister Ariane nor I ever heard him mention a half-sister—yet she lived with the family in Shpalernaya Street for some time. It was one of the apparent discrepancies which caused me to pause when Professor Slonevski astounded me with the discovery of Madame Semyenova—the granddaughter of my aunt Irina. I often saw—in correspondence and some other records my father kept, my grandmother's name cited as Erassi von Dillenius. This confused me because the prefix von is used primarily in noble names in the Germanic world. It is not exclusive to that purpose, however, as it simply means “from”, and appears in non-noble, older German names. This has led to the practice of simply writing v. in front of the name to signify noble distinction (as in v. Furstenberg, for example). The many immigrants to the Russian empire

from the Baltic region and Livonia, mainly nobles, often dropped the von to “russify” themselves. Good examples are Counts Benckendorf and Freederichs, the last Lord Chamberlain of the Court. In many countries, it is the practice to maintain a first husband’s name by a widow who remarries. Marie Dimitrievna had first married Jacov Dillenius and they had one daughter named Natalya. Dillenius is a German name, and there is no prefix von. Jacov may have been a descendant of Johann Jacob Dillenius, a celebrated botanist from Westphalia, who published many learned works on the subject and died as a Professor at Oxford. Perhaps in the context of my grandmother the prefix was being used to indicate “from” her former husband Dillenius. I have no date of his death.

As our two family branches compared notes, memories and snatches of family facts—and resumed research, an even more astonishing discovery was made. It would seem that our grandparents separated at some time around 1909, because Mikhail Stanislavovich suddenly moved to an apartment in Baskov Lane No. 23, near the Church of St Simeon, taking the phone number (2066) with him, leaving Marie Dimitrievna and the children in Shpalernaya Street—not very far away. My cousin Dmitri Sergeevich (my aunt Irina’s great-grandson) had the good idea of consulting the St Petersburg telephone directories for the early years of the 20th century. This not unimportant piece of family news comes as a surprise even to Irina’s descendants because, just like her brother Dimitri, she never mentioned it. Marital separations and divorces were certainly not common in Old Russia, although perhaps somewhat more frequent than in Roman Catholic countries. It was hardly an event that would be shrugged off as of little consequence, but, on the contrary, perhaps it was so traumatic as to be erased from the children’s memories.

My father’s reticence to talk of his mother, this separation, and much later impressions from his sister Irina, suggest that Marie Dimitrievna was not an adored mother, or wife. Although her husband’s infidelities may have caused the breakdown in her marriage, there must have been major incompatibilities. In the 1930s, living in Warsaw, she corresponded with my mother, in French, of course, and made a great impression by the purity and elevation of her writing in that language. Unfortunately, the correspondence has not survived. But grandmother Marie Dimitrievna, seemingly very straight laced, would not have recounted her personal history—her first marriage and separation in her second, to a new daughter-in-law she had never met. And my mother would certainly have told us if she had.

The two girls were born in quick succession: Irina on the 14th of February, 1896, and Marie Magdalena on the 20th of December in the same year. So they would have been 12 when their father left the family home. Dimitri came later on the 16th of June 1898. We never celebrated his birthday as there was always confusion between the old style calendar and the new—and in any case name days were celebrated in Russia, rather than birth days (26 October OS, for Dimitri). I have a copy of his certificate of baptism on 20th July 1898 which shows as parents Captain Mikhail Stanislavovich Yassukovich and legal wife (curious expression) Maria Dimitrievna, both Orthodox with godparents Kolezhski Advisor Evgeni Viktorovich Glushkov and widow of hereditary honorary citizen Anna Kirilovich Erassi. Kolezhski means “college” in Russian so the godfather has some academic position, probably at the Engineers College. The godmother is obviously a relation of Marie Dimitrievna whose maiden name was Erassi and her husband had a civic title—a rough equivalent of City Freeman, which was hereditary in Russia. This is one of the many curiosities of the complex structure of Imperial Russian society. Irina had the greater classical beauty of the two sisters, although Marie’s looks improved with age. It would also seem that Irina was the most outgoing and had very much a mind of her own. The two sisters were so close in age that little Dimitri, two years younger, might have felt a bit isolated. But he was extremely fond of both his sisters.

Circumstances, of which more later, were to put Irina foremost in his mind, even when he suffered from senile dementia in his last years. Marie Magdalena contracted scarlet fever at one point and as a result, lost hearing in one ear. Otherwise, they seem to have been a healthy family. Natalya Jacovlevna Dillenius, born in 1886, lived with her mother, stepfather and three step-siblings until her marriage in 1908 to Baron von Ringel, who had industrial interests in Moscow and St Petersburg. Ten years older than her sisters, Natalya would not have been in the nursery, and surely had a social life of her own from 1904 or thereabouts. But this hardly explains why my farther never mentioned his half-sister. Natalya was to be very close to her half-sister Irina after the revolution.

Naturally, the three had very much a nursery upbringing, as was the custom of that time for their class. At one point, there was an English nanny. It seems there was a certain turnover of nurses and nannies, due to the General's libidinous inclinations. They spoke French to their parents on the probably rather rare occasions they were together. I recall my father saying he often spoke English to his sisters. Again, although my father never mentioned it, it seems there was a family property in Nevel—although this is not to surprising, given the family origins, as that town was part of the Lithuanian Polish Commonwealth before the 1725 partition. Irina was born there, and possibly Marie Magdalena as well—but Dimitri was definitely born in St Petersburg. Holidays might well have been spent at Nevel. My father referred to having met his friend Serge Belosselsky-Beloszerski on holiday in the country. In fact, that was the only reference to a childhood friend I can remember him making. Years later, we knew he had known his friend Juri Haveman since his early youth, but he never mentioned details, and we were too shy to ask. Belosselsky-Beloszerski re-surfaced in the early 1950s, serving as an interpreter at the UN in Lake Success. They took up the last conversation they had been having when they were ten years old as if they had seen each other recently. It is the only mention of holidays by my father that I can remember—other than his story of his grandmother's fur coat. I thought it strange as we children always talked about our holidays. And he spoke of the country, not specifying Nevel or its surroundings, perhaps because he thought we would have no idea where it was.

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For his second novel, *The Threads Remain*, he tackled that tragic time in history through characters inside Germany before, during and after the war.

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CHAPTER 1

Verstecken: Hiding

1944

He had created chaos, and he was enjoying it. Friedrich jabbed the point of a short stick into an ant hole in the Platz (square) in front of his home. He knew that his Mutti (Mama) was watching from the third-floor railing in front of their apartment, two floors above the piano store that stood at ground level, as she always did while he played in the small patch of land. The square was outlined by one-lane roads in a sleepy part of München Gladbach. It was mostly grass-covered with some bare patches and a few scraggly bushes on each corner that were perhaps decorative at some point but now seemed to make the square look bleaker on this gray, cool November afternoon. Allied bombs had hit two of the dozen or so buildings that surrounded the square and were hollow shells of their former selves, with jagged edges of brick, looking paper-thin, almost defying gravity to stay upright. One still smoldered, giving the air a faint smoky scent that might have been pleasing if not accompanied by the image of wreckage.

Friedrich was six months past his third birthday. He was slim and tall for a boy of that age, with a narrow face and olive skin. His dark eyes were lined with lush, thick black lashes which gave him an angelic look that every woman he met commented on. He wore a drab gray stocking cap and a brown wool coat that was missing a button on the front and had a small hole in the arm. A few wavy black locks of hair escaped the stocking cap and hung down his forehead.

The ants poured out of the hole as he jabbed the stick at the opening with the typical lack of coordination of any three-year-old child. He began to trace the pinwheel-like shape that he saw on the banner across the square from his apartment. That shape was everywhere. Soldiers wore it on their arms, bright flags bearing the shape streamed from buildings all over town. Even the piano shop at the base of their building displayed that shape in the window. He liked

it. As he traced it over the ant hole, the ants scurried in every direction. The boy watched, curious, studying, transfixed. He heard and saw nothing around him as he focused on the chaos he had created. Then his body lurched as his arm was yanked, and he rose violently into the air.

Friedrich looked up and realized he was slung under Mutti's right arm. Renate Brunst was a tall, slender woman, but she was wiry and strong. She easily ran across the street and bounded up the steps, two at a time, all the way to their third-floor apartment while carrying the boy like a grocery sack. Friedrich was disoriented by the jostling and began to whimper halfway through their ascent. As they reached the apartment, Renate swung the door open, then closed and locked it with one hand, still carrying the boy under her right arm. She lifted him onto the table in the kitchen and knelt before him. Friedrich was glassy-eyed, his lips puckered and trembling, making him look even more angelic than usual. Renate leveled her gaze on him and held both of his cheeks in her hands, which were moist with sweat. She had a strong, masculine jawline but kind eyes. "Friedrich, my dear," she said softly with a quiver in her voice. "You must listen to me carefully. You are going to hide, and I need you to stay completely quiet for a very long time. You are not to come out or make a sound until I come to get you. You must promise me."

A tear escaped his eye and rolled down his left cheek as he nodded slightly.

Sliding her hands down to his shoulders, Renate gripped him firmly. "Do you remember the stories in *Struwwelpeter* my dear?" She nodded for him. "And do you remember the *Grimms' Fairy Tales*?"

Friedrich nodded. The stories scared him. Each tale ended with some horror visiting a child who did not obey. One story in *Struwwelpeter* haunted him. It was about a boy who sucked his thumb, so a demon came and cut the boy's thumb off with shears. The image on the page of the smiling lanky demon with shears and blood pouring from the boy's thumbless hand gave Friedrich nightmares and had cured him of ever sucking his thumb again. He looked back at his Mutti. He had only known love and gentility from this woman. Now, her face was twisted with a fear that penetrated his own chest. He made no reply.

"I need you to say that you understand, that you will hide quietly until I come for you."

"Yes, Mutti," he squeaked out over a trembling lower lip.

Now tears escaped Renate's eyes as she saw the fear and pain on his face. She hugged him closely. "I love you, my son. I always will." She turned to the back wall of the kitchen, placed her hands firmly in the center of the paneling, pushed in, and then slid it to the left. The panel fell forward against her hands. There were the sounds of heavy footsteps on the stairs outside that caused them both to look toward the front door. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. As her eyes opened, she smiled softly and spoke quietly. "My love, I am sorry. I wish we had time to help you understand. I wish I could hide with you, but there is no room and if I am not accounted for ..." she trailed off and shook her head. "You are such a good boy, such a brave boy. I know you can do this. Not a single sound, no matter what you hear. Do you understand?" She forced another smile and nodded gently.

Friedrich blinked and said again through trembling lips, "Yes, Mutti."

The moment he agreed, she hugged him tightly one more time, placed him into the opening in the wall, and replaced the paneling.

Everything went pitch black. Friedrich trembled and began to cry but did so silently. He had never known darkness like this. There was no light. He felt the rough back of the paneling against the backs of his hands as they hung by his sides. He tilted his head forward just a few centimeters until his nose felt the same rough surface. He was in a box, between wall studs on each side, the building siding behind him and the paneling before him. In complete blackness.

There was a bang at the door of the apartment. He heard men's voices and his own Mutti's, but they sounded strange to him, shrill and angry. The men's voices rose, followed by a loud crashing which sent vibrations through the wall that Friedrich could feel against his nose. His mouth opened to scream but no sound came out as he remembered his promise.

The unfamiliar man's voice rose again and sounded closer now. The words were foreign to Friedrich, *harboring; witnesses; enemy*. His Mutti's voice responded, "He's gone. Yesterday. You will never find him, you devil." The final

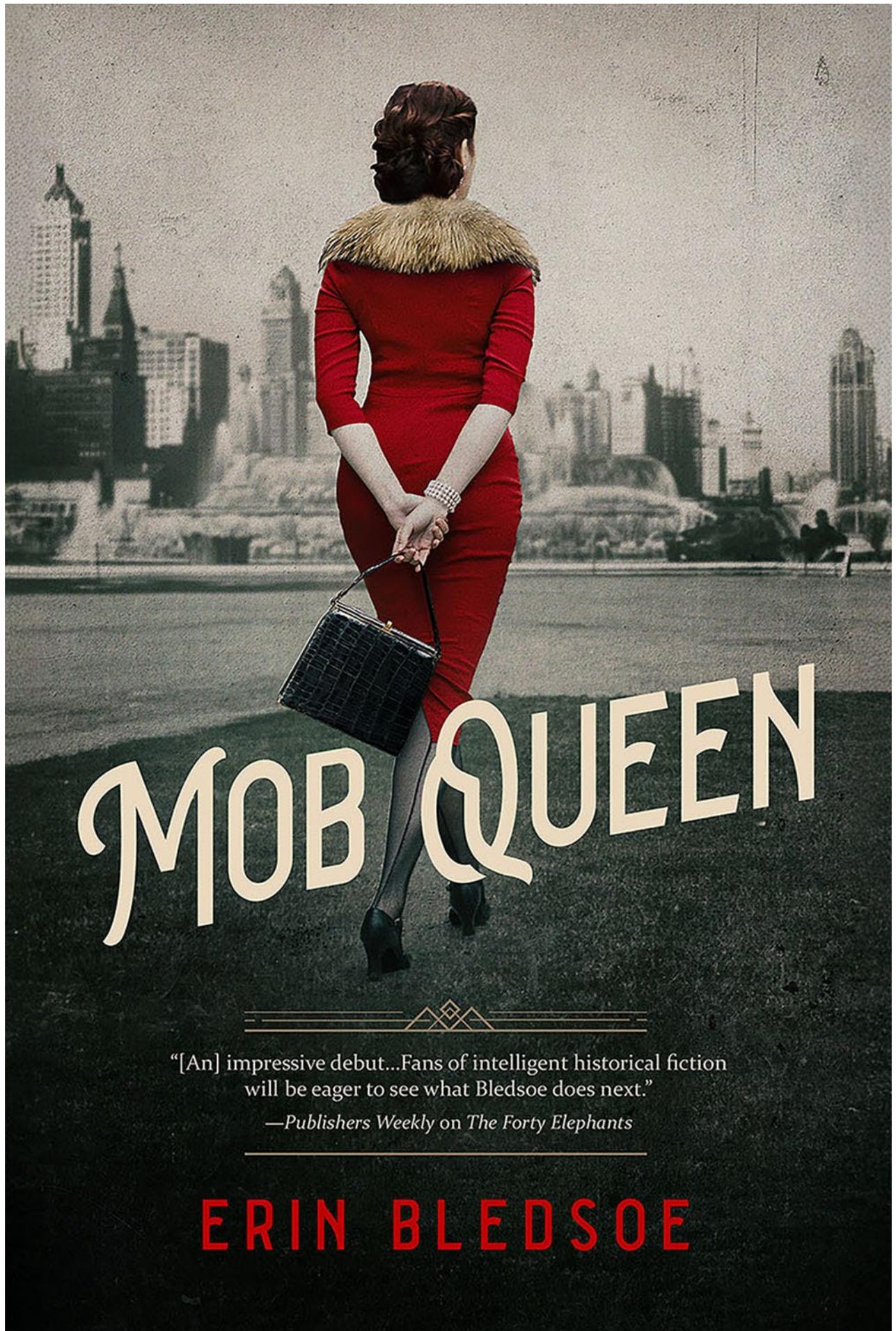
word rose to a shriek. There were two loud bangs, so jarring that Friedrich let out a startled yelp and then held his breath. He heard two men now, arguing. Then the room was silent.

After a long silence, there were footsteps around the room. He heard a clatter of things falling or being thrown around. Friedrich continued to cry silently. He said to himself, *I must stay quiet until Mutti gets me.* The door closed and the house was silent again. He waited.

Friedrich could not know how long he had been inside the wall, but he knew he was hungry and had to use the toilet. The fairy tales were not kind to children who didn't eat their supper or who made a mess. They were also clear on obeying your parents, so he felt torn. He was going to break one or more of these rules and surely be gobbled up by a witch or meet some other grisly end. He hoped his mother would open the panel soon and let him avoid that fate. But she did not come.

As time passed, he propped his body against the wall stud to his right. He had been standing for so long his legs were numb. With his weight shifted, and somewhat supported, he drifted to sleep. He awoke to sounds in the home and a terrible smell. He had messed his pants. He began to cry, thinking of what would happen to him. Is it a demon or a witch in the house now, come to claim the bad child who messed his pants?

A man's voice spoke softly in the house. "Little boy. Where are you?" It was no voice he knew. *A demon*, he thought, and he stayed silent.



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* * *

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Erin Bledsoe was told in middle school that her essay on Marie Antoinette showed promise, fueling her dream to write about historical women, particularly the ones that behave badly. When she's not writing, she's wrangling children, exploring nature, or rolling dice at a table with friends playing Dungeons & Dragons. She lives with her husband and children in Michigan, where she'll occasionally have her coffee outside just to watch the deer.

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Chapter One

chicago world's fair, 1933

"He's here again," said Rosa, barreling into the kitchen with two plates stained red from our meatball special. "Third time this week, Virginia. Have you told him you divorced him?"

"Not today." I let out a hard breath to blow some hair out of my face, a messy red curl that not even my favorite ribbon-trimmed bandeau could save from the Avenue of Flags. I was long gone from the bannered entrance at the north end of the Chicago World's Fair, but I could still feel the wind beating off Lake Michigan, threatening to knock me over.

I leaned down to rinse my hands under a nearby faucet in the small but homey restaurant kitchen, where you couldn't take a step without bumping into jars of oils and dried pasta. Cooks shuffled plates of ravioli genovese and mustaccioli into the window, giving each dish a final sniff of approval before the waitresses trayed them for serving. It was barely noon, and my stomach growled with hunger.

"He better not cause another scene today. Ma won't have it."

I pulled off my hat and combed my fingers through my hair to tame the mess. Georgie was the least of my worries. I was far more concerned with the woman I'd seen on my way in, standing by the gladiolas near the terrace. My missing friend, with rapeseed-yellow hair framing her slender

face and long neck, sporting a lilac day dress with a bell-shaped skirt and puffed sleeves. She waited in a sea of customers in line at the front of the restaurant. A man chatted with her, holding her hand in a delicate way, looking deep into her unremarkable brown eyes she hated so much. "Madeline," I called for her, loud enough to catch the attention of others in the line. They cast me questioning looks while I used both arms to shove past them like I was running from something. I reached out for her shoulder, but like all the times before, when she turned to face me, I saw only a stranger.

Just another tourist with good fashion sense, observing the Italian Pavilion with wonder. It was shaped like a giant airplane, the entrance resembling the tail fin, adorned with "Italia" in large red letters, and left most visitors in awe.

I quickly withdrew my hand, tucking it behind my back while giving them both a smile. "Excuse me."

I turned back to the restaurant and overheard her asking the man where to find the Sears and Roebuck building, gushing about how she longed to do some shopping. My friend knew the fair like the back of her hand. She wasn't Madeline—no matter how much I'd wanted her to be.

That feeling of suspended hope resided in my stomach even now. And you'd think after making this mistake at least a dozen times, I'd stop assuming every fair-haired girl was Madeline, but I couldn't help it. Between the two of us, all we had were a couple of lowlife ex-husbands and each other. If I didn't keep looking for her, who else would?

Rosa snapped her fingers, pulling me back to the noisy kitchen. "Let me get dressed, Rosa, then I'll take care of Georgie."

She tossed the red-stained plates into the sink of soapy water, then searched the kitchen for a dry towel. "You better hurry. You've got a regular out front asking for you. Big tipper."

I took the towel and dabbed my hands dry. "Which one?" "Joey Ep."

"Same time every day."

"Same soup every day," she groaned in response.

I pulled my apron over my cranberry-red dress and lazily tied the knot around my waist. Rosa stepped in to help me adjust and flatten my peaked cuffs and sleeves. Her dress mirrored mine, a spun rayon, firmly tailored with stitched pleats; only she fit it better with her dainty frame and small bust. I was envious, frankly. Momma always said I had more curves than an old dirt road.

She moved behind me, pulling any loose hair from my dress collar. "Why didn't you come in through the front?"

"Your ma doesn't like it when I come in the front without my uniform on," I answered with a huff, searching my purse for a tube of matching cranberry lipstick to give my lips a dab of color. "I don't have a life outside this joint, but I'll be damned if I'm walking through the fair in my apron."

"She likes you," she insisted with a comforting smile. "Might not always seem like it, but she does. You work well. Don't date any of the customers. More than she can say for the rest of the girls that work here. They'd do anything to be a filly to one of these joes."

"Can you blame them? Gangsters are about the only folks in this town with any money," I reasoned. I didn't like the truth, but I knew it.

She leaned in a little, eyebrows narrowing suggestively. "Why don't you go on any dates?"

"Four years of trying to keep a man happy was plenty enough for me." "Better looking men in here than your ex-husband. More dough too."

Sweet Rosa. She yearned for a date, but her ma ran this place, and her with it. Nobody touched her, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon. The best kind of fun she could have was living vicariously through the other girls. And they had plenty of stories to tell.

The San Carlo, Al Capone's favorite place to eat and talk business before his lockup, was still buzzing with the city's most dangerous criminals. And for the girls that worked here, the most eligible bachelors.

"Money isn't everything," I countered, though admittedly, I didn't believe my own words. I'd never had real money, despite Georgie's promises of getting us better lives. I had grown up in a withered old farmhouse on a small plot of land, with cows, chickens, and shit-stained feet. But money through men always came with a price. Maybe I'd work the rest of my life to have something decent, but at least it would be mine. "What about love, Rosa?"

She let out a boisterous laugh, then leaned against the nearest wall, too close to the oven. A wave of heat hit us both, leaving a black tendril of hair stuck to her forehead. "I don't care what they say, money *can* buy happiness ... I'm sure it can buy love too. It worked for Madeline. She wasn't here two weeks before she had herself a man and a ticket outta this joint." She looked up, placed a hand on her chest, and let out a long, dramatic sigh. "There's not a girl here who isn't trying to walk in her shadow." My gaze fell as my stomach twisted into a familiar knot. The truth was, I had no evidence anything bad had happened to her. Nobody did, really. Rosa believed Madeline had gotten herself a man to take care of her, then kissed Chicago goodbye—and in all fairness, that's precisely what happened. Only Rosa didn't know her like I did; she was my best friend, and she wouldn't not write me. Two months since her last postcard was all the warning bell I needed.

"Not everyone can be Madeline," I said before drawing a breath.

I reached into my apron, checking that the two items that kept me grounded in my search were still there—a photo of her and her fair souvenir booklet. I lightly ran my fingers along the brochure’s spine, its pages littered with notes about all the men who dined at the San Carlo. Madeline was a hunter, so most nights she didn’t know the special, but there wasn’t a detail she didn’t know about every man in this joint. What they ate, who they fancied or married, and who was free for the taking.

She would talk the same way about this place and all the promises it held. That all she needed to do was catch her a big fish, and she’d be set for life.

“But she must have taught you some things,” Rosa pried, as if she wanted to pull out a notepad and jot down some pointers. “You two were so close when she worked here.”

I felt my throat grow dry and dismissed her assumption with a wave.

“These mooks tip me good. Why would I want to mess that up with a date gone wrong? Madeline could make anyone fall in love with her . . . but me, well, my mouth is always getting me in trouble.”

Rosa frowned in response.

“But if I ever get naked with one of them, you’ll be the first to know.” A blush soaked her cheeks, and she looked around timidly, as if the word *naked* might trigger her ma to spontaneously appear to pop her on the hand.

I took a deep breath and quickly changed the subject, forcing myself to wear the same mask I had worn for months. Just another girl, another waitress. “Get Joey some creamy tomato for me? I’ll get the rest of his order after I run Georgie off.”

“You want me to run him off?” My favorite cook, Robbie, peeked over a pot of boiling noodles, the steam rising and filling the kitchen.

I held my smile and gave him a peck on the cheek. “You know I like to do the running off myself, Robbie.”

His skin was oily, and he smelled like an onion, but he was the best cook here. If you kept the cooks happy, they fed you on the house, and there was nothing better than sneaking home with boxes of leftovers to hold me over for a few days. Before I started working here, I waited in soup lines or got up early to see which churches were handing out bread to the unemployed. If all I needed to do was kiss a man on the cheek to eat, it was a small price to pay.

He pulled open the oven and tossed me a piece of fresh bread. I caught it with my apron to cool it off while exiting the kitchen through the back door. Outside, the clatter of silverware and feverish staff were replaced with a dull alley where yesterday’s trash waited for pickup.

I placed my hands on my hips. “You’re going to get me tossed, Georgie!”

He lingered by the trash in a clean, pressed, button-down shirt and seersucker slacks. He was mostly legs, with a short torso and broad shoulders. I hadn’t liked how lanky he was when we first met, how hard it was to stretch up and kiss him, but I’d ignored the things I didn’t like for the things I did. I was fifteen years old and would have done anything to get out of the Southern hell that was Marietta. Georgie had said all the right things: “*Marry me, and I’ll take you away.*”

A good head of hair on top of it all? Momma said I wasn’t going to do any better.

“I ain’t giving up on you, Virginia.” He rushed up to me and reached for my face to give me a kiss. I shuddered away and lifted my hands to push him off. Tragic was the only way I could possibly describe going from thinking the world of someone to being repulsed at the thought of touching them again.

I hadn’t known the first thing about being a wife when we got married, but I’d played the part the best I could, taken the beatings he dished out when the money troubles and drinking started weighing him down. All of Chicago was fighting to eat, to breathe. I thought I was lucky to have a room and food in my belly. But when I cried myself to sleep at night with his arms wrapped around me, I knew I’d become my mother. And once you start hitting back, there’s no getting back to the way things used to be. The divorce was messy, and the judge wanted proof beyond the flesh.

A witness to fight back against Georgie’s Southern charm. If not for Madeline’s gripping testimony in a four-page letter, I’d still be under his thumb. “You’ve got to stop doing this,” I said with a sigh, thinking about Joey Ep finishing

his soup and impatiently waiting for me to scribble down his lunch order. I couldn't afford to piss off one of my best tippers. "I need to get—"

"I'm going back home," he told me urgently. "Come with me! Chicago ain't done nothing for us. We can go back and start over. I'll get a good job, and we can make some babies. A fresh start."

I picked at the warm piece of bread, my lips flattening into a line. Just a request like that proved how little he knew me. "You know why I left Marietta."

"We'll live far away from your pa."

"There's nothing farther away from my pa than here." "I love you, Virginia."

"I don't love you, Georgie. How many times do you want me to say it? I have friends here."

"One more chance."

Despite my new independence and desire to see how far I could take it, the sound of his voice pulled at my resilience. He'd gotten me to cave before, to try again. It was difficult surviving without him, I couldn't deny it. Living was just easier with a man, maybe because life came easier for them.

"I'm staying here," I said firmly.

"And slinging meatballs for tips? You can't make it this way." He looked at the restaurant, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. The old Italian atmosphere, a favorite with tourists visiting the World's Fair, wasn't fooling any Chicago natives. "You know the crowd here. You could get hurt if you say the wrong thing. They might have Al Capone behind bars, but Chicago still belongs to the Mob. Everyone knows it. This place is nothing but trouble."

I shrugged and tossed him the bread with a fearless smirk. "I'm not afraid of a little trouble."

And I wasn't going anywhere without Madeline.

He caught the bread and threw it at the door behind me, too close to my head for comfort. "I'm not clowning around, Virginia!"

"Does it look like I'm joking?"

"Your place is with me. You're my wife."

I rolled my eyes, sucking in some air to calm myself. "I'm your ex-wife. Are you honestly scared for me, Georgie? Or scared of what I might do without you?"

He growled at my tone and took a step forward, puffing out his chest like a child. "Don't mock me, Virginia."

I involuntarily flinched and briefly wondered if I'd be able to cover up a black eye to finish my shift before snapping out of it. I had done this before ... stood up to men that hurt me.

I picked up the bread and threw it at him. It bounced off his forehead, absurdly slow, and his face heated into a rage that brought out his freckles.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore. I almost killed my pa with a frying pan full of grease before I left because he thought he needed to remind me of my place in this world. It ain't with him, and it ain't with you."

I reached for the door and opened it swiftly, maneuvering one foot inside. Predicting my movement, Georgie lunged, snatching me by the upper arm to pull me away. Just as the pressure of his fingers began to burn my flesh, someone on the other side of the door jerked it open with a fierce swing. Robbie stood tall, sauce stained along his white shirt, bushy brows steady. The only thing moving was the toothpick in his mouth, twisting with his grinding teeth. He had a single oven mitt in his hand, certainly not anyone's weapon of choice, but something about his foreboding presence compelled Georgie to retreat. Perhaps it was the unknown? Robbie might be nothing more than a cook, but he still worked at the Mob's favorite spot. He was too close to men that could snap their fingers and make people disappear.

People like Madeline.

"You got customers," he told me, then pulled the toothpick out and pointed it at Georgie. "You best be going."

Before I made it inside, I overheard Georgie mutter, "God be with the next man you marry, Virginia. Have the decency to warn him that you're just a devil with nice hips."

Chapter Two

Robbie slammed the door, and his flat smile curved up. I knew the look too well. It was the same look Georgie gave me on our wedding night. Having played the hero and saved me from my abusive father and dull, small-town fate, he longed for a reward, praise, something to satisfy his ego. Men could be so dreadfully predictable.

“You know how to pick them, don’t you?”

I ran my hands along my apron and dress, adjusting any piece of fabric that got ruffled in the struggle. “I’d say that’s my business, not yours.” I paused for a moment before adding, “Thank you.”

I moved through the crowded tables of chattering guests, placing my hand on my chest to soothe my racing heart. *Breathe, Virginia. Breathe.* Georgie always left me a nervous wreck.

I continued walking, finding that the deeper I ventured into the restaurant, the easier it was to forget there was even a world outside the place. The San Carlo looked as if it had been plucked from old Italy, with arched windows, string lights, and terra-cotta flooring that appeared more worn down daily. Ma believed the shoe scuffs tarnishing the flooring were the mark of a flourishing business. Each imperfection was a new or returning customer, sinking money into her place when nearly half of Chicago’s workforce was unemployed. She was right. I was lucky to have the job.

Sometimes, while closing up, I’d drift through this place, gliding my fingers along the fresco paintings and dancing under the lights to an Italian opera. I’d imagine I was somewhere far away, a little Italian village in the countryside. I’d never be happy there, of course, just like I was never happy on the farm. But the thrill of being someone else always left me dizzy with excitement.

Months before Madeline left for New York, we thought about packing our bags and moving to California. She claimed we could be the next Loretta Young and Katharine Hepburn, and I played along with her dreamy words for a few weeks. I’d fallen in love with Hepburn after seeing *A Bill of Divorcement* but had no illusions I’d ever make it to the screen. I had one dream: a life of my own that didn’t depend on a husband. Madeline didn’t mind a husband if he was able to give her what she wanted—everything.

I sighed deeply at the thought.

How far did you go for everything, Madeline?

“Where have you been?” Ma’s round face burned red at the sight of me. She heaved a tray of empty plates to a nearby busboy, and he nearly toppled over trying to balance them. “Joey Ep has been waiting—”

“I’ve got him,” I assured her, though that didn’t seem to bring her any sense of relief.

I passed men in fitted, stylish suits with two-button notch-lapel coats. They sat at tables draped in crisp white cloths, their drinks half full, with only the buzz of a whisper between them. I could never make out the conversations. It was as if they’d been trained to speak a language all their own.

I swallowed down a cough while walking through a plume of cigar smoke.

Joey Ep was at his usual table on the veranda that overlooked the bustling World’s Fair. He was a cool drink of water if I ever saw one, plenty rugged, with a warm smile. His suit was action black, a signature diamond weave pattern with a black felt fedora to match. As usual, he had a paper in his hand, reading it slowly while adjusting his thick black glasses. Glasses I’d usually want to take off to get a better look at a man’s peepers, but not his. His eyes were large and blue and always ever clear.

As I predicted, he was all done with his soup. He had the empty bowl strategically placed at the edge of the table for pickup.

I pulled out a pad, tucked under Madeline’s booklet, from my apron and hurried over. “The usual?”

He folded down the paper and observed me leisurely, from shoes to hair. But he didn't undress me with his eyes like the other joes here. He looked at me the same way he looked at the books scattered across his table every Friday. Numbers in need of crunching. Money in need of moving.

"I do like that color on you, Virginia."

It was the cranberry color I wore every day, the standard uniform, but he always paid me the same compliment. Joey Ep thrived on routine. He was never late, ordered the soup and the special, had a suit for every day of the week, and loathed change. A few weeks ago, I caught a bug and needed to rest in bed for the day. When Rosa told him I wouldn't be in, he folded up his paper and left.

I shrugged a bit, giving him my usual response: "Too bad I'm not on the menu, Joey."

There were so many secrets passing in and out of this place every day, but it was a well-known fact that Joey Ep was in charge of every nickel and dime for the Chicago Outfit. If he wanted something, he got it.

Too bad that rule didn't apply to me.

He half grinned, the endearment leaving his eyes bright. "How many times do I need to ask you to dinner before you say yes?"

My conversation with Rosa crossed my mind, and I paused a moment.

When I didn't deliver my usual quip fast enough, his eyes narrowed.

I flashed him a charming smile, one I reserved for a few select men— one I should have given Robbie but didn't want him getting the wrong idea. I wasn't really interested in Joey Ep, but I wanted to keep playing the game of *will they, won't they* with him because of all the men listed in Madeline's notes, his name was the only one circled.

And that made him my only lead.

I'd worked plenty of shifts with Madeline before she started traveling with her mystery man, one she'd always promised to tell me more about, but she never got around to doing it. I knew it was one of these goons, knew she kept him a secret because secrecy kept the Mob thriving. I would never have guessed Joey Ep; he just wasn't her brutish type. "We have dinner together all the time," I teased, gesturing to the restaurant.

He chuckled a little and pressed his lips together. A tic of his—a sign he didn't particularly like my response but didn't want to show it. "I'll have the special."

Shocking, Joey.

I scribbled it down and turned on my heel but spotted Georgie at the front, shouting demands to a very uncomfortable Rosa, who stood rigidly at the host stand. She stepped around the podium and lifted her hands up to block him from busting inside, where all the customers turned their heads to the commotion.

I left Joey Ep without a word and rushed to the scene. Ma bolted from the kitchen to save Rosa with a firm grip of her shoulders and a shove back. Then she stepped between her daughter and Georgie. "You need to leave," she growled, her voice as robust as her six-foot-tall stature. "You leave, or I make you leave."

And she wasn't lying either. I'd seen her do it.

I reached for Georgie's arm and pulled him back. "Georgie, let's go." "I told you to take care of this, Virginia," yelled Ma, throwing her anger between us. Her chin trembled, and she called for Robbie. He stormed out of the kitchen with a baseball bat, eyes holding Georgie in a deathly stare.

I knew what happened next—I'd seen him knock a man down with a quick swing to the head, then drag him to the alley to get him out of view. Nobody knew what happened after that, and I had no interest in taking any guesses.

I pulled at Georgie until he gave in, letting me drag him a good distance away.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? I just served Charles Fischetti and Jake Guzik ravioli last night. I am begging you to leave, right now."

"I'm not leaving without you." He took my arm and yanked me forward so hard that I tripped over my shoes and stumbled. It was a mess of a scene, one that caught the eyes of several fairgoers. I flushed with shame, and before I could even find my balance, he pulled me like

a child, and for one tragic moment, I let him.

I'd just settle him down and then escape in the night. Anything to get him away from my job, my only chance at finding Madeline.

But then I thought about her and how much we both fought to see the divorce through. I stopped moving, planting my feet firmly. "No."

"I can change, Gin. You just have to give me a chance. I know I hurt you. I got this anger inside me ... I don't want it. I'd do anything to get rid of it. You make me better. I know that's hard to believe, but it's the truth." My bottom lip began to quiver. "You can't change, Georgie. We both got anger." Sometimes it felt like a sickness, festering inside me, turning everything black. "You're going to hit me again." "No, I won't," he rushed out.

"And when you do, I'm going to kill you." I could hardly believe I'd said it, but the words tasted sweet on my tongue. I had never been more certain of anything in my life. I was going to kill him, and then both our lives would be over.

He stood there a moment, picking at the lining of his pants; then his face turned ravaged, and I waited for him to spit his venom—the harsh insults he often handed out when he felt cornered. He couldn't use his fists here, so only his mouth would do.

"The truth is, you're a whore. Your pa paid me money to marry you, said you ruined yourself with some farm boy. That's why you live at that massage parlor, isn't it? That's all you're good for, Virginia. All you'll ever be good for. I'm glad I'm rid of you."

I tried to concentrate on the fairgrounds, the noise of the children skipping by with balloons, pointing up at the Sky Ride towers. I wanted to control it, that sense of deaf rage my pa handed down to me. It was like another person inside me, a woman I didn't want to know—a woman I'd do anything to silence.

Georgie talked a lot of silver-tongued nonsense, but "*I got this anger inside me ... I don't want it, I'd do anything to get rid of it*" felt like the most honest thing he'd ever said to me.

We fought the same battle, and if I didn't keep fighting it, I'd be just like him and my pa, and I'd have no room to talk of change.

When I said nothing, Georgie continued viciously, "You sleeping with that cook, now? When I get back to Marietta, I'll make sure the entire town knows the kind of woman you turned into. That your pa was right."

My breathing hitched.

"You'll never be worth a damn thing."

"Go home, Georgie." My words came out slow, breathless.

"We would have been a family if you had just been a wife and done what I told you to do," he uttered, the anger and sadness clashing to create a strangled sound. "If you didn't make me hurt you, we'd have that baby right now."

"*We'd have that baby right now.*" The words burned me like he knew they would, branding along my stomach as a reminder of what I lost, and what I never had.

Then there were no sounds, just the beat of my own heart, hammering like a drum in my chest. I stood, curled my fingers into a fist, pulled my arm back, and swung it into his face. The noise came back to me just as the pain made my entire arm tremor. I cursed and cradled my hand. Georgie stumbled back, clutching his bleeding nose. "I'm fucking bleeding, Virginia!"

Suddenly I was a child again, staring at the bruise on my mother's cheek, demanding she stand up to my pa. "*Women like us must take what we can get,*" she'd tell me. "*I'll do better, listen more, obey him. Be a better wife.*"

Ten years later, I was staring at the same bruise on my face, compliments of my pa for pulling him off my mother. She held a cold cloth to my swelling jawbone, muttering another lesson into my ear: "*Don't hit back, you'll just make it worse.*"

Why did hitting him back feel so good, then? Why did I always find peace in my pa's rage? The very rage that had stolen my childhood. Robbie positioned himself between us with two giant steps, holding the bat so tightly his knuckles looked white and knotted. Georgie lifted his hands in surrender. "I'll go! I'll go."

My fingers felt crushed inside my hand, and try as I might to stretch them, they throbbed from the pain.

With Georgie off into the crowd, Robbie rushed me inside by the waist, past an awestruck Ma and an applauding Rosa, nestling me into a corner table near the kitchen.

“Give me your hand,” he insisted, pulling it toward him to observe my swollen knuckles. He stretched out each finger, and I ground my teeth through the pain. “Not broken. I’ll get some ice.”

Ma was in front of me in a split second, hands on her hips with distaste. I closed my eyes and waited for it. I was losing this damn job over my ex-husband, likely without a reference for another position. No job, no money, and no Madeline.

Her eyebrows knitted together. “What a greaseball.”

“I sent him off earlier,” I told her. “I thought he took the hint.” She gave me a dubious look. “I think he got the hint now.”

Robbie returned with the ice and reached for my hand, but Ma snapped her fingers. “Back to work, Robbie. We got orders waiting.”

He cleared his throat and handed her the ice, wrapped in a napkin. She took my hand in her own and placed the ice on my knuckles with little delicacy. I tried not to wince.

“The only reason I’m not tossing you is that was a damn beautiful sight, Virginia.” She leaned in, not allowing me a moment to accept the compliment before squeezing my sore hand until my elbow jerked from the pain. “But you bring that kind of nonsense in here again and mess with my business, you’re done. You are not the only one around here that can throw a good punch. Do we understand each other?”

I smiled through the pain. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good girl.” She looked back outside to the veranda. “Now, shake a leg. Clean up your hand and go check on your tables.”

I jumped from my seat and headed to the bathroom to wash up, only momentarily glancing in the mirror to smooth my frazzled mess of hair. I wanted to splash some water on my face to calm myself down, but I didn’t want to chance ruining my makeup too.

I breathed in, then out, until the buzzing in my head stopped. I lost myself again, but it was over now. I rinsed my hand off and wrapped it with the napkin before leaving the bathroom. Rosa stopped me on the way out with a tender grip on my shoulders. “That was something else! A great kiss-off to a lousy marriage, if you ask me!” She bounced on the balls of her feet. “I wish I could throw a punch like that. Can you teach me?”

I shook my head, resisting the urge to snap at her. “The best thing you can learn from that is don’t go marrying a man you need to punch, Rosa.” I maneuvered around her, her ma’s words fresh in my head. “I need to get back out there before your ma kills me.”

“Joey Ep paid out,” she said, handing me his ticket—a hundred-dollar tip on a less than five-dollar tab. I stared at the money for a few long seconds, shaking my head in disbelief. He always tipped well, but never this good. Why today when I didn’t even get him the rest of his order?

Rosa rolled her eyes. “Ma really needs to let me start waitressing.”

Tangled up in the money, a note read, “Party tonight. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

BASED ON TRUE EVENTS

THE
LITTLE BIRD

ASHBY JONES



THE LITTLE BIRD BY ASHBY JONES

JONES'S BOOK *THE CROSSING* WAS LONGLISTED FOR THE GOETHE BOOK AWARD AND THE HISTORICAL FICTION COMPANY BOOK AWARDS

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* * *

In 1964, a Black teenager was murdered by a drunken white cop who got away with the crime, and eight years later, the boy's best friend, Shane, returns from combat intent on carving out justice himself. Suzanne, the daughter of the lawyer who failed in prosecuting the case, also lands back in Virginia, but her aim is to follow her father's path to suicide, a path created by his loss and the severe rheumatoid arthritis that followed. Shane and Suzanne were four years apart in high school and barely knew each other before they met, but after a chance encounter, an almost instant connection is made. Neither knows the other's secret goal, but as their bonds deepen, their love will be tested by familial duty, long-held grief, and even shifting sanity. But love might have other plans for both Shane and Suzanne if both decide to live long enough to find out. In this vividly told and slightly surreal novel, the power of forgiveness might be their salvation.

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Ashby Jones has been writing historical novels for 30 years. With degrees in Literature and Clinical Psychology; Creative Writing at UCLA under the guidance of Leonardo Bercovici. Jones previously published: *The Angel's Lamp* in 2017 which was well-received and reviewed by the *Irish Times*. Jones's passion is writing literary fiction that attempts

to understand mankind's never-ending battles with irony, tragedy, blatant contradiction, and the anomalies of love. Such is the focus of *The Crossing*. He studied under such notables as William Hoffman, a best-selling author, and years later at UCLA under Leonardo Bercovici, a highly regarded screenwriter.

PROLOGUE

When was Suzanne born? Yesterday? A decade or so ago? At the turn of the century or tomorrow? Possibly without a date at all but in some timeless, mythological crater under the watch of circling angels? The truth is, she wasn't born as it's commonly thought. She *arrived* in her paradoxical world as a little hatchling, an anomaly whose purpose was to flee the nest and never return, and yet she did.

Her birth name was Jenny, but in her teens, after her father lost the trial, ultimately causing her mother to leave home, and soon thereafter, when her father left this world, she chose the name, Suzanne. She adored the song by the same name, written by Leonard Cohen in the mid-Sixties and sung by Judy Collins, but more than that, she loved the hissing sound, the faux echo of the double set of "ss-ss" when the name, Suzanne, was spoken. It reminded her of the resonances in the word, suicide. But for the first few months of her life, she was called The Little Bird, and here's why.

Born prematurely and breeched as well, she descended through her mother's womb with her tiny toes flexed and caught on the muscled wall of the uterus, delaying her arrival. Chelsea, the midwife, sensing that something was wrong, yelled for a doctor, causing Jenny's mother to jerk violently in alarm. The canal walls shook. Jenny's toes quivered and then pointed, releasing their grip. In a gush of warm and welcoming blood, she slipped upside-down and pencil-thin through the gateway of life into Chelsea's trembling hands. Jenny's arms, forced high and straight as she arrived, reminding the midwife, an avian caretaker at the local zoo, of a sparrow's wings. She'd never seen such a birth nor ever known that it was even possible.

About to detach the placenta, Chelsea immediately realized that baby Jenny wasn't breathing. She shouted again for a doctor but knew she had no time to waste. Applying the same gentle rhythm she'd often used to bring little birds back to life when they'd fallen from a nest or flown into the screen around their cage and lay in shock, mistaken for dead, she began to stroke Jenny's chest tenderly, but with insistence. Jenny's mom came to her elbows and watched, gasping and sobbing as her baby's skin slowly turned red and then purple. Chelsea stopped stroking and dropped her ear to the baby's chest. Jenny's mom was about to scream in despair when the midwife rose with a grin and shouted: "She's alive, Mrs. de Ville! She's alive!"

Chelsea detached the placenta. "Here's your little bird," she said, handing the hatchling to her mother.

Being born upside-down was just the first irony in Suzanne's life, a forewarning that her struggle with existence had just begun.

Chapter One

The haunting memory of Jesse's murder came to Shane in torrents now. Jesse the teenage Black boy who'd help raise Shane after his mother died, was beaten to death by a cop for showing up at a white high-school baseball game.

It was the opening game of Shane's senior season, the first game played under the school's newly installed lights. Excited, Jesse had come to see Shane pitch, to find out if the secret practice sessions they'd had in the marshes had paid off. There, in the pre-season cold of winter, when the sky's grey dome helped conceal them, Jesse, saddled with determination, had tried to teach Shane to throw a baseball a hundred miles an hour. At that speed Jesse said the ball would make the air whistle.

Shane was on the mound, having struck out the first two batters he'd faced, when the siren wailed. He would learn that Sergeant Talley, the drunk cop, had skidded his patrol car to a stop behind the bleachers. Gun-in-hand he jumped out of the car to catch Jesse watching the game from the trees behind the right field fence. There, in less than a moment, Talley beat Shane's brother to death with the stock of his gun. Three months later the case against Talley, prosecuted by Suzanne's father, was thrown out in Court, a decision praised by the community.

Jesse's murder happened almost eight years ago, but like a record spinning on an unstoppable platter, his scream for help had replayed in Shane's head ever since. It was now 1972. Thanksgiving was a little over a week away.

Though numerous baseball scouts had come to his games, Shane had given up on any hope of playing professionally, and in the summer of '64, as soon as he graduated from Jefferson, he left Meridien to join the Marine Corps. He volunteered to serve two tours of duty in Vietnam. He'd made a tragic mistake that led to Jesse's death and hoped that he could bury it in the soil of forgiveness. Instead, the guilt and shame for what he'd done, or failed to do, gathered strength in combat, in daily killing, where his disgrace vanished the moment the deed was done, only to return in his sleep. At last, his guilt jumped the jagged gap between the past and present to plant in him a resolute demand for revenge.

He mustered out of the Marines in mid-November and returned to Meridien from Camp Pendleton for the first time since he'd enlisted. An intense storm in the Gulf grounded his plane overnight in Dallas. He spent the long delay at an airport bar, whose name he couldn't remember. However, he kept promising Jesse in an increasingly slurred tone that things were going to be set right now that he was home.

Defying the hangover that flattened him to his bed at The Oleander, Meridien's ancient, Victorian boarding house, he stretched up toward the ballfield's argon lights flooding the scoreboard. For one magnificent moment he felt himself take flight. The lights engulfed him. It was as if the moon had exploded. His teammates appeared as tall as trees, as powerful as gods. The sound of Ethel Merman singing, *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*, filled the evening air. The hand-chalked foul lines seemed to float on her voice as he soared from the mound away from the shouting crowd, rising and falling with the wild night wind. Just as he was about to clear the scoreboard, he heard Jesse's scream, and for a moment so empty that he thought his heart had stopped, he hovered in the silent, amber night searching for his brother. Then he plunged into an abrupt darkness. Swiftly into the darkness, a stuporous, bourbon-soaked interval somewhere between sleep and waking.

His body was shaking so hard that the bedsprings screeched. A frost-embedded wind made its way through the cracks in the window, but even though he was lying in his underwear, he couldn't cover himself.

Abruptly, the lingering agony of Jesse's scream was replaced by the excited voice of Shane's small catcher, Toby, shouting the same thrilling words he'd shouted when the last batter struck out that day, "*We won, Shane! We won! We won!*" In moments like these Jesse came back with a cramped and unbearable reality, as though he'd squeezed painfully through some narrow void in the past. Shane saw the joy in Jesse's large brown eyes and felt the dream's deceptive surge of hope that he might still be alive.

Although his belief in God had sunk into the mire of combat, Shane pleaded with The Almighty to let Jesse return. The begging came from the back of his throat, loud, rolling and guttural before slipping into a scratchy vibrato that pierced the murky layers of his hangover, engaging his brain to draw him out of sleep. He sensed that time was moving uncontrollably toward dawn and that life was about to turn on again. The true nightmare was in waking - when it would start all over, that stalking, gut-wrenching shame that threatened to extinguish his life at some blind and dark intersection. If it hadn't been for him, Jesse would never have come to the game.

Shane tried his damndest to avoid waking up to that, but his eyes wouldn't obey. They caught the late afternoon sun and stared as if it had something to tell him, some cold cosmic secret that had sprung from its surface only moments ago, something that would help explain why he was years behind where he should be, years behind redemption.

He started counting backwards from one-hundred. As the numbers flowed past, he visualized them dropping behind his eyelids to rest next to one another as they once did on the huge wooden scoreboard. His heart plunged as if his chest had abruptly become a pit. His head snapped from the pillow. A familiar pain leaped from the wound on his neck, the ironic, if not comical wound he'd sustained in Da Nang the night before he was scheduled to leave Vietnam and return to Camp Pendleton.

Shane expected a flutter of heartbeats followed by a swooping cavity in his chest that might be his undoing, but he was wrong. His heart slowed and then instantly thudded, as if God was prodding him awake. Gasping, he rolled out of bed, slipped and stumbled into the bathroom where his jeans lay on the floor. He took his wallet out to see if he had any money left, but when he opened it, the worn Polaroid of Jesse fell onto the floor. He picked it up. Jesse's broad smile stretched so wide that it appeared to match the bill of his baseball cap. The oversized letters threaded across chest spelled out the word, "*Cardinals*", the major league team that Jesse's older brother, Jason, once played for. Shane forced the picture back into his wallet in the doubling down of guilt and hatred.

He'd come home to avenge Jesse and by doing so banish his remorse. No, not home, he corrected himself. Yes, he was born in Meridien but it wasn't his home. A town hidden from a changing world, a place long reserved for retribution, like Dante's Ninth rung of the Inferno, reserved for those who'd committed treachery and were to be punished in the equivalent of their sins. Would that be him? Would his return be the beginning or the end of his life? It would be one or the other but nowhere in between, he'd promised himself.

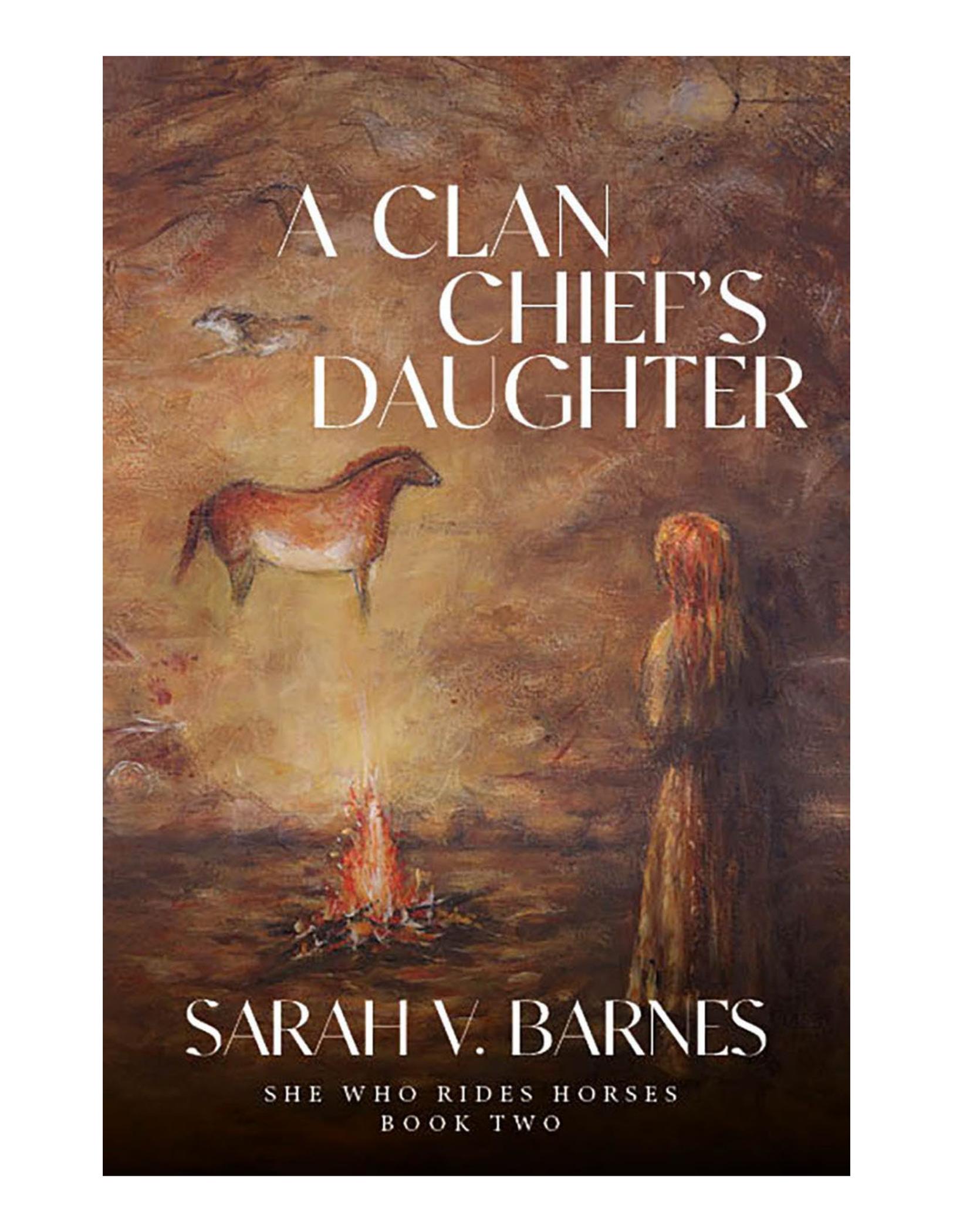
He went to his suitcase, yanked it open, and ran his fingers through the clothes to brush the soft velvet box that held his Purple Heart. Under the Heart he felt the cold, prickly handle of the M.45, his furtive gift from the war.

Relieved, he took the pistol out of the suitcase and checked the chamber. It was full. He pecked the barrel and slid the gun back into the suitcase. At long last, yesterday and today were one in the same and if that paradox wasn't enough, tonight he would be venturing out to a party, the one that Medic, his beloved high school English teacher, threw each year for his senior students, always on the twelfth of November, the day in 1945 when his Marine unit was summoned home from Europe where he and his fellow soldiers were assigned the task of helping to free prisoners from the death camps.

Shane had called Medic from Pendleton to make sure the party was going to be held this year. The operator said that the phone number was out of commission and the person he was trying to call was no longer listed in the phone book. Afraid that something had happened to Medic, Shane immediately sent his question by telegram, and to his great relief, Medic replied, letting him know that this year's party was being held for any and all former students, but this year it was for his retirement, a synonym for freedom, he wrote, the reason he'd named it the Emancipation Party.

He reached into the suitcase and took out a fresh pair of dark blue, Marine dress pants, a wool shirt and his fading, earth-colored trench coat. He tried to convince himself that he was looking forward to something cheerful, and if not, at least an event blessed with whisky. But more than anything, the reason he'd made such an effort to go to the party was to find out if Medic still believed what Shane had overheard him say in the hall outside his classroom when he was approached by a fellow history teacher, the kindhearted Miss Collins. She'd asked Medic if, given his involvement in freeing prisoners from the concentration camps, there was any room in his heart for forgiving the Nazis?

Medic's answer was imprinted on the inside of Shane's skull. "Miss Collins, there are some sins that cannot be forgiven, because to do so would be to commit an even greater sin."

The background of the cover is a textured, painterly illustration in shades of brown, tan, and ochre. In the upper left, a small grey dog is depicted in profile, facing right. Below it, a reddish-brown horse stands facing right. In the lower center, a fire burns brightly, casting a warm glow. To the right of the fire, a tall, slender, dark figure stands with its back to the viewer, looking towards the horse and fire. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

A CLAN
CHIEF'S
DAUGHTER

SARAH V. BARNES

SHE WHO RIDES HORSES
BOOK TWO

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(SHE WHO RIDES HORSES)
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* * *

Set 6,000 years ago on the Eurasian steppe, *A Clan Chief's Daughter*, book two in the She Who Rides Horses series, continues the story of Naya, the first person to ride a horse.

In Book One, Naya and a magnificent chestnut red filly, brought together through a mystical encounter, begin a relationship destined to change the future of humans and horses alike. In Book Two, Naya must contend with the consequences of the forces she and the filly have unwittingly set in motion.

The daughter of a clan chief, Naya returns to her people after a winter spent in the company of the wild horses, only to discover that enemies of her father seek to exploit the horses she has tamed in order to undermine her father's leadership. Plagued by nightmares of what could happen to the filly and her band at the hands of men seeking power and control, Naya must decide whether protecting the horses and remaining loyal to her father require renouncing her sacred gifts and sacrificing her heart's desire.

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Pub Date: June 21, 2025

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Critically acclaimed award-winning novelist Sarah V. Barnes is both a historian and a horsewoman. Her first novel, *She Who Rides Horses: A Saga of the Ancient Steppe*, received the 2022 Best Indie Book Award for Historical Fiction, among other prizes. *A Clan Chief's Daughter* represents the second installment in the She Who Rides Horses trilogy. When not writing stories, Sarah practices and teaches riding as a meditative art. She also offers equine-facilitated coaching and wellness workshops. Sarah holds a Ph.D. in history from Northwestern University and spent many years as a college professor before turning full-time to riding and writing. She has two grown daughters and lives with her husband, her dogs, and her horses near Boulder, CO.

[Website](#)

CHAPTER TWO

On a bluff top near the clan's settlement ...

Stretched out on her stomach, sharp rocks biting into her hips and forearms, the smell of damp soil and crushed weeds mingling in her nostrils, Naya lifted her head just high enough to see down into the ravine from her hidden perch. Even from this distance, she felt a constant buzz of anxiety coming from the herd of horses trapped below.

With no breeze stirring, the heat of the mid-morning sun was becoming uncomfortable but she remained as she was. If she sat up to ease her position or remove a layer of clothing, she might be spotted from below. She wished she could get closer but as it was, she was testing the limits of the strict orders her father had given her yesterday to stay away from the corrals.

Restless, the horses circled, and circled again, their hooves churning the rain-soaked earth into a quagmire as they searched for a way to escape. Occasionally, one or two at a time would stop to grab mouthfuls of grass hay from one of several scattered piles, before resuming their incessant pacing. A large clay basin near the corral gate held clean water, untouched. Every now and then, one of the mares, always the same one, lifted her head and gave a loud whinny, full of nervous tension, calling to the stallion to whom she and the others had looked for protection. The mare's desperate cries were futile; the stallion could no longer answer. The sound rent Naya's heart. These horses were her friends.

She could envision all too clearly what must have happened the previous day, not long before her return to the clan's settlement after being away all winter. Too late, BeHregs, the stallion, had understood the danger toward which he and his family were being stampeded. Before he could turn them back, he'd been cut down by the men's spears. Panicked, the rest of the herd had galloped on, chased by more men and their dogs, leaving BeHregs's body trampled in their wake. Now the mares and the youngsters were trapped inside the corral into which they'd been driven. At first, Naya imagined, they must have raced frantically around the perimeter of the enclosure until eventually, exhausted,

they'd had to stop. Even after a night in the pen, she could see they remained unsettled. Anyone approaching the fence set them off running again.

Rebhjo, largest of the mares, was the most upset, calling repeatedly and threatening to kick her herd mates if they strayed too close. The others who Naya recognized—Mus and Ghrasom, along with their yearling offspring MiMus and Bhrounos—did their best to give the big mare space but in their own agitation could not always stay out of her way. Rebhjo's filly, Melos, seemed to have attached herself to a new member of the herd, a small, pale-coated mare with an even paler star-shaped mark on her forehead, who was heavy with foal. BeHregs must have added her to his band since Naya had last seen them. Another addition, a golden dun mare with a dark dorsal stripe, had a tiny foal at her side who couldn't have been more than a few days old.

Seeing the little one, Naya pushed the image of another small, vulnerable creature out of her mind. Only two days had passed since the awful morning of the lion attack, when she'd held the blood-soaked body of MeHnd's month-old colt as he died in her arms. The other horses who'd been with them—the colt's mother MeHnd, the outcast gray stallion Šuurgan and MeHnd's three-year old red filly Réhda, with whom Naya had a special bond—had disappeared immediately afterwards. *Only two days!* Naya thought. Yet so much had changed. For the first time since Réhda and the others had vanished in the wake of the attack, she was glad there'd been no sign of them. At least they weren't trapped with the herd below.

Naya pressed her forehead into her folded arms and squeezed her eyes shut, willing the dizziness she felt looking down at the horses to stop. Wishing she could block out the memory of the dead colt as well, she recalled instead everything that had happened since yesterday, when she and her mother and the others had arrived at the clan's settlement.

The previous afternoon ...

Rather than the warm welcome they'd expected after their long absence, they'd found the encampment temporarily deserted, with no one on hand to greet them. Climbing up to the bluff top above the settlement, they discovered the whole clan gathered on the opposite side, looking over the cliff's edge into a steep ravine, pointing and exclaiming about whatever was below. At first, no one had noticed their arrival. As soon as Naya spotted her father, she'd raced across the distance separating them and thrown herself into his embrace. As much as she'd anticipated the triumph of riding into the clan's settlement astride the red filly, she longed even more to feel her father's strong arms wrapped around her. Safe in the protective circle of his love, she could forget the anger, grief, betrayal and guilt of the last few days and cling to him instead.

"What is everyone so excited about?" she'd asked him once he set her down.

"We've captured a herd of wild horses."

"Let me see!" she begged, trying to get a glimpse down into the ravine.

"Not now," he'd insisted, pulling her away from the cliff's edge. "First we need to celebrate. Thank the gods, you're home!"

Joy lighting his face, he'd picked her up again and spun her around, just as he'd done when she was a little girl. Afterwards, they were both swept along by the crowd, so that she had no chance to go back and see the captured horses for herself, and once they'd returned to the settlement, her father kept her with him, even dissuading her when she would have gone in search of her grandmother.

"Awija will greet you soon enough," he told her. "Right now, you and I must oversee the festivities."

He'd made clear that she was to remain by his side, and she felt flattered to be given a seat next to him in front of the central fire. The place of honor to his right, however, was reserved for the clan's distinguished guest, the young warrior who, she learned, had been visiting for several days and was responsible for the plan of capturing the wild horses. Even before being officially introduced to him, she recognized the young warrior as Wailos, son of one of the tribe's other clan chiefs. Her cousin Melit had pointed him out at last year's Gathering, remarking on how handsome

he was, but at the time Naya hadn't paid much heed. Now, however, his feat had become the focus of everyone's attention, including her father's, thereby overshadowing her own homecoming. Worse, along with her father's admiration and respect, the clan's visitor had evidently stolen Naya's idea, or at least a version of it.

If only I could talk to Papa alone, she thought. She wanted it to be just the two of them so she could tell him about everything that had happened with the red filly over the winter while she'd been away. She would explain to him that her vision for the horses had nothing to do with taking away their freedom. But the filly was only part of the reason she wanted to speak to her father in private. He deserved to know the truth about what she'd witnessed going on between her mother and Oyuun, the stranger who had stayed with them throughout winter, keeping them safe.

Instead, Naya had been required to remain demurely by her father's side, surrounded by other people, behaving politely while trying to hide her mounting impatience. She'd grown especially frustrated listening to the other men extoll Wailos's knowledge of the nature and habits of wild horses and asking for his views about how to tame them—for what purpose Naya still wasn't exactly clear. *She* was supposed to be the one with the special relationship with the horses. *She* was the one who knew how to tame them, how to *ride*! As badly as Naya had wanted to interrupt, however, she'd held her tongue, afraid no one would give any credence to what she had to say. After all, she was only a girl.

Almost as irritating, she'd had to endure watching Krnos, her childhood tormenter, be recognized for his contribution to the wild herd's successful capture. Apparently he'd been the scout credited with sighting the horses and alerting the others. Watching as he ducked his head in feigned modesty while Wailos sang his praises, Naya could see Krnos had become a great favorite of the clan's esteemed visitor, whom he clearly hero-worshipped in return.

As if Krnos felt her eyes on him from across the fire, he'd pinned her with a derisive smile. "Naya," he'd called, loud enough to be heard above the babble of voices, his tone just shy of mocking. "Tell us, how did you manage to make it through the winter?"

Caught off guard, Naya stared back. With everyone's attention focused on her, she'd stubbornly refused to look away, which made her failure to respond seem rude. In reality, she hadn't trusted herself to speak. Before the moment could grow even more awkward and her father find it necessary to rebuke her for her lack of manners, her mother had stepped forward and offered to tell the story of their survival.

Naya should have been relieved—grateful even—but she wasn't. Listening to her mother's account of what had befallen them, she'd grown even more upset. On top of giving all the credit for their survival to Oyuun and Aytal—the stranger and his son who'd rescued them—her mother managed to avoid mentioning the red filly and the other horses entirely, not even the poor colt. Outraged, Naya wanted to object to her mother's version of the story but was afraid that she might burst into tears. And so she sat there, letting her mother speak in her stead.

The only person to whom she might have turned for sympathy was off limits. Even had both her parents not warned her against speaking to Aytal, neither need have worried. Now that they had returned to the settlement, Naya wanted only to avoid him. Not because of Aytal's errant arrow that had almost ended her life. She'd forgiven him for that, unlike her father who had made clear that justice still needed to be served. But after everything else they'd been through, including the lion attack, Naya's feelings for Aytal were complicated. She needed time to sort them out before confronting him.

He and his father had found a place at one of the smaller fires surrounding the central blaze where they stayed throughout the evening. At one point Naya saw Aytal's younger brother Dayan join them, but after a while the boy left to rejoin her uncle's family, with whom he'd been living. As the festivities wore on, Naya found her gaze turning in Aytal's direction but whenever he looked up, she quickly glanced away. She wished he would stop wearing that remorseful expression, which just made her feel more irritated. If only she could bring herself to be truly angry with him, things would be so much easier.

Eventually, tired of brooding and as annoyed with herself as with everyone else, Naya decided to go back to her family's dwelling where she could at least pretend to sleep. By now, she was sure, she had little hope of attracting her father's attention, let alone talking to him. *Why couldn't he understand?* She wanted him to tell her how she'd succeeded in taming not only the red filly, but the mare and the gray stallion as well. She was even willing to give Aytal his share

of the glory. She wanted to describe what it had been like to ride, galloping across the vast grasslands, as free as an eagle soaring on the wind. She wanted to confess what had happened to the colt, how guilty and devastated she felt about his death, and she'd wanted to warn her father of her mother's betrayal.

Absorbed in talking to the other men around the central fire, her father didn't seem to notice her unhappiness. Not until she rose abruptly did he put out a hand to stop her, asking where she was going.

"I'm tired Papa," she'd said, evading his grasp. Swallowing hard, she managed the smile she knew he would want to see. "It's been a long day," she apologized. "I need to go to bed."

Hurriedly, before the light from the fire could betray the tear-tracks staining her cheeks, she'd excused herself, disappearing into her family's shelter.

Back at the bluff top, overlooking the ravine ...

From below Naya's hidden perch, a loud and disgruntled *moooo* echoed off the limestone walls. Lifting her head, she scrubbed away grit and tears with her knuckles. *Enough*, she admonished herself, determined not to give-in to her feelings. She looked down once more into the steep-sided gorge. Next to the large corral that held the horses stood a smaller pen, also constructed of brush and saplings bound with stout rope, containing what remained of the clan's livestock. A pair of her male cousins had taken down the enclosure's makeshift gate and, with the help of a couple of dogs, were driving the animals through the opening. As they passed, Naya counted: ten *lāpos*—young female cattle, one bullock, eight ewes, and seventeen she-goats, including the two she and her mother had brought back with them. The *lāpos* were too immature to have been bred this season, which accounted for the lack of calves. But no new lambs or kids cavorted at their mothers' sides either. Missing as well were the clan's two rams, six buck goats and the magnificent young bull who had cost her father so dearly when he'd traded for him at last year's Gathering, not to mention the majority of the clan's other cattle as well as the most productive of the dairy goats and the best wool producers among the sheep.

The loss, Naya realized, was staggering, especially the absence of youngsters and breeding males. Without them, there would be no means of rebuilding the herds, and little likelihood of the remaining sheep and goats continuing to produce milk. As for the upcoming rites of *Sāwel-Dom*—the sacred marking of the sun's still point in the summer sky—her people would be unable to make their expected contribution unless they gave up nearly all the animals that remained. Even if the other clans attending the Gathering could be persuaded to help, Naya knew her family's future looked extremely uncertain. The alternative was for them to go back to depending solely on hunting, fishing and gathering what they could from the land, with all the loss of status such an existence entailed.

From what Naya had gleaned last evening listening to the talk around the fire, her clan's only hope of avoiding such an outcome had something to do with the captured horses. Did her father know that the animals trapped in the corral belonged to the red filly's band? That they were *her* horses? If she'd been allowed to see them for herself yesterday, she could have explained to him how special they were.

She watched now as the mother of the new foal finally stood still long enough for the youngster to nurse. Dark patches of sweat stained the mare's flanks. The sun had gained in height and the cliff wall no longer cast much of a shadow. Naya worried about the lack of cover for the horses. She looked over to where a group of men stood several paces away from the corral gate, enjoying the shade of a large oak tree. They'd been there all morning, talking. Clearly they were discussing the horses, but Naya was too far away to hear their words. At the moment, her father, her uncle Tausos, and two of her father's cousins were listening intently to Wailos. As had been the case last evening, the other men apparently regarded their guest as the expert.

All of this is my fault, Naya thought, looking down at the captured herd. First the colt, then poor BeHregs, and now the rest of the mares and youngsters—trapped, desperate to escape, bound for some fate she did not yet understand. The horses' disquiet continued to waft up like a hot breeze from the ravine floor. Naya was still dizzy, her

head had begun to throb and her throat felt parched. Perhaps it was time she returned to the settlement. The sun's arc told her she'd been gone too long. People would wonder where she was and she needed a drink of water.

"What are you doing?" called a voice. Startled, Naya rolled off her stomach and sat up. Coming along the path from the settlement was her cousin Melit, her long black braid swinging behind her as she walked.

"Watching the horses," Naya replied, furtively wiping her cheeks. She crawled away from the cliff edge so she wouldn't be seen from below and stood up, brushing dirt and dried grass from the front of her tunic. Melit hurried forward. Throwing open her arms, she swept Naya into an enthusiastic hug. Although they'd exchanged waves from a distance the night before, they hadn't been able to talk to one another. Unable to resist her friend's genuine affection, Naya returned her embrace.

"I missed you so much!" Melit said, stepping back. The expression in her deep brown eyes matched the wide smile dimpling her pretty face. "A lot has happened since you've been gone."

"To both of us," concurred Naya, wondering where she would start if she were to try to explain to Melit about what she'd been through. Putting on a smile she hoped would hide her inner turmoil, Naya linked arms with her cousin as they turned to walk back in the direction of the settlement. "You talk first," she said with false brightness. "Tell me about all of it."

Words tumbling over one another, Melit began to recount the details of everything that had occurred during Naya's absence. In addition to descriptions of the winter's hardships and gossip involving their other female cousins, she gravely relayed to Naya the circumstances of her grandfather's passing. With a shock, Naya realized his death had occurred the same night that the colt was born, just as she and the others were preparing to set-off from the clearing. Four nights later had come the disastrous raid on the clan's livestock.

"They decided to lay your grandfather's body in a temporary grave," Melit explained, "until the rest of the tribe can be present for an official funeral befitting his status as chief of chiefs. He's to be formally interred on the second day of the Gathering." Melit turned to look at Naya. "No one as important as your grandfather has died since before you and I were born," she pointed out, sounding both solemn and excited. "His funeral is bound to be quite an occasion."

Listening to her cousin, Naya's mood sank even further. So many terrible things had happened while she'd been away. No wonder her father seemed even more burdened and preoccupied than usual.

"But Wailos and his cousin arrived just in time," Melit was saying, interrupting Naya's gloomy thoughts. "Capturing the wild horses was all his idea—although someone was saying your grandfather had some kind of dream about horses before he passed. Either way, Wailos was the one who came up with the plan. Isn't he handsome? And he's always so friendly. He certainly seemed interested in you last night."

Stopping for breath, Melit gave Naya a sidelong glance. They had reached the opposite edge of the bluff and were about to start down the narrow path, full of switchbacks, leading to the settlement. From here they would have to travel single file until they reached the bottom. "Has your father said anything to you?" Melit asked over her shoulder as she began to descend the rough trail.

"Said anything about what?" Naya replied, still distracted. She was used to listening with only half an ear to Melit gushing about attractive young men. At the moment, thoughts of the horses and her grandfather's dream preoccupied her. Had he spoken of her and the red filly before he died? Surely, he had not given anything away.

"Silly," Melit, teased her, looking back over her shoulder. "I meant has your father said anything about you and Wailos. Everyone is talking about how advantageous a match it would be. I'm sure it would solve a lot of difficulties for your father. I've heard him discussing it with my mother when he visits our tent in the evenings. They whisper and assume I'm asleep, but I still hear a lot of what they say. Mostly what they talk about is boring, but I pay attention whenever the topic is marriage.

"That's when your name comes up," she continued. "Of course, I haven't heard them mention Wailos *specifically*, but now that you're back—alive—and with the whole clan talking about how much your father respects Wailos and

what a good alliance it would make—well, all I can say is that I'm sure your father would be really happy if you two were to wed."

Naya halted midstride, speechless. Did her father really want her to get married already? And to Wailos? The son of one of the tribe's wealthiest and most powerful chiefs? But maybe that was the point, the reason her father needed to create such an alliance. For the first time since being introduced to Wailos, instead of resenting him, Naya began to see the young warrior in a different light. Cocking her head to one side, she caught her lower lip between her teeth, considering.

Even without understanding all the dynamics at play, Naya had more of a grasp of tribal affairs than her cousin, enough to realize that her grandfather's death would be the cause of upheaval and uncertainty, with the question of her father's future position at the center.

More than anything else, Naya wanted to help her father. If she could show him that she could be an asset to him, instead of always being an embarrassment, maybe she'd be able to make up for having been born a girl, her father's only child, the one to have survived instead of her twin brother. She'd tried for most of her childhood to be as good as any boy, but that had gotten her worse than nowhere. If what Melit said was true, maybe as Wailos's wife she could finally be useful to her father, serving as a liaison between their two clans. And she'd have status. Krnos and the others would no longer be able to taunt her. She might even be able to influence what happened to the captured horses, or at least prevent others, including the red filly, from suffering the same fate.

She hurried to catch up, slipping a little on the steep slope.

"Of course, if I were you," Melit was saying, "I wouldn't take it for granted that you'd be the only option for Wailos to marry, especially if you keep acting like you used to before you left."

Her tone was light, but her message was clear. Before last winter, in addition to trying to compete with the boys, Naya had been prone to spending a great deal of time alone on the steppe. That was how she'd discovered the red filly and her herd in the first place. Melit often teased her good naturedly about her solitary behavior, but others had not always been so kind.

"Seriously though," Melit went on, "my aunt Saurosa seems to have caught his eye. She's not too old to snatch him up."

As they reached the bottom of the trail and neared the edge of the settlement, Melit turned to Naya, her expression earnest. "If you want to please your father," she cautioned, "my advice is to be nice to our guest. Who knows, you may turn out to like him."

Before Naya could respond, her cousin was off on another subject. The path leading the remainder of the way to the settlement widened. Walking abreast once more, Melit linked arms and leaned in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Tell me about the young stranger," she urged, then proceeded with her own observations on the new topic of interest. "I can't imagine having to spend all winter with someone who'd almost killed me. It must have been awkward. He doesn't seem to have much to say for himself, from what I can tell. He is good looking, though, in a rough kind of way. At least he has a nice smile."

Stopping once more, Melit turned to Naya. "They say your father will announce his sentence today, just before the contest," she observed. "Do you think he'll be allowed to participate? Dayan, his brother, has been bragging all winter about what an accomplished bowman he is—although shooting a defenseless girl in the back doesn't seem like very good aim to me."

"What contest?" asked Naya, finally getting a word in.

"The archery contest, of course, like we have every year before the *Wesr-Admn* feast," answered Melit, resuming their pace. "While you were up on the bluff all morning, the rest of us have been busy preparing. After such a long, hungry winter, it will be wonderful to have plenty to eat and to really celebrate. My mother had me and the other girls cleaning fish all morning, while most of the boys have been collecting wood for the bonfires. The others set up targets

for the competition on the floodplain down by the river. Wailos and his cousin have said they'll take part. I bet Wailos is a good shot, although I doubt anyone will be able to best my brother, Kawona. You remember, he won last time."

"I wonder if my father would let me take part." Naya hadn't meant to speculate out loud.

"You?" replied Melit, sounding scandalized. "First of all, as you seem to keep forgetting, you're not a boy and only the boys and young men compete in the *Wesr-Admn* contest. Even Saurosa has never entered, despite being pretty good with a bow and arrow. And second, while you may be able to handle a spear, you'd make a complete fool of yourself in front of everyone in an archery competition. You don't know how to shoot!"

"But I do," contradicted Naya. "Aytal—the young stranger—taught me. I even have my own bow and arrows ..." *We made them together*, she almost added, thinking of the days she and Aytal had spent crafting her weapons and then attempting to perfect her skills. Naya pushed the memories away. She was too angry with him to want to remember the good times. "I bet I can hit at least the closer targets," she said instead.

"Well, if I were you," Melit dismissed the idea, "even if you've got better aim than all the men and boys combined, I'd keep it to myself. Neither Wailos nor your father is likely to be impressed."

"Perhaps you're right." *Oh course she is*, Naya told herself. Look what happened the last time she'd missed where she was aiming. If only she'd been able to hit the lion, the colt might ... But she wouldn't let herself go there. As for Aytal, she thought bitterly, he'd been worse than useless. She almost hoped he *was* allowed to participate in the contest, just so that someone—Wailos, or Melit's brother—would put him in his place. But more likely he would refuse to take part, using the vow he'd supposedly made against drawing his bow as a convenient excuse.

Naya swallowed hard, once again forcing back tears. They were approaching the edge of the settlement. She couldn't risk giving way to all the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Instead, she must be brave and strong, so that her father could be proud of her. Melit was right. She needed to grow up and start acting like the daughter of a clan chief.

WAGES OF EMPIRE



A NOVEL

MICHAEL J. COOPER

WAGES OF EMPIRE

BY MICHAEL J COOPER

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* * *

IN THE SUMMER OF 1914, sixteen-year-old Evan Sinclair leaves home to join the Great War for Civilization. Little does he know that, despite the war raging in Europe, the true source of conflict will emerge in Ottoman Palestine, since it's from Jerusalem where the German kaiser dreams to rule as Holy Roman Emperor.

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MICHAEL J. COOPER emigrated to Israel in 1966 and lived in Jerusalem during the last year the city was divided between Israel and Jordan. He graduated from Tel Aviv University Medical School, and after a forty-year career as a pediatric cardiologist in Northern California, he continues to do volunteer missions serving Palestinian children who lack access to care.

His historical fiction novels include *Foxes in the Vineyard*, set in 1948 Jerusalem, which won the 2011 Indie Publishing Contest grand prize and *The Rabbi's Knight*, set in the Holy Land in 1290. *Wages of Empire* won the 2022 CIBA Rossetti Historical Fiction Award for YA fiction along with first-place honors for the 2022 CIBA Hemingway award for wartime historical fiction.

He lives with his wife in Northern California with a neurotic but lovable Golden Retriever and a spoiled-rotten cat. Three adult children occasionally drop by.

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PROLOGUE

April 18, 1911

Jerusalem

The Temple Mount was shrouded in darkness. It was the dead of night yet sounds of digging echoed within the Dome of the Rock.

Gunter von Wertheimer knew the sounds well—the steady scrape of a shovel, the bite of a pick, and the whisper of soil poured from full panniers.

Cloaked in a hooded robe, he stood in the shadow of the shrine and looked up at the sky. Among the bright points of stars, the constellation of the scorpion hovered over the Dome; the sharp stinger formed by a bright star the Arabs called *Lasa 'a*, poised to strike.

As the digging continued, another sound whispered out of the darkness.

“It’s time.”

He knew the voice was that of his friend and fellow archeologist, Rahman B’Shara, a hulking shadow in the darkness.

“You know what you must do,” said Gunter.

“It’s strange, though,” Rahman murmured. “When Walker first came, I thought he was like the others—just another greedy treasure hunter, anxious to get his hands on the golden vessels hidden beneath the Foundation Stone. But once I joined the dig, I couldn’t believe how quickly it was progressing.”

“Do you still believe he’ll break through in the next few days?”

“No. He’ll break through in the next few hours.”

“Because of the spiritualists and clairvoyants he hired?”

“More likely, it’s the unchecked access he’s had to dig for the last two weeks. Walker also has a keen sense of which Ottoman officials to bribe—starting with the Turkish governor.” Rahman turned, stepped past Gunter and whispered, “There’s no time to lose.”

“Good luck, my friend.”

“Why do I need luck?”

“You know that better than I. His guards are well armed.”

Rahman smiled, his white teeth flashing in the starlight. “We have something more powerful than their guns.”

“Indeed. We have the power of the Temple.”

“In the end, yes, but I was speaking of a power of *this* world—the power of the mob.”

“And what a mob!” Gunter agreed. “Thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Feast of Nebi Musa! When they hear the Temple Mount has been desecrated by treasure hunters, Walker won’t need to enter the Temple to experience divine wrath.”

“Yes! The faithful will be quick to avenge this outrage.” Rahman bolted away, disappearing into the darkness.

Gunter knew he was heading to the Moslem Quarter beyond the northern edge of the sacred precincts. After a few seconds, he heard his voice calling out, echoing among the narrow lanes.

“Sacrilege! The *Frenji* are breaking the foundation stone! Sacrilege!”

Within seconds, two armed Turkish guards with torches shot out of the shrine and sprinted in the direction of Rahman’s voice.

Gunter flattened himself against the smooth tiles and watched as they came to a stop, apparently despairing as they heard the words Rahman was shouting.

“Arise to vengeance! The Turks have given over the Holy Mountain to the greed of infidels. Avenge the sacrilege! Arise!”

The guards ran back into the shrine and within seconds, Gunter heard the anxious voice of Montagu Walker.

“We must get out of here double quick! Hurry! Take whatever you can carry!”

As he waited in the shadows beneath the arches of the arcade, Gunter knew that Rahman had been the one best suited to infiltrate Walker’s scheme—to expose and stop him. Walker had hired him as his consulting archaeologist to give his treasure hunt the patina of a legitimate excavation—Rahman, who could trace his ancestry in Jerusalem back for a hundred generations.

Though Gunter had also been born in Jerusalem, he was the son of German Templers, and never completely trusted by the local population; suspected of working for the Germans, or the Ottomans, or both.

But Gunter served no colonial empire. He, like Rahman, was a Guardian of the Temple Mount, an order that traced its origins to a time before the holy mountain had a name, a time cloaked in the shadowed silence before history.

A line of flaming torches appeared along the northern border of the Temple enclosure. Shouts of execration filled the air.

Walker and his crew tumbled out of the Dome of the Rock, struggling with heavy sacks, shovels and picks that scraped and clattered on the paving stones.

“Leave that stuff!” Walker shouted. “Run for your lives!”

They rushed headlong away from the mob, frantically clawing past one another.

Gunter knew they were making for a gap in the southern border of the enclosure.

The mob surged forward in pursuit, the light of a thousand torches beneath the black sky.

Walker was finished.

The passages and chambers within the Temple Mount would remain sealed, as they had been for a thousand years.

But Gunter knew that others would come—drawn by the power and mystery of Jerusalem. And he also knew that the Guardians of the Temple Mount would be watching, and they would never rest.

Chapter 1

June 11, 1914

Cedar City, Utah

Evan was in no hurry to get home.

Finding refuge in a pick-up game of baseball after the last day of senior year, he stood in center field amid patches of parched grass and tufts of saltbush, shirtless in the summer heat of the high desert. The dry ground shimmered beneath the late-afternoon sun, and from somewhere a chorus of cicadas whined, the sound sustained and rising.

He squinted at the distant contest between pitcher and batter, framed by the rickety wooden backstop and the Pine Valley Mountains. His team was ahead by two runs with two outs in what both teams had agreed would be the last inning.

“C’mon! Get this guy out,” Evan said in conversation with himself since no other player was within a hundred feet of him.

Nearly two years had passed since his mother’s death, and bereft of her touch, home had become little better than a boarding school with a strict live-in tutor. In addition to the regular high school curriculum, Evan matriculated under the unbending tutelage of his father in ancient Greek and Classical Latin.

He was in no hurry to get home.

Pushing sun-streaked hair out of his eyes, he relished the simplicity of baseball and the camaraderie of his friends—welcome relief from the oppressive loneliness and static mental labors he faced at home. And once the game ended, he wouldn’t be going home, but to the dry gully a quarter mile from the house—there to enjoy the quiet solitude of practicing with his sling.

And tomorrow, graduation ...

As a prank, he had formally requested that his diploma be issued under the name “Pancho Villa.” His father hadn’t been amused. Nor had he been pleased to discover blank college application forms crammed into a box in the hall closet. Despite Evan’s best efforts to the contrary, he had done well enough to gain admission to college. But there was the small matter of the application.

“Let’s finish this!” Evan pounded a fist into his worn leather glove and bent at the waist, resting his hands on his knees. He imagined he was in the vast green outfield of the Polo Grounds in upper Manhattan, where he had fallen in love with baseball and with the New York Giants on a hot summer day in 1912, soon after he and his parents had arrived in New York City by steamship, and before leaving by train for Utah. His mother, in the early months of pregnancy, had elected to stay close to the electric fan in their hotel room.

On entering the Polo Grounds, Evan’s breath caught—the sweet smell of the freshly mowed grass and the vast sweep of green stretching into the recessed shadows of center field. The majestic glory of the green cathedral was further enhanced by the great pitcher, Christy Mathewson, winning the first game of a double-header against the Boston Braves.

His father, not wanting to leave his mother alone all day, insisted they forego the second game of the double-header, but Evan’s baptismal experience was complete—reborn a new convert to the religion of baseball.

The memory of that day was one Evan cherished—the last time he could remember a sense of easy friendship with his father.

In his imagination he was now playing center field for the New York Giants against the Boston Braves, with Christy Mathewson pitching. Framed by the huge green stadium on either side, with the first and second decks rising two hundred feet into the sky and filled with spectators, Mathewson stood unmoving—the batter also still but for the bat waving slowly like a cobra, waiting to strike.

“Throw the ball, already,” Evan muttered as he picked a stone off the ground and tossed it aside.

Finally, the pitcher reared back and threw.

The batter swung and Evan heard the sharp click of contact between bat and ball—the white dot arcing upward against the blue sky.

Tracking the ball’s flight, Evan uncoiled and began to run, shouting, “I got it!” as he skirted clumps of weeds and gopher holes. He raised his glove, caught the ball, and without breaking stride, trotted in, pausing briefly near second base to acknowledge the thunderous applause from the capacity crowd at the Polo Grounds.

“Nice catch,” Mike Cope said and raised his glove.

Evan threw him the ball. “Yeah, good game.”

“You wanna have a soda in town?”

“No. I gotta go home.” Evan stuffed the glove into his haversack.

“Hey, buddy, finals are over. We’re done!”

Evan shrugged. “My father . . .” He left off, not needing to elaborate.

“Your dad is so strange,” Mike said, shaking his head.

Evan bristled at the characterization, even though he largely agreed with it. He missed the version of his father he had glimpsed that day at the Polo Grounds.

“Have you asked him about our trip to Moab?”

“Yeah—no problem.”

“Good! See ya tomorrow.”

“Why? What’s tomorrow?” asked Evan, deadpanning. “Oh! You mean graduation?” He shrugged. “Not sure I can make it.”

“Too busy conjugating Latin verbs?”

“Yeah, that’s it exactly!” Evan said and struck off into the desert.

He was soon well away from the ball field, the ground-heated air fragrant with the pungent smell of sage and parched earth—the trackless waste dotted with Manzanita. Still shirtless, his faded canvas haversack hung over his right shoulder and swung as he walked. His face and arms were deeply tanned while the skin of his broad shoulders and long torso were of a lighter hue and freckled. The cicada’s song had ended, and the only sounds were those of his footsteps over the dry ground and the sibilant whisper of the late afternoon breeze, cooling his body.

He stopped walking and closed his eyes as thoughts of his mother’s death rose in his mind. They often did when he was alone. The memories stabbed through his heart; the anxious dread in her eyes with the too-early birth pains, the fear in his father’s voice as he guided the automobile through the night, the asphalt road illuminated by the headlamps from Cedar City to the hospital in St. George, the weak cry of the sister he would never see, his mother’s blond hair radiating out on the hospital pillow after she had died, and the emptiness of leaving St. George without her.

He exhaled a sigh and resumed walking until he reached a deep ravine. He descended a stairway of boulders into the dry riverbed with its pavement of coarse gravel dotted by smooth stones. Rounding a curve in the gully, the silence was broken by a sudden rasping hiss that brought him up short—a barn owl huddled in the shadow of a rocky cliff. The owl rotated its white, heart-shaped face, following him with its small eyes.

After a few minutes, he saw his goal—a large beavertail cactus cascading down the gully wall with bright rose-colored flowers.

He stopped at a distance of about fifty feet, tossed down his haversack, unhitched the clasps and took out his sling—a strip of sheepskin seven-feet long. He examined the stitches that secured the quarter-pound lead weight to one end, and with his pocketknife, cut away a few trailing threads. As he worked, he thought about Ned Lawrence.

Ten years Evan’s senior, Lawrence had taught Evan how to make the sling when they’d met during his father’s first sabbatical year at the Carchemish digs in Northern Syria. Lawrence, already a working archaeologist, had shown Evan how to cure and split the sheepskin to make the leather supple, how to select stones of the proper size and shape, how to grip the sling, how to launch the stone, and how to use the weighted end like a South American bola.

Evan had already mastered the sling’s bola function as evinced by dozens of amputated dried-out flesh pads and faded cactus flowers that lay scattered on the riverbed. That part hadn’t been difficult. But slinging stones was challenging.

He fitted a rock into the sling’s apex and began to spin it. As the sling rotated faster and faster, he thought about what Lawrence had told him about the connection of the sling to the Balearic Islands; how men of the islands served the Roman Empire as a special division of hoplites.

The sling blurred. Releasing the lower, unweighted strap, the stone flew forward, though far wide of the mark, missing the cactus by at least ten feet. He picked up another rock. Again, he whipped the sling about. This time the stone slapped into the ground at his feet.

As stones flew—occasionally in the direction of the cactus—his mind was crowded with thoughts. *I will not go to college in the fall. Maybe I'll run away—volunteer to fight for Pancho Villa and the revolution in Mexico. Or maybe I'll hitch rides to Blytheville, Arkansas and try out for the Giants 'farm team ...*

Finally, a stone hit the cactus with an audible pop.

“Yes!” he shouted and pumped his fist in the air. “The Balearic hoplite strikes!” He bent down and picked up another rock.

As evening fell and the desert cooled, his missiles began hitting the cactus with regularity—stone after stone. And the air rang with his triumphal shouts.

“Where the hell is he?” Clive Sinclair said aloud as he set water to boil on the stove. “He should have been home hours ago!”

Leaving the kitchen, he went to the living room, which also served as foyer of the small house. He opened the front door and looked out through the screen, already adorned with lacewings, past the porch and dusty front yard into the desert. *Where the hell is he?*

Still dressed in the dusty dungarees, khaki shirt and boots he had worn for work, Clive turned from the door. Regarding the mahogany clock on the mantelpiece, he took the watch from his waistcoat pocket and checked the time, then opened the glass lens over the clock face and pushed the minute hand back three minutes to eight o'clock. Closing the glass, he was surprised at how loudly the smooth metallic click of the copper clasp sounded in the silence of the house.

His eyes rested on the photograph next to the clock, taken at the outdoor bus terminal in Jerablus on the day that they had left for Beirut—the first leg of the return trip to England, before continuing his sabbatical in the United States.

“Almost two years now.” He lifted the photograph off the mantelpiece and looked at Janet—her hair the way he loved it, gathered in a single braid over her shoulder. Leaning closer, he saw that a fugitive strand had escaped the braid and lay along her cheek. He looked into her steady eyes, her mouth, smiling. He saw the same happiness in his own and Evan's face as they stood on either side of her. And in the glass over the photograph, he saw the current weary solitude of his own reflection. “Now Evan is avoiding me and we're still in Utah,” he said looked back at Janet's face. “You were the bridge between us in this land of long shadows, my love. Evan and I are now like two solitary and unmoving pinnacles in vague proximity but no longer connected.”

He thought back to the night of her death—the onset of early labor, the pain rippling through her belly, the fear gripping their hearts, and the same unspoken prayer; *Please, God, not again!*

But the pattern was sadly familiar; Janet had miscarried twice in Mesopotamia, and the long drive through the night from Cedar City to St. George was fraught with the specter of a recurrent nightmare. As he drove, checking the time and counting the miles to the hospital, he realized that his notions of time and distance had yielded to a primal force that kept its own measure—in the ebb and flow of the birth pains and in the sound of Janet's breathing. In the end, the baby had been born in hospital, marked by a single weak cry followed by silence.

And Janet?

“We're trying to stop the bleeding.”

But the bleeding wouldn't stop.

Clive took off his wire rim spectacles and dried his eyes.

In the kitchen, the teakettle was shrieking. He turned off the fire, and the shrill whistle fell silent.

And in that silence, he heard a voice.

Out in the desert, someone was shouting.

He stepped to the front door and stood listening, looking into the crimson desert.

There it was again.

Someone calling for help?

And in the space of one terrible moment he realized it was Evan. He sprinted out of the house, past the low picket fence, and across the road. Threading a path among clumps of sagebrush, he was guided by Evan's sporadic shouts, his heart gripped with fear as he catalogued lethal denizens of the high desert; cougars, diamondbacks, recluse spiders. A final shout led him to a bluff above a dry wash.

To his relief he saw that Evan appeared unhurt. He paused to catch his breath and watched him fit a stone into what looked like a sling, and spin it round. Then he saw the target—the remains of a huge flowering prickly pear cactus on the far wall of the gulley with ragged fragments of the plant scattered on the ground.

He watched as Evan released a stone with such force that it tore through the cactus' pulpy flesh and rattled among the boulders along the gulley wall.

As Evan shouted for joy, Clive shouted from the bluff, "What in the name of heaven are you *doing*?"

Clearly startled, Evan turned. "Just ... practicing with my sling, Sir."

"I can see that." He picked his way down the steep embankment, and nodded in the direction of the cactus. "And *that's* your target?"

"Yes, sir."

Clive approached the wounded prickly pear, shaking his head. Apart from the fragments and flowers scattered on the ground, dozens of stones were embedded in the flesh of the plant's remaining pads, with jagged wounds where stones had grazed it.

"Have you *completely* lost your mind?" he asked, struggling to control his anger. "Do you realize that this cactus may have been a hundred years old? Do you realize that you have destroyed an ancient living thing?"

"Sorry," Evan offered weakly.

"He's *sorry*," Clive repeated in the direction of the cactus. "And there's *this!*" He produced an envelope from his jacket pocket. "Have we forgotten about your application to the Branch Normal School?" His voice rose as darkness fell. "I *distinctly* remember that you were going to take care of this!"

"I did," Evan replied quietly.

"What?" asked Clive putting a hand up to his ear.

"I said I did!" shouted Evan. "I decided not to fill it out! I don't want to go there!"

"And what do you *intend* to do?"

"I don't know yet!"

Clive turned and paced silently as he looked up at the darkening sky, night taking hold of the desert, the air cooling. "Where's your shirt?"

"In my haversack."

"Put it on. You'll catch cold."

Clive watched Evan kneel, pull his shirt out of the haversack, and angrily stuff in the sling. "Where did you get that?" he asked.

"I made it. Ned Lawrence showed me how in Carchemish. He told me it's a Balearic sling."

"As in the Balearic Islands?"

"Yeah."

At least an appropriate historical connection, Clive thought as he felt his anger ebbing away. "So long as you're a minor, it's my responsibility to direct your choices. I'll discuss the matter of your application with my colleagues at the college and see to it that you'll be allowed to tender a late application. This application." He held up the envelope. "Understood?"

Evan shrugged as he buttoned his shirt.

“And after graduation tomorrow, you’ll begin looking for a summer job.”

Evan barely nodded as he picked up his haversack. Clive wasn’t sure if it was resignation or resistance he saw in Evan’s shoulders.

They walked in silence through the twilight toward the lighted porch.

Clive’s heart was heavy as he wondered how he might repair things—how they might return to just being father and son.

Reaching the house, he mounted the two wooden steps illuminated by the porch light shining through a cloud of lacewings and a few clumsy June bugs. He put his hand on Evan’s shoulder. “You want some dinner?”

“Sure.”

“How about soup? We have vegetable and tomato.”

“Tomato.”

“OK. Go wash up.”

As Evan turned toward the bathroom, Clive spoke again. “And, Evan ...”

“Yes?” he replied without turning.

“There will be no more tutorials—we’ll just talk.”

“About what?”

“Whatever you want. And that trip with your friends to Moab in August?”

Evan turned and asked, “I can’t go?”

“No. I want you to go. It’s a good way for you to enjoy your summer break.”

They ate standing together in the kitchen—soup with saltine crackers. They spoke about baseball, the civil war in Mexico, and the rising tensions in Europe.

Clive thought the evening went well.

MYSTERY & DETECTIVE

DEAD

MAN

A silhouette of a man wearing a hat, standing on a rocky shore and looking out at the ocean. The scene is captured in a blue-tinted, monochromatic style, serving as the background for the word 'MAN'.

BLUES

S. D. HOUSE

DEAD MAN BLUES BY S. D. HOUSE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SOUTHERN BOOK PRIZE WINNER

RECIPIENT OF THE DUGGINS PRIZE, THE LARGEST AWARD FOR AN LGBTQ WRITER IN THE NATION

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* * *

Two grisly murders. A disgraced former mayor. A tranquil town on the verge.

This gripping historical crime novel set in the South pulls the past into the present, perfect for fans of Attica Locke and Wiley Cash.

Dave Hendricks was once a respected man in Shady Grove, a tiny town on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. But after his wife leaves him for his best friend, he also loses his job, and his reputation is left in shambles. With nothing but his houseboat and his dog left, he’s working odd jobs and listening to the blues. But when murder strikes their peaceful town, Dave finds himself compelled to team up with Sheriff Victor Burns, the man who betrayed him and took his wife to find the killer.

Two bodies are found on Cedar Lake, and both murders strike fear in the tight-knit community. Old friends and foes draw back into Hendricks’ life in the investigation, and he’s forced to finally come to terms with what is and what was—or see justice die in the process.

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S. D. House is the pen name of *New York Times* bestselling author Silas House, who is the author of seven novels, including his most recent, *Lark Ascending*, which was a *Booklist* Editors' Choice and is the winner of the 2023 Southern Book Prize and the 2023 Nautilus Book Award. In 2022 he was the recipient of the Duggins Prize, the largest award for an LGBTQ writer in the nation. In 2023 he was inducted as the Poet Laureate of Kentucky for 2023–2025 and became a Grammy finalist. His writing has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Time*, *Garden & Gun*, and *The New York Times*. House teaches at Berea College and at the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Creative Writing.

[Website](#)

Prologue

Esau Campbell, after several years of wandering and messing up, felt like a lost puzzle piece that's finally been rescued from underneath the couch and nudged into its proper place. His success at running this fishing camp had been helped along no small amount when the world- record largemouth bass had been caught here four years ago.

These two things—Esau's success and the world record—went hand in hand because, unbeknownst to anyone, Esau had slid two dozen metal sinkers down the gullet of the big ole bass when the fisherman brought it in to be weighed. Esau knew that fish was big enough to maybe be on the list, which would bring in a whole lot more business and secure his job, which he needed badly. But Esau wanted to guarantee it, so he dropped in the sinkers, then called in a notary to witness him weighing the bass. The affidavit was signed and made official at a staggering twenty- two pounds and two ounces.

A world record.

And that had sealed the deal not only for the Capability Fishing Camp but also for Cedar Lake itself. Business had been booming ever since despite the whispers of some fishermen who suspected Esau of subterfuge.

Esau always liked to use the shower house late at night, when all the guests had already turned in, and this night he had played a lengthy poker game with some of the boys staying at the camp and had gotten a little too drunk, so he needed a cold shower to sober him up and wash off some of the day's stink.

The day had been a long one for him. He had mucked out all the nightcrawler basins at the bait shop, then filled them with new dirt. He'd drained, scrubbed, and refilled the minnow tanks. Like always he had tended to the camp guests all day long, and last he had climbed up onto his cottage roof to add a couple of shingles after finding a small leak a couple days before. Once up there, he stumbled, and when he went to correct himself, he pulled a muscle that had become more inflamed as the night dragged on. Sitting hunched at the game of cards certainly hadn't helped, but he had been winning, so he wasn't about to quit. By the time the men all left at two- thirty that morning, the small of his back ached as if a hot brick was sitting at the base of his spine.

So Esau whistled softly as he padded down the flagstone path to the shower house. He looked out onto the still lake, its calm waters lit by more stars than he'd ever seen before, brighter in the moonless sky. This was the prettiest, most peaceful place in the world, he thought, and he wanted to stay here the rest of his life. He heard a whippoorwill call and stopped for a moment to hear it repeat its lonesome cry. He had always identified with that pining sound.

Once inside he took off his clothes, hung them on the small silver hook on the wall, and turned the water up to as hot as it would go. Immediately steam pumped out along with the stinging stream. Already the heat pounding into the small of his back was working its magic. He leaned one hand against the wall and let the needles of water pound

against his muscles, becoming so relaxed that he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool concrete blocks.

Something made him open his eyes. He didn't know what. Not a movement or a sound really, but a change in the way the air felt.

Then he saw: the electricity had gone out. The lights in here had been dim to start with, but now there was thick darkness. All he could make out around him was the steam slithering through the shower house. Probably one of the boys messing with him.

"Hey, you sons of bitches," he hollered. "Cut it out now."

Esau put his hands out in front of him, not exactly sure if he was feeling for someone nearby or if he was simply trying to find the wall to guide him over to the light switch.

And then, he realized someone was within inches of him, their shape sudden and looming. Before he could even speak, the first slash of the knife swiped through his right side and he felt blood—slicker and thicker than the water—stream down his leg.

His hand found purchase on the shoulder of this intruder, but he didn't even have time to sink his fingers into the meat there before the knife pierced his heart. Esau gasped, then sank to his knees, both hands around the knife now, trying to pull it out. If he could get it out, he'd be okay, he thought.

But Esau fell face- first onto the concrete floor, plunging the knife an inch deeper and ending his troubled life that had only recently found its footing. The force threw him to his side and he collapsed that way. Just before death completely took over, he could feel the water from the showerhead pecking at his eyeballs and he wanted to call out for his mother and Celeste, but just as he put his lips together to form the first sound, he was gone.

Chapter 1

Just about all Dave had left after the divorce were his books; his wiener dog, Shorty; a whole crate of record albums; and his houseboat, which he called *The Sherlock*. Once he'd had the biggest house on Main Street, the most important job in town (mayor), the prettiest and unhappiest wife, two cars, and the only privately owned television set in the entire town of Shady Grove. Even his job had been taken from him. Not that he had wanted to keep it anyway. But *still*.

He'd had it all and now he only had what he really needed, but best of all was having a quiet place to live, right here on Cedar Lake.

As he sat on the porch of *The Sherlock*, looking out at the black water and the starry night sky, with Shorty in his lap, a glass of Jameson Irish whiskey in his hand, and Bessie Smith playing on the record player behind him, he knew he didn't need a thing more.

"Nobody knows you when you're down and out," Bessie sang, and that's exactly why he loved her: she always told the pure- D straight truth, no holds barred. The thing was that he didn't even mind that nobody from his old life came around anymore. He had a few new friends here at the marina after only six months of living on *The Sherlock*. They were the misfits, the outcasts, the ones who didn't fit in back in town, but Dave reckoned that's who he had always been, too. He'd been fooling himself and everybody else when he'd been the most popular citizen of Shady Grove. The truth was this: Dave didn't like many people. When he did like someone, he really liked them, but he had decided long ago that for the most part, the world was full of assholes.

"A toast," Dave said, holding up his second glass of whiskey toward the night sky, "to this night. To the fourteenth night of June 1955, a night that I have to put up with no assholes. Here's mud in your eye, June fourteenth!" He tipped back his head and the whiskey slid down, warm and oaky and honeyed.

Dave wasn't normally a drinker. He certainly wasn't an alcoholic. But some nights he couldn't stop thinking about Germany. He couldn't stop thinking about all those bodies, all those skeletons walking toward him with their arms stretched out, asking for help. He couldn't stop thinking about his buddies who had died beside him while he, miraculously, had lived. Other nights he couldn't stop thinking about the way his best friend and his wife had betrayed him. He knew that in some strange way he was just as haunted by that as he was by the atrocities he had witnessed in Europe. Both sets of events were about the cruelty people can do to each other: one was on an epic scale and the other intimate. So, some nights he sat on the porch and watched the night sky and had a few glasses of Jameson, petting Shorty and listening to music until he could go to sleep.

He'd had both things on his mind all day because he had been alone since early morning. He had borrowed Rex's runabout and gone out on the lake, just driving around, stopping for an occasional swim in the clean, deep water. He had laid in the boat, reading the latest Erle Stanley Gardner, and then for at least an hour he had dozed, awaking to find himself a bit sunburned before heading back into the marina.

Suddenly Shorty's hackles went up and a low cough caught in the back of her throat. Shorty was very small, but she didn't realize this, so she was always ready to go on the defense for Dave, who hadn't heard a thing. Shorty sprang up on her short legs and stood in hunting pose—front right paw held up—and let out a riot of barking. She was so agitated that a rumbling growl spread through her chest when Dave went to calm her.

A light went on in the houseboat next door, which was especially strange since nobody lived on it. Rex Hardy, who owned the marina and half the boats moored here, had been trying to sell it for the last year.

Shorty really went crazy then, struggling to jump down so she could rip out the ankle meat of the intruder next door.

"Shorty, Shorty, calm down, baby!" Dave cooed. "It's okay! It's all right." He wasn't sure if it was all right or not, actually. Perhaps someone was prowling about on the little houseboat next door.

But then the door opened on the boat porch next to him and the silhouette of a woman stepped out. "It's okay, sweetie," she said, and Shorty instantly switched gears and wagged her tail as if this new woman might be the bearer of very good treats. Shorty stood on her hind legs, leaning against the railing so she could see over to the other porch. She even gave a small pitiful whine, the way she did when she wanted to be picked up. The woman was lost to the shadows as she stepped closer to the railings separating their porches. She leaned over to pat Shorty's head and Dave could see the soft curve of her face, the bright silky auburn of her hair. There was something very familiar about her.

"You've got a good little watch doggie there," she said, then brought her eyes up to latch on his. The woman kept her right hand busy with rubbing at Shorty's chest while the dog reared back with her eyes half closed in ecstasy, and extended her other one for a handshake. Then he could see her face: Nina Owens. A face he hadn't seen in twenty-five years. But he had thought of her on occasion and always missed her.

"I'm your new neighbor, I guess," she said. She didn't seem to recognize him in the darkness. "I rented this old beauty yesterday."

"Nina," Dave said, his voice full of disbelief, remembering all their time playing together as kids. Running through the woods. Building a dam in the creek. That innocent kiss, a peck on the lips that had been the first for both of them. Watching as her parents' truck drove away, taking Nina away from him. "It's me. It's Dave."

"Dave? Wh—Dave Hendricks?" she said, her smile overtaking her face. "I can't believe it!" She broke into a full, contagious laugh, and he joined in. "I knew I'd run into you eventually, but I didn't figure I'd land right beside you."

They had been best friends until they were ten years old, when her parents had been forced off their land for the flooding of the lake. A deep woods had separated Dave's family land from Nina's, and that grove of trees—along with the ridge they stood on—had kept Dave's family's property safe from the taking. But Nina's family had to move off the land their people had lived on since the early 1800s. Her father had been so angry about it that he left the state altogether. Nina had promised to write from their new home in Alabama, but she had only sent a couple letters and had never answered the last one he wrote to her. Dave wasn't about to admit to her now how that had hurt him, how he had pined for her a couple of years, how he had always wondered where she was.

Dave watched her there in the shadows, laughing, and thought he was going to like having her as a neighbor just fine. Shorty seemed to agree.

“What are you doing back?” he asked, trying to mask the amazement in his voice.

She leaned against the metal railings between them. Shorty stood on her hind legs, licking at Nina’s hands. She didn’t seem to mind. In fact, she didn’t even seem to notice.

“Well, I’ve worked in newspapers all over the South but never have been satisfied anywhere. So when I saw an opening here, I just thought what the hell, I’ll go back to Shawnee County. My family never did get over this place.”

Dave had been small when the community conversations had started about the lake taking over the valley, but he remembered how heated the community meetings had become. No one had been more upset than Nina’s father. Legend had it he had once pulled a gun on the Corps of Engineers men who came to give him final notice that his family had to leave, an order of eminent domain in hand. The Corps had paid top dollar for the property but still, most people didn’t want to leave land that had been in their families for generations.

“Well, I never did get over y’all leaving,” Dave said, and let out a little laugh because he hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

“What a coincidence!” Nina said quickly, as if embarrassed by what he had said. “To be your neighbor again.”

“So you’re working for *The Shady Grove Sentinel*?”

“Yep. Lead reporter of the smallest paper in the state. I’m in the big time now, huh?”

“At least you’re employed.”

“You’re not? I thought you were the mayor.”

Dave wondered how she knew that. Maybe she had missed him, too. The album had reached its end and there was nothing but the comforting sound of the lapping water between them.

“Well, I was. For seven years. And sheriff for two years before that.”

“What happened?” Nina sat on one of the rickety metal folding chairs that had stood on the empty porch of the houseboat for the last year, waiting for someone to unfold it.

“The short version is that I was happy as a person could be, I thought. Loved my little town. Loved serving its people. Loved my wife. I thought we had it made. But then I found out she was sleeping with the town sheriff, who happened to be my own best friend.”

“Oh God. I’m sorry, Dave.”

“Yep.” Dave felt around on the floor beside his chair. “This calls for a drink.” He held up the green bottle of Jameson. “Join me?”

“You go ahead,” she said. “I drank too much at supper and had to get sobered up from that, so I don’t want to drink again.”

“Sure?”

“I’m more of a gin girl, anyway.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any of that in stock,” he said,

“but your new landlord, Rex, specializes in it.”

“Oh, please, drink up,” she said, throwing a dismissive hand toward him. “Don’t worry about me.”

“All right, I will,” Dave said, and tipped back his glass. The whiskey soaked into his tongue. “I’ll drink for both of us. It’s not often I drink, but I don’t have anywhere to go tonight.”

“Forgive me if this is too personal, but I am a reporter, so—”

“Ask me anything,” Dave said.

“How does your wife having an affair lead to you not having a job?”

“Because the night I found out I had too much of this,” Dave said, and held up the glass of whiskey. “And then I stupidly got into my car. And stupidly drove it into the county courthouse.”

“Ah, I see,” Nina said, nodding. “You never did do anything halfway, even as a little boy.”

“And your newspaper had a field day with that, then the other papers got on board and well, I finally resigned. So I went from being the town mayor to being the town screw-up.”

“I’ve always preferred the screw-ups, myself,” Nina said.

“You’re kind to say so,” Dave said. “But to tell you the truth, I’m happier now than I’ve ever been. I didn’t even realize how miserable I was. I was just floating through life, making money and buying Janet whatever she wanted and not even noticing that she didn’t care anything about me.” “Janet was your wife?” Dave nodded.

“Not Janet Dawson?”

“The one and only.”

“We hated her in elementary school. She was a snob even when she was ten years old!”

“Well, I thought she had changed. But she hadn’t. I don’t know what I was thinking. I was really good at basketball in high school and that caused her to bat her big blue eyes at me one day. One thing led to another and—”

“And the next thing you know,” Nina offered, “you’re married to the cheerleading captain, you’re mayor of the town, and don’t really have control of your own life.”

“Exactly,” Dave replied. But how did she know Janet had been the cheerleading captain in high school? Something told him Nina had been keeping up with things since she had been gone. Maybe she had already known he had been married to Janet and was just playing along like she didn’t. Or maybe it was a lucky guess. Even in elementary school it had been apparent that Janet would grow up to be the most popular girl in school.

“My life hasn’t exactly gone the way I planned either, Dave,” Nina said, but she didn’t offer any more information. “I reckon it’s that way for most folks.”

“Well, if life wasn’t full of surprises, it’d be awful dull.” Dave looked out at the calm lake.

“I always wondered about you, during the war,” Nina said. “I have to admit that when the war was over, I snooped around some. Easy to do when you’re with the newspaper. I did some investigating to make sure you came back.”

Dave took the last drink of whiskey from his glass. *No more of that*, he thought, because he was definitely starting to buzz.

“I did come back,” he said. “Got hailed as a war hero by Shady Grove, although I hadn’t done anything particularly heroic. Came home and ran for sheriff even though I didn’t have a lick of experience, and I won. I was more surprised than anybody.”

“I can’t imagine how bad the war was,” Nina said.

“No, you can’t,” Dave said, a little sharper than he intended. There was a flash in his mind of the bodies, stacked like firewood, the people emerging from the smoke and ash, the eerie silence of the day they liberated the camp.

“My dad was in the Great War, remember? He never did get over it.”

He did remember. Her father hadn’t dealt well with the shell shock. Growing up, Dave had often heard people say how Old Man Owens never was right after coming back from France. And once his land was taken by the government, that anger seemed to be on the surface all the time instead of simply being a boil that rose up occasionally. Sometimes Dave and Nina had played out in those woods together because both of them were trying to get away from their fathers: hers raging from the war he couldn’t shed and his full of the anger that whiskey stoked in him. They had understood this about each other as children without having to articulate it much at all. That’s one reason he had missed her so badly when she left; nobody else got it the way she did. There was something about living in an angry house that bound people.

He found himself laughing in a way he hadn’t in a long time. Still, there was something a little off, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on, but it mostly felt like distrust. There was something this woman was hiding. Dave reckoned he was probably being arrogant in wondering if she was talking nonstop because she was nervous about seeing him again. She said she’d moved back to Shady Grove four days ago to take a job for the local newspaper, had been staying at the Town Square Hotel. She didn’t like any of the rental properties in town, and had heard about the houseboat for rent down at the marina.

“I took a look at it yesterday and I never considered living on a houseboat before in my life, but I kind of fell in love with the idea of being on the water,” she said.

She had been married right out of college, she told him, but it only lasted a couple years and hadn’t produced any children. “I don’t have any intention of ever doing *that* again,” she said, but didn’t expand on why it had been such a bad experience.

Dave felt that familiar grief wash through his stomach when he thought about both of them being childless. He had always wanted a baby so badly. The whole time he had been in Europe, he had consoled himself by thinking that he would survive the war, go back home and marry Janet, and they’d have two kids, the American dream. That’s what had kept him going. And now he not only didn’t have any kids, he didn’t have any of it at all.

As Nina went on, he found out they had even more in common: they both loved Sherlock Holmes, Ella Fitzgerald, and Yorkshire tea. Dave had picked up the habit of afternoon tea during his time stationed in England and did it even more religiously now that he lived so close to Rex, who was from England. Nina’s only explanation was that she needed it to calm down after work.

“Five years ago, I had an aneurysm and almost died,” she said.

“So young?”

“They can happen anytime,” she said. “I’m telling you, Dave, I really did die for a few minutes. I saw a big bright light, saw my mother waiting at the end of a tunnel, the whole shebang. I thought I had left this earth forever. That’ll change you.”

Before he could respond, Nina yawned and glanced at her watch. “Oh my lord, it’s five in the morning!” Nina laughed. “I guess we really did some catching up.”

Dave never had a chance to reply. From across the widest part of Cedar Lake, there came anguished screams, curling through the warm night air over the still water. Dave figured the sound was coming from the direction of the fish camp, and he was surprised by the clarity of the screams. Open water was an amazing carrier of sound, and the yelling was so piercing that both he and Nina were startled and they both turned to look that way.

“We need to go over there,” Dave said.

“What’s over there?”

“Capability Fishing Camp,” he said.

“Is there a little boat we can take?” Nina asked. “I don’t imagine these houseboats have much horsepower.”

“Rex won’t mind if we take his,” Dave said, already on his feet.

A MYSTERY



TO

KILL

A

QUEEN

AMIE MCNEE

TO KILL A QUEEN BY AMIE MCNEE

***FROM THE FOUNDER OF THE POPULAR INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT @INSPIREDTOWRITE AND THE UNPUBLISHED
PODCAST***

“If you are looking for an exciting Elizabethan mystery novel then this is the book for you.”

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* * *

Enter a shadowy world of crime in Elizabethan London with this twisty historical mystery featuring a queer sleuth and a dash of romance!

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Amie McNee is an author, speaker, and podcaster. Her fiction novels include *The Rules Upheld by No One* and *Regrettably, I Am About to Cause Trouble*, which explore the lives of women in 16-century England. In addition to her fiction, Amie is the author of *We Need Your Art*, a manifesto on the vital importance of creating. Through her online

platform, Inspired to Write, and her podcast, The Unpublished Podcast, Amie shares inspirational pep-talks, guidance, resources, and teachings with a worldwide community of both aspiring and flourishing artists. Amie currently splits her time between speaking, writing, and creating spaces for artists to thrive, always driven by the belief that storytelling is one of humanity's most profound acts of connection.

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Chapter 1

London, in the year of our Lord 1579, smelt like shit but somehow still felt romantic. It happened every summer. Every time it got hot, all the Londoners started pacing the cobbles, looking for a good time. I leant against the timbered wall of Queenhythes Jewelers and watched this lusty city do its thing. I'd be asked to move along soon—it was a classy establishment— but until then, I wanted to people watch. There was someone I needed to speak to; he was sure to turn up soon. A sophisticated fellow of a gentleman exited the shop, clutching a sizable parcel. I wondered whether he'd bought it for his wife or a mistress. He moved quickly to his carriage but got momentarily distracted by a working girl waving to him from the brothel window. He stopped, scratched his head, then walked straight past his horses and straight into the so-called house of ill repute. I looked to the woman who had made her catch; she winked at me. I grinned. Shame she was busy. I wasn't immune to this sordid mood that had possessed London.

“Spare a coin for a madman?” There was my man. I watched as Mad John slung his perfectly able arm into a sling. I always liked to watch him work. I would wait until he got his coin before I approached him. Only polite. “My codpiece, mistress! My codpiece!” he sang, chasing after an unsuspecting lass. “You must smell how it stinks!” I could see the poor woman's cheeks blush from all the way over here. She clutched a desperate handful of her kirtle and rushed on as quickly as she could, but that was never going to stop Mad John. I followed a few steps behind. She took a quick turn toward the river, down Artillery Road, but it didn't matter. Mad John only pretended his leg was lame. He began loudly singing a nursery rhyme:

Jacke boy, ho boy newes

The cat is in the well Let us ring now for her knell Ding dong ding dong bell!

“Please leave me be!”

“To shut me up, it takes a ha'penny; to get me gone, it'll take two.” She stopped. Mad John stopped. I stopped. The busy London street kept on by.

The shaken woman shoved two silver pieces into John's “good” hand and walked away at a brisk pace. “Belongs in a madhouse!” she cried.

“They'd be lucky to have me!” Mad John sang back. Then he took his arm out of his sling, straightened his back, and turned to me. His previously contorted face relaxed into something close to handsome.

“I sang her that song for you, Jack!” Of course he knew I had been there. He missed nothing. That was why he was so useful.

“I always loved that one.”

“Course ye did, it's about a cat falling down a well and dying, you dark, devilish thing.” I liked it more for the catchy tune than for the dead-animal imagery, but when you came from a family like mine and you had done the things I'd done, the dark devilish vibe sort of stuck.

He linked arms with me. “How's your father?”

For God's sake, straight to my pa. I would never shake him.

"Wouldn't know. Haven't seen him."

"He's not a bad man. You can't avoid him forever."

"John, he's literally the worst man. A murderer, a thief, an adulterer. He breaks all ten of the commandments weekly."

"Oh, and I suppose you're all square on the Ten Commandments front?"

We paused the conversation to take a tricky step over a very puddle of human excrement.

"I'm atoning for my sins," I reminded him when we reached the other side.

"Oh yes." He patted my arm. "I forgot about all this business with the justice of the peace."

"That's actually why I wanted to talk. I am trying to find information about a murder."

"Let's discuss it at the tippling house. What about the one with that lass you like? Jenny, isn't it?" He was astute. Either that or I was very obvious.

"You've only got twopenny to your name, John; you're not going to get a drop." He grinned. He was only a little older than I, but he'd lost most his teeth. Still, I liked his smile. "Nay, I've sung to a fair few lasses this morning; none of them tolerated me for long. I can treat you to a tippie."

The smell got progressively worse the closer you got to the Thames, but it was still nice to walk along its banks. There was more barge than water in the river today. Rich folk, poor folk, church folk, they were all precariously staying afloat in whatever piece of wood they could afford. I noticed a few diving willingly into the foul-looking water. It was almost inviting in this heat. If I had been in full ladies' dress, I would've fainted. But I was in my normal garb today, just a shirt and men's breeches, my shoulder-length hair under a flat cap I'd pinched from a store on the bridge.

We walked toward Ye Olde Cheshire Inn. It was on the bank of the river, and if God was on your side, you could get a seat watching the boats. That's why I liked it. The people watching.

And also, as Mad John had noticed, because of Jenny.

It was heaving with people when we arrived. But my faithful Abraham-man threw his arm back in his sling, began making veiled comments about how the devil was his lover, and what would you know, a seat outside, right by the water, became available.

"I'll save you the seat, Jack; you go get the drink." He winked at me. "Anything I should be mulling over while I wait?"

"It's about the Mary Platter murder." He nodded, familiar with the name. "I want to know about her husband."

"Thomas?"

"Aye. Someone left her black- and- blue, John. I want the man who did it."

"A lot of women leave this world black- and- blue, Jack ... 'tis an everyday occurrence in this city. Why do you want this man in particular?"

No one believed I was doing this from the good of my heart. I really did want to be a better person, but also ... "There's reward money for turning him in."

"Ah." He nodded seriously. "I'll think on it."

I left my madman and squirmed my way through the sweaty throng of lusty Londoners. I wanted to avenge Mary's murder, I did! But I also really did need coin. Being a detective paid a lot less than my previous trade, if you could call working for my father a trade.

I had found my way to the bar. Jenny was short but fierce, her long black hair braided down her back. She danced around with tankards in hand, seemingly unperturbed by the masses throwing abuse at her. I wasn't going to get much time with her, but anything would do.

"Much good do it to ye, Jenny." She hadn't heard me. Embarrassing. Should I try again? I'd try again. "Hello, Jenny!"

She turned. "Jack! You here with Mad John?"

"How do you know?"

“Someone’s complained already.” She poured a tankard full of ale. “I was on my way to throw him out.” My embarrassment deepened. I was always bringing unsavory characters to the pub. Hell, Jenny probably thought I was an unsavory character myself. “Will you give him a minute, Jenny? I need him for a case.”

“As long as he doesn’t start singing or pestering any of the lasses.”

“I promise he’ll be well behaved.”

She waggled her eyebrows skeptically. Christ, she was so becoming. “Did your jury sway the right way with that assault last month?” She had been an instrumental witness in that case. Barmaids were second only to whores when it came to noticing things, and Jenny was incredibly astute.

“We got him. All thanks to you.”

She leaned over the bar. “You’re a good detective, Jack.”

My face went hot. I tried to think of a casual and easy reply but failed.

“Stop flirting with the lady boy and give us our drink.” An old man two down from me smacked the bar. I flinched. That really took the shine off things.

“That was the end of my shift, goodman. This fine gentleman’s ales were my last pour.” She took off her apron, hung it on a hook, and came around the bar. There was a moan of protest from the slandering old drunk, but Jenny just smiled. She hadn’t asked me for coin, and I wasn’t going to remind her.

“Such service,” I said as Jenny took my two ales and carried them outside for me.

“I’m the best barmaid this side of the Thames.”

“That you are.”

I threw one glance back toward the bar to make sure the man wasn’t following me. It would be embarrassing to be bludgeoned in front of someone as fair as Jenny.

We found Mad John throwing wanton looks toward a woman sitting on the next bench. I sat myself directly in his line of sight. “Oy, don’t come between a man and his money.”

“You’re lucky I don’t throw you out right now. I would’ve put you in the Thames if Jack weren’t here.” Jenny handed him his ale. “You’re a good lady, Jenny. Terrifying but good.” “And you’re a terrible horror, John,” she replied.

“Enjoy your afternoon off,” I said.

The barmaid stood in front of the sun. I squinted up at her, a halo of light around her head. Innocent. Pure. Everything I wanted to be.

“You’re a good one.” She touched my shoulder and went on her lovely way back toward the center of town. I watched her as she went.

“You don’t have a chance with her,” John muttered into his beer. “She’s far too good for you.” No one on the streets wanted to believe I could better myself. On my darker days, I was wont to agree with them. But today, today I was going to avenge the Mary Platter murder.

“You got anything for me?” I asked.

“Surely you know Thomas did it.”

“I suspected as much, but the justice of the peace is on one about it being a vagrant robbing her. The jury only listens to him.” “That man’s a flubber-witted idiot. What does the coroner think?”

“He told me to come out and get word from the street.”

“Verily, I saw the Platters in a yelling match at least a dozen times at the Olde Bell. He was sure she was fucking some actor from the playhouse.”

“Was she?”

“I saw her often enough at a show. Cert possible. How did it happen?”

“Beaten to a pulp.”

“Aye, regular beating just gone too far,” John mumbled.

“I thought so.”

“I can come tell the jury what I saw if you need.”

“No offense, but you’re hardly a credible witness.”

“And you’re hardly a credible detective.” John liked to remind me of where I came from. I liked to ignore him.

We spent the next hour gossiping about our mutuals. John was a collector of facts and stories, and it was useful for me to have an ear to the ground of London’s filthy streets.

The madman went and got the next round. I scanned my surroundings to make sure the turd from the bar wasn’t nearby. Or anyone else who might want a go. I provoked a violence in people because of the way I looked. I noticed an odd fellow sitting on the other side of the tavern garden watching me. I rifled through my list of people who wanted me dead. Wasn’t any of my archenemies. But I’d keep an eye. I angled myself so that he was in my peripheral and watched the boats. I caught a snippet of a conversation saying that Her Majesty was also on the water today. I risked a look upstream and could see what looked like the royal barges. Red sails in the distance. If I hadn’t been so caught up in this case, it would’ve been enjoyable.

“There’s a commotion going on up the river,” John noticed, handing me my ale. My eyes traveled up the Thames. There were so many boats you could walk from one bank to the other if you had a steady foot. John was right. I could see people gathering about the dock. A moment later, the sound reached us. An excited hubbub. I thought I might’ve heard a scream. Perhaps someone had drowned.

“I might get up there.” Mad John downed his drink in a respectable two gulps. “They might be so distracted they don’t notice their pockets being picked.”

“I’d say you’re right. Someone’s definitely dead. There’re too many boats on the river today for it to be safe.”

“Hmm, hope it’s not Her Majesty.”

My interest was piqued. Surely not. But the commotion was near the red sails. People were swarming to the banks.

“Look, go ask one of the others about Thomas Splatter. They’ll say the same as I. He’s notorious. The JP would be mad as I am not to arrest him,” said John.

“Did Thomas see any of the girls in the Cheapside stew?”

“Would be surprised if he didn’t. Go ask. Flex your father’s name; they’ll give you what you want.”

I gritted my teeth. I knew enough of the girls to hopefully get some information without dropping that piece of knowledge.

“Listen.” Mad John looked serious, a rare thing. “Do you have a good spot to sleep tonight?” Nothing more humiliating than an Abraham- man who slept on a roof asking about your welfare. “Don’t worry yourself about me.”

His frown deepened. “I do worry. There’s a fair few out there who wouldn’t mind seeing you dead.”

Chapter 2

I was halfway to the Cheapside whorehouse when I realized it would be far more convenient to turn back on myself, go via the

big crowd at the dock, and then go to Cheapside. Sure, it was longer, but it would be nicer that route, more ... sunshine. I just wanted a closer look. Just quickly. If Thomas was the murderer, he was a wife beater, not a serial killer. And it was unlikely that he’d marry and kill a new lass by sundown.

The crowd was only growing. The bank was pulsing with people. I saw royal guards. Carriages and horses were colliding with the crowd. I scanned the masses. There had to be a handful of my father’s people in here. I just wanted a tidbit. Something to quell the curiosity. I wouldn’t be able to leave without it.

I put my body into the throng, listening to the yells. But it was a cacophony of noise. I went deeper. I wanted the epicenter. But there was no sense to this madness. There was no middle. The Queen would have been attended by

many on the water: the mayor, the companies, boats of musicians, boats of artillery. Her Majesty would've been long escorted away by now, but her entourage was not here either. It was just this mess of peasants, criminals, and busybodies in one big hot throng of noise.

I looked for John. But he wouldn't be doing his usual eye-catching performance of yelling and pissing people off. He would be playing his pickpocket game, and that meant blending in. He was surprisingly good at that too. When he wasn't limping and screaming, he could really disappear into a crowd. All my friends could. I was probably surrounded by my kin and mischief makers, who would be doing what they did best in a crisis: staying invisible and picking people's pockets.

I pushed through the peasants and the boatsmen and found a group of more-respectable-looking merchants farther upriver. They were standing by their boat, some still aboard, all of them discussing the event in hushed whispers. They were rattled. So rattled they didn't notice Little Lizzie, my half sister, inspecting their pockets.

Lizzie was many years my younger, with dark skin and the nimblest fingers I'd seen in all London.

"Sister." I snuck up behind her and whispered in her ear. She jumped. *I've still got it.*

"God's balls, Jack. Zounds!" We moved back to the shade of the nearest alley.

"Were their pockets ripe for the picking?"

"I don't know. You interrupted me!"

"I just want to know what's occurred, then you can be off on your thieving little way."

"I forgot you were a saint now. Too moral and good for our antics." She was playing with me, but it hurt still. She leant her little body against the crumbling wall. "From what I can gather, a shot was fired onto the Queen's barge. A yeoman is dead." "An assassination attempt?" I felt my stomach drop.

She shrugged. "I dunno. I'm just a little Moorish thief. Can I go now?"

"Aye, thank you."

She gave me an obnoxious sisterly stare, then hugged me round my middle. "Miss you," she said into my belly.

"Miss you too." I did. All these criminals were my family, my kin.

I might be trying to live a different life now, but I still loved them.

"You got somewhere safe to sleep? Papa will have you."

"I'm well, Lizzie."

"What about your humors? You had any of your turns?"

I stared at her blankly. "I am well."

"You haven't had any trouble with no one?"

"No one's tried to off me, Lizzie."

She gave me a suspicious squint, then was off.

I watched from the shadows for a moment longer, but there was nothing I could do to help the Queen. This would be handed over to her spies. Probably a Catholic conspiracy.

I walked back into the throng. Still, I was glad I'd taken the sunnier route. This was interesting. I extricated myself from the crowd and took a moment to look to the river. Completely empty of people now, with all the boats abandoned, sitting like carcasses, many untethered and bumping into one another aimlessly. I could still see the royal barge near the shore. It, at least, had been properly roped to the dock. She was ornate. Very long and elegant, with gold decor swirling across her bow and hull. The oars had been dropped haphazardly on the deck. They were silver. Then there was the throne where the Queen would've sat; it was covered by curtains normally, but they had been thrown back in the fuss. How I'd love to sneak onto it and have a look around. But I needed to get to the whorehouse.

★ ★ ★

Cheapside was unpleasant, but to me it felt homey. Everything was predictable. I knew where everyone who hated me lived. Bad Alan, for example. I had committed a home invasion with Alan not a few years past, and no, I hadn't split

the booty evenly. He slept on the stoop near the worst butchers in London. So I never walked past there. Same went for the entire Dormer family, who didn't much like my father. I knew not to go down Mylke Street without my wits about me. Then there were all the gaunt faces peering out of the alleys and on the stoops. The blatant vagrants with holes gouged in their ears from the pillory, laughing and harassing anyone who looked even a hint respectable. The taverns overflowing, the sound of loud, possibly jolly, probably angry, voices pluming out of the eaves. The shit, the mud, the blaring sun steaming it all up. It was gross, but it was familiar, and I knew how to keep myself safe there.

The stew I knew too. It was the biggest in this part of London, and if Thomas Platter was going to visit one, this would've been within his budget and only a walk away. There were girls out the front. I smiled and tipped my hat at them.

"Looking for Annie."

"She'll be somewhere in there, goodman." The whore winked at me, I winked back. Love the stews.

The brothel was essentially just a tavern with rooms to rent. They simply came with a little extra. For an added fee. In the main hall, on a summer's day like this, it was full to the brim. All the seats taken at the long tables. The women all over the place, on laps, on tables, dancing. It was a good scene. Licentious and good.

I scanned the room for Annie.

"Looking for someone, Jack?" I felt a hand at my elbow.

"Just you."

She smiled, took me by the hand, and led me to a quieter corner of the hall.

"It's not for what you think, Annie."

She pouted. "Jack," she groaned teasingly. But she invited me to sit. We were old friends.

"I need to know if a Thomas Splatter frequents this establishment."

She nodded straightaway. "He's notorious. There's only one or two of us who'll take him."

"Violent?"

"Consistently."

"Has he been violent with you?" I asked, not that it was relevant.

"Verily." Even more reason to nail this pizzle. No one touched Annie.

"Bastard. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about me." She smiled, unfazed.

"I always worry about you."

"And I always worry about you!" she retorted quickly.

"Would you testify against the man? His wife is dead."

She tutted. "Could've easily been one of us on the wrong night." She looked out over the tavern. "I would usually say no. You know how we are. Tittle-tattling on clients makes for bad business. But I'll do it, and you'll find a few girls here who'll testify, methinks. Rotten man."

"Could I ask for a few names to give to the JP and the jury?" "Give 'em mine. And I'll go round up some other volunteers." She moved out into the crowd. I felt a few odd glances my way. For those inclined to take more than a second's look, my appearance was wrong. Something not quite right to their eye. My tactic was to simply stare right back, often with a little smile. Guaranteed to unnerve them.

My thoughts strayed to the Queen. I knew the JP had connections with her spies, and I wondered if he might know something about what had happened on the river earlier.

Annie returned. "You've got three names including mine. You can also rely on an Elisabeth Knolly and Little Elisabeth Beckett." "The Elisabeths. Got it." I stood up.

"How've you been holding up? You got a place to sleep tonight?" she asked.

I shivered with annoyance. "You heard about the mess on the river today?" I asked, pointedly ignoring her question. "Aye. Everyone's talking about it."

"Know anything particular?" I pressed.

“I know some of Axe’s boys were on the river.”

“God’s balls.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. Your father’s got men everywhere; doesn’t mean he was involved.”

She was right. And though my father had killed a lot of people, I couldn’t see him being one for regicide. Still, I’d follow it up.

“Do you know which of his men were there? Was it one of his actors from the playhouse? Or a mumblecrust from the streets?”

She shrugged. “I’m unsure on the specifics. It was just gossip from the girls. Bet your coroner would like a hold of that quandary.”

“Blast the coroner; I want to know.” My curiosity felt almost like lust. Or perhaps I was just confused, what with being in a brothel. But the desire to prove myself was always strong, whether I was surrounded by women or in the morgue.

“So does Her Majesty— and most of London, I would suppose.”

Annie’s bright eyes glimmered. “Now what you got for me?”

“I got a halfpenny?” I put my hands in my pocket, rummaging for the coin. She put a hand on my wrist, then proffered me her cheek for a pecking. I placed my lips on her skin.

“That’s more than a halfpenny’s worth, methinks. Promise you’ll come back when your pockets are heavier?” Annie knew how to do business.

“Undoubtedly,” I said, and I bloody well meant it.

Sherlock
Holmes
is dead.

But his
nemesis
is not.



THE RETURN OF MORIARTY



JACK ANDERSON

RAVEN BOOKS

THE RETURN OF MORIARTY (A MORIARTY MYSTERY) BY JACK ANDERSON

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* * *

After Professor Moriarty survives Reichenbach Falls and Sherlock Holmes dies, Moriarty finds himself caught up in a locked-room mystery Holmes couldn't solve.

This time, it's up to Moriarty to crack the mystery, perfect for fans of Sherlock Holmes ingenious retellings like the ones by Anthony Horowitz and Laurie R. King.

Upon escaping from Reichenbach Falls, his empire in ruins, criminal mastermind James Moriarty takes the identity of wealthy inventor Hugo Strahm and embarks on a dark pilgrimage to the cliffside manor of Schloss Alber in Bavaria.

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Jack Anderson is a UK-based writer of horror and mystery fiction. Jack got his start writing for the internet, penning the viral serial *Has Anyone Heard of the Left/Right Game?*, which he wrote in a caffeine-fueled haze. It has since been adapted into a hit QCode podcast starring Tessa Thompson in the leading role of Alice. His debut thriller, *The Grief Doctor*, was published by Raven Books in June 2024. He is currently working on his new Moriarty Mystery series, with the first novel, *The Return of Moriarty*, scheduled to be published in Autumn 2025. Jack is also developing a number of original television and film ideas across the horror genre. Jack lives with his wife in Sheffield. Lifelong fans of games and puzzles, together they're burning through every escape room in the North of England.

[Website](#)

From the Diary of Dr. Francisco Castillo

5th May 1891—Entry No. 1

There comes a time, in any man's life, when he has no recourse but to wait.

The duration of these purgatorial stretches can vary greatly. Some are a matter of seconds; a beat of intoxicating inertia as an ivory ball rattles around a track.

Some last much longer; hours of helplessly awaiting your wife's first words when you've returned from the roulette table with empty pockets for the fourth consecutive night.

It takes no genius to observe that my examples are not only related, but personal. In fact, it was the trajectory of these events that led me to a three-room cabin in the middle of Chaltenbrunnen—the place where I have been waiting, alone, for six long days.

When I arrived, I found it quite picturesque. Logs set upon logs, rising for a single storey. A slate roof with a considerable overhang, as if the cabin were hiding its eyes beneath a low cap. The symmetry of the structure was broken only by a stout wooden chimney rising from the lefthand side.

The interior was unexceptional. The central chamber sporting a rudimentary kitchen with a larder, a table and chairs. A moth-eaten armchair stood by the fireplace, the most luxurious fixture in the main room by way of disqualification.

I perused the two bedrooms, testing the mattresses. Both made me pine for the armchair.

It was warm enough, at least, the larder had been stocked, and the bedsheets were laundered. I was also pleased, having arrived with nought but my leather weekend bag for what I thought would be a two-day excursion, to find supplementary garments hanging in the wardrobe of the smaller bedroom.

My employer, despite being overdue, seems to have a great facility for planning.

The only thing I am displeased with is the meagre contents of the writing desk. Not a shred of paper, nor a drop of ink! It is thanks to my own dwindling supply that I am able to commit my thoughts to paper.

Crack. Snap. Movement outside. My pen raises from the page, and my ears prick like a hunting dog's. There is no path to a cabin this remote, which made it hell to walk to but, equally, I am confident that I cannot easily be crept up on here.

I listen, forgetting to breathe. "Please," I think, "let my callers have arrived. Let us finally get this bizarre business over with."

But I hear nothing more. The door remains unknocked. I settle back into my diary and swallow an increasingly bitter impatience.

Prior to this excursion, I had never been to Switzerland. I'd never wanted to go. Where many of my contemporaries sought fortune and adventure beyond Valencia, I never questioned that I would live, practise my profession and eventually die within earshot of the Catedral de Santa María.

When she once asked why I hadn't followed my learned colleagues abroad, I explained to my wife that a man can listen to a thousand melodies but, perhaps unbeknownst even to himself, truly he is searching for a single song that he will never tire of. While my friends left to seek their spiritual homes, I rejoiced in having found mine at birth.

I used to take pride in my contentment, and pity those with what I perceived as an incompleteness of spirit. My arrogance was fuelled by the praise of my neighbours. "A doctor of such keen intelligence, making a home here instead of scampering to the Americas? How stirring! How bold for a man of such infinite horizons to plant his feet among us!"

Then, in the dawning days of my twenty-ninth year, there came one glorious August evening when I found myself at a tertulia. The dances had played themselves out, flushing our cheeks and invigorating our conversation. I'd left my wife's side to ask a young architect about his plans for the city, when his two investors threw their arms over his shoulders to offer their own spirited opinions on the man's work.

I found myself, like a bird riding a thermal, in the elevating presence of three intelligent, rabid conversationalists like myself. Our talk flowed from literature to opera, to the summer programme of the Teatre Principal and, eventually, to further social destinations for that night.

With that uncanny aptitude some tourists possess for unearthing venues even a resident might not stumble upon, they told me about a rather bohemian gentleman's club deep in the city's centre. Caught in the evening's crook, I helped my wife and her friends into a tartana and paid the driver to ferry them home.

It was on that night that I first played roulette and tumbled, headfirst, into the hole in my heart.

I had played cards socially, games of skill and bluff, wagering as much as any man with a healthy penchant for distraction. Yet even the most enthralling contests would eventually tax my energies, until I felt no qualms about walking from the table..

Games of pure chance, as I learned that night, worked their inexorable way beneath my constitution and gripped like nothing I had imagined. I had witnessed it in other forms, seeing men bent to the bottle or the syringe, acting in ways that their good sense should not countenance.

I had judged them harshly.

But now it is clear to me, as a proponent of evolutionism, that there exists an animalian shadow within even the most collected psyche. A base urge endures, which wants and shouts and pines and, despite availing itself of not a single syllable, holds more persuasive weight than a library of rhetoric.

That night, as the ball sank into twenty-four black and my money was raked away across the table, I was flooded with the aching possibility that I could win it all back, and more besides.

My wife failed to sympathise with my Darwinian argument, perhaps because she had not read *On the Origin of Species*, perhaps because women do not have the same tawdry wants and incompleteness, or perhaps because I had lost a month's income in a matter of days.

Regardless, for the first time in my blessed life, I felt the taste of despair, and such despair had but one destination.

I took out loans, I forewent sleep, I hollowed myself out whilst trying to maintain the increasingly thin veneer of my reputation. My beloved wife clawed at me; as if she were sinking into a lake, tied to a heavy stone. I saw her desperation grow into weary acceptance, which hurt even more than her wrath.

Eventually, I borrowed money from those with no reputation to protect and the veneer was broken, many times over.

Knock. Knock.

My eyes flick toward the cabin door. My breath is arrested in my throat.

The creaking cabin walls, the snap of a twig, the passing of some nocturnal creature through the undergrowth, all have brought me to my feet at some point in the past week, believing my patron had finally arrived.

This was no such illusion. It was a sound of distinctly human intent.

I slip my diary into the bureau, grip my cane, and haul myself onto my good leg. A trio of distinct sounds rises from the floorboards as I limp across the room. A tap, a footstep, a drag. The burning hearth seems to grow uncomfortably warm, as I begin to panic over what I am to say.

No handshakes or specific phrases were discussed, only that there was a set of rules for my opening salvo, and I would be wise to stick to them. I formulated an adequate sentence two days ago but, as I draw closer to the oaken door, chilled by the cold draught that bleeds through the cracks, I can scarcely remember a single word.

I look to my medical bag: white leather with silver adornments and a polished wooden handle. It was here when I arrived, along with a note to keep it ready beside the door for my guest's arrival, supplied with all the latest instruments and tinctures. I focus on my duty, the duty for which I trained for all those years, and the calm of the medical practitioner takes root in my mind.

I remember my wording, reach for the doorknob with a steady hand, and turn it.

"May I heal a weary traveller of ..." I say in English as the door swings open, before abruptly falling silent.

The small wooden porch is entirely empty, and the sound of retreating footsteps is barely separable from the rustle of windswept leaves among the dancing pines. Cold air brushes past me and I breathe it in through my nose, my stomach folding with the unease of a man who is without company, yet not entirely alone.

Pressing on my cane in the effort of turning myself around, I briefly look down. I stop when I see a large, brown paper envelope on the step. It stares up at me, unaddressed, without a stamp, almost smug in its ability to creep up to my door.

I take a final, perfunctory glance around my empty surroundings, before gripping my cane in two hands and painstakingly lowering myself to one knee. I snatch up the envelope, haul myself back to my feet and promptly shut myself inside.

The armchair calls to me from the fireside, my one unquestionable ally.

I stare at the envelope. It was, without doubt, deposited in the last few moments—it is still dry despite resting on damp wood outside. Some devil on my shoulder whispers to me that I should open it, but my curiosity is tempered by the urge for self-preservation.

I am here for two reasons. Firstly, because I am a consummate physician. Secondly, because my vices have rendered me desperate. I am being paid well for my discretion and if an envelope arrives at my patron's door, I cannot think of a worse first impression than breaking its seal.

I open the writing desk and throw the envelope inside. However, before I can shut the lid, something curious happens. The envelope splits, sliding over itself. It takes a second for my mind to understand what I'm seeing. What I thought was a single letter is actually two, resting perfectly atop one another.

So much for my keen powers of observation.

The second envelope catches my eye. This one does have an address, or rather an addressee, which was mostly obscured by the other envelope. I reach down and extract it, three English words slowly revealing themselves.

To The Doctor.

The words have a dark ring to them. The letter is addressed to me, but not by name. It is as if the sender does not know me personally, but is aware of the situation I have found myself in. I begin to feel that I am like a piece on a chessboard, entirely subordinate to the intentions of others.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Shock causes me to drop the lid of the writing desk, which almost slams shut upon my fingers. Inexplicably, after six days of waiting, I have had two visitors at my door in as many minutes.

I linger briefly at the desk. It would not take more than a few seconds to rip the envelope open and absorb its contents, but with the cabin's curtains parted wide, an impatient caller would very likely catch me at it.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

And impatient they are. I stride across the room. Tap. Step. Drag. Tap. Step. Drag.

I pull the door open and I'm presented, finally, with my intended complement of guests: one man with the darkest eyes I've ever seen, and another close to death.

5th May 1891—Entry No. 2

As one might imagine, my expectation of the pair's arrival renders them no less alarming.

Before me stands a menacing figure approaching six foot in height, his exposed forearms displaying a lithe frame of tightly bound muscle. He wears a grey military cap over a mane of scraggly black hair. Paired with enormously thick eyebrows and an explosive beard of grizzly black strands, it feels like his beady brown eyes are peering out at me from a deep thicket, a man hiding in the bushes of his own face.

There's a deep frustration in his eyes, and desperation, as he stands breathing heavily in the doorway.

A large leather bag hangs from his left shoulder, a signet ring gleaming on the little finger as he grips the strap. Over his right shoulder, he props up the other man, who is in no shape to be walking on his own.

While the two are of a similar height, the injured figure seems to lack his companion's efficient musculature. His head is covered by a black burlap sack. His clothes are damp, his thin limbs shivering, his white undershirt blossoming with blood. Every visible patch of skin is either red-raw with ice burn or smudged with inky purple bruises.

That he is upright at all is quite a marvel.

I remember myself.

"May I heal a weary traveller of ... injury?" I stammer, an unexpected quiver in my voice.

The bushy-haired man observes me closely, like some barbarian sizing me up as a meal.

"Ready and eager," he growls, his voice accented with a Scottish brogue. He clearly resents the formality of our code. "Awaiting immediate medical treatment, sir."

Transfixed for a moment by the sight of his brutalised colleague, I regain my composure and step aside, pointing the pair towards one of the bedrooms. The man surges across the main room, the tips of his charge's shoes dragging along the floorboards as he goes.

I slam the external door and hurry in behind them, finding the grievously injured man already on the bed when I arrive.

"Take off his clothes, carefully," I order, happy to hear a ring of professional authority in my voice.

The grizzled man complies immediately, a little more roughly than I'd like but with due attention to haste.

The unclothed patient is a tapestry of dark bruises and fresh cuts still seeping blood. There's a breakage in the wrist, from which the bone protrudes. I understand, even from a glance, that whether he lives or dies is as much in fate's hands as it is in mine.

So much for avoiding games of chance.

"I need to see his head," I remark, setting to work on the man's open wounds while nodding to the dark sack over his face.

The grizzled man glares, unmoving.

“Bag stays on,” he replies, not a word spare.

“Well, when you covered it, did he have any head wounds? Were his pupils dilated?” I question, surprised at the firmness of my voice. “Was his breathing obstructed?”

The grizzled man stares at me scornfully, as if my attempts to save his companion have crossed a boundary. I thread a spool of suture through a curved needle and match his aggravation.

“Are you protecting his anonymity?” I ask, sharply. “Then by all means, keep the bag on. His tombstone will be blank, and you’ll have done your job.”

After a moment of resentful calculation, the grizzled man turns and gently lifts the sack from the man’s head.

The man is pale, impressively so, with a thick head of well-groomed, grey hair that’s currently matted with his own blood. His eyelids are firmly shut, the sockets slightly sunken, or perhaps only seeming so in comparison to his slightly protruding lobe of a forehead.

There are multiple contusions and excessive bleeding across his face and head, instantly vindicating my desire to see the bag removed. I almost feel a little smug.

At that moment, the body begins to seize, the shoulders arch and the man gasps. The head will have to wait. Swallowing my momentary pride, I grab my stethoscope and place it to his chest. The right side of his body ebbs and flows perfectly, only throwing into greater focus how stilted his left side has become.

I hear an ungodly whooshing beneath the surface of his skin, indicating that I have only a few minutes to save the man’s life.

I reach into my bag, withdrawing a long needle. I raise it above the man’s abdomen, as my hand seeks a gap between the ribs.

Attempting to bring the needle down, I instead feel a firm hand grip my wrist.

“What the devil are you doing?!”

I turn, indignation eclipsing my fear, as the grizzled man keeps me from my work.

He says nothing, a troglodyte snarl on his face. I realise he sees the world in the most base, uneducated manner. A sharp object brandished above his master cannot be anything but an attack, his lack of medical training blinding him to its benefits.

“Are you to be murderously stupid?” I shout. “The man has a tension pneumothorax. He ... he has air in the space beneath his lungs, they cannot expand into that space unless the air is drained!”

The man holds firm. In his eyes there is the angry ignorance that so often bludgeons reason with its blunt force. As the patient gasps below me, I make one final appeal.

“If he dies, I suppose you might kill me for my failure. Do you think I have any intention of dying today?”

The man’s face ripples, as if the act of ordering his thoughts somehow requires muscle. With great reluctance and a quiver of his fingers, the grip on my wrist loosens, and I plunge the needle into the ailing patient.

A long gasp is drawn from the man, unstilted and clean. The pressure subsides, and my assistant shrinks back into an onlooker’s stance, too proud to concede but perhaps willing now to accept my expertise.

Hours pass with little further excitement. I stitch, compress and bandage my patient’s left wrist, right leg, abdomen, and the entirety of his head. Eventually, there is little I can do but hand him over to God’s own grace.

Observing his deathly pale skin, my eyes fall on a needle-tipped tube in my medicine bag.

“He has lost a great deal of blood. He may require a transfusion. It’s not without tremendous risk but if we’re lucky it will strengthen him. An infection in this state would spread like a fire through a haybarn.”

My assistant, loyal attack dog that he seems to be, has slowly grown used to my presence, increasingly respecting my concern for his master.

“Risky?” he grunts, requesting elaboration. “Yes. Only to be done if necessary.” He considers the words, before nodding.

“Only if necessary,” he confirms darkly, his agreement mixed with grim warning.

Night has fallen by the time I end my examination, and I retire to the cabin's main room. The grizzled man follows closely behind me, which I find thoroughly frustrating. Though medical concerns have taken the fore over the last few hours, one part of my mind remained fixated on the envelope in the writing desk. An envelope that is seemingly, impossibly, addressed to me.

I wish to read its contents with an almost jittery impatience, yet I know not how my accomplice might react, and he seems determined to keep an eye on me wherever I go.

"Will you turn in soon?" I query, checking my watch before slipping it back into my pocket.

The man grunts, nodding towards the armchair I am currently occupying.

"I see." I deflate as the realisation dawns upon me. "Of course, there are only two beds. You can't tell me you plan to sleep in an armchair, at least not after the day you've had! Take the bed, I'll sleep in here."

The man looks at me and for a panicked moment I believe he can read my intentions, until I realise it is merely a base glare of vigilance and suspicion. He will be sleeping in the chair tonight, the main room serving as a nexus point between my room and the patient's chambers. If anyone makes any movement, in either direction, he will be aware of them.

"All right, well, don't say I didn't offer," I smile, calculating, with increasing frustration, how I might transfer the letter to my room.

"Once again, Cristina LePort pens an excellent thriller, enlivened with vivid medical details and startling twists. She gets better with every novel!"
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Bestselling Author of DISSECTION



CHANGE *of* HEART

A MINER & MULVILLE MEDICAL THRILLER

CHANGE OF HEART
(A MINER & MULVILLE MEDICAL THRILLER)
BY CRISTINA LEPORT, M.D.

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“An excellent thriller, enlivened with vivid medical details and startling twists. She gets better with every novel!”
-**TESS GERRITSEN, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

* * *

In the bustling heart of New York City, a young medical student’s life is tragically cut short, though her heart continues to beat, holding the promise of life for another. Detective Kirk Miner is called to the scene and quickly uncovers a chilling conspiracy involving organ donations and high-stakes crime. As the investigation unfolds, Miner realizes the case is far more complex and dangerous than it initially seemed.

Enter FBI Agent Jack Mulville, who steps in to supervise Special Agent Charlotte Bloom as they join forces with Miner. Together, they unravel a web of corruption, revealing that Amy Winter's death is connected to a ruthless organ trafficking ring.

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Dr. Cristina LePort, accomplished cardiologist and Amazon bestselling author, captivates readers with her medical thrillers, which merge her rich medical background with gripping narratives.

Cristina's novels, including *Dissection* and *Change of Heart*, offer a unique blend of suspense, medical insight, and ethical exploration. Her journey from Italy to the U.S. and transition from medicine to writing highlights her

resilience, intellectual curiosity, and dedication to storytelling. Cristina's work stands at the crossroads of medicine and literature, engaging readers with tales that resonate with authenticity and depth.

Born in Bologna, Italy, she graduated Summa cum Laude from the University of Bologna, completed her internship and Internal Medicine residency at the Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn, NY, and her cardiology training at the VA/UCLA. She is board-certified in Internal Medicine, Cardiovascular Diseases, and Nuclear Cardiology, and is the Chief Medical Officer and co-founder of Genescent, a biotech company devoted to genetic research on aging and longevity.

She lives in Corona del Mar, Southern California, with her husband Peter. They have 3 children and 3 grandchildren.

Her first novel *Dissection* was described as “High stakes and breathless suspense” by Lee Child and “Moving at a frantic pace” by Tess Gerritsen. In Amazon US, *Dissection* reached No. 1 bestseller status in the Political Thriller and Suspense category and No. 2 in the Medical Thriller category. In Amazon Canada, *DISSECTION* reached No. 1 in Spy Thrillers and No. 2 in Medical Thrillers. In Amazon Australia, it reached No. 6 in Medical Thrillers. In Amazon UK, it reached No. 2 in Political.

[Website](#)

CHAPTER 1: THE VICTIM

The bullet carrying Amy Winter's name whooshed through her hair at a speed of fifteen hundred feet per second, burned a jagged hole into her smooth 24-year-old flesh, burst through the thin layer of her temporal muscle, and shattered the temporal bone. Protective membranes melted away and cerebrospinal fluid gushed out, merging with spurting blood. Amy's knowledge of biology and chemistry dissolved with the pulverization of her hippocampus. Her bubbly personality disappeared with her temporal lobe, followed by the loss of motor function, language, problem solving, judgment, and socio-sexual behavior—all wiped out by the shockwave crushing her frontal lobes.

Amy Winter the person was no more, but her heart kept on beating.

*

At 5:38 AM, the colors of dawn were brightening the clear October sky when Kirk Miner arrived at the crime scene. The garbled sounds of disapproval from Aurora, his wife of over sixteen years, still resonated in his ears. She had voiced them from the other side of their bed half an hour earlier, when he had gotten the call. Kirk would have to make sure to remain only a consultant in the case. Not only that, but he would have to keep his excitement in check and leave the policing to the police. At least he would try, as he had promised Aurora. He had to admit that past failures to keep that promise had gotten him into some very close calls during the past few years.

The N.Y. City Medical Center parking lot was crawling with blue uniforms. Black and white police cars flashing red and blue lights called his attention to an area walled off by yellow crime-scene tape. Kirk parked his Subaru SUV behind a black sedan he recognized as belonging to his friend John Spencer, the new captain of the NYPD Manhattan division. He noticed John's tall and athletic figure standing next to a black Mini Cooper at the center of the crime

scene. John always reminded him of a leopard ready to leap into action. Kirk lifted the yellow tape and ducked, stepping into the action as well.

“What have you got?” Kirk retrieved his PI identification card and held it up for a young policeman guarding the perimeter of the crime scene. “Captain Spencer called me.”

“This way.”

Kirk followed him to the Mini. The driver’s seat was empty, testifying to the recent removal of the victim. Medics acted faster than medical examiners. The victim must still be alive.

John turned after hearing what the young policeman had to say. “Kirk,” he said, “thanks for getting in so quickly.”

“Hi, Captain.” He stepped closer. “I thought you were promoted to paper pusher. What got you out of bed so early?”

John’s clear blue eyes drooped from lack of sleep and his usual high-strung vitality wasn’t quite there. Strands of gray peppered the black hair at his temple. The man had barely hit 40. The new rank of Captain had to be taking its toll already.

“Ah,” John sighed. “Where’s the fun if you can’t smell the shit and get your hands dirty?”

“I’m not surprised. You never struck me as desk-job material.”

“How’s the family?”

“Cept for Peter’s growing pains, not too bad.” Kirk pointed his chin at the car. “What’s up?”

“Twenty-two-year-old female with gunshot wound to the head.” John turned to the young uniform at his side and pointed at Kirk. “This is private investigator Kirk Miner. He’s known as ‘The Medical Detective,’ because of his extensive medical knowledge. It’s like having Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in one brain.”

“Wow,” Kirk said. “Just to hear that makes it worth getting up at the crack of dawn. But why am I here really?”

“The victim, one Amy Winter, has a typed and signed note to donate her organs.” John retrieved a clear plastic evidence bag from a backpack at his feet and handed it to Kirk. “Left on the passenger seat, next to her pocketbook. Seems like she drove all the way from New Jersey to kill herself here. But no mention in the note about why she’d blow out her brains. Just the organ donation.”

“An organ donation letter?” Kirk smiled. “I’m flattered by how much you miss me.”

John knew precisely how to shove Kirk into a case, at which point Kirk was always happy to help his former mentor. But most of all, Kirk loved doing the work. The bread and butter part of his PI practice was like a pleasant, leisurely jog, but the periodic criminal case consultation was the all-out challenge, the limits-testing, reinvigorating sprint he needed to keep him on his toes.

After leaving the police force almost eight years ago, and only a few years of Pi work, Kirk needed these cases like the air he gasped into his lungs after one of those runs, when he leaned forward, bent at his waist, massaging his painfully engorged spleen, looking down with pride at the countless bleachers he had just climbed, together with his son, at the college sport camp. If only he could make Aurora understand how good it felt.

“For today, you can thank the FBI,” John said.

“The FBI? Why would they be interested in this case?”

“Apparently it’s because of the hospital.” John pointed his thumb at the building behind him. “It’s on their radar because of some unsolved cybercrime.”

“You don’t mean last year’s hacking of hospital records?”

“That’s it.”

“The New York Medical Center was one of them? I don’t remember seeing anything about that.”

“Yeah. They kept it out of the press, but they were hacked all right.” Spencer nodded. “And Director Mulville wants first peek at all violent crimes associated with NYMC. After finding out about the donor business, he asked me to call you. You’re getting famous.”

“Mulville?” Kirk’s brows went up.

“He wants you to work with his cybercrime agent,” John said. “He’ll call to explain. He also wants you to act as liaison with the police.”

“Wait a minute,” Kirk said. “In Mulville’s vocabulary, that means I’m going to manage the investigation instead of the Police.”

“You got it.” John again nodded, this time pointing his finger at Kirk. “He wants the Police to back off. And I’m not crying about it. Trust me, we’ve got enough business as it is.”

Kirk nodded. Great. Aurora would be delighted to hear.

He examined the blood-smeared paper. Only one typed sentence: *I donate my organs for transplant*. He stared at the illegible signature. Something begged for attention, but Kirk couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

“The \$40 million question is: Did she pull the trigger?” Kirk said.

“Yeah,” John said. “Amy’s poor parents are on their way from somewhere in Ohio. In her wallet, we found a picture of Amy with another young woman. We’re trying to identify and contact that other woman. Hopefully, we’ll find out something.”

From his bomber jacket pocket, Kirk retrieved a pair of plastic gloves and pulled them on. He peered through the open driver-side door. The window was down. Inside, on the passenger’s seat, sat a small brown leather pocketbook covered with grayish and blood-red droplets.

The spray of the same material coated the passenger side front window. Blood’s pungent smell entered Kirk’s nostrils, forcing him to recall how it had been produced. Small particles generated odors by clinging to receptors inside the nose. He was inhaling small parts of the woman’s brain. The thought, on an empty stomach, made him feel queasy. Kirk stood up and took a deep breath of fresh air.

“Any weapons or bullets?”

“This was on the driver’s seat between the victim and the door.” John produced a second evidence bag from his backpack. “A Ruger. A woman’s gun. Small, concealable, and accurate.”

Kirk reached for the bag and wrapped his hand around the plastic covering the grip’s checkered frame. In his mind, the weapon’s light weight and John’s words triggered an image of a beautiful young woman, Amy Winter, with no future.

“The bullet,” John went on, “ended up embedded next to the ceiling, on the car’s front passenger side. No other bullets found in the gun.”

“Why next to the ceiling?” Kirk lifted his eyes from the gun.

“It must have hit her cellphone.” John handed Kirk a plastic-wrapped iPhone with a dazzling pink case. “She must’ve been holding the phone to her ear when the bullet exited. We found the phone on the car floor between the two back seats. Screen’s shattered, phone’s dead.”

Kirk examined the phone. The black screen bore a bloody diagonal fracture from top to bottom. Toward the ceiling would have been the direction of the exiting bullet grazing a phone glued to the woman’s right ear. Who in hell would she be chatting with while killing herself?

“Who discovered the victim?” Kirk said.

“A man called the hospital ER and 9-1-1 at about the same time.” John extracted a smartphone from his sport jacket and scrolled through his notes. “The call to the ER was registered at 4:41 a.m. I’m not sure how precise that is. The 9-1-1 call came in at 4:42.”

Kirk placed his index finger on the phone’s volume button. Nothing happened. Then his thumb pressed the reset button several times. After the third try, the screen lit up. A key piece of a puzzle fell into place, making Kirk feel almost giddy with excitement.

“I’m afraid we’re not dealing with an attempted suicide,” Kirk said, turning the face of the phone toward John, “but an attempted murder.”

“I agree.” John’s brows went up. “But how can you be so sure without any forensics?”

“Several things,” Kirk said. “The note was added later, after the shot. Smears of blood, instead of sprays. Poor attempt by the shooter to make us believe the note was on the seat before the bullet hit.”

“Yeah,” John said, “that’s been bothering me also. You’ve come a long way from your training over ribs and beer.”

Kirk smiled at the memory of their favorite pub. It seemed a long time ago when Kirk decided to leave the police force and John helped him get started as a private investigator. John was more than a mentor. He always cared about Kirk, but cared even more after Kirk’s near-fatal car accident years ago. John had become as protective as an older brother.

The image of the dark pub dissipated and Kirk refocused on the victim’s note.

“I’m no calligrapher,” he said, “but, from the slanting of the signature, I think the victim is right-handed. A right-handed person would shoot her right side.”

“If it’s actually her signature,” John said.

“The shooter could have forced her to sign at gun point,” Kirk said. “Either way, it would point to attempted murder.”

“What else?”

“We’ve got the exact time of the shooting,” Kirk said, waving the plastic-clad phone. “Here in this frozen, undead iPhone.”

John grabbed the evidence bag. He stared at the fractured, frozen screen. His lips stretched into a grin.

“The bullet froze the time at 4:43,” Kirk said. “One minute *after* the 9-1-1 call. The man called *before* the shooting occurred. It’s unlikely someone would notice the shooter, figure out what he was going to do, call the police, and leave without talking to them.”

“The witness could have left because he was afraid the shooter would come after him,” John said.

“Or perhaps,” Kirk said, “the caller knew the shooting would occur because he himself was the shooter. And he wanted the victim to be found as soon as possible.”

John referred again to his notes. “The caller said that someone *had been* shot. Not someone is going to shoot, or is shooting, somebody. The woman had gun powder residue on her left hand, but the shooter could’ve placed the gun in her hand before throwing it in the car. We’ve got a few prints on the handle. I bet they’re all from her. But I still think you’re right.”

Kirk nodded. “The shooter made sure she would be rescued in time for her organs to be saved for donation and subsequent transplant.”

Kirk turned toward the hospital ER entrance. A vivid memory materialized. A plastic bracelet around his wrist, from six years ago, in a different hospital. The bracelet classifying him as an organ donor. After his prolonged coma, doctors had given up on Kirk. Luckily for him, he had woken up and retained his organs.

The woman who had crossed the ER threshold earlier that morning wouldn’t be so lucky. Someone wanted her organs badly enough to put a bullet in her brain.

CHAPTER 2: BLOOM

Charlotte Bloom closed her computer and pressed her palms against her shut eyelids. Not even noon, and boredom had already made her sleepy. She reached out for a tall paper cup on her cluttered desk and poured the leftover cold coffee into her mouth. She stretched her neck and turned her head side to side, peeking into the two workspaces on each side of her cubicle. Both empty. No chance of a chatting break with the woman who had survived the same grueling 20 months of Quantico training. Or the cute new guy from DC who had just joined the team.

She looked up at the ceiling and stared at a large brown spot, the result of a past water leak. She sighed, bent down under her desk to dispose of the coffee container, then picked up the phone while opening a file on her desktop.

After several rings, a woman's raspy voice answered. "Who is this?" The Italian accent came through from just those few words: Mrs. Mezzapelle, an 85-year-old victim of vishing.

"It's Charlotte Bloom," Bloom said after taking a deep breath. She wanted to project her voice with authority. "From the FBI. We spoke last week."

"Did you find my money?"

"Mrs. Mezzapelle." Bloom paused. "Unfortunately, it may take some time. We confirmed that the call you received a month ago was definitely not from the IRS."

"But I spoke with an agent! He said he was with them. How was I supposed to know?"

"I'm sorry." Bloom searched for the best words. "Usually, the IRS doesn't accept gift cards as payments."

Heavy breathing followed. "One thousand dollars I paid him! And he said it was a discount."

"We're doing everything we can to find this crook ... and recover your money. I assure you. I'll call you again as soon as we know more."

Bloom shook her head, sorry for the poor woman. After hanging up, she slid open her desk's top drawer. A shining FBI badge seemed to wink at her in mockery. The final test she had to pass at Quantico flashed into her mind. She had stood, eyes shut, in front of a uniformed man holding a can of pepper spray. Before she knew it, her face was on fire. But to pass this test, she had to open at least one eye, attack a punching bag, and defend herself against an assailant trying to take her gun out of its holster. She had earned that badge.

Now an FBI Special Agent, Cybercrime Division, she had been probationary for almost two years. Where were the national security cyber intrusions, the investigations of terrorist organizations, and the intelligence operations sponsored by foreign governments mentioned in the FBI's job description? Instead, she was assigned to online fraud.

She slammed the drawer shut. After lunch, she would speak with Director Jack Mulville about her dissatisfaction. He should know she was ready for real assignments. Getting up from her desk, she fetched her backpack from the floor and slid her gray jacket off the back of the chair. She wiggled into both as she walked to the elevator.

After a descent marked by a series of pings, she exited into the lobby. Before heading to the covered parking lot, her fist closed around her keys, several blades protruding between her fingers, according to her self-defense training. You never knew when a disgruntled perp would decide to preempt an investigation or an arrest. Mulville had insisted she take private Karate lessons over and above what the FBI required. She had complied, working hard to achieve black belt status. She couldn't wait to put her skills to work in challenging cases.

Her ponytail swung as she walked all the way across the garage and to the back wall. Having reached her black Mitsubishi, she stopped cold when her heart thumped out of rhythm for several beats and a wave of dizziness forced her to hold on to the side of a nearby SUV. The damn light-headedness again! Twice this week alone. She took several deep breaths. The dizziness intensified. No. She couldn't faint. Not now.

Trying to blot out the bright dots dancing in front of her eyes, she shook her head, sealed her mouth, and pushed air down into her chest. The thumping subsided; the dizziness disappeared. No driving to lunch today. She would have to get a sandwich from the local food truck.

*

Charlotte sat on a bench in front of her building, chewing on a pastrami on rye but not savoring it. In about two months, her probation would finally be over. No more "Probie" Bloom, but full-fledged FBI Cyber Special Agent Bloom. She had come a long way, and was so close. No way some stupid heart-rhythm glitch would get in her way. If discovered, a problem like that would likely disqualify her from any FBI field position. She couldn't let anyone know. Not even Mulville. Most of all, not Mulville.

Thank God she'd already passed the lie-detector test months ago. "Are you aware of anything that would interfere with your work as an agent?" At that happy time, her answer had been a truthful "No." Perhaps, with the right assignment, she could speed things up and graduate before.

That doctor, a month and a half ago, had warned about possible progression of the heart problem if it went untreated. How could she win this race when, under the current circumstances, she probably shouldn't even be driving? She swallowed and clenched her teeth.

*

Dr. Zayne Wilder looked up into the bathroom mirror and ran a sweaty hand through his unruly dark hair. He took his time washing his hands and drying them on paper towels, then he straightened his white coat collar and stepped out into the hall. As he walked through the corridor, glancing at the pictures of former chiefs of staff in hopes of finding inspiration, a familiar quivering started in the pit of his stomach. He stopped in front of a door labelled "Family Conference Room." After a deep breath, he pushed down on the handle and entered.

On a brown leather couch, a middle-aged man with a potbelly and receding hairline huddled with a frail-looking woman with mousey, dark-rooted blonde hair. Amy Winter's parents stood up holding hands, and lifted tired, puffy eyes full of pain and bewilderment.

"I'm Dr. McCarty." Zayne cleared his voice and offered his hand in salute and comfort. "A heart surgeon."

"Something's wrong with her heart now?" The man's voice carried a tinge of resentment.

"No. Nothing wrong with her heart." Zayne directed all his empathy to the man's eyes. The poor father would rather focus on a new problem than accept the agonizing reality of facts. That nothing much could hurt his daughter any longer, because everything was already lost. "I'm very sorry about your daughter. Thanks for meeting me this morning. Please, sit down so we can talk."

"Joe Winter."

"Martha Winter." The two murmured their names in introduction, while shaking the doctor's hand, then took the same position on the couch, clenching each other's hand again.

Zayne's task suddenly revealed itself to be much harder than anticipated. He expected an uphill battle, but now, instead of starting from way up the hill, he identified the parents' position as located at the base, miles from where he stood. Today, Zayne was facing the most impenetrable of all barriers. Parents' heartbreak. He sighed.

"This morning," Zayne went on in a soft voice, "we did another scan of Amy's brain. As the neurologist already explained to you, her brain, due to the extensive trauma she suffered, is not functioning any longer."

He paused to assess the parents' ability to follow his reasoning, hoping to spot any body language confirming agreement with his statement. He saw only blank stares. His chest tightened as he got ready to pronounce the preamble to the difficult request he had come to make.

"Your daughter is being kept alive by the tube in her throat and the respirator. The neurologist has declared your daughter brain dead. That means there is no chance that she'll ever wake up again. I'm so sorry."

Tears streamed down the mother's cheeks. The father placed his arm around her shoulders. Procuring hearts for transplants wasn't Zayne's favorite task. Talking to relatives about the death of a loved one didn't get any easier with experience. Talking to parents about their child as an organ donor required great diplomacy on his part—he needed to focus on his other patient, the potential recipient. Zayne was glad he could count on his fingers such cases in his experience. From his lab coat, he took out a folded paper.

"Why do we need to talk to a heart surgeon?" the father asked, tightening the hug around his wife.

"Your daughter wanted to donate her organs." After pushing aside a few magazines, Zayne unfolded the paper and placed it on a coffee table in front of the couch. He rotated the document to orient it toward the couple. "I'd like to get your consent so, according to her wishes, we can proceed to harvest her organs as soon as possible. I have a

patient, a young woman just like your daughter, who's dying due to heart failure. She's a good match for your daughter's heart."

"How do you know she's a good match?" the father asked. "Who gave you permission to check it?"

"Your daughter is a blood donor," Zayne explained. "And she's also a pre-med student who participated in a study about donor compatibility, so we have her genetic information on file."

The father removed his arm from the mother's shoulder and reached out for the paper. Zayne retrieved a pen from his breast pocket, uncapped it, and offered it to him. The man ignored him and kept on reading in silence. The mother leaned forward and tilted her head to get a better view.

"We can't believe our girl took her own life," she said, after lifting her gaze. "We need time to understand what happened."

"We can't just let her go." The father shook his head. "No matter what you tell us."

Zayne knew when not to insist. It was inhumane to ask relatives for permission to cut up loved ones before they even had the time to accept their death. But this was the cruel rule of the organ donation game. He had learned to balance the urgency of his need to acquire organs, against the expected reluctance of relatives to relinquish the last shred of hope for their loved ones' recovery. Better to let things simmer and come back later.

"I understand," Zayne said. He knew he didn't. In his 36 years of life, he had never incurred a loss of that kind. "I'll leave the consent with you. You call me when you think you may be ready, or if you have any questions. But please, keep in mind that the window of opportunity may close at any time. Your daughter's condition is unpredictable. Her heart may suddenly give out. If that happens, we won't be able to save the other patient and honor your daughter's last wish."

The father rose, pulling up the mother by the hand. He dropped the consent form back on the desk top. They shuffled to the door. Before exiting, the man turned.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he said. "I know you're doing your job, and we'll take all this into consideration, but for now we need to be with our daughter, while she's still with us."

The door closed softly. Zayne sighed. His patient would have to wait a little longer for a new heart. He bent down, retrieved the consent form, folded it, and put it back in his pocket.

*

On the 11th floor of the FBI Headquarters, Bloom stood still and stared at the name on the door: *Director Jack Mulville*. She pulled at her ponytail and tucked her shirt collar inside her suit jacket. Her watch showed 1:29 P.M. At exactly 1:30, after a deep breath, she knocked twice.

"Come." Mulville's voice never ceased to intimidate her.

She stepped into the office. Mulville's bulkiness protruded from behind a large desk covered with files and papers. He had always reminded her of a mountain. His clothes seemed too small to contain him, as if on the verge of ripping, like the garments of a transforming Incredible Hulk. She wanted him always to be on her side.

He sat with his back to the stunning Manhattan view. Bloom had wondered why he had placed his desk in that unfavorable position. For at least a minute, Mulville shuffled papers before lifting his icy blue eyes. He smiled. Mulville didn't smile very often, but he did at her, sometimes.

"Bloom," he said, pointing at a chair across his desk, "how's your investigation coming along?"

"I followed the leads as far as some place in India. Waiting for the perp to go at it again. Chances of getting anywhere at this point are pretty slim." Bloom dropped onto the chair's worn fabric. "Did you read my report?"

He nodded too quickly to be truthful. She lifted her head and locked her eyes on the blue slits in front of her. Had he risen too high on the ladder to know she'd closed the case two days ago?

"I need a real case," she said. "Soon. I'm ready for it. I think you know that."

Mulville stared at her. Now she could see the white surrounding the blue of his eyes.

“Have you forgotten the first time you asked me to work for the FBI?” she asked, channeling her anger and fear into boldness. “When I helped you save the Country, five years ago, while working as a lowly hospital clerk to pay for my college tuition?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten the second 9/11. And you did help. But those were exceptionally chaotic times, where almost everybody who could help were nowhere to be found. This is the real world.” He made a sweeping gesture with his Karate-stubby hands.

“And now I’m a trained agent who’s wasting time investigating the vishing and phishing targeted at little old ladies.”

Mulville’s head jerked back as if hit by a shockwave. Perhaps she had gone too far. She had been mostly immune from his semi-violent reactions, so far, but the director was unpredictable in his mood swings, and there was always a first.

“Well, well,” Mulville said, nodding, his lips tightening, “you’re ready to screw up a real case and get fucking shot or killed, aren’t you?”

The last words struck her as out of place between an FBI Director and an agent on probation. Like it or not, she was his special project, ever since that eventful time five years ago, when fate had brought her and Mulville together, forging a bond that only life or death events can cement.

“No sir,” she said, directing her chin at Mulville’s thick and muscular neck. “I’m ready to solve a real cyber case. That’s what I’m trained for, and what I’m good at.”

“Says who?”

“Me.” She hoped that the heat she felt rising from her chest wouldn’t cause her to blush. “I need a real case to prove it.”

What kind of conversation was this? Crowding her mind were memories of Mulville counselling her about college courses, attending her graduation, and reviewing her FBI application. She was more than his special project. She sensed a particular connection between the two of them, something that made her feel warm inside and, she suspected, made grumpy old Mulville feel uncomfortable. Originating during extreme circumstances, the bond had grown. It filled the need of both a fatherless young woman and a childless, middle-aged man. Was this bond compromising her career?

Mulville looked her in the eye and tilted his head. Then his mouth stretched into a grin.

“Look what just came in.” His hand reached down inside a file cabinet to his right, and his fingers walked across several file folders until they stopped. He extracted a single paper, holding it between his index and middle finger, and handed it to her.

Bloom closed her hand around the thin paper. A wave of excitement made her stomach rumble. She hoped Mulville didn’t hear the noise. She steadied the paper between her shaky fingers, read the few sentences, and sighed.

“But how’s this a cybercrime?” she said, keeping her tone from rising above the respectful range. “It’s a homicide made to look like a suicide. Why do we even need to get involved?”

“Calm down.” Mulville put out his palm. “This happened in front of NYMC.”

She looked at him expectantly.

“Last year, several hospitals in New York and other major cities were victims of cybercrimes. Someone hacked into their medical records and paralyzed their systems. In order to get back control, the institutions paid hefty ransoms. The New York Medical Center was one of them. Unlike other hospitals, they managed to keep their name out of the press.”

“I know about the hacking,” Bloom said, straightening her back against the uncomfortable chair. “For a short time, I was shadowing one of the investigators. The suspect was a mobster, right? What was his name?”

“Santo Montepulciano.” Mulville nodded. “We tried very hard, but we just couldn’t pin it to him.”

“So, you think this may be connected to the past breach?” Bloom lifted the hand clenching the paper.

“That’s where you come in,” Mulville said. “The victim has a letter giving permission for organ donation. I want you to determine if this involves someone with illegal access to patient information.”

“What evidence do we have that Montepulciano was the mastermind of the original hacking?”

Mulville opened a drawer and retrieved another file. He opened it and skimmed the documents inside. “We were able to track the hacking to a Vincent Gonnella, who we know has been doing business with the Montepulciano crime family in the past. Unfortunately, he was orchestrating the takeover from somewhere in the Bahamas and we were never able to physically locate him.”

“Before this case, I never heard of Santo Montepulciano,” Bloom said. “I remember reading stuff about another Montepulciano being killed a couple of years ago.”

“That was Santo’s brother, Vincenzo.” Mulville pointed the closed file at her. “He succeeded his father as head of the business.”

“The business?”

“Mostly drugs and prostitution,” Mulville said. “Vincenzo died under unclear circumstances. Food poisoning maybe. Most likely someone did him in in order to take his place.”

“Santo?” Bloom said, her brow rising.

“I don’t think so.” Mulville shook his head. “Santo Montepulciano kept a relatively low profile while his father and then his brother were in charge of the Family.”

“Did the guy do any time?”

“Santo did some time a few years ago, for drug trafficking and such.”

“What kind of drugs?”

“Mostly pot,” Mulville said. “No proof for the rest of the crap—cocaine or speed. Had a very good lawyer. Got out in only a couple of months. Supposedly moved on to some legitimate occupation. Want to know what it is?”

“What?” Bloom grinned. “Computer stuff?”

“You got it. He owns an IT consulting company.” Mulville handed Bloom the file. “What a coincidence, right? All seems legit, and not just a laundering façade. Even pays taxes.”

Bloom reached out for the file and held it together with the homicide document.

“After his brother died,” Mulville went on, “the hospital hacking started. It was as if Santo Montepulciano had to do something substantial to prove himself worthy of his new position as Family Boss.”

“Like steering the family business toward something new,” Bloom said. “Much more promising than the stuff mobsters did in prior decades.”

“Exactly. A few of his competitors disappeared from circulation. One we fished out of the Hudson with cement shoes. Likely a revenge for his brother’s death. None of which we could prove. Now Santo Montepulciano has a few layers of stooges ready to take the fall for him.”

“Can I have a copy of this file?” Bloom said, waving the documents.

“It’s all yours.”

“This is great,” Bloom said, as a rush of adrenalin made her hands tingle. “Thanks.”

“This is a hands-on case,” Mulville whispered, eyes narrower than usual. “Your hands could get very dirty. And not only your hands ... and not only dirty.”

She nodded.

“I’m serious.” He pointed at the file. “You may think you’re ready, but you’re still very green. The fact that you think you’re ready shows what a rookie you are. Only reason I’m allowing this so soon is that Kirk Miner is on the case. I spoke with him and—”

“Miner? The detective who worked with you on the second 9/11?”

“One and the same.”

“With all due respect, Director,” she said looking at him in the eye, “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Miner is on the case as a liaison with the NYPD,” Mulville said. He cleared his voice. “And also his medical knowledge may be useful dealing with transplants and hospital stuff. Listen, if you don’t want the case, plenty other agents will try to grab it.”

“You,” she said, a lightness expanding in her chest. “You had already decided to assign me this case, hadn’t you?” Mulville’s slit eyes gave her a poker look. Bloom’s heart responded with a short flutter.

CONTEMPORARY FICTION & FAMILY DRAMA



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TO BE
NICE**

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1

Avery was flat on her back. Her gaze drifted across the wrinkled brown curtains, drawn together in front of a half-open window. A bottle of contact solution sat on his bedside table, next to a pair of glasses he'd probably had since tenth grade. Every time Ethan (or was it Evan?) thrust into her, the corner of a *Pulp Fiction* poster taped to the wall flapped from the gust of his movements.

"You like that, baby? You like that?"

Avery scrunched her face and glanced up at him, trying to get him to register with his own eyes that she definitely did not like that, not even a little. But he wasn't looking at her. She sighed.

You'd think she'd be used to this by now.

"Oooh, yes," Avery breathed as Evan (wait, *was* it Ethan?) continued pumping without regard for the human being underneath him. She willed herself to feel something, anything, besides the metal coil in his mattress digging into her spine. But there was nothing. There was always nothing.

"Are you—" *Pump pump pump pump pump*. "Are you close?"

Avery raised an eyebrow. This guy had clearly never heard of the clitoris. She decided to spare him the snarky comment and say nothing, her desire for this to be over surpassing her desire for an orgasm. Seconds later, he let out a loud, satisfied groan and collapsed on top of her, crushing her with his weight. She patted his back, which was slick and gummy with sweat. Then she peeked at the digital clock flashing on his nightstand. They'd started two minutes ago. She couldn't believe she'd waxed for this.

Ethan/Evan hoisted himself up, pulled on his boxers, and promptly unlocked his phone. The light from the screen illuminated his face, reminding Avery of why she'd swiped right on him a few hours ago. His angular jawline and icy blue eyes coupled with his CrossFit abs easily ranked him among the hottest guys Avery had ever hooked up with. But he had the sexual prowess of a seventh grader.

"So, I'll text you?" He was still looking at his phone, engrossed in what appeared to be a Reddit page with gifs of people screaming, though Avery couldn't get a close enough look to be sure.

She pressed her mouth into a line. "Sure," she muttered, but they both knew he wouldn't. Not that it mattered. She retrieved her jeans and silky black tank top from the end of the bed and dressed like she was being timed, then scanned the apartment for any remaining belongings. She didn't need this guy thinking she'd accidentally-on-purpose left her hoop earrings on his nightstand because she wanted an excuse to see him again.

As she slung her purse over her shoulder, ready to leave, she heard the tinny sound of someone yelling. Her eyes flicked to her hookup. He was biting his knuckles, enraptured by whatever weird shit he was watching.

She blinked at him. “Well, bye.”

Avery stopped to use his bathroom, then slipped out of his apartment and onto the sidewalk, where she was greeted by the perfect cacophony of Manhattan: police sirens blaring down the block, bars pulsating with music so loud it thumped in her chest, a jackhammer drilling into a mess of broken concrete. She checked her phone for the time—11:30 pm shone in promising bright white letters on her home screen. The weekend, her salvation, had barely begun.

She hit her vape, feeling the tingles of restlessness that had become familiar to her since her breakup with Ryan a year ago, and began walking, following the nicotine buzz and city sounds wherever they led, which she hoped was somewhere good. She instinctively opened Instagram, her thumb stopping on a picture of her best friend Morgan and Morgan’s boyfriend Charlie, posted ten minutes ago from Morgan’s account. Charlie’s arm was wrapped protectively around Morgan, and Morgan was gazing up at him, her entire face crinkled from grinning. The caption read *Love of my life*.

Avery’s lip twitched as she double-tapped the picture to give it a like. Morgan and Charlie’s love for each other seemed to increase in tandem with Avery’s number of sexual partners. She’d gotten used to their PDA, though, for the most part. They’d been like this since they met at a pregame freshman year, when Morgan had summoned Charlie to be her partner in a round of beer pong, and he lifted her into a hug every time she landed a throw. Tonight, however, Avery wished Instagram had a *We Get It* button. Of course, she was thrilled Morgan had found the kind of love most people spent their whole lives searching for and especially rarely found in college, or at least in the frat-star factory that was Woodford College, their alma mater. But still. *We Get It*.

She sent Morgan a text. *still w Charlie? wanna get a drink?*

She stopped to lean against the brick wall of a bodega, vaping some more and waiting for her best friend’s reply. With each silent minute that passed, she grew increasingly jittery, alternating between digging dirt out from under her fingernails and kicking pieces of mulch spilling out from a sidewalk tree pit garden. Morgan and Charlie *lived* together; they hung out every single damn day, from the moment they each got home from work until they went to bed, rinse and repeat. Surely Morgan could stop giving him attention for ten seconds to respond to Avery’s text.

Avery’s phone finally buzzed. *Sure!! Just finishing up*

Doc Holliday’s? Avery texted back. Doc Holliday’s was a solid dive bar nearby. It was loud enough to be lively, but quiet enough that you could hear yourself talk, unlike so many East Village bars at this time of night. It was nothing like that sweaty, crowded basement from that party senior year, with that lukewarm keg and sticky floor and—

Avery’s phone buzzed again, interrupting her thoughts before the panic set in.

Cool, Morgan replied. *Give me 20*

Avery heaved a sigh and shoved her phone in her pocket. How was she going to kill twenty minutes? The bar was right around the corner. It would take her no time to walk there, and then she’d have to wait for Morgan alone, as usual. She put her lips to her vape, then tossed it back into her purse. She wanted a real cigarette, to feel actual smoke burn her lungs. She rummaged through her purse and found one, crushed beneath empty bags of chips and crusty tubes of mascara. *Gross*, she thought. She needed to clean this thing out.

She lit her cigarette. The tip illuminated bright orange, and off-white smoke billowed into the sky. As she inhaled, she made eyes at every guy that walked by, enticing them to ask her for a light. Entertaining herself with cheap male validation was better than feeling sorry for herself for how single she was. Annoyingly, though, most guys passed by without a glance. Some ogled her cleavage, on full display thanks to her push-up bra, so that was something. A homeless man wearing black slides approached her asking for a dollar, and she told him no. She never carried cash anyway—her favorite nail technicians had started accepting Venmo for tips—but after she’d paid her rent this week, she barely had enough money for her sad desk salads.

She spent a few more minutes smoking and trying to entice guys, to no avail. Nothing titillating was going to happen on this corner, and she was starting to feel pathetic. It was time to go. She stubbed out her cigarette butt and tossed it in the trash before making her way to Doc Holliday's, where a group of high schoolers stood at the front door trying to convince the bouncer to let them in. She frowned. Did these kids have nothing better to do tonight? They had their whole lives to get wasted at bars and do something they'd regret. She wanted to scream at them to go play on a swing set, to preserve their innocence before it was too late. Because once you lost it, she knew, it was never coming back. If only someone had told her that her senior year of college, before she put her trust in the wrong man's hands and watched it break apart.

She shoved the thought out of her mind as quickly as she shoved through the crowd and into the bar.

"Hi there," she cooed to the bartender as she sat down on a stool, batting her eyelashes like windshield wipers to fade away the memories. She tossed a curtain of her thick dark brown hair behind her shoulder and inhaled the sweet smell of booze. "Can I please get your finest cheap beer?"

The bartender regarded her with a smile. Behind him, a hodgepodge of outdated holiday decorations and handwritten signs threatening to ask for ID hung above the bar. He grabbed a bottle of Rolling Rock from a mini fridge and popped it open with a *tsst*, winking at her as he handed it over.

"Sure thing ..." he began, offering an open-ended pause for her to fill in her name.

Avery met his eye, let her gaze linger. "Avery."

He nodded. "I'm Jim." He tapped the bar twice with the palm of his hand. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Avery took a hearty sip of her beer just as Morgan called out her name from the front door. She waved as she strutted through the bar in a little black dress that clung to her five-ten frame. Morgan was stunning, with waifish, model-length limbs and high cheekbones that contrasted with Avery's curves and round face. Someone definitely would have approached her outside on that corner.

"You're early!" Morgan said, hoisting herself onto the stool next to Avery.

Avery suddenly felt self-conscious about the way her thighs spilled over her seat. They looked like two loaves of banana bread bursting over their pans. "Shocking, right?" She tossed Morgan a coy grin, pretending she didn't hate herself.

Morgan flagged Jim down for a beer. "Extremely. Did your date end early? How was it?"

Avery shrugged. She'd hardly call what had happened tonight a "date." The cocktails they'd gotten at Lovers of Today earlier in the night were simply the accepted prerequisite for meaningless sex. But Morgan wanted Avery to fall in love-of-her-life love, like she had with Charlie. Avery never knew how to tell Morgan that it wasn't as easy for some women to get that. That some women, in fact, might never get that. But Morgan meant well. Avery would allow Morgan to be optimistic, even if it bordered on pathological.

One of them had to see the good in Avery, after everything.

"It was fine," Avery said.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. He was hot, but kind of dull. He also lurks on bizarre subreddits."

Morgan raised a suspicious brow. "Well, did you have anything in common?"

"Not really." Avery paused and pointed at Morgan with her beer bottle. "Sorry, I lied. We both grew up in the tri-state area. Does that count?"

"Hardly," Morgan said with a laugh. "Did you sleep with him?"

Avery hesitated. "Yes."

Morgan's forehead creased in worry, like it had so often since Avery and Ryan broke up. But Avery ignored it. She didn't want Morgan worrying about her. She didn't want *anyone* worrying about her, not that any of their friends besides Morgan cared about her anymore anyway. She was perfectly fine with having surface-level hookups and forgetting guys' names by the next day. It was easier this way, keeping her distance so she couldn't get hurt again.

“I just came from his place, actually,” Avery added. “The sex wasn’t good though. He basically used me as a human Fleshlight.”

Morgan sighed. “I totally get it. When Charlie and I first started dating, it took several training sessions for him to learn that there’s a person attached to a vagina.”

Jim slid Morgan a beer. She used a cocktail napkin to wipe the condensation off the bottle, her shiny, loose waves rippling like a current across her shoulders as she moved. Her hair was light brunette with streaks of blonde that, thanks to her half-Irish genes, looked red at certain angles. It reminded Avery of the way the ocean surface looked when it was dappled by sunlight.

“At least you had someone to teach,” she said.

Avery regretted saying that as soon as she saw the beginnings of a crease on Morgan’s forehead again.

“I’m sorry, Avery. Next time. Your guy’s out there.”

Avery waved Morgan off. She didn’t need pity from beautiful people in happy relationships. Morgan didn’t understand what loneliness felt like, the cavernous empty space Avery tried to fill in an attempt to feel whole again after she essentially ruined her own life. She was fine. Fine, fine, fine.

“It’s fine, I’m fine.” Avery took another sip of her beer. “How was your night?”

A coquettish smile crept onto Morgan’s lips. She thrust her dainty left hand in front of Avery, and suddenly her smile exploded across her face. A massive emerald cut diamond sat on Morgan’s ring finger, glinting beams of bright oranges and yellows. Avery gasped. She’d known a proposal was inevitable but not that it would happen only five months after graduation. Then again, she supposed they were in that delicate place between youth and adulthood now, where some people were settling down and other people were ... well, other people were flashing their cleavage at creeps outside bodegas.

Avery shook off the feelings of self-loathing bubbling up inside her and clutched Morgan’s hand, a grin taped to her face. “Charlie *proposed?*!” Avery marveled at the ring. Charlie had even remembered what Avery told him junior year, about Morgan wanting a solitaire diamond with a gold band.

“Yes!” Morgan cried, resting her hand on her heart. “And I said yes!”

Avery flung her arms around Morgan’s waist, her happy tears seeping into Morgan’s dress. “You’re engaged!” She felt the wind knocked out of her from both breathless joy and a sucker punch to the chest. Her best friend was getting married, and thanks to her new compulsion to bolt from a guy’s place immediately after sex, she was well on her way to dying alone. She never thought she’d be that kind of girl, but alas, this was who she was now. Avery released herself from Morgan’s grip but kept her hands on Morgan’s shoulders, digging her fingers into her skin. *Keep smiling*, she thought. *Don’t be a bitch*. “How’d he do it? Tell me everything. I need every detail.”

Morgan’s caramel brown eyes misted, twinkling beneath the overhead lights of the bar. “We were getting dinner at Manhatta, that restaurant with the sky-high views sixty stories up. Our table was right by the window, overlooking all of downtown. We’d just finished eating, and then ...” She pulled in a deep breath, holding it for a second before releasing. “And then he started talking about how much I mean to him, and how much he loves me, and finally he got down on one knee. It took me a second to realize what was happening. But when I did, I started sobbing, Avery. Sobbing! I’m surprised my makeup isn’t all over my face right now. And then, a band just started playing *music*. And a bottle of champagne just *appeared*.” Morgan sighed dreamily. “It was perfect.”

Avery hugged Morgan again with as much excitement as she could muster. All the while, she couldn’t help but think that everyone was growing up, moving on, making something of their lives after graduation. Everyone but her. She was still stuck on that party senior year, on the moment Noah got her alone in that bedroom, and she was too drunk to give him a convincing no. It was her fault for being so friendly with him, for making him think she wanted to sleep with him when that couldn’t have been further from the truth. She knew she wasn’t supposed to think in such a victim-blamey way. Feminism and #MeToo and all that. But she couldn’t help it. She felt like the exception, like those movements were talking about other women and not her.

“Now, I have something to ask you,” Morgan began. She fanned tears from her face and took Avery’s hands. “Will you be my maid of honor?”

Avery’s jaw dropped slightly. Part of her had thought she’d be excused from this massive responsibility when it came time for Morgan’s wedding, because Morgan’s childhood friend Kim was an event planner and loved doing this kind of thing. Avery also hoped that Morgan wouldn’t put her in the line of fire so soon, in front of all the people who thought she’d cheated on Ryan. What happened senior year didn’t happen that long ago, and their group of friends still wanted nothing to do with her, while of course Noah hadn’t suffered at all from the fallout. He was lucky his head was down when they were in that bedroom at the party, that Avery’s face was the only one visible through that crack in the door. Everyone thought she’d hooked up with Ronald Archibald, the rando nobody was friends with who only lived in that room because he needed housing. Nobody knew it had been Noah sucking the life out of her.

Avery tensed. “Are you sure? I—I’ve never even been to a wedding before. I don’t know the first thing about being a maid of honor.”

“Of *course* I’m sure!” Morgan’s face was wide- open, earnest. “And you’ll learn. It’s not like you’re doing everything by yourself. I’ll be with you.”

“But what if I mess everything up? What if I forget to pick up your garter or something? Do brides even wear garters anymore?”

Morgan laughed. “You won’t mess anything up. You’re super responsible.” She paused, then backtracked. “Well, you’re capable of being responsible. I’ve seen it. You just gotta ... I don’t know. Tap into that again.”

Avery bit her cheek, piercing the tender flesh with her teeth. Maybe there once existed a version of Avery who was responsible, a girl who used to read novels and spend her weekends going to brunch and was generally just normal. But now Morgan was making a huge mistake. Avery was the girl whose credit card got declined for a four-dollar coffee at Starbucks, who let her houseplants wither and die from lack of watering, who got both a pregnancy scare *and* a gonorrhea diagnosis from the same one-night stand. She was different now. Someone she hardly recognized.

Morgan folded her hands in front of her chest, pouting.

“Please?”

Avery studied Morgan, her last remaining friend in the world. After Ryan broke up with her, Avery made it clear to Morgan that she didn’t want her to pick sides, and Morgan did her best to stay friends with everyone. She forgave Avery for sleeping with Ronald while understanding why everyone else wouldn’t. And it wasn’t like Avery corrected anyone’s version of events of what happened that night. She could never say out loud the terrifying things that Noah did to her. That would just make them real.

“Morgan ...” Avery tasted blood inside her mouth. “I don’t have a natural eye for wedding stuff. I can’t help you, like, choose flowers. I don’t know a rose from a chrysanthemum.” *And all of our friends still hate me for what they think happened at that party and I’m too scared to tell anyone the truth. And I’m gonna be single forever while you and Charlie die together* The Notebook-style *because I won’t be vulnerable with a man ever again.*

“We’ll figure it out together!” Morgan held Avery’s gaze, a tenderness settling onto her face. “I really want it to be you, Avery. You’re the only person who can keep me in check. When I start obsessing over which cheese knife to put in my registry, you need to sedate me.”

Avery fidgeted with the zipper on her leather jacket. She had no idea how she could be a strong, stable anchor for her best friend when she felt so lost in her own life. She’d need to pore over every *Brides* magazine she could find, study weddings like she’d studied for the SAT. She’d need to be calm and levelheaded and a source of sanity for Morgan, despite feeling like she had none of those comforts available for herself. It wasn’t even that her well had run dry, but that at this point she couldn’t remember the last time it was full. But she would have to move on from what Noah did to her at some point, wouldn’t she? Surely she could keep convincing herself that what happened was just a stupid drunken hookup, which would help her get over it eventually. Right?

She wasn’t sure of the answer to these questions. But she could pretend for Morgan’s sake.

“Plus,” Morgan said, her eyes round and hopeful. “You’re my best friend. That means way more to me than the stupid chrysanthemums.”

The corners of Avery’s lips pulled into a smile. “All right.” Her voice was thin. She hesitated and then said it again like an incantation, as though repeating it might summon her long-lost confidence. “Yes, all right, I’ll do it! I’ll be your maid of honor!”

Morgan clapped and kissed Avery on the cheek. Avery beamed, feeling her shaky confidence strengthen and solidify. How could she have thought that she wouldn’t be her best friend’s maid of honor? Avery was always going to be part of Morgan’s wedding. Whenever she heard Morgan fantasize about it in college, it went unsaid that Avery would be involved, and nothing about that was going to change now. Even though everything else—and everyone else—would be different.

Jim appeared on the other side of the bar, grinning apologetically. “Can I get you girls anything else?”

Avery slid her empty beer bottle toward Jim and leaned forward to show off her cleavage. “I’d love another one of these,” she said.

Jim’s eyes flicked to her chest before he walked away.

Morgan stared at him, cringing. “Avery, that guy has the most jacked up teeth,” she whispered. “And he has *visible* dandruff.”

Avery shrugged. “So what? My hair gets greasy. Nobody’s perfect.”

Jim grabbed Avery another beer and poured two Fireball shots, filling the glasses so high that liquid spilled over the sides and onto the bar. He pushed the glasses toward them.

“On me,” he said with a wink. His teeth *were* a little yellowed, now that Avery got a closer look. Whatever. He was the only guy giving her attention tonight, and she needed the self-esteem boost, proof that someone, somewhere, could still find this broken version of her desirable. He’d have to do.

“Please tell me you’re not going to sleep with him,” Morgan begged as Jim brought a toothpick to his scalp and scratched his hairline. Dandruff fell like snow onto his black T-shirt. “He looks like an incubator for STDs.”

Avery rolled her eyes. Again with the worrying. But Morgan wouldn’t understand. While she racked up blissful nights with her fiancé, all Avery did was rack up her body count. Last weekend, there was Dylan, the guy Avery blew to completion who then ignored her to tinker with his fantasy draft after he came. The guy before that was Victor, or maybe his name was just Vic. Avery shook her head, reminding herself she didn’t keep track for a reason: because it hurt too much when she forgot. Forgetting was a reminder that there had been way too many, that her pain dictated more of her behavior than she was willing to admit. Her logic went that the more men she slept with, the more that night with Noah would fade into irrelevance. It made perfect sense.

Avery nudged Morgan with her shot glass. “Forget about Jim. Tonight’s about you. You’re getting married!”

Jim brought over two glasses of water, stealing another glance at Avery’s chest.

“Hopefully you’ll even have time for me this year,” Morgan said as she eyed Jim suspiciously. “Jim might want you all to himself.”

Avery flashed a mischievous smile. “I’ll allocate my time between both of you, don’t worry. How’s that sound, *Mrs. Durham*? If you plan to no longer be a Feeley, that is.”

“I’m definitely changing my last name.” Morgan’s cheeks flushed. “Wow. *Mrs. Durham*. Can you say that again?”

Avery laughed. “Say what again? *Mrs. Durham*?”

“Yes. With my first name.”

Avery spread her arms out wide as she shouted in her best emcee voice, “Ladies and gentlemen, *Mrs. Morgan Durham*!”

Morgan’s eyes turned into hearts, like the emoji. “God, I love that. I love that so much.”

“Now imagine it embossed on one hundred off-white thank-you notes.”

They giggled and clinked their shots together, then flung the Fireball to the backs of their throats. Avery shivered once her stomach settled. Fireball had been her and Morgan’s drink of choice in school, mainly because it was the

cheapest of all the booze at the corner store near Woodford. It didn't taste that bad, either. But it had been a while, and that cinnamon burned horribly now. Forget college graduation, moving out of your parents' house, and getting a job: Outgrowing Fireball was the real transition into adulthood.

The bar started clearing out, save for a few tables covered in empty beer pitchers and a couple playing darts in the back corner. Avery was surprised that people were leaving already. It was only 1 am—the night was young and teeming with potential! She was about to ask Morgan what bar they should go to next, until Morgan yawned and scooted off her stool.

“Okay, it's getting late. I'm gonna head home. Wanna split a cab uptown?”

Avery knew Morgan had the right idea. The night was not young at all. Nothing good came from being out alone downtown at one in the morning, scraping the bottom of the nightlife barrel to find something to do. Nights that seemed sparkly and infinite were just black holes that sucked Avery in, disintegrating her into dust.

But going back home to an empty apartment sounded even worse. “Nah,” Avery said. “I think I'll stay out a little longer.”

Morgan shook her head in disapproval, but it was lighthearted, like she knew she wouldn't be able to stop Avery so why even try. This was part of their dynamic now: Avery would be Avery in ways Morgan didn't understand, and Morgan would just let it happen, almost as a joke, unknowingly giving Avery the go-ahead to self-destruct. Avery would've felt guilty about it if she could feel anything besides panic at the threat of being alone with her thoughts again.

“If you say so.” Morgan draped her crossbody bag over her shoulder. “Just promise me you won't black out and sleep with the bartender.”

Jim grinned at Avery from behind the bar. A piece of spinach was stuck in his gums, right above his front tooth.

“He's *so* hot though,” Avery cooed sarcastically, giving Jim a seductive wave. “It'll be tough to resist.”

Morgan scrunched her face. “You're gross.”

“But you love me.”

Morgan sighed, her lips curving into a smile. “Unfortunately.”

Avery hugged Morgan goodbye, then watched her walk out of the bar and disappear into the night. She could've sworn Morgan was moving slower and steadier than she normally did, like she was practicing walking down an aisle of a church. Avery put her hand on her chest, her heart warming at the idea of Morgan in a gorgeous white gown, a lace trail gliding on the floor behind her. She imagined Charlie, his usually disheveled curly hair neatly combed, waiting for Morgan at the altar. She imagined the mist in both of their eyes, their romantic exchange of vows, the roar of applause as they kissed for the first time as husband and wife. And she imagined herself running around the venue with bobby pins, holding Morgan's dress up as she peed, giving a heartfelt speech in front of the crowd—being the perfect maid of honor that her best friend deserved, proving to their friends that she wasn't the cheating monster they thought she was.

Avery pushed away her beer. There was half a bottle left, but she wasn't going to drink the rest. No, she was going to go home, back uptown to her apartment. She was going to put on her matching pajamas, make some peppermint tea, and read a book, the way the old Avery would have behaved, content and serene with peace and quiet. She wasn't going to let what Noah did to her affect her anymore. She might have lost her boyfriend, her friends, and her dignity all in the same night, but she needed to get her shit together for the sake of this wedding. And, she supposed, for herself.

ANNA GOMEZ

SOMEWHERE
ALONG
THE
WAY



SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY

BY ANNA GOMEZ

***FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *IN THIS LIFE AND MOMENTS LIKE THIS**
*A PENCRAFT AWARD 1ST PLACE WINNER AND CHATELAINE BOOK AWARDS FINALIST***

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* * *

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But after finding a stash of letters from the mother she never knew, Charlie can see exactly what’s been missing in her life. Determined to track her mom down, Charlie quits her high-powered job and road trips to California, giving her plenty of time to rethink her life. But before she can even leave New York, she winds up with an unexpected passenger ...

The mysterious Graham Mead has his own reason for heading west, one that Charlie will discover on a journey that will help two lost people find a home—and a future—within their own hearts.

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Award-winning author Anna Gomez was born in Makati, Philippines and moved to Chicago after an education abroad. Sometimes writing under the pen name Christine Brae, Gomez's titles include *My Goodbye Girl*, *In This Life*, and the *From Kona with Love* series, co-written with Kristoffer Polaha, which has been optioned for film and television. Her works have been covered in *People*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Gomez has also been featured on CNN Philippines and Ad Age.

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PROLOGUE

"Hi," he whispered, quietly tiptoeing through a children's waiting room doorway. She'd been sitting by herself, surrounded by torn-up books and tiny cups and saucers laid out in front of broken dolls. "What are you doing?"

"I'm having a tea party," she replied. "You were gone a long time, Papa."

Her father sighed and took his place next to her, crossing his legs on the floor and motioning for her to come closer. The little girl scooted toward him and settled on his lap. With practiced expertise, he spread out the frills of her yellow dress over her knees and tightened the braids on her hair.

"Why can't I come out, Papa?" she asked, her big brown eyes looking up at him. He thought of her mother and how he saw her in this little girl every single day. "Why can't I see my grandma and grandpa?"

The father bristled at her question but tried to remain composed. How could he tell her she'd never see them again? "Well, the doctors and nurses are trying to make sure they're taken care of."

"And then I can see them?"

"Hija," he said, pulling her close.

She tucked her head under his chin and waited for him to continue.

"Granny and Grampy ... they fell asleep and went to heaven."

"You mean they had a heart attack or a stroke? Like Ellie in *Up*?"

If this moment weren't so profound, he would have laughed. How could he forget how smart this six-year-old was? Her keen intuition? How old was her soul?

"Why, Papa? Why would that happen? Grampy walked to church every day. Granny vacuumed all the time."

"Their hearts got tired, I suppose," he answered.

"Did they get tired because they were helping to take care of me?"

"Oh no!" the father exclaimed. "Don't ever think that. They'd get mad at me whenever I'd take you to Auntie Elma's instead."

"But ... we had so many plans. I wrote them all on the calendar. Our trip to Atlantic City to go on the rides this summer."

"We can still do all that," he said, releasing his hold on her so she could lean forward to reorder the cups and saucers and change places between the yellow and blue doll.

He watched as she focused on the tea kettle and poured imaginary tea into the cups. It wasn't unusual for her. She didn't dwell on sad things. She kept moving.

"So, I don't have a mom, and now I don't have a granny or a grampy anymore," she said, matter of fact like she was reciting a poem or spewing words from memory.

Her simple words crushed him, and when she looked up at him, his heart began to break. He took a deep breath and held it, afraid to release all the pain he had inside.

What she did next would define their relationship as father and daughter. It would empower him and fill him with conviction.

She grabbed his hands in hers and held them tight before leaning forward and kissing him on the cheek. “Don’t worry, Papa. I’ll be okay. The only one I need is you.”

Part 1 Charlotte

Chapter 1

These weren’t snacks. They were meals. Large aluminum trays brimming with meat, chicken, lasagna, noodles, and rice. It was ten o’clock in the morning, for heaven’s sake.

Next to the long plastic table stood two oversized orange coolers. She lifted the lid off one of them to find soft drinks, water bottles, and beer. *Beer?* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small tray of cheese and crackers, store-bought spinach dip, and a bag of Doritos.

He would have laughed and pointed that out to me, she thought, allowing herself the tiniest of smiles. “*A mix of cultures. Aren’t we so lucky to be living here?*”

“*We know who brought that, Charlie.*” She could hear him saying, too.

There it was again. That searing pain in her chest. It caused her to clutch her heart. This physical pain was so consuming that it debilitated her, numbed her, and kept her from crying. The pain trapped her tears. Charlie had to choose: tears or pain.

Why not both?

“Charlie?” A tall, skinny man in a gray suit placed a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry, Kent,” she answered with a murmur, pushing her shoulders back and walking toward the table. She ran her finger along one of its edges before pulling back the foil that covered a stew, releasing a whiff of soy sauce and vinegar. Kent wiggled his nose and sniffed. Charlie turned her face away from him, afraid he would sneeze. “What are we going to do with all this food?”

“We can announce that there will be refreshments after the service,” he replied.

“Okay. Who brought all the rice and adobo?”

“Your Auntie Elma’s cousin,” Kent confirmed.

“And I suppose Dad’s side brought the crackers?”

“Your Uncle Pete. And the beer. He said your dad would approve.”

Still distracted, Charlie glanced through the doorway and across the hall. Chunks of snow formed a trail from the lobby to the gathering place, and a maintenance man showed up every few minutes to mop the wet footprints left by the visitors’ heavy boots. The constant influx of people through the revolving doors brought in a taste of the damp, bone-cold Brooklyn air in February.

A few hours ago, Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow. Charlie had never understood it but had always been intrigued by how people allowed their life to be defined by ... well, in this case, a groundhog. But then again, she

found herself listening to the radio every year, just like she read her horoscope or followed astrologists on Instagram. She was waiting for something, always counting on something better coming her way.

Six more weeks of winter was right, anyway. At least in her case. *At least this year.*

From where she was, Charlie could see two people kneeling at her father's casket, the rest seated on banquet chairs. There were over forty of them, and their actions were repetitive and familiar. Signs of the cross, hands on the casket, rosary clutching, shoulders shaking, whispers and prayers, and words of condolence. They were the hankie generation, from a time when blowing your nose into a disposable piece of something was such a waste of money. They'd lived in the era of cloth diapers and clothespins. The women held those hankies, dabbing their eyes, while the men had them tucked into their pockets. Charlie's father was like a son to them. Abandoned by his wife, raising a daughter on his own. The Sunset Park community had adopted and parented him from the time he was a young man.

Directly facing the other doorway, she spotted the three Missys—Missy Smith, Missy Donahue, and Missy Malone—with some others she knew from high school. Dressed in all black, their necklines and wrists dangling with gold, their hair coiffed, and their nails impeccably done, they whispered quietly, shielding their mouths with their hands. She could name the designer purses they flaunted on their arms. She'd only started buying them last year. These women had them all their lives—first from their daddy's money and now from their husband's. Auntie Elma convinced her father that attending a prep school in King's County and paying thirty thousand a year in tuition was the only way Charlie could gain future entry to an Ivy League school. Seeing the three Missys brought back the teenage trauma of going to a school where every parent owned a business, an estate, or an entire football team while she was known as the daughter of a limo driver.

Papa, Missy's dad, bought her a Range Rover for her sixteenth birthday.

Your car is so much cooler, hija! I bet you don't know anyone else who owns a stretch. You can sleep in it, eat in it, and party in it.

In the years to come, he would call it her party bus. It became a running joke between them.

Charlie was supposed to be out in this crowd of people who loved her father, allowing them to comfort her. But what placated her was this place, being in the break room, surrounded by the food her father loved and the beer he consumed too much of.

"You sure you're okay?" Kent asked again. How he'd changed over the years. He was Party Boy Kent in high school, and look at him now, the owner of a funeral home.

"Sure I am," she lied. "How much do I owe you for this? You know, he didn't have any insurance, but I can write a check—"

"Don't worry about that now," Kent assured her. "It won't be much."

Charlie nodded, her chest still numb and heavy. "Thank you."

"We should probably start with the service. Did you want to say a few words?"

"Uh." Charlie avoided his eyes, her gaze fixed on his lapel's round, shiny button. It was some sort of holy medal that she knew, but even after all those years in Catholic school, she couldn't remember the saint's name. "I don't think I can. But I know my Auntie Elma would be happy to do so."

Auntie Elma looked eerily composed when she walked up to the podium. That was such a far cry from the way she'd thrown herself onto his hospital bed as the machines stopped beeping. Charlie always thought Auntie Elma was in love with her father. After all, what woman would devote all this time to help raise a daughter that wasn't even hers? But there sat Joe, her husband of twenty years, and then their only son, Justin, who was as smart as he was good-looking.

Auntie Elma swayed sideways, pausing briefly in front of the coffin to pay her respects. Charlie was ready to spring into action, certain she was going to faint. But on she went, tapping the microphone to get everyone's attention. For a few seconds, Charlie couldn't help but look lovingly at her father's image. He was only fifty-five, his hair just starting

to gray, but his spirit was strong and youthful. He drove a limousine during the day and spoke of the famous New Yorkers who were his regulars: Al, Tony, Ryan, Anne, Sarah J. He called them by their first names and asked them to autograph their ride tickets for her.

They'll be collectors' items someday, hija.

Anne and Ryan sent flowers, which stood out, especially these massive white wreaths with specially imprinted wide ribbons.

Until Auntie Elma's voice broke through her thoughts.

"Thank you all for coming today. For those who don't know me, my name is Elma. Edgar and I have been friends for over thirty-five years. I was his best friend—" She stopped and looked at Charlie. That pain, again. Sharp and stabbing. "I am a close family friend," she corrected herself. "Right now, I am doing the unimaginable. I never thought I'd be here standing in front of you under such traumatic circumstances. Edgar was beating prostate cancer. He was in the process of recovering. So this is a shock to all of us. Never in a million years did we ever think we would be where we are today. He ..." she choked before swallowing loudly, "... was taken away from us too soon. But before he succumbed, he wanted to make sure we knew that he had a great life and how thankful he was to all of you for being a part of it. And that he leaves to us his whole heart, his daughter, Charlie, to cherish, to nurture, and to love with all our hearts, just like he did all these years."

Auntie Elma beckoned her to come forward.

No. Charlie shook her head. It was too much. This pain. Going up there and vocalizing the fact that he was gone? She wasn't ready. This couldn't be real. Just two days ago, he'd gone off oxygen and told her he was feeling better. She'd sworn he'd recovered from the virus, the pallor in his cheeks banished, the weakness and coughing subsiding. The last time she'd called him, he'd said he could walk once around the ninth floor of the hospital. All good signs. She'd known he'd have to build his strength back up, but he'd assured her they'd be discharging him soon.

Shortly after, he'd felt a tightness in his chest. Then, the high fever returned.

The chemo had made him thin and weak. Maybe Charlie had always known he'd never be the same, terrified that any type of infection would shred his insides. And that's exactly what it did.

"Charlie, we are here for you. We will always be here for you. We have lost the kindest, most genuine man we have ever known."

Charlie glanced at Auntie Elma's husband, who shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"But most especially, Charlie has lost her father, her best friend. Our deepest condolences and prayers go to you. At least now we know he rests with your grandparents, Wilma and Bert."

A woman from the audience ran up to give Auntie Elma her hankie.

Don't do it, Auntie Elma. I saw her using it a few minutes ago.

She blew into it loudly, pausing with her mouth agape when she saw the line of people starting to form. About thirty of them were leaning against the wall and squeezing themselves along the narrow aisle between the rows of chairs. Aunt Elma broke into a wide smile. "Well, I didn't even have to ask. It looks like we're going to be here for a while. Everyone is limited to a minute each, and Tia Malou, do not, I repeat, do not start wailing into the microphone!"

The tributes lasted over an hour, and there was a mixture of tears and laughter delivered by the people whose lives her father touched.

He could fix anything.

He recycled my speaker wires and used them to fix my clothes dryer.

He sang like Frank Sinatra.

Did you know that he was Muhammad Ali's driver?

He was like a son to us. To all of us.

He never asked us for any help but would give anyone the shirt off his back.

We single women always wondered why he never dated. It was our loss.

He was so well-read. He loved history. But he also loved Hallmark movies.

He was a diehard 49ers fan. That traitor.

And although no one could see her as she stood covered to the side by her father's giant portrait, Charlie held her head high.

Screw the Missys of the world. She'd been the daughter of the King of Sunset Park.

Chapter 2

"Charlie. Wake up."

The light of dawn streamed through the dust-laden blinds, illuminating the powdery remnants floating through the air. Little streaks of orange seeped through every opening, trying to invade the darkness Charlie had grown accustomed to in the month following his death. She slept through everything. Every sound, every noise. The crackle of potato chip packets and wrappers lodged between the creases of her comforter, the shrill of ambulances and police sirens, people yelling and screaming on her street, car alarms, laughter ... nothing fazed her or aroused her from her self-induced stupor. Not even the empty juice boxes and the chewed-out chocolate bars strewn atop the piles of dirty laundry covering her bedroom floor.

Charlie squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds, determined to go back to sleep. It had been her only respite for weeks, and it pissed her off that the pills were losing their effectiveness. She'd taken a double dose the night before. They should have been working well into the late morning.

"Charlie."

Charlie's body shuddered from head to toe. A gust of frigid air caused her to pull the ends of her comforter over her head. *Was it ...? Could it be? Let me dream some more.*

She stayed still, afraid to make a move. But when she realized what was happening and the possibility of it, she shot straight up, eyes wide open, eager to confirm that the voice she heard was his.

"Papa? Is that you?"

He sat on the side of her bed, just like he used to when she was a little girl. Charlie would talk his ear off and tell him about her day from when she woke up until she went to bed. As the years went by, those moments grew less and less, her teenage memories overshadowed by her determination to move away. She'd worked hard to get into Harvard and planned her grades and achievements since she was a high school freshman. She opted for business because of its stability. That was her goal: stability. Predictability. Safety. She breezed through school, excelling with a photographic memory and hating every minute of the path she had chosen to take, so far from who she thought she was, who she longed to be. She wanted a life where she could create colorful stories, travel the world, and live in the moment.

Of course, none of that was practical. So Charlie graduated summa cum laude with a degree in business and now works at a global consumer goods company as their youngest-ever chief revenue officer. Stable. Predictable. Colorless.

Her father smiled at her now and nodded. "Yes, Charlie. It's me."

"Am I dreaming?"

"Probably," he said, his blue eyes looking so young and alive. Charlie noticed a full head of hair on him and his favorite gray suit. It was way too big for him, a hand-me-down from Auntie Elma's husband, but he carried it off with ease. Her father was a beautiful man, and he knew it. Always the schmoozer with the ladies, he could talk anyone into a business proposition, and he'd done it for as long as she could remember. Always working on a new idea, none of them ever taking off. But then he got sick, and the chemo zapped all his dreams away.

"Listen, Charlie. Do you remember when you turned eighteen and decided you wanted to find your mom? You asked Auntie Elma to help you, but then you went to college and never brought it up again. Why was that?"

She thought back to that time. “I realized I didn’t need to find her. I had you. And Auntie Elma and Auntie Elma’s million relatives. I was grateful.”

He turned to look around the room. “You haven’t left this apartment in five weeks.”

“What do you mean? I’ve gone to the grocery store a couple of times.”

“Going to the little store across the street doesn’t count.” He held both arms up and turned from side to side. “And what is with this wreckage?”

“I ... I just—”

“This is not you,” he interrupted. “You hate mess. And I’ve never seen you eat so much chocolate.”

“You’re dead! Give me a break, Papa. You were the only one I had. And now you’ve left me. I’m still trying to figure out how to live my life without you.”

“By what? Killing time?”

“Why not? You always told me that time heals all wounds.”

“Oh, my darling daughter. Wounds can also fester and grow if left uncared for. Healing only begins when you try to move forward. I’ve had my time. I’m happy now, free from pain, and watching you from where I am. Life is so beautiful, Charlie, and you have so much more to live. You can’t waste another moment by living in the past. I hope that, in my own way, I’ve been able to show you how happy you made me and how joyful my life was because I had you. And how proud I’ve always been to be your father.”

“How, Papa? How am I supposed to keep going?” Charlie was a blubbering mess, swiping the tears from her eyes so she wouldn’t lose sight of him. There he was, speaking to her like it was a normal day, and they were sitting at the table for dinner. He was her source of support and cheerleader, helping Charlie with her thesis and rehearsing her presentations with her whenever she needed an audience.

“By focusing on yourself and doing the things that make you happy. Promise me, Charlie. Promise me you’ll take your life back. Promise me that today will be the last day you will live a life of regret.”

“I would give everything to have you back. I feel bad I never got to spend more time with you after I got promoted. I was traveling so much, working so many hours, I—”

“We texted each other every day. While you were on the train, every day.”

“That wasn’t enough. I realize that now.”

“Hija,” he said, reaching out to touch her.

Charlie yanked his hand forcefully and brought it to her face. He smelled like Dior’s Eau Sauvage, his favorite cologne. She could feel him. He was real. The familiarity of his skin, mottled and dry, calloused from all the manual labor he’d done through the years, his right thumb deformed by arthritis.

“I love you with all my heart. I will always love you. You have given me all the happiness a father could ever ask for. And now, I want to give you one last gift. Speak to your Auntie Elma. She has your mother’s letters.”

“My mother? Letters?”

“Your mother wrote to me regularly from the time you were born. I kept all her letters. Saved them until you were old enough to get to know her. I thought that maybe I could give them to you once you had your own daughter. She was the love of my life. And you were her gift to me.”

“But ...” Charlie stammered. She couldn’t find the words. “You said she left.”

Truth be told, at that moment, she couldn’t care less about who left who or even about those letters. She cared about her dad being there. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed so hard for him to stay. Maybe he was still alive, and the past four weeks had been nothing but a bad dream.

“I have to go, Charlie. I’m so sorry I didn’t give them to you. I thought we had more time. I kept hoping things would change,” he reasoned. “Read those letters. Get to know your mother. And find the joy and resilience in them. And please,” he said, smiling as he gently brushed his thumb across her cheek, “stop sleeping your life away. From this day on, live your life in the sunshine. You brought so much light into my life. Share that light with others.”

“Don’t go, Papa. Don’t leave me,” Charlie wailed. “Tell me how I can get past this. How do I survive when my home is in you?” The more she reached for him, the more he backed away, stepping away, moving back, further and further from the bed. Charlie thrust her body forward, arms outstretched, trying her best to grab him and pull him back to her. Instead, she fell flat on her face, sobbing and soaking the bed with her tears.

“Little one, tell me why I named you Carlotta,” he whispered.

“Charlotte.”

“Okay, fair. You changed it to Charlotte when you were in first grade,” he acknowledged with a wide grin, his face coming to life. It seemed impossible to her how this man was truly gone.

Charlie lifted her head, straining her neck so she could keep looking at him standing at the edge of her bed. “Because you couldn’t name me Wilbur.”

He laughed. His deep, rumbling laugh filled the room like the waves of an ocean. “Okay. The second reason.”

“Because you said I was special and that I saved you. Why are you changing the subject, Papa? I don’t want you to go. Please don’t leave me!” Charlie screeched, clawing at the comforter and covering her face with it.

“They say that children who grow up without a parent start out with a broken heart. It takes fortitude to grow up without a mother. That’s what you’ve done. You have it in you. This tenacity, this ability to make do with what you have. Keep that going. Do that for me, okay? Live your life with passion and zest. I will always be watching over you, cheering you on. Oh, and—”

He threw his head back and laughed again, a loud bellow accompanied by his trademark belly rub.

“Dump Lorenzo. There’s someone else coming.”

And with those words, he was gone. There she was again, all alone in her room. In her life. In her heart. But this time, when she looked around, she saw that things had changed. The sun was shining. The blinds were pulled back. And all around her, surrounding her, was a magnificent abundance of light.

Chapter 3

“Dios mio! I am so happy to see you!” Auntie Elma cried, making a sign of the cross before pulling Charlie into her arms. “Carlotta! You scared us. I didn’t know whether to send the police to stage an intervention. One month! You didn’t return calls, you didn’t answer the door. What happened? Are you okay? Maybe you need to get checked at urgent care. Were you sick? What did you eat? Do you need—”

Charlie gently tapped a finger on her cheek. It was only two days since she’d had that dream, or whatever it was. After he’d left, she’d experienced a lightness she hadn’t felt since the first time he got sick four years ago. The dust bunnies that had settled on those windowpanes had caused her to have a sneezing fit, so she’d grabbed the hand vac and zapped the living crap out of every single one of them. And then she’d gathered all the wrappers, taken out the garbage, and opened the patio screen doors. Charlie had also thrown away every single moldy pot and pan left on the stove for weeks. She hadn’t even realized they were there. She’d lived every day without him in a blur.

Charlie had slept through the rest of winter, but that morning, she’d felt strong enough to leave her apartment.

“I’m okay. I needed time alone.”

“Yes, alone, but did you have to refuse my calls?”

“There was nothing to say,” Charlie muttered.

Elma led her to one of the chairs by the kitchen table. It dawned on Charlie that she’d never even asked her father how Auntie Elma got so rich. The kitchen table was the third kitchen table in the house, with three separate kitchens. “Sit. Let me get you a drink,” Elma said before proceeding to the wall-to-wall fridge and grabbing a can of Fresca from among a variety of a hundred other cans. “Here, I know you like this.”

“Thank you.”

“Charlie.” Elma slumped forward to grab her hands. Charlie saw that they were shaking, so she pressed them stiffly against the table to quiet them down. “Your papa was supposed to give you something, but he never had the chance to. He gave them to me when the cancer returned.”

“I know.”

“You know?” Elma leaned away from her, eyes wide. “How?”

“He told me.”

Tears filled Elma’s eyes. Her head tilted to the side, eyes constantly blinking. “What do you mean? When?”

“I had a dream a few days ago. Papa chastised me for shutting off the world, among other things.” Charlie chuckled softly. “He told me that my mother wrote him letters and that he planned to give them to me. But, of course, things happened—”

Elma looked away, her silence wistful, her eyes fixed on nothing. “He found a way to tell you,” she whispered, shaking her head.

Charlie squeezed Aunt Elma’s hands. She wanted to pass on the feeling of peace she’d had after seeing her father. “He looked so good. So youthful and strong. He said he was watching over us and that we should be happy he is at peace.”

Elma nodded before reaching for her hankie on the counter and blowing her nose. But then the tears started up again. “He suffered so much in the end. In a way, I’m wracked with guilt that he was all alone in the hospital. But the doctors, they wouldn’t let us visit. They only called me in when he was already—”

Charlie circled the table and wrapped her arms tightly around Elma. It was a memory she couldn’t shake, a vision that still haunted her every day. Elma had FaceTimed when her father was dying. He’d asked to see Charlie, who, despite driving as fast as she could, pulled over to the side of the freeway when she knew it was too late. Her phone had been their only connection. When his lungs emptied out and he started to gasp for air, Charlie watched helplessly as he tried to lift himself off the bed, struggling to breathe and reaching for something with horror in his eyes. Charlie screamed for him and saw Aunt Elma throw herself on the bed with a high-pitched keen. “Edgar! Edgar! Look at me! Don’t look over there, look at me! I love you,” she’d screamed. “I love you.” And then, without warning, the nurse had ended the call.

It felt good to share these tears with her aunt now. Charlie hadn’t cried it out yet, and she knew it was inevitable.

Elma kissed the crook of her arm before tapping on it as a sign to let her go. “I’m going to get those letters,” she said, straightening up and collecting herself.

It took a while for Aunt Elma to get back to Charlie. So, she took advantage of the time by using the washroom and walking around the foyer. Charlie always loved looking around Aunt Elma’s home, where things were always new and interesting. Every trip to Europe, every souvenir, every memory was proudly displayed. There were pictures of Charlie and her father, some just the two of them, others with the entire family. She didn’t know Elma’s husband, Joe, that well. He was always traveling, acquiring a company here, setting up a plant there. Charlie never questioned the fact that he was always gone—after all, it became a normal thing for her to see Elma at their house with her father, at her school functions, and on playdates with Justin.

“Sorry, I had to take a minute,” Aunt Elma said, coming down the large circular stairway.

Charlie saw that her eyes were swollen and pink. “It’s okay,” Charlie assured her before taking a seat on the last step and waiting for Elma to sit next to her. Elma handed Charlie a pile of white envelopes neatly held together by a red velvet ribbon. It looked like a perfectly wrapped gift. Charlie laughed to herself. *Are these gifts? What are these, and how will they impact my life?*

“Your mother and I were best friends. Did you know that?”

Charlie shook her head. “I thought you and my papa were best friends in school.”

“Well, indirectly, I suppose. I was your mother’s best friend and met your father through her. When they separated, I felt the obligation to stay in your father’s life so he wouldn’t have to raise you by himself.” She caught herself immediately. “I mean, obligation is not the right word. I loved you from the day you were born.”

Charlie studied the envelopes. They were clean but weathered, the older ones crisp and brittle, their edges somewhat yellowed. Careful not to remove the ribbon, she plucked at each edge with her fingers and counted out loud.

“Every other year on or around your birthday, she would send a letter.”

“There’s no return address. Do you know where she is now?”

“No, we don’t. We know she’s in California, running her family’s business. But that’s all we know.”

“There are only fifteen,” Charlie declared. “I’m thirty-two.”

“I know how old you are,” Aunt Elma said with a laugh. “Your mother was twenty when you were born, so she’s around fifty-two now. And your father, he was four years older ... I can’t believe he’s gone. They were so young when they had you. And yes, the letters stopped coming two years ago. Your father was already sick. Maybe he knew that his time here was limited. He gave them to me one day and told me to keep them safe in case he couldn’t give them to you. He did worry when they stopped coming. In many ways, that love of his kept him going. But it also hindered his ability to ...” She paused before a tear fell down her face. “Love again.”

Charlie pulled Elma close, resting her head on Elma’s chest, feeling strong and protective over her. “What should I do with them, Aunt Elma?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell you what to do with them. All I know is that they are yours now. When they stopped coming, your father changed. And before he died, he asked me to find her. For you. You never really asked about your mother except for about a week after your eighteenth birthday.”

“That’s because I never really missed having one. My father played both roles so well. And you were always there for me.”

“And I will always be here, Charlie. You are our family. We are yours. Always remember that.”

Charlie kissed Elma on the forehead and slowly stood up, pulling Elma up along with her. “I’m going to go. Thank you for these.” She waved the envelopes in the air. They suddenly weighed like stone, and Charlie’s heart felt just as heavy. She didn’t want to ruin their visit, so she tried to sound upbeat, even as all this information was suffocating. The air began to thin out, and Charlie couldn’t seem to get enough of it.

“Will you read them? What are you going to do?”

“Maybe. Don’t know,” Charlie managed, turning her back toward Elma, trying her best to place one foot in front of the other, afraid she would burst into tears.



KALAYLA

UNRAVELING
TANGLES

JEANNIE NICHOLAS

KALAYLA
UNRAVELING TANGLES
BY JEANNIE NICHOLAS

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* * *

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LENA MANERO BARZETTI

That Girl

I'm not one of those old biddies who minds other people's business instead of her own. But, there are some people it is impossible to ignore, and that girl, Kalayla, was one of them.

The first time I saw Kalayla was mid-June last year. I was walking back from Mickey's Market on one of those perfect sunny days that made you believe you could live happily ever after. *The National Scoop* headline, "*Princess Diana's Death Revealed as Hoax*," made the same promise.

Kalayla was ahead of me, half swaggering, half strutting in a way so familiar I thought I must know her. I ruminated on it until I realized my twins walked like that when they were showing off, which was pretty much from the minute they got up until they went to bed.

How often had I seen those two boys swagger, strut, or taunt each other? Mikie would dare Jimmy, "Bet it takes you more than 20 seconds to shimmy up that streetlight." Jimmy would dare Mikie, "Bet you can't get five bucks panhandling between here and home." Off they'd go, running, laughing, shoving and punching.

The blast from a horn jolted me out of daydreaming, or I'd have bumped right into Kalayla. She was staring into Hanson's Book Store window, and her saucer-sized green eyes briefly glanced my way.

I pegged Kalayla as a Cambridge street kid scraping her way from one meal to the next, an old hand at trash picking and layering up with everything she found. That day, she wore three layers on top with a mishmash of colors and designs; a rope held up the baggy capri-length pants that would have been shorts on someone taller. A beat-up blue-and-red baseball cap with the brim turned backward squashed down her kinky orange-brown curls. She was an inch or two shorter than my five feet two inches, and I couldn't tell how old she was. Most teenage girls wanted to show off their bodies, but Kalayla didn't.

After that, I saw Kalayla everywhere I went. She was always by herself, and I wondered why. The only way my four boys were alone was if they were going to or coming from someplace where other kids were hanging out. Even my boy Mark, who was always getting in fights, had plenty of friends. If I were that girl's mama, the fact she was alone so much would have worried me.

About two weeks later, I was walking back from buying milk and eggs at Mickey's Market when I saw Kalayla talking to Maureen, the red-headed woman who waited tables at Eddie's Eatery. Eddie's was across from my apartment building, and sometimes I stopped by to chat. Maureen was friendly and cheerful but didn't blab personal stuff like some folks. Eddie told me she was a widow with a daughter.

I watched Maureen kiss her on the forehead and go into Eddie's. The girl had the same huge green eyes and delicate features Maureen did. Maureen's skin was ivory, and the girl's was light chocolate, but she had to be her daughter. She crossed the street and went into my apartment building. I hurried to see where she was going, but she had disappeared when I arrived.

I didn't just live in the building. I owned it and the building where Eddie's was located. They were the first properties Joey and I bought after we married, and our families solidified their business partnership by forming Manzetti Properties. Joey didn't turn out to be much of a husband, but his family knew all the angles when it came to rehab and construction, and my family was skillful and shrewd at buying and marketing real estate.

My job was to locate vacant buildings or properties the owner was interested in offloading quickly. I kept my eye out for local contractors. It was good public relations to involve them in small tear-downs or rehabs and leave the big jobs to Joey's crews. My office was at our corporate headquarters, and I still worked one or two days a week.

My brother Dominic was a financial wizard who'd been pretending to train his son and daughter to take over for him for the last three years. When I asked Dom if he knew anything about the girl and her mother, he laughed and said, "Have you been walking around with your eyes closed, Lena? Those two moved in across the hall from you."

Well, I never! When they moved in, I must have been volunteering at Helping Hands Shelter for Women, having supper at Dom's, or out with my best friend, Carlotta. That girl didn't come across as if she wanted to keep a low profile, but Voles hunkered down underground would have gotten my attention faster than those two.

A few days later, I saw Kalayla on our landing, staring out the window like a lost soul, and it wrenched my heart. I'd looked out the window many times and wished I'd see Jimmy or Mikie strutting down the street. But no amount of wishing could bring them back from the dead. And no amount of wishing changed the fact that the girl reminded me of them. When we finally did speak, it was no surprise the first thing out of her mouth was a smart-assed comment, like my twins would have made.

When my boys were growing up, Lotta repeatedly told me to wash the twins' mouths with soap. She never raised kids, or she would have known you can't stick a bar of soap into a child's mouth, no matter how tempted you might be.

A STORY OF SUCCESS, LOVE & VIOLENCE

TIM REUBEN



TEQUILA

A BRIAN YOUNGMAN NOVEL

TEQUILA
A STORY OF SUCCESS, LOVE & VIOLENCE
BY TIM REUBEN

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Tim Reuben is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School. He's a veteran trial lawyer and founded his own litigation firm in Los Angeles, where he also actively publishes articles on topics of law and society. Inspired by his legal experiences, Reuben presents his first wholly fictional “thriller-killer” novel, *Tequila*. When not practicing law or writing, Reuben plays tennis and golf, hikes with his wife and two big dogs, and enjoys imbibing aged spirits, including tequila.

[Website](#)

PROLOGUE

1950

The sun was hot at midday over the fields in the Jalisco Highlands of Mexico. Sotero Ramirez wiped his brow as he worked and then redonned his sombrero. It was September and almost time to harvest the beautiful plants he had nurtured with his sweat and love. He had pruned the sharp stalks, the *quiotes*, and had even hired extra men to help him, the *jimadores*. And they had fought off all the killing insects and worms hungry for the blue Weber agave.

These plants were ten years old—he had worked that long for this harvest, and he had big plans. Soon he would take the hearts and slowly bake them in his large brick oven, then crush them with his stone wheel, extracting the pungent juice inside. Next would come the intense long days to produce the magic liquid that his father had taught him how to make. First the fermentation—he had a special kind of yeast for this—and, second, distilling the fermented liquid, the *mosto*, twice, which itself would take ten days. Finally, he would age the tequila in barrels before bottling.

Sotero had produced his biggest agave crop ever. This year, he planned to make not just the white, the *blanco*, but also the rested, the *reposado*, and the old, the *añejo*. A third he would bottle right away, while the rest went into white oak barrels, one third for three months and the other third for a full year.

Barrels were expensive, but Sotero had decided to make the investment, taking a huge leap of faith that his guess would pay off. Over the shrill objections of Xiomara, he had taken out a loan using his farm as collateral. The interest and terms had been oppressive—at first the Mexican banker had not agreed to loan Sotero the funds.

“Why do you need to make a different, more expensive product?” the banker asked.

“It’s my only way forward,” had been Sotero’s answer. “The white I can sell, but everyone is making white, so I barely break even. If I make the *reposado* and *añejo*, I have almost no competition. No one else is doing it. And it is so wonderful to sip—you don’t just drink it all in one quick gulp. The oak enriches the flavor—it is wonderful, so smooth. I think I will be able to sell the *reposado* for twice, maybe three times the price of the *blanco*. And with the *añejo*, maybe even more.”

The banker shook his head. “I don’t think so. You think the cowboys and peasants will be interested in sipping tequila? Nonsense. They just want to get drunk as fast as possible. And the rich folks will look down their noses at your tequila, thinking it is low-end. They still just want their whisky Manhattans or gin martinis. And when it all fails, I will have to take your land from you—are you crazy? Do you want to risk losing a property that has been in the Ramirez family for generations? Even with pieces sold off to pay for its upkeep, it is still the largest single farm in our region. Sotero, go home and give up this pipe dream.”

But Sotero did not go home; instead, he begged and pleaded and cajoled until the banker relented. Sotero Ramirez got his loan, bought the barrels, and started working harder than ever. At first, he had not planned on making any *blanco*, but Xiomara had insisted. “How are we to pay for food? Or for clothes? Or for all the other costs of keeping up this infernal place?” she had demanded.

“We can use some money from the loan to get us by,” Sotero explained.

“You idiot!” Xiomara cried. “We can’t take that much of a risk. Have you forgotten your children? Pedro is almost six, but he is growing like a weed, so we need to keep getting more clothes for him. And Marta, she is so smart, even at seven she is reading so many books and needs constant stimulation. And when was the last time I had a new dress? All you think about is tequila and your dreams of making it big with your father’s old recipes. Well, you cannot take everything from us. You must make the *blanco* and sell the silver tequila in town like all the other producers so we have enough money to get by. Not negotiable!”

Sotero could not stand the wrath of Xiomara, and after all, she had a point. She was already pregnant with their third child, and *Dios mío*, children were expensive. He wondered why he had been so willing to start a family in the first place. But then, he knew why. Xiomara with her dark eyes and long black hair and deep brown skin—she had a

temper like a tornado, but she so excited him even with her angry looks. He adored her. He had wooed her for months until she finally relented and agreed to marry him.

“Why should I be interested in you?” she asked him. “You are just a farmer. You will always have dirty fingernails.”

“Maybe so,” Sotero answered, “but you will never go hungry. It is a big farm. Besides, don’t you think I wash up before coming into the house? And our *hacienda* is old, but it is large, big enough for a big family.”

She had looked at him with those piercing eyes, both condescending and not completely trusting. But finally, she succumbed to his logic—and also to his patience and persistence.

“But you must promise me,” she said, “that my children will be educated. I don’t want them to be farmers. They shouldn’t have dirty hands all the time.”

Sotero promised and proposed. They were married in a church a few miles outside of the town of Tequila. After the priest pronounced them man and wife and he took her home, he found he could not have her enough. But she would tease him and make him wait and then require him to profess his deepest devotion to her before she would let him seduce her. He was completely devoted—the couple enjoyed that passion of lovers in their twenties, when they have no need for sleep and can make love for hours upon end. Xiomara kept getting pregnant. Sotero was almost thirty and would have three children by then, with more to come if their habits continued. That was part of his reason for seeking bigger returns—his love for Xiomara and the certainty of a huge family to raise and pay for.

After he had harvested and baked and fermented and distilled and aged and bottled, he brought his bottles of reposado into town to show the distributors. The reposado had a fancier label—another investment of his. He told the distributors that this was a very special tequila that commanded twice the price.

“Why should we pay so much for this batch?” they asked, and so he opened a bottle and offered them all a taste. To his delight, they became very excited and began competing with one another to purchase his product and distribute it. He sold his entire stock of reposado on the first day, and it yielded such a profit that he was able to pay off his loan in its entirety.

“*Ay caramba*,” exclaimed the banker. “I guess you were right all along. Perhaps you can send me a bottle of that stuff since I was good enough to loan you the money.” But Sotero just smiled.

Xiomara was ecstatic. “How much did you end up with?” she asked excitedly.

“Well, after I paid off the loan, there is not much left,” he explained.

“What?” she almost screamed at him. “How much did those distributors make off of you? All they do is just ship your bottles. You do all the real work.”

“I think they mark up the tequila by 250 percent—two and a half times what they pay us,” Sotero said. “But that is the way it has always been done. And we can sell the *añejo* at a higher price to them, and all of that will be profit. They can make their money—it will be okay.”

“Aaaah!” she cried out. “We need to do that ourselves. We can distribute our own product as easily as they can.”

“But I have always just sold my product to them—I haven’t done that before.”

“Well,” she said, “we are going to start.”

“If we do that, the distributors in town will be very angry.

We will be taking away their livelihood. There may be trouble,” he said.

“Why should we worry about them? They have been taking advantage of us for years. We will do what is best for us.”

“Okay, but we had better be ready.” A shadow of concern crossed Sotero’s face.

But Xiomara could not be deterred. Despite this warning, she began to focus on the business side of selling and distributing tequila. She wrote to liquor stores in California and investigated how to ship the product from Mexico to the United States, how to deal with customs, and how to rent trucks to move their product. She worked in the office at the *hacienda* while her children played in the yard—except Marta, who wanted to be near her mother all the time. Xiomara discovered as time went on that Marta was very good at math. Marta would check her mother’s calculations

and catch any error. Xiomara worked late in the evenings when the younger children were asleep. Marta would curl up on the couch and stay with her mother.

After a year, Xiomara had set up her small distribution network, and Sotero no longer sold his tequila to the distributors in Guadalajara; instead, rented trucks transported his product up to California. And their profits increased threefold. After a couple of years, Xiomara realized she hated to pay anyone else to move the product, so she bought one truck, then two, and hired some of her relatives to drive the product to America, deal with customs, and sell it based on the deal she had made from her home in Mexico. They now had a family business, with only family members involved, totally integrated from production to distribution. Soon, other producers were asking Sotero if Xiomara could arrange to distribute their tequila. Xiomara agreed, charging a much smaller fee than the distributors in town, much less than the other tequila producers had ever had to pay.

The timing was auspicious, since America was in a period of post-World War II boom. Unemployment was low, personal income was doubling, factories were shifting from wartime equipment to consumer products, and the “buy now, pay later” mentality became popular. People wanted to forget the traumas of war and enjoy life, so cocktail parties and drinking at lunch became common. And the Ramirez family operation grew even larger and more profitable.

“We are getting bigger,” Sotero said to Xiomara one day while she was working in her study with Marta. “Maybe we ought to have a name for our company. What do you think?”

Xiomara looked thoughtful. “We are a family company,” she answered. “No one must ever forget that. We are the Ramirez Family Company. Isn’t that good enough?”

“It is a bit long,” said Sotero. “Can’t we make it catchier? And shorter? We could put the name on all our trucks and maybe it will help sales. The word ‘family’ makes us look so small and unimportant. Everyone wants to appear bigger than they really are, so why shouldn’t we? People are impressed with size today. No one cares about some family from Mexico.”

Xiomara thought about this. She knew he was right.

“What about just calling it Ram?” Marta suddenly interrupted. “That is short, but everyone in Tequila, Mexico, will know that it stands for our family. And you know, a ram is a male sheep in English. It also means hitting something hard, like a ram would ram into you if he was mad. So it would sound strong to Americans.”

The two parents looked at their young daughter, then at each other.

“Ram,” said Sotero.

“Ram,” said Xiomara. And they both hugged Marta and kissed her cheeks.

“We could also paint a picture of a ram on our trucks,” suggested Marta, smiling at her parents. “It would be like a symbol of how strong our family is.”

Sotero looked at his daughter, then at Xiomara. “It could be an angry ram, snorting and pawing, ready to charge and ram into something. Or someone,” he said thoughtfully.

“That could suggest that the drink is strong and virile, and the company is strong and virile too,” added Xiomara. She hugged her daughter again. “You are a genius, my sweet. We have a name and a mark, and it is all about our family!”

Sotero reached his arms around both of them in a group hug.

The name “RAM” with a picture of a raging ram began to appear on all their bottles, on their trucks, and everywhere else they could think to put it. Their brand became familiar in the industry, and their sales continued to grow, as did their profits.

One evening while her mother was working and Sotero was out in the distillery, Marta, now age twelve, heard the sound of a truck coming up the roadway to the *hacienda*. No one was expected, so she looked out of the window and saw a vehicle she did not recognize enter the round drive in the front of the *hacienda*, and four men jumped out. Each man carried a bat or a club of some kind and had a grim look.

“Mama,” Marta cried out. “Some men are here and I am scared.”

Xiomara rushed over to the window and saw the men approaching. “These men are here for no good. Run as fast as you can and get your father. Tell him what is happening.”

“But Mama, what about you?”

“Don’t worry. I will be fine. Now run!”

Marta ran—out the back and the hundred yards or so to the distillery where her father was working. Meanwhile, Xiomara went boldly to the front door planning to confront the intruders, who she saw carried clubs as well as torches that they were now lighting. She burst through the front door angrily, screaming, “How dare you? How dare you come to our home? Get out! Get out!”

“Papa, Papa, men are here and I am afraid they are going to hurt Mama,” Marta cried out breathlessly as she ran up to the distillery.

Sotero did not answer her, but he ran to a closet and took out a twelve-gauge double-barrel shotgun and a bag of extra shells. “Stay here,” he ordered her and began sprinting back to the house.

But Marta did not stay. She followed him, although she could not run as fast as he. She could hear yelling and screaming in the distance and a crash of glass as she approached their *hacienda*. And then she smelled it. She ran faster, straight to the back door of the house, in the door, up to the bedrooms.

“Wake up! Wake up!” she screamed at her brothers, Pedro and Carlos, as she grabbed her baby sister, Francesca, from her crib. She led them all out of the back door and away from the growing smell of smoke. They hurried toward the distillery, but then Marta stopped and handed the baby to her little brother Pedro. “Stay here!” she ordered. They were all crying, but she had no time to console them. She began to run to the front, but before she could get there, she heard two big booms that made her stop running. Marta looked up and saw flames on the roof of her home growing bigger and bigger very quickly. And then she heard two more big booms. The flames seemed to be all over her home.

She rounded the corner of the burning building and saw it: Her father had shot four men and they lay bleeding on the ground, two of them writhing, two not moving. Then she saw her mother on the ground, with her father kneeling by her. She watched Sotero rise from Xiomara, reload his shotgun, and walk over to the men who were on the ground. Then she watched as he shot each one of them again in the head, even the ones no longer moving. He tossed aside the gun, walked back to Xiomara, picked her up, and carried her away from the flames.

When morning came, the *hacienda* had burned to the ground, and Marta no longer had a home or a mother.

CHAPTER ONE

Houston—Present Day

The black limousine sat parked in front of the spa waiting for its passenger. This was the most expensive spa in town, and it only catered to the very rich. The Temple of Bliss spa rewarded its customers with the highest prices, topping even spas in Manhattan or Beverly Hills, but its wealthy clientele raved about the treatments and affirmed it was well worth the ridiculous price. Dmitri sat patiently in the driver’s seat, properly attired in a black suit and tie, listening to Russian radio that he was able to pick up on his system and at the same time focusing on the screen of his phone. He knew this was an easy ticket, a simple drive to the airport and a big tip. It was five p.m. and he was early, but he had the time and was more than happy to listen to the news of his homeland.

A second black limousine pulled up behind him. Dmitri glanced up and then went back to his phone. Other drivers with other fares were to be expected at this place. But a moment later, he looked up to a tap on his driver’s side window. A Hispanic fellow in a similar type of black suit was signaling him to lower his window. Dmitri was annoyed.

“What the fuck do you want?” he growled, lowering his window.

“Hey man,” said the Hispanic. “You don’t need to be here anymore. Your ride has been cancelled. I got it.”

“No fucking way,” Dmitri shot back. “This is my fare.”

“Hey, I get it. It’s a big fare. What is it? Two hundred fifty dollars? Three hundred dollars? But you see, this woman’s husband has a special surprise for her that he has arranged, so we are taking her there when she comes out. It’s a surprise, get it? So she doesn’t even know about it. And that’s the way he wants it. He’s a big shot in Los Angeles and he wants to do something big for her. We will take it from here.”

“I haven’t heard that my job was cancelled.”

“And you won’t, see, because this is a surprise so she wouldn’t cancel.”

“What about my fare? I am not going anywhere, man.”

“No problem. Here.” And the Hispanic ripped out four crisp hundred-dollar bills and passed them to Dmitri.

This was even more than he had expected on this trip, and now Dmitri did not even have to share it with his boss. But he was still not ready to give up. “I don’t know,” he said, at which point the man lifted his jacket to show a .357 Magnum pistol in his belt.

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be, man. Just take your money and drive off.”

Dmitri did not think about it anymore. He drove off immediately, heading for his favorite bar to have a bottle of their best vodka. He sent a text to his boss that the client cancelled at the last minute.

The new black limousine pulled forward to take its place, and a second car, a white van with two more Hispanic men sitting in the front seats, pulled up behind it.

Nora Ramirez sauntered up to the checkout desk inside the spa. The two young girls behind the counter both smiled at her.

“We hope you have enjoyed your stay, Mrs. Ramirez,” said one.

“Why, Lisa, it was just marvelous,” Nora replied. “And you have such lovely new things in your shop—I had myself a good old time. Now be sure to email that bill to my husband, Tomaso Ramirez. It’s gonna be a big one and his getting that is icing on the cake for me. In fact, I just think I’ll take another peek in your gift shop—maybe there is something I missed.”

Nora smiled in delight, thinking about how Tomaso would groan. She virtually floated out of the spa fifteen minutes later, feeling rejuvenated and totally happy. A box was to be shipped from the pricey store directly back to Los Angeles with not one, not two, but three different cover-ups, since she simply could not make up her mind. She had just spent a fortune, a massive bill that she would make sure her husband saw. She had also purchased a chic new sweatsuit and sandals at the spa’s expensive shop, and she wore her comfy new outfit with relish for her trip home. Her large yellow Goyard tote bag, embossed in red with her initials, NMR, hung over her shoulder. She almost skipped out to the waiting limousine, and the attentive Hispanic driver politely opened the door for her to enter. She breezed in.

“What a day, what a time, what a life! I just love Texas,” she said to no one as she sprawled in the back of the vehicle. The limousine moved off with the white van trailing close behind. Nora looked out the window as the buildings passed by. It was a cool autumn day but clear, and the sun shone brightly. The car moved through town as Nora continued to bask in her many recent spa experiences. She thought that just maybe she would give one of those cover-ups to her teenage daughter Jocelyn. Or perhaps not; she could decide after trying them on again when back in LA.

When the city was left behind, the limousine made a sudden turn into a cul-de-sac to a location that was hidden from the main road. The white van followed. Nora had been lounging but sat up, accidentally knocking her yellow Goyard purse onto the car floor. Some items spilled out of it.

“What are you doing?” said Nora annoyedly to the driver. “Sorry, *Señora*, I have to check on something.” He quickly stepped out of the car.

“What?” she said. But suddenly both back doors of the limo opened, and two burly men grabbed Nora from both sides. She screamed, but there was no one to hear her. She kicked but the men were quite strong and held her firmly. The driver produced some zip ties, and soon Nora’s hands and feet were tied and her mouth was gagged. The men carried her from the limousine and carelessly threw her in the back of the van like a sack of potatoes. Her yellow Goyard bag was left behind in the back of the limousine. The limo driver pulled Nora’s cell phone out of the bag, smashed it on the ground, and then drove in the opposite direction while the van left the city.

Nora was bruised and confused, stunned and terrified, and she kept kicking with her bound legs at the side of the van. The men ignored her. After twenty minutes, the van stopped, and the men pulled Nora out of the back of the van. She looked around and realized she was in a heliport. By this time, it was dusk turning to dark, and the men had parked the van on the side of the building, so it was mostly out of sight from anyone around the heliport. The area was deserted anyway, but the men had opted to take no chances that they would be seen. They stuffed Nora into a large burlap sack, hog-tied and gagged, and then carried her to a nearby helicopter and pushed the flopping sack into the middle of a passenger seat. They jumped into the helicopter on either side of her. The pilot was already in the cockpit and had been waiting for them. The helicopter took off and began its flight to the south with only the pilot, the two men, and the sack.

“*Señora*,” one of the men yelled to the sack, loudly enough to be heard above the sound of the rotors. “We are going to take you out of there so you can sit up, but only if you don’t struggle or kick or fight with us.”

“We are high above the ground now,” said the other kidnapper, “so if you make any trouble, we can just push you out of here, but I don’t think you would like that.”

The men untied the sack, pulled Nora out of it, and sat her between them. They also took her gag out of her mouth. She immediately started screaming.

“What are you doing? Why have you taken me? Please don’t hurt me! My family will pay for me, anything you ask,” Nora pleaded. The men ignored her, and the sound of the flight was so loud, it was easy to do. “I’m thirsty. Can I have some water?” They still ignored her. “Please, please,” she persisted, and finally one of the men gave her a bottle.

They flew for hours and then landed. The pilot turned off the engines and jumped out, but the men on either side of Nora did not move. Nora realized that the helicopter was refueling. She thought about trying to attract some attention, but looking at her two captors, she gave up the idea. Soon the pilot was back and the helicopter quickly took off again. It was already dark, and Nora had no idea what was happening or where she was going. Her wrists and legs hurt, her head ached, and her bladder was uncomfortably full, but there was nothing she could do.

Soon she realized they were over the ocean, and they flew on for a long time. Hours later, she saw the lights of a ship in the distance, and the helicopter began to lower. It flew to the ship and landed on a helipad at the front, but the pilot did not turn off its engines. Instead, a large black man, lowering his head to avoid the propeller, approached the door of the helicopter, and the two kidnappers slid open the door and pushed Nora out of the cockpit to the black man, who carried her as if she weighed nothing. He moved out of range of the blades with Nora slung over his shoulder. The helicopter took off immediately, and the sound of it soon faded. Nora began to wriggle and yell, but the man held her tightly.

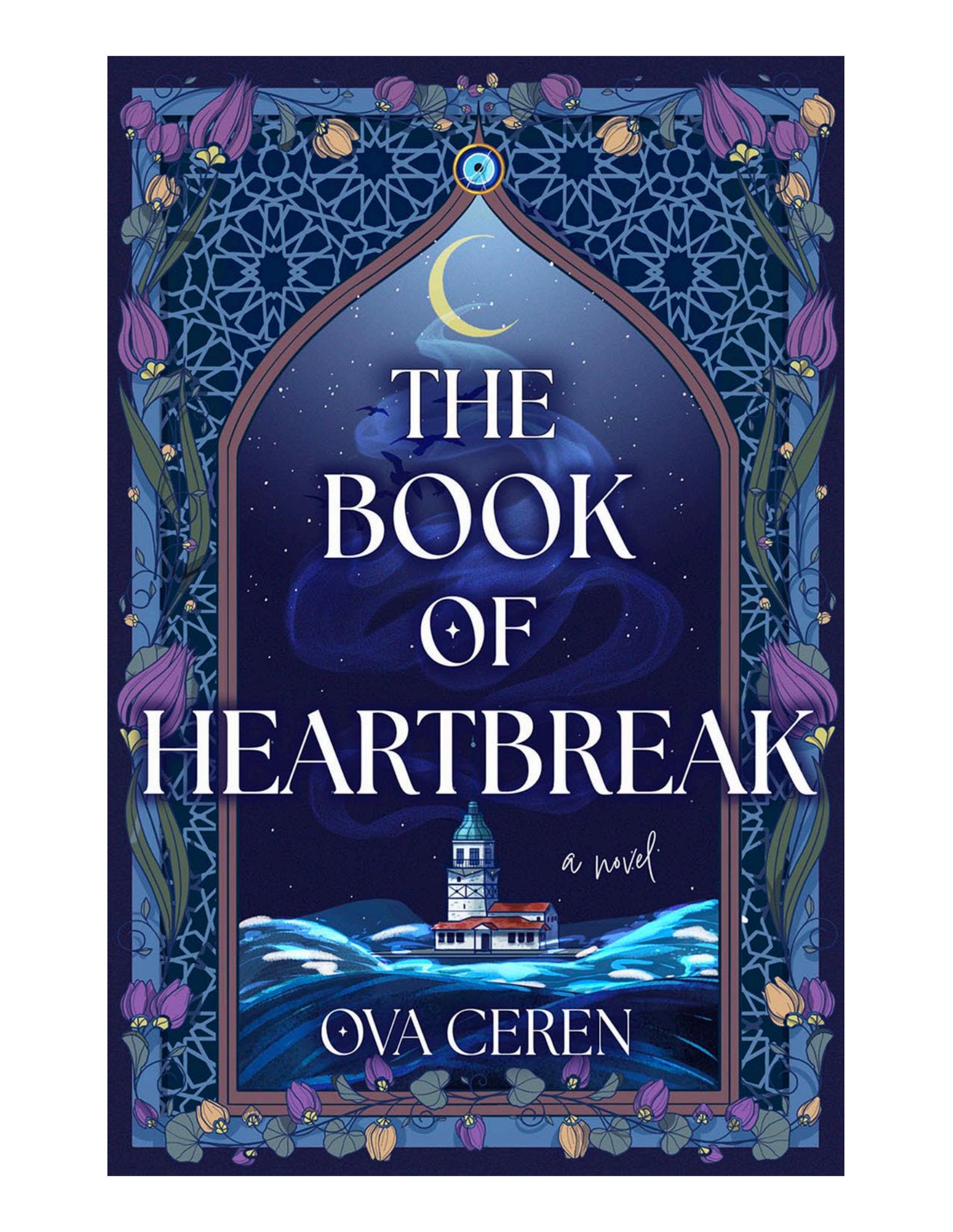
“Who are you?” she cried. “My family will pay for me. Please put me down.”

But the man carried his whimpering cargo to the stern of the boat. He flopped her down on a bench and she cried out in pain. She was sprawled on her side, but the man sat her up, and then tied her to the seat so she could not get up or move. Although she was completely traumatized, Nora struggled to get her bearings and calm her spirits for whatever was to come next. The large man sat on a bench across from her and began to whittle with a pocketknife. She was about to try to speak with him again when another man came up from below the deck, walked over to her, and shined a flashlight in her eyes.

“Well, Nora, so good to see you!” he said. “Welcome to the Caribbean. I hope you enjoyed your trip.” He smiled at her with a wicked grin.

Her heart filled with dread when she realized who he was.

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Ova Ceren is a software developer and the creator behind the highly popular BookTok and Instagram channels @excusemyreading, where she shares literary landmarks, cozy views of her garden library, and ongoing adventures of her resident flock of ducks. Half woman, half book, she was born and bred in Izmir, Turkey, and now lives in Cambridge, UK. Ova never forgets a heartbreak. She writes magical stories to put the pieces back together.

[Website](#)

*Communication is classified as Highly Confidential.
Circulation strictly limited to beings of celestial origins.*

Subject: Urgent Inquiry Regarding Discrepancy in Curse Records

Date: 7 January 2025

From: Grey the Compassionate, Associate Cherub, Curse and Malediction Archives, Worldly Index, Sacred Data Systems, Halotech Data & Integration Hub **To:** Fate Adjustment Bureau—ALL Angels

CC: Mortal Affairs Commission—ALL Angels

Dear and Most Respectable Angels of the Fate Adjustment Bureau,

I hope this message finds you in cherubic spirits. I am reaching out to address a most pressing matter in the Curse and Malediction Archives.

During a recent database upgrade, I discovered that the curse record CID-1010834556 had been deleted without the approval of my superior, the Divine Data Officer. While I can retrieve some of the data from the backups, attempting to open the full report, including the related document (DTH-9000719), results in an Unauthorized Access error, even though I have the necessary permissions.

And there is more! On several occasions, the cursed mortal, ID: M939274856567048343, appears to have crossed into our domain, yet there is no record of their arrival on the Otherside. It is most perplexing that this soul has experienced death three times. Three times!

Further investigation led me to conclude that this is the work of an exceptionally strong curse, festering on years of unanswered prayers from another mortal. It's unfortunate that the Prayer Response & Fulfillment Division was too occupied to respond, and thus the curse spawned many tragedies. A quick examination reveals that a throng of mortals involved are already dead, and the curse, which should be dormant according to our sacred systems, is still very much active. It tickles my curiosity.

I would be delighted to volunteer my services in any plans to tackle this curse. I always had a fondness for Konstantiniyye—or Istanbul as it's called these days (a pity if you ask me, as I favor the old name)—and I'm particularly enthralled by enigmatic curses.

As much as the audacity of advising my superiors crushes me, I am obliged to remind you that if this matter falls onto the radar of the archangels or—Heavens forbid—They Whom Should Not Be Concerned, the consequences may be drastic. So we must act, dear comrade superiors!

Your prompt attentions to this matter will be greatly appreciated.

Yours divinely,
Grey the Compassionate
Doctorate of Angelic Scholarship (Hons)
Thrice longlisted for the Heavenly Achievement Prize

Chapter One

It may not be evident to the untrained eye, but Death is ever-present, woven through our world like the wind, rain or storm. Those blessed with the pure eye understand that Death is not a lone entity but a legion, its acolytes walking among us to fulfill their duties. These emissaries may occasionally falter, their missteps—though trivial to them—bearing dire consequences for mortals. What is a human life to the Hidden, if not too numerous and dispensable to be accounted for with meticulous care?
Excerpt from *The Book of Heartbreak, Münecimbaşı Sufi Chelebi's Journals of Mystical Phenomena*

My life turns upside down on a Tuesday evening in June.

I get home from school as usual, eager to shut out the world behind the front door. But the minute I see our neighbor Fiona tucked into the hallway, I know something is wrong.

The evening is too balmy for shivering, the hour too late for visitors. Not that we usually have any. It's just Mum and me—if you don't count the succession of men who make fleeting appearances at random hours. Mum's regrettable taste in the other sex must be beginning to drag down the property values in our morbidly expensive street.

"Sare." Fiona looks everywhere but into my eyes, balancing her toddler Dotty on her hip. "Darling."

At the word *darling* my hands go clammy. Mum's friends mostly ignore her asocial, weird seventeen-year-old daughter. But now Fiona extends her arm toward me, her shirt buttons askew, her hair a mess. I recoil from the touch. Whatever has caused her to wash up here wearing slippers and no make-up is bad news, and I want none of it.

"What's going on?" I shrug; my backpack.

"Will you come inside for a minute?"

"Where's Mum?" I'm determined to pinpoint my mother's whereabouts before delving into whatever trouble has transpired. If I can predict what's wrong, perhaps things won't be as catastrophic. "Is she home?"

Now looming at the threshold of the reception room, Fiona shakes her head.

I go still, my gold pendant heavy around my neck, any remaining hope I had melting like ice cream in my hand. Grubby toddler fingers tug at Fiona's hair, but she doesn't flinch. *Shit*, I think as my feet follow them inside the room. *Shit, shit, shit*. The thuds of my footsteps sound hollow—as if I'm made of fear and not flesh. Something must have happened. I begin to plot tolerable scenarios that wouldn't be the worst. Perhaps Mum's in hospital, unwell but unharmed. Or she could have driven to Ferit's place again, the ex she can't forget. Has she made a scene at his? Perhaps the police have arrested her.

Inside, Dotty starts to cry as soon as Fiona sinks onto the worn-out sofa. "Please sit."

"Why?"

“Please,” she repeats. Her gaze still evades me. She doesn’t want to be here, I realize. She doesn’t want to deliver this speech or meet The Book of Heartbreak my eyes. I feel a twinge of pity for her, that she has to bear whatever turbulence my mother has caused. My heart Gutterers inside my ribs like a caged bird. The Guttering is a gentle prelude before a burning pain that mustn’t come—a warning that I can’t think about others. I have to focus on myself. She isn’t here, but Munu’s words chime in my ears as I sink onto the sofa, perching on its edge. *You have a responsibility to protect yourself. You must care about yourself and no one else.*

If only it were that easy.

Fiona sets Dotty on the floor before easing herself beside me. The toddler immediately uses the edge of the coffee table to pull herself upright. Three empty wine bottles wobble in front of her, the dappled reflection of the Japanese maple in the front garden imprinted on their necks.

I clasp my hands between my knees and face Fiona, ready to absorb the damage.

“Your mother—” Her knee jabs into mine as she snatches a tarnished coaster from Dotty’s mouth. I shift to avoid her squirming. “Your mother was involved in an accident, and unfortunately, she didn’t make it.” Fiona swallows a dry sob.

“Accident?” I look away from her and glance around the room as if it owes me an explanation. Last night’s half-finished meal is sat on a plate in the corner, rotting. Mismatched cushions lie on the sofa, the TV remote wedged between them; wine glasses, an array of empty mugs, boxes of painkillers on top of a pile of magazines.

“She was driving down the M11, and it appears that she’d been drinking—” Fiona shakes her head in disbelief, as if it makes no sense, like Mum was the sanest person on the face of the earth and would never drink & drive. She pauses as if it’s my turn to talk, but I don’t have any words.

“The police called me an hour ago,” Fiona says eventually, with a sigh.

The fact that this woman was Mum’s emergency contact &lls me with sorrow. Mum lost her own mother when she was born, and her father died when she was pregnant with me. She has a few friends, sure, but no other family. We have no one who truly cares. No one to call when she dies. No one but a neighbor, who clearly wishes she wasn’t involved.

“She’s ... dead?” I &nally stutter. The idea that someone’s life can be flicked on & like a light switch—that your mum can vanish on a motorway in an instant—doesn’t seem real.

“She’s gone, Sare.” Fiona reaches for Dotty’s shoulder as the child loses her balance and lets out a wail. “I can’t believe it. I saw her only this morning.”

Dead, my mind registers, like an ink stain expanding on a white napkin. My mother is dead. The Guttering in my chest sharpens into a searing, inescapable throb. My hands twitch on my lap, the scars inside my left palm tingling.

Fuck. I shouldn’t have ignored the Guttering.

A dated photograph of my mother and me in a wooden frame grows larger above the &replace. I must be &ve or six, Mum is sober, and her smile is timid. Her hand clutches my arm as if to ensure that I’m real, that I’m really hers. She used to love me back then, when I was a child and she still had a light in her eyes. Then I grew up, and she changed. *Why do you make everything a big deal?* Her voice wavers in my ears. *Why do you always have to worry so much, Sare?*

The walls begin to shrink and I exhale all the hope that was left in me. My lungs debate. My heart begins to sizzle and I look down to my open palm, where three faint scars are carved as reminders for me not to mess up again.

“She’s gone,” Fiona repeats, her voice stilted like a robot on the brink of shutting down. That’s when I spot the &ssures appearing on the wall behind her.

No. It can’t be happening again. I have to stop it. I have to prevent it.

Rule number three, I recite in vain. *Death is not an option.*

For a brief moment I consider grasping my pendant to summon Munu. Is it too late? Maybe she can help, do something to prevent my failure, but before I can do anything, the walls crumble, and the room closes around me like the grip of an old regret.

She's gone. The words echo, circling me like vultures. *She's gone.*

She's gone. She's gone.

"No!" I scream. "Stop!"

Sare, you fool. Did you really think you could win against the curse?

What have I done? How did I trick myself into believing that I didn't love Mum? I never stopped caring about her. She is all I have.

The floor quivers, creaking and groaning in response to my panic, and the house bows down, succumbing to the relentless force of the earthquake. The pain I yearned to forget these past four years pierces me like lightning, proving once more that it's stronger than I've ever been. I should get back, recite the rules, breathe, count—distract myself. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?

There are hundreds of ways to live your life, and they say you should make the most of it. I never dare follow this advice. In the past, I was naive enough to chase happiness, but each heartbreak has taught me a lesson. I wasn't like the other kids. I had to master my emotions. And I thought I had—I haven't cried since I was thirteen. I shut myself away so no emotion could worm itself into my chest. I refused every sliver of hope and happiness. I didn't have a drop of love left in me. I can't be screwing all that up now.

But the earthquake rages on, breaking glass, splintering wood—telling me what I truly am. An orphan. A no one. The loneliest girl who ever walked the earth. It's too late to get back or resist; too late to call for help. I hear the crack of my heart and fall to the floor like a ragdoll.

This time, it only takes nine seconds to die.

INTRODUCTION BY
RACHEL HARRISON

HOWL

AN
ANTHOLOGY OF
WEREWOLVES
FROM WOMEN-IN-HORROR

EDITED BY LINDY RYAN &
STEPHANIE M. WYTOVICH

HOWL
EDITED BY LINDY RYAN & STEPHANIE M. WYTOVICH
EXCERPT BY CHRISTINA HENRY

BRAM STOKER AWARD NOMINATED EDITOR

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An exceptional draw not just for horror readers.”

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* * *

Flesh splits. Bones break. Screams build.

The synchronicity of woman and wolf has long been buried. Ruled by the moon and her cycles of blood, rage, and transformation, the desire and pull to shapeshift and transmute runs deep beneath her skin. She is a beacon of duality, the divine and the monstrous, the deep glow of wolfsbane and the indent of fresh bite marks on skin.

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STEPHANIE M. WYTOVICH is a Bram Stoker Awards®-winning American poet, novelist, and essayist. Her work has been showcased in numerous magazines and anthologies such as *Weird Tales*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *Southwest*

Review, Year's Best Hardcore Horror: Volume 2, The Best Horror of the Year: Volume 8 & 15, as well as many others. Her edited nonfiction anthology, *WRITING POETRY IN THE DARK*, was a Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist in 2023.

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[Website](#)

WHEN WE RUN WE ARE FREE

By Christina Henry

A pickup truck pulled into the lot this afternoon. This is not unusual in a general sense, but the truck was brand-new—just rolled off the lot brand-new. The closest dealer is 80 or so miles from here, and most people around these parts can’t afford anything new. So, a traveler. We don’t get a lot of travelers this time of year.

A fragile-looking blonde climbed out of the passenger side. She wore one of those \$3,000 puffy coats with coyote fur on the ruff. I tried not to hold the coyote fur against her. Her snow boots appeared to be touching snow for the first time. Ed Debicki does a pretty good job cleaning the lot with the plow, but there’s always a little slush built up around the pumps.

Despite the boots, the blonde picked her way across to the store like her bones were made of glass. The bell over the door rang as she entered. She looked around at the chips and beer and cigarettes, then found me standing behind the counter. Her eyes widened a little, like she hadn’t expected to find an actual human this far from civilization. She’d only be part-right on the human score, but that wasn’t something I talked about with strangers.

“Hi. Do you have a bathroom I could use?”

I pointed in the direction of the two single-person rooms in the back corner. She nodded and continued her careful journey. As she crept along, I reassessed my opinion. She wasn’t tiptoeing because she was afraid of falling. She was walking that way because she was already hurt. I frowned after her as she disappeared behind the closing door.

A second later, the bell jangled again. A big guy with an unnecessarily aggressive expression pushed in. He, too, wore an overpriced boots-and-jacket combo. He stalked up to the counter. I put on my best bland expression. I already knew what this jackass was mad about.

“I can’t use my credit card at the pump?”

“No, sir,” I said. We had old-fashioned manual pumps, the kind where you watch analog numbers rotate as the gas emptied into the tank. “I can take cash here, or Visa or Mastercard.”

“Not American Express?” he said, already pulling out a platinum card.

“No, sir. Cash or Visa or Mastercard.”

“Goddamned banjo-playing backwater,” he said, and threw down a wad of bills from his wallet.

If I was not a good wolf, I could have broken his neck and taken his cash before he’d even blinked. I even had a good place to hide the body. There are so many ravines to conveniently lose things you don’t want to keep.

Then I heard the toilet flush and remembered that I *was* a good wolf. Mostly.

“Which pump?”

“Pump 1, obviously,” he said, already huffing his way out the door. “Goddamned bitch.”

Of course I was a bitch. When men don’t get their way, any woman near them is a bitch.

I rang in \$60 for pump 1, flipped it on, and rubbed the back of my neck. The tiny baby hairs there stood up beneath the thick weight of my braid, but I didn’t need raised hackles as a clue. “That guy is bad news,” I murmured.

The fragile blonde came out of the bathroom and stopped in front of the Hostess cake display.

She appeared to need some encouragement, so I said, “It’s always a good time for something sweet.”

The blonde glanced up at me, hunger and longing and something else—fear?—flickering across her eyes as she shook her head and said, “I’d better not.”

I looked out at the man angrily watching the pump dial and thought, *You mean he thinks you’d better not.*

“Passing through?” I asked, since she was hovering in the store but making no move to buy anything.

“Oh, um, no. My husband’s friend has a cabin near here? He said we could come visit for a couple of weeks?” Her voice turned up at the end of every sentence like she wasn’t really sure about their plans, or her life, or anything at all. “My husband wants to go snowmobiling in the national forest.”

“Uh-huh.”

We always got a few of those folks every winter, but they generally stayed in Mason Junction, about 20 miles away. There was a nice-looking bed and breakfast that stayed open past the summer tourist season. I was trying to figure out where this nearby cabin she’d spoken of was located when Big-and-Jerky came stomping back in.

“What are you doing, Deenie? Get back in the truck. Change,” he said, holding out his palm to me.

I glanced at the pump total and handed him back twelve cents. I’d always heard rich people stay rich because they count every penny.

Deenie was already out the door, hustling as fast as she could, when he slammed the shop door open and caught up to her. He grabbed her upper arm, and I saw her flinch and cry out. My hackles were as high as the Rockies now. He was half-dragging her to the truck.

“Bad news,” I said, as he pushed her into the passenger seat.

A minute later he gunned the engine and accelerated out of the lot. I spared a thought for Deenie, then sighed. It was none of my business and nothing I could do about it, anyway. I went to check the backroom stock just to have something to do. As I shifted boxes around and marked things off on the clipboard, I kept seeing his fingers closing around her arm.

None of your business, I told myself again, and kept repeating it until I kind of believed it.

* * *

There’s always a little rush right before the end of my shift, even in winter. Locals heading home, picking up a quart of milk to tide them over until they can get to the Safeway forty minutes away. Older folks sick of sitting in their houses all day pop in for some scratch-offs and conversation. People who just got paid rush in with less than a gallon of gas left in the tank, desperate not to be stranded on the side of a mountain road in winter.

Lieutenant Richardson’s tan SUV with the park ranger symbol emblazoned on the door pulled in a couple of hours after my encounter with Deenie and her partner. I’d spent most of the intervening hours restocking shelves that didn’t need it and polishing floors that were already clean. My whole body vibrated. I knew if I didn’t go for a run when I got home, I’d end up ripping someone’s head off the next day—and with me, that’s not a metaphorical action.

“How’s it going, Sam?” I said as he entered.

He tipped his ranger cap back on his head, gave me a look and went directly for a six-pack of Rainier.

“That good, huh?” I asked as he put it on the counter along with two cans of Pringles.

“Meg, sometimes I think tourism should be illegal. Or at least they should have to take an ‘Am I the Asshole?’ quiz before they cross the borders of our state.”

The back of my neck prickled again. I was getting sick of the feeling.

“Trouble with some out-of-towners?” I asked, with a lightness I didn’t feel.

“Rich piece of shit in a brand-new truck gets lost heading to his fancy-ass cabin and has a meltdown when I pull up behind him and tell him he’s on a forest service road.”

“Did he have a little blonde with him?”

“Yeah, she looked like she wouldn’t say boo to a goose,” he said, his expression asking a question.

“I had the pleasure a few hours ago,” I said, waving my hand outside. “He’d never seen a manual pump before. Nor, apparently, a credit card swipe that didn’t take American Express. So, what happened?”

Sam shrugged, throwing down a \$20 as I rang up his purchases. “And a Lucky 7s.”

I rolled my eyes as I pulled the scratch-off ticket down. “Why don’t you just put that \$1 in the toilet and flush it? Same effect.”

“You never know,” he said, accepting his change and the ticket. “Anyway, I told him he had to turn around and go back, that he was not on a road open to the public. Thought his head would actually explode. Started ranting and raving about how the GPS sent him that way and how the hell was he supposed to get there before dark if he turned around.”

“Not your problem,” I said, dropping his Pringles into a plastic bag.

“Just what I said.” He took a coin from the ‘give a penny, take a penny’ tray and began methodically scraping all the silver foil off the card. “Eventually I did have to indicate to the gentleman that I was not an interpretive ranger but a law enforcement officer and as such have all the powers that come with that position.”

“Like shooting his ass,” I said, with not a little hope in my voice.

“Or, alternately, arresting him if he continued to be a problem.”

He sighed and handed me the dud scratch-off. I threw it in the trash can without a word.

“Out of the kindness of my heart, I gave him the correct directions for the place he wanted to go and then followed him to make sure he got there. Bet he was screaming at the little blonde the whole time. Poor thing.”

“Where are they staying?” I asked.

“You know that old ski resort on the other side of the forest, off old route 78 across the state line?”

I frowned. “The one that closed down about five years ago?”

“That’s the one. Apparently, some rich so-and-so bought it, renovated it, and made it into his winter lodge. This guy is a friend of the owner.”

“A whole-ass ski resort just for him and his buddies? How come I didn’t hear about it? Nobody around here worked on it?”

“Nah. I gather the owner is some real-estate type so he had everything, including people, flown in from elsewhere. Great job supporting the local economy, huh? They did the work and moved on to the next one. Must have stayed on that side of the state line because I didn’t see them around here.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I hope you don’t run into them again.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will. Told me, once he’d calmed down a little, that they intended to go snowmobiling. The fellow did not strike me as the type to triple-check which trails he’s permitted to use, so ...” Sam trailed off meaningfully.

I laughed. “Well, enjoy your peace while you’ve got it.”

“You, too.”

He took off and I sat there for a minute, thinking. I was thinking about the little blonde, Deenie, and the careful way she’d walked. I was thinking about her husband’s hair-trigger temper.

And I was thinking I needed a good long run through the woods, maybe all the way to the state line.

My father was a wolf. He died when I was five. I remember his beard, big and scratchy, and how he would rub his cheek against my cheek and make me laugh. He wore worn-out flannel shirts that smelled like Old Spice aftershave. He would throw me in the air and I would fly high, so high, and then he would catch me and spin me in a circle.

Then he was gone and all that was left was my mama, bitter and grieving. And my mama did not want a child who spontaneously changed shape, who howled at the moon and made the neighbors think we were keeping a puppy that was not allowed in our apartment building. She didn't want a child that was not fit in any way for the public school system in Cleveland. When I was older, and thought about it some more, I decided that she probably didn't really want to have me in the first place, but she'd loved him, and he'd wanted me.

I never really understood how my dad ended up in a city in the first place. Cities are full of people and sharp smells, the smells of exhaust and frying onions and sweat and fear, smells that crowded up into your nose and sent your brain scrambling. There was nowhere to run, nowhere that was safe. What if a person thought you were a stray and trapped you? What if you got hit by a car?

I asked my mama on the drive out west why Dad had moved away from his home, away from the mountains and streams and forests where he could be free.

She'd said, through clenched teeth, "Get back in here and shut that window. Your father didn't want to be who he was."

Even then, I had a funny feeling that it was my mother who didn't want him to be who he was. It seemed to me that he'd given up a lot, more than his fair share, just to be with her. And Mama didn't want me to be what I was, either, so she drove for three days and nights until she found my grandmother, standing on the porch of her cabin like she knew we were going to arrive at exactly that time.

My nana held her arms open to me. My mother disappeared into a cloud of dust, never to be heard from again.

Nana taught me how to read and write, how to distinguish poison berries from delicious berries, how to run under the moon, how to keep my emotions in check so I wouldn't wolf at inopportune times. She filled me up with her wisdom and her cooking and her love. When I was 25 years old, she went into the forest and lay down in a bed of new-fallen leaves and never got up again.

I inherited her cabin and her belongings, but I didn't get quite enough of her inner peace or her good sense, because if I had, I wouldn't be standing on the edge of the old ski resort, ears pricked forward, paws twitching in the fresh snow.

The building loomed halfway up the slope, comically large, ludicrous for just a few people. It was one of those ski lodges that originally had a huge lobby and dining room and probably was meant to house 40 or 50 people at a time. Now it was some rich person's plaything for a couple of weeks out of the year.

It was just over the state border, as Sam had told me. While passing into a different state is not the same as passing into another country, I was profoundly aware of being out of my usual territory. There were other wolves about—full wolves as well as a couple of other half-humans—and while we'd respectfully avoided one another, I didn't know how any of them would respond if I did something stupid. Not that I was *planning* on doing anything stupid, but I always like to leave the possibility open.

The fact that I was standing there in the first place was stupid. Why did I give a shit about an angry rich man and his wrung-out-dishtowel wife? They were nothing to me. I didn't need to get involved.

I took a couple of steps forward, then back. It wasn't like me to hesitate. But then I remembered the way he'd grabbed her arm, and the way she'd hovered uncertainly in the store like she wanted to tell me something. Suddenly it wasn't so hard to trot up the hill toward the lodge.

I approached the building with more-than-usual caution. Plenty of people don't like wolves in a general sense, and they aren't shy about taking potshots at any who linger around their property. The guy inside seemed like the type to carry a gun but also the type who didn't know how to use it. Still, it was dark and I was careful.

The shiny new truck was nowhere to be seen. There must be a garage or carport around the back, because this tool had already gotten lost one time that night and I couldn't see him cruising around the curving mountain roads in the dark. A long and winding drive led up to the front of the building, a place where, in days past, a valet had likely taken the keys from travelers and parked their vehicles elsewhere.

Lights blazed in one corner of the house. The owner had gone with enormous, almost-but-not-quite floor to ceiling windows over most of the ground floor—very likely so he could see the sun rising or setting whichever direction he looked. Big windows like that made me feel exposed, but I suppose that rich people assume other folks want to look inside their houses.

Given the oversized windows, I'd have to be even more careful about how close I approached. I sidled up to the beams of light, stopping just short of where they cast on the snow, and looked inside.

Angry Rich Guy sat in a large leather armchair, a highball glass full of amber liquid near his hand. He was laughing with two other guys in their own leather armchairs. They were all white and middle-aged and had the soft look that came with wealth. They looked like the worst possible stereotype of men with privilege, down to their stupid goddamned leather slippers. They appeared to be having a grand old time, but there was no sign of Deenie.

I kept moving around the house, peering in each ostentatious room as I went. The second room was filled with hunting trophies—a stuffed black bear standing on its two back paws, a handful of deer and elk heads mounted on the wall. In one corner hung several wolf and coyote tails, probably trophies from public wolf cullings. My lips pulled back, exposing my teeth.

There was another room with an array of gym equipment, all of the cardio machines facing toward the mountains. It didn't make a lot of sense to me. I mean, you could run on a treadmill while looking at the mountains or you could hike in the mountains. I knew which one I preferred.

In the back I found the expected garage, about half the size of the house itself and clearly newly built. There were three brand-new trucks next to one another inside, big tough trucks so fake tough guys could pretend they were one of the common people. I also noticed three snowmobiles nestled under weather-resistant covers off to the side of the garage.

Just three snowmobiles, huh? I guess that meant that Deenie wouldn't be welcome to ride with them. I tucked that information away for later.

I kept going, trotting around to the other corner of the house. Every room had those huge windows, so she was easy to see when I found her.

She was in an enormous kitchen stocked with every overpriced brushed steel appliance imaginable. There was a massive refrigerator, an equally massive dishwasher. Everything seemed to have been purchased with an eye toward crowds. There was even a double oven. When would the three guys laughing over the liquor glasses ever need a double oven? This was clearly their private sanctuary. They wouldn't be letting the masses in.

Deenie stood with her back to me at a large kitchen island with a marble top. She appeared to be intently arranging a charcuterie board, no doubt for the pleasure and delight of the three assholes in the other room. Her shoulders were pulled up all the way to her ears and her movements were stiff and jerky. I watched her for a few minutes, feeling like a creep. Even if I was a woman, it didn't give me the right to spy on someone else's life. Just as I was about to turn away and head home, she went toward the refrigerator and I caught a glimpse of her profile.

The right side of her face was swollen, the eyelid closed and purpling. No makeup was going to cover that. And whatever he'd done to her, he'd obviously done it with the full endorsement of his little friends, because it had happened only in the last few hours.

It was hard not to pull a *Dracula* and crash through the window at that moment, rampage through the house, tear out the soft throats of those soft men while they screamed and pissed themselves. I heard my own growling, felt the fury spurting through my veins. Then I made myself step back, farther into the shadows. It was important to stay calm. If I killed them inside the house, there would be an investigation. If it looked like a wolf had killed them, then innocent wolves would suffer. I had to think. I had to come up with a plan.

Most importantly, I had to make sure to hide the bodies.

* * *

I didn't have a day off until Monday, which meant cooling my heels for two whole days. It was probably better, in the long run, as it meant I wouldn't do anything spontaneously stupid. Employers don't like it when you show up to work covered in blood and picking your prey's flesh out of your teeth.

Each night, after my shift ended, I took a run up to the cabin again. I followed long snowmobile trails in the snow, taking note of where they chose to ride and the convenient topographical features nearby that might assist me in my plan. The wild card, of course, was guns. All three men probably had them. All three men would probably consider shooting a wolf fair sport, especially a wolf like me. Werewolves are larger than your average wolf, even the females. At least one of them would consider my corpse a trophy.

I didn't have time to break into the house or garage and investigate this matter, so I'd just have to assume "guns" as a potential peril and leave it at that.

On Sunday night I returned to the lodge after following that day's snowmobile tracks. The three men, as Sam had already assumed, were not especially interested in staying on designated trails. They regularly detoured to hiking or horse-only trails, which I'm sure infuriated anyone else who encountered them. The house was dark when I returned, so I just took a trot around the grounds as a matter of course, not thinking I'd actually discover anything meaningful.

Deenie stood in the snow in the back, halfway between the house and garage. She wore no coat and no shoes, and she was crouched on the ground, sobbing into her hands. Her crying wasn't the worst part, though—it was that she was clearly trying to hide the noise from the men in the house. Even out here, in the cool night under the moon, she muffled her voice.

I wondered if her voice had ever been truly heard, if she'd spent her life smiling just because she was asked to, if she'd squashed down her "no" and said "yes" because she was taught to be agreeable, if she'd made herself small in body because she was told she was a pig if she was hungry. I wondered if anyone, ever, had heard her cry, or if it was always like this, hidden away from those who might hurt her for daring to be upset in the first place.

Her scent drifted to me on the night breeze, and I knew in an instant why she was outside in the snow, trying to freeze herself to death. I could smell three men on her, and I doubted she'd agreed to the arrangement.

I padded lightly over the snow to her, and stopped a few feet away, waiting. It was not my intention to scare or startle her. I didn't know what my intentions were, really. I just knew I couldn't bear to hear her cry. I let out a little huffing breath, so she would know I was there.

Deenie picked her head up out of her arms, her cheeks running silver in the moonlight. A little "oh!" puffed out of her, and she went very still. She was accustomed to making herself invisible when in sight of hunters.

I crept forward, nose down, making myself look as sweet and harmless as possible. It's not exactly easy when you're a large wolf. I stopped when I was within reaching distance of her hand, and waited to see what she would do.

She watched me, wary, but at least she wasn't sobbing anymore. I wanted to tell her it was all going to be better, and soon. I wanted to tell her what had happened that day would never happen again. I would make sure of that.

Her hand lifted out, trembling, unsure, and touched the place between my ears. I stayed very still as her fingers curled into my fur, tentatively scratching.

"You're beautiful," she said. "Beautiful."

I crept a little closer, and a smile creased her bruised and tearstained face. I let my tongue loll out, acted like a good doggy.

"I wish I could be like you," she said. "I wish I could just run away from here, run free."

You can, I wanted to say. *You always have that power.*

But, of course, she didn't believe it. She didn't believe it because he made sure she didn't. She didn't think she could do anything unless he said so.

I touched my nose to her cheek, felt her startled breath. Then I turned away and left her there in the snow. “Come back again,” she called softly into the dark.

I stopped and looked back, saw her watching. I gave a small, soft bark to let her know that I would.

* * *

The next morning, I waited in the woods near the edge of the property. I didn’t want to make any assumptions about the direction the three assholes were headed. There wasn’t a chance I’d let Deenie stay with them one extra day, not after what I’d discovered the night before.

They emerged from the lodge laughing, wearing their smug privilege like cloaks of armor. They all looked the same—wearing the same black coats and pants, goggles hiding their individual identities. Not that mattered. This was about more than just Deenie’s shit of a husband now. I deserved a goddamned award for not charging the three of them right then. But I steadied myself and remembered why I’d made the decision to wait. It wasn’t just about saving Deenie. I had to protect the other wolves around me, too.

The men climbed on to their snowmobiles and shot off the same way they’d gone the last two days. That made things easier. If they continued in the same direction, they’d come to a place where the trail curved tight around a cliff. There was a little bank that rose up about seven or eight feet above the trail, with several lodgepole pines sprouting up. The pines were a perfect place for me to lurk.

The tightly curving trail was not meant for snowmobiles. It was barely wide enough for two broad shouldered people to sidle past one another while hiking. They clearly thought they were quite the daredevils. I was thankful that they’d, at least, not encountered any actual hikers there. If they had, the hikers would have been pushed off into a narrow ravine that plunged about 500 feet down. Which, of course, is an excellent place to lose a few useless rich people.

I bounded after them, staying out of sight. It was easy enough to keep track of them. The snowmobiles were noisy and made the forest stink like exhaust, and the three of them kept howling and whooping at each other, clearly under the mistaken impression that they were real men.

As I ran, everything wild in me blossomed and bloomed. I kept it suppressed when I was around other people, smiled like I didn’t have fangs. Now it seemed my fangs grew sharper, my hunger larger. I’d dreamed of blood on the snow, and soon, I would have it.

It was nothing to arrive at the bank of trees I’d planned on hiding in before they did. The snow on the trail had a light, fresh cover from the previous night, and there were no footprints in it, which meant no worries about a winter hikers’ untimely return down this path. I crouched under the branches of the pines and waited.

The first driver appeared, climbing the path toward the turn. I had to time my leap perfectly. Everything slowed—my furious heart, my boiling blood, my eager breath.

Just as the first man was about to negotiate the turn, I bounded off the bank and into the path. He reacted precisely as I’d hoped. He panicked and steered away from me, and of course there was only so much trail for the front skis to grip. The weight of the machine, the weight of the man, and the acceleration required to climb the turn all combined in a nearly cinematic arc as he flew off the edge and into the ravine. It all happened so fast I didn’t even hear him scream.

The second driver tried to brake in time, but I lunged at him, and he threw himself from the snowmobile in a panic equal to his compatriot. The trouble is, the laws of physics still applied, and when you throw yourself into air, gravity does insist on exerting its will. The snowmobile skidded off the edge as its driver fell and fell and fell.

The third driver did halt, probably in shock, and I knew right away that it was Deenie’s husband. Despite the gas and exhaust, I smelled his acrid sweat and recognized him. He was the least of the three, the one who’d been given the last place in line despite (or perhaps because of) sacrificing his wife to the other two.

He sat there on the machine, watching me. I could tell he was thinking about charging me but wasn't sure he'd have enough room to do it safely, nor enough to back up without causing an accident. Instead, he shut off the snowmobile and climbed off slowly with his hands in the air, trying to make himself look bigger to scare me off.

"Get away!" he shouted. "Go on, go! Get lost!"

His tone was aggressive as usual, but he couldn't disguise the note of fear underneath, and it was so sweet to me. I growled at him, all my hackles up, making me look even bigger than I actually was.

He reached for a broken branch in the path and brandished it at me like a pathetic little sword. I'd thought he'd have a gun with him, but there was no sign of one. I'm sure he was regretting it. I growled even louder, savoring the terror that now filled my nostrils. Saliva ran over my teeth and dripped into the snow. I stepped closer.

"Go away!" he shouted. "Get the fuck out of here! Help! Help!"

I bet Deenie had called for help. I bet she'd prayed for it, night after night.

My body coiled, ready to spring. I let out three sharp barks, just for the pleasure of watching him drop the branch, startled. He stumbled back, tripping over the snowmobile's ski and falling to the snow.

"Oh, god," he said.

I leapt. He screamed.

My teeth found the curve of his throat, wrenching away the scarf he'd wrapped there. His hands reached up to try to hit me, to try to hurt me, but his hands were nothing to me, just pathetic little toys, beating in futility. My jaws opened wide, and the last things he saw on this earth were my white, white teeth.

I bit into his neck, felt his blood spurt hot and delicious on my tongue, heard him gurgling and crying. I didn't want to hear him anymore. He was meat to me, nothing more than that. I clamped down harder and felt the crunch of his spinal cord break. His head rolled away to rest in the snow, and I ate contentedly.

After a little while, I nosed the remains off the trail in the direction of the other two men. Then I pushed the snowmobile off, too, hearing it crash against the side of the mountain on the way down. I carried the head up to the knoll of pines, dug a hole, and buried it there.

Thick snow started to fall, and I was glad. It would cover the evidence of my sins. It would also cover the snowmobile trail the men had taken, which meant it would take longer, much longer to find out what happened to them.

It might even take until spring, and by then, who knew what might have happened? Perhaps their bodies will have been eaten by a bear or by a mountain lion or even, possibly, by a hungry wolf. Perhaps there would be nothing remaining but bleached bones and ragged cloth. Perhaps those bones will have been dragged into a cave or a crevice, never to be found. Perhaps someone will have even destroyed their identifications and shattered their jaws so that there would be no hope of discovering who they were at all.

I found a stream and cracked the thin layer of ice until I found the running water beneath. I doused my muzzle in the freezing water, rinsing away all traces of blood. Then I made my way back to the lodge.

The sun sets early in the winter, even earlier in the mountains, and the shadows were long when I returned. She waited at one of the tall windows that faced the back of the house, her arms crossed and barely visible in an oversized sweater that drowned her. She was clearly anticipating the men, and there was a notch in her forehead because she'd obviously thought they'd be back by now.

I trotted into her view, sat on my haunches and waited. Her eyes lit up and her arms uncrossed. She scrambled to the back door and opened it, pulling on boots as she did so. A gust of hot air emitted from the house.

"You," she said, and she knelt down, holding out her hand to me.

I crossed the snow to her and pushed my wet nose into her hand.

"I'm so happy to see you," she said, patting me.

I darted away from her, turned back, barked. She looked confused. I ran back, pushed my head at her, repeated my previous actions.

"You want me to follow you?" she asked.

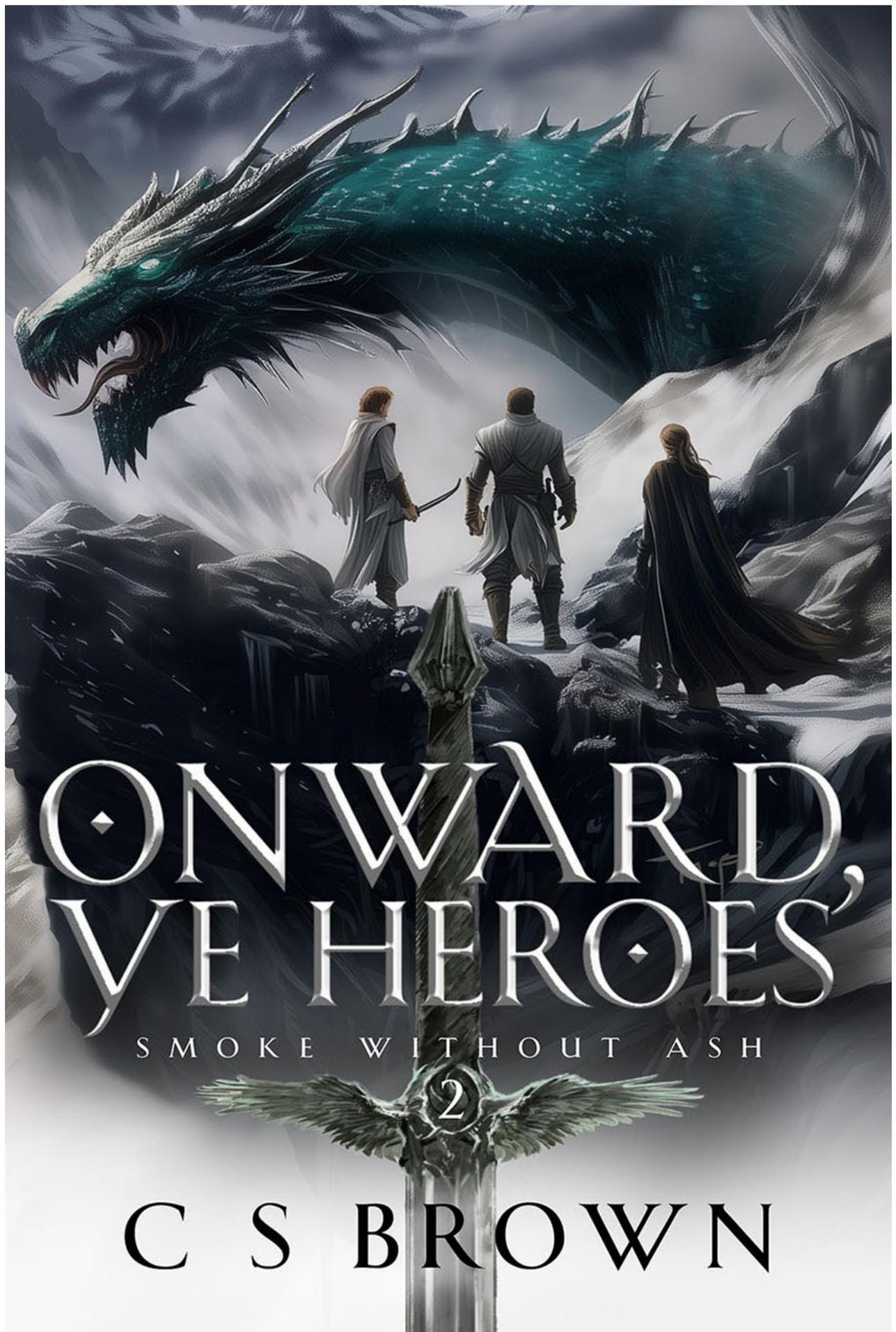
I barked again.

“It’s almost like you understand me,” she said, laughing as she pulled on her heavy coat. I still didn’t like the coyote fur.

She yanked the door closed behind her as I lured her out into the snow, running back and forth, playing tag, making her chase me. She kicked up snow and laughed like a child.

Her face glowed in the burnished light of the setting sun, and in that moment, she was free.

She ran, and she was free.



ONWARD, YE HEROES'

SMOKE WITHOUT ASH

2

C S BROWN

ONWARD, YE HEROES
(SMOKE WITHOUT ASH)
BY C S BROWN

“With surprising twists and secrets this is a perfect ending to an epic duology.”

~BOOKTRIB

* * *

The three heroes stand against evil, their fates entwined. Pushed by clans of dragons to accept a responsibility that never should have been theirs, they must face the Smoke Without Ash as it emerges from the northern deserts. Together, they must stand on the front line, defending the world from the forces of evil.

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A few years ago, C S Brown left the rat race and moved to Central America. Perched atop a mountain in the middle of a jungle with a beautiful view of the local lake, he settled into retirement. But he found I wanted to do something productive with his time.

He started writing. Never before had he tried telling a story. He got hooked and kept writing until one day he realized he had written a book.

Today, you can find him enjoying the view, writing his fantasies in the peaceful confines of a little house outside a (very) small town. When not writing, he enjoys playing guitar, hanging with friends, and being bossed around by two cats. All in the shadow of an active volcano.

[Website](#)

QUESTIONS

Elsbeth's fiery gaze met the eyes of the two dragons without flinching. Sitting to her right, his majesty Tian Unseer watched her with nervous fascination. On her other side, Torg sat quietly, waiting for someone else to speak first.

The three Heroes sat on one side of the oversized table in the Annishere pavilion. Across the table, Déa of Tauris Reach and Déa of Drake Valley sat side by side. Behind them, outside on the parade field, the great form of Orator rested in the sparse grass.

Tian turned to face the two Déa. "Thank you all for coming. I know that I have some questions, and I thought we might ask them together."

Elsbeth fumed. "I'm getting tired of the answers we receive. I am happy enough to pack up and go home. I will leave the hero business to you and Torg."

Tian pursed his lips. "That is certainly one possibility."

"I'm thinking it is more than a possibility. I haven't been able to come up with a good reason to stay."

Torg looked her. "Just because Tian and I have also been told we are the Hero of Destiny doesn't mean you are not. Perhaps if you leave, the Dark wins."

Elsbeth stiffened, glared at him for a few seconds, then visibly deflated. "The prophecies of Laitia do mention that I have a choice. I can quit and live out the rest of my life in peace. But if I do—and if I really am the Hero—the Dark will eventually destroy the world."

Tian turned to look directly at the Déa. His eyes were flinty, his lips drawn tight. "I want to know why there are three of us sitting here when there is only supposed to be one Hero of Destiny."

Déa of Tauris Reach shifted uncomfortably. "Sire, I apologize. We searched the world for the Hero, but prophecies are not always as clear as we would like. We are convinced that one of you is the prophesied one but don't know which of you it is."

"And you did not think you should inform us of this?"

"With all due respect, it was hard enough getting you to muster your troops. Would you be here now if you thought someone else was the Hero?"

Tian thought for a moment. "I think I would, but I might have waited. I doubt I would have responded as quickly."

“Exactly. We need you here. If the Hero of Destiny is not here to confront the Smoke without Ash, then all else is a lost cause. Because you might be him, we could not afford to take the chance.”

Elsbeth shot a withering look at the Déa of Drake Valley. “If you are unsure, how can we trust that any one of us is the Hero? The world is a big place. Your savior might be washing dishes in some saloon right now.”

“Most unlikely. We searched everywhere, and only you three were found. Truthfully, we were surprised to find more than one, so we were careful in our search.”

Torg leaned forward on his elbows. “I am wondering. How exactly do you check? Orator told me he could smell that I was the Hero.”

“*Not exactly, Hero.*” Though there was no sound, the memory of Orator’s voice came unbidden to mind. “*I said that I could taste it in the air around you. This is as close as I can describe the sensation, as you lack the sensory perception necessary to detect magical ability in others.*”

Tian sat bolt upright. “Magical ability? What are you talking about?”

“*All three of you have magic talent.*”

Tian scoffed. “If I were a magician, do you think I would have spent my life as a soldier? I would have sat in some luxurious court telling fortunes to noble ladies with more gold than sense.”

Déa of Tauris Reach smiled enigmatically. “Of course you have magical talent, Tian. Why do you think you have survived so many wars? What do you think makes you such a good swordsman and a master tactician?”

Tian frowned. “I have been wielding a sword almost as long as I can remember. I always thought I was lucky.”

“I have watched you on the practice field defeat five veteran swordsmen without taking a single blow. You appear to counter your opponent’s attacks before they even happen. On the battlefield, you always manage to choose the best tactics, placing troops as if you knew your enemy’s mind. And in a way, you do. I was unsure of the exact nature of your talent until you dreamed of Wurmsteep.”

Tian’s eyes widened at the reference. “Are you saying that my dreams are magical?”

“I believe that you have the gift of prescience.”

Tian settled back into his chair, his face descending into a void of expression.

“Maybe Tian can see the future, but there is nothing magical about me,” Torg insisted.

Orator’s reply appeared in Tian’s memories. “*Look carefully before you dismiss your talent. As an apprentice minesmith, you eclipsed your master. Think back on how many times you located rich veins of minerals hidden in the rock that others had missed, how you naturally knew when an extra support or brace was needed, or when to avoid an unstable area. Your magic is rooted in the knowledge of the Earth itself.*”

Torg sat silently for a second. “How do you know this? Have you been watching me for the last four years?”

“*No, I only recently met you.*”

“Yet you seem to know all about my life.”

“*I did not see, but the rock remembers.*”

Before Torg could frame a follow-up question, Déa of Drake Valley jumped in, “And yours, My Lady, is obvious. You can make dragonsteel.”

Elsbeth’s head snapped up to stare down the Déa. “That isn’t magic, just an accidental discovery.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Elsbeth paused. “Well . . . Finch can make dragonsteel as well as I can.”

“When working with you.”

Elsbeth stopped, silently contemplating the assertion.

After a few seconds, Tian spoke, “You claim we all have magic talents, but there are wizards and witches living throughout the land. By this definition, any one of them could be the Hero. Why us?”

Déa of Tauris Reach responded, “It is true that there are some few who have learned the science of manipulating magical energy. And there are a great many who have learned the arts of deceit and trickery. But natural magical talent in humans is exceedingly rare, so rare in fact that we were shocked to learn that more than one of you existed.”

Elsbeth leaned forward, her eyes drilling into those of the dragons. “You say you don’t know which one of us is the Hero. Don’t you think it’s time you figured it out? We are about to go to war with the Dark.”

“Does it matter?” Heads swiveled to look at Torg.

Torg’s voice lowered to a severe timbre. “We are here. And we need to fight the Dark because it is coming regardless of what we say. So does it really matter which one of us is the Hero of prophecy?”

Els spat incredulously, “Of course it matters.”

“Why?”

A pause in the conversation sat heavily atop them as they contemplated the question.

Tian broke the silence, “Perhaps you are right. We have been worried about who is the Hero of Destiny, when what matters is what we are here to do. The war is upon us, and we need to work together. But that would be true even if we knew which of us were the Hero. Who is destined to fight the final battle is unimportant. Time will tell.”

Déa of Drake Valley put on a beatific smile. “How wise the young man is. We must all work together, putting aside our doubts.”

Tian leaned forward and put his palms face down on the table in front of him. “We must work together. Us, the Heroes. For all your posturing, nothing I have read in any prophecy suggests that dragons need be anything more than fodder for the battlefield. You have toyed with us long enough, and I no longer have much faith in your words. If you want me to trust you, you will have to earn it. For now, you are dismissed.”

Déa of Drake Valley looked into Tian’s eyes and shivered. She recognized a man who had been pushed to his limit.

Worries

Torg walked up to the door of Usue’s tent. In a quiet voice, he called out to her. A few seconds later, her head popped out from the tent flap.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“To talk, I think.”

She nodded. “Give me a bit.” Her head disappeared back into the tent.

Torg shifted nervously from foot to foot as he waited. After a minute or so, he heard her call out an invitation for him to enter. Inside her tent, he looked around. A bedroll was spread next to a small trunk, and a thin, threadbare carpet covered the grass. Two small pillows were on the carpet, and a battered wooden crate sat to one side. A candle stood in a dish on the crate, giving off a wan light.

Usue motioned him to sit on one of the pillows as she took her seat on the other one.

“This is the first time I have been in here. I didn’t realize you have so little. I feel kind of bad for dragging you all the way here to live like this.”

Usue shrugged. “I have enough, and I don’t remember you forcing me to come. I could have returned home when the church dismissed me.”

Torg looked at his friend. “Nevertheless, I should have paid more attention. You deserve better than this.”

Usue quickly changed the subject. “You said you needed some advice. How can I help?”

“We are meeting this afternoon with the leaders of the other armies. Two kings, a prince, and a baroness will be there. Why do I need to be in attendance?”

“Because you are the Hero of Destiny.”

“Am I? I don’t feel like a hero. Most of the time I feel like a kid who told a lie and now is in over his head. Only this time, Mom and Dad aren’t there to bail me out.”

Usue reached out and clasped his hand. “You shouldn’t feel that way. You are so much more than you give yourself credit for. It has only been two days since you met the other Heroes, but I have already seen that they listen to you when you speak. You have a great ability to focus on the important things and ignore the distractions. This makes your input valuable, even to kings.”

Torg shifted on the pillow. “I guess.”

“You need to quit focusing on their titles. Tian is a man, Elsbeth a woman. And you are the Hero of Destiny.”

“So are they.”

“No, they aren’t. They might not realize it, the dragons might not realize it, and you might not realize it. But I do. You are the true Hero. I am sure of it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Call it woman’s intuition. Call it faith. Or call it witchcraft. I believe with all my heart that you are the Hero.”

“Thank you, but that still doesn’t help me. I don’t know what I am supposed to do when we meet to plan the war.”

“Be yourself. You led a clan of dragons out of the mountains. You earned the loyalty of three generals. You took refugees and turned them into the core of an army. And you won the respect of the barbarian tribes of the southern ice. This is nothing. This will be easy.”

“Those things just happened. I didn’t really do anything.”

“Those things happened because you are you. Continue being yourself, and this will work out too. You only need to remember that you belong there. You aren’t Torg, a young minesmith from Silverton. You are Torg Minesmith, Lord of Dragons.”

Torg blushed. “I don’t know if I can be the Lord of Dragons. It’s not who I am.”

“Yes, it is.” Usue snapped sternly. “And you are going to have to accept it.”

“Like you accepted the title of ‘Emissary of the Gods?’”

Usue cringed. “I get your point. It is a bit uncomfortable, but I have embraced my title. Not because I want it or because I think I’m special, but because I had to.”

“Had to? Why?”

Usue’s cheeks deepened to a dark crimson. “Because it is the only way you would let me come with you.”

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* * *

Jackson Cross kills strangers with nothing more than a drone and a computer in exchange for crypto—all from his mother's basement.

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Paperback: 9781645480655 / \$17.95

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Jones Worthington is the pseudonym for Dragon Award Nominees Stu Jones and Gareth Worthington. The best of friends, they technically sit on opposite sides of the political aisle yet leverage their different worldviews to create vivid backdrops and unforgettable protagonists.

Jones works in law enforcement, has served in patrol, narcotics, criminal investigations, and as a team leader of a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team. He is trained and qualified as a SWAT sniper, as well as in hostage rescue and high-risk entry tactics. Recently, Jones served for three years with a U.S. Marshal's Regional Fugitive Task Force—hunting the worst of the worst.

Worthington holds a degree in marine biology, a PhD in Endocrinology, an executive MBA, is Board Certified in Medical Affairs, and currently works for the pharmaceutical industry. He is an authority in ancient history, has hand-tagged sharks in California, and trained in various martial arts, including Jeet Kune Do and Muay Thai at the EVOLVE MMA gym in Singapore. Born in England, Worthington has lived in Asia, Europe, the USA, and currently resides in Switzerland.

[Website](#)

Preface

While this is a work of fiction designed to thrill and amuse, the seed for this story is inspired by the sociopolitical work of Dr. Daniel H. Deudney, who, at the time of writing, teaches political science, international relations, and political theory at Johns Hopkins University, USA. In the book *The Limits of Constitutional Democracy*, edited by Jeffrey K. Tulis and Stephen Macedo and published by Princeton University Press, Daniel lays out one possible near future for humanity—a state of “omniviolence.” In the essay, omniviolence is considered as the leakage of nuclear weapons capability into the hands of non-state actors (think a terrorist group versus Uncle Sam). But this idea has grown to encompass violence of all forms committed by everyone against everyone—and for such widespread violence to be socially acceptable.

Importantly, the democratization of technology and declining faith in both government and state-controlled currency means that this latter definition of omniviolence is increasingly possible. Once upon a time, to inflict population-level violence, one required an army. However, it is now possible for a single person to control millions of small quadcopters, each carrying a small, shaped explosive charge. Theoretically, these drones can be programmed to target anything or anyone—perhaps blond-haired men without mustaches—then fly into a major urban area and kill anyone fitting the description. Now imagine that payments for such services can be completed via cryptocurrencies on the dark web and combine this idea with a complete lack of government to uphold the law or defend country borders against foreign agents. Finally, factor in our increasingly politically divided society, where canceling your opponents is commonplace and viciousness on both sides of the aisle is increasing.

How long will it be until we reach a state of omniviolence?

Prologue

@TubaniTucan44: Hey @JC4Sho Kill yourself half-breed! Bet ur broke-ass foot-ugly mom wished she hadn't shot you out her vagina!

Lying on his belly on the scratchy living room rug the color of long-spoiled milk, nine-year-old Jackson Cross stared at the words under his most recent SlipStak post. In his photo, his dark, chubby face contrasted against the skinny porcelain tone of his mom, slathered in green eye shadow. Jackson analyzed TubaniTucan44's every word and, though the full meaning escaped him, the message somehow burned into his chest. The stink of the carpet clawed at Jackson's nostrils, so he wriggled up and sat with his back against the stained thrift-store couch. He tucked his knees against his chest and worked his toes into the clotted yellow fibers littered with chip packets and the occasional disfigured kids-meal toy.

Jackson thumbed the profile button of TubaniTucan44, real name Komo Tubani, a twelve-year-old who lived at the end of Jackson's block. Herc Royer said Komo's dad sold drugs, and that's why their place was nicer and why they drove fancy cars. Jackson didn't know one way or the other. What he did know was Komo wasn't any fun to be around. Komo slapped Jackson at the bus stop, pulled on his afro at the co-op's run-down playground, and yelled *half-breed* down the street.

Yesterday, Komo had one-armed a basketball so hard into Jackson's stomach that it knocked the wind out of him. Jackson had tried not to cry. He'd run home through the snow and told his mom about it, then watched her march up the block and bang on the Tubani's ornate front door. Nothing ever came of it that Jackson saw.

What was a *half-breed*, anyway?

Jackson re-read Tubani's comment over and over. His skin prickled hot, and his belly soured. In the gloom, his eyes burned, fixated on the bright three-by-eight-inch screen clutched in his hands. He scrolled the other comments.

Louise Earnest: Hahaha. Half-breed! Good one.

MikeyMike6: Don't listen to them. You do you.

Luan Va: Get right or get even!

Jackson fingered the screen again and zipped back up to Tubani's main comment. He typed out a feeble response, deleted it, and watched the replies mount.

Damshady132: Hahaha!!! Half breed. Burn in hell!

Proppitt: Don't stoop! Chest out, chin up. Respect must be earned.

AceMcgee99: Do what it takes to prove him wrong!

DeadDuck00: Bwahahahahaha!!!!

Jackson wished Dad was still around. Tubani wouldn't be so tough, then.

Jackson's eyes welled.

No. No crying. He wiped a sleeve across his face and scratched at his matted afro.

Another unrestricted browser window clicked open at the touch of his hand. He tapped at the screen, his large eyes reflected in the hypnotic glow. He scrolled the reels—fails, pranks, fights, and a gang of girls in G-strings. His finger reached out for the video of the girls. Their bare butts jiggled. He felt warm inside.

The familiar scratch of metal on metal. Jackson closed out the unrestricted browser as his mom opened the front door and bumped into the living room ahead of a wall of cold air. Keys clattered on the sideboard, and she clicked the door closed.

“Jackson, baby, you hungry?” she wheezed. “I got you Yippee’s.”

“I ate that yesterday. Twice,” he said without looking up.

Jackson’s dad had always taken him to Yippie Burger. It didn’t taste as good now.

His mom didn’t say anything, so Jackson pulled his gaze from the screen. She hovered there, her expression worn and sad, still wearing her nail salon uniform under her tattered down jacket, the Yippee bag in one hand.

“I’m sorry, baby. I got no excuse. What would you like?”

“You not hungry?” he asked, noting the lack of a second bag.

She set the greasy brown bag on the couch and smoothed her hands over the little paunch under the uniform’s belt. “No, baby, I’m fine.”

The meaty scent steamed up Jackson’s nose and made his stomach rumble. He frowned, wondering if he’d had lunch or not. He remembered the inside of the fridge, the grimy bare shelves, a pack of American cheese slices, a carton of OJ with a swallow in it, and a case of tropical wine coolers. He’d eaten two slices of cheese, then stepped back onto a belly-up cockroach.

The memory of peeling the body off his bare foot, then having to pick each crisp, dried leg one by one from his skin, sent a chill through him. His notifications dinged again. He looked down at the screen. Fifty-six replies, now, to Tubani’s comment. And climbing.

“You should turn that off now,” his mom said. “Been on it for hours.”

“I’m talking to my friends,” he whined.

“Oh, new friends?” His mom pulled off her shoes and winced, rubbing the soles of her feet. “Which ones?”

Jackson forced a smile.

A familiar, lonely expression returned to his mom’s face. “Okay, twenty minutes,” she said, then forced another weak smile and sauntered into the kitchen, probably to fetch a wine cooler.

Jackson peeled the brown paper bag open and peered inside. The hot steam bathed his face. Another car toy, as part of the kid’s meal. He hadn’t played with cars in years. His stomach rumbled, but he closed the bag and tossed it to the manky carpet. His mom could have the burger later.

Seventy-four comments, now.

Gogodawg: Hahaha half breed faggots.

KikoSam: Get a life peeps. Leave the half-breed alone.

Hooman4: Revenge. Pure and simple.

The sourness in Jackson’s stomach deepened. How many people would see this? He’d definitely hear about it at the school co-op tomorrow.

His mom walked back through the kitchen in sweatpants and a tube top that pushed her boobs up. She leaned against the wall, making kissy lips, and took a selfie. She’d post it to her stack alongside many others just like it. Jackson screwed up his face and considered unfriending her, but she had even fewer followers than he did.

He slid his phone under his thigh. “Mom?”

“Mmm hmm?” She took another picture from a higher angle.

“What’s a half-breed?”

“What?” she snapped.

“Half-breed?” Jackson asked.

His mom dropped the phone to her side, her duck face now a scowl. “Did someone say that to you?”

Jackson shook his head. “Just heard it.”

“Jackson.” She raised her voice. “I’m serious.”

“I just heard it, Mom.” He studied an action figure he’d pulled the arms off, lying on the rug.

“It’s rude, is what it is.” She huffed and stormed up the stairs to her bedroom.

Jackson scrolled down his feed. Maybe throwing up would make him feel better. He rubbed his feet on the grimy carpet and scrolled past a video titled *U.S. President Pro Tempore Bunker Hit!* by some kid who thought herself a journalist. He scrolled back only long enough to see a billow of white smoke and men in black suits running around like ants. He scrolled on.

Jackson’s phone dinged, and an inbox notification lit up. He clicked on it.

DeadKillerSlim: U gon let that kid talk to u like that?

Jackson read the message again.

JC4Sho: I guess.

DeadKillerSlim: Wanna teach that dick licker a lesson?

Jackson conjured up all the times Tubani had made fun of him or punched him in the face. A prickle of heat danced across his scalp.

JC4Sho: Yea.

DeadKillerSlim: Whats his house number?

JC4Sho: ?

DeadKillerSlim: His address. Where he stay at.

JC4Sho: S Morgan St Chicago. Why?

DeadKillerSlim: Number lil bro.

JC4Sho: 6431.

DeadKillerSlim: R u sure?

JC4Sho: Positive.

DeadKillerSlim: Cool. The Tubanis look home?

Jackson got up and crossed to the living room window clouded with frost. He squinted down the darkened street at the house with the fancy door glowing at the end of the block, two cars in the driveway.

JC4Sho: Lights on. His dad’s car is there.

DeadKillerSlim: Perfect. Gimme a min.

Jackson’s mom trundled down the stairs wearing a neon green halter top. She leaned back dramatically in the doorway to the kitchen, flipped her hair just right, and took more pictures. Jackson switched from SlipStak to a video platform app and streamed one of his favorite movies, *Big City Ninja*. His mom fussed when she caught him watching movies with a lot of blood.

The DM notification pinged on Jackson’s phone. He slid back to SlipStak.

DeadKillerSlim: Walk to the front window, young buck.

Jackson stared at the screen.

DeadKillerSlim: Anytime u ready... u tell me.

A tingle of realization crawled over Jackson. Did this guy see him? Know where he was? Down the street, a plastic bag flapped on a bent fence spike, and a mangy stray dog pissed a yellow hole in a drift of ice-crusting snow. Jackson’s breath fogged the glass. He wiped it with his sleeve and looked back at the screen.

DeadKillerSlim: U Ready? Say the word.

Jackson licked his lips, chapped and peeling.

JC4Sho: Ready.

DeadKillerSlim: hehe.

The brilliant flash of fire blinded him for a moment. He ducked his head as the blast wave rolled down the street like thunder and set off every car alarm in its path. He pulled himself back up to the windowpane, heart hammering in his chest.

“Jackson!” his mother screamed as she blundered across the room, one hand pressing her halter top in place. “What the hell was that?” She clutched him against her body as she stared out the icy glass, then raised her phone and recorded the house engulfed in orange flames and thick black smoke, the cars shredded by debris. “Oh, God,” she hooted, “it’s the Tubani’s place!”

Jackson looked down at the smooth cream of his mother’s skin, mashed against the mocha of his own. Pinned to his chest, the screen of his device glowed into his Lycra T-shirt. He thumbed the power button, and the glow vanished.

“Baby, stay here,” she said. “I’m going to get a better shot!” His mother threw on an overcoat and flung the front door open. A razor of icy wind cut through Jackson, hanging in the air when his mom slammed the door.

He watched her stumble out toward the sidewalk, hugging herself with one arm, her phone held up to record the fire. Flames gushed from every open port of the Tubani’s residence. Their big door with the diamond windows shattered and smoldered in a dirt patch yard across the street. Everyone on the block poured outside as the nicest house on the street turned into an absolute inferno. All the kids who’d laughed when Jackson cried, and their parents—everybody but the Tubanis.

Jackson looked down at his reflection on the black screen of his device. A brace of nausea swirled up into the back of his mouth. He touched the power button, and the screen blinked on.

DeadKillerSlim: Boom! Everything those drug dealing shitbags deserved.

Jackson flipped to his SlipStak feed, now showing one-hundred-four replies to Tubani’s comment. The last one, a high-angle video of flames gushing from the Tubani’s place.

DeadKillerSlim: @TubaniTucan44 Another scum of the earth racist bites the dust. Anyone else wanna call lil homie a half-breed? I din fuckin think so.

Jackson gazed at the screen. Not a single comment followed. Not one.

Outside, his mom waved and shouted into her phone. The civilian fire brigade scrambled around down the street, spilling more water than they managed to get from the hydrants onto the flaming hell.

Jackson swallowed and looked back at his screen. He flipped to his messages.

JC4Sho: You totally killed them.

DeadKillerSlim: U needed some justice and I needed to pull a job on his dad. Two birds an all. U want something in life? Respect, money, power? U gotta take it.

A message in sparkling letters popped up in Jackson’s SlipStak inbox: *DKSlim wants to send you 500 Giltcoin. Do you have a wallet?*

DeadKillerSlim: Here’s ur cut lil homie. Thanks for being my eyes on the ground. More where that came from if interested.

Jackson’s face glowed in the artificial golden light, and a powerful urge stirred in his chest.

Chapter One

Six Years Later

Jackson

The unmarked delivery drone dropped from the sky and came to a near-perfect stop just above Mrs. Evesham’s walkway. It hovered there, quad rotors humming, level with her chin. The barrel of a suppressed micro pistol flashed.

The old woman's head exploded in a mess of permed purple hair, bone, and brain. She slumped to the concrete walkway, legs spasming. The drone auto-stabilized, then screamed off into the clouds, a thin wisp of gun smoke trailing behind.

"Shit," Jackson said, more at his over-poured bowl of crunchy loops than the assassination he'd just witnessed. "Old bat must've pissed somebody off," he muttered and swept the spilled loops to the linoleum beneath his sock-covered feet. Morbid curiosity forced just one more look at his neighbor's corpse. Her body twitched in a growing pool of blood right beside a long row of pink and purple mailbox pansies.

"Typical Genial."

To Jackson, Gen X, Millennials, and Zoomers—Genials for short—were one amorphous swath of adults. They were caught in that weird period between paper and electronic worlds before everyone stumbled into the next level of social consciousness. They'd set up camp on static social media platforms and felt safe saying whatever they wanted. Their parents had taught them freedom of speech absolutism, which they believed in. Even the Zoomers, the cancel-culture generation, thought their righteous calls for justice could never be silenced. Now, running your stupid mouth from behind your keyboard had consequences.

Mrs. Evesham probably reprimanded some kid in Korea for his sissy-hypno-porn post, not realizing that if that same kid possessed a smartphone and half an ounce of tech know-how, he could smoke her ass from across the globe.

Why? Because he's worth it—the unrelenting mantra every generation fed to their kids and their kids' kids. *You're special. Just go for it. You deserve it. No one can stop you from doing what's right for you.* A never-ending social anthem of *Fuck everyone else if they think differently.*

So that's what people did.

Fucked everyone else.

Jackson's generation didn't bother trying to understand how humanity ended up here or how the Collapse had come about. On the other hand, Jackson liked to think of himself as smarter than his idiotic peers. He knew how they had arrived at this dog-eat-dog nightmare, and he embraced it.

Jackson scarfed down the last spoonful of cereal, picked up the bowl, and drained the sweetened milk into his mouth. He tossed the spoon into the sink and clacked the floral-pattern ceramic bowl on the side of the basin, then sauntered off toward the basement door.

"In the dishwasher, Jackson!" The shrill voice of his mom could penetrate any wall.

"Just do it when you're cleaning up!" he yelled back.

His mom screamed something so high-pitched only dogs could make sense of it.

Jackson scratched his ass through a hole in the seam of his shorts and peered into the optical scanner fixed to the wall. The ten-gauge steel door popped open, and he stepped through. Old yellow bulbs flickered on, then the heavy door clunked shut and auto-locked behind him.

Still half asleep, he let out a long yawn as he stumbled down the wooden stairs and into his very own base of operations. The leather chair, well-molded to Jackson's narrow shape, hugged the edges of his shoulders. He swiveled the seat around to the ten-foot-long console, rubbed his hands together, and pulled up the nearest keyboard. A few taps, and he was in.

Eight high-end monitors winked to life.

One screen always had the crypto market up. Jackson's skin prickled as he watched the dramatic wax and wane of coin value. With a few more clicks, he checked his balance. Up nearly four hundred and seventy-nine thousand in Kitcoin today.

A first-person shooter game stood paused on one screen. On another, a movie played on a streaming service while talking heads traded barbs on a twenty-four-hour news channel on yet another. Not actually news with an anchor, but a user platform where influencers and self-proclaimed truth seekers got paid in crypto to upload footage of breaking incidents from around the world or scream insults at each other over trivial agendas. The videos with the most views

got paid more. Users like Jackson had to filter the garbage—cat videos and amateur porn. He only focused on a few reliable sources.

A public service announcement popped up from Anja Kuhn, her glottal Germanic accent harsh in Jackson's ears. "The kill-kill ratio has spiraled in the last five years," she began, "with one remote murderer now slaying an average of four hundred innocent civilians per action. Humanity cannot sustain—"

Jackson muted the channel and rolled his eyes. "Again, with this shit. Life sucks. Get over it, stake." He turned to his second favorite monitor, filled with the giant breasts of some chick being drilled by a dude in a unicorn mask. His fingers groped at the bulge in his shorts, but before he could get things going, the news channel cut to a live feed from Hellcat_59.

Hellcat. Always at the right—or wrong—place at the right time. Jackson turned the volume back up.

Shot gonzo, with a smartphone, it looked like New York, perhaps Madison Square Garden. The glass walls and billboard out front gave it away. Hellcat pinged the location, confirming Jackson's suspicion. A huge crowd spilled across the intersection, stopping all traffic. Placards bobbed up and down that read *Stop Sylcoin!* and *Sylcoin will kill us all*, or *Sylcoin = Sly-coin*.

"The protest was today?" Jackson blurted out, then scrambled to read his emails.

Nothing. No rejection letter.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Fuck!"

Traffic around the arena ground to its usual halt. The doors of three self-drive yellow cabs opened simultaneously. Jackson cranked up the volume. A swarm of single-rotor drones poured out of the cabs, and a monotonous hum filled the streets. Each tiny helicopter carried something like a coiled rope flat to their bellies. They fanned out into concentric circles and held their position a few feet above the crowd.

Jackson stood and clutched the keyboard. "You motherfu—*really?*"

Under the net of drones, the crowd screamed, then fractured in all directions.

The outermost ring of drones detonated first.

People crumpled to the concrete, their bodies transformed into pulped hunks of meat. Those who survived fled inward to the center of the drones' formation to escape the ring of fire. A second wave of drones exploded and continued the spiraled domino effect, wiping out more of the wailing throng. The firestorm pushed from the sidewalks to the middle of the street, leaving behind a cluttered war zone of dismembered bodies, black smoke, and drone fragments.

Hundreds dead in less than a minute.

He slammed the keyboard into the monitor. "That was *my job!*" The screen shattered in a spray of sparks. "Don't they know I'm the best of the best? CyberRonin81, bitch!"

Lungs heaving, the broken keyboard dangling from his hands, Jackson wracked his brain. Drone fragments could be traced. Tons of collateral damage. The target was only that one programmer for Sylcoin. But the killer went and took out half a city block.

Jackson's stomach roiled. The thrill of the unexpected rattled up his spine and settled at the base of his neck. The idea of killing so many to get to one. Amazing. Disgusting. Jackson respected it.

The alarm on Jackson's crypto trading site blared.

He wheeled his chair back to the desk, plugged in a new keyboard and monitor, and logged into his crypto platforms. By the last keystroke, Sylcoin had halved in trade value. With a scream, Jackson stood bolt upright, grabbed the new keyboard, and cocked it over his shoulder, ready to swing.

He sucked in a deep breath and pinched his lips. He'd lost a job to an amateur, as well as half his Sylcoin savings. "That's what you get for keeping your coin on the exchange, dumbass," he muttered under his breath. But then again, squirreling all his coin away in offline wallets, even digital wallets, would mean he couldn't instantaneously take advantage of market shifts. "Still holding my Giltcoin, though."

Gilbert Flint Coin—or Giltcoin, named after its inventor—was Jackson’s preferred stable currency. It propped up some of the leading network chains on the planet. While decentralized chains and currency effectively removed power from governments, sheeple had started the same capitalistic exercise all over again. Giltcoin had become as powerful as the old dollar.

“Be cool, man.” Jackson sat back down and cracked his neck. “You’re a cryptokiller, and we don’t bitch. We get even, stake.”

He smirked. Drop the word *cryptokiller* into any search engine, and reams of web pages, blog posts, and videos popped up, all whispering about the cyber assassins’—*his*—exploits. Sure, any moron could attempt to 3D print a drone or a gun to slay someone who cut them off in traffic, but many were too chicken—or just shit at it and blew off their own faces. Even DKSlim got ended a couple years back with nothing more than a pipe bomb.

Jackson was a pro and slayed people for a price. Pissed-off housewives, husbands who couldn’t stop gambling, and irked sports fans provided a lot of business. Jackson once programmed a smart fridge to explode to kill a cheating boyfriend in some shitty part of Birmingham, England. Dude ended up with ham and pineapple cocktail sticks blown through the back of his head.

The real coin, though, flowed in on contracts to take out the owners of fledging network chains that posed a threat to post-capitalistic crypto empires. A couple of years ago, he’d paid a kid in Africa fragments of a token to letter-bomb the CEO of Mzeecoin in his Nairobi high-rise office. That gig had earned Jackson close to a million Giltcoin. Easy money, near zero effort.

For a 146-pound teenager from Chicago, it was a fucking wet dream.

Unlimited power.

A teenage millionaire assassin.

The coolest kid alive.

HORROR

Lindy Ryan

AUTHOR OF
*Bless Your
Heart*

ANOTHER
Fine
MESS

A NOVEL

ANOTHER FINE MESS
(A BLESS YOUR HEART NOVEL, #2)
BY LINDY RYAN

BRAM STOKER AWARDS NOMINEE

*A *GIZMODO*, *CRIMINAL ELEMENT*, *CRIMEREADS*, *RUE MORGUE*, *BRIT + CO.* MOST ANTICIPATED TITLE FOR
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*AUTHOR-IN-RESIDENCE AT *RUE MORGUE**

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“Newly exposed gaps in the Evans family’s knowledge and history will intrigue fans, leaving them hungry for more.”

~*BOOKLIST STARRED REVIEW*

* * *

From Lindy Ryan, "one of the most electrifying voices in the horror genre" (Gwendolyn Kiste), *Another Fine Mess* brings the Evans women back around in this unputdownable, crackling, rollicking mystery of humor, heart, and horror.

Making sure dead things stay buried is the family business ...

For over a hundred years, the Evans women have kept the undead in their strange southeast Texas town from rising. But sometimes the dead rise too quick—and that’s what left Lenore Evans, and her granddaughter Luna, burying Luna’s mother, Grace, and Lenore’s mother, Ducey. Now the only two women left in the Evans family, Luna and Lenore are left rudderless in the wake of the most Godawful Mess to date.

But when the full moon finds another victim, it’s clear their trouble is far from over. Now Lenore, Luna, and the new sheriff—their biggest ally—must dig deep down into family lore to uncover what threatens everything they love most. The body count ticks up, the most unexpected dead will rise—forcing Lenore and Luna to face the possibility that the undead aren’t the only monsters preying on their small town.

“Fans will love this series that's full of heart and charm.”

~*LIBRARY JOURNAL*

“Vampire fans will enjoy this spine-chilling tale, which is not for the faint of heart.”

~*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

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Lindy Ryan is an award-winning author, anthologist, and short-film director whose books and anthologies have received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist* and *Library Journal*. She also writes sweet, seasonal romance under the pseudonym Lindy Miller. Several of her projects have been adapted for screen.

Ryan is the current author-in-residence at Rue Morgue and a columnist at BookTrib. Declared a “champion for women’s voices in horror” by Shelf Awareness, Ryan was named a *Publishers Weekly* Star Watch Honoree in 2020, and in 2022, was named one of horror’s most masterful anthology curators. She previously served on the Board of Directors for the Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA) and currently sits on the Board of Directors for the Brothers Grimm Society of North America.

She is an award-winning professor at Rutgers University, and a guest faculty mentor in Western Connecticut State University’s Creative Writing MFA program. Prior to her career in academia, Ryan co-founded Radiant Advisors, a business intelligence research and advisory firm, where she led the company’s research and data enablement practice for clients including 21st Century Fox Films, Warner Bros., and Disney. Ryan founded Black Spot Books, a specialty press focused on amplifying women’s voices in horror, in 2017, which was acquired as an imprint of Vesuvian Media Group in 2019.

Born and raised in Southeast Texas, Ryan currently resides on the East Coast.

[Website](#)

PROLOGUE

PIE EVANS, SEPTEMBER 1982

When the old grandfather clock in the parlor struck midnight, Priscilla Evans celebrated her ninety-third birthday with a box of store-bought vanilla wafers and a bowl of homemade banana pudding—her mother’s recipe.

She sat at the small kitchen table with nothing but a blank sheet of paper for company and used the wafers to spoon cold cream straight from the dish while she wrote. From cellophane sack to pudding bowl and down her gullet went the wafers, and when the moon grew bright enough that she could see the space between the trees, and her pencil tip had worn to a nub, Pie pushed up from her seat. She left the letter on the table and covered the leftovers with wax paper.

Pie stuffed the pudding bowl in the icebox and the cookies in the cupboard, and then she put away the supper dishes and tidied her small bedroom in the back of the funeral parlor.

She brushed her teeth.

She wound the clock.

When her chores were finished, Pie braided her long white hair and stripped down to a simple cotton nightgown. She picked up the old Winchester she kept by the back door and slipped a cartridge into her pocket. Pie said goodbye

to the pudding and to the cookies, to her small bedroom and to her late mother's grandfather clock in the parlor. To the letter left on the kitchen table.

And then she went out alone into the dark to dig a hole.

Far from the first, she thought, but, Lord willing, this would be the last.

Humid nighttime air tongued Pie's cheek as she made her way to the edge of what remained of her family's property. The shovel stood where she'd left it staked in the ground, right where the moonlight touched grass, where the green grew a little coarser than the rest.

Lightning scratched across a tissue-paper sky and Pie stuck her tongue out to taste the air. This time of year always brought storms through rural southeast Texas. The heat let up enough to breathe and the weather started to change. Nothing turned pretty in late September, and a chill didn't set in till November, but still-simmering temperatures meant rain. All the wet that had blown through earlier softened the summer-dried dirt, but left the stink of ozone hot on its breath. Any minute now, and the sky would open.

But she'd be done digging long before then.

Pie palmed sweat away, wicked the moisture on her dress, and wrenched the shovel free. She could do without the throb in her joints and the aches in her bones, the constant twinge in her bad ankle, but Pie Evans was not the sort of woman to shy away from a little midnight yard work.

She wasn't the kind of woman to shy away from anything, really.

"Never have been," Pie muttered as she traded the gun for the shovel and stabbed metal into earth. "And I reckon tonight ain't the time to start."

Pie spooned soggy dirt from north to south—until brown reached her ankles, then stained the cotton hem of the gown, her calves. When her skirts started to stick to her knees, she tossed the shovel aside and climbed out of the grave.

With the rifle as a crutch at her side, Pie limped back to what used to be Daddy's old farmhouse and settled into her favorite cowhide rocker. She laid the gun across her ruined skirt, and the barrel bumped the other chair, set it rocking. She lit a pinch of rolled tobacco.

And then she stared out into the hot, hungry, crackling dark, and waited to die.

Pie had waited a long time for this night to come.

Too damn long, she'd be happy to tell anyone who bothered to ask, not that anyone ever did. Folks around town had given Pie Evans a wide berth for as long as she could remember—but if that had bothered her once, it didn't now. As far as she was concerned, most people didn't have the good sense God gave a goose. With folks like that around, it'd take more than sideways glances and fencepost gossip to get under skin as tough as Pie's. Besides, the way she saw it, all those cold shoulders did her a favor: the less people paid her any mind when they were alive, the less she had to mourn them when they turned up dead.

The less she had to care when she put them back down.

Her braid ticked across her back, a pendulum keeping time, counting down. "Too damn long is right," Pie said to the lightening dark.

Cowhide prickled her thighs under the dirty cotton shift, and Pie raked age-hardened fingernails into the thin cloth. The porch slats creaked under the weight of the rocker, the press of the wood clammy under her bare feet, the first breath of almost-morning fresh on her skin.

In the distance, thunder rolled. Pie licked the taste of the storm from her lips as she chewed at the tobacco pinched between her teeth.

Used to be, when Pie's daddy built the old dogtrot farmhouse for him and Mama and her, before her twin brothers ever came along, a person could sit on this porch and stare out at nothing but pine trees and dirt, far as the eye could see. Back then, most folks who settled on this little knob of swampy prairie between the Neches and the Nothing either raised rice, cattle, or timber, or worked on the river.

But that had been before the derrick struck. Before the black geyser spilled out from the earth, before all hell broke loose.

Before the fire. Pie exhaled the thought in a cloud of bitter smoke and tightened her grip on the bolt-action rifle in her lap, eyed the line of dirt trapped beneath her nails. She'd been a girl of twelve when she'd faced her first ghoul right here on her daddy's land. Her bad ankle twinged. A lot had changed between that night and this, but it had all started here, at the Evanses'.

And for Pie, this would be where it ended.

Another flash of lightning clawed the sky open, and dense autumn raindrops splattered against the porch roof. A tug pulled somewhere deep in her gut, and Pie's braid stopped ticking. The long length of white cord slipped over her shoulder as she dug one foot into the wood to halt the rocker.

He'd crossed the property line.

Pie knew this land like she knew the back of her hand. She could feel him move out there in the dark, in the heat, in the wet. The one she'd been waiting for.

At least, she hoped it was.

"Better safe than sorry, I reckon." Pie bolted a round in the Winchester's chamber. She lifted the rifle and peered through its iron sights. "Come on now," she said to the deep smear of shadow that bloomed in the distance, heading her direction. "I'm ready."

The shadow took shape. The dark blur became a figure, became a man, as it stalked through the rain toward Daddy's old farmhouse. Pie's pulse rose and her ankle throbbed, but she held the gun steady. Squinted. Just because her body had stayed strong over the long years didn't mean her eyes didn't give her hell.

And a ghoul at fifty paces was a ghoul at fifty paces.

This time the thunder rolled into a voice, filling the space between raindrops as it wafted over the distance to brush her cheek.

"Happy birthday, Priscilla," it said.

She swatted the noise away and took another drag off the cigarette. Her vision might be shot, but her hearing was still sharp as a tack. She held the smoke in her mouth until her lungs singed, then Pie exhaled through her nose and spit the butt onto the porch to burn itself out.

"Happy birthday, yourself," she grunted back through the gun's sights, then, "and nobody calls me that anymore."

"Sure they don't." The dead man stopped out of the rain's reach, inside the shadows that hung over the edge of the porch. Dark hair, midnight eyes, straight nose, and a jaw that promised dimples. Something flickered across his eyes, maybe the moonlight fighting back the approaching dawn. "You mussed up your dress, Pie," he teased in a low drawl, the corners of his lips quirking up in a way that made him look human. "Course, I haven't seen you so prettied up since you were knee-high on a grasshopper."

Pie stomped, bits of dried mud crumbling on the wood slats at her feet. "Never you mind about my dress, farm boy."

"See you've still got my old gun, too." He stepped up onto the porch, smirking at the single-shot Winchester she kept upright in her arms. "You're not planning to shoot me with it, are you, Priscilla?"

"This old pea shooter?" Pie grunted and lowered the gun, then knocked its muzzle on the wood slats at her feet. "Waste of a bullet. Would just make a mess outta you. Besides," she said as she slid the bolt back and removed the round, palming the cartridge. "Evans women are blades women."

"I know."

The dead man settled into the rocker beside Pie's in a cool wind of honey and woodsmoke. Most ghouls smelled like rot and dust, but not him. He smelled exactly the same now as he had the night he'd died. Looked the same, smelled the same.

He's dead, and I'm the one rottin', Pie thought. Figured.

She laid the rifle on the slats between the chairs and flicked her braid back over her shoulder. “There was a time the name Evans meant somethin’ in this town. More than a bunch of crazy old biddies who run a funeral parlor,” she reminded him. “Back when Daddy farmed this land—before so much of it got sold off, become somewhere to plant the dead instead of crops.”

The dead man shook wet drops from his hair, his jacket. “I remember.”

“Course,” Pie spat, “that all ended damn near a hundred years ago.”

“I haven’t kept count.”

Pie had. Hadn’t had much of a choice, considering. Heat rose in her throat, and she clucked it away. “Nearly one hundred years since I slid headfirst into this world,” she said, “and not a single one of them has come easy.”

Not a single damn one. Pie studied the round in her hand, the dull shine of metal in the dark.

The dead man gave her a weak smile. “There’s your girls.”

The girls. Pie had birthed a daughter, and that daughter had birthed a daughter, and her another daughter. Three generations of Evans women had been birthed inside these four walls, had gone off and made their own homes, though all still kept Pie’s family business. If anything in this world remained worth dying for, it was those daughters.

And that was exactly what Pie had been waiting for, wasn’t it? What she’d written in the letter left on the kitchen table—more or less.

“You’ll look after them when I’m gone,” she instructed the dead man. “Ducey. Lenore. Grace. The next one, and the next. You watch over my girls just like you’ve done me.”

She made him promise twice, as the sky changed from navy to royal, then, “We’d best be gettin’ on. Ducey will be over with the sun,” she said. “Girl’s always been an early riser. Chaps my hide.”

“Can’t all be night owls,” he said, smiling dimples.

Pie slid the rifle round into her pocket as she pushed herself up. “Do I look like I’m laughin’?” The twinge in her ankle made her stumble, but she swatted the dead man away when he offered a hand to steady her.

His eyebrows furrowed, but the skin between didn’t crack. “You sure you’re ready to call it a night?” he asked. “You’re barely ninety-three.”

Pie slipped her arm through his, the clammy press of the ruined nightgown as cool as the dead man’s skin against hers.

Too damn long, she thought again.

“You and me both should be nothin’ but dust and bones by now, no matter what sort of blood is runnin’ through our veins,” she told the dead man around the tang of blood in her mouth, the stink of burning oil and smoke in her nostrils. “Now, come on and help an old woman get to bed.”

He sighed. “Pie, I don’t know if I can—”

“You have to.” The words cut her tongue, stung her gums like ant bites, but she got them out. “You saved my life once, now I need you to do it again.”

The dead man pulled against her, and his midnight eyes poured over Pie’s face, her shoulders, the muddy dress as he turned his head toward her footprints on the wooden porch slats. “We don’t know for sure what I did,” he whispered, so faint she could barely hear it over the crisp sounds of predawn. “There’s still more for me to learn.” His free hand clipped her chin. “Give me a few more years, kiddo.”

Pie let out one short, sharp bark. “Listen to me,” she said, pulling the dead man off the porch, into the grass, toward the shovel. “I was born here. I’ve lived my life here and, God willin’, I’ll die here too—but only *once*.”

The dead man stiffened like he might argue. “I’m not a child anymore,” she snapped. “Don’t you dare treat me like one.”

She stopped him at the edge of the hole and looked him square in the eyes. “Now, you do what needs doin’. Take it all,” she told him, “and when it’s done, make sure I stay put. Make sure I don’t claw my way back out of that grave.”

The dead man sighed as he watched Pie fish the rifle cartridge from the pocket of her nightgown, watched her slip its length between her teeth.

“You’re really not going to tell them,” he said, “any of them—about what they are?”

Pie spoke around the metal in her mouth as one of his hands cupped her cheek and the other slid around her back. “I told them enough,” she muttered against his cold, unbeating chest, “but some things you take to the grave.”

Then she peered up at him, the man who’d died so she could live, the man who had to put her down now so her daughters could go on. “I mean it, Sammy,” she said. “Keep an eye on my girls, and make sure I don’t come back.”

Samael’s body tensed, but his words breathed soft against Pie’s cheek, and this time she let them rest, warm on her skin. “Anything for my best girl.”

“Nothin’ to tell them anyway,” Pie said as the dead man leaned in.

“My girls know exactly what they are,” she said as his fangs touched her throat, pierced her skin, slid under. “They’re Evans women.”

The Enterprise

STILL NO ANSWERS IN RABID ANIMAL ATTACKS THAT LEFT SEVEN DEAD, TWO MISSING

Friday, September 24, 1999

Nearly four weeks after the last known attack, the rabid animal that police blame for leaving seven members of the community dead and two missing remains at large.

Among the victims is high school sophomore Alison Haney (15), whose body was discovered behind the Parkdale Mall movie theater. Snow Leger (48), Edwin Boone (55), Clyde Halloran (83), and Grace (38) and Ethel “Ducey” Evans (80) are also among the deceased. Another high school sophomore, Andrew West (16), a paper delivery boy for the *Enterprise*, and Patsy Milner (95), a housebound widow, are missing, and suspected victims of the animal, which authorities believe to be a rabid “ghost wolf,” one of the coyote–red wolf hybrids recently spotted along the Gulf Coast.

Sheriff Buchanan “Buck” Johnson (81) was the final victim. In the weeks since the attacks several area pets have been reported missing, but none have been recovered.

“We’re doing everything we can to locate and euthanize the infected animal or animals responsible,” says Undersheriff Roger Taylor. The attacks began on August 22 at Clyde Halloran’s homestead on Farm Road 121 and moved toward town center before ending back where they began. A month later, Animal Control has not located any animal that could have been responsible for the attacks.

If an infected canine remains in the area, it is unlikely to be caught. Chief Medical Examiner Jedidiah Quigg says this is “less a question of police efforts than the nature of the infection.” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, infected animals usually expire within seven days of becoming sick.

Which would mean the danger has passed—but has it? Channel Six’s Penny Boudreaux isn’t so sure.

“Nine community members lost their lives last month, and not a single paw print has been entered into evidence,” says Boudreaux.

Quigg told the *Enterprise* that a bite from a rabid animal requires significant treatment, including a round of seven shots followed by three rounds of follow-up immunizations given over the next fourteen days. “You don’t want to mess around with wild canine bites, rabid or otherwise,” says Quigg, noting that rabies left untreated is typically fatal for both animals and humans.

While the attacks have been officially blamed on a rabid canine, law enforcement continues to pursue other leads. Undersheriff Taylor declined to comment, but Deputy Brandon Hinson promises that no stone will be left unturned as the investigation continues.

Following Sheriff Johnson’s passing, Undersheriff Taylor will be confirmed in his placement as sheriff on Tuesday, September 28.

Animal Control will test all expired animals found near FM 121 and advises any community member who feels they might have been exposed to seek immediate medical attention. A research professor from the University of Texas will also be on-site to aid in the search for any ghost wolves spotted in the area.

Forest Park High School will hold an assembly in honor of Alison Haney and Andrew West this upcoming Monday as part of the Homecoming season kickoff. Brett Haney and Katherine Brooks-Haney, parents of Alison, are expected to attend, as well as Tanya West, mother of Andrew. The Homecoming Dance is scheduled for Friday, October 1.

CHAPTER 1

SISSY BROUSSARD, SEPTEMBER 1999

Sissy Broussard disliked a lot of things.

She disliked the kind of rain that came down in sheets, the scratch of a brush through her hair, the chalky pills Mother pushed down her throat every evening. Scents of citrus and mint and pepper. Loud noises. Cold. Sissy especially disliked the necklace Mother gifted her last birthday. She disliked the way it fit, too tight around her throat, how Mother insisted that she wear it, that it looked so pretty on her. She disliked the cool metal clasp that pulled at the hair at the nape of her neck, the glitter the necklace left along the edges of her vision, the silver charm that jangled loud enough to hurt her ears.

But most of all, Sissy disliked cigarettes.

Especially the ones in the green and white package, she thought and sneezed. The acid and peppermint made her nose itch and her lungs burn—which put Sissy in a predicament, because the mint cigarettes were Mother’s favorites.

Mother did her best to control the cigarette stink, but she could pump the air inside the house thick with all the Glade she wanted and it would still smell like burning menthol, but with the added fumes of Vanilla Breeze and Rainbow Potpourri. Sissy let the choker squeeze her throat, pull her hair, clink against her chest because Mother said it was important, but the curling acrid smoke that stunk up her beautiful coat and made her sneeze?

That she could not abide.

“Don’t you go sneakin’ out tonight,” Mother reminded her from behind the acidic fog, forever worried about cranky Mr. Gordon, who opened his front door and made sweet sounds whenever Sissy walked by. “Too many gone missing lately,” Mother said. “Don’t want nobody makin’ off with my pretty girl.”

Sometimes Sissy listened to Mother’s warnings and sometimes she didn’t, but the concern that she’d wander too close to the old man’s porch was wholly unnecessary.

Offensive, really, Sissy thought. She disliked Mr. Gordon, with his loud catcalls and coffee stink almost as bad as Mother’s cigarettes. His frizzy brown hair and frizzy brown eyebrows and frizzy brown beard. She only ever walked on his side of the road to get a better look at the birdbath on his front lawn, and even that she preferred to watch from the comfort of her favorite reading chair.

Aside from a little window shopping, birds were too much trouble for Sissy to bother with.

Too much, really, for Mr. Gordon to bother with. If he wanted to invite birds to his yard, he already had a perfectly good nest perched right on top of his head.

But Sissy disliked involving herself in anyone else’s business almost as much as she disliked anyone involving themselves in hers. And so, after a lazy Sunday spent lounging in her favorite reading chair, caught in a beam of warm September sunshine, she nibbled at the dinner her mother served, enjoyed the *clack-clack-clack* of the spinning wheel on her favorite game show, and then, when Mother retired to the back bedroom to smoke herself to sleep, Sissy pushed open the screen door and went out to get some fresh air.

The night's warm breath pushed the cigarette odor out of her nose, tickling along her back as she padded down the center of the quiet residential street.

Daytime strolls were fun but when the sun went down, Mother went to bed, Mr. Gordon shut his door, and all the silly birds that flitted about the ugly concrete eyesore in his front yard hid themselves away for the night.

Everything else woke up.

Sissy knew every house on her street, every pet, every sound, all the way from the small house with the red shutters where she and Mother lived to the two-story at the opposite end of the block where a bratty Pomeranian yipped from behind the window every time Sissy strolled by. Now, from her viewpoint in the middle of the streetlamp-shadowed road, everything lay before her, spread out in every direction—the neat little houses all in a row, with their matching shutters and matching front doormats and closed garages. A few porch lights were on, but all of the windows dark. A tall trash bin punctuated the end of every driveway, lids closed to keep out the sort of nocturnal critters that dined on refuse and rubbish.

That don't have mothers to lay out their meals for them.

Sissy disliked Mother's habits as well as her gifts, but she quite liked her daily servings of cold fish and liver pâté.

Tomorrow morning the big green truck would make its way down the street, snatch up the plastic cans waiting at the end of each driveway, and gobble down their insides, just like they did every Monday morning—just like Sissy did when Mother served treats of chilled cream and crust in a special dish on the kitchen counter.

She listened to the sounds of night as she passed the tall can at the end of her driveway, the abandoned birdbath two doors down on the left, the square tubs the lady across the street always put out one night too early, on green trash night instead of blue recycling night. Sissy crept just outside where the streetlights touched, where the sparkles on her necklace didn't glimmer in her peripheral vision. Her ears quirked at the tiny nicks of squirrel claws on bark, the scuttle of nocturnal critters as they skittered around, the crunch of dry leaves scattered against curb walls.

A possum hissed at her as she passed, but Sissy ignored it.

A squirrel chattered overhead, but she—

A flick of fur caught her eye.

Sissy froze. The stupid silver charm on her neck tinkled at the abrupt stop, then lay quiet against her chest. She stood stock still, the coldest thing in the warm autumn dark, not a wiggle of nose or twist of ear. Her eyes locked on the small tuft of what might be a tail, might be a paw, half-hidden behind one of the big green bins at the end of somebody's driveway. She scented the air. Whiffs of moldy food scraps and drying leaves, a trace of Pomeranian scat on the downwind, but nothing that smelled like dinner.

Moonlight deepened the shadows around the trash can, outlining its edges with thick black borders. Even with her night vision, Sissy couldn't make out the fine details of the brush of fur, but she lowered herself onto her haunches and listened.

A twig snapped. A mouse, maybe.

The brush of fur moved, became a ball of dark.

Raccoon, Sissy guessed as the fur swelled around the moon-shadowed edges of the can and she caught the scratch of nails against asphalt. Some little bandit, hoping it could wrench open the tall bin's lid with its little humanlike claws, scavenge around in the filth within.

Electricity surged under Sissy's skin. Dinners nibbled out of a tin were easy and cheap, but she'd trade every last puck of tuna and saucer of cream in Mother's kitchen for the feel of a fresh catch between her teeth. A taste of raw meat.

A mouse would make for a delightful midnight snack, even if it would mean extra bathing tomorrow as Mother cleaned the blood from her fur.

Tomorrow Sissy would have all the daylight in the world to bathe, to snooze, to sneeze.

Now in the fresh air and wane of last night's full moon, she'd hunt.

She crouched low enough that her small, lithe form might become nothing but a blur on the pavement, a smear as easy to overlook as an oil stain. As the snarl of dark hair that tried to hide in the can's shadows.

Sissy's ears twitched, her stomach rumbled, when the trash can growled. Definitely not a mouse, then. Not a raccoon, either.

Mr. Gordon?

Sissy's ears flattened against her head. Her whiskers worked, her fur jumping up at the roots when an odor almost as acrid as Mother's stupid cigarettes infiltrated her nostrils. The scent tore the hunger from her instantly, and a new instinct flooded through her. When Sissy pushed her body against the hot top now, it wasn't so she could watch the creature behind the bin.

The ball of dark shifted, stretched, stood on all fours. The mass of fur and teeth atop its shoulders turned toward the street. Sissy stayed still as a statue while gleaming eyes cast out into the night, searching the shadows, scanning the dark—catching the sparkle of Mother's necklace around Sissy's neck.

The cat sprang to her feet and ran.

Another snap, another growl, and the predator behind the trash can gave chase.

The silver bell on Sissy's collar screamed against the sound of the beast's feet as they pounded behind her on the pavement—a *ting, ting, ting*, tracking her every step as she raced away from the thing behind her.

Her paws left asphalt, hit grass, slid over sidewalks, driveways, porches, as she fled, the neat little houses all in a row, their matching shutters and matching doormats and closed garages, all suddenly strange and unfamiliar.

She did not see Mr. Gordon's house, his stupid birdbath.

Didn't see the recycling tubs, set out a day early.

Didn't see Mother's house.

Sissy saw nothing but black. Smelled nothing but fear.

Heard nothing but the sound of her own collar, making it so easy for the monster to close in.

THE BURNING CLASS

a novel by
LUISA
COLÓN



THE BURNING CLASS

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Born and raised in New York City, Luisa began her career as a journalist and content producer at *New York* magazine in the late 90s. Over the past 20+ years, her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications including the *New York Times*, *New York*, *Parents*, *Family Circle*, *BuzzFeed*, *Vulture*, *Latina*, *USA Today*, *Elle*, and many more. She is the author of *Bad Moon Rising* (published 2023)

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Prologue

I have my doll with me the whole time.

I carry it to the restaurant. The big family party is being held in a space that's below street level and has no windows. The restaurant itself is completely empty, which feels strange. We walk through the big room, weaving in between tables, and in the back there's a door that opens to a narrow staircase. I'm clutching my doll with one hand and holding onto my mother with the other as we make our way down the stairs. I can hear family sounds of talking and laughing, and I smell food and cigarettes and the faintly musty scent of a basement.

All the grownups at the party make a fuss over me. They ask me how old I am, and I tell them I'm four years old. I'm a big girl. My parents instruct me to hug one relative after another, and one person pretends to try to take my doll away.

"Can I have your baby?" he says. It's my father's oldest brother, Uncle Gene, who we don't usually see because he lives far away. "It's such a nice baby."

I can feel a nervous half-smile on my face as I say, "No."

Everyone laughs.

After that, I stay close to Uncle Gene. He's not a tall man, and his hair is a dull brown color. His face reminds me of a rabbit's. When he pretended to try to take the doll away, he had a big, warm smile. Then it faded away and his expression has been stern ever since—standing on line at the table where all the food is spread out, fiddling with a cigarette lighter, listening to one of the other relatives talk about a distant relative's sudden death. His wife and their two daughters are there but he barely interacts with them at all. I think if I stick with Uncle Gene, he might smile like that again. So I sit next to him and eat spaghetti, the plate balanced on my lap and the doll stuffed in the crook of my

arm. I bring him an ashtray when he asks me to, and the grown-ups laugh and one of them says *Gene always had a way with the ladies*. I stand by his side when a cake is brought out and everyone sings to Cousin Margot. Uncle Gene goes off to have a whispered, smirking conversation with Margot's husband, and I'm starting to feel tired so I sit on the stairs with my doll and watch everyone milling around, smoking, talking, drinking, eating.

Then suddenly Uncle Gene is standing right there, one arm up on the wall, his body angled towards me.

"Is your baby getting tired, Analie?"

I nod at him, feeling that nervous half-smile again, and I'm hoping he smiles back at me. Then he asks me if I want to hear a special secret.

I nod again, hoping it's a good secret and not a bad one, not a scary one. He jerks his chin up towards the top of the stairs. "Go upstairs and wait for me, I'll be there in a minute," he says. "I'm gonna grab another drink and then I'll come up and tell you the secret."

No one notices as I go up the stairs and carefully open the door at the top. I find myself in the empty restaurant. It's creepy but the lights are on and I'm glad about that. I make my way around tables and chairs until I reach a fish tank in a corner of the room and I sit down on a nearby chair so I can look at the fish. The table is all ready for people to sit at it and eat—it has a tablecloth and silverware and plates and napkins. I put my doll on the table and feed it imaginary milk from one of the drinking glasses.

"Aw, you're feeding the baby," says a voice, and I turn around and it's Uncle Gene standing right behind me with his hands in his pockets.

"She's hungry," I say. "But she can only drink milk because she doesn't have teeth yet."

"Right," says Uncle Gene. "Where did you get the milk, did you buy it at the store or did you make it for her?" I'm confused, and Uncle Gene can tell. He laughs. There is the big warm smile. "Did you know that mommies make milk for their babies?"

I nod uncertainly. I imagine my mother in the kitchen pouring me a glass of milk. My Abuela makes me something she calls Pink Milk and she won't tell me how she does it but the milk isn't just a pale rose color, it's sweet, too.

Uncle Gene looks over his shoulder and then crouches in front of me.

"You're a smart girl," he says. "And a good girl, too. You have such nice manners. I wish my daughters had manners like you." He's staring at me and I'm waiting for the secret. But he just stares at me so finally I ask him. I ask him what the secret is. "The secret is that I want to give you a special kiss for being a good girl," Uncle Gene whispers. "Can I give you the special kiss?"

I nod. I am holding my doll the entire time.

Afterwards I run down the stairs and back into the packed basement room where the adults have finished the cake. There are leftover crumbs and chunks of it on plates all over the place. I go from one adult to the other and all of them look at me like nothing has happened, nothing has changed. So I think, *maybe nothing has happened. Maybe nothing has changed*. Or maybe they all know something happened and it's okay with them. After all, they let it happen. Uncle Gene comes down the stairs a minute later and strolls into the room, drink in hand. Everyone starts getting ready to leave, putting on coats, saying goodbye. My mother instructs me to hug my relatives again, including Uncle Gene, who no longer has the big, warm smile on his face. Something inside of me hurts when I see his expression. His eyes are cold and they flick over me. He doesn't look like someone who shared a secret, or a special kiss.

At home, I pull out the dusty wooden blocks that I used to play with as a baby, and I build a tower and put my doll on the inside of it and make a roof with the remaining blocks.

Dad is walking by me to get to the kitchen and he stands there for a moment, looking down.

"Are you making a house for your dolly, Analie?"

It's not a house, it's a tower. But I nod. I don't say anything.

I don't want to tell him why the baby has to be in the tower, why she must always stay in the tower.



I. The Dead Girl

I.

Tenny reminded me of an antique doll that had been thrown away a long time ago, in favor of something newer and shinier. She didn't look cared for or loved and she smelled funny, too—damp, as though the discarded doll had been left out in the rain.

“There's a little girl mooning around the neighborhood, looking for a friend,” Abuela had told me. “Her hair is like a rat's nest. Go look for her and see if she wants to play, she seems very lonesome, God bless her.” I went downstairs, eagerly—I didn't have any friends where Abuela lived, in Gravesend—and sure enough, she was standing in front of the bodega wearing an oddly old-fashioned romper and holding a satchel, bare limbs long and thin. Her hair was light brown and very curly. Some of it separated into perfect, doll-like corkscrews, but as I got closer, I saw that parts of it were matted and tangled. She had the whitest skin I had ever seen, so pale it was almost tinged with blue.

“My Abuela said to come down here and look for you,” I said as a way of starting the conversation, and she smiled uncertainly. “My name is Analie.”

“I'm Tenny,” she said, in a raspy voice. “What's an a-buel-a?”

“Abuela,” I said, and giggled. “It means *grandma* in Spanish. But for a long time I thought it was her actual name. And then I heard my mom call her ‘Isabelle’ and I was confused.”

Tenny laughed too. Her eyes were green, but in one eye, a circle of brown bloomed around the pupil, nearly filling the iris, and making it look like she had two different colored eyes.

“*What's* your name again?” I wasn't sure I'd heard it right.

“People call me Tenny,” she said. “My full name is Tenacity.”

“That's pretty.”

“It’s a word. It means determination. My mom says I’ve always been very determined, even from before I was born.”

“My mom says I’m stubborn,” I offered. “I’m ten, how old are you?”

“I’m twelve.”

We both started to speak at the same time and then said, “Sorry, you first,” in unison. “You go,” I said, generously.

“Central heterochromia,” she said, sounding out the words carefully. “My eyes. I know my eyes are weird. It’s a condition. That’s what it’s called.”

“Oh,” I said, and then, “Your eyes are neat. I have money, want to buy some candy?”

And that was it. It was so easy to make friends with her. I bought us candy, and we sat on a bench outside Abuela’s building, and asked each other questions. Tenny lived in Gravesend with her mother and a fluffy white cat named Aurora, after Sleeping Beauty. She said they had once lived in a big brownstone in Park Slope. It had a lot of rooms and a piano and an art studio with a skylight, because Tenny’s father liked to paint. Then he died and they fell on hard times, and moved to a one-bedroom apartment in Gravesend. I told her that I lived with my mother and father in Windsor Terrace, which was a neighborhood about a twenty minute drive from Gravesend, and that we came pretty much every weekend to visit my Abuela.

We were finishing up our candy and I was wondering what would happen next when Tenny’s strange eyes flickered over my shoulder and her whole body stiffened. I started to say “What—” but she shushed me and whispered, “Don’t turn around. Don’t say anything.” But of course, I turned around.

A tall, teenaged boy was striding down the middle of the street, taking long steps and—incredibly, because he seemed only a little older than us—smoking a cigarette. Tufts of unusually light blonde hair were sticking out from beneath his baseball cap. As he passed, his brown eyes focused on Tenny and he said, “Whooooooooo” with a smirk and a waggle of his fingers. His brow furrowed slightly when he saw me, and then he was receding into the distance, looking like a totem pole made up of sneakers and jeans, a faded t-shirt, and the cap jammed over that headful of blonde hair.

“Who was *that*?”

“*That* was Corvi Welliver,” she said, gazing after him. “He’s in high school. Did you think he was cute?”

“How do you know him?”

“He lives on my street,” said Tenny proudly. “He’s a bad kid.”

“Really? How?”

“He’s just bad. Everyone says he and his friends burned down the house on Shell Road, cause they do vandalism and play with firecrackers. And he’s the *ringleader*.”

I was intrigued. Tenny saw it in my face, and eagerly continued. “No one knows *for sure* that Corvi started that fire, but did you know Davey Saxe?” I shook my head no. “Everyone *definitely* knows that on the same day, his nose got blown off because he and Corvi were playing with firecrackers.” I shrieked at this, covering my face with my hands, and Tenny giggled. “Did you see how Corvi teased me? My mom says when boys tease me, it means they like me. Corvi and his friends always make spooky sounds when they see me.” She laughed. “I don’t know why they do! But I like it.”

2.

Tenny became my friend in Gravesend. I was happy to have someone my age there, and it made me feel better about going to visit Abuela every weekend. It had been boring for a long time, but Mama insisted on it, and my father went along. There was really no reason for him not to—when we went to Abuela’s, he had two women waiting on him instead of one. He ate, drank scotch, watched television, and dozed on the sofa. He was usually too sleepy to drive us home that night, and my mother couldn’t drive at all, so we frequently slept over. Abuela had a second bedroom with a cot for me at the foot of the queen-sized bed where my parents would sleep.

I introduced Tenny to my family. She was very polite, and I could tell Mama felt sorry for her. Later, Abuela clucked and commented on Tenny's strange eyes, and then the two of them discussed Tenny's hair, how tangled and tragic it was.

My hair was longer than Tenny's, but Mama and I kept it meticulously clean, combed, and braided. One weekend, my mother made it her mission to comb through Tenny's hair. She used olive oil and she worked through the tangles until tears ran down Tenny's face. "*Bendito*, I'll stop anytime you want," my mother told her. "Why don't you let me take you to the beauty parlor, we'll have your hair cut? They'll make it look real cute." But Tenny didn't want her hair cut off, she wanted it long and beautiful and tended to. It took all day Saturday, and well into the night. "Don't you need to call someone at home, let them know you're safe?" my mother kept asking, and Tenny would say, "It's okay. My mom isn't feeling well today, and I don't want to bother her." By the end of the weekend Mama had done it. Shining from a shampoo but still glossy from all the oil, Tenny's hair had been transformed. I couldn't stop touching it and neither could she. She ran her hands through it, she tossed it over her shoulder, and the damp strands began to spring into coils as they dried. She loved Mama before that, but she adored her afterward.

"Her mother should be doing that," Mama whispered darkly after Tenny had left to go home, proudly whipping her newly silken curls over her shoulder. "You've met her, Analie. Is she always sick?"

At first, I had thought Tenny's mother, Iris, was just a slob. Their apartment was a small one bedroom a few blocks from Abuela's, and when I went to spend time with Tenny, there were drinking glasses all over the apartment—set down by the ironing board, on the bookshelf, even in the bathroom, with leftover brown liquid that Tenny explained to me was a drink called Running Coke. But when I told Mama, she clucked her tongue. "Ay, she means *rum* and *Coca-Cola*," she explained. "I think the mother has a drinking problem."

After that, it made more sense. Iris spent a lot of time in the bedroom, calling out for Tenny in a plaintive, quavering voice. When she made an appearance—short and thin, with at least six inches of grey roots in her dyed, rust-colored hair—she chain-smoked and sometimes burst into tears out of nowhere. Tenny slept on the couch in the living room. She came and went as she pleased, and as we got older, she starting showing up uninvited both at Abuela's apartment and at our house in Windsor Terrace.

Sometimes she climbed through my bedroom window unannounced while I was doing homework. Other times I would go upstairs and open my door and she would be sitting primly on my bed in one of her strange, old-fashioned dresses, reading one of my books and looking like something out of a nursery rhyme gone wrong. Little Miss Muffett, maybe, or Goldilocks. "Hi, Leelee," she'd say, smiling because she was happy to see me, but uncertain about whether the feeling was mutual. And I wasn't always happy to see her. I complained about it to Mama, who looked worried. "She's got nothing, Analie," Mama would say. "No father, no home life, and she's such a strange-looking little thing. Be kind to her."

I had no idea how anything got done in Tenny's household. Who bought food and toilet paper, and changed light bulbs? My own family moved fluidly, as a unit. We had routines. I wore a school uniform. My father worked, and Mama stayed home and cleaned and cooked and took care of me. On weekends we went to visit Abuela, and as I got older I began doing things on my own, with girlfriends, like going to the park or Coney Island or the movies.

After I told Mama about the Running Coke, and Tenny started showing up at our house unannounced, Mama became uneasy. One Saturday, she took a little walk over to meet Iris. I stayed behind at Abuela's place and we played Go Fish with my father and I beat them both every round.

When Mama came back, she sank silently and ominously onto the sofa.

"Analie," she said finally. "You are never going over there again. Why didn't you tell me they lived like that? *¡Ay, dios mio!* That poor child."

"Is it that bad?" Dad tossed his cards down on the table. "No more, Analie. I'm tired of getting my ass kicked."

"*Hey!*" said Mama and Abuela at the same time.

"They live in a pigsty," Mama went on, murmuring in Spanish as she took her shoes off.

"English, please," said Dad. "I don't want to miss any of *this*."

Mama said *Cyrill, it's not funny*, and Abuela leaned forward eagerly. Finally, someone was going to give *her* some gossip instead of the other way around. As Mama dramatically described Tenny's apartment, I went back in my own mind, wondering why I hadn't considered it all more carefully. I knew, obviously, that Tenny and Iris lived a different kind of life than us, and that it was mostly not the kind of life I would want. I did like how much freedom Tenny had, but at the same time I didn't like it. Tenny ate what she wanted, when she wanted to. She never had to clean up anything. She went a public school, but sometimes cut out and spent the entire day at the library. It was intriguing, the way a dark, tangled forest might be intriguing, but I preferred the neat little lawn of my own home life.

The stove in Tenny's kitchen didn't work; they stored pots and pans in it and used a hot plate for cooking. The apartment always smelled like cat litter, because of Aurora. Little plates decorated with pale pink roses and crusted with remnants of cat food were all over the place. And Iris had kept her late husband's prodigious collection of what she called his "girlie magazines."

"He loved that stuff," she told me soddently one rainy afternoon when Tenny and I complained there was nothing to do. "For the human form—you know. Go ahead, take a look, you're old enough." I was eleven at the time. I felt sick at the sight of the crumpled *Penthouse* that Tenny pulled out of the big carton under the bed—the woman on the cover was braless, in a skimpy tank top and shorts, legs spread. Her face was lowered and obscured in a way that made it look like she didn't have a head—or that her head didn't matter. "I don't want to see anymore," I said sharply, and Tenny shrugged and said they *were* pretty gross.

I was sure Iris hadn't whipped out the porno collection to show Mama, but Mama was still appalled.

"I told Tenny and that mother this and I'm telling you, Analie. Tenny is welcome to come over here, or visit in Windsor Terrace, but she has to call first. No more showing up, climbing through the window." Abuela tsk-tsked at this.

"Was Tenny okay?" I asked. I was trying to imagine the scene—Iris in her bathrobe with a glass of Running Coke, Tenny looking mortified—but it was difficult.

"She was fine," said Mama succinctly. "What, she's not gonna be fine with it? She doesn't have a choice."

The grown-ups kept on talking, and I got up and went over to the window. Somehow, I knew she'd be there, and she was, standing beneath the window. She wore cutoffs that ballooned around her thin, stark white legs. Her top was old-fashioned, sleeveless and with a bold blue-and-green print, and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Even from the window, I could tell it was tangled again. I felt frustrated with her suddenly—couldn't she try to be more normal? She gestured at me excitedly, asking me to come down, and I sighed, feeling resigned, and went to get my shoes.

3.

When I was with my friends in Windsor Terrace, we did regular kind of girl stuff. But being with Tenny was different. We both loved the idea of fairies so much that we pretended we believed in them. We found a huge, gnarled old tree a few blocks from Abuela's apartment and decided it was a fairy kingdom. The tree sat right by the street, and the sidewalk had buckled around it, exposing some of the roots. When we sat at its base, we didn't see the cars passing by or hear the elevated train on McDonald Avenue. We just saw an ancient kingdom where fairies would want to live. The tree trunk was enormous, the bark thick and dense. We didn't try to peel off chunks of it. We perched on the slabs of defeated concrete and pointed to parts of the roots.

Here is a bridge for the fairies to cross, I can still hear Tenny saying in her strange, scratchy voice. It's the entrance to the kingdom. Once they cross the bridge, everything belongs to them. See how the roots go up and down? The fairies slumber in these dips and slopes. They sit with their wings aflutter on these knots, these rough gnarls.

We brought a sketchpad and drew a map of the kingdom. We labeled the bridges and the shelters and the lakes. Tenny was very good at drawing, and she somehow managed to both represent the way things really looked and make them magical too. She had a bin from her old house in Park Slope that was filled with art supplies, simple things like pipe cleaners and glue, but also a wondrous assortment of odds and ends: tiny fabric flowers, bits of gossamer, and cloth remnants that looked like the faded wallpaper you might find in an old, vacant house—once vivid and bright,

now long forgotten, the patterns of tiny leaves and buds nearly invisible. We made our own fairies, twisting the pipe cleaner into bodies, cutting dresses from the faded fabric, adding wings and crowns of roses. We made tiny books for the fairies to read. And the fairies had conflicts, drama.

Bow your head, relinquish your crown! Tenny commanded. And then later: *I forgive you. All is forgiven.*

Sometimes we took candy down into the basement of Abuela's apartment building. There was a garage, a laundry room, and a door at the very end of a corridor that had a small sign: FALLOUT SHELTER. The door was never locked and it opened into a tiny room. Tenny and I liked to think we were the only ones who knew about it. It was our secret room. We brought down a blanket and sat on it and ate jellybeans and pretended we were survivors of a nuclear fallout. Tenny described what it would be like, and it scared me a little. Even just pretending we were the last people on earth made me uneasy. Tenny seemed to like the idea, and it did seem safe in a strange way. But I didn't want to be stuck with her forever, with no one else to talk to or play with.

4.

Tenny loved making prank phone calls. We huddled around the phone together—at her apartment if Iris was sleeping, or at mine if my parents were out—hearts pounding. “Hello, I'm calling from the refrigerator repair company,” Tenny would say in her distinctive, scratchy voice after dialing some random number. “Is your refrigerator running?” And if the stranger on the other line said *Yes*, Tenny would shriek out “Then you'd better go catch it!” Not everyone took the bait. Some people just hung up, or were confused, or yelled at us to stop wasting their time.

We called Corvi Welliver. Tenny had looked up the Wellivers' number in the phone book, and she brought it over to Windsor Terrace on a piece of her father's old stationery. We both pressed our ears to the receiver as we listened to the phone ring. My heart beat very quickly.

And then, a young male voice. Corvi.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” whispered Tenny, trying to disguise her voice. “This is the, um, refrigerator repair company. And we called to ask, if, if, if your refrigerator is running?”

“Let me just take a look,” said Corvi, and Tenny and I looked at each other, wide-eyed. “Oh my God, it is,” he went on. “Holy shit, it's running away, it's trying to escape! Come back, refrigerator!” He dropped the phone and we heard his footsteps pounding as he pretended to give chase. “Come back here, you fucking *bitch!*” There was a tussle, as if he was wrestling with something. “You piece-of-shit fridge,” he hissed, suddenly back on the phone. “You think you can get away from me? You'll never, ever get away from me. I'm going to make you wish you were never *manufactured.*” He laughed, his voice low and drawling. “I'm gonna fuck—you—up—”

Tenny slammed down the phone and we stared at each other, breathless.

We called him again after that. Sometimes we just listened for when he said *Hello?* and then hung up, flushed and giggling. But by then, I had a little secret that I held close: I had a crush on Corvi, too, even though I'd only ever caught the most fleeting glimpses of him—striding by us, making spooky noises at Tenny, a Coke in one hand and a cigarette in the other; or sitting above the street on a fire escape with some of his friends, sneakered feet dangling, jeering at the people down below. He was Tenny's crush first, so I pretended to be indifferent. But even the sound of his name made me feel flushed and excited.

Abuela knew who he was. She called him *Rubio* because of his unusual hair. He became one of the neighborhood characters to speak of or gossip about whenever something bad happened, as if he was solely responsible for every instance of robbery, vandalism, or fire—especially fire, for Corvi was known as a kid who liked to watch things burn. Anything that had been set ablaze—a charred, smoldering shopping cart by the train station or the oozy, blackened remnants of a soda bottle that had been filled with newspapers and then lit on fire—was all assumed to be Corvi's handiwork.

“Where are the *parents?*” my mother would murmur when Rubio came up in conversations. My Dad would call him a *bad seed*. And if I was in earshot, I'd find myself smiling.

5.

Tenny started smoking. If I smelled smoke in the lobby of Abuela's apartment building, I'd know she was waiting for me in the fallout shelter. There were even echoes of cigarette smoke in the house in Windsor Terrace when Tenny was there. Mama was not happy.

"Your friend's been smoking in our house, Analie," she screamed, waving her hands theatrically in front of her face.

"Yell at her, don't yell at me," I screamed back.

"I will, when I see her. She sneaks around," snapped Mama, who was no longer as sympathetic towards Tenny as she'd once been. She felt that the older, teenaged Tenny was trouble.

"How do you even get in here," I would mutter irritably at Tenny when I found her smoking in Abuela's fallout shelter, but I already knew. Tenny liked going into buildings and ringing every buzzer to see if someone would let her in, and then roaming around or going up onto the roof. I did it with her sometimes, but I didn't like the feeling of being so high up, or the way Tenny stared down at the streets below so intently, like she might jump at any moment. Sometimes she brought food, like fruit or sandwiches, and threw the remnants over the low wall so she could watch them go *splat*.

We went to Park Slope, and Tenny showed me the house she'd grown up in.

"That was my window," she said wistfully, pointing to the second floor of the looming, stately brownstone. Then she tugged on my arm. "Look, see those paper clips?"

I wasn't sure what she meant at first, but then I saw a little chain of metal paper clips dangling from one of the window bars. "I made that," she said. "I put the clips together and hung them from the window before we moved. So that I could pass by and always see them."

"Why?" I asked, even though I thought I understood.

"It's like—it's like my past life, waving at me," she said, and waved back.

6.

One weekend when she climbed through my bedroom uninvited, Tenny said she needed my help with a plan. We sat on the bed with the phone between us, and Tenny told me what to do. Tenny was fifteen, and I was thirteen.

My hands were sweaty as I dialed Corvi's number, which I now knew by heart. I kept one finger on the cradle so that I could hang up in an instant if necessary.

"Hello?"

"Hi," I said, my voice quavering a little. "Is this Corvi?"

"Yeah. Who's this?" Corvi already sounded amused, as if he knew what was happening.

"You don't know me," I swallowed, hard. "But I know someone who likes you."

"Oh, yeah? Who?"

"She's your—your secret admirer. She wants you to guess."

"No shit," said Corvi. There was a rustling sound. "Hold on a sec, lemme take off my jacket. I just got in. Okay, I'm ready."

Tenny's eyes were bright, and the brown spot around her iris, in her right eye, almost seemed to pulsate. She was biting her lip, her cheeks flushed, and her face was infused with color. She looked like a different person.

After some rustling, Corvi spoke again.

"So do I know this secret admirer?"

"Kinda," I said, looking at Tenny, who nodded at me.

"Did we go to school together?"

"No."

"Are *you* my secret admirer?"

“No!” I was smiling, starting to feel relaxed. Corvi’s voice, and the sound of him breathing on the other end of the line, made me feel strangely close to him. I wished Tenny wasn’t there.

I heard the popping of a can, and then a series of gulps as he drank.

“Whoo,” he said finally. “Oh, man. God, I needed a cold one.”

“A cold what?”

“Beer, dummy,” he said, and Tenny and I gaped at each other. “Okay. So my secret admirer didn’t go to my school. Gotta be a Gravesend thing. Does she work at the supermarket?”

“No ...”

“Does she live on my block?”

“Yeah.”

“She does! Okay.” Corvi took another swallow of his cold one. “Oh, wait. Wait a sec. Hold on. You’re not talking about—you’re not talking about the dead girl, are you? The one with the drunk mom?”

I forced myself to look at Tenny. The color was disappearing from her face like water down a drain. Now she looked even whiter than usual.

“I don’t know who that is,” I said quickly.

“Oh, thank Christ,” said Corvi. “I don’t need that kind of secret admirer. We call her the dead girl because she looks like a corpse, like someone pulled her out of the Bay. I heard her place is a total shit hole and that her dad is dead but they keep his mummified body at the table so it’s like he’s there with them—”

I hung up. Tenny and I stared at each other again.

“What a jerk, Tenny,” I said consolingly. “He sucks, anyway.”

I felt bad for her, I really did, but there was also a part of me that was glad he didn’t like her. This way, I could pretend he belonged to me.

7.

As I got older, I spent more and more with my friends in Windsor Terrace, and I didn’t invite Tenny to join us. The one time I tried to have everyone together at my birthday party, it was a disaster. All the girls wore jeans, but Tenny showed up in an old blue dress that had white lace at the collar and sleeves, looking more than ever like a discarded doll. She spent the entire time sitting sullenly in our living room, refusing to talk with anyone—unless I had to walk past her. Then she grabbed at my arm, calling my name in her cracked, raspy voice, trying to rope me into listening to a story or doing something that excluded everyone else. Every now and then I heard murmurs from the other girls of *Is she okay?* and *What’s wrong with her?* She’d had a growth spurt, and her white limbs stretched out like some kind of insect unfolding itself in slow motion. Her presence was oppressive, an imposition. When it was time to have cake, and everyone sang to me, Tenny’s voice was the loudest. But she didn’t sing the normal birthday song. “Hippo birdies, two ewes,” she sang out in her scratchy voice. “Hippo birdies, two ewes.” I smiled tightly at her, trying to telegraph that she could stop. *I get the joke but now you can stop.* But she wouldn’t stop. I glanced at my mother’s face and saw her own curdled smile as we tried to drown Tenny out.

I decided not to invite her to any more birthday parties.

8.

During my senior year of high school, at Mama’s urging, I sometimes did schoolwork at Abuela’s during the week. Abuela was getting old, Mama said, and she needed company. Once in a while, when I let myself into her lobby, I could smell Tenny’s cigarette smoke. Her cigarette smoke was distinct from anyone else’s, with hints of mold and baby powder. Tenny was going to art school in Manhattan by then. When she visited Iris in Gravesend, she always tried to see me, too, never calling first, just popping up—falling into step with me on the street, or climbing through my bedroom window, or even just being close by and hoping that the scent of her cigarette smoke would announce her and bring me to her. But sometimes I pretended not to notice the smell and went directly upstairs. When I did force myself to detour, to push open the heavy door of the fallout shelter, Tenny would be sitting there smoking, eating

candy, and leafing through a magazine. I'd say, "Hey," and she'd respond with her usual "Hi, Leelee," a hopeful look on her face that immediately blanched into sadness when she saw my expression. Sadness and something else—a rueful kind of acknowledgment, as though I were just confirming something she already knew, which was that I was hardly ever happy to see her.

"I gotta go upstairs—" I would say, gesturing towards the ceiling, and Tenny would murmur in that scratchy voice that it was fine, totally fine, she just liked sitting in the shelter, she didn't need me to be there.

But sometimes when she showed up in my bedroom in Windsor Terrace at night, I welcomed her. Nighttime was when I was the most frightened about life, when I needed company the most, and that was when I felt the most warmly towards Tenny.

Tenny called these nighttime feelings "the scaries." She had said when we were kids that the scaries were afraid of light, and that's why they only came out when the sun went down.

She told me stories to help me get sleepy.

The scaries versus the fairies.

During the day, the fairies lounged on the slopes and crevices of their kingdom, and the weather was always sunny, even when it rained, Tenny would say, her raspy voice cracking. Nighttime is coming, nighttime is coming. The fairies start scrambling off of the roots, trying to find cover. They know it's going to be time soon—time for the scaries to come out, time to hide.

Tenny told me that 3AM was statistically proven to be the most dangerous time—the time when studies showed that terrible things happened. The only way you could escape the bad things was if you were asleep. I tried to fall asleep so that I wouldn't be awake when the clock turned to 3AM. If I was still awake, I kept my eyes tightly shut. Open eyes made me vulnerable. I believed it. Even in high school, I believed it. Or maybe I didn't believe it, but I felt it. My old baby doll, perched on a shelf directly opposite my bed, was a combination guardian angel and bad luck charm—I wasn't sure which. I thought she might keep the scaries away. But in some way, I blamed her for the thing that had happened to me. If I hadn't been holding the baby doll at the family party, maybe Uncle Gene never would have noticed me. He wouldn't have had anything to joke about, any questions to ask. When I imagined it going this way, I saw myself without a doll, being presented to the grownups, and this time I held on tight to my Dad's hand and Gene didn't say anything. My inner voice, retelling myself the story, was a scream: *Don't let go of Dad's hand! If you don't let go, Gene won't—he won't.*

He won't.

But he always did.

Tenny and her stories helped me fall asleep. She whispered to me about the fairies and the scaries, and there was something about it that made me feel like we were two ghosts caught in a moment of the past, with no bad feelings between us or anything to argue about. No one could hurt us any more. It wasn't just Tenny who was the Dead Girl, it was me, too.

The
Face
in the
Mirror



Kenneth Johnson

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

BY KENNETH JOHNSON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE MAN OF LEGENDS*

CREATOR/DIRECTOR OF SUCH EMMY AWARD-WINNING SHOWS AS *THE BIONIC WOMAN*, *THE INCREDIBLE HULK*, *ALIEN NATION* AND THE LANDMARK ORIGINAL MINISERIES *V*—THE HIGHEST-RATED WORK OF SCIENCE FICTION IN TELEVISION HISTORY.

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Kenneth Johnson, bestselling author of *The Man of Legends* and other novels, is also Creator/Director of such Emmy Award-winning shows as *The Bionic Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Alien Nation* and the landmark original miniseries

V--the highest-rated work of science fiction in television history. Johnson was nominated for the Writers Guild Award for *V* and has received multiple Saturn Awards from the Academy of Science Fiction, as well as the Sci-Fi Universe Lifetime Achievement Award and the prestigious Viewers for Quality Television Award. He and Susan, his wife of 50 years, live in Los Angeles.

[Website](#)

Chapter 1

There was a frightening screech as automatic brakes slammed on, and the late-model Tesla skidded to a stop half an inch before hitting Matthew Shaw.

Matt was bent forward over the hood, hands atop the gunmetal-gray surface, heart pounding. He saw his own twenty-four-year-old face reflected in the windshield—wide-eyed and white with shock. The furious driver was shaking a fist and shouting Farsi epithets at the idiot pedestrian. Matt held up his hands, sincerely embarrassed. “Sorry, s-sorry!” he sputtered, his breath puffing in the chill November morning air.

Matt had trailed his gangly pal Dev Bhandari, dodging through New York’s Lower Fifth Avenue traffic. Dev grabbed Matt’s windbreaker sleeve and pulled him on toward the curb while calling out in his Gujarati dialect to the driver, “Pardon us, uncle!” Dev’s other hand waved a small cooler labeled human organs. “Medical emergency!”

The driver saw Dev’s pile of black hair brushed straight up like a tall crown and took him to be equally idiotic. He snarled in Farsi—which likely translated as *I’ll give you a goddamn medical emergency*—and swerved the weighty car right at them.

“Whoa!” Dev yelped as they leapt up onto the sidewalk, barely avoiding contact when the beefy front tire banged the curb and ricocheted off. The furious driver stabbed his middle finger at them and sped south toward Washington Square.

Matt’s heart was fluttering from both near misses. “I *told* you, man!” he said with a mad-clown grin at his classmate. “We should’ve g-gone down to the light.”

“You are right, as usual,” Dev acknowledged, as they hurriedly navigated through the United Nations of people on the busy sidewalk, their pace as brisk as the kinetic energy of lower Manhattan life bustling around them. “But jaywalking offers unexpected excitement!”

“Excitement’s okay. Survival’s more important.”

“Oh Mattsy, I am just trying to pump up your spirit of adventure.” Dev spotted something ahead. “And look! There’s your chance for some *safe* adventures!” He pointed enthusiastically toward a line of identical posters plastered on a plywood wall. They heralded a current event at Town Hall: beyond paranormal with dr. thelma greer. The sixtyish face of Dr. Greer stared out piercingly through her slightly tinted glasses with a shrewdly raised eyebrow.

“Just look at her expression!” Dev gazed with starstruck eyes as they passed. “You can absolutely tell she really knows stuff. That she has seen some weird shit.” Dev had the bubbling cheeriness of a true believer. “It’s going to be so cool to see her live and—”

“Forget it, Bhandari,” Matt interrupted, chuckling. “I didn’t get into med school to study alien autopsies.”

“We will *perform* one someday, mark my words.”

“*You* probably will,” Matt said wryly, “Right after you get abducted and probed.”

Dev ignored him. “It’s going to be a great convention. Lots of *Stranger Things* stuff! Plus, the new *Doctor Who*,” he tapped one of Greer’s poster faces, “and she’s doing different panels about her years running UCLA’s Parapsych Unit, all her great poltergeist hunting and—”

“Dev!” Matt jerked his friend to a momentary stop in front of the last poster with imposing Dr. Greer staring right at them. “Try to focus.” Other grumbling pedestrians dodged around them as Matt used both hands for emphasis. “We are at NYU. Not Roswell U.”

“Matt!” Dev deftly imitated his friend’s emphasis, standing his ground. “*You* have got to open your mind, expand your thinking. ‘*There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio—*’”

“Than in my bank account,” Matt countered, then shivered from the cold as they walked on. “Buying food is higher on my list than seeing fuzzy photos of UFOs.”

“Okay, okay.” Dev kept pace, shouting to be heard as an FDNY paramedic van sped past with emergency horn blaring, “But you really need to spend a couple bucks on a Thermoball, Mattsy.” He was referencing his own bright yellow North Face jacket which was much more protective than Matt’s frail windbreaker. “And listen, if food is the issue, I have got you covered.” He opened the human organs cooler while they hurried along and pulled out a clear Ziploc bag containing a chunk of human liver.

Matt spoke deadpan—as if he took it seriously. “I’ve told you, Dev: no red meat.”

“Just as well,” Dev said as he put it away. “The pathology team wouldn’t want it if you’d taken a bite. But how about—?” He pulled a banana from the cooler and wiggled it at Matt.

Matt shook his head, laughing. “How about you get your ass in gear so we’re not late?”

Across the avenue from them, nestled among pedestrians who were headed in the same direction as Matt and Dev, a man was slightly ahead of them, but keeping pace.

Anyone glancing at him would not have looked twice. He was in his fifties, from central European stock. The well-worn baseball cap over his salt-and-pepper buzz cut had no team logo. His green, vintage US Marine’s peacoat looked exactly like millions of others. He was nondescript. That was his preferred appearance when working.

He was looking straight ahead as he walked, however, he repeatedly glanced down at the small video screen on the device in his hand. It had been specifically designed to resemble a satellite phone, including the heavy-duty cylindrical antenna, an inch in diameter and six inches long, common to sat phones. But it was not an antenna. It was a highly directional microphone with sensitivity and technology far beyond anything available to anyone without a security clearance.

His handheld device was a sophisticated digital camera designed for clandestine surveillance. He had its disguised, ultra-compact lens pointed across the avenue. Displayed on its screen was a head-to-toe image of Dev and Matt. A blinking red dot indicated that it was recording. The observer holding it continued tracking them as they walked.

Two blocks above Washington Square, the two collegians turned east onto East Ninth Street, then skittered across to the south sidewalk. The observer paused his recorder, moved across Fifth Avenue. Adroitly skirting a two-deck sightseeing bus, he kept the two students in view. Following them discreetly from the north sidewalk of Ninth, he steered smoothly between slower pedestrians to get slightly ahead of his targets. He then restarted his recording as they approached a repurposed 1950s office building just before University Place. It featured a modern sign with a black glass background and stainless-steel lettering, identifying it as med-x laboratories. Several employees were in a short line at the security entrance. Dev fell in behind them, but Matt was looking around for someone.

The observer also slowed to a stop slightly past them on his opposite side of the street and leaned casually against a lamp post. He never glanced in their direction but kept watching their images on his video screen. He saw Matt continue to scan around and for a moment Matt looked directly into his camera. The observer didn't budge but watched his screen as he pretended to be tapping it in his hand. He was certain Matt would assume he was deeply engaged in something on his sat phone. He was correct. Matt's gaze passed right on as he stepped off the curb to peer further down the street. Then he called back to Dev, loudly enough for the observer to hear.

"Hey Dev, do you see her back toward Fifth? She said she really wanted to—"

"Matty! Hey!" a female voice shouted. Matt turned around to look towards University Place.

The observer's handheld camera followed Matt's turn, panning to find and focus on a striking, sunny-faced young woman who'd appeared from around the corner on the observer's side. He recognized her immediately from his team's earlier surveillances and research.

He knew Molly Perez was twenty-five. Her rich auburn hair and hazel eyes indicated that her mother from Ireland's County Cork had possessed the strongest gene pool. Her father's Argentine heritage contributed the warming color to her smooth skin. She was bundled against the cold in a white, puffy down coat over a purple NYU sweatshirt. She jaywalked quickly across Ninth, gracefully dodging a fast-moving e-scooter messenger and a Subaru Uber to reach Matt.

The HD videocam zoomed in closer as Molly gave Matt a quick kiss and fist-bumped Dev. The observer was confident they were unaware of his surveillance. Since Ninth Street was much narrower than Fifth Avenue, he was able to fine-tune his directional mike, filtering out much of the ambient city noise, distant sirens and such. He knew an occasional passing vehicle would momentarily interrupt the signal to his earbuds, but he'd be able to get the gist of their conversation. He settled in to observe and heard Molly eagerly asking Matt, "Did you have time to read it?"

The observer's seasoned eyes noticed a very subtle—but to him telltale—shift in Matt's expression. He saw that Dev, standing in line behind them, also sensed Matt's trepidation.

After the briefest pause Matt said, "Yeah." He sounded generally positive as he pulled a few wrinkled pages from within his worn, thin jacket. "Yeah, Moll. It's good. I liked it."

"You did!" She bounced slightly, relieved. "I'm so glad!"

She hugged him, crushing the papers between them while enthusiastically talking a mile a minute. "I dug really deep into interviews with people who were *on* Pettus Bridge that Bloody Sunday. People on John Lewis's side, but also sheriff's deputies who attacked. I found firsthand details I'd never heard! It was so terrifying and brave and historic all at once!" She looked keenly into Matt's blue eyes, seeking affirmation. "And you liked how I blended it all?"

"Yes. It's a good essay." His smile was genuine, but also—the observer felt—it was a bit wan. Molly also sensed Matt's subtle hesitancy as he went on, "It's r-really well-written, but ..."

Molly's shoulders sagged. Matt's stutter apparently betrayed his uneasiness, confirming her suspicions. Her eyebrows went up. She stuck the word right back at him, "*But* ...?"

“Well,” Dev intervened loudly, eager to avoid the line of fire, “My *personal butt* is freezing off. And—” he lifted the Human Organs container “—I’ve got to get this into the path team. Catch you later, Molly.” He escaped into the lab building as Matt felt the pressure of Molly’s stare.

“Didn’t you say your assignment was to be ‘c-completely objective?’”

Molly frowned, annoyed. “It *is* objective! I patterned it after Hemingway’s early dispatches from the Spanish Civil War. I was really careful to stay unemotional, not editorialize and—” She cut herself off with a huff, looked away from his steady gaze. Stewing about his implied criticism.

Matt averted his own eyes, giving her room to go through her irritation. Then Matt said softly, “Here’s what I honestly think, Moll: It really is some of your f-finest writing. You drew me inside those horrible moments and—”

“Oh pu-*leeze*,” she waved a hand dismissively, “don’t try to backpedal and—”

“Just listen a sec, huh?”

She planted her weight on one foot with a huff of irritation and stood hipshot. Without looking at him she popped her head archly, indicating for him to continue. If he must.

The observer allowed a slight smile to curl one corner of his lips. Despite his professional detachment and inbred cynicism, he was intrigued by this young couple’s interaction.

Matt spoke quietly. “The way you assembled all the pieces is powerful, Moll. There were a couple places, though, wh-where I found myself remembering what you told me this *same* professor had said—”

“About what?” she snapped.

“About reading between the lines to learn whose side the writer is on.” Matt saw her eyes flick slightly, her mind opening a crack. “By examining which *adjectives* a writer chooses.” He pointed at a sentence. “Like here, where you wrote, ‘When the coldhearted attack began, John Lewis and his marchers heroically stood their ground—’”

Molly’s taut face slackened suddenly. “Oh, shit.” The observer saw she was busted, and she knew it. She tried to fight down a smile, wanted to hold onto her anger, but couldn’t. A laugh percolated out as she repeated, with mortified enlightenment, “Shit.” She nodded.

The observer had also understood and nodded as Molly articulated, “Writing ‘coldhearted’ and ‘heroically’ tips off my own subjective feelings.”

“Which most people agree are exactly the *right* feelings,” Matt encouraged.

“But the specific assignment was for me *not* to express any opinion. Only unbiased reportage.” She chuckled, finally looked into his eyes, embarrassed by her annoyance. She took her papers from his hand. “I’ll weed back through it, make sure there’s not too much of me in it.”

“Could never be too much for me, Moll.”

She touched the lock of chestnut hair on his forehead. “You are sooo—I’m searching for the perfect, highly-biased adjective—*sweet!*”

She gave him a very real kiss. The observer noticed a fifty-something woman of Middle Eastern descent passing by them who saw their kiss and smiled as she continued inside. Then Molly snuggled Matt but grew concerned. “Oh Matty, you’re cold. We’ve got to get you a warmer coat.”

He shrugged it off. “I’ll survive till my next paycheck. See you tonight?”

“Yeah. And thanks for being honest.” He was happy to have helped. She leaned closer again, with a bedroom smile. “And tonight ... Definitely.”

After a quick parting kiss, she headed off happily. Matt gazed fondly after her before entering the lab.

The observer clicked off his surveillance camera. He stood contemplatively for a moment as the traffic on Ninth Street continued passing and New York pedestrians of varying shapes, sizes, and ethnicities hurried by in both directions. He was weighing the professional need to remain unbiased himself.

Finally, the observer inhaled a resolute breath. He walked back toward Fifth Avenue, blending in among the populace and feeling that at least the time of information gathering was ended. The harvest had been plentiful.

In less than a day, he could proceed to the final stage of his mission.

~ ~ ~ ~

Matt was pleased to have gotten his job at Med-X ten months earlier. It was not only his prime source of income, but a prestigious credit to have on his CV because Med-X was the prime biochemical facility affiliated with NYU hospitals and health centers. Matt went through the small public lobby, then used his ID card to enter the cloak room for storing outdoor garments. Still chilled from being outside, he left his windbreaker on and put a fresh white lab coat over it. He paused before opening the security door into the ground floor laboratory. He took a deep preparatory breath. That had become a ritual for him: readying himself for what lay ahead.

Matt's ID opened the door, and it hit him full in the face, just as it always did.

The Whiteness.

After working in the lab ten months—even ten *years*, some longtime employees had told him—the white-out effect was still phenomenal. Everything in the room was white: the walls, floor and ceiling with its abundant built-in LED illumination.

About three-fourths the size of an all-white basketball court, the laboratory's whiteness was overwhelming. The first time Matt walked into the lab he'd thought even the air seemed white. And smelled white.

Long, clean, white countertops at desk height lined the walls. Below them were multi-sized white drawers containing supplies. Every four feet there were leg spaces for workers seated on white chairs or stools.

Above the countertops were easily reachable white shelves containing white electronic instruments as well as racks of glass test tubes, bottles, vials, volumetric flasks in all imaginable sizes and often quirky shapes. Matt thought several were amusing, looking like nonsensical props from 1931's *Frankenstein*.

The fifty or so people working in the lab had faces of different colors, which leant a warm, humanizing aspect that Matt was grateful for, even though they were all clothed in white lab coats, some in matching white scrub pants. Many had white hair covers.

Staffers worked along the countertops operating many examples of sophisticated state-of-the-art, mostly white equipment. They were varying instruments for the analysis of blood components, enzymology, toxicology, endocrinology, DNA, and such. Everything Matt and others needed to study, document, and report lab tests from pathological research projects and health care patients.

Once acclimated to the initial blizzard of arctic whiteness, Matt also appreciated the grace notes of color sprinkled across the lab, such as the colorful LED touchscreens mounted over the eyepieces of the two dozen Koehler 40X-1000X Trinocular microscopes being used by skilled scientists. Plus, there were computer monitors of differing sizes displaying texts, graphs, oscillating 3D wireframe images of DNA and a few screensavers of landscapes, personal photos or, of course, cats.

The staff ranged in age from seniors down to college grads and med students like him and Dev.

Down the center of the room were two islands of white-topped lab tables with attending stools. Matt saw that Dr. Pauline Diamond, who had passed him and Molly outside, was settling in at her supervisory station. Pauline was a substantial, confident woman whom he knew was of Israeli heritage via Brooklyn. Early on, she'd treated him to a slice of cheesecake from Junior's on Flatbush Avenue. She extracted an iPad from her weathered carpet bag as Matt sat nearby to boot up a computer saying, "Good morning, Dr. D."

She smiled, glancing sideways at him as she started her iPad. "Looked like you were having a good morning outside."

Matt felt his cheeks redden as he smiled shyly, but proud. "... Yeah."

"A significant other perhaps?"

"I'm a lucky guy."

"I'd say she's pretty lucky, too. She at Tisch? Studying acting?"

Matt laughed lightly. “Double major in History-Journalism. But she gets asked that a lot.”

“Understandable, with those looks.” Pauline noticed he was fishing out his package of Tums. “Hey, you’ve been hitting those quite a bit. Feeling okay?”

“Physiology midterm next week.” He drew a breath, looking away, thoughtful.

He knew she was watching him, likely sensing he was screwing up his courage about something as the lab around them continued buzzing with activity, analysis equipment bleeping, colleagues conversing. Finally, Matt said softly, “Also, Dr. D, I r-really hate to ask, but could I pick up a couple more hours here?”

She blinked. “With *your* load of classes? And also—”

“I’m doing okay academically,” he jumped in, eager to quell her concern. “I really think I could handle it.”

“But Jesus, Matt, between processing lab reports and doing IT for us, you’re almost full time now. When will you sleep?”

He shrugged. “I figure maybe when I’m thirty-two.”

Pauline leaned closer, her warm brown eyes peering over her hornrims. She spoke confidentially. “Is money that tight, kiddo?” He offered a pallid smile. She sighed. “I’ll see what I can do with HR.”

“That’d be great, I really appreciate—”

“Hey, Cyberman!” Dev called out.

They looked two tables away and saw that Dev had pulled a white hair cover over his tall pile of black hair. It resembled a white top hat.

“Oh my God.” Pauline chuckled. “*The Cat in the Hat* lives.” Matt grinned as she asked, “Why *does* he brush his hair up like that?”

“He likes having a ‘signature look.’” Matt grinned. “So why not? He’s very proud of it—and it’s sort of like having a pet.”

Dev was pointing at his computer with serious concern. “Is the lymphatic cell analyzer program really supposed to look like *Mortal Kombat*?”

Pauline exhaled a frustrated puff. “Shit. Another goddamn virus?”

Matt was already on the move, waving back at her. “That one’s easy-peasy. I’ll inoculate it.”

“You are the man, Matt!” Dev said much too loudly, for the doctor’s benefit. “I will bet they pay you lots extra for all these viruses you save them from, huh Matt?”

Pauline smirked back, “Now there’s an idea!” She gave Matt a wink and made a note on her iPad.

Matt poked his pal’s shoulder. “Jeez, couldn’t you say it a little louder?”

“Just trying to help, man. ‘The squeaky wheel gets the oil.’”

“An old Indian saying?”

“Actually, it’s a Bhandari original.” He stood and Matt took the stool, eyeing the misbehaving computer screen as Dev shook his head. “I can’t get back in.”

“I thought guys from Mumbai were born knowing this stuff.”

“My DNA was glitchy.”

Matt’s fingers were trying different combinations of multiple keys, but the animated images onscreen persisted. Matt muttered, “Actually this one looks more like *God of War*.” He tried two more combinations then suddenly the white-on-black DOS Command Prompt screen appeared.

“Ha!” Dev laughed. “You are a cybernetic sorcerer! The Fauci of IT.” Then Dev spoke louder in Dr. Diamond’s direction. “Wow, great save, Matt! You fixed another one!”

Matt was amused, but hissed at his pal, “Will you shut up?”

“Hey, when you’ve got it, flaunt it. But just remember when they pay you more—I get some vig.”

Matt let Dev resume the stool and nodded. “Ten percent. Most def.”

The observer was in his middle-class office on the lower West Side. Typical desktop items included a small container for business cards with his name, Charles Reinhardt, and his area of expertise, investigations.

Reinhardt also wanted visitors to see authentication of his background experience, so his walls included mementos from years in military and FBI intelligence, then later educating recruits at Quantico before he'd taken early retirement and gone private.

Also in evidence were four new file folders. Clipped to the corner of each was a small photo of a different graduate student. The first, labeled Z-1, was a black male with neat dreads pulled tight in back, creating a ponytail. Z-2 was a male with red hair and freckles. Z-3 was a serious-looking female of perhaps Arabic heritage. Z-4 was Matthew Shaw.

Reinhardt was making a final editorial pass on the surveillance videos of Matt that he and his staff had recorded.

A twenty-four-inch monitor displayed the image of a burger joint called Cozy's. It was appropriately named, being a tiny, thirty-foot-wide mom-and-pop eatery nestled in the shadow of a looming, thirty-five-story apartment building at Broadway and Astor Place. The video zoomed in through the window to frame on Matt and Dev sitting at the counter as a black waitress with purple hair joked with her old friends. She served Matt a bowl of Cozy's legendary pea soup and Dev a burger the size of Cleveland. Matt took a Tums then enjoyed the soup. The image froze.

Reinhardt dropped that shot into the montage timeline then continued playing the sequence of surveillance shots he had strung together. All were scenes of Matt living his everyday life. One showed Matt sitting with Dev and two female classmates on the concrete benches in front of Washington Square's classic Roman arch. Dev and the women were arguing over a complex passage in a medical textbook. Their words were audible but incomprehensible to anyone not steeped in medical terminology, including Reinhardt. One female pounded the page with her forefinger, heatedly expressed her interpretation and Dev stood up shouting, "What, are you *crazy*? How can how can you possibly *believe* that?" The offended woman jumped to her feet angrily, gathered her books and purse, preparing to storm off in a huff—when Matt muttered something unintelligible, but apparently so startling that the others stopped dead to stare at him.

Then they all cracked up, laughing heartily together at his comment. The tension evaporated. The female who'd been angry plopped back down, still laughing. The other young woman patted Matt's shoulder, appreciating his clever, understated ability to smooth the moment and right their ship with a single quip.

Reinhardt was impressed when he'd first seen that moment and he still was.

The next video was in Battery Park. Captured through a telephoto lens, with children crisscrossing the foreground, Matt and Molly were sitting on a pair of swings, gently rocking as Matt listened to Molly read an op-ed from the *Times* about truth telling.

The following shot showed Dr. Diamond walking along University Place while Matt used his hands to shape an idea about patient care. She was clearly impressed with his engaging presentation.

The next clip showed Matt riding on an electric scooter with Molly holding on behind as he zipped along, weaving their way down Wall Street.

Following was a shot taken on a chilly evening showing Molly arm-in-arm with Matt crossing Bowery onto funky Great Jones Street, their heads inclined toward each other while talking quietly. Seemingly without noticing, they passed a vagrant woman bundled in discarded clothing, huddled in a shuttered doorway. Matt slowed to a stop, glanced back at her. He dug out the few coins in his pocket. Molly added a couple dollars and Matt gave it all to the woman, who only nodded vaguely. Then Matt took Molly's arm and they walked on.

The next scene showed Matt almost hit by the Tesla—and the image froze.

Reinhardt scanned back a few frames to hold on Matt and Molly having just helped the homeless woman. Reinhardt studied the image thoughtfully, impressed by their humanism.

Then he picked up his cell and touched the contact number for his employer.

Chapter 2

By 9:30 the next morning, Reinhardt was riding shotgun in the starboard seat of a blue and white Bell Jet Ranger. The Hudson River was sliding past barely a thousand feet below them. Reinhardt felt his stomach lighten as the pilot began their descent. She was a short-haired female with the assured confidence of a combat veteran. She nodded toward the village they were passing over which was nestled against the river. Her eyes smiled from behind her aviator glasses as she clicked her headset mike and spoke over the engine noise, “Sleepy Hollow. Been up here?”

Reinhardt clicked his mike. “Yep. Had a headless horseman hunt me once.” She smiled at his reference to the legendary story. “But I haven’t been to where we’re going.”

“Just a couple miles up.” She pointed ahead to what looked like uninhabited park land alongside the river. “I’ll give you a quick three-sixty before we set down.” She banked the aircraft to cross lower over the railroad tracks that were snug against the shoreline, then she continued over stands of old growth trees on the inland side. “There it is.”

In the green countryside ahead, over a mile from the public road, was a large park with broad green lawns and massive stands of two-hundred-year-old trees. Half were deciduous and nearly barren of leaves in November, but an equal number were evergreen, lush and thriving. Sitting in the center of this sixty-seven-acre estate was an imposing mansion built entirely from large, rectangular blocks of granite. Reinhardt’s eyes widened as he took it in and the pilot said, “One of the old Vanderbilt places.”

It was a Gothic Revival palace that caused Reinhardt to frown curiously. “Hmmm, I’ve got some *deja vu* going on.”

“Like you *have* seen it before? Entirely possible. It’s been in a couple movies. I’ve piloted some aerial camerawork myself a couple of times.” Then she added sourly, “before they all started using drones. Actually, my last film gig was here. For that *Downton Abbey* wannabe, *The Gilded Age*.”

“Ah. Right.” Reinhardt nodded with recognition, “That’s exactly where I saw it.”

She flew a slow circle around the manor house allowing him to see its impressive mixture of architectural styles. The dominant feature was its square bell tower, twenty feet on the side and rising to six stories above the building’s back corner. Halfway up the tower at the fourth story on each side were arched windows ten feet tall and wide with leaded glass. The top floor was an open-air chamber with glassless, fifteen-foot-long colonnaded windows.

He saw that attached to the right of the tower was a substantial three-story wing. On the tower’s left, the mansion’s main central portion consisted of four large, conjoined buildings of different heights. The tallest had a five-story, steeply pointed roof. There were other Gothic pointed arches of varying sizes everywhere as well as tall, lean, leaded-glass windows.

Reinhardt marveled at it. “Damn thing looks like it *could’ve* been built in the 13th century.”

The pilot brought the helicopter slowly around to fully face the front where a gardener driving a tool-laden golf cart steered to one side to give her space. The pilot settled the chopper gently, gracefully alighting on the front lawn.

Reinhardt saw one of the mansion’s two broad, thick front doors had been opened by an old-school butler who took a few steps out and stood beneath the arched covered portico, awaiting him.

Reinhardt climbed out, retrieving his valise and laptop, then spoke apologetically to the pilot. “I may be a while.” She winked, stifling a yawn. “Take your time, I’m on their dime. I’ll just sit out here getting drunk.”

Reinhardt smirked, then walked toward the stone arch of the portico. He glanced up at the full front of the granite mansion which loomed imposingly over him as he approached. The clouds above it had darkened, lending a vague uneasiness.

He saw that the trim, balding, white butler watching him approach was perhaps sixty. His eyeglasses had narrow rectangular lenses, suggesting to Reinhardt that he was a man of precision. Neatly dressed in a tailored brown business suit and matching tie with a tan vest beneath his jacket, his attitude was polite, but restrained. Rather than offering his hand, he nodded deferentially saying, “Mr. Reinhardt. Welcome. I am Jamison.” He gestured congenially for Reinhardt to enter, and the investigator stepped inside the broad, arched, marble entry foyer where a middle-aged housemaid awaited on the thick oriental carpet beside a beautifully carved, ten-foot coat rack.

She gestured pleasantly toward his raincoat, speaking with an Eastern European accent, “May I, sir?” As she took it, Reinhardt glanced up at the curved arches of the ceiling which were painted to mimic the marble walls. Two life-sized busts of male Romans surmounted pedestals on either side of an inner archway. Just beyond was an oak parquet-floored music and reception room with elegant Georgian furniture, a grand piano and a marble fireplace beneath a huge mirror on its mantle. The nine Greek muses were painted, Renaissance-style, on the sectioned ceiling. Outside light poured in through the three floor-to-ceiling leaded-glass windows that comprised the far wall.

“This way, sir,” Jamison said, heading into a side hallway. Reinhardt followed, glancing into large rooms they passed—all with twelve-foot ceilings—including a spacious library two rooms deep, containing plush reading chairs, large globes, a presidential-sized desk, and glass-fronted bookcases fully loaded with countless volumes.

Reinhardt passed a sumptuous dining room with a vaulted, beamed ceiling, walls padded with forest-green cloth wallpaper in between twenty narrow pillars of black marble. The colonnades created nooks containing antique side tables holding marble sculptures and cast bronzes mostly of robust Roman women. All of this surrounded an oak table with twelve padded leather chairs.

During his FBI years Reinhardt had seen a great variety of places, but never any private home so outrageously opulent. Particularly eye-opening was the final Great Hall: even more posh and richly appointed than all preceding and far larger with a lofty thirty-foot Gothic-arched ceiling and a towering three-story window on the far wall.

Reinhardt mumbled, “... Jee-sus!”

“Not an unusual reaction, sir.” Jamison sniffed.

Several heavily framed paintings from masters of the Renaissance through Impressionists to early 20th-century surrealists adorned the broad granite walls.

The Great Hall had a few pieces of comfortable 19th- and 20th-century furniture, particularly near the ten-foot fireplace framed by marble pillars supporting a mantle sculpted in early Romantic style.

Reinhardt noted curiously that the expansive chamber was also doing service as a repository and clearing house for historic relics. Sturdy wooden tables along the walls and in the center contained dozens of archaeological finds being scrutinized and sorted by a middle-aged, scholarly-looking couple plus two interns. Many specimens were only fragments, but others were mostly intact, some quite large. Two suits of crusade-era armor stood alongside a table which held various broadswords and a spiked mace with a chain. Another table held a yard-long section of meticulously hand-sewn medieval tapestry protected between Plexiglas sheets. Its illustration was of a victim being tortured by grotesque demons.

Reinhardt passed a table where a child-sized mummy with its wrapping in dusty tatters lay beside a mummified cat with empty eye sockets gaping. Nearby, resting on a cushion of bubble wrap, was an atrophied human forearm, its skin coated with dirt and dried blood, the gritty hand and fingers curled into a claw.

Reinhardt paused, cringing. "Where the hell does he get all this?"

Jamison subtly arched an eyebrow, suggesting, "... Garage sales?"

"Riiiiight." Reinhardt smirked, surprised that the staid butler had some humor.

Jamison continued, "Mostly from archeological digs he supervised."

Reinhardt noted boarded-up crates addressed to the Louvre. "And he sells them to museums."

"Correct, sir."

"Looks like they pay pretty well."

The proper butler didn't comment on that, but added, "He's also a historic advisor to several of the majors." As Reinhardt looked again at the clawed hand, Jamison said, "After twenty-two years here, I'm rather used to pieces like these. You find some unsettling?"

Reinhardt nodded. "But also intriguing. He must be an interesting man to work for."

Jamison volunteered nothing, but Reinhardt noticed a shadow cross the man's face, before he said, "The master is upstairs, sir. This way."

As Reinhardt followed toward another Gothic marble archway, he passed a heavy table supporting a gargoyle like those atop Notre Dame. With its fiendish grin and wide eyes, it appeared to be staring right at him, stone-faced.

Beyond the arch, they climbed a broad mahogany-paneled stairway which had a landing halfway up and a tall window overlooking the grounds and threatening sky. The butler slowed to a stop, pondering, finally speaking in a confidential tone, "If you'll permit me a few private words, sir?"

"Of course," Reinhardt responded, curious.

"Have you ever spoken directly to the master?"

"No, the arrangements were handled through Mr. Deakins, his lawyer. Why, is there a problem?"

"Over the last two months or so, he has been having subtle episodes of what his doctor confides may be oncoming dementia. Or worse."

"Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that," Reinhardt said sincerely. "I went through that with my late mother. Is there memory loss, or—"

"Yes. As well as some sporadic paranoia and even delusion now and again. You may find him quite fine and entirely clear-headed today. Several days in a row often pass where he seems completely normal and then, well, if you've experienced it, you know."

"And I know it requires patience."

"Yes. That's why I thought it best to alert you."

"I appreciate it, Mr. Jamison." Reinhardt extended his hand.

The butler was surprised, but gratified. "Thank you, Mr. Reinhardt." His hand gripped Reinhardt's for a moment. "This way, then."

At the top, Reinhardt was led into a large study with a beamed ceiling and rich wood paneling. He saw that one entire wall had glass-front wooden cabinets containing archeological artifacts.

A gray marble fireplace dominated the inner wall with an oval Baroque mirror overtop. Arranged before it were a red velvet Victorian settee, two matching chairs and a polished tea table. On that table was a sterling silver tray holding an equally sterling tea service.

A leaded-glass window wall was opposite a roll-top desk on one side and a long wooden table on the other. Atop that table, Reinhardt recognized numerous archaeological tools, plus some stone and wooden relics as well as two thick, ancient leather books.

Reinhardt saw a man with his back to them slouching over the table facing a slim, pricy laptop. He had close-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair and appeared to be of mixed White and Black parentage, leaning more toward Black. He wore a light brown country jacket. Even from the back Reinhardt sensed an imposing presence.

Jamison gingerly stepped closer to his master then quietly cleared his throat.

The man's low, gravelly voice grunted, "... Yes?"

"Mr. Reinhardt is here, sir."

"Who's here?" The man's unexpectedly deep bass voice reminded Reinhardt of James Earl Jones. Then he swiveled his chair, and the investigator got his first in-person look at Dr. John Zachery. Reinhardt knew he was eighty, but he looked older. His skin tone was definitely more black than white, with numerous age spots. Reinhardt saw his nose had been broken in his youth. His neatly trimmed full moustache and rounded Van Dyke-style beard matched his hair and eyebrows. He had strong cheekbones which, Reinhardt imagined, if more fleshed out when he was younger, would have lent it fulsomeness. But at his current age his cheeks were sunken, giving him a leaner countenance. His lines and wrinkles were deep.

Reinhardt felt, however, an aura of strong passion and resolute self-will about Zachery. Despite his slouch, he had a commanding, formidable deportment. He tilted his furrowed brow down slightly to peer at the visitor through the vari-focus lenses of his tortoiseshell wireframe glasses. His penetrating gray-green eyes, though slightly bloodshot, suggested keen, literate intelligence. And Reinhardt sensed something more: that subtle self-awareness and mysteriously quiet calm he'd often seen in the eyes of people who possessed a level of power.

But to Reinhardt, Dr. Zachery also seemed a tad confused, eyeing his visitor carefully, trying to make a connection, while sucking some air in through his teeth. "Who?"

"Mis-ter Rein-hardt," the butler carefully articulated, then added supportively, "the gentleman Mr. Deakins engaged to investigate your university candidates, sir."

Zachery stared into the distance a moment, processing, finally nodded. "Ah." He beckoned Reinhardt toward the table.

The investigator stepped over, offering his hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Dr. Zachery."

Zachery shook his hand distractedly, mumbling a greeting, then he noticed the butler waiting attentively and said, "Thank you ... uh ..."

The manservant patiently prompted, "Jamison, sir."

"Of course." Zachery seemed slightly embarrassed. "... Jamison."

The butler shared a private glance with Reinhardt, which reinforced their preceding conversation. Then Jamison picked up an empty crystal glass nearby. "More pear juice, sir?" Zachery shook his head absently. "Will that be all then, sir?"

"Yes, thank you ... Jamison." The butler nodded respectfully, watching his master's gaze drift downward as the old man sighed wistfully. Jamison shared a last glance with Reinhardt and exited.

But the moment the door closed, Reinhardt noticed Zachery's eyes slowly rise to look steadily, carefully at the door, as if to be certain the butler had truly walked away. A moment of paranoia, perhaps? Then Zachery inhaled and his cloudiness seemed to evaporate. He rose from his chair, beckoning congenially, "Here, Mr. Reinhardt, I'll make some space for you." He began moving the items on his worktable.

Seeing the older man standing and less slouched, Reinhardt assessed his aging physique. His shoulders might have been much broader in his younger years, but now were slightly hunched, shortening his height to slightly below six feet. His pants seemed baggy, indicating how younger hips and legs had been reduced in size and strength. Otherwise, he seemed fairly fit for eighty. He carefully slid aside the two books, each about twenty inches square and thick as an unabridged dictionary. Their heavy leather covers were cracked and ancient, the paper inside yellowed, rough-edged.

"They've been around a while." Reinhardt said while taking the four files from his laptop case.

"Late eleventh century," Zachery confirmed, raising his eyebrows for emphasis. "One of them supposedly contains the Philosopher's Stone."

“The what?”

“The legendary Philosopher’s Stone was the illusive formula for turning base metals into gold. One of many magical transformations sought by ancient alchemists. Including Sir Isaac Newton.”

“Really? The physicist, mathematician?”

“Plus theologian, astronomer, author, philosopher, and sometimes thoroughly deranged genius. Newton evolved into all of those after his disappointing efforts at alchemy.”

Reinhardt opened his laptop. “Have *you* had any luck, doc?”

“Quite a bit overall, yes,” Zachery said with a wry smile, “but not as yet in that area of alchemy. Like so much of antiquity, that answer remains elusive.” He resumed his chair, indicating a nearby stool for his visitor.

Then Zachery glanced at the covers of the four folders, each bearing a photo of the student documented. “Are they arranged in any particular order?”

“Just alphabetical, sir.” Reinhardt booted his laptop. “And I also have video material of each as you’d requested.”

“Very well,” Zachery said pleasantly, “let’s have a look at these young folks.” He opened the Z-1 folder, which contained a half dozen pages, and peered down through his tortoiseshell wireframes.

It took an hour for Zachery to read carefully through the first three reports, often pulling his lower lip thoughtfully. He asked Reinhardt questions and encouraged the investigator’s personal comments on each candidate while watching their individual surveillance videos. As he closed the third folder he said, “Well. Three excellent candidates.” Then he opened Matt’s dossier, glanced over it briefly, saying, “Run the next video and remind me about this one.”

“Matthew William Shaw, second-year med school,” Reinhardt said as his laptop began displaying the surveillance videos of Matt going about daily concerns. “Three-point-eight-five GPA. Very diligent. His professors and other TAs are unanimously positive, as you’ll see in their recommendation letters and our interview summaries. He’s modest, self-effacing, and trusted by his fellow students, though he doesn’t seek the limelight. Paying his own way through school, he’s been employed for a year nearly full time at Med-X Laboratories which confirms his excellent worth ethic. He is also a computer whiz and helps with their IT issues. Very little savings. Owes some hefty college loans.”

Zachery glanced from the video to look for something in the dossier. “Family?”

“None living. Parents were anthropologists and—”

“Oh yes, yes.” Zachery noted a reference in the report. “I remember now. I actually knew his parents slightly.” He saw another notation, frowned. “His father was killed in a hit-and-run?”

“Just before Matthew was born, yes. His mother died of cancer when he was eighteen. He’s very health conscious. Non-smoker. Only an occasional beer with his chicken-tomato-basil pizza. No drug use. Chews a lot of Tums. Likable. Generous.”

Zachery’s gray-green eyes studied Reinhardt cagily. “You’re partial to this one.”

Reinhardt shrugged. “Seems like a particularly nice, deserving kid.”

As Zachery watched the videos of Matt, he opened a bottle of yellow prescription pills, took one with a sip of water from a cut-crystal glass as a new video image included Dev.

“His roommate, Dev Bhandari,” Reinhardt described, “Mumbai native. Pre-med. Good student. Little on the retro-fringy side. It’s all in the file. Also, a work-up on her, too.”

Molly had appeared. Zachery was struck by her sunny face and auburn hair. “My, my. His lady fair?”

“For seven months. Molly Perez. They are very devoted.”

The older man assessed her lovely face, confidently surmising, “A Tisch theater student, no doubt.”

“No, sir. History and Journalism. Double major. First-year graduate.”

“Surprising. Given those looks.”

Reinhardt saw Zachery’s appreciation of Molly. He felt it was the classic image of a man in the winter of his life recalling the springtime.

After a few more scenes another came up that particularly caught Zachery's attention. The video was of Matt seen from behind, jogging at a good pace along the East River Promenade. It had been recorded in warmer September weather. He was shirtless, in only shorts and sneakers. His physique was muscular. He was being photographed unaware by a GoPro camera mounted on the front of a bicycle that tracked him from behind. Then the camera glided past him, and the image switched to a rear-facing GoPro point of view revealing the graceful Williamsburg Bridge behind him. Matt continued running while enjoying his view of Brooklyn on the far side. A couple of women he passed enjoyed their view of his well-honed six pack and strong legs.

Zachery pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip as he watched Matt. Reinhardt thought it was somewhat like watching an expert stable owner assessing a thoroughbred's possibilities.

When the montage video ended, Zachery inhaled deeply. He laid down Matt's dossier atop the others and said with finality, "Well done, Mr."—he paused to recall—"... Reinhardt."

The investigator was stowing his laptop. "Thank you, Dr. Zachery. I'm glad you're pleased. And this thumb drive contains all the files and videos."

Zachery took and inserted it into his own laptop. "Always like to confirm that components function properly." He was gratified to see a main menu appear with the four candidates' names and photos. A click on Matthew's accessed a submenu with icons for text and video. He started the surveillance footage; let it play for a few seconds and paused it. "Very well. I think we're squared away ..."

Then Zachery stood—flinching slightly and grunting with annoyance. "Ouch. Sitting too damn long." He went to his rolltop desk where he picked up a business envelope. Reinhardt stood up respectfully as Zachery walked back. The doctor took another deep breath and twisted slightly as though to unkink his back. "You and your associates did six months' worth of research in only three." His arthritic hand offered the envelope. "And I've decided to reward you accordingly."

Reinhardt was surprised and received it with his head graciously inclined. "Well. That's ... very generous of you, Dr. Zachery."

"You've earned it." The doctor nodded formally and turned away to sit down facing his laptop. "Good day."

Being a former Marine, Reinhardt recognized that he'd been dismissed, but said, "If you need anything further—"

"I shan't." Zachery restarted the video, intent on watching it, saying conclusively, "You can find your way out, I'm sure."

"Certainly, sir. And thanks again for—"

"My pleasure," Zachery mumbled without looking back. Meeting over.

Okay. Well then. Reinhardt thought.

He walked across the study, opened the door then took a last look around the room with its peculiar artifacts and back at the doctor, who was facing away. Reinhardt knew instinctively that Zachery had already forgotten about him. He was busy scanning the video of Matthew Shaw. Reinhardt saw him pause the images momentarily on Matt's face, then on Molly's, then Zachery let play the scene of Matt running shirtless on the East River Promenade.

Finally, Reinhardt stepped into the hall, pulling the door almost closed. But not quite. He hesitated, pondering the curious old man, and feeling an unusual frustration that he would likely never know the inside story of what happened next—particularly to the young people into whose lives he'd had a momentary, tantalizing glimpse. He felt a fleeting ache of disappointment.

But then his professionalism caught up. He drew a breath, and quietly closed the door.

MIDDLE GRADE & YOUNG ADULT



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Sherrilyn Kenyon has had more than eighty novels on the *New York Times* bestseller list and has more than seventy million copies of her books in print in over one hundred countries. Her ongoing fiction series include the Dark-Hunters, The League, Deadman's Cross, Chronicles of Nick, Eve of Destruction, Nevermore, and the Lords of Avalon.

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Prologue

Lightning split the sky, creating a rift between the worlds just large enough for the good fox to slip through. Red and white, the little fox raced with her bundle, doing her best to outrun those who were out to kill them both.

“High and low, searching they will go. The dark ones will seek, and they will kill. This poor little infant’s blood they will spill.”

Keiko looked down at the baby she carried in her mouth.

Poor little thing. So wanted and so hated.

So loved and so feared.

“I am all that stands between you and death.”

And she was just a tiny little fox. A trifle compared to the other, more powerful creatures who wanted this baby dead. Those who could hunt without tiring.

Why her goddess had chosen her for its keeper, she had no idea. She wasn’t much older than a kit herself.

But she was fast. And she must be faster still.

Running, she tucked her head down and headed for the nearby woods as more lightning flashed and thunder rolled. The others were coming through the portal she’d just used, as determined to kill the babe as she was to save him. She heard them cursing. Felt their powers crackling.

They sought this infant and the power he would one day hold.

The power to give life and to take it.

“Don’t worry, Ryu-chan,” she murmured as she ran. “I will protect you.”

She hoped and prayed. Because if she failed, the world would fall to the kage-kami, the shadow gods, and everyone would perish. Then there would be no holding back the eternal night shadows that would swallow the world whole.

You must find a place to hide him, Keiko, her goddess, Haruka, had ordered in those last desperate moments. Find a safe den for him while his powers are dormant. One where the dark kami, Ryukage, can’t find this child.

Where Ryuichi could grow up safe, away from those who would corrupt him and turn his heart to darkness, the way they’d done his beautiful mother. Because of the shadows this baby alone would control, any mortal who ever learned of his parentage would be honor bound to shun him or kill him.

And if they killed him, there would be no one who could fight the dark powers that were growing. There would be no holding back the eternal night shadows that would swallow the world whole.

Only this child would inherit the powers to stop them.

He alone could save humanity and repel the cruelty that was headed for them all.

And she alone could protect him. The whole of Japan was dark now. At war, and fighting.

Nowhere was safe. *As above, so below.* How could the Master Powers have forgotten that one basic rule?

Or did they no longer care?

The Ryukage and his masters were a sickness, and once they took root, they killed everything in their wake. There was no stopping them or the damage they brought to everyone in their path. Their evil had corrupted the gods, and

now it was spreading throughout the human world, tainting everything it touched. The Ryukage had destroyed Ryuichi's noble mother, Haruka, whose sacred duty had been to protect the boundaries of the worlds. To limit who could traverse the gates and when. All so that Ryukage could have the power to come and go to whatever realm he pleased.

Now Haruka was gone, and Keiko refused to allow Ryukage to destroy this child too.

The goddess had been firm with her orders. *Ryuichi holds in his hands the fate of Japan.*

But it was more serious than that. Ryukage didn't just want to rule Japan. He would take over *all* the worlds. Any realm he chose at any time he wanted.

To do that, he needed access to every portal Haruka had controlled.

With the powers that Ryuichi would one day command, no one would be able to defeat him. Ryukage knew that too.

They all did.

It was why Ryuichi must live. Why no one could find or harm him before he learned to master his temper and his powers.

If Ryukage couldn't turn this child to his cause—couldn't control him—he would kill him. As would all those enemies who wanted to stop them both. All those who would fear that this child was corrupted by his parentage.

Yorukaze Ryuichi was cursed. Marked for death by all beings.

As above, so below ...

But he had one stalwart defender.

As she ran the endless miles, Keiko chanted to Ryuichi, lulling him to sleep. "I will hide you where no one will find you."

Not until he had come into his powers and was ready to take on all his enemies.

Chapter 1

eleven years later

Swallowing the tears that were lodged in his throat, Ryuichi watched as the others prepared for the celebration he'd been banned from attending because he wasn't good enough. Smart enough. Deserving enough.

Wasn't wanted.

Didn't come from the right family or have the right heritage.

I should be used to it.

He wasn't. No matter how many times he heard those cruel words, they still stung.

Know your place. Do as you're told. Don't complain, and have no thoughts other than what we give you.

Be a mindless sponge.

That was all anyone ever said to him as they shoved him into corners or elbowed him aside. It was the only life he had ever known. At the rate it was going, he feared that one day he might very well become as invisible as they all treated him.

Today they were holding a celebration on the anniversary of his birth—and he'd been given stable duty. He wasn't even allowed to attend.

Not that they were celebrating *his* birth. No one cared that he was on this earth, or that his mother—whoever she'd been—had gone to the trouble of having a son. All he knew about his parents was that his father had been a warrior who'd died in battle, and his mother a noblewoman.

But the sad truth was that his parents had been of so little note that no one had even bothered to remember their names.

Like him, they'd been unremarkable. Utterly forgettable. "You're lucky we even allowed you to attend this academy,

given the fact you have no family to claim you." That was all any of his teachers or Yoshi-sensei ever said to him. "Had your father not been a warrior with a retainer to speak for you, you'd be working in a field. Or worse, dead. Be grateful we even tolerate you here."

His classmates barely acknowledged him, and when they did, it was only to insult him.

To make himself feel better, Ryuichi made up lavish stories about his parents. His father had been the illegitimate brother of the mighty Oda Nobunaga—one of his bravest and fiercest samurai, able to take down an entire army single-handedly. And he'd been madly in love with Ryuichi's mother, a proud, undefeated onna-musha like Gozen Hangaku, the famed woman warrior who'd led an army. In his mind, his mother had died with honor, in battle—just as his father had done. A beautiful flower who had sacrificed herself to protect them all.

Indeed, he could see her now, in battle, handing him off to one of their warriors as she lay dying, her last words. "Protect my son."

That was the dream he held so tight.

In his heart and soul, Ryuichi knew he had to be the son of such masterful warriors. He could feel their ki resonating through his very blood. It simmered and snapped, sometimes wanting out so badly that it was all he could do to contain it.

But if he ever tried to tell that to anyone else, they laughed at him.

"There's nothing special about *you*." *You're no one.*

Nothing.

So he kept to the shadows, where he felt at home, and tried to be as invisible as the others made him feel.

"O genki desu ka, Ryu-chan?"

Ryuichi glanced up from his work to see the old barefoot woman in a mismatched kimono. Gray-haired Keiko. He had no idea where she lived, but it must be nearby. She always appeared whenever he felt glum, as if she magically knew his mood.

"Ohayō, Keiko-san." He bowed politely.

She glanced toward the hall, where everyone was heading. "You're not going the right way." She took him by the shoulders and turned him around. "That's where the party is." She urged him forward.

In spite of his heartache, he laughed before he turned back to face her. "I'm not allowed there. I have other duties today."

She looked horrified. "No! No! How can they have a party without the great Ryu-kyou? Do they not know who you are?"

"Apparently not, as I was told to go mind the horses for Lord Hiero's guests."

Her mouth fell open. "This will not do. It won't do at all! Do they not know who you are?"

Ryuichi loved the way she made him feel. Like he mattered. He gave her another smile. "It's okay. The horses are probably better company anyway." Given how most people treated him, he actually preferred the horses.

With a polite bow, he left her tsking and headed off to the stables to attend to his duties before he got into trouble again, which seemed to be his natural state of being. But it'd been good to see the old woman for a moment.

Keiko wasn't mean-spirited. Nor did she make him feel bad whenever their paths crossed.

Never had he seen her be cruel to anyone. Yet others avoided her as if she were pox-ridden. He had no idea why she chose to remain in their village when she had no family here. If he had his freedom, he'd leave and never return to this godforsaken village.

Yet Keiko stayed for reasons only she knew.

He'd always wondered what had happened to her family. She never spoke of them, and no one else seemed to know anything about them either. It was awful to be alone in the world. That made him ache for her, and it was why he went out of his way to be nice to her whenever their paths crossed.

With a ragged sigh, he darted into the shadows as he saw Uchida Hitoshi and Niwa Kin heading toward him, laughing together in their finery. Like two evil little oni out to menace whatever innocent victim they could find. He even imagined them with horns growing out of their heads.

While they were the same age as him, they thought themselves his superior in every way. And everyone else's, for that matter.

Even though he knew that neither of them was nearly as good with a sword or even chopsticks as he was. Something proven every day when they trained, and he knocked them on their rumps and they screamed that he'd cheated—which he never did. He didn't have to, as they were just that incompetent.

Still, everyone thought they were great, and that he was nothing.

Because of the honor and reputations of their fathers. Last thing Ryuichi needed right now was another encounter with either of their scathing tongues. Or worse, their fists. "I wish they'd trip." Those whispered words had no sooner left his lips than Hitoshi's sword slipped and tangled with his feet. He gasped and fell into Kin. Entwined, they both landed in a disgraceful lump on the ground.

Ryuichi gaped at the sight as their sensei hastened forward to scold them for their clumsiness. "Dishonor on you both! Get up and clean yourselves before someone sees you!"

Still, Ryuichi stared at the fulfillment of his whispered desire.

What were the odds?

It'd happened just as he wanted ...

So focused on them and what had happened, Ryuichi wasn't watching his own steps, which carried him straight into someone else.

"Excuse me! Hello?"

Stunned, he realized he'd collided with an incredibly beautiful girl. One with dark brown eyes that were filled with intelligence and humor. Her black hair was in a geiko shimada similar to a samurai's chonmage ... except the top of her head wasn't shaved.

She also smelled like cherries and almonds.

When she smiled, two deep dimples flashed in her cheeks. "Are you all right?"

Ryuichi could barely think to answer. "Um ... yes." "Then may I please have my arm back?"

It was only then he realized he'd grabbed the girl's dark blue kimono when he'd stumbled and was still holding on to her.

"I'm so sorry!" His cheeks burned. Embarrassed, he quickly let go and stepped away.

"It's fine." Moving back, she straightened her kimono sleeves and the small suji kabuto that she carried. From the number of stripes on that helmet, Ryuichi knew she was from a rich samurai family. A grown man having it would be impressive.

The fact that it was made for someone their age ...

Ryuichi swallowed in fear of what he'd just done. Accident or not.

Bowing, he prayed he hadn't offended her by touching her. Most of all, he prayed she wasn't from one of the more respected samurai families. She could have him whipped for his clumsiness. "Forgive me, my lady."

She bowed to him. "Nothing to forgive, my lord. I should have been more careful and looking where I was going too." She flashed that impish smile again. "I'm Hattori Takara."

Of course she was. *Of all the people to run into!*

Ryuichi groaned inwardly at his ever-rotten luck. She wasn't just connected ...

She was the daughter of one of the most prominent samurai families, renowned for their fighting prowess. And for their intolerance of those who broke tradition and protocol.

The leader of their clan, who was probably a close relative of hers, was called a demon by everyone.

Feared by all.

And he'd just run her over. By all the stars above, he'd be lucky if they didn't disembowel him for the affront.

"Takara!"

She turned as one of the elder lords called for her.

Grateful for the distraction, Ryuichi wasted no time running for the stable and removing himself from her sight.

Maybe she'd forget he'd been there.

Everyone else thought he was invisible. Hopefully, she would too.

As fast as he could, he skittered around the door and pressed himself back into the shadows so that he could watch Takara.

"Boy?" She glanced about for him.

"Takara! Come here now!"

Grimacing, she glanced about one more time before she headed toward the man calling for her.

Ryuichi's heart pounded as he watched her go. In his mind, he imagined for a moment that he was Hitoshi, or one of the other boys at the party. One who had a family name to give her that would equal her own, so that they could be friends. He would love to learn swordsmanship from a member of their clan. To have the honor of riding beside a Hattori. Surely, it must be glorious ...

But that was only a dream. Sighing, he headed into the barn.

Suddenly, he heard a horrific sound. High-pitched and unholy, it cut through his ears and made him flinch. Covering them, he looked about for the source. What could make such a screech? A sick owl?

The horses stamped and neighed in their stalls, trying to flee. Not that he blamed them. If the ear-piercing shriek wasn't bad enough, the place smelled as if Hitoshi had farted after eating rotten cabbage.

Ryuichi headed for the first stall, wanting to calm the horse before it injured itself. Yoshi-san would have his head if something happened to his favorite steed.

But before he could reach him, a blur ran past his feet. "Watch it, bonebag!" the blur shouted.

Something else flew past his head. "Stop!" a boy shouted from his right. *What in the world?*

Ryuichi turned—and was assaulted by all manner of things exploding around him. Even the very straw seemed to be alive. The pitchforks were fighting the saddles, and brooms were attacking bridles. Everything was moving. Some of the things ran so fast that he couldn't even tell what they were.

"Yōkai!" the boy shouted. "Watch yourself!"

No kidding! As if he hadn't figured that out, given the number of obstacles flying at his head and feet. Ducking, he held his hands up to shield his face, while trying not to trip over the things fighting in the straw.

Scared, Ryuichi growled, as he felt a weird wave rush through him. Hot and searing, it was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. His skin sizzled. His ears rang. It felt as if electricity flowed through his entire being.

One moment, chaos reigned, and in the next ...

The pitchforks nearest him were blasted back into the wall. Harmless now, they fell to the floor.

The other boy stared in awe. "What did you do?"

Wide-eyed, Ryuichi shrugged as he stared at the "dead" pitchforks. "No idea."

"Can you do it again?"

He had absolutely no idea. But he was willing to try. Rolling his shoulders, Ryuichi tried to blast the saddles with his thoughts. Two fell to the ground. One went sideways, and the rest continued to battle.

Well ...

He'd almost succeeded. Kind of.

At least that was his thought until the rest of the objects turned toward the two of them. And headed in their direction.

Ah, crap ...

Ryuichi swallowed hard. “Um, I think I just made them angry.” He took a step back.

“I think they’re going to attack.” No sooner had the other boy spoken than all the enchanted items rushed at them at once like a huge, angry army—the saddles, the bridles, pitchforks, and other things guaranteed to gouge out their eyes.

Ryuichi tried to use his unseen powers to block again. It didn’t work. His electricity fizzled, sputtered.

He tried even harder. He held up his hands and growled low in his throat.

Still nothing.

Until the items reached him. Then they blew apart into dust that fell slowly to the ground.

Stunned, he stared at his hands as if he’d never seen them before. What had he just done?

How was it possible?

“Mikito! What are you doing?”

Ryuichi lowered his hands as he realized Mikito was the boy beside him. And the man speaking was a *very* high-ranking and unhappy samurai.

“Chichiue.” Mikito bowed. “Forgive me. I was fetching the sword you sent me for when I was attacked.”

His father looked around at the mess with a dark scowl lining his brow. “Yōkai were after the sword?”

“Yes, sir.”

As the man moved forward, Ryuichi caught sight of the samurai’s emblem.

Hattori Hanzō. Better known as Oni no Hanzō—the Demon Hanzō—because of his battle skills and bloodlust. It was said that no one could defeat him or even touch him in battle. He was one of the most feared warriors in all of Japan.

Terrified, Ryuichi lowered his gaze. *This day just keeps getting better and better ...*

Mikito gestured toward him. “He helped me fight and stop them.”

Why am I no longer invisible? Of all the times for people to see him, why did it have to be now? Why did it have to be *them*?

Hanzō arched a brow, before he swept a disbelieving stare over Ryuichi. “You!”

“Sir?”

“What’s your name, boy?” “Ryuichi, sir.”

“Your family name.”

Here we go. Pain lacerated his heart. Everything came down to the one thing he had no control over. “I have none. My father was a warrior who died in battle, but no one remembers his name.” Unlike other warriors, his father hadn’t called out his name while fighting and dying.

So he’d been forgotten.

His expression grim, Hanzō gave a curt nod. “Your mother?”

“She died while I was an infant. I was brought here by a renowned retainer who vouched for my parents so that I could be raised by the good graces of my lord, Hiero. No one remembers her name either, sir.”

That caused his frown to deepen. “Yoshi is training you as a warrior?”

Sort of. Most days, Ryuichi felt more like a practice dummy for the others. It was only Lord Hiero’s honor that forced him to train Ryuichi. Had his lord not vowed to the retainer of Ryuichi’s parents that he would make sure Ryuichi was settled in his home and trained, there was no telling what he’d have done with Ryuichi instead. “Yes, sir.”

“Hmph,” he grunted dismissively.

Turning around, Hanzō headed toward the entrance. Mikito hurried after him.

With that abrupt dismissal, Ryuichi bent over to begin picking up the mess they’d left behind before he got in trouble for it.

Yet no sooner had he done so than he sensed something coming at his back.

Instinctively, he kicked the pitchfork at his feet up into his hands and twirled it to block the stick thrown by Hanzō. He knocked it aside before it struck him.

Hanzō stared at Ryuichi for a long minute, then turned to his son. “You see, Mikito? That instinct is so hard to find, and even harder to teach. Help him clean up this mess and pack his things.”

“Yes, sir.” Mikito bowed as Hanzō strode out, sword in hand. Confused, Ryuichi looked at Mikito. “What just happened?” “My father is going to speak to your master. You’ll be leaving here with us.”

That made no sense to him. He was never allowed to leave. “And go where?”

“To Iga.”

Ryuichi blinked, then blinked again at the unexpected news. “Where’s Iga?”

“Three days away.”

It sounded so simple, and yet he still couldn’t comprehend what Mikito was telling him. “Why take me?”

“We have a school there. A *very* special school,” Mikito said with pride. “Our teachers can help you hone the skills you already have. You should be thrilled. My father never does this.”

Ryuichi stared at the boy as he tried to digest what he was being told. This had happened so fast. He couldn’t believe it.

Hanzō wanted him? Because he could swat a stick?

It just didn’t make sense to him. He wasn’t sure what to feel, and deep down, there was a lump of fear and apprehension.

Well, you always wanted to be wanted.

True, but this reminded him of an old adage. *Don’t invite the tiger to replace the wolf. Because that usually comes with a giant dose of regret.* Not to mention an even bigger heaping of humiliation.

BOOK ONE

THE
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THE GREAT DEMPSEYS

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Brianna MacMahon is a multi-award-winning author. Her book *On the Precipice* won the 2024 Readers' Favorite Bronze Medal for the category Fiction - Thriller - Political, and *The Great Dempseys* won the 2025 Literary Titan Gold Book Award and the 2025 Reader Views Bronze Medal for the category Young Adult (16+) Fiction. For undergrad, she attended Hartwick College, where she received a dual-degree in political science and history. While there, she wrote plays, monologues, screenplays, short stories, and poems. Afterward, she received her MA in political science from Syracuse University. When she is not writing, Brianna enjoys reading, hanging out with her family, playing RPGs, and watching her favorite comfort shows on repeat. She can't wait to share her stories with the world!

[Website](#)

CHAPTER 1

Audrey Great Gray

Complicated. That was the word Audrey would use to explain her relationship with mornings. For instance, she loved her and her father's tradition of waking up early on the weekends and, weather permitting, going for long walks along the Hudson. There was something magical about New York in the morning, something unknowable. In the early hours, while most still slept, Audrey could pretend the city was a secret only she and her father had discovered. He adored New York, more than Audrey ever had—or could. When she was with him, seeing the city through his eyes, she found herself appreciating New York a little more: its culture, its history, its people. And she loved that; she loved feeling more connected to a place that had never quite felt like home to her.

She didn't, however, love being unceremoniously awoken or going to sleep knowing she had to be up at a certain time. The city wasn't so magical then. No, instead, it was loud and obnoxious, with sirens, construction, and cars—not to mention people all screaming at each other over the most mundane things.

The morning of August 28, 1978, was the latter, as it was a morning when Audrey *had* to wake up early. It was her first day of school. Not just her first day of school but the first day of her sophomore year. And through some process Audrey still didn't quite understand, she would now be attending Great Gray, one of the most prestigious private schools in New York.

It all started when Principal What's-His-Face from her middle school had put her name forward as someone who was “worthy” (whatever that meant) of attending Great Gray. No way, Audrey had thought. Impossible! Great Gray was an expensive school, for rich families—which the Niensens were not.

Apparently, though, Audrey didn't need to worry about this, as she hadn't secured one of the scholarship positions for that year. Instead, for her freshman year, she attended a public high school, and all returned to normal. Unbeknownst to her, however, her parents had applied for her to be transferred to Great Gray for her sophomore year. Her grades were solid, as were her extracurriculars, and against all odds, she'd managed to procure her spot as a transfer student—on a full scholarship.

Though her family was not destitute, by any means—they lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village—Audrey knew they could not afford the tuition of a place like Great Gray. Alexander, her father, worked as a

shoe repairman—or, as he called himself, a cobbler. And while he earned enough money to support his two daughters and his wife, Sophia, he didn't have a lot to spare. Claire, the oldest of the girls, was attending New York University, which was enough of a financial strain. Adding Great Gray into the mix would be, in Audrey's estimation, too much. Besides, the economy was tanking, and everything was a mess.

At every turn, though—and despite all of her thoughtfully reasoned objections—Alexander and Sophia assured her they weren't letting her give up on such an “amazing, once in a lifetime opportunity!” Yes, Audrey agreed, attending Great Gray would be an incredible honor, but she didn't even know if it was something she wanted. She'd been going to school with the same kids since preschool, and she'd already finished one year of high school. At Great Gray, she'd have to make new friends, whose lives were as far removed from hers as Antarctica was from a tropical climate. What if she didn't make friends there? What if she didn't belong?

But her own feelings on the matter were inconsequential, apparently, as her parents made the decision without even asking for her input. As soon as they'd heard that Audrey had, in fact, been offered one of the scholarship positions, they'd enthusiastically accepted on her behalf. She was now a member of Great Gray's Class of 1981.

“Isn't this amazing, sweets?” Sophia had asked her, her eyes twinkling with so much excitement that all Audrey could muster was a resigned nod.

And so, on the morning of August 28, Audrey wasn't in the best mood. Though months had passed since she'd learned about Great Gray, she still resented her parents for having made the decision without consulting her. Didn't her opinion matter? Didn't they know they were ripping her away from her comfort zone, her life?

“You'll make new friends,” Alexander insisted at the breakfast table as he read *The Wall Street Journal*.

In many ways, Alexander was a mystery to Audrey; he was fascinated by the stock market and learned all he could about it, but he never dabbled. He was far too financially cautious to risk his money like that. It was the same reason he never went to casinos or bought a lottery ticket. Great Gray, however, was a different story; to him, it was not a financial risk but an investment in his youngest daughter's future.

“Maybe,” Audrey said, shrugging. “Probably not, though.”

“Don't say that. Of course, you will!” Alexander gave her a thumbs-up for extra encouragement, reminding Audrey of those horrid days when she had to run the mile, and the Gym teacher would cheer them on from the sidelines.

“Oh, thanks. That's real helpful. Just like that, all my nerves are gone. Poof. Like magic.”

Alexander laughed. “Come on, Audie,” he said, reassuringly touching her hand. “You're going to be just fine. Great Gray is an amazing school.”

“Sure. But at the end of the day, it's just a school.”

“A school that Supreme Court justices and senators have attended,” he reminded her, as if either of those was a career path that interested Audrey.

Hearing all the noise, Sophia sauntered out of her bedroom, wrapped in her favorite robe. She beamed when she saw Audrey, and she placed her hand to her chest.

“You look beautiful in your uniform, Audie,” Sophia said.

“Thanks,” said Audrey. “It's not very me, but—”

“You look beautiful,” Sophia reiterated, nodding for emphasis. She walked over to Audrey, a wistful smile on her lips. “Oh, I remember when I used to have hair like yours,” she mused, running her fingers through Audrey's Farrah Fawcett-inspired hair.

“Mom! Careful!”

“Sorry, sweets! Here, let me ... there. Good as new!”

Sophia always loved to mention how much Audrey favored her, with her honey-blonde hair and green eyes. Every one of Audrey's yearbook photos, it seemed, reminded Sophia of the youth she'd once possessed. And while Audrey was deeply flattered by the comparison, she couldn't help but note a trace of sadness in Sophia's eyes when she looked at her, as if in disbelief that she was old enough to have one daughter in college and another in high school. Children,

it seemed, served as a constant reminder of the passage of time, the growing distance between the adolescents parents had once been and the adults they now were.

Alexander averted his attention to the clock on the wall. "But you better get moving, love. Don't want to be late." Audrey gave him a look. "If I miss the subway, another will come along."

"I know. It's just ... you're not all that familiar with Uptown, and it's a bit of a walk from the station to Great Gray, so—"

"She'll be fine," Sophia said, exchanging a knowing look with Audrey.

"I'm pretty smart, you know," Audrey piped up.

"Yes, I know." Alexander sighed. "Just ... keep your wits about you, yeah?"

"Don't worry. I'll be careful. I always am."

Alexander smiled. "I'm just so proud of you, Audie."

"Thanks, Dad." Audrey kissed his cheek. "Love you." She pulled Sophia into an embrace. "Both of you."

"Bye, Audie!" said Sophia, waving as though Audrey were departing on a transatlantic voyage.

Despite her father's fears, Audrey had little trouble navigating her way to Great Gray. She and her parents had visited the school over the summer, to scout out the area. ("Can't risk you getting lost, now, can we?" Alexander had teased, all too familiar with Audrey's embarrassingly poor sense of direction.) Audrey remembered joking whether they called it Great Gray because the building was big and constructed from—wouldn't you know it?—gray stone. No, her father had informed her with a chuckle; it was because the mascot was a great gray owl. And while Audrey had found that explanation to be lacking, Alexander had then pointed out the gray, black, and white crest above the front door that boasted what must have been a great gray owl in the center. (Audrey simply took her father's word for it, as her knowledge of birds was severely limited.) Thus, grudgingly, Audrey had to concede the point—but not without noting that the gray building wasn't coincidental.

Now, as Audrey gazed at Great Gray's exterior, she had to admit it was undeniably striking, with its polished stone and fenced-in courtyard. A few students were milling about, reacquainting before the start of a new year. Though Audrey had always been a social butterfly, she dreaded the prospect of having to make friends. Maybe she wouldn't be the only new kid; maybe some other sophomores were also transfer students.

"... out of this rat hole," a boy was saying to his four friends—or, more accurately, minions, as they struck Audrey as boys who had no existence outside of their appointed leader.

But their leader was certainly nothing to write home about, reminding her of every soon-to-be disgraced politician apologizing for his misdeeds. He would've been labeled a nobody at her old high school, but since his family was obviously wealthy—the boy proudly wore an expensive-looking, ill-fitting watch—he was probably one of the popular kids. Effortlessly, Audrey could envision him as that fifty-year-old man still telling stories about his high school glory days, living vicariously through his suffering son.

"But we're seniors now," the boy went on. "And you know what that means." He removed a cigarette from his pocket, lighting it up with a clear aura of discomfort, as if it were something he'd never done before. "We can skip out whenever we want."

They all laughed at that, revealing just how pitiful their senses of humor were. One of the other boys called their leader Alistair, which cemented to Audrey that she'd truly entered another world. Only people with serious money were named Alistair. Perhaps naively, Audrey hoped these boys weren't indicative of the sorts of people she'd meet at Great Gray, but she wasn't all that optimistic. A part of Audrey had assumed that private school kids would be more well mannered than their public school counterparts, but clearly, regardless of their upbringing, teenagers were teenagers: entitled, boastful, and annoying.

Upon entering the school, Audrey saw that most of the students were already being escorted into the auditorium for what she assumed was the obligatory first day of school assembly. No doubt, they'd be subjected to the same speech they'd been given every year since kindergarten: bullying is bad, your teachers are here to help you, and detentions go on your permanent record. Audrey wasn't sure what a permanent record was, or if it even existed, but it'd been

mentioned so many times she assumed it had to be real. At this point, Audrey could deliver the speech herself—and much more humorously, if she did say so herself.

“Name?” a student asked her, though it sounded more like a demand.

“Audrey Nielsen. I’m a sophomore, but—”

“Over there to the left.”

Audrey scooted to the left. To her relief, most of the students around her looked just as nervous as she was. Hopefully, she would be able to find a good group of friends. She didn’t want to feel like a pariah for too long.

Only one student stood in front of Audrey, and three were standing behind her. One girl with flaming red hair sat at the reception table, thumbing through the list of students and corresponding schedules.

“Next!” said the redhead, pointing at Audrey. As Audrey neared her, the redhead simply said, “Name?”

Were some of these “student helpers” planning future careers as drill sergeants? They acted as though they resented Audrey for simply existing and going through the same rigmarole as everyone else. The redhead was clicking her gum, her eyes on the *Cosmopolitan* magazine she had unsubtly placed underneath her list of student names.

“Audrey Nielsen.”

The redhead nodded distractedly, then handed Audrey her schedule. “This will tell you where your classes are. Do you have any questions?”

Audrey stared at the schedule, struggling to take it all in. Yes, as a matter of fact, she *did* have questions—lots of them. For one, how was she supposed to know where these rooms were? Some of the rooms had numbers, and others had letters. And why did she have two different classes listed at the same time?

“Here at Great Gray, we alternate between Gray and Black days,” the redhead explained. “Today’s a Gray day. So, for fifth period, you’ll go to Gym. On Black days, you’ll have study hall.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense. Thanks!”

“Sure.” The redhead cracked her version of a smile. “The auditorium’s over there to your left. Principal Waverly will tell you more about what to expect here at Great Gray.”

Audrey was spellbound by the auditorium’s grandiosity. Four pillars lined the aisle, two on each side; windows flanked the left and right walls, reminding Audrey that the real world did, in fact, exist outside this place. The school crest hung above the stage, complete with some pretentious Latin words: *UIRITUS*, *VIRTUS*, *VICTORIA*. Audrey could hardly believe she was now attending a school with a motto—and a Latin one, at that.

She claimed a seat at the back of the auditorium, with no one immediately around her. Then, she surveyed the room. Everyone was wearing variations of the same outfit—black pants or a black skirt, with a white dress shirt and a gray-and-white checkered tie. Audrey found the ensemble to be dreadfully dull, with minimal room for self-expression. Some of the female students, though, embellished their outfits with the kind of jewelry Audrey had seen only in Fifth Avenue storefronts.

“Good morning, students. Good morning,” said Principal Waverly, with pseudo enthusiasm and a matching smile. He looked like he should have been a librarian and lived every day perplexed as to how he’d become a principal. “I’m sure you are all ready and excited to start a new school year. As the principal of Great Gray, it is my honor to welcome you—some of you again, and some of you for the first time. Yes, I see many familiar faces out there, and for those I don’t recognize, I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you—but hopefully not for the, uh . . . unfortunate reasons,” he added with an awkward chuckle.

From her vantage point, Audrey could see the rest of the auditorium. Most students were engaged in their own side conversations, acting as though Principal Waverly wasn’t even there. Some students were even plucky enough to outright leave, and Audrey couldn’t blame them—and secretly wished she had joined them. Principal Waverly wasn’t a gifted public speaker, and he was delusional to think that teenagers—especially this early in the morning—would give him any of their attention.

“Here at Great Gray, we live by three words: *uiritus*, *virtus*, *victoria*,” Principal Waverly continued, seemingly unaware that very few students were actually listening. “For those of you who do not, uh, speak fluent Latin, those

words mean excellence, virtue, and success. It is our, uh, most sincere hope that what you learn here at Great Gray will carry you through the rest of your lives ...”

As Principal Waverly droned on about school policies and expectations, Audrey reminisced about warm summer days biking in Central Park. She fondly remembered staying in East Hampton for the Fourth of July and her birthday, grilling and relaxing on the beach. This was the last place she wanted to be, in a stuffy auditorium listening to a middle-aged man trying to relate to her and her peers.

Audrey knew she was zoning out, but she was too lazy to zone back in. A few seconds later, she felt a swift breeze, then heard someone sit down on the open seat to her left. Instinctively, Audrey turned, curious as to who this latecomer was.

It took everything inside Audrey to not stare. He was outrageously handsome, boasting what could only be dubbed movie-star good looks. While most adolescent boys opted for longer, feathered hairstyles, he did not; on the contrary, he sported an Ivy League haircut, with his dark-brown hair parted to the left. As he settled into his seat, his head turned slightly toward Audrey, and she caught a glimpse of his baby-blue eyes. He was zealously scrawling in his notebook, his hand racing across the paper. Audrey stared for a beat too long, as he finally felt her eyes on him and looked up.

“Hi,” he said, offering a smile, revealing yet another attractive feature—dimples.

Audrey had never struggled to make conversation before, but in his company, she balked, scrambling to invent a suitably witty response to his simplest of greetings. She understood the importance of first impressions, and she didn’t want him to think she was shy—or, even worse, boring.

“Hi,” she said at last, instantly regretting her uninspired choice. She sank into her chair, cheeks burning.

Before she could say anything more to him, Principal Waverly informed the room that next Friday, there would be a fair for all of Great Gray’s clubs and activities. Though many of the sports teams had already begun practicing, some were still open to new members. Audrey actually felt her eyes gloss over when she heard the word “sports.” And, to her shock, he mentioned there was a polo team. People under the age of forty played polo? Was Great Gray trying to prepare their students for lives of leisure as members of some ridiculously expensive social club?

“Please be sure to attend the fair so you can get involved in all that Great Gray has to offer,” Principal Waverly said. “Now, thank you all for your undivided attention,” he went on, without a trace of irony. “Let’s make this the best year yet! Please, at this time, make your way to your homerooms.”

Principal Waverly walked up the aisle, waving at students as though they were fans of his. Only a few desperate brown nosers waved back. Audrey wondered what Principal Waverly had dreamed of becoming—and what had happened in his life to lead him to this point, where he required the adoration of teenagers to be happy.

Audrey pulled out her schedule to see where her homeroom was. Of course, she had no idea which rooms were where, so she’d probably end up roaming the halls for twenty minutes. By then, she would already be late for her first class. Hardly a good way to demonstrate how grateful she was to be here.

“Are you a freshman?” the boy asked her.

“No, I’m a sophomore, but I just transferred here.”

“Oh.” He smiled warmly. “Well, welcome to Great Gray.”

“Thanks.” She smiled in return, proud of herself for maintaining her composure.

The boy leaned forward. “I know they don’t give you much help on where things are. If you want, I could walk you to your homeroom.”

To Audrey’s delight, his accent was decidedly New York. It wasn’t as strong as a Brooklyn accent, for instance, but she clearly heard it when he pronounced “walk” more like “wawk.”

“That’d be great! Thanks!” said Audrey, elated she had an excuse to spend more time with him.

He grinned. “I’m Bobby, by the way. I’m a sophomore too.”

“Audrey.”

“So, Audrey ... where are we headed?”

“Let’s see ...” Audrey consulted her schedule with furrowed brows. “Room 418.”

They stood up, and Audrey was surprised by how tall Bobby was; he had to be almost six feet tall. As they walked, Bobby asked her if she was nervous about her first day. Audrey admitted she was, as she’d never been good with change.

“It’s different from my old school,” she said.

“I’m sure you’ll be just fine,” Bobby said, suddenly stopping. “Here we are.”

“Oh.” Audrey was strangely disappointed they were already parting. “Well, thanks again.”

“Of course.” He shifted on his feet. “I’ll, uh ... see you around.”

“Yeah, uh ... see you too!” Audrey said, waving awkwardly.

Luckily, Bobby couldn’t hear her pathetic response over the swell of students who had just arrived in the hallway. With her head hanging low, Audrey entered her homeroom, trying to refocus her attention.

The first day of school was always absurdly monotonous, with every teacher giving the same speech on expectations and time management. Some tried to strike fear into the hearts of their students, claiming that tardiness and late assignments would result in automatic Fs. Others assumed the opposite approach, trying to be all buddy-buddy with the students—with equally ineffective results. Going from teacher archetype to teacher archetype was a form of whiplash for which Audrey had not been prepared.

Thankfully, though, she had lunch sixth period, so she made her way to the cafeteria. All the tables were rectangular, with three seats on each side. She glanced around the room, knowing very well that her social future depended on where—and with whom—she sat. Unintentionally, Audrey could ruin her whole high school experience by sitting with the wrong people—or, even worse, sitting alone.

To her surprise—and endless relief—Cassandra Irvine, a girl from her Geometry class, stood up from her table and waved her over.

“Audrey! Over here!”

Audrey didn’t exactly know why Cassandra wanted her to sit with her and her friends, but she wasn’t about to refuse such a kind offer. Instead, Audrey walked over to the table. As she did so, Cassandra signaled for one of the girls to move over so Audrey could sit in the middle chair directly across from Cassandra.

“Hi,” Audrey said to the other girls at the table, none of whom she recognized from her earlier classes.

“This is Lisa,” Cassandra started, motioning to the girl on Audrey’s left, “and this is Shelly and Barb.” She pointed at each girl in turn. “Girls, Audrey is new here.”

Disconcertingly, Lisa, Shelly, and Barb were almost spitting images of Cassandra, with their shoulder-length half-dos and accessorized uniforms. The girls leaned forward, as a unit, their curiosity piqued.

Lisa placed her elbows on the table. “New from where?”

“I went to a school in the Village,” Audrey replied.

“Is that a different country?” asked Barb.

Audrey laughed. “Maybe to some people.”

None of the girls laughed with her. Barb, for her part, seemed genuinely perplexed, and Audrey began to fear that Barb actually thought the Village was, in fact, a different country. Perhaps money didn’t equate to a better education after all ...

“I thought the Village was for poor people,” Shelly interjected.

Before Audrey could respond to that, Cassandra shot Shelly a piercing look. “Oh, is that where you live?” Cassandra asked, redirecting her attention to Audrey. “Greenwich Village?” After Audrey nodded in response, Cassandra asked, “So, what are you doing here?”

It sounded like an innocent question, but Audrey sensed an underlying, accusatory edge. The girls were staring at her, waiting for her answer. Audrey shifted in her seat. She felt as though she were being interviewed for a job: one she was, evidently, woefully unqualified for.

“I earned my place here,” Audrey said, perhaps a bit too defensively.

Cassandra broke into a conciliatory smile. “Of course, you did. We *all* did.”

Audrey didn't know what to make of that. *Had* they all earned their place here? Barb didn't even know where—or what—the Village was, and Shelly certainly hadn't learned anything about manners, as far as Audrey could tell. Not willing to rock the boat, however—or ostracize herself from this potential friend group—Audrey simply grimaced.

"I guess we did," she said flatly.

"Well, we're happy you're here now," Cassandra went on, "and the girls and I will be more than happy to help you ... fit in with the rest of us," she added, her eyes on Audrey's unadorned uniform.

"Oh. That's ... nice of you." As Audrey said these words, dread pooled in the pit of her stomach.

"Cassandra is *always* so nice and thoughtful," piped up Shelly, which didn't do much to assuage Audrey's mounting doubts.

"I bought this dress one time," Lisa began, visibly eager to illustrate Shelly's point, "and Cassandra told me it wasn't my color. She was right, of course!"

Cassandra nodded sagely. "You look positively *garish* in yellow."

Audrey's eyes widened. Would this be her future—being told what to wear by some five-foot-two dictator? Maybe she would have been better off sitting by herself, if this was the alternative.

"Don't worry," Cassandra told Audrey. "I bet you look good in *every* color. Especially ..."

She trailed off, absently stroking her many glittering bracelets. "... *green*."

"Jeepers!" gasped Shelly, eyeing Cassandra's bracelets. "Are those new?"

Cassandra shrugged. "Oh, these? Just a back-to-school gift from Daddy."

As the girls squealed with delight, Audrey took a large bite of her sandwich and, perhaps melodramatically, hoped she would choke.

The last three classes were much more enjoyable than the previous five. Audrey got to meet her English teacher, Mrs. Parker, who, though undoubtedly intimidating, possessed a dry wit that Audrey appreciated. And, dissimilarly to some of the other teachers Audrey had already met, Mrs. Parker did not allow her students to walk all over her. Within the first five minutes of class, Mrs. Parker sent some boy down to detention for flinging rubber bands at the back of a girl's head. He claimed he was just joking around, but Mrs. Parker wasn't in the mood for such juvenile antics. Audrey wished she had shown that same grit during lunch, that she'd called out Cassandra and her friends for their judgmental comments.

A little under an hour later, Audrey was back home. Her mother was in the living room, and as soon as Audrey walked through the door, Sophia sprung to her feet, peppering her with all sorts of questions about Great Gray.

"How was your first day? Did you make any friends? What are your teachers like? Do you already have homework?"

Audrey answered her questions as vaguely as possible, knowing very well she wouldn't mention Cassandra or the other girls. She knew how important it was to her parents for her to fit in, and she didn't want them to be worried about her. Audrey started giving Sophia her assessment of Mrs. Parker, the school's most daunting English teacher, and Alexander walked in.

"They say she fails students just to make them cry," Audrey told them. "I don't think I believe it, but ... she *does* have that look about her. I kind of like her, though. She's funny. Has that Aunt Trina sarcasm?"

"Oh, no. There's two of them?" joked Alexander.

"Well, we're so proud of you, Audie," Sophia said, unable to suppress her palpable glee. That was one of the things Audrey loved most about her mother—her unwavering positivity. "Really, Dad and me ... we were saying this morning just how impressed we are by you. It's a big change, we know, but ... you'll do great."

"And don't forget, love," Alexander piped up, "high school is the best years of your life. So, soak it all up!"

Sophia added, "Oh, and next Saturday, we're all going out to dinner, to celebrate this new school year."

“*All of us?*” asked Audrey. “Including Claire?”

“Well, of course!” said Sophia, oblivious to Audrey’s tone.

Though Audrey loved Claire, the two had never been particularly close. And Audrey would have been lying if she said that having Claire out of the apartment and in one of the NYU dorms hadn’t been a dream. In fact, when their parents had decided a dorm would be worth the extra money to ensure that Claire had the whole college experience, Audrey hadn’t protested. Now, it was just Audrey at home, and she’d already gotten used to having the bedroom all to herself.

“Right. I won’t forget,” Audrey said.

“Well, dinner’s almost ready, sweets!”

After dinner, Audrey handed over all the paperwork to Alexander to sign. Predictably, he made the same joke he always did, remarking how he felt like Elvis Presley signing autographs. Audrey laughed, as she always did, not wanting her father to ever think he’d lost his touch.

Eventually, the evening morphed into night. Because the apartment contained only one bathroom, they had devised a schedule for who could use it when. It was a routine they had down to the minute. The wonderful parents they were, Sophia and Alexander always let their daughters go first. With Claire out of the lineup, Audrey was the first one on the list.

The night before, Audrey had been racked with anxiety, stewing over every possibility, living through every worst-case scenario. Tonight, however, her anxiety was more centered, grounded in the reality of how her first day at Great Gray had gone. As she closed her eyes, she saw Cassandra Irvine and her posse laughing and pointing at her.

“You don’t belong here,” they said in chorus. “You never will.”

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the worst thing
that can ever happen?

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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 Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators.

[Website](#)

“It is perfectly okay to admit you’re not okay.” ~Anonymous

The Burning Shed

1

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.

On the Run

2

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.”

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